Untold energy surged through innumerable conduits, all softly glowing, the lifeblood of the massive ship. A man, small compared to the cyclopean structure of the engine walked slowly through the superstructure. All the sights were familiar to him. Every crack and every cable had a place. The sounds his labored footsteps made against cold pulsing metal. The steady hum of the antimatter engine, its massive cylindrical bulk towering above him several stories.

As a force of habit he stopped at a small screen and wiped the dust from it, frowning slightly. How many years had it been since he was last here? It seemed so recent. Had it been so long? The years were running from him. And an additional sadness stretched in front of him, the interminable march of eons.

He put the thought out of his head for a moment and looked at the screen. All the readouts were stable. There was enough fuel for centuries. Centruries. Millenia. The ship was ready for immortality, as it always had been. He had built it of himself. It was his scion. Perhaps that was why it was so familiar.

He was out of the engine room. He wasn't sure when he had left the room. It was unimportant. His subconscious processes were thoroughly debugged. He could probably lie dormant for those centuries, wait so he could oversee the refueling. It was a rare event. But interesting? Probably not.

He yearned for the new and the unique but instead he was entombed in the known. If he could lie silent as the universe passed around him, what was the point his consciousness at all? Could he just dream away? He had heard, at some point in his life he had become aware of the fact that some like him did just that. Barely alive really. Hulks of Scions, merely husks, floating alone in the cosmos, never to awaken, for to do so would subject the owners with that pure existential dread that only living brought. You never had to truly think if all you did was dream.

But he had his own dreams. Or at least he thought he did. Processes so deep that they were no longer enumerated. Had they worked their way into the very living fabric of his brain? Were they that important? Were his dreams so pervasive? They were. He could feel it now, the urge. Sleep would not do.

The world slammed into being around him. He was truly conscious now. Every second a second. Every minute a minute. He cursed himself for wasting such time. There were things to do. They were not going to get done without him. Automation could only stretch so far, and he had never...trusted? He had never…understood? A minor memory malfunction. He had never been one to give his responsibilities to another. To see his dreams fulfilled by another? Even of his own making? The definition of hell. Everything would drop through, the dread would return.

He must be active, it was his own dreaming. It was how he filled the years. No purpose only than its own. His purpose was the comforting ouroboros of science, of learning. Perhaps it was because of all the things, all the pursuits that could exist, it was as infinite as himself, as the years that he had and would have. No end. The universe stretched around him. Its emptiness called and he answered.

He got to work.

It was all new. It was all sublime. The experiments had unknowable results. All unique. No one was doing what he was doing, he was pretty sure. His scion was and had collected thousands of samples from the nebula around itself. And now he pondered its makeup in the most intimate room on the ship, his lab.

The smallest room, it consisted of inert metal walls, simple and unadorned. It didn't even run the length of the ship. Had it been its own ship? Was this his childhood? It didn't matter. Instruments surged around him, every one in its place. A grid stretching as far as his unaugmented eyes could see, each one connected to the Scion's computational fabric.

The results were… good? Surprising certainly. Levels were altogether unexpected. A smile played across his face, and some part of him realized how significant that was: that he could still smile.

The results were analyzed methodically, minute precision, no gaseous stone left unturned. Then millions of hypothesis were created instantly. Why? What a beautiful question. His mind surged. He was in his element.

And suddenly the answer came. The hundreds of models collapsed into a handful based on the new data. The creation of the nebula, its constituent parts, its future (if undisturbed) all became clear. And in doing to, everything dropped through.

He walked the cold hallways alone, mentally cursing the inane outcome. So simple and so clear. So boring. Was this what he would spend his life on? Analyzing countless phenomena? He had found some secrets, but always one in a million. Could he not send drones for the rest? Ah, he had already. One of his threads reconnected with his main processor: the results of thirty nine other phenomena spilling into his head.

One or two looked interesting. Certainly unique, but worthy of the decades of travel needed to get there? Or the energy expenditure? Probably not.

But what was worthy nowadays? More theoretical exploits? He had already stretched his knowledge to the limits of what he was willing to experiment with in or around the Scion. Perhaps he would have to dispatch another drone to test some of the more exotic theories.

Another thread merged with his consciousness. He stopped in the triangular hallway as the merging process took over his cognitive functions for an instant.

Oh. There was something he had left for it to do. He called up an image of the space surrounding the Scion. The mental image of the environs trickled into his mind, thermal data, electromagnetic sweeps coalescing into some super-mental whole.

He realized the second reason he was at the nebula. The Conference.

The tiny speck of a station hung in the deep space outside the nebula. He remembered it vaguely. It lay dormant most of the time, under no one's jurisdiction. He had agreed to dispatch a drone to it early to perform maintenance before the Conference.

But now it was time. It looked like one of Megareeth's clones was there. The other entity had been coming in person less and less frequently. Some cursory scans revealed only two other ships. Curious. One, a large and crude affair, belonged to the Heronians. So those brutes were still around. The other belonged to the Stellar Alliance.

He was somewhat surprised and a bit disappointed to see no trace of the Ebrin Collective. Of the few “neighbors” he had in this part of the galaxy, they had been the faction with the most similar interests to his own.

Another thread merged.

Ah, they had been destroyed by some bio weapon or experiment? That was a shame, some of their research in nano-biotics surpassed his own knowledge.

There was further clarification. The Stellar Allaince had not been doing so well. Apparently the remnants of the Ebrin Collective had *become* some sort of malign bionanite-synthetic virus? That was certainly a development. Well, he had warned them about instability among the nanobots.

He expressed some annoyance at the thread's timing, and searched the record to see how many more were still unpooled. That was the last one. Good. He still thought it rude to talk to other entities or factions with less than his full self. Megareeth's decision not to come in person was a bit insulting.

He mentally prepared a couple thousand settings both on his own body and the Scion and boarded the small craft.

For the first time in nearly a century, he left the Scion.

He could still feel it in the back of his mind as passive sensors and sweeps performed from its array's broadcast themselves continuously to his main processor, but there was an infinitesimal delay which he observed growing as he left the ship. The speed of light was always an enemy of his.

He connected with the neutral station and departed his own craft. The dull bulkhead of the station was a stark difference from the power churning mind circuits of the Scion, and he had to remember that these factions still thought of ships and computers as two different things.

In a moment of nostalgia, he reached out a hand to the wall, and experienced the readings from his tactile sensors. It was still mostly steel alloy. He had specifically told the drone to only repair the station using ancient technology. He knew better than to let any of the factions, especially the Heronians, have any of his research.

Sounds and activity on his sensors told him that the other delegates were all already there in the main room. Tearing himself away from the ordinary wall, he walked down the narrow hallway and into the delegate chamber.

It was nearly three stories tall and circular. All dull metal, lit diffusively from small glow lights in the ceiling, it was arranged so that any number of factions or entities could be assembled there, each with its own slice of the circle. In the middle lay a raised oval podium where the head of each delegation sat. Behind that were four rows of seats for the lesser delegates. Being an entity, rather than a faction he had expected his section to be empty, as it always was.

When he walked into the room however, he was surprised to see the drone he had dispatched. It had placed itself and three smaller drones it had apparently fabricated to help it, on the seats. Peculiar. He had to look carefully at its programming. Centuries of isolation and the ability to reprogram itself always lead to the possibility of it developing actual intelligence. He was usually more careful than that.

Despite that annoyance, he let the drone have its fun for now, purposeful or not. He glanced around the room. The Stellar Alliance had seated itself to his immediate left, their plain clothed representatives accompanied with several of their young ones, presumably for their cultural exchange program. He would have deal with that later.

Their main diplomat happened to be the son of the man who had met with him last time, and the young human clearly recognized him. The blue, grey and brown suited representative bowed to him. He acknowledged the gesture but didn't give the representative any false hope. He liked to stay well clear of any inter-factional politics. It was a waste of computational potential.

The Heronians had set up opposite the Stellar Alliance, a move which was not lost on him. There was no love lost between the two, even if the interdiction of the Conference had usually kept things civil between the two factions. The Grandmaster's second in command approached him and apologized that the Grandmaster himself was not able to attend. It seemed there were several rebellions that had to be taken care of.

At the mention of the rebellions, his sensors detected a quick transition of focus onto the Stellar Representatives. Politics remained politics it seemed.

He thanked the representative, casually observing the other man's deep bow and show of deference. The Heronians were aware of his dislike of their tactics and were as always, eager to keep him from any reason for interfering, not that he had in recent millennia.

Megareeth was inscrutable as always, her bulbous clone oozing in its corner, distinctly between the two factions, as always a disinterested observer, even compared to himself. He knew how the other three factions had thought of Megareeth. There was something to be said about keeping a human form, even if it was just to communicate with other human factions. He seriously believed that Megareeth's love of xenobiology outweighed any connection she still had left to her once compatriot race. At the same time, he respected her neutrality and devotion to her work.

He had asked to share research once or twice, but had been rejected each time. That was not a problem, the method of communication between them would have been challenging at best. Megareeth's biotic Scion was large and complex, but the two would have worked for months to establish a convention for the transfer. It was possible that the two entities had forgotten how to work with others. So they worked alone.

Conspicuously absent of course was the Ebrin Collective. Their composite yet talkative provost generals would have almost certainly have attempted to engage him in conversation by now. He felt a bit of loss staring at their barren section to his right.

The stellar alliance's representative, whose name his Scion had dug out of their databases, called the meeting to order. The Stellar Alliance, despite rocky starts was a descendant of a descent of a faction from Earth and attempted to maintain equanimity between all the entities and factions in this part of the rim, and it had been them to put this hole Conference together.

That being said, Gareth son of Road, the current representative, was no doubt aware of his father's attempts to destabilize the Heronians, even as they supplied him weapons.

It was this same Gareth who now spoke.

“Assembled factions and entities. I would like to cordially thank you for attending the hundredth Conference of the outer rim.”

The Heronians who apparently had wanted to to begin the ceremony, especially for such a significant occasion, were visually annoyed, but quieted down as their Grandmaster Second stood before the podium.

He himself, tried to look attentive. Body language was not purposeful or reflective of thought when one's processors were as abstracted as his, but appearances still mattered with a humanoid body. Megareeth on the other hand merely burbled forward. He detected intense bioelectric signatures coming from the mass, so at least it was listening or thinking about something. Or fabricating something, or procreating. He could never tell with such heavily engineered organics. They were not his strong suit.

He was somewhat surprised to gain four additional data feeds from the drones behind him, each of which focused on one of the delegations, the odd one out doubling down on Megareeth, presumably out of some base interest. He had not requested the gesture, but it allowed him to focus all his sensors on the current speaker, which in turn allowed him to read the man's facial features as a higher level of detail.

The man seemed to feel some emotion at continuing his father's work, yet was troubled by something. He had started the ceremony out of requirement. He had something… to ask of them. He waited for the man to come out with it himself.

“… An auspicious time and yet also an inauspicious one. No doubt you will notice the lack of representatives from the Ebrin Collective. You all should have received warnings and reports from our efforts to contain the… thing that had emerged from its remains.”

They had lost several planets. Worse yet, each loss seemed to contribute to their foe's strength. It seemed to spread like some horrible virus from planet to planet.

“Our engineers and scientists are working on containment solutions, but such research is being conducted in our core worlds. We estimate it will take a decade before such implements can be brought to bear, during which time, at least twenty additional planets and orbitals will be in danger.”

“I will not lie or bend the truth here. This is an enemy we didn't expect, striking much closer and harder to our core planets than we have prepared for.”

A smirk came over the Grandmaster Second. “Somewhat like a rebellion, no?”

Gareth ignored the interjection and focused instead on Megareeth and himself.

“We had thought that you two, with your impressive knowledge of both biotics and nano technology could perhaps come up with something much faster than we could?” He left the question hang in the air, hopefully.

Well. They certainly were pressed if they were coming to entities for help. Entities rarely even interacted with factions or each other, let alone directly helped one another. It was an unspoken rule that everyone was on their own, even in such a heavily populated place like the rim.

He and Megareeth started speaking at the same time. If it could be called speaking.

“I must..” He stopped as Megareeth powered her way through. The air hummed with bioelectric residuals, and the communication devices around the room blared out static for a moment, before communicating an incomprehensible voice. It said several things rapidly in ancient tongues, its tone changing with each. Finally, perhaps by judging the reaction of the representatives around the room, settled onto the current dialect.

“I believe that to be impossible Representative Gareth. I must regret to inform you that the Main Host is over three light years distant from this place at the moment.” The voice was not what he remembered. Once, Megareeth had kept the timbre of a human if not quite the body of one. Now it was a gurgling, booming voice, more male than female.

“Additionally, the introduction of nanites into the Symbotic Realm is a despicable abomination of science. I have been asked to pass on Megareeth Prime's condolences, but such research is outside her purview.”

Such zealotry was still surprising. Megareeth had in the past couple of centuries, departed substantially from her core form, splicing in new and interesting organisms. While doing so, she seemed to have lost some of her scientific objectivity, or sanity. Or both. Was there still something that could be called a person in there?

She knew he still clung to his biological brain as part of his main processor, even if heavily augmented. Was this what would become of him if he automated that part away as well? The part of him that still recognized such emotions shuttered. Perhaps there were lines that shouldn't be crossed, not because of some philosophical or religious sentiment, but because things became unstable.

He had warned the Ebrins as much. Too many foci of computation, all churning away. One of them was bound to malfunction at some point. Without the proper safeguards, the whole network…

Well, that was Megareeth's reply. Gareth looked disappointed, although not crushed. He apparently expected this outcome, but had been hoping for something better.

“What of you then?” Gareth asked the clone. “Prime may be out of reach, but your help would be invaluable in our efforts.”

There was a small pause. Megareeth did not like differentiating between her clones and her regular self. Perhaps Gareth didn't know that.

“This form is not stable, as you can see. My purpose was merely to communicate Megareeth's interests at this Conference. Full biotic breakdown is expected within two weeks, just enough time to complete the chrysalis which I will send back.”

Instability among her clones was new as well. Perhaps there would be one further delegation missing next century.

“Then what is the point of coming yourself?” One of the Stellar Alliance representatives argued from behind Gareth.

Gareth turned around quickly and silenced him.

“Please ignore my well intentioned colleague. He is simply worried about the people on the planets in danger. I apologize for the intrusion.”

Megareeth, or rather her clone, said nothing, but backed slowly away from the podium.

He was going to announce his intentions next, but the Heronians spoke up first, the second such intrusion.

“We… Recognize the… precarious position of the Stellar Alliance. Indeed, it is an unenviable one, especially as your second fleet was apparently very close to the Ebrin Collective.” He assumed the representative meant proximity wise, as the shared collective consciousness of the Collective was wildly foreign to the individualist nature of the Stellar Alliance.

“However, we too have own own thorns in our side. The Grandmaster is, as we speak, committed to wiping out the last of the rebels that have destabilized some of our systems. Unfortunately, because of this, as our resources are directed elsewhere, we will not be able to contribute to your efforts.” The Grandmaster Second said, bowing to Gareth.

He noticed a slight imperceptible smile on the Grandmaster Seconds face as he did so. The refusal was clearly a tit for tat arrangement.

Again, Gareth did not look too surprised by the reply, but feigned disappointment.

“Am I also to assume that the requested cruisers can no longer be delivered as ordered?” Gareth asked, addressing the Grandmaster Second.

“There you are mistaken my friend. The cruisers are indeed close to completion and will be delivered. Unfortunately, due to rebel activity in some of our construction ports, we thought it best to do a full diagnostic of all the major systems before we delivered them. We wouldn't want any malfunctions!” He said, again hiding a smile.

This seemed the affect Gareth more than the refuel of explicit help. A second long grimace passed over his face until he locked down his composure once more.

“That is much appreciated. And can I inquire as to how long these diagnostics will take?” He said, in a much too nice of a voice.

“Well, Representative Gareth, the cruisers you requested are top of the line. Such a process will take nearly a year and a half due to their complicated designs. But as your father requested, they will be only the best.”

“I see.” Gareth sputtered, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead. There was only one person left to ask.

“I will agree to study the Ebrin's technology, assuming I can come up with the proper safeguards. Do you have an example of their implant?” He said, not waiting for Gareth to ask him.

Gareth actually looked surprised for a moment.

“You will?” He stammered.

“Yes. Provided you can give me a sample. If possible I would like to see an… infected version and a regular version. I have the schematics, but it would help to have a physical product. If I remember, there was a subtlety to their construction that I may not be able to produce quickly.”

“That… That can be arranged. We luckily were able to obtain a handful of uninfected implants from a cell on the far reaches. The infected kind we have more than enough. I presume your systems are centuries past our own, but I would still caution you to keep the infected copy detached from your main systems. They have some sort of malign intelligence even isolated.”

He nodded, a gesture he did consciously, timing the descent of his head and the duration. He had forgotten such passive social gestures, but did not forget their importance in conversation. Besides, he was aware of some very interesting alcubierre style warp drive research that the Alliance was just starting. While he had mature versions of this technology, he was interested in their approach on the topology and energy management. He would make a trade with them.

The representatives behind Gareth talked among themselves quickly and one ran off in the direction of their docked ship, presumably to obtain the sample.

The Heronians looked peeved, although they tried to hide it. They had bargained on completely isolating the Alliance. Too bad. They could stand to be a bit disappointed.

Megareeth stood, or lay, which ever one, silently. He presumed he would get nothing out of her and mentally dismissed the clone from his mind.

Pleased with the turn of events, and satisfied with the outcome, Gareth redirected conversation to more mundane topics, treaties, scraps of news from more distant factions and entities. It was only at this time that he allowed his threads to wander again. Some went back to his ship and restarted their research, others looked a bit more closely at the drones behind him.

Annoyingly, the drones displayed some reluctance at letting him access to their core files, moving around data and purposely obfuscating parts in order to make it harder. He withdrew, suspicions confirmed.

Finally the affair was over. The hundredth Conference was a rousing success, apparently, despite there being less participants than any other in history.

The Heronians were bowing to him, and he surprised them by making a tiny response in return.

An Alliance aide whispered something into Gareth's ear.

“Ah! I almost forgot. The intercultural exchange. Are all participants still willing?”

The Heronians talked among themselves for a moment before the Grandmaster Second nodded his head slowly.

“Provided that you can assure the safety of our ward even during your… conflict. It would be very unfortunate if anything were to happen to him. Artisail, you are free to go.”

A young man bowed deeply to the Grandmaster Second and walked to a pre-agreed representative.

An older man, evidently a foundry expert, crossed to the other side and silently stood next to the other Heronians. They seemed to already know him somehow, and surprisingly there was some measure of respect the displayed towards him.

Megareeth sent no representatives to any of the other factions. Their use of electronics, and artificial intelligence was insufferable to her, apparently. However, a team of three Alliance biochemists present were assured by the rumbling clone that they were welcome, provided that they protected themselves from the toxic environment of the bio Scion Main Host and agreed to abandon their craft and any technology upon contact.

The fact that they would have to spend almost a decade in cold sleep apparently didn't phase them, or perhaps they had known already. Such devotion was admirable, especially for those for whom immortality was still an impossibility. But was cold sleep really any different from his own passive state? He would think about it later.

And finally his own transfer. A child. They were sending him a child. The last transfer had been a venerable scientist who had quietly conducted his own research, and even refused to return the to Alliance until he passed of old age on board the Scion. Although the man apparently had been one of the most brilliant of their scientists, even he could only help on small projects that he had conducted.

Eventually the older man had admitted that he was having trouble following the research and withdrew to conduct his own. It had been a good arrangement. The man was not troublesome. They hardly had ever communicated, and when they had, it was about research. He had expected something similar.

But no.

In front of him was an obviously shy brown haired girl. She must have been no older than twenty. What on earth were they thinking?

He simply did not answer for a moment, while he tried to understand their position. Gareth, trying to understand his own reaction kept on telling him how brilliant she was, and how she had been a savant from a young age.

Sure, that was what he said. Was this some political play? Of humiliating him in front of the others? He didn't care about such things, or even the fact that she was young, but the fact remained that some of his experiments were quite dangerous, deadly even. He was quite looking forward getting his hands on their warp drive research. If their ward accidentally stuck her arm through, for instance, a large field of intense ionizing radiation, who was to say that they would still hand it over?

These thoughts surged through his head until he came up with a solution. He would simply accept the surprise, and return the favor.

“Ah, of course. Helia, your presence is expected. I have had the opportunity to review some of your research on condensed matter. I believe this opportunity will be mutually beneficial.” He said, motioning towards the hatch where his smallcraft lay.

She timidly took several steps forward, looking backwards at a group of people who he assumed were her family or guardians of some sort.

She started toward him. His sensors told him she was a bit frightened of his appearance. Something about that reaction surprised him.

“Of course it is a cultural *exchange*.” He said, stopping.

The Heronians and Megareeth had already left.

Gareth looked up, surprised. The man was and looked tired. He put on a diplomatic face though, all smiles.

“Uhh yes. Do you have someone you would like to put under the care of the Alliance? I was not aware there were...” He paused, evidently trying to think of the diplomatic way of saying something, “… others of you?” His voice lifted at the end, and it was clear he was confused. Good. Let them puzzle over this.

“No. Not someone. Those drones.” There was a confused broadcast from the main drone.

He had surprised two parties it seemed. Served them right.

“It seems that I had been inattentive. These drones have evolved on their own. They now display some sort of rudimentary intelligence. I have no idea how they have done so ...” he lied, “… or the extent of their consciousness if they have any, but I imagine that your scientists would be interested in observing such a peculiarity.”

The drones sent him some duplicitous fawning promises of increasing productivity, and mental processing. He was unconvinced. Automation was one thing, but he did not trust many other intelligences, biological or artificial. He refused to allow any strong AI develop among his drones ever since a bad encounter with one that had evolved previously. They had a habit of becoming unstable.

Gareth, still confused, agreed to the transfer, and some representatives took the drones.

He transmitted the drones their orders, not waiting for their reply and bid Helia to follow him. There was much work to do.