



## Homeworld

By Buddy Goodboy

It had been a long day, and Em was getting impatient. Em dropped files onto the office's server and flopped onto the office chair. The psych opposite them skimmed through some pages, then turned back to Em.

"Everything seems to be in order—"

"Em."

"—Em. So let me ask you this. You're obviously qualified to emigrate, but the Company's interested in long-term commitment and stability. I have to ask, why do you want to leave Earth?"

Em's stomach growled. "Sorry. Today was my section's rationing day."

The psych nodded. "Mine was yesterday."

"And they always need nurses on the settlements. I can do some good out there."

"You're not a stranger to hard work, your record shows that. I'm obliged to warn you, though—there's no safety net out there. A bad harvest, disease, uncontrolled weather patterns—it's a fact that settlers live shorter lives. You could even die in the shuttle to the *Pioneer*."

"There hasn't been a shuttle accident in—"

"—there is always risk. There's no shame in staying here."

Em locked eyes with the psych. "Some things are worth the risk."

The psych scrolled to the bottom of Em's file and tapped "Approved."

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Em was poked, prodded, jabbed, scraped, probed, and tested, and through it all, against their instincts, tried to be a good patient.

"I wouldn't sit through this," remarked the doctor on call. "Your heart rate and blood pressure are good though. Keep your speed up another few minutes."

"Of course you wouldn't." Em puffed and tried to keep running. "You have everything you want right here. I bet you have a car and a housing unit outside the city."

"My car's three years old."

"But you're licensed for one. My block hit the cap for drivers. I'm in the lottery once one opens up. Until then, I'm stuck in the city."

"You should get out to the country sometime. Fresh air, better than that canned crap you'll get in the *Pioneer*."

“Just *Pioneer*. She’s a lady, you don’t call her ‘the.’ Besides, I’m going to a country farther out than yours, and fresher air, too. Lots more room to spread out.”

The doc cocked an eyebrow. “Millions of miles to spread out all over. Lord knows what you’d do with all that empty room. I’d say you’re crazy, but Psych cleared you for lift. Godspeed to you, then. Hop off the treadmill and we’ll move on to some other tests. You’re healthy as an ox, though, so I’d say you’re going to space.”

\* \* \*

Em double-checked their seat restraints and said a quick, breathless prayer to St. Barbara. A tinny announcement from the captain, and then a deep rumble overtook everything.

The rocket’s engines thundered from below and back, setting the world of the cabin to quake. A giant push pinned Em to their seat and squeezed all thought from their head. An eternity later, the weight lifted and Em became aware that they were no longer pinned to the chair, instead bouncing gently against their seat restraints.

They were hours away from the mammoth *Pioneer* but the excitement hit the passengers at once. It was real now—they were on their way to a new world.

There was, as expected, a fight for the portholes facing Earth, but after a sharp elbow to the back of the head, Em got their turn. Em couldn’t see home—Mother Terra wasn’t that cooperative—but they saw everything. There, receding slowly into the blackness for the last time, was home.

They’d never been off-world, not in any way that mattered. A vacation to the Moon as a graduation gift, but they’d gotten postcards from all their friends from the Moon years before. The Moon wasn’t really space. A capsule to Earth Station, a cruise ship to lunar orbit, and Luna City, all sealed in a can and guided along by tour guides.

But there it was. Earth.

Em blinked away tears and tried to wave them away.

“Lookit,” someone said. “You can see the *Pioneer*.”

They could, barely. A brighter dot than the others slowly swelled and focused into the shape they’d all seen, a great silver sunflower. The solar sail at the ship’s stern would catch the light pumped from Earth Station and carry them to Mars. Once the hundred or so new settlers coming with *Pioneer* all been dropped off and supplies replenished for the colonists there already, *Pioneer* would pinwheel on its axis, the sunflower’s stem would ignite, and its nuclear engines would carry it home.

\* \* \*

“*Pioneer* will be your home for the next year. Many of you will be asked to assist with shipboard activities. The captain asks for your cooperation and the understanding that labor will be paid in credit upon planetfall...”

So it was that Em volunteered to be the quartermaster’s assistant.

“You’re a nurse,” said the quartermaster.

“The ship’s doctor doesn’t need another nurse right now. Clothes, toiletries, medicine for the infirmary, food, seeds for the hydroponics, all those are going to need refilling, and the farming equipment will need maintenance. They’re supposed to be up to the cold and vacuum, but would you trust them till you’ve inspected them?”

He ran a hand over his eyes. The reclamators would be lifeblood for the settlement, able to slowly turn dead dirt to living soil, which the settlers desperately needed. Their stock of reclamators was old, prone to breakage, and too few. The air was breathable, but the reclamators brought the world to life on a microbiotic level, and made it *really* fit for life. A huge amount of the ship’s stores were Earth dirt, insects, and microbes ready to be injected into a new planet. He really did need extra hands. “You don’t know how to fix reclamators.”

“We’ll be on board for a year. I’ll learn. Besides, knowing how to fix the new models on board will let me do some good once we make planetfall.”

“You even rated for EVA work yet? Go see the officer of the watch and get certified for your pressure suit. I want to start.”

\* \* \*

Em slotted their helmet into the airtight collar and checked the seal. They gasped a little, just to be sure the air flow was working.

“Hold still so I can check your suit before we head outside, kid.” Q fiddled with the fittings at Em’s neck and wrists. “We didn’t used to do this,” grumbled the quartermaster, “but the Company wanted more space inside for you folks. More of you, more of your things. And your babies, your food, oxygen, water, all of it. Cheaper to harden reclamators for vacuum than to design a new ship...”

As they’d gotten closer to *Pioneer* that first day, the clean lines of the ship showed themselves to be warted with lumps of machinery lashed to the hull. It made sense after Em thought about it. *Pioneer* would never enter atmosphere itself, and aside from vacuum exposure, there was nothing but micrometeorites along its course. Most of those were deflected by tarps, but real spacemen didn’t leave anything to chance.

“Use your magnetic boots until I think you’re good enough to let loose. And for god’s sake, secure yourself onto the maintenance rail. I won’t have you flying away while I’m in charge.”

Em clacked their suit’s radio twice to confirm. The ship breathed its air back in, and in silence, the airlock hatch cycled open.

Q helped them through the hatch and locked their safety lines in place.

Q said something, but Em missed it. They looked up, and out, and out.

There were stories about spacemen who lost their nerve when finally taking a spacewalk. Harrison, of course, who'd taken a risky walk to repair a radio receiver, lost his footing, and spun just out of reach of the ship until the next watch officer was able to catch and relieve him.

From the earthworms inside, they'd heard nothing but fear. They'd stay comfortably sealed up until they transferred out to a landing craft, seeing but not knowing the medium through which they traveled. Space was falling forever, it was vast nothingness, it was everything in its terrible glory.

Em was out in it. They didn't feel like falling. Instead, they felt like it was a great, big open room. Space was wide open. Stars hung, and Em felt they could reach them. This was a place, not an absence of place.

Something buzzed in their ear. Em shook. "Q? I didn't copy."

The quartermaster reached for Em's glove and gave it a squeeze. "I said, it feels right, doesn't it? You got that look."

"It feels like I get to be alone with space and it's all here just for me."

Q laughed gently. "Take your time. I'll check the reclamators this time. Mind your oxygen stores."

Em stood face to face with the universe and smiled. Finally, they were home.