

## The Nightland

Up north, it never really got dark.

The sun, a small white circle of warm ice, would be high in the sky all day and linger for most of the night, only allowing for a meager few hours of would-be-darkness. And even when it set, a small line of red would be ever present on the horizon while the light clung onto the landscape with a faint but tireless will to survive. Snowflowers would never close their petals, and animals had long since adopted a sleep pattern that barely included any sleep at all, leading scholars to speculate that they regained their energy through photosynthesis.

That was in the summer. During the winter, it was different.

Renatika stood at the top of a hill, freezing and ankle-deep in snow. In her gloved hands she held a small golden object. She had yet to figure out how all the different cogwheels and unidentifiable moving parts in the apparatus worked together in order to enable it to tell the time, but she knew one thing. When the two moving lines both pointed towards the white circle at the top, it was the high of day: Noon.

And so they would, in just a few moments.

She looked up at the horizon, in the direction of the sun. It wasn't even a full circle; only little more than half of the glowing disc was visible, a baby bird meekly sticking its head over the edge of its nest. The faint light only barely lit up the snowy landscape, giving off almost no heat at all. Renatika shuddered. The world around her seemed dead, a barren wasteland, where all but the hardiest of animals had gone into hibernation to make up for the sleep they did not get during the days of light. Even the wind seemed to have gone to rest.

*I then realized just how far away from home I had gotten*, she remembered one of her sources saying while recounting his own experiences in the north. For her, however, this was the closest she had been to home in years.

She let her mind wander for just a moment and then fished up another small instrument from her pocket, this one triangle-shaped but golden like the other. She held it up to the halved sun, took the measurements – twice, to be sure she had gotten it right – and memorized the numbers before turning around and trudging back the way she had come.

The inside of the small cabin was warmer than outside, but not by much. Despite it consisting of only one room, the wood burner wasn't nearly strong enough to heat it up properly and, being in the middle of nowhere, there were no other houses or buildings to shelter it from the icy wind. But from

the top of the stove the smell of soup met Renatika with an embrace, and the inner warmth it gave her was almost as good as real heat.

Oliverin looked up from his cooking when she entered. Two bowls stood on the table, and the absentminded way in which the skinny young man stirred the pot suggested that lunch was long ready, but that he wasn't going to serve it until she announced the results of the day. Renatika caught herself considering, out of bad habit, staying silent to test Oliverin's patience and apparent good nature. She stopped herself; she was rather hungry.

"Little less than—"

"No, I need the precise number," he interrupted her.

She shot him an annoyed glare before continuing, "Point nine eight of those, uh, the small ones—"

"Degrees."

"Yeah. Those. Point nine eight more of those since yesterday. It was at seventeen hours, fourteen minutes, and ... six seconds."

Seemingly satisfied with the answer, he nodded and paused his stirring in order to walk over to the desk and carefully write something down. His black hair, which had grown longer during their stay here, covered his face as he wrote, but Renatika knew what it looked like; tense in concentration, his calm eyes impossible to make contact with. She no longer even bothered looking at his notes, since to her each page of numbers and diagrams looked exactly the same as the rest. She wasn't even sure what they were supposed to represent. Oliverin had taught her to measure the position of celestial bodies, revealing that the sky, which she had always thought of as merely one, big surface, was actually a complicated grid of degrees and seconds. He had explained, or tried to at least, the rudimentary principles to her, but that was about the extent of her astronomical knowledge. The finer points of the science were still a fine kept secret.

Oliverin walked back, gestured for her to sit down and started pouring thin soup into the bowls. Somewhat awkwardly she edged her way in between table and chair – she couldn't pull her seat back without hitting one of the beds behind her. The cabin was much too small for her to feel entirely comfortable occupying it with another human being, but luckily Oliverin was the quiet type. He didn't talk much, and when he did, whatever came out of his mouth wasn't boring. He wasn't too bad.

In any case, they wouldn't be living together for too long. Despite her lack of knowledge about astronomy, she *had* picked up on a few things from the young man's work. In a little more than three months it would be summer, and his measurements here would be completed.

She took a sip of the surprisingly rich soup. When you lived in a place like this, you learned how to make the most of what little ingredients you had.

“Are you seriously going to go further north?” she asked, “Isn’t this place tortuous enough, especially for a southerling like you?”

Oliverin smiled, shrugged, “The Nightland isn’t very frightening in the summer; during that season it ought to be called the Dayland.”

“More like the Coldland,” she scoffed, “There aren’t any houses, much less cities further north. How are you going to avoid freezing to death?”

He didn’t answer that. He probably didn’t think an answer was necessary, but Renatika suspected that he didn’t actually have one.

“I just don’t understand why you’d go to so much trouble for something as silly as tracking the movement of the sun. What’s that even for?”

“Why are you up here?” he asked.

She raised an eyebrow, “I already told you. I’m collecting stories.” A pause. “And don’t give me any of that ‘stories are equally silly, why are *you* troubling yourself’ nonsense, because it’s different and you know it!”

“I wasn’t going to say that,” he emptied his bowl and started pouring himself another portion. “Though, you have to admit: a crazy person venturing up into the Nightland in the name of the sun – that makes for a pretty good story, does it not?”

For a while she merely stared at him, vaguely annoyed. But, as expected, his patience equaled that of a rock. In the end she gave up, returned to her soup, and the rest of the dinner was consumed in silence.

Days passed slowly. Aside from the daily measurements, there was little to no reason to leave the cabin. For the most part, Renatika was the one to go out with the instruments while Oliverin stayed behind to scribble in his books, but sometimes he joined her. Other days, when Renatika was in a particular mood and swore that if she had to look at that endless sea of dimly lit snow one more time, she’d gut someone, he went alone. Diversions in the cabin were likewise few and far between. Oliverin sat ever silent at the small desk, edged into the corner, filling page after page with indecipherable observations and considerations. He wrote like he drew breath, and Renatika was sure that if the ink ever ran out, he would use his own blood as a replacement.

Meanwhile, Renatika tried to fill her time with sleep, huddled up in several layers of blankets, splayed out on her bed, on Oliverin’s bed, on the floor, and at one point curled up on the table. She stared out into the darkness beyond the single, fogged up window, burrowed into the darkness of the bedding, wandered around in circles in the four square meters of floor, going stir-crazy in a way she hadn’t yet thought possible. Often, waves of immeasurable, inexplicable sadness crashed over her without warning. Not wanting to cry in front of Oliverin, she merely sat on the floor and contem-

plated slashing her own throat. Other times, she would exaggerate her behavior in a bored attempt to aggravate her housemate; stomp her feet, sigh heavily, tap her fingers on the table. Again and again she had to conclude that he truly was made of stone. He never looked up from his work.

But sometimes he did. And then they would tell stories.

Oliverin's stories were mostly concerned with the sky. "Everything moves; in ellipses or circles," he would explain, pointing to diagrams and illustrations that Renatika didn't understand, "Our planet is moving, too, look; here we catch up to the Twins, here they overtake us again."

His finger traced where the orbit of two circles looped and Renatika knitted her brows.

"If everything circles, what is it circling around?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out," He moved some papers around gently, almost caressing them, "I think it might be the sun."

"So the sun isn't moving?" she asked as she watched Oliverin's gaze grow distant and his jaw clench slightly.

"I don't know," he mumbled, "It doesn't make sense for it not to. What would it mean if it didn't?"

Renatika hummed, picked up a piece of paper and stared at it like one might at a pattern of fallen leaves in a pond. It had taken so much effort for her to learn how to read and write; the thought of doing it all over again to learn an entirely new language wasn't attractive to her.

"I know a story about someone who thought the world revolved around the sun," she said.

The clarity in Oliverin's eyes seemed to return as he shifted his attention to her, "Oh?"

"But it's short and ends with them dying."

"Most stories are like that, aren't they?" Slowly, Oliverin folded his hands and moved his head forward, letting his chin rest on the small mountain ridge formed by his knuckles. He was looking out the window, at the thick blanket of falling snow that was dancing in and illuminating the darkness. "Life is so short."

*Far too short to be locked up in a small, dark room day in and day out,* the old man's voice resonated in her head. As she plodded through the snow a few steps behind Oliverin, she saw the man sitting in front of the fire in his living room, skinny and hunched over, his eyes hidden behind countless wrinkles and smiling. When she met him much further south and wrote down his story, he hadn't been north in many years, but he remembered it as clearly as he did everything else. The cold, the darkness, and the light.

"The cold goes into your bones and infests them like a wound. It sticks to your inner core, and a trace of it will always be in you, no matter how far south you flee," she quoted him, staring straight ahead, "It's the same with the darkness, and the light can only do so much to chase it away."

“What did you say?” Oliverin stopped and turned towards her.

She felt unable to stop walking and continued a few more paces before finally halting. Even then she felt as though she was being crushed under the weight of the icy air and the darkness. It had gotten lighter recently, the sun was higher in the sky, but even so its rays didn't seem able to penetrate the layer of gloominess that Renatika felt covered her.

“I grew up in the north. How can I know if I have that cold? How can I know if he was right when I can't tell the difference between having it and just being ... normal?”

She looked at Oliverin expectantly, but he stood with his arms down his sides, looking uncomprehending. Despite this, he smiled softly; perhaps he recognized his own lack of understanding in how Renatika must have looked each time he tried to explain astronomy to her. Wishing to repay her for long hours of listening, he walked closer and placed a hand on her arm.

“Maybe you can't. But you can do your best to try and find out.”

She shrugged, uncertain, but Oliverin considered his job done and returned to the real issue at hand. Pulling out the tools, he held them up to the sun and took the measurements.

Renatika watched him work in silence for a little bit, but somehow she felt particularly talkative today. Her body felt heavy; maybe it was words weighing her down.

“It was an adventurer who told me that about the cold. He said he worked in a mine, but he hasn't been up here since. I don't think he ever got this far north, though.”

“Mm-hmm,” Oliverin was clearly only listening with half an ear, and it took him a while to answer properly. “Have you ever been this far north before?”

She shook her head, then remembered that he wasn't looking at her, “No, not quite. But the town I grew up in is one of the northernmost ones.”

She hadn't been back yet. Although the old man's story had somehow made her want to return, she had found herself going in a big circle around her hometown. She had been in the next town over trying to justify her decision to stay away when she had met Oliverin on his way to the border of the Nightland and the perfect escape tumbled into her lap. They agreed to go together. Oliverin could do with the help of a local, and Renatika figured there'd be a story to collect. So far, however, she hadn't written a word. Numbers and diagrams didn't encourage much of plot.

Silently, Oliverin finished up his work and packed away the apparatuses. He gave Renatika a quick nod, and they started walking home.

She considered asking him about his observations, but couldn't bring herself to it. She was convinced that she would be unable to make sense of them, anyway, and the wind was clawing at her face besides. A little too strongly, it occurred to her. The weather had grown worse while they had been standing.

“It’s snowing,” Oliverin pointed out casually, and Renatika felt a chill go down her spine even in the coldness.

“Come on, we need to hurry if we want to make it home,” she snapped.

“The cabin is right nearby—“

“Not near enough.”

Nothing was ever near enough up here. Indeed, they didn’t manage more than three steps before the wind forced them one back, and the gentle drizzle of snowflakes had grown into an aggressive swarm of them. In just a moment, the world had become a reverse inferno of darkened white.

Renatika swore under her breath and shouted, “Here, take my hand and keep going forward.”

She was certain that the wind took the words and threw them back in her face, but Oliverin must have heard, because she soon felt his gloved hand gripping hers tightly. She let the unfamiliar sensation bother her for only a second before she forced herself to walk, pressing against the sheer strength of the wind as it screamed at her in protest. The snow drew a veil over her eyes and she had to squint, but even through the small slit of her vision she could see a dark figure suddenly tumbling past her. Immediately after, she heard a shrill sound that did not come from the storm, but from a living creature. Oliverin let go of her hand.

“What are you doing!?”

As he ran stumbling past her, she heard him shouting, “My bag; the tools! I can’t lose them!”

“Get back here, you idiot!”

No response. For a moment she hesitated, afraid to move in any other direction than towards the cabin, and when she finally hurried after her fleeing companion, it was too late. Impossible to see more than a meter ahead in the dense snow, Oliverin in his worn-gray clothing was quickly swallowed by snowstorm and darkness. She tried shouting his name, but once again the gusts tore the words away from her and replaced them with masses of snow that froze the inside of her mouth and neck and nearly choked her.

Her insides felt as icy as her outsides as she gave up and turned around.

Lifting an arm up to shield her face, she let her eyes dart around in search of some sort of landmark, anything she could use to find her way back, but there was nothing to be seen but white upon white. Nothing grew up here but the smallest, sturdiest of plants. Never in her life had she longed so intensely after a tree.

After moving forward for a while, her steps grew more difficult as the ground began to slope, and a small hope lit up in her chest. She remembered the cabin being up the side of a hill. She quickened her pace to as fast a run as she could manage in the headwind, almost immediately lost her footing, and slammed her chin into the frozen ground. As she felt herself sliding down she clawed futilely at

her surroundings, blinded by the snowfall and unable to tell ground from storm, hardly able to move in her thick clothing.

She ended up in a heap at the bottom of the hill – or so she thought, at least; she didn't trust her own senses enough to be sure that she had stopped moving. The disorienting white tangle continued to push and pressure her from all angles, and she felt indisputably, irredeemably stuck. The snow had the same stranglehold on her as her father and the rest of the town had had on her when she was young. What an idiot she was. She had managed to escape the north many years ago, and now she had gone back to do exactly what her father so desperately had wanted her to: bend her neck, accept her place, and die.

No. If nothing else, she was a storyteller; she ought to be able to come up with a better ending than this. She closed her eyes. With every ounce of willpower that she could muster, she scrambled back to her feet and started moving back up the hillside.

Only a few steps later she let out a scream when something seized her shoulder. Swiveling around, she saw Oliverin staring at her with fervent, blue eyes.

“I found the bag,” he shouted into her face.

They somehow made it back to the cabin. Renatika wasn't sure how; she had been occupied with the hands of snow that seemed to grasp at every part of her body as they trod through the storm. Once safe inside, Renatika allowed herself a moment to brush the snow from her face before she picked up one of the chairs and smashed it into Oliverin's side. He was flung to the ground.

“Are you absolutely insane?” she screamed at him, “You nearly got both of us killed!”

“I had to get the tools,” Oliverin stuttered, his hands slipping on the melting snow on the floor as he edged away from her, “without them, it would be pointless to—“

“To what, pointless to *live*?” She stared at him in disbelief. “Would it really have been so terrible if you couldn't do any more measurements? You have so many already. You could have done estimates, you could have gone up next year to finish, you could have done *anything but leave me alone in a damned snowstorm!*”

“Renatika—“

“I'm sick of this!” She picked up the chair again and clutched it so hard that splinters pricked at the palms of her hands, the pain of it made worse by the fading numbness in them. “I'm sick of snow, I'm sick of darkness, I'm sick of you and your astronomy. It would be pointless without your tools, you say? It's pointless already. Who cares if the sun moves or not? It all moves in circles – we're just going to end up in the same spot, anyway.”

“Renatika, please calm down,” Oliverin said quietly.

She stared at his huddled, dripping wet figure lying on the floor, one hand raised defensively and eyes wide. Again she raised the chair above her head, but instead of swinging, she started to sob. The tears felt as though they were going to freeze to ice right there on her cheeks.

Only when she had dropped the chair and slid down into a sitting position on the floor, still weeping and gasping for breath, did Oliverin dare standing up. He changed out of his wet clothes and convinced Renatika to do the same, and her tears shied away as she had to place all her focus on prying off the soaked garments that clung to her skin. For what felt like an eternity she hid under a blanket with a lump in her throat and embarrassment in her chest until Oliverin brought her a cup of heated water.

They sat next to each other on the floor for a while, sipping at each their cup.

“Bring me my book,” Renatika said.

He gave her a look.

“I’m writing down that damn story right now,” she explained, “No matter how pointless it seems.”

He got up and rummaged through her bag the large book she wrote down her stories in. While she waited, Renatika sat and flexed her fingers, almost nervous to grip the pen without knowing what to write with it.

“Tell me about the sun,” she said hesitatingly once Oliverin was seated opposite her and the book was open in her lap, a blank page glaring up at her. “But try to leave out the numbers.”

Oliverin chewed on his lip for a moment before he started talking, “Until recently, we thought the sun and all other things in the sky were playthings that the gods threw up in the air and caught again underneath the horizon. But now we know that our planet is round, and the gods live inside our bodies.”

She wrote down what he said and added to it. Changed words and phrases here and there – each time Oliverin went on about temperatures and hours of daylight, she reminded herself of the feeling of warm sunshine on her skin and midsummer bonfires. She wrote to the sound of the raging snow-storm outside until it, too, eventually faded.

“The sun journeys across the sky each day,” she read aloud while Oliverin heated a pot of water on the stove for dinner, “Sometimes our world tilts away from it, and its rays can scarcely find their way to us. At these times, the darkness and cold inside us grows until we can hardly open our eyes or even move. But the sun will always fight its way above the horizon for us to reach out to it, to gain its strength and wait for lighter days. We circle around it, wanting to be closer to its warmth”

Carrying bowls and spoons to the table, Oliverin nodded and pursed his lips thoughtfully, “I like it. And you can always add more about its movement, once I get back from the Nightland.”



“You’ll be staying there all summer,” Renatika sighed, “I guess this story won’t be finished for a while.”

She made sure the ink had dried before carefully closing the book and slowly running her hands across the cover. Its leather binding felt familiar and almost warm to the touch.

“My father told me that life isn’t like what you hear in stories,” She looked out the window at nothing in particular as she talked, mostly to herself, “and I figured it was just because we lived up here, where not even stories could grow. But that old man had stories about the north. I guess it depends on how you look at things.” She looked back at the table where Oliverin just now placed the pot of thin soup. “Stories are just better versions of reality.”

He gave her a slight smile, and they sat down to eat.

And eventually, gradually, the days got lighter. The darkness shied away and grew smaller and weaker until it nearly disappeared, while the cold continued to dominate, but felt somewhat less threatening. By the time the stout, dark-skinned boy who had guided them to the cabin half a year earlier appeared with his goat on the horizon, the snow had been reduced to a thin, powdery coating.

Oliverin strapped on the backpack the boy had brought him as Renatika watched him with her arms crossed.

“You’re crazy.”

“You have been saying that all winter,” Oliverin smiled and stuffed a small packet of biscuits in his pocket.

“That’s because it hasn’t stopped being true,” she sighed, “Just don’t die up there.”

“Stories always end with someone dying.”

“There won’t be any story if you don’t come back to tell it to me.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Removing his gloves, he opened one of his shoulder bags and pulled out a thick folder, firmly held together by rough leather straps. He handed it to Renatika, who, once Oliverin had nodded his approval, opened it gingerly.

“These are ... your observations—“

“Copies of them,” he corrected her. She couldn’t recall having seen him copying anything all winter. “In half a year, I’ll meet you in Laketown like we agreed; but if I don’t, I want you to distribute those.”

She frowned, “To whom?”

“Scholars, city masters. Priests, farmers, vagabonds. Anyone who’s interested. The same kind of people you tell your stories too.”

She flipped through some of the pages, trying her hardest to find meaning in the scribbles, “Not exactly the kind of story I usually tell.”

“But a kind of story nevertheless,” Oliverin said, “Not all stories are easy to understand, you told me that yourself. But in time, maybe ...”

His voice drifted off. After a brief silence, she sealed the folder and put it in her own bag.

“Yes. Maybe.”

They said their goodbyes and Oliverin continued further north into the Nightland, while Renatika followed the boy down the mountain. The snow cover shrank and disappeared the lower they got, and Renatika gradually removed her winter clothing. When she took off her hat and let her hair fall down her back, the goat nipped at the reddish strands like it had on the way up. Eventually she pulled off her tunic and flung it over the goat’s back, continuing bare-armed in a thin undershirt.

“Miss, won’t you freeze like that?” the boy asked with concern, still wearing a thick coat to shield him from the wind.

“It’s alright,” she assured him, “I’m not cold at all.”