

## My World - Batul, Year 10, VIC

Lina and I are like the sky and the earth. Always separate – yet bound together. She is the ground I stand on, and I am the sky she reaches for. She is steady, constant, and rooted, while I am restless, shifting, made of clouds and wind and unspoken dreams.

Together, we make the world feel full.

In the market, she passes me pistachios, cracking their shells effortlessly as she flashes a crooked smile.

“Sweet, aren’t they?” she says, her big green eyes glinting with laughter.

I nod, but I never tell her that they taste like waiting. Because they do. And I wait. For her. For me. For the moment that will tear us apart. It comes sooner than I expect. Because my sister – my sky, my soil – she is getting married.

The square is full of smoke and sweat. Soldiers bark names, dates, announcements. The weight of a nation balancing on their guns.

“Zain Hassani has released another article,” the soldier announces, his voice flat, deep, the Slorian accent slicing through the market air. “Whoever knows of this Qumari man’s whereabouts should report it to us immediately. So that he can be dealt with—”

A pause.

“—Adequately.”

I stand in the distance, narrowing my eyes as the wind tugs at my hijab. The articles in my bag feel heavy – not just in weight, but in meaning. They carry grief, defiance, and truth, pulsing with a fierce life I can almost touch, to the world that feels distant, like a story written in another language – one I no longer comprehend. I am the space between words and lines – the voice my silenced country yearns for. They say Qumara is gone. That it belongs to them now. But I still write. I still remember. They can try to erase us – to replace our words with theirs, our memories with their myths – but I refuse to forget. I refuse to be silent. I—

“Safa?”

Her voice startles me. I turn. She steps forward, arms wrapped around herself, eyes darting nervously between the soldiers and me.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Lina says. “It’s dangerous.”

I shrug, my palm pressed to my cheek,

“I know. I know.”

She places her hand on my arm – tentative, a gentle hold, familiar like a fading melody. Yet beneath the calm, I cannot shake a queasy flutter twisting deep in my belly. Why does she care, anyway? Soon, she’ll be married to a man she hasn’t even bothered to introduce to me. Soon, she will belong to another house. Another name. Another silence.

And I – I will be left with nothing but echoes.

The quiet between us is thick, like the dust settling after a storm. Then she breaks it, shoving a handful of pistachios at me, a half-smile tugging at her lips, “What’s with the sad face? You can’t eat these all at once?”

I laugh and toss one into my mouth.

“Watch me.”

She rolls her eyes.

“You always say that. Then you get that weird crunch face.”

I bite down dramatically.

“It’s a talent you know.”

She shakes her head, smiling.

“You’re impossible *habibti*.”

I grin, elbowing her lightly.

“Someone’s gotta keep you entertained.”

She nudges me back.

“Just don’t get any pistachio shells stuck in your hair this time.”

I look up, mock-offended.

“I am a lady, thank you very much.”

Her laughter fills the quiet air, her green eyes sparkling as the sun dips low.

“Sure you are.”

That night, I write again. By candlelight, in ink that runs a little too quickly from the pen. My hands tremble. My breath is uneven.

“The truth must be known,” I write for my crumbling community, for my beautiful home, slipping like sand between my fingers, “even if it costs us everything.”

The next morning, the ink is smudged; a black blur. It’s almost laughable how something as sharp as truth, as full and alive as a single thought, can be destroyed by a drop of water. A shaky hand. A smear of time.

My voice, my flame – reduced to a mess of bleeding letters. That’s all it takes. One mistake. One smudge. And suddenly the thing that gave you power becomes unreadable. Suddenly your words don’t matter. Suddenly, you never existed. That’s how frail it is. This fight. This fire in my throat. This fragile breath of rebellion.

I stare at the ruined page and turn to see Lina standing frozen in the doorway. The same green eyes. But not the same look. Not anymore.

She doesn’t look at me like I’m her sister. Not like I’m the sky she once reached for. No. Now she just looks afraid. Her hand is wrapped tightly around the arm of a tall Slorian soldier. And he is smiling.

“Safa... I didn’t mean for this to happen...I-”

“You what?” I cut her off, my voice trembling, “You’re betraying your country for a man? Betraying me – your sister – for a man?”

Her eyes flicker like delicate glass, the Slorian soldier’s grip loosening as she steps forward, cupping my cheek softly, thumb brushing over my skin like a quiet promise. “*Wallah*, Jad didn’t know. He just – he’s helping, that’s all. I...love him and... he and I are going to get you out. I won’t let them kill you. I... I promise.”

But her words slide right off me as her lips quiver, sorrow spilling from her like forgotten rivers down her face. She looks away, away from me, away from the sister she once was, away from the thin threads that still bind us to this broken universe. But she says nothing else. And maybe that’s worse than if she had. The sky does not fade, the earth does not shatter – but my world does.

Strings are winding around my heart, tightening with every breath, as heat blurs my vision and dots the patterned carpet like a scattered confession. In the gap between us, Lina’s hands were the ones that peeled away the layers of my world – like pistachios, one shell at a time,

until I was left bare, exposed. Until there was nobody left to peel away the stale flavour of emptiness.

They don't speak when they take me. Just grip my arms and pull me into a cold room that smells of rust and something rotting. No questions. No glances. I am nothing but a stain now. Something they plan to wash out with rope and spectacle.

Before dawn, a guard enters and asks if I want a last meal. I almost laugh. But instead I whisper, "Pistachios."

And I ask for the best ones in town. The roasted kind from the gold tins in the upper market. The ones Lina used to buy when she was feeling generous. When we had something to celebrate.

They bring them in a paper bag. Warm. Fragrant. Split perfectly. I place one in my mouth. Bite down.

And still—

It tastes wrong. Because the best pistachios I've ever had are the worst in my life. Every bite is a reminder. Of what was. Of what isn't. Hollow, like a memory missing its voice. I sob as I eat them, shoulders shaking, the salt of my tears mixing with the shell dust on my lips. She didn't come. I knew she wouldn't. But knowing doesn't soften the blow – it only sharpens it. She knew they wouldn't let me go, and still, she stayed away. No final goodbye, no parting glance. Only the ache of absence, heavy as dusk, settling where her shadow should have been.

The crowd gathers in the market. Where once we sold spices and scarves and songs, now we gather to watch a girl hang. The rope is thick. Stiff. It scratches my neck as they tighten it, the knot digging into skin that still remembers sunlight.

I do not cry. I do not plead.

I found refuge in the rhythm of my breath, the pulse beneath my skin, the blood that chants I am still here – still ablaze. They came for my voice, my name, the essence of who I am. But they cannot lay claim to the wind that lives in my lungs.

I lift my chin, hold my head high, finding Lina's eyes in the crowd. She is not crying. Just Staring. And her husband? Grinning. I say nothing for her. I speak for the sky. For the earth. For the people buried beneath both. I speak for Qumara. That is why when the executioner steps away I whisper:

"For my home."

And then louder – loud enough to make the clouds pause–

“For my home!”

The rope tightens. And in my mouth, the taste of pistachios lingers – dry. Bitter. What once spoke of love now lays cracked on my tongue, stripped of the tenderness it used to hold.

Because...Lina chose another world. One I can't reach. And now, I am just sky – too wide, too lonely, with no ground to anchor me. And she is just earth – silent, distant, rooted in something I no longer understand. We are still the same. Sky and earth. Always separate – and now, no longer bound.