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Terra Two An Ark for Off-World Survival.

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Leaving, by Sam Pheby-McGarvey

She looked around her and the sight did not impress. A rag-tag group of pilgrims waiting for salvation to take them off world, away from all the mud, dirt, and grime of life. She sighed – if this was the start of the next journey of her life, she wasn't looking forward to it; she felt tired.

She looked at her hands: no lines, wrinkles, or deep blue veins, the hallmarks of encroaching old age; but the skin looked stretched, like a balloon blown to the penultimate point before popping. The Joove treatments had kept her looking, and feeling, physically young, but at the core she felt old. She'd done this before, lived this before – this is it – the last time – no more traveling; after this – no more adventures – just home, just living!

A wet tongue licked the back of her hand and brought her out of her reverie with a shock; she looked down at Spot, what was left of her dog – a husk of flesh, encased in hard metal and machinery. It was a good job – it almost looked like a real dog, almost felt like a real dog, and the artificial saliva in the tongue was a nice touch; but it didn't feel real. It didn't give off any warmth at night.

She looked around her at the planet, her planet, her home; it might be the last time she ever saw it again. Everyone agreed it was ending, the dream dying. The terra-forming meant to make it better had, for a while, been a success; but it had also caused more long-term problems: pollution, flooding, then droughts, then flooding, and then a spiral: riots, martial law, and civil unrest.

The lucky ones were already off planet – so long and thanks for all the fish – and now it was her turn. It hadn't been easy, with the unpredictable weather it was hard landing a ship; just last week one had crashed – hundreds of people on board, lost in a dust storm, the engines clogged and... She shivered.

She looked up – a bright light was descending from the heavens, a roar of engines that heralded salvation. The crowd she was in began to pick itself up; people were checking, and double checking to make sure they had everything. The ships didn't stay on planet long, and anyone not boarding fast enough, or without the proper paperwork, would be left behind.

The dust storm whipped up by the engines engulfed her, tiny grains of sand stinging and invading her skin; the engines began to quieten, and the dust settled in red clouds over the throng. She blinked rapidly, her eyes watering; she rubbed at them and looked up.

The ship was old, a relic from a hundred years ago, its hull battered and rusting. The huge sphere of metal, reminiscent of a fish's body with two huge wings, had two jet engines and tiny landing legs which anchored it in place. A ramp began to descend from within its belly as soon as it had firmly touched the ground, and two lines of uniformed people quickly marched out.

They wore the crisp black uniform of the People's Planetary Police; they held large rifles rather lazily, and shock batons hung from their belts. An officer in a peaked cap stepped out from the two lines and addressed the crowd.

"Good People", he said in a clipped stern tone, without a shred of emotion, in the voice of a machine; "you will wait where you are and be called up by name. When called, you will walk up to me and show me your papers; your belongings, will, be, searched! Anyone without the right papers, or a valid inter-planetary passport will be denied entry to the vehicle. Anyone found with any illegal items or substances in their belongings will be arrested. We have thirty minutes to board, and anyone not boarded in this time will be left behind. Neil Parkinson..."

People were called forward, and their documents were inspected thoroughly; the officer's eyes were two investigating, inquisitive lenses as his gaze bore into every facet of each being. The few meagre possessions carried by the travellers were rifled through roughly; a scanner searched them, and every so often a bag would be taken, upended, and the contents examined before being thrust back to its owner.

Before long it was her turn. She grabbed her bag, and stowed Spot in it. She walked up to the officer. She reached into her coat pocket and drew out her battered passport; thumbing deftly through it to her picture as she glanced down, she saw on the opposite page the Earth travel stamp, her only other time off planet. She handed the document over, and the officer's eyes scanned it, looked at her, scanned again... and nodded her through. Her bag was scanned without incident, and then she was walking up the ramp and taking her seat in the passenger bay.

It was filling up already and she quickly grabbed a free seat. It was old and grubby, with upholstery stained every possible shade of brown. She sat and waited, and after maybe ten minutes she heard a commotion outside – a People's Planetary Police constable was shouting that they were taking off in one minute. Outside the sound of voices grew to a roar before a single shot silenced it; afterwards, it was replaced by screams, and then the roar of the engines as the craft began to hover into the air.

She looked out of the window, at the arid red desert below, as a voice over the PA spoke: "We are now leaving Mars; we will be travelling to Proxima Centauri, where we will be landing on Terra Two!"

Commentary

In this story I wanted to play with the idea of leaving to go on an adventure to the stars. The protagonist has already experienced the excitement of adventure, and is old, and tired. It is another variation of Bilbo Baggins in the Hobbit, or Arthur Dent in A Hitchhikers Guide, a story about the unwilling individual who has happened upon adventure.

The protagonist in 'Leaving' differs slightly, as this is an old hat adventurer, the tired looking Ford of Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull, who has had the journey foisted upon him. These travellers have to leave due to the inhospitable climate of the planet. I wanted to allude to the fact that this could have been Earth, but the reveal at the end is that it is in fact Mars, the implication being that the protagonist has already had to leave Earth behind, due to climate change.

Climate change is the most dangerous phenomena in the world, even more so as it is self-inflicted, and prominent figures around the world are vehement deniers of its existence. Most people see the dangers and believe they're real; I am writing this after one of the hottest days in February in British history. The message of the story, if it has one, is that if we do not find a way to halt or even reverse climate change, what will stop a cycle in which we abandon this world, but then leave a trail of dead worlds across the universe?