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Grade 7

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Winter Sky

Sienna Wright was six years old when the daylight ended for the first time.

She held onto her daddy's hand tightly as she watched the sun set over the snowbanks for the last time. The light reflected off the snow and made it glitter like a mountain of sugar. With a shiver, Sienna pulled her coat around her body, happily fingering the big red buttons that trailed down the front of her jacket.

“Why is it so cold, Daddy?” she asked curiously. “Why did we come here? When is Mommy coming?”

Her father stared down at her sadly. His eyes were full of pain, but Sienna didn't notice. She dropped her daddy's hand and twirled through the snowfall; giggling despite the bitter weather and humming a children's song about the winter sky. The questions she had asked floated through the chilly air, forgotten by the questioner almost the moment they left her lips, but hanging over her father like storm clouds. He sighed and looked up to the gray sky above.

“You'll find out soon enough,” he whispered. The sun disappeared behind the hills and the last rays of light faded into night while the man walked towards a wooden cabin, the only stain of color amongst the endless white. His daughter skipped beside him, singing. “*Way up high in the winter sky two little snowflakes caught my eye...*”

The sun did not rise the next morning, nor the one after that. Sienna's bright blue eyes, so much like her mother's, welled up with tears each night at the realization that an entire day had passed without a sunrise or a sunset.

“Why is it always nighttime, Daddy?” she questioned once, her face crumpled with confusion.

“Will the sun come back?”

Her father smiled at her, but the smile never reached his eyes. “The sun is taking a break for wintertime. It’ll be back soon,” he promised.

Sienna nodded, but her definition of soon was different than her daddy’s, and her trust in him wavered as each morning presented no more daylight than the one before.

One afternoon the man and his daughter went for a walk, sick of being cooped up in the candlelit cabin. They trudged through the snow, the wind whipping Sienna’s braids around her face violently, the air cold enough to freeze any exposed skin. They sat down on a patch of ice and Sienna’s daddy held her small, gloved hand.

“Mommy’s not coming back, is she?” Sienna said quietly. Her father’s heart broke to be reminded of the woman he loved and to hear her voice in this small child beside him. He squeezed Sienna’s hand and pointed towards the dark sky. “No, sugar, Mommy is not coming back. But she’ll always be with you. She’s in the stars, do you see?” Sienna stared at the winter sky, at the stars that had not once disappeared since the days ended, and nodded.

That night, Sienna slept well. The nightmares that plagued her every time she slept fell silent for once. Her quiet fear of the dark evaporated and in its place a new appreciation for the stars formed.

The next morning, the sun rose, and the stars did not come back for six months.

Sienna Wright was ten years old when the daylight ended for the fifth time.

She was used to it by now. In the corner of the cabin, near the thin cot she slept on, was an old log; on the log, Sienna scratched careful lines, marking the days until the sun rose again. She no longer cried into her pillow each night, longing for her mother, for the terrifying blanket of darkness to be lifted. Piles of warm furs scattered the cabin, and a blazing fire crackled in the homemade fireplace,

keeping the man and his daughter temperate as the fierce wind roared outside.

They passed time by reading. Stacks of worn novels placed on the table were the main source of entertainment on those dark, cold nights. Most of them had been read more than once. Sienna's favorite, a book about constellations, had been read so many times that the faded title on the cover could barely be deciphered. Running her fingers over the carefully written label on the inside flap, she could almost imagine her mother sitting beside her, chattering casually about the stars as she braided Sienna's hair. *This book belongs to Rosabel Wright*, it said in deliberate cursive.

Sienna asked her father about Rosabel sometimes, but the answers were often cryptic. "You'll find out soon enough," he would whisper, pain evident in his brown eyes. Then he would take her hand in his rough, calloused one and suggest they go for a walk to break free of the stuffy cabin.

Sienna didn't push it.

The walks had become a regular occurrence; they were beginning to feel like the only connection Sienna had with her father. His eyes, so often full of sadness, glazed over when they landed on his daughter, as if it hurt too much to look at her, as if she was a painful reminder of the past. But when they were outside and the wind was howling like a ghost and the frozen snow crunched beneath their boots, Sienna felt closest to her father. The man and his daughter sat on the same patch of ice each afternoon, looking towards the stars. Conversation transpired at times, though more often it didn't, and they sat in silence, each immersed in their own thoughts.

Sienna's father surprised her one afternoon, and as silence was beginning to settle over them on the stretch of ice, he broke it by taking her hand and speaking with the voice of a man who had been through far too much for his age.

"The world is a cruel place, sugar," he announced, "There's a reason we don't live with everybody else." Puzzled, Sienna looked at her father, but his brown eyes had glazed over once again.

Sienna knew the way they lived was different than other people. That was apparent from the books she read repeatedly, books about little girls living in big cities and boys growing up to be heroes,

and from the snippets of memories that occasionally made their way to her consciousness. She caught bits and pieces of her mother tucking her into bed, with bright blue eyes similar to hers, and she faintly remembered a classroom full of kindergartners, singing a silly song about the winter sky. She hummed it once, on the way home from their daily walk, and her father, for the first time in years, looked more alive than he ever had.

At the age of ten, Sienna did not know very much, but she did know that her daddy was slipping away from her more and more each year, escaping into the depths of his mind, overrun by the ghosts of his past. She knew that she couldn't live like this much longer, with the stars disappearing for months at a time and the sun not rising each morning for half of a year. She knew it, but she didn't know what to do about it.

Sienna Wright was fourteen years old when, for the first time in her memory, the daylight did not end.

She had been observing them from a distance. At times she ventured closer, but never close enough to be seen. A summer breeze blew through the mountains, the snow fell softly, and the bright sunlight glaring down on her made the arctic landscape appear warmer than it usually did. Sienna was in high spirits at the moment, but she knew that within a month the sun would set for half of a year and the stars would reappear.

Sienna loved the stars, she truly did, and she did not entirely mind the winter months when they twinkled in the sky both day and night. And summers were, for lack of a better word, comfortable; with the weather warm and the sun constantly shining, Sienna and her father managed to survive, sometimes even cheerfully. But when it came down to it, she knew that this was not the way people were supposed to live. This was not natural. This was not the way a child should grow up, often in solitude, often cold,

often in the dark. Sienna knew of no other life, her memories slipping away quietly as each cold day passed into the next, and she could no longer recall a time before the daylight ended. At fourteen, Sienna did not know much, but she did know that her *life* could not be called a life. She was existing, nothing more.

Sienna asked her father about it once, on one of their daily walks, curious as to how he could be so satisfied in this barren wasteland, how he could have willingly relocated to a place with no presence. The man only repeated the words he had first said four years ago, his eyes murky, his face looking as if he had aged twenty years in the past five. "The world is a cruel place, sugar," he said.

The man and his daughter ceased their daily walks soon after that day, the man claiming headaches, his daughter disgusted with him for giving up so easily. She knew, deep down, that he could not help it, but her heart was so full of loneliness and she needed *somebody* to blame.

The nightmares came back, suddenly worse than they ever had been. Sienna cried out at night, for her mother, for her father, who was almost as good as gone, for the stars when the sunlight was constant and for the sun when the stars never vanished. Her mind overrun with panic and pain, searching for answers to questions that had never been answered, would never *be* answered, hanging over her like storm clouds.

And so Sienna observed them, usually from a distance, sometimes venturing closer. They were often absorbed in their work, but their eyes were kind, and she knew they would accept her if she ever gathered the courage to expose herself and approach them. Sienna Wright was fourteen now, and though she was contented at the moment, she knew that the happiness would not last, for it would soon be replaced by more fear, more terror, more darkness. Not even giving herself time to think about it, she trudged through the snow towards the group of benevolent-looking scientists, singing a song softly to herself and hoping for the best. "*Way up high in the winter sky two little snowflakes caught my eye...*"

Evelyn Hollaway had never witnessed the daylight ending.

They always departed before then, only staying as long as the sun hung in the sky. She had to admit she was the slightest bit interested, but she was on a tight schedule, and her career meant everything to her. One day, Evelyn promised herself, she would remain long enough to watch the sunset. But for now she focused on packing the various pieces of equipment, organizing the supplies, preparing for the long trip ahead. The boat would be leaving tomorrow, a month before winter arrived, and Evelyn wanted to be ready. They would arrive in South America soon after they left here and she would begin another six months of challenging but rewarding work.

Evelyn was so concentrated on the task at hand that she almost didn't notice the teenage girl standing next to her. When she did, she jumped, startled at the sudden appearance, curious as to who this girl was and what she was doing here. The girl had bright blue eyes and brunette braids, and she nervously fingered the buttons trailing down the front of her coat as she looked at Evelyn hopefully.

"My name is Sienna Wright. Please take me with you," she pleaded. "I want my days here to end."