

A New Light by Riley Clarke (aged 17)

"McLeod and Douglas, check and clear."

"We read you, Sanchez," McLeod replied. Her own voice sounded alien to her, filtered through the comms and back into her ears. "Don't think I'll ever get used to this," she muttered.

"Me neither," agreed Douglas. "The funky gravity, I can handle that. The space food, that's all fine. But walking around in a suit that's the only thing separating you from the void of space? Incomprehensibly freaky."

Despite it not being exactly what McLeod meant, she had to agree. There was no amount of simulations that could prepare you for real spacewalking.

"Can we save the chitchat for later?" Sanchez asked impatiently. "The storm is scheduled to arrive in less than thirty minutes."

"Relax, we'll make it," Douglas answered. McLeod couldn't see his face, but she was certain that he was rolling his eyes.

"Always thought it was weird that there was weather in space," she pondered, while Sanchez gave a huffy sigh. "When they call it 'the void', that's kind of what you expect, you know? Just a whole lot of empty space."

"But instead, we get bombarded radiation and space junk that's unimpeded by gravity and atmosphere!" Douglas added cheerily.

Their mag boots clunking along the hull of the station should have been droning, but instead they were irregular. The rhythm was disrupted by the varying thickness of the hull, and the speed and force with which the astronauts stepped. McLeod couldn't attest to the accompanying noises, because all she could feel was the vibrations travelling up her legs.

They were only a few meters from the solar panel now, although the distance felt like miles with how slow they had to go. Even from here, though, she could see the problem; the entire structure had been misaligned, and several of the light-absorbing slates were chipped or entirely missing, making the panel into a patchwork.

Douglas breathed something unrepeatable as he spotted the damage, but started making his way around to the other side.

"How bad is it?" Sanchez queried, sounding like he was bouncing his leg in anxiety.

"Pretty bad," admitted Douglas, looking the panel up and down. Looking closer, McLeod could see that some of the framework was warped, too.

"Can you fix it in... sixteen minutes?" he asked.

"We can give it a shot," McLeod replied. She reached out and grasped the edge of the panel, and pulled it around so that it swung closer to where it should have been fixed. She counted the holes that were missing bolts. "Eight. I only have six spare bolts."

"It'll be fine," Douglas said. "It only needs to be good enough not to get ripped off the station in the storm. We can come back with more bolts and better tools later."

McLeod nodded and set to work. When she was tightening the fourth bolt, a glimmer caught her eye and she looked up.

"Wow," she breathed.

Douglas turned to look. "Wow," he agreed.

On the left side of the station, some way away, the void was filled with shimmering light. Gentle brushstrokes of orange, pink, and yellow spread in tongues across their field of vision. The colours bled into the void, filling it with brilliant, dancing light.

"What? What's happening?" Sanchez asked eagerly.

McLeod couldn't tear her eyes away. "Solar flares or... something. There's this beautiful light..."

It reminded her of a bonfire on a cold winter's night, only instead of the sparks swirling erratically, they moved in slow motion, fluttering around in the dark.

"Imagine..." Douglas searched for the right words. "Imagine a sunset had sex with the northern lights."

"James!" McLeod groaned. "Trust you to lower the tone."

"Eh," he said, "It wasn't that high to begin with."

"Well, now I have to see it," Sanchez laughed. "Damn, I wish I was out there."

McLeod grunted as she resumed replacing the bolts, "We'll remember that the next time someone has to come and repair a solar panel half an hour before a storm." She regretted saying it immediately. Joke-cracking Sanchez was a lot more bearable than anxious Sanchez.

"You guys have eight minutes. Maybe – maybe you should just head back? It took you a while to get over there, and—"

"Can it, Sanchez," Douglas interrupted. "We'll get it done. We'll get back. Everything will be fine, get your panties out of a twist."

Sanchez fell silent, and for a while none of them spoke.

"So, you ever see the real deal?" Douglas asked after some time.

"What?"

"Sorry, the northern lights. You're from the middle of nowhere, right? You ever see them?"

McLeod scowled, "I'm from Shetland."

"Yeah, like I said, middle of nowhere," he teased.

Sanchez nobly came to her defence, "I don't think someone who was born on a boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean is allowed to say anyone else is from the middle of nowhere."

Douglas laughed, "On the contrary, that makes me the most qualified!"

"You were what?" McLeod asked, aghast.

He shrugged as best he could in the spacesuit, "I guess it's why I don't ever get travel sick."

McLeod blinked in surprise a few times and then returned to work. How had she managed to live on a space station in the actual middle of nowhere with him for so long and not know that endlessly intriguing fact?

"You know, I never did see the lights," McLeod finally answered. She tried to remember a time, but the closest she could recall was mistaking the glimmer of light pollution in Lerwick for aurora borealis. "I suppose I didn't stick around long enough. I joined the space program aged twenty-one."

"And here you are, eleven years later, seeing the space equivalent of the northern lights," Douglas said.

"Wish I had a camera," she sighed.

"I wish you had a camera too," Sanchez added, feigning misery, "then I could actually see this thing." The comms crackled over his last words and static began building.

"Sanchez, not to alarm you, but I think your estimates about the storm may have been a little off," Douglas said calmly. He had started walking back around the panel, which was now fixed to the best of their ability.

McLeod thought she could hear Sanchez scrambling on the other end of the line, but the static made it hard to tell. "Uh, uh, oh God—how far are you from the airlock? Um- what's the—" He continued to ramble, but at this point it was probably more productive to tune him out and focus on getting inside.

The first wave that hit them was startling, but not enough to detach their mag boots from the station hull. McLeod found her breath quickening as she regained her balance and continued towards the airlock. She dared not to pause to check on Douglas behind her, and there was so much interference on the comms now that she couldn't be sure she could hear his breaths any more. She was overwhelmed with a feeling of being utterly alone.

The second wave of radiation that glided over them felt like a hefty shove on her side, and since she had one boot off the station, she almost toppled. The puny mag boots gripping the hull didn't seem like nearly enough to resist the solar tsunami. Taking a mere second to steady herself, she pushed on, starting to feel clammy and claustrophobic in her suit.

She barely made it a few more steps before the next wave, but she had both feet firmly planted on the hull for this one. She could see the airlock now, too, so close.

But she made the mistake of looking up.

For a moment, without her rational mind to guide her, she lost the comforting context that she was looking up into a sky filled with stars, and felt instead as if she was gazing down into the abyss, clinging to a tin can by a mere thread. The thought paralysed her for a handful of seconds that was worth an eternity.

Suddenly, she felt Douglas' hand on her arm, and although his sun visor was down, she had the look on his face memorised. A well-worn mix of concerned, reassuring, and urgent. She nodded and they kept walking, side by side, closing in on their salvation.

When they hauled each other into the open airlock waiting for them and depressurised, McLeod heaved some deep breaths and released the catch on her helmet, freeing every claustrophobic nerve in her body. Douglas gave her a brief nod with exhausted eyes.

McLeod looked back through the window into the open space that they had just left and saw the glimmering dance of the solar flares again. It beckoned like a siren's call, and suddenly she felt glad that she'd never had the misfortune of being transfixed by the northern lights on a cold winter's night back home.