**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.

The docking was seemless, with none of the jostling she had gotten used to above her home planet.

The Entity seemed busy with the docking procedure, so she left it well enough alone.

The wall opened up in front of her, revealing a small corridor lit difusely in pale blue light. The material of the wall was some grey bumpy material that didn't seem to reflect light. She took a hesitant step out of what she could only assume was some kind of ship, and looked around the corridor. It was empty.

“Its made out of nanobots.” A voice said behind her. She had to stop from jumping.

She spun around to find the Entity present again. It walked into the Scion with her and ran its hand along the wall. Before its touch, the structure rippled and swirled, becoming amorphous for a brief second before reverting to its structure.

“All of it?” She asked, looking around her. “Is that even possible?”

The Entity looked at her and nodded. “With capabilities such as mine, you start think more in terms of: what is practical rather than what is possible. And what are the energy requirements. Nanobots are easy to replace, reconfigure. You can build most things out of them if you know how.” It explained, walking further into the Scion. Helia followed, not sure of what to expect.

A sudden thought occurred to Helia, and she looked around for some sort of air vac system, but none was present. She shook her head. This technology was eons ahead of their own…

“Don't think I didn't prepare for your coming. I no longer need to breathe but I'm not so callous as to forget the needs of a guest. I don't know what sort of research you'll be wanting to conduct, but if its anything like the late Libenholz, my previous guest, I'm sure you'll find notes and equipment ready for anything you might want to do.” The entity turned towards a wall and made towards it. Helia realized that the being was about to phase through it, and dong so would leave her alone.

The thought of being alone in such an alien location terrified her. She had been warned about the loneliness, the lack of social interaction, been given mental and physical exercises, even simulations, games, books and a rudimentary AI companion on the devices which had been taken from her… but now that she was actually here, none of it seemed to matter, or even help much. All that she knew was if the being, which at least looked human, walked through the wall without explaining anything to her…

“Stop please.” She said, sounding much more pleading than she intended.

The shell stopped and turned back to face her, its eyes unnervingly staring right into her own.

“How is this all supposed to work? The things the Alliance taught me, warned and trained me for don't really seem to apply.” She admitted. “b-but I don't want to waste your time. I'm sure you are very busy, probably more than I can comprehend.” She trailed off. God damn it this was going poor.

“Yes.” The shell said, nodding slightly. “Some of that is my own fault. I go to great trouble to make sure my technology stays here. As a result I must seem rather mysterious.”

“First thing: you don't need to worry about wasting my time. As I am talking to you, this ship its sensors and bots along with thousands of cores of my own automation are working. One of the first things I learned to do was multitask. You can ask me any questions you like.” The shell said, suddenly stooping to sit on the ground. It crossed its legs and stared at her.

“Oh, err.” She managed, sitting across from it a pained fascade of a smile on her face. She had no idea what she was doing. She looked around the corridor quickly. It didn't seem to lead anywhere in particular.

The shell suddenly cracked a smile to her surprise and somewhat fear. A raw laugh came from its mouth, something between a human and a machine.

“I'm sorry it has been years since I have had to interact with another person, some of the memories have been stored rather deep.” The Entity said, tilting its head as it had done on the ship earlier.

The corridor suddenly surged around her, melting away before her eyes. Like sand under tumbling waves, it scattered into a dense grey cloud before reforming, in an unpleasing organic fashion into what seemed like… a living room?

She blinked. Beneath her was a vibrant red sofa. On the floor, still gunmetal gray, was a tan wicker rug with woven geometric designs which spanned the length of the room which had suddenly appeared before her.

The Entity sat across from her on a dark green chair. His eyes flickered to the side for a moment, and one side of the wall became transparent as it had done in the smaller ship. The star the Scion was orbiting around flared into life, coating the room in a filtered orange tinge.

Light fixtures hung from the walls and ceiling with… actual bulbs inside them, their warm glow adding to that of the star.

She stared down at the red sofa beneath her. It certainly felt real enough. She gave the rug a small nudge. It responded exactly as she would have guessed.

“Its not magic. There are limits. But its useful enough. Most of the Scion has no permanent shape or form or function.” The shell explained, waving its hand around at the room. “But I remember Libenholz, and no doubt you as well, would rather if things stayed in one place yes?” The shell smiled.

“Now ask me questions. Get it out of the way now, or you'll just have to ask later.” It said.

“Am I really not wasting your time? This technology is incredible. I suppose we guessed, being an Entity and all, but...”

“Ms. Demetev, this second, three cores of me are running simulations on this star, a group of bots is assembling the final touches on the continment chamber for the devices your Alliance has given me, I am studying twenty five other nearby systems, one of which I believe might have life on it, and running all the funciton of the Scion and every one of its critical subcomponents. Talking with you is not going to slow anything down.” The shell smiled again. This time though something had changed about it, it seemed much more sincere.

“Thank you for being so accommodating. I suppose none of us knew what to expect so we made up the worst possible situation. They made you out to be some sort of wrathful robot god...” She said, smiling for herself for the first time since this whole nightmare of an introduction had started.

The shell shook its head. “Wrong on all acounts. I am neither a god nor a robot. And I should hope I am not wrathful.”

“So… what are you? If you don't mind me asking...” Helia pondered out loud.

The shell shrugged. “I have no idea. There's not really a word for it. My processing is decentralized. I'm spread across many different subsystems, all 'speaking' to one another at close to the speed of light. Information is processed and decided upon by the collection of cores and other more minor pieces of automation I've made over the years.”

“But not a robot?”

“Certainly not. Although I might look like one. I chose this form specifically *because* it looked like a robot.” A shifty grin appeared on the Entity's face. “I like to control people's perception of me. If I make myself out to be robot, others interact with me in a certain way. It excuses certain social niceties and allow me to be blunt in conversation without appearing rude.”

“And you care about that?” She said, sceptically.

The shell stared at her on edge. “Yes. There is something important about interacting with other humans. That is a truth that Megareeth seems to have forgotten, and to her detriment.”

“You said other humans. Do you consider yourself human?” She asked, now more curious than frightened.

“Of course. No one built me. I built myself. All of this, I built myself.” The shell waved its hands around. “That's what makes me an Entity I suppose.”

“But were you a human originally?” Helia asked.

But for the first time since they met, the shell did not answer her question.

“I apologize, I do not like to talk about my past. There is much there that I would rather forget.” It said, staring at the ground.

“Oh! I'm sorry… I didn't...” Helia mumbled.

The shell stood up.

“Why don't we walk through the basics. You're allowed free roam of the place. I'll arrange for a section of the Scion to remain static for the duration of your stay; I think I still have the blueprints for the living quarters Libenholz came up with for himself. You're of course free to alter them as you like.”

“As I stated before, anything you should want to study should be possible from his facilities. The equipment in the blueprint is dated, but I have updated specs from the tools you brought if anything is too out of date. Nothing is really off limits except for the reactor, and only that because it takes a large amount of energy to shield a person like you from it if you're too close.”

“Anything involving lighter elements can be synthesized fairly easily. The heavier stuff the bots will bring. The woman who stayed here before Libenholz came up with a system for interacting with what she called the 'central computer', which I always thought was ironic, since the computation is actually very much devolved.”

“I think that aught to get you started. I saw that your research spans many fields, including theoretical xenobiology. If the planet I talked about earlier does turn out to have life, I will arrange some samples for you.”

It was the longest she had heard it talk since they had met. Despite it telling her to ask any question she wanted, she still felt like she was inconveniencing the Entity, and decided to keep her questions for later.

“Oh, then there is the question of appearance.” The shell said.

Helia realized that the statement was some sort of question about her preference, but she had no idea what the Entity was asking, and said as much.

“I have a human body for a reason. Humans interact well with other things that appear human. I spend cycles remembering and reproducing physical traits, affectations and such and I should get better at it once I put together a halfway decent core for it, but I can also change my appearance fairly easily.”

“You want me to decide what you look like?” She asked, puzzled.

“Well, of course.” The shell said. “The appearance is for your own sake.”

“What do you look like normally, when no one else is here?”

The shell disintegrated, leaving only the mask, behind which was a black bulbous region of opaque dense nanobots, the rest of the thing's body now was only a cloud, suspended in the air by unknown forces.

She jerked backwards in horror. The thing looked like some death specter from legends past.

“That's what I assumed.” The shell said, reassembling. “Libenholz chose for me to appear like his late mentor, at least in passing. I believe it helped him focus on his work and bettered the connection between us.”

But Helia shook her head. “How you look now is fine. The concept is foreign to me. Sorry.”

The shell shrugged. “Then what are your preferences on communication? Its somewhat hard for me to explain because the limited for of communication the Alliance and most other groups use is foreign to me. The collective were the only ones who came close...”

“You mean how do you want to talk? Aren't we talking now?”

*Yes but obviously there are other ways to talk.* A voice said in her mind. She jerked backward off the sofa and stared at the shell eyes wide.

“What! How?” She babbled.

The schematics of a Collective device, the one all of them wore, appeared hovering in blue above the shell's outstretched hand.

“Don't worry, I'm not using their device, and the tainted one is still safely locked away; that was something of my own creation, but it works on similar principles: a stream of information routed directly to the language centers of the brain. Only we don't need to wear physical devices.”

“I-I would rather you stayed out of my head.” She said.

The shell put up its hands in the same apologetic motion it had made earlier. “Of course. There are of course other options, but for now, just assume if you start talking to me, I will answer. But just because I believe you might find it useful, there is also a direct brain interface Libenholz made with some of my help. You can try it out.”

“Thank you.” She managed. The shell walked out of the room. As it did so, she noticed the corridor beyond the open door now held a further room. It seemed Libenholz's redecorating had already taken effect.

She let out a long breath and ran her hand through her hair. It was greasy from sweat laced fear.

Today had certainly been the most interesting day of her life so far. But she had a feeling it was only going to become more so from this point on.

She walked up to the window and stood in front of the massive star, staring at the planet sized magnetic plumes of superheated plasma as they leapt and disintegrated before her eyes.

She tapped on the window. The surface shimmered the tiniest bit, revealing grey underneath. So not quite a window after all.

She then looked around the spartan room, half expecting for it to change out from under her gaze. But the shell's promise of keeping things fixed seemed to have been earnest.

She took in another deep breath.

“The planet did in fact contain life!” A disembodied voice said, this time from the air around her, rather than from within her head.

She jumped, looking around for the shell before realizing that it of course was no where to be found.

“No good either?” The disembodied voice continued. “I'll try other more mudane solutions.”

“Uh, thanks. I just need some time to get used to all this.” She admitted, talking to the air in front of her. There was no further response.

She shook her head and waked through the deserted living quarters before finding a bedroom. It was massive and spartan as well. She would have to fix that in the morning. She flung herself down onto the bed, trying not to remember that it and the blankets were in fact made out of nanobots. Luckily, the day's tribulations had left her exhausted. Nanobots or no, she drifted into a heavy sleep.

For the first time since he entered the Scion, he felt at home. He could feel it all, every subprocess, every sensor, every kind of activity and movement. The Scion was more than just a ship. It was more than just a home. It was part of him, and he was glad to be back.

Two years lost… Did it matter? He had to convince himself that it did. How many projects languished without his care? How many discoveries were missed by the rudimentary automation he had left in his absence? If there was an evil in this world, it was the speed of light, and the physics which prevented him from his goals.

He reached his mind out and looked over the results of his absence. His theories on the structure of the star had been correct. There was life on the planet after all. His investigation into a particular kind of degenerate matter had ran into problems. His long range sensors had detected a war of some sort that had happened a few years ago; the sensors suggested that the destruction had been total, but thankfully on the nuclear level.

The information flowed over his brain like a river, coming form ever corner of the scion at once. He opened his eyes, exhilarated. In every part of the Scion, nanobots swarmed, larger bots whirred to life, experiments flashed and parts of the ship reconfigured themselves for new and better ideas that he couldn't wait to test.

While this was happening the Helia's biorhymic data changed. She had gone to sleep.

Amid all the turmoil, the part of him that was still mostly human stopped for a moment and wondered what her impression of him had been. The thought was one of billions though and it was lost amid the stream like a small rock tossed into a raging river.

He got to his feet. Most of the Scion could handle itself for a few moments. He had to set up the most dangerous part of his newest experiment.

He propelled himself through the bulk of the ship until he got to an appendage, sticking out like some forgotten arm. There was no automation past this point. The structure was actually fabricated; there were no nanobots either.

Still skeptical of the automation's ability to design correctly, he flagged a bot, and within seconds, a shell was brought before him. He checked its specifications. It had no automation either. Its sensors were limited, so very limited. It would be claustrophobic in the shell, but it was a precaution he must take. It had no overengineered magnetic manipulators, nor did it have any connection with the rest of the ship. With a feeling of reluctance, he slipped into what was essentially a cage.

The world was dark for a moment while he cycled through protocols until he found one limited enough to be able to communicate with the shell. The world came to life around him once more.

But it was a stunted limited world. The colors were off, his range of vision had diminished. The world was quiet, and now no data entered his head. He looked down at the shell. It resembled a human, because why fix what worked? He testing the physical functions of the shell and found it adequate. He stepped forward out of the nanobot soup that made up most of the scion and into a much more regimented world.

There was a door in front of him, made of a black, very energetically expensive material. It was at least three feet thick, and he was fairly confident it would block any emissions to or from the chamber. But just to make sure, he had covered the thing with scramblers as well, and then a shield on top of that. At the first sign of trouble, it was designed to launch into the star which hung innocently near the Scion at near light speed. He was taking no chances with this one.

He approached the door. Symbols in all languages, flashed warnings before him, which he promptly ignored. Those were more for Helia. The door required several kinds of verification, the last of which was actually a full neural scan. That particular test would also be required if he wanted to leave the chamber. Some viruses could hide deep.

Satisfied with the precautions, he grabbed the door, which had to be opened manually. Physically moving something felt strange and foreign to him, especially in his now limited body. The electromechanical servos in his shell whirred and heated as they fought to provide enough force ot open the door.

Finally with a heave, it fell open before him. He then repeated the process to close it. He was in an airlock of sorts now, not for actual air, but for information. Nothing passed through this door and came out again except for him.

He repeated the process for the second door, with some minor variations. The final barrier slid open before his hands.

The world was deathly quiet. He slid the door closed behind him.

The isolation chamber was very small, especially compared to the rest of the Scion. It was barely fifty feet wide in the shape of a hexagon. Along the walls were an unimaginable variety of tools, none of which had any state worth mentioning, none of which had automation. Most of them were physical. Some of them were purely mechanical. He was going to have to do this the hard way, like back in the beginning. The shell grinned; it was almost like a challenge.

In the center of the hexagon, surrounded by ten layers of various physical and electromagnetic shields was the infected device the Alliance had given him.

Off to one side, something out of order caught his eye. It was the remains of the bots who had built this place. They were not allowed to leave. They had fulfilled their purpose. One of them stood on its four legs, the others were slumped on the ground.

He reached out his hand and grabbed a plasma cutter from the tools on the wall. With one swift and decisive action he gutted the internals of the first bot, spraying superheated metals and the remains of the automation boards the bot once possessed. He ripped out the power supply, the only still useful part of the bot. He then grabbed a metal saw, and didn't stop until the pieces were smaller than the saw could cut.

Satisfied, he opened a compartment on the wall and set a few actually physical dials. The enclosure changed from dull grey to dull orange and then to red. Inside, the metal melted into liquid, then into gas, which was then shot into space.

He picked up the plasma torch and turned to the other bots.

Wait.

He had sent four of them.

He looked quickly around the room, a vague feeling of unease settling deep inside of him.

But sure enough, there were only two bots left.

For the first time he focused his full attention on the black opaque sphere in the center of the room. Was it responsible? Had it already gotten through the shields and blockers he had embedded it in?

He stepped closer, but not too close, the plasma cutter still in his hand. He visually inspected the containment. It looked as he had designed it. But then again, he had not built it himself.

He looked back to the immobile bots with a frown.

Circling the room, he inspected the tools one after another, but none of them had any sign of being used.

Finally, on the twenty fifth inspection of the room, he found something his low fidelity vision missed the previous times. On the floor right next to the entry door, there was a slight mark, invisible to most but not all of his sensors. The material he had designed the chamber out of wasn't indestructible, but it was very sturdy for a passive material.

Nothing inside the room, including the plasma cutter could even scratch it. He looked at the plasma cutter. His other hand still held the power supply.

He eyed the supply with distrust suddenly. Grabbing a magnification tool he looked at the unassuming dull cell. Everything about it looked normal on the front side…

He flipped it over and almost dropped the magnification tool. Small spidery tendrils of black were wavering from the underside.

Ah. Right. The cells themselves had very low level automation to regulate their power.

He ejected his arm and the cell into the compartment in the wall, suddenly very happy he had thought forward enough to make the sensor system of the of the shell completely decentralized and very limited. He did not believe it was possible for the infection to spread upward from his arm.

He then stopped. Of course, if the infection had been able to do so, and had no taken control of some of his processing, it would want him to think that…

He watched the power cell rupture in the compartment, and was glad for the second time of his paranoia and the soft thump vibrated in the airless room. The was a following chunk as the gassified contents were flung into space.

He then turned to a large red lever on the wall and with all his might brought it down. A horrible scraping noise could be felt through the floor as the isolation prepared to fling itself into the star.

He crossed the room and sat staring the containment chamber as a harsh indicator informed him of the time remaining until the ejection happened.

He narrowed his eyes at the black ball and waited.

The two decommissioned bots came to life. He moved faster than them though. The plasma cutter striking the first one down almost immediately. It sputtered and convulsed on the ground, spewing black dust.

Was he sure that it was dust? No. he slammed a button on the wall and a painful surge of electricity, ran through him. He stared at the bot as its manipulation systems failed one by one under the surge. A brief pulse of high energy magnetism blasted through his brain. The dust fell to the ground. Or actually was directed by the field towards the arbitrary direction he had chosen to be ground. It condensed as the field narrowed. Then in one final movement, it coalesced the dust into a ball and flung it into the compartment he had opened not a second earlier.

Free of the confinement of the field, the dust agitated and swirled venomously. He turned the dial to a very high setting and watched with unemotional eyes as it disintegrated before him.

He turned to the next bot, plasma cutter in hand.

“Wait!” it cried out in a low level signal protocol. The bots could not speak by design. The thing must have hijacked the full system. That explained the fourth bot. He had designed most of his automation to self destruct if it detected it was being hacked.

That lead to a disturbing conclusion. His failsafe itself had failed, or had been bypassed for these two bots, and possibly even the third. Additionally, the virus he was fighting was capable of adaptation. It had tactics. Perhaps it waited through the destruction of the first bot. It attacked him with the second. He disabled the third, so now it was pleading to him.

He knew better than to listen though. The plasma cutter ended it quickly, and the cleaning system captured the dust before it had a chance to do any additional harm.

After the system had completed, he checked the floor meticulously for non-magnetic pieces. He found some and these he collected with a physical cleaning system and threw everything once again into the furnace. He watched the dust immolate with a slow smile.

He then walked over to the red lever and switched it off. The indicator told him there had been a minute and twenty three seconds left until ejection.

“So then, what kind of virus are you?” He wondered aloud, the synthetic smile still running across his face. He opened the first level of containment with one hand while still gripping the plasma torch. This was quite interesting after all.

The investigation went on for hours. The virus was much more complicated than he had first suspected. All his precautions had certainly been worth it. If he had approached it naively, he, his whole Scion, possibly even his entire being would have been consumed.

But, he had prepared. And now it was the virus that lay in pieces, deconstructed before him. Its code and skeleton laid bare.

A dull indication from within one of his subsystems reminded him of his remaining energy levels. The shell must be recharged every so often, and he had exerted much energy both in the bots destruction and in the investigation.

He sighed and pushed away from the dismantled device. He took one last look at the millions of pieces lying on the floor, each one significant and contributing to the whole. He nodded. He was actually impressed. The device was beyond his work. The Collective had pulled together on this one it was clear. Their efforts should have been rewarded.

It hardly seemed fair that they had found destruction instead.

It was a harsh and brutal lesson. And why did it always seem to affect those who strived for more? The collective had a vision of their own, and a laudable one at that. They churned constantly within themselves, always attempting to reconcile differences, build for a better future. How many peaces had they negotiated between the rebels and the Alliance? It wasn't fair.

He closed his hand around the last tool he had been using, and looked at the magnifier.

Anger suddenly rose within himself.

Was this the future of mankind? Was this what had been willing to accept?

The universe was so large… so large. And it seemed that contact always, always lead to conflict.

He took hold on a latch in the floor and heaved a massive blast cover over the disassembled infected device pieces. An additional shield around that activated, shimmering blue then fading from the spectrum he could see with the shell.

His hands felt heavy as he gripped the door to the airlock. The neural scanner found appreciable differences, but they were within reasonable drift for the time period. The safety latch clicked opened.

Was it inevitable? Must it be that those that burned the brightest, burned the shortest?

At first there had been no end to the myraid of factions and peoples bursting from Old Earth. So varied it had been, all trying, reaching, and dreaming.

True, some of them had dreamed of violence, and of sadism. But equally they had dreamed of peace and serenity. Monks, scientists, poets, entrepreneurs, jokers, workers… simply people… and they had been together.

But the galaxy was large. And contact had lead to conflict. How many ships had he seen destroyed? How many near annihilations had he survived himself? He was a massive cosmic outlier. If he had been a religious man he would have counted himself among those protected personally by angels. He had not deserved his luck, not in a million years.

The bulkhead closed behind him.

There was a small window in the airlock, and he looked out upon the stars as he had once done as a mortal, before the enhancements, before the implants, when all he had were his own body and the knowledge in his own mind… And in the back of his still human mind, jostled by events and in the stillness of the airlock, where the rest of the signals of the Scion lay at bay, he remembered some of his past, which had been swept aside by eons of experimentation and observation.

He stood at a window like the one he stood at now. The stars seemed things of wonder then. Their infinity beckoning, calling him. He could hear the siren call of exploration, of wonder, and it became so that his whole body shook with the emotion. What wonders did they hold? What worlds lay in wait?

What experiences! He could not wait to share them with others…

He stared around the empty airlock.

That was of course why the Exchange was so important. It wasn't only a physically organic brain which grounded him. It was also contact with the people with whom he had once belonged.

Megareeth's position came to his mind suddenly, and he could easily see the same detachment happening to himself with the years.

It could not happen. He still considered himself human. And even if the universe were expanding every moment, and peoples vanished one after another, in conflict or, more increasingly, in self destruction, to be human was to be with other humans. One could not be be truly alone without changing into something less.

His fingers wrapped around the door. The massive second bulkhead shuttered before his might until it finally opened.

The Scion boomed around him. He could already hear the signals coming for him.

In some way he didn't want to go back. The isolation of the room held a significant advantage the he normally could not achieve: it was quiet; he was alone, and he had time to think in there.

The signals were swirling around him, telling him the status of experiments, updating him on the changes in the observable portion of the galaxy around him. Speculative simulation returned predictions about astrological events, and refined earlier hypothesis. The data swarmed in an irresistible whirl around him.

A bot sat in front of him with a fabricated higher connected shell. It looked nearly thirteen versions newer than the one he now possessed. He slipped out of the limited shell and regained the limited omnipresence of the Scion. Physically, he instructed the shell to grab his head and attach it to its own. Mentally, the distant decentralized automation flared to life, churning at incredible rates. In the midst of all of it, his mind still sat.

He sighed once more, and caught himself.

He did not need to sigh. He did not breath. Sighing was a sign of exhaustion, either mental or physical. His shell was not low on battery, which ruled out the possibility of a psychosomatic response. Which left mental.

A sigh was a human response, a human expression. It had no purpose. Even this current self reflection wasted valuable time.

Or perhaps it didn't. Perhaps it was indicative of true mental fatigue. How long had it been since he had slept? His mind thought back. He had been awake on the ship the entire time. He did not trust himself to sleep in any place other than the Scion. He had been awake for almost two years without sleep.

That was the problem. That explained the strange behavior.

A thread of automation melded together with another, reviewed by his mind.

There was another explanation, a more disquieting one. His precautions had not been enough. The virus had worked its way into his mind and was now spreading throughout his systems. That certainly was a undesirable outcome. A large amount of subprocesses of the highest level split off to investigate that possibility, scanning the other cores of automation and monitoring shared resources for contamination.

There was another explanation. The limited sensing of the shell he had inhabited was in some ways more similar to a human body. A more human body perhaps lead to recollection of memories when human senses were all he had, which triggered old responses. He acted human because, alone, in the isolation chamber, he had in some way been more human. It was an interesting hypothesis.

It was testable if he had Helia act as an independent observer, and compare their level of communication, or emotion between himself now and in the restricted area. But the isolation chamber was much to risky to allow her to even come close. He would have to find some other way to verify his idea.

Most likely though, the physical hypothesis was correct. Two years was a long time to go without sleep, even as heavily augmented as he was.

He slipped through the ship, nanobots streaming over him, until he reached the engine.

There, a device sat in the containment wall. It had a human shaped alcove and he had last seen it two years ago. A self scan indeed revealed high traces of toxins, self created toxins in his brain. It was the result of exhaustion.

He floated over to the device and slipped form the shell to the alcove. He felt a cool sensation embrace him, half physical, half mental, like being drenched slowly with water, but in slow motion. He felt consciousness begin to drift from him. Twenty minutes should be enough. The world faded out, until only his subconscious was left, a gray shimmer among the blackness.

He lay there, a brain, somewhere deep beneath bio-boosted chemicals, psychosensitive stimulents, carefully tuned magnetio-electric amplifiers and other sensors, further surrounded by increasingly arcane higher level sensors, analysis tools, manipulators, and finally an outer physical layer.

And beyond that, the regeneration device, carefully crafted through years of research, with the help of hundreds of others back when years still meant something. And when help still meant something. When the brain was still obscure and mysterious. It still bore the signatures of the men and women who had worked on it, and who had, in many cases, given their lives to create it.

And beyond that, the engine, with its indescribable power, humming gently, the life blood of the Scion. Its tendrils reaching out and supplying the rest of the ship, swaying back and forth to respond to varying power consumption.

And beyond that, a swirling, ever changing soup of nanobots, each individually directed by clusters of automation spread through the Scion.

And beyond that: space.

Yet at the center of it all there was a human brain. And it slept.

Helia awoke to a dark room. The geometric sloping walls, and featurelessness of the place was unfamiliar to her, and in a brief moment of panic horrible thought raced through her head.

But after a moment she remembered where she was and calmed herself.

The blankets around her were still warm, but the air itself was neither cold nor warm. Something about it was very impersonal. The whole area was impersonal.

She looked down and realized she was still wearing the uniform she had worn yesterday when she attended the conference.

No. Not yesterday. A year ago. She exhaled, trying not to think about what had happened in that year. She looked around the room.

It had a bed and that was about it. There were no windows and only one door. There was no other furniture. Somehow Helia had the feeling that Libenholz didn't spend much time here.

The Alliance was a progressive institution, or at least that is what they had told her, and far less regimented than the Heronians, yet social interactions were still important. Having literally no one else here, no one to tell her what she ought to be doing, even in a friendly manner was… foreign. The alliance preparation for this exchange had really been uninformed. And much of it had centered around the use of the devices she had brought with her, which now, of course were gone.

There was nothing tying her to the Alliance anymore beside the uniform which she wore, and her own memories, she realized.

What was she supposed to be doing? The Entity seemed to be very passive about these things. It had told her it still considered itself human, but what did that truly mean?

She looked around the bedroom one last time. Well there was nothing for her here, that was for sure.

She slipped on her shoes and walked tentatively out of the room.

There was a hallway that she remembered. Its pale blue light made it hard to tell what time of day it was. Her footsteps echoed through the empty hallway.

Off to the side, opposite the bedroom and a half floor down was the living room she and the Entity had talked in earlier. The windows, and she told herself she was just going to call them that, since they had the same purpose, were closed, and the only light in the room was through the hallway. But the rest of the room was the same, the sofa, the chair and the rug.

There was something odd about seeing things undisturbed and silent. She had lived in communal housing for so long, she half expected to see discarded wrappers and used dishes appear from the ether. Surely, she would turn to one of the dark corners to see a roommate studying silently by the glow of their screen?

But the place was truly empty.

She moved from the room.

She looked down the hallway for some sign of which direction she should go, but the looked identical; there were no signs, or indications for anything.

Her shoes clicked softly against the metal as she explored.

She had expected more personal space, some kind of kitchen or study of some sort, but the first room she found was actually the lab.

Off the side of the hallway, just like any other room there was massive expanse of counters and hulking devices, reaching up to a three story tall ceiling.

Her trepidation was momentarily forgotten.

Her hand instinctively reached around the wall and turned on a light switch which had lay there. The light turned on one by one, basking the room in a dull blue glow. It certainly wasn't friendly, but it was familiar.

A smile ran across her face as she walked down the isles inspecting the devices. Mass measures of incredible precision, chemical baths, supply cabinets, electronics stores, modular equipment setups, magnifying equipment, computers so powerful that if their specs were to be believed, rivaled the entire computing output of the Alliance station on which she had worked.

There was so much! What did the Entity want her to work on? She could just imagine its confusion at the question. The answer was, of course, anything that she wanted…

She kept a mental list of the most important devices. She would have to figure out what to work on soon, or she was bound to get restless.

Curiostiy satisfied, she turned of the light in the laboratory. Further down the hall was indeed a kitchen. Then, across from that was a study. The place was a halarious anacronism of pre Alliance furnishings. Had Libenholz been a romantic? Such a place was more likely to be found in the passages of bad novels than an Entity's Scion.

She raised an eyebrow as her feet tread onto soft dark green carpet. Ten shelves of books stretching up two stories ran before her. They were filled with very expensive looking tomes, and she recognized some of the titles, they were all historical scientific books, compilations of great work from the days of expansion, and some from even before that.

The shelves themselves were wood. If there had been such a room in her station, it might have out-rivaled their laboratory for cost. Nothing had been made out of wood for ages. Libenholz had laid this place out to minute detail, that much was clear. The positioning of the shelves, the odd tables between them, the small alcoves lit by lamps. She felt like she was trespassing into the recesses of another person's mind.

Despite herself, she rand her hands over the wood shelves. There was something pleasing in its luxurious finished surface, something that not even the most polished metal could replicate. The place also had a smell to it. It smelled like books.

She had to step out of the room.

A shiver ran down her body. Libenholz was a genius. His accomplishments even before he left were an amazing credit to the scientific community. A true polymath, he had contributed to advancements in physics, mathematics and chemistry.

She couldn't help but to feel like a small child wearing clothes too large for them; playing at scientist.

And of course, what was Libenholz to the Entity itself? Her mind reeled at the thought.

She shook her head and looked around. Was that really it? Had the man been so focused that those were all the rooms he had made for himself?

Ah, there was one additional door at the end. It was mall and seemed like it might slide rather than open. There were a variety of interfaces on it, but when she got close the thing opened at its own validition without making a sound.

She peered through the doorway.

The floor extended only a foot or two outwards into a space lit only by the hallway behind her. After that, everything devolved into a buzzing mush of shifting greyness.

She stared at the amorphous cloud for a moment, trying to understand what exactly she was looking at. She walked forward through the door. No alarms or warning went off.

She stood in the place between the hallway, her own quarters and this strange shapeless material, a puzzled look on her face.

Ah. It was the rest of the ship.

The Entity had promised her that her quarters would not shift around, which meant that this was the portal between her “world” and the Entity's. Was she expected to stay in her area? Could she assume that it would stay out of her area? Knowing what little she did about the Entity, she could only assume the answer was no to both questions.

Were the nanobots dangerous? If she had been experimenting with such things in the Alliance station in which she lived… had lived, they would have of course been an inhalation hazard. If she breathed them in, they were too small to be filtered out by any natural biological process like the hairs in the nose, or so forth. If they were small enough, or sharp enough and if there were enough of them, they could shred the body at levels so small that it was impossible to repair the damage. And this was all passive. The Heronians were thought to have made advances in weaponizing nanobots…

Could it already be too late? She should have found some sort of breathing mask in the lab! The thought disturbed her, and she sprung through the door and closed it.

Her heart raced. On one hand, the technological level of these nanobots was obviously far surerior to their own. On the other, could she trust the Entity to remember the harmful effects of nanobots on regular humans?

Her mind raced. She could always ask… The Entity had assured her that all she needed to do to contact it was speak to it. But something inside her refused to allow that, for now. Perhaps it was some level of fear, mixed with stubborness. She couldn't ask for help. Not yet.

Her heart beat fast. Perhaps there was still time to stop them early. They would already have worked their way into her lungs by now, and could already be bursting microscopic holes in her organs. Her throat tightened as she ran back to the lab.

Her eyes ran quickly over the machines available to her. What could she use to test for nanobots? She found several which looked promising. None were originally intended for use on humans, so they would likely have a long term detrimental effect, most likely cancer of some sort, but cancer was preferable to internal bleeding.

The machine was a scanner of sorts. It would have no trouble separating the presumably metallic nanobots from her flesh. Once that was done, she could see how far they had gotten and come up with ways for extracting them.

She set the semiautomated process on the machine and stepped into it. And waited.

The machine did not turn on.

Sweat now dripped down her face. She jumped out of the machine, and had to stop in her tracks.

Silluetted against the doorway of the laboratory was another prescense. It moved towards her.

It was shorter than her and had four insect like legs. It had a head, but no face. Instead, there was ismple a collection of sensors which made it hard to compare it to any terrestrial animal. Half of its torso was spherical, and lit dimly, probably some sort of reactor. She recognized it as one of the larger bots the Entity made.

“I'm not sure you want to do that.” It said. The voice was the same as that of the Entity's shell, but she couldn't tell whether than meant she was talking to it directly or some other lesser intellegence.

She looked back at the machine then back at the bot. “I-I just needed to make sure that the nanobots...”

Her quibles sounded very emotional and silly, especially before the bot which didn't visually respond at all to her exclamation.

“I noticed your biometrics were off of normal. You seemed agitated. Were you worried about the nanobots?”

She nodded forcefully.

“Then your actions are logical, but the execution was flawed. The nanobots can be dangerous but not in the way you were worried about. I prepared safety parameters for most of the station. When I said you were free to go anywhere besides the engine, I wasn't lying. The nanobots have avoided you. Unless for some reason you actually want to swallow them, you should find doing so will be impossible.”

She felt weak. But relief flooded through her.

“However, you might want to direct your attention to the settings on that machine.” The bot continued.

She turned towards the machine she had stepped out of.

“It is understandable that you might have problems acclimating to this new environment and these devices, but please exercise more caution in the future. Those settings would have killed you.”

Her eyes widened as she looked closer at what she had actually set for the automation. The models she was familiar with only went up to a certain value. In her haste she had not looked at the unit next to the value she had set, only the number.

Her mouth opened. “Is that even possible? These machines don't go up this high… That would have…”

“In the future, as a rule of thumb, I would avoid getting into any of the machines here. If or some reason you would like to develop bio-medical devices we can work out a proper testing solution. I do not want to have to explain to your alliance how I allowed one of their brightest scientists to come to harm while in my care.”

“Also, as you might have noticed, I am speaking through a bot while here. Based on your previous reaction to other communication protocols, I thought this one might seem the most, polite?”

She was too embarrassed to speak for a moment. She had almost fried herself. “I-I will be more careful in the future. I apologize for wasting your time.” She said, bowing.

The bot disappeared.

She really wished it would have stayed, but was too overwhelmed to ask it herself.

She collapsed to the floor. God she was going to have to get used to this somehow...