

Years 9 & 10

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Falling Stars

They looked like shooting stars – golden streaks tearing through the darkness of the night and illuminating the black sky.

The city beneath them watched with caught breaths as they descended, lower and lower, an agitated buzz snuffing out the sounds of everyday life: traffic, bin collection, the hum of distant TVs – their noises swallowed. All that was left was the sound of heartbeats, jumping in every person's throat, radically beating as the tense, horrid anticipation grew longer.

Somewhere, in the row of apartments just along the coast, a girl no older than five stood at the window, breath fogging up the glass as she stared with wide eyes at the sight. She had never seen anything like it, and for good reason.

"Anna." Her mother's voice was sudden and twisted, calling from another room.

"Come here, quick."

Anna didn't respond. She pressed closer to the glass, feeling the cool pane against her cheek. The coolness of the night, the buzzing in her ears . . . proof that she was alive.

"Anna!" The voice was stricken now, hurried footsteps that could hardly be heard above the buzz rushing closer. "Anna, where are you?"

"I'm in here," the child called back softly.

The door erupted, her mother standing in the doorway, chest heaving as though it was a conscious effort to breathe. "Get your teddy bear," her mother said urgently.

"We have to go!"

"Mama." Anna pressed a hand against the glass, leaning back to look at her mother.

"Look at the falling stars."

Her mother shuddered, tightening her hands around herself. Her hair was a mess, cheeks flushed, eyes wide and darting as though searching for escape. "What stars?"

"These ones, mama." Anna darted over to her mother and folded their hands together, tugging her to the window. "The golden ones! I've never seen a shooting star before."

Anna was staring out of the window again, entranced. What she missed was her mother's eyes flooding with tears. She was looking at her daughter, her joy, who hadn't even turned six and yet was the best person she'd ever known. Her tiny curls were tied back into space buns. Her brown eyes were wide, and her soft pink lips fell agape, a missing tooth just visible between them.

"The stars," Anna gasped again. "They're beautiful."

A sound broke in her mother's throat. "They are." Her mother wept, pressing her head forward against the glass. "Like you, my baby." She held her head there, stealing the moment. The moment with her daughter's warm hand intertwined with hers, light blooming behind their eyes, breath and blood coursing through them. If she pretended, she could almost convince herself that nothing existed outside of this moment. That this was all there was and all that ever would be; mother and daughter, together, watching stars fall upon their city.

But no stars were falling.

Her mother dropped to her knees, pulling her daughter into a tight embrace. “We have to go, baby,” she said into Anna’s shoulder. “Go get your teddy. *Quick.*” Anna nodded and darted out of the room, leaving her mother on her knees by the window. Her mother cast one final look at the streaking lights before she threw her head back, scrubbed away her tears and ran after her daughter. Because no stars were falling on their city tonight. Only bombs.

Stuffy breaths. Burning skin. The room was too hot for his liking. He tugged at his neatly ironed collar, letting air rush beneath his shirt in an effort to steady the jittering of his heart.

The office door swung open, and another man appeared – he was older, his hair more white than brown. He adjusted his tie slightly, nodded his head in acknowledgement, and then took a seat across from the younger man. Neither spoke for a moment, staring at each other in a silent battle of wills. The younger man thought inwardly that the other man’s eyes seemed glazed, covered in a layer of plastic film that made him look empty. As though he did not feel, had become a mere observer to a world that was meant to be *experienced*.

“What have you done?”

The words had slipped out, but the second they had, he realised he had no regret for them. The anger, the *guilt* that he had been suppressing finally spilled forth, a land mine that had gone off days ago and just now was erupting.

The older man coughed lightly into his fist. “Watch yourself.”

The younger man took a moment, a mere second to process the sheer nerve of the man sitting across from him.

“Watch myself?” he said softly, mouth tilting up in a smile that made it clear nothing was funny. He stood, slamming his palms on the table, all traces of humour slipping from his voice as fast as it had come. “*Watch myself?*”

The older man said nothing, simply folded his hands together and pursed his lips as though waiting for a toddler to complete its tantrum. All this accomplished was to infuriate the younger man more.

“Do you realise what you’ve done? You bombed the city! The goddam *city!*”

The man nodded. “I am aware.”

“You *killed* people, you realise that? Kids. Children.” The younger man clutched his head in his hands, lost for words to convey the feelings raking through him, tightening his throat and cramping his stomach. “Innocent people, whose only crime was living in that country and being born under that government.”

“Do not raise your voice at me,” the older man snapped, his jaw tightening. “I did what had to be done. The country’s government was a threat, and now we have sent a message.”

The younger man shrank back into his seat. He inhaled softly, trying to gather himself. He had just crossed a line that not many returned from, and the words he chose next would have to be careful and deliberate, intentionally calm. “You haven’t touched the people who were threatening us,” the man said softly, slowly. “You’ve only killed innocents.”

“But don’t you see?” The older man leaned back in his chair, raking a hand through his hair. “*Through* this, we hurt their government. *Through* this, we win.”

The younger man swallowed, his throat riding the motion. Ever so slowly, he rose from his chair again.

“Not like this,” he said softly. “You could have taken down their government in a hundred ways, but you didn’t.” He shook his head, as though the action would unravel the past, erase the tragedy of what had just been carried out. “You shouldn’t have done it like this. And when they retaliate, and we lose our cities, while you sit here guarded by armed forces, our people will see that.”

The older man looked away, eyes darting for a brief moment, and the younger man knew he had gotten to him.

“And then they will see this for what it truly is,” the younger man pressed on. “A massacre.” His eyes trailed away from the old man’s face, over the spotless office room that was so far away from war and blood that it was almost laughable. “The only pity is that we will have to experience the death of our people first, before the humanity in us kicks in and we regret what we have done.”

The younger man took a heaving breath and bolted for the door. The room he left went quiet.

But outside it, for millions of others, the world began to burn.

His sister was praying to a God that had forsaken them, in a language that had betrayed them.

“*Kun ma’ana, ya Rabbana.*” Her voice was cracked as she rocked back and forth, hands pressed over her ears as though she was trying to block out the world.

“*Owhea te sebna.*”

The basement was dark and cramped, dust drifting from its low ceiling to flood his lungs. He inhaled, drawing in a shuddering breath, the air diluted by the sick smell of mould and the scent of his own sweat.

The two of them were in their home’s basement, limbs bent and twisted at odd angles to fit in it. Both were tense; his sister was crying, tears streaking down her face.

“Shut up, Neim,” he whispered as her sobbing rose to a peak. “They’re going to hear you.”

She plastered a hand over her face, catching her tears and muffling her sobs.

He strained his ears; above them, he could hear angry voices. The familiar creak of their unoiled front door, followed by footsteps too heavy to belong to their parents.

Neim had heard it too. “*Yah Rabbana,*” she breathed. “God. Oh God.”

Fear suddenly coursed through him, sudden and jabbing; goosebumps erupted along his arms as the footsteps grew louder and closer. Blindly, he reached for Neim through the dark, fingers closing around her arm. She was trembling, looking at him with wide, scared eyes; the white of her eyes shone through the dark; he could almost see his reflection in them.

And suddenly –

A shriek. A bang. And a final resounding *thump* as something heavy hit the floor.

Death stole in a second and haunted for an eternity.

His blood was freezing in his veins, crystallising into ice, making it impossible to breathe, move, think – he would never function again. It was as though his tongue was lodged in the back of his throat, his skin peeling, and his lungs collapsing. He felt himself turn to look at Neim, searching through the gloom for her face.

She was staring back at him. He watched as her face crumpled. “*Mama?*” she mouthed in question.

And it was all he could do to nod.

Neim threw her head back, and for a moment, he was certain she was going to let out a wail of grief. Instead, she buried her fist into her mouth, tears tearing her face apart.

Tears had found their ugly path down his face, too. He was helpless. He imagined his mother, above them, her crumpled form and the ugly men who stood watch. They were separated now – he and his mama. Separated by inches of wood and the difference of life and death.

Footsteps again, moving steadily closer.

An angry yell, in a language they didn’t understand. Far too close. Just above them, to the point that it struck him then, with absolute certainty. They had found the basement entrance. They were going to die.

He tightened his grip around his sister’s arm. She looked up at him, and he could see the dullness in her eyes. The despair and acceptance that came with shedding all last scraps of hope.

“*Ana mish ‘ayez amut,*” he said softly to her. *I don’t want to die.* What a childish thing to say – the world did not change for what anyone did or did not want. And yet they were the most honest things he’d ever said, a young boy’s desire to live expressed in the frantic heartbeats before death.

His sister reached for him. “*Haneba ma ‘a Rubenna.*” She swallowed. “We will be with God.”

Her words were cracked, and he could taste the bitterness behind them, sense the fact she did not believe them. For where was God? Certainly not here in the basement between them. Not up there with his mother’s corpse. Not out on the streets that were being ravaged, where millions were being killed in their own homes. God wasn’t there when the countries declared war on one another.

Or perhaps God was there; the boy didn’t know, would never get to learn. Perhaps he would have learnt when he got older that God never left, learnt to speak to God, and to rely on him. Maybe as he grew, he would have grown in his faith and learnt that God had never once left him.

But suddenly the door above them flung open, the barrels of silver guns greeting them, and God had never felt further.