

Weaned

A short story by

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Dr Nakamura paused at the door of the lift, taking his last opportunity, the last opportunity, to gaze upon the panorama he was leaving behind. The dust of dried soil covered everything, barren and yellow. Geometrically perfect mounds of various sizes littered the landscape as far as he could see, surmounted by the skeletal forms of trees long dead. Above the sky glowed a defuse orange with one spot glaring almost white, the source of the heat that scorched him now.

He sighed, his grey-stubbed chin dropping to his chest, and entered the lift. The air within the transparent box was stifling, even hotter than outside and with a recycled flavour. He pushed the button by the door and watched as the landscape receded, the speed increasing at a constant yet comfortable rate.

The arid region around the base of the lift appeared to shrink, the patchwork of the greater panorama unfolding around it. There was, despite the increased field, little variation in the view. Some areas were a richer yellow, some light brown, but nowhere remained the rich, deep browns and greens of generations before. Here and there the nearly uniform geometry of dessicated fields gave way to the natural patterns of riverbeds and other features, all now as dry as the arid soil.

After a few minutes the curve of the world was clearly traced against the black horizon of space, colours muted by the filter now surrounding the lift as it ascended. Below lay a world of yellow and grey, sand and stone, obscured not by clouds but a constant haze of dust. Above floated a large and solid looking vessel, moored to the scaffold platform from which the lift was suspended. Gravity subsided as the lift slowed.

A curious sense of awed pride swept over Dr Nakamura to know that he would be the last person to make this ascent, or any, from the world below. Though the platform was to be left active for as long as possible no one believed it would find use again, it was only for his research that anyone had remained this long.

Cool air, though recycled still, flooded the lift as its doors opened to reveal a short corridor. At the other end an airlock hatch opened, through which appeared a young man in uniform floating forward.

"Welcome aboard, Dr Nakamura. I'm Ensign Hartman, I've been assigned to carry your equipment," the uniformed youth explained as his slippers caught the Velcro of the corridor.

"Thank you," replied Dr Nakamura, handing the ensign a couple of boxes and stepping forward with the third, "Will I be able to keep it with me?"

"The Quartermaster says you can keep one box in your quarters, Doctor, but the rest must be secured."

"Very well," he sighed.

His quarters turned out to be further than he expected from the airlock, the journey there a quiet one. Everyone must, including the young ensign, be in as reflective a mood as

himself. Most had been raised on the world they were now leaving, they had all grown up hearing its ancient stories of blue skies and vast oceans. It was strange to think that some could not remember a time before the exodus began; a thought struck him.

"How long have you been on the exodus operation?"

"My whole career," replied his young companion, "It had begun before I joined up, I knew this was what I'd be doing."

Dr Nakamura gave a small, subdued laugh, "I should have expected that. Do you plan a long career in the service?"

"No. My tour will be up before the operation is complete, but I don't intend to re-enlist."

"You show wisdom," the Dr observed, bringing silence once more.

Soon he was shown into his cabin, a small space compared to the civilian cruise cabins of youthful holidays. Strikingly utilitarian as well, a uniform shade of grey with nothing beyond the necessities of life.

"Thank you," he said to the ensign, "this is the box I'll be keeping, I'd like to get settled in now."

"Certainly, Doctor. Dinner will be at the Captain's table at nineteen-hundred hours," with that and the ripping sound of detaching Velcro the ensign turned and floated away.

Dr Nakamura sighed again as he slid the door closed. There was a small, filter-covered porthole giving a view of open space. He'd have to get used to it, that was going to be the scenery of the rest of his life; an infinite black field powdered with stars. At least, he thought, the air would be cool.

A klaxon sounded, followed by an order to all aboard to assume secure positions. A moment later a dull clunk reverberated through the hull as the mooring was released, followed moments later by the apparent onset of gravity as the vessel began to rotate.

"Farewell," Dr Nakamura said softly under his breath, "mother of us all."

THE END

A note from the author:

It is my fond hope, like that of any writer, that you have enjoyed this story. If you have I ask that you share it with others whom you judge likely to appreciate it. Finally, it would bring me great satisfaction to hear from any readers, with comments or constructive criticism. To contact me please e-mail solar.granulation@gmail.com and specify "Short story comment" as the subject.