**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.