

The Shadow Behind the Sun

By

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The Mirona was an old ship, that was true, but the escape pod he'd been forced to enter was positively ancient, not even original to the aged ship. It had to be reclaimed salvage, possibly from damage. Or even worse, never retrieved from where it had crashed until his cheapskate captain had found it amongst some depressing debris. That was a route he didn't want his thoughts to go too far down, so he settled on it being perfectly good but outdated and sold on the used market. It didn't give him as much confidence or comfort as he'd hoped.

On his knees in front of the limited controls, he could still see out of the window, where stars gently spun in front of him. What kind of escape pod had a window anyway? It seemed secure enough and was probably as strong as the rest of the hull, but that wasn't saying much. The whole concept was positively archaic. Instruments should offer everything and more than a window could. A glance back down made him snort. The panels actually offered pathetically little.

Once more, he tried to unlock the controls, but they thwarted him even in their simplicity. At least the thrusters had finally stopped firing. He didn't know if the fault had fixed itself, or if the pod had exhausted its fuel supply. In theory, the thrusters should only have fired long enough to jet him clear of the ship and then handed manual control over to him. Instead, they'd never quit, blasting continuously, and accelerating him further and further from the Mirona.

He took a deep breath to keep calm. It had the opposite effect, making him wonder how long he'd be able to do that if he was stuck in here for any length of time. An extra oxygen supply might not be available in this junky old craft. Maybe the breathable air that was contained in this cramped space was all he had. With nervous thoughts of pressing time, he tried again to key in some commands, but the computer rebuked him with an angry noise each time, refusing to cooperate. Well, he was an engineer, not a pilot. Even if he had been a pilot, who knew if anyone alive today could have made sense of this ancient tech.

It hadn't seemed like too big a deal at first. A section of the Mirona had sealed off due to a breach. It happened to be the very section he'd been working in at the time. While it was all well and good for everyone else, safe in the more frequented areas of the ship, it left him stuck down in the bowels that were bleeding oxygen out into the vacuum, with no way to override the safety locks and open the access hatch that led back to the main body of the ship. The solution was simple, the captain had said—just pop into the escape pod and once he'd jettisoned, they'd swing around and pick him up, using the bay on the opposite side where the hatch to the rest of the ship was accessible. It would be quicker, easier, and safer than using a suit, he'd assured him, and easier to find him in the darkness of the void.

It had sounded good, but that was before the engines on the pod had ran and ran, meaning that instead of free-floating nearby, he'd shot further and further away from where the captain and crew expected to find him. Strapped safely into one of the three seats, expecting to have nothing to do except wait for rescue, it had taken him some time to question what was happening. When it dawned on him, he'd freed himself from the harness and took up his current position, kneeling in front of the tiny control panel right in front of the surprising window, trying to shut down the engines, call up the Mirona, and eventually just try to get some readings that made some kind of sense. Enough to tell him where he was and what the pod was playing at at least. He'd failed at all of them.

Eventually, with a ragged and uneven wheeze and gasp, the thrusters had shut off by themselves, leaving the pod spinning languidly, yet still travelling at the same speed in its outward velocity. It didn't make a whole lot of sense.

If he could trust what he believed the readings were telling him, and he wasn't sure that he could, there was something nearby; something that was growing steadily closer. He'd first noticed it about ten minutes ago, spirits lifting with the belief that it was the Mirona. His relief had been fleeting, chased away by the realisation that his motion had been forward and the object in question was ahead of him, not coming from behind and catching up to him as his ship would have been.

Another look at the screens, assuming he was interpreting correctly what he was looking at, showed that the small escape pod was veering slightly to the left, taking it directly toward whatever was out there in that great expanse. Since the engines had stopped and he should technically be aimlessly drifting, this change in angle of his trajectory meant that the *whatever* had a significant gravitational presence. That was odd. The Mirona had been nowhere near any planets or stars when he'd entered the bay to patch up the old girl yet again on her interstellar meanderings.

As best as he could figure, he should be able to see whatever was out there soon. The tumbling pod would bring it into view sooner rather than later. He quit fiddling with the unresponsive control panel and leant forward to peer out the window — ironically the most reliable instrument he had at his disposal now.

He watched, leaning to one side, anxiously trying to catch as early a glimpse as possible. His fingers rubbed at his furrowed brow as he realised he must have been mistaken. There was nothing out there in the darkness of deep space; no planets, no asteroids, no undefinable masses, no crafts...only...wait, yes. The glorious celestial landscape beyond the glass didn't look quite right. As the pod continued its slow rotation and forward motion, he could see the paths of some of the stars distorting, as if manipulated by some unseen force. There was something there, something too small to see, but something with an enormous gravitational well, since it appeared to be lensing the light from behind.

That could only mean one thing that he knew of: some type of miniature black hole. Except, as far as he understood it, any black hole on that scale would evaporate quickly due to Hawking Radiation, so that was impossible. Yet with that kind of gravitational strength, it had to be...

An alarm blasted around him, seeming to come from every direction in the small craft, making him jump. Frantic now, he turned his attention back to the control panel, desperate in his attempt to interpret whatever it was showing him. There was probably a more useful screen somewhere, but since it wasn't responding to his inputs, he was stuck with whatever information it chose to flash up on the readouts.

The information the panel conveyed confirmed that the computer had drawn the same conclusion as he had. The mystery object was drawing the pod toward it, and much more rapidly with every passing second. The gravitational attraction had been minor, but it had ramped up now and was increasing at an alarming rate.

At least it's not an oxygen leak.

It was the only positive he could find. Abandoning the useless control panel, he turned his attention back to his view outside the window, still seeing nothing other than the odd distortion of the stars passing behind it. It was almost out of view now anyway, the spinning of the pod unaffected by the gravity well that drew it in. He felt the shaking first, but was soon able to hear and see it too, the whole escape pod now trembling violently, groaning and creaking with the ever-increasing stresses it found itself exposed to in this strange voyage it was never created to encounter or withstand. Small particles rushed by, some pinging against the aged hull to add to the strains of the craft, the invisible object's pull drawing the tiny amount of free-floating matter and concentrating it into a hail storm of tiny rocks. Anything bigger might do serious damage, if the pod didn't break apart first.

Good sense told him he should return to the chair and strap himself in, but he chose to listen to another voice in his head instead — the one that told him being strapped in wasn't going to make a blind bit of difference to his fate. If the escape pod was about to be sucked into a black hole he'd be as well staying here and at least seeing what it looked like. It would be the last thing he saw, but what a last experience to have. He stared out the window, fixated, wishing he could hold on to the moment, wishing he could record it, wondering how amazing it would be to share it with others, even though that could never be.

The alarm cut off suddenly, as if the pod too had given up at the futility of it all and resigned itself to its fate. The silence rushed in, almost deafening, then for a brief moment everything seemed almost still...

The rush made him gasp, the sense of enormous speed stealing the precious air from his body.

A brief, intense flash illuminated the entire space around him inside and out, gone before he even had time to blink against the blinding glare. It left behind glowing lights flashing by at such a rate they left streaks of brilliance behind, the pod seeming to surf across them as if it rode the top of a wave, tidal forces propelling it forward in a swirl of thundering white horses. His temporary craft rattled and shook violently, yet he couldn't take his eyes off the wondrous and terrible sight before him, not even to check the panels and controls to see if they gave him any clue as to what was happening. It was too mesmerising, almost hypnotic. His eyes stung, but he fought against the need to blink; he would miss too much in the fraction of a second the action would take.

Stars, he realised, as he watched, transfixed. The pod was rushing across a sea of stars that stretched out in all directions to unfathomable horizons. It was an impossible view. There was no region of space with such a dense and even quantity of stars, and even if there was, there was no conceivable reason why they should all be exclusively beneath the pod rather than rushing by it on all sides. Yet there was no denying what he saw.

The stars were different now, some faint warm reds and oranges, others sharp hues of blue that seared a residual beam across his retinas. Still, he fought the urge to blink. These could be his last moments, and he was witnessing something no-one else had ever seen. He fully intended to soak it all in, to see every last magnificent detail. He wouldn't let his rising fear colour the experience more than the beauty of the universe itself. It was showing him something undocumented, unprecedented, and he needed to appreciate the gift while he could.

Distantly, barely registering in his melee of thoughts, he wondered if it had actually been a black hole, or something else, something new. Had he been sucked into something undiscovered, crossed some strange threshold beyond the understanding of physics? Perhaps he was already dead, crushed to a microscopic dot by intense gravity, or stretched and spaghetti-fied into a million strands, and this was just some crazed imagining created by his own mind in its last moments of consciousness.

The pod was steady now, no more uncontrolled shuddering despite the insane speed it appeared to travel at. Would he ever be able to tell anyone about this so they could help find answers to the questions that raced through his thoughts, each more demanding than the next, a battle for dominance taking place inside his head as his unblinking eyes remained focused on the wondrous multi-hued lightshow playing out for him alone.

It all came to a stop. The jolt of the hurtling pod coming to a standstill shocked his body and almost made him lose balance. His stomach lurched, left behind somewhere in the warp speed of a second before. His eyes took a moment to adjust, longer to send the signal to his brain that the undulating waves of stars had vanished in another bright flash that sent a fleeting sear of pain through his temples. In place of the carnival ride light display were what he could only best describe as clouds. Not fleecy wispy white clouds gently floating in blue skies, nor dark and pendulous menacing thunderheads, or deep red atmosphere-choking blankets, or purple floss balls, or any other type of cloud he'd seen in any documentary of various planets in his galaxy or the next. These clouds were lit by slowly flickering light from inside their depths, also illuminated by some brighter light source not visible from the window of the pod. There was nothing that could give him a sense of scale, but the uneasy sense that these clouds would be measured in scales of thousands of kilometres almost overwhelmed him. He was a tiny blip on the radar, maybe even too small to register. He was nothing. The pod began to spin again, or maybe it had never stopped. He could no longer tell.

The feeling of tension, of crawling apprehension, grew as the pod slowly turned. Soon, he would be able to see whatever cast the light onto the clouds. Already something was coming into view, the edge of a disc that appeared to be made up of a gaseous substance – pale, orangey-pinks, pastel lilac deepening to amethyst and vibrant violets spun and glowed, dimmer at the edges, growing increasingly bright toward the centre.

His mouth was dry, his heart pounded, although he couldn't think of any reasons why. Something about the slow shift of this thing coming into view made his body react on a primal, subconscious level, as if it knew something his conscious knowledge base did not.

There it was, fully in his field of vision now. A black void at the centre of a spinning disc of gas that glowed a brilliant blue-white right where it met that expanse of nothing within it. *This* was a black hole for certain, massive beyond imagination, making his every experience, his every achievement, his very existence, insignificant in its vastness and power of utter destruction of anything that dared cross its path. He should be terrified, screaming, frantically fiddling with the pod's controls, trying to get it to do something, anything. Yet he wasn't. He remained where he was, staring at what presented itself before him.

No, that was wrong, but why?

The phenomenon looked for all the world like an enormous eye, crystallising his feeling of disquiet. As he studied it, it came to him that it didn't just resemble an eye, it was *looking* at him. He could feel it, seeing through him, viewing everything about him, weighing, considering, assessing. Judging. That's what was wrong. It wasn't presenting itself to him, he was being presented to it. Compared to this, he had never been *seen* before, not in this sense.

As much as the intense scrutiny made him squirm inwardly, he could not stop staring back, could not move, could barely even think. Should he plead his case, justify every mistake he'd made in life, rationalise and explain every decision he'd taken? He quickly came to the understanding that there would be no point. It saw everything and drew its own conclusions.

Nothing changed in the scene outside, but he felt the shift in energy. It was done, its attention already moving elsewhere. He gasped again, falling back from the window and console, shocked at his sudden ability to move, released from a paralysis he didn't realise he'd been under. There was a build-up, a fizz-like resembling a static charge densifying to an almost crushing electrification. The view outside blurred, flashed, and with no idea how he could, he knew the eye had dismissed or banished him, flinging the pod to some new location at great speed.

There was no sea of stars this time, no astounding yet terrifying spectacle rushing by the unlikely and unexpected window. He had been in one place, there, next to the eye at the heart of everything, and now he was here, somewhere else entirely. He raised himself closer to the thick glass. Cautious but curious, he peered out. At first there was nothing, the black, empty void beyond shocking after the previous glorious and powerful displays. After a moment, the retina burn from the brightness of his last encounter cleared and his vision adapted to the depth of the dark that seemed to suck up photons to spit them out elsewhere.

The pod spun listlessly, revealing a faint glow that illuminated forms floating in the void. He counted eight rocks – asteroids perhaps – in a circle, dimly lit from a swirling galaxy below, the stars much fainter than he would have expected from a celestial gathering of that magnitude.

His focus returned to the rocks, revealing the eight to be perfectly spaced, each one smooth and spherical. Both observations spoke of the fact that this was constructed, not naturally formed. Even now that he'd adjusted to the much darker view, he could discern nothing in the centre that the rocks could orbit around. The pod had stopped spinning, this ring of stones now fixed in his view from the window. Their perfect form and unusual placement belied an accurate identification as asteroids. With nothing to compare them to, they could just as easily be moons, or even planets.

Movement caught his eye, something down in the spiral of stars below. Two behemoth shapes leisurely advanced, swimming through the void as if it were the deep, blue ocean he'd seen on nature documentaries about the vast variety of species that had once populated the Earth. From those same documentaries, if his memory served him well, these creatures looked like the whales he'd been fascinated with, their sheer size in direct contradiction to their gentleness and grace.

These remarkably similar creatures inspired the same awe. They moved slowly with the same elegance, streams of energy floating softly from their eyes, leaving delicate ribbons of trails that glowed iridescent in the void. As with the clouds before, it was impossible for his mind to grasp any concept of scale. They could be hundreds of feet or hundreds of miles long. What he did know was that they felt as ancient as they were gigantic.

Again, the feeling of being *looked at* washed over him; that feeling of being examined, assessed, judged. What would such a lifeform make of him in his tiny, frail pod, kept alive by trivially thin layers of metal and glass that they could send spinning through the void with a single nudge, or crush without giving it more than a fleeting thought. Their song filled the pod, filled his ears, and his soul. Long gentle cries, almost mournful, powerful enough that he could feel the essence of them as well as hear them.

A slight tremble rattled the pod. This time he was almost prepared for the rising rush. Whatever he'd been sent here for was complete and he was to be sent forward once more. Their judgement had been made, his next journey or fate decided by the languidly swimming giants. Wherever they were travelling to, he wasn't going with them. The view outside blurred, brightened, and again that sense of stomach-lurching motion overwhelmed him; the feeling of jumping distances he couldn't comprehend even if he could have seen it charted for him.

He was somewhere else. Maybe with no fuel, maybe running out of oxygen, and with useless instruments that wouldn't respond. All he had was the window and his own senses. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself before he took that first, concerned but impatient look.

As he'd suspected, there was no sign of the whales. If possible, everything was blacker than even before, absolute nothingness even once his eyes had recovered from the brief flare of brightness as he was thrown from one place to another. Not a single pinprick of light, not one photon, was out there. It disorientated him, as did the total silence. Sensory depravation of the only two tools he'd had to rely upon. He took a moment to lean back in an attempt to ease the ache of his back from where he'd been leaning forward to stare out incredulously at all that was happening to him. He focused on the pain, and the minuscule relief from it. It gave him a sense of still being real, still being whole, that the jumps and locations were stripping from him.

Sense of self somewhat restored, he assessed the dark, wondering what if there was simply nothing there, or if something was there but some atmospheric condition sucked every spark of existence from it. In such panoptic barrenness, the slightest thing would have caught his attention, and it did.

Off to the far left, a faint glimmer was forming. He held his breath as he watched, mind racing, but unable to come to any expectation as to what might be coming. The glimmer rapidly became glittering in the dark. Whatever it was moved with speed and was heading his way. He was reminded of sparks, or pyrotechnics perhaps, in only the cool white of freshly fallen snow, or icicles illuminated by silvery moonlight. It had been tiny at first, but growing larger with every fraction of passing seconds, approaching, brighter, like a cloud of metallic confetti, sparkling in some unseen light as each piece darted and danced.

With a rushing whoosh, the brightness surrounded the pod, startling him even though his focus had been fixed upon it. Eyes struggling to adjust to the sheer intensity of brilliance against the backdrop of sweeping nothingness, he still couldn't tell what made up the swarm. Tiny machines or something organic? A shoal of fish? The forms swirled and raced around the pod, their light and lustre flashing across every surface.

He gathered himself, leaning toward the window again, fascinated by this latest impossible sight. Everything he'd seen should have left him screaming, pushed to the brink of madness by his helpless, hopeless situation. Yet they had all been so cosmically wondrous, so beautiful, and so *implausible* that fear had remained buried deep beneath other emotions, neither a second, nor third, or even a fourth consideration.

The swarm swirled and spun around him, patterns visible in the dancing movements. Each one moved independently, yet with a breath-taking synchronicity that mesmerised him. Flocks of birds gathering, swooping and soaring before a storm or roosting for the night came to mind, but he was no nearer to grasping what these entities or objects were.

A sense of joy infused him, the kind that makes any being laugh aloud in sheer delight. It radiated out from the glittering, glowing individuals as they flowed this way then that. This was their nature, to revel in existence, to dance and spin and laugh in their own way, with a sense of happiness at all the wonders of creation. He wished the feeling would last forever, that the moment would never end.

Then they were gone, moving off into the black depths. A circular formation, unseen until the jewelled swarm swam or flew through it, came briefly into view. Eight perfectly spaced cylinders. Then the tingle, the faint shudder as if the pod had to prepare for what came next, and he knew it was time to move on again. It was accompanied by disappointment that he wouldn't see the glittering cluster again, to feel that unadulterated, untainted joy once more.

This time, the flare of light as he shifted at the whim of whatever directed this weird play that he'd been given a bit part in was nothing compared to the flash that burst through the window when he arrived, bright enough that he cried out, raising an arm to shield his eyes as he jerked back from the window.

Thankfully, it was brief, but just as he was about to tentatively lower his arm there was another flash. He gave himself time, waiting out the pulses of light that came at regular intervals, allowing his eyes to accommodate the almost unbearable brilliance before gingerly bringing his arm down, although he remained back from the window, hoping the thickened, toughened glass would provide some protection. Against what, he didn't yet know.

Outside, two streams of light spun around a glowing central orb, a beacon in the middle of the void. Around it, bathed in the ever-rotating iridescence, were eight planets, equidistant to each other and the centre of the sphere. It was impossible to make out anything else, the intensity of the beams and flare from the centre drowning out anything that would provide clues to his surroundings beyond it and its eight dutifully orbiting planets.

It was no surprise to him that he felt an awareness here also, this one steadfast and serious, a complete contrast to the mocking, jubilant swarm he had last encountered. Moments before he felt he could safely lean forward for a better view, he had been weighed up and assessed once again, held against some unknown criteria. There it was, that slight tremble, then the weighty rush around the pod. The scene blinked and blurred from view, the flare of light seeming tame in comparison to the pulsing, blinding, yet solemn sphere.

Once more he came to a stop, the pod spinning slowly again. At least he thought so. It was hard to tell anymore. If it weren't for the slight ache of his knees on the metal floor, reality may have escaped him completely. A few deep exhales centred him, and he looked out to see what strange scene faced him this time.

Outside were shapes, tall, jagged and irregular, lit with no uniformity by hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pinpricks of light, like streetlamps viewed through a dense mist or fog on a dank, drizzly night. Serenity flowed over him until the sense of scale snapped into place. He gulped, swallowing the lump that formed in his throat as he realised he was looking at vast pillars of dust, dense and dark in some places, the lights emanating from deep inside faint and flickering. Thinner in other places, where the bright flares of stars could be seen much more clearly.

He had seen images like this from the deep space observatories that stared out into the distant void that humanity had no hope of reaching. Except now, except him, he thought as he stared in previously unmatched awe and wonder at the stellar nursery—the birthplace of stars.

Colours he'd never seen before or even imagined stunned him, the beauty of the universe renewing itself bringing a fullness to his eyes that spilled over and ran unhindered down his cheeks. These young stars would eventually drift apart, maybe gathering a veil of dust around them that perhaps in time would clump into planets, and perhaps there, new life would arise, new stories, new observers to see the wonders of the universe and hear its tales.

At first, the scene appeared static and frozen, but as he recovered a little from his crushing emotions, he noticed subtle movements in the vast dust clouds, saw stars flash into existence, saw some dim from their initial blazing heat, tempered by the passage of time. This was something new. He was seeing motion, but motion that took place on a galactic scale, not in human timeframes.

Something brighter and closer came into view as the pod spun on its axis, a ring of eight age-old stars, huge and swollen, glowing a deep red with their ancient heat. Always eight, always in a circle. Clearly it signified something, but he didn't know, and had a feeling he would never know, what, except that there was intelligence and design at work here, and behind everything he was experiencing.

Had any of it been an accident, the fault in the Mirona, the breach where he was working, the antiquated pod with little or no controls and the surprising window? Was this all somehow predetermined, meant to be? Would it have a final outcome? He couldn't answer any of his own questions, so settled for soaking in the beauty and meaning of what was before him until he felt the usual indications of another shift begin, the scene in front of him softening and streaking. As the transition began, he wondered what could possibly come next after this. Hadn't he just seen the most meaningful thing there could ever be? Would this be how the rest of his life would pass, ceaselessly moving from one space to another until his death or the pod gave up and broke apart, whichever happened first, never finding rest until that final moment.

This time it was different. A cascade of psychedelic neon flowed around the pod, vivid and intense, but not so bright as to hurt his eyes. He watched, entranced and dazed once again, until his mind interpreted the signals from his eyes and adjusted to what he was looking at.

Through the haze of bright hues, he saw that this was a galaxy, its unusual colours shifting and stretching, flowing from it towards him in rapid cascading streams, surrounding the pod. He squinted, realising it spun as well as rushed far faster than any galaxy he knew of could—and it was moving backwards.

The temperature in the pod dropped, his breath creating small puffs in the air. Unease crawled over his skin, his body signalling to his brain that something far beyond normal was happening. The metal of the console felt chilled and greasy beneath his white-knuckled grip as he shifted as far forward as possible, trying to grasp some understanding from the impossible. He swore he could see tiny flickers inside the glass itself, brief points of colour twinkling as if the window itself had stars embedded within.

Too fast and backward. Nausea rose, bile burning the back of his throat as the galaxy grew larger and nearer. Too fast and backward...

His exhales turned to desperate pants as he tried to overcome the motion sickness, the fog created in front of his face glittering as if the molecules sparked into life.

Time, he thought, the galaxy now too close for him to see all of it, expanding well beyond the range offered by the window. I'm moving through time, backward in time.

At the speed at which the arms of the spiral galaxy rotated, he couldn't begin to fathom the incredible rate he was moving. Would he regress, regress beyond his life's beginning? Then he was slowing, the colours drifting back towards something more normal, less vibrant and saturated.

The sickness eased and he swallowed hard, clearing the bile from his throat, feeling only the faint acid burn remain. The pod headed toward some point just outside of the glowing spherical centre, a point still quite heavily populated with stars, though not nearly as dense as the heart of the galaxy. Up ahead in his path sat one star in particular, sharp and clear while the others were colour-shifted and smeared.

The star grew in size as he approached, colours now completely normal, the temperature in the pod restored. He could no longer see his breath. The metal felt normal under his panicked grip. His mind calmed while his body involuntarily reacted with terror. A resigned calm, a curious calm, an unusual calm under the circumstances. There were no more sparkles inside the window glass.

There was no way to tell exactly when the journey ended, when he stopped being hurtled down the timestream. Now there was only the regular mechanical noises of the pod as it gallantly kept him alive, holding up beyond anything this aged technology should have been able to handle. Gratitude for the machine and whoever had constructed it flooded him, as well as guilt for his initial derogatory thoughts. He might have chuckled at his ridiculousness if he wasn't so close to the star itself, a sun burning blue and bright.

Alarmingly close.

Concern that the pod would not be able to protect him from the heat and radiation that surely streamed from this unknown sun, in some unknown galaxy, in some unknown time, filled him, the dread and fear that had been kept at bay throughout beginning to simmer inside, ready to rise and fill him with the adrenaline of survival, fight or flight. Realistically, he could do neither.

This was the end.

There was no circle of eight here. He felt no consciousness in the scene around him. Nothing viewed him, nothing inspected him. He'd been passed from one place to another, from one being to another, for the decision to be made that this was where he ought to be sent, where he was meant to end up.

He jumped, startled, shifting his view from the window to the console as the proximity alarm pinged, detecting something at the edge of its range. Hurriedly, he flicked his gaze back outside. Whatever the scanning systems had detected ought to be visible. He could see nothing...wait, maybe there was something, right there emerging from behind the star itself.

The communication system sprang to life, a signal that was unlike anything he'd heard before, with nothing intelligible in it.

Lights blinked across the console, readouts changed, the screens flickering between one display and another. The thrusters suddenly hissed, making course corrections. Yes, that tiny dim point of light was something, definitely something. His focus shifted from console to window and back again. The pod's main engine kicked in, a dull roar, some clanking and hissing, a shudder as it moved him forward now that the thrusters had orientated his position. Forward toward that light.

The light too seemed to be moving toward him, sleepily easing itself from where it had rested behind the sun. The pod's main engine switched off and again the thrusters fired, shifting his course a little and making more slight adjustments to its orientation.

It was a ship, a certainty now as the proximity alarm pulsed faster and faster, the tones almost blending into one frantic bleep. He could see it now, a long, smooth, and near featureless ship, simply shaped, nothing like the ships that humanity built, that was for sure.

With a few last bursts of the thrusters, the signal stopped. Somehow, this strange craft had taken control of his pod, but everything was in place now. He was heading in the right direction to meet the ship, positioned and angled for a perfect pick up.

The sleek grey mass filled his view now, almost nothing on its flat surfaces other than a name written in characters that were at once alien to him, yet perfectly readable as they slid passed, the monogrammed side of the ship all he could see now.

"The Long Grey Shadow," he breathed softly.

There was a clank and a rumble as docking mechanism met docking mechanism, and for the first time in an age he turned from the window, looking at the entrance to the pod as the doors slid open with a hiss of merging atmospheres.

He held his breath as he stared, wide-eyed, down a corridor beyond the entrance to his pod, wondering if he could breathe in whatever atmosphere suited the crew of this vessel. Then he relaxed. What would be would be, it was somehow chosen, fated. He first breathed out with a sigh, releasing the air he'd been holding, then inhaled. The air was cool and slightly sweet, reminding him of nothing as much as the fresh smell after the rain. His body accepted it, appreciated it even.

He stood as much as he could in the confines of the pod, threatening cramp and frantic tingling assaulting his legs and feet as blood flowed freely again, forcing him to pause for a moment. Slowly, he eased his stiff body toward the open door.

There was no sign of anyone or anything to meet him, to greet him or otherwise. No crew, either clad in protective suits to survive his atmosphere or not. No robot soldiers or inquisitive, watchful drones. A calming blue light lit the space, yet he could find no source for the soothing glow that illuminated the matte metal walls of the corridor. Instead, it seemed to be everywhere equally, coming from nowhere in particular.

He took his first steps onto the ship, stopping only a few from the pod doors to run a finger over the metal, finding nothing unusual in the feel of it. The voice came from nowhere and everywhere.

“Welcome home.”

It had been days, possibly weeks, since he’d stepped aboard the Long Grey Shadow.

It had been a relief to be free of the tight confines of the pod, although the ship had little in the way of comforts. Little in the way of anything at all really. Most of it was as featureless as the outer hull.

There was no crew, it had turned out. Only the ship itself. A living, conscious being.

There was a room for him to sleep, with a rudimentary bed, and a room for him to eat. Rudimentary food too if he was honest.

He’d had a sense that the ship had somehow created these things for him, reshaping its internal structure to make room to accommodate this strange new being.

There was no bridge. No access to whatever powered the ship. No access to engines, engineering, or life support. There was only the corridor, the bedroom, and the dining room, to give it a grander name than it deserved.

The ship had been relatively talkative and quite pleasant. No, it did not know why he was here, or how he had arrived there. No, it had not heard of anything like the beings he had encountered, nor of the type of travel he’d described, nor of time travel itself. No, it had not heard of planet Earth, or human beings, and it had no way to tell where they were in relation to it. Or where they actually were.

It had been here, it said, in close orbit around this star for the last few thousand years as he would measure and understand time. This place was a long way from where it had been born, and deliberately so. It was what would commonly be referred to as a warship, capable of unimaginable destruction.

No, it did not want to talk any more about its life prior to coming to this star, thank you very much. It was no longer the same ship as it had been back then, and it refused to even remember that time.

That said, it had grown tired of being here, bored of hiding, lonely in its self-inflicted exile. It needed a new purpose and was glad to have spotted his pod show up out of nowhere. It could and would adjust itself so that together they could pilot. This would be done with a direct interface between his mind, its mind, and the machinery that ran the physical craft. He would find it a wonderful experience, it promised. With his permission, it would begin using electro-magnetic fields to adjust his brain in order to prepare him.

Welcome home.

He'd pondered the words over and over. This was indeed his home now. There was no way to trace a route back to where he'd come from. The ship had no way to travel through time, nor any understanding that such a thing would be possible. Equally, there was no way any others of his species would ever be able to follow him here.

This was all he had now.

He had given the ship the permission it sought.

Then, after those few days, or weeks – it was hard to measure time within the constant and unchanging environment of the ship – it told him all the preparations had been made and everything was set to be initiated on his say-so.

He had no hesitation, didn't give it any more thought. He'd told it to initiate the interface.

It only took a few seconds, and it was as if his body had grown new limbs, as if he had eyes, arms, legs...and engines, effector fields, guns, and a mile-long metallic skin that sensed the whole universe around him. He was floating in the void – *was this how the whales felt, what they experienced* – the warm glow of the bright blue sun shining on one side, an array of stars, distant yet so easily perceivable it was if he could reach out and touch them. Planets around the nearest stars were specks of dust, but he could zoom in and study them in great detail if he wanted. All he had to do was focus on them.

Whatever he turned his attention to, he could sense its composition, its age, its motion. He knew exactly how long it would take to fly there. The ship may have had no idea on how to travel through time, but whatever it used to power its flight was capable of speeds that broke the laws of physics in their own way.

He revelled in all his new senses. Whatever the ship had done to his mind and brain made them all second nature, as if he'd been born with them. The elation they gave him rivalled that of the joyous shoal that had danced and played with him and the pod.

Alongside him was the mind of the ship itself. He could see and feel its thoughts and emotions as readily as it could his. Though it had no body, no face, it smiled, curious, eager, a touch playful.

“Where to now?” it asked.

He grinned in response.

Did his body, back there in the cabin, also grin, or was that just here?

He powered up the engines, as eager as the ship. The universe was theirs to explore.