

The Light Room

by Wen.

Ayla paced up and down the corridor, perusing the pamphlet in her hands. Crowds bickered their way around her, pointing at their own papers and the many banners along the street. Work hours had not even begun yet, but tunes of carnival echoed across halls, dances sprang in nooks, children laughed. The light room would finally be opened.

They had been working on it for years now. Rumor had it, it would be absolutely spectacular, a feat of the greatest minds in the colony. The Mayor was especially proud. Creating a transparent component that could resist the planet's radiation, based on the very materials mined below the colony, was the stuff of medals, he said.

Ayla just hoped it worked. At the clinic she'd seen the effects of the narrow corridors and dark hours. She had soothed Miners who trembled and cried, she had medicated Traders who tried to open doors into the void. The children were worse. They were indifferent to all of it. She'd given them vitamins, sent them trotting back to school.

The pamphlet displayed the same simple words, but Ayla kept reading them over and over. *The light room is to be opened. Come and enjoy a show like no other.*

People began to line up. Ayla rushed to the door, ticket in hand. The room was oblong, filled with seats and murmurs. Farmers, Miners, Architects, Politicians—the most prominent of each section had all been invited. They giggled and whispered and shifted in their seats. Soft lamps and paintings had been placed everywhere, and even someone had nudged a pot with a small flower into a corner.

The only empty space belonged to the front wall, stripped to its bare metal planks. A banner with the words “Light Room” had been placed on top, and from anywhere you sat you could see a small plaque with the opening hours. Dark glasses had been placed on every chair, with instructions to be put before the display.

Ayla swallowed and straightened her skirt. Her own papa and momma would not have missed it for the world. They'd been among the first to journey to the colony, and had mined their life away on the ground below.

The Mayor adjusted his tweed jacket with a pompous laugh and stood up. Everyone fell silent.

“It’s an honor today,” he cleared his throat, “to unveil the efforts of this town. Our founders said it’d be impossible, but we have achieved what they thought couldn’t be made.” Several heads nodded. “We’ve conquered this planet’s soil,” he continued, flustered with emotion, “molded it to our will, and fashioned it to our advantage. Here’s to the colony, here’s to the future. Let there be light!”

Darkness fell upon them with a gasp. The planks of the front wall chirred and creaked slowly, and then they snapped open.

Outside the clouds swirled across a dusty sky, the sky on which the colony had floated for so long, but had never seen. Its colors changed one moment to the next, red pulsating with oranges and purples and yellows, all gathered and separated by the winds which, in their strongest days, rocked the colony back and forth. And there, in the middle of the moving patterns, it stood.

Ayla held her breath.

It was small and perfect, a bright disc behind the clouds.

The storm around it grew and dimmed, never without motion. A burst of energy flashed across the window. The colony trembled, the crowd let out a small shriek. The glass began forming drops of ochre water, and the disc disappeared.

Ayla exhaled. It was the first time she had ever seen the sun.

As she walked out another crowd rushed in. They pressed themselves against the halls, long pale faces with distorted eyes asking to no one in particular how it had been. Her momma and papa had described suns many times before, but she didn’t know how to, so she dashed away.

Back at the clinic the Miners couldn’t be contained. Their eyes were brighter and clearer. For the first time they returned from the tight, descending tunnels with a smirk, boasting who’d seen it before the others. She watched as the other Nurses slowly turned every conversation to the room, and how much they couldn’t wait to go again.

On the streets, soon bets were placed on how fast the light room would stop being fashionable, and Traders immediately began claiming spots in its surroundings. Suddenly ticket boys were all the rage in school. Crowds came and went through the room, and some returned to the halls with lowered heads, because the storm had been too heavy that day.

Ayla preferred to go after work hours, during official night time. She paced along the empty corridors she had lived in for fifty years, looking up at the fake streetlamps, down at the dirty and abused floor.

The light room was quieter then. She sat in the dark, observing the colors and the twirls, and the ochre water hitting the glass. From time to time, she caught a glimpse at the disc.

She stared at it for as long as she could get away with, second-hand memories floating in her head. Her momma's earth, her papa's sea, all those leftover hopes, all the loves abandoned a long time before to fulfill a dream out there, in the emptiness.

When lighting hit the red sky it also illuminated the room. There was always a slight jump in everyone who watched, eliciting chuckles and whispers. Ayla saw her own pale reflection on the screen, protected behind the dark glasses. Even then, it was an aging image. She glanced at the room to fade it away. A cloud moved, allowing the sun to shine through.

The shadowed faces were all lit in rapturous awe, filling up a random room in an unknown sky.

And for a moment, Ayla smiled too.