The eagle suffers little birds to sing,
And is not careful what they mean thereby,
Knowing that with the shadow of his wings
He can at pleasure stint their melody

—Titus Andronicus,
William Shakespeare
The buggy was going too fast. As it sped into its turn at the top of the dune, its front passenger-side tire sank into the loose sand. For a moment, it seemed it would make the turn anyway. Then the tire dug in further. The wheel sheared off. The buggy’s back end lurched up. Airborne, it twisted end over end.

As the vehicle tumbled past him, Bashim saw the passenger’s grinning white teeth in a face masked by desert dust and violet Worldshapers. The tailpipes coughed fire, so close Bashim could feel their alcohol heat. The sheared-off wheel bounced past, a black disc eclipsing the desert sun. It narrowly missed smashing into three wallahs who scrambled out of its path just in time.

Then everyone was running: sheikhs in their gleaming white thawbs and oiled sandals, wallahs in their cheap, dirty bazaar-bought T-shirts, their torn third-hand jeans and flip-flops. The buggy came to a rest, at the end of a trail of shed metal, crushed down to its roll cage, a lick of blue flame climbing its passenger side.

One of the sheikhs put his hands to the sides of his mouth and whooped up into the sky in joy.

Later Bashim and three of the older wallahs sat around their campfire, waiting for their dented tin teapot to come to a boil. The sunset had turned the sky above the Kara-Kum to a sea of embers, but now the stars were masked by dust. The moon was a dull disk.

Armen, Bashim’s older brother, had been given two turkey legs by the sheikhs. He was pulling them apart, sorting the meat into equal piles. The other two boys, Rovshen and Azamat, were focused on the greasy turkey.

“Tell me again what he said, Bashim,” said Armen.

Bashim was glad to tell his story. His first day serving the sheikhs, and he had a good story to tell back at the village: he had run faster than all the others, had gotten to the smashed buggy first.

“I helped pull him from the car. His thawb was splattered with his blood, and blood ran from his scalp, but he was still smiling. He put his hand on the side of my face and said, ‘Such a brave child. I will find you later and reward your bravery.’ And then he squeezed my shoulders. He was so large! And muscular. A giant. He must have been more than two meters tall! And he spoke English just like Top Hat Avatar.”

At a nearby campfire an older boy who Bashim did not know was telling another story: “. . . and he placed the falcon on my arm. ‘Careful you little bastard’ he said, ‘that’s my grandfather.’ You could see it in the falcon’s eyes, too . . . the way it cocked its head at me. It really was a man in there.”

“If I died,” another boy said, “I would not want to be put into a bird.”

“What would you be, then?”

“A snow leopard. I would live high in the mountains.”

“He saw a show once on snow leopards. Now he won’t shut up about them.”

“You wouldn’t come back as a snow leopard. You would come back as a wallah. Because that is all you are ever going to be.”

The boys at the other fire laughed.

Around Bashim’s fire, the four boys shoveled the turkey into their mouths. When they finished, Armen said: “Come with me, Bashim”

In the dark outside the campfire’s guttering circle, he continued: “Bashim, I want to you to sleep away from the camp tonight. I will pitch your tent beyond those rocks there.” He gestured to a rock formation barely visible in the darkness, an outcropping of boulder fingers jutting from the nearly featureless desert.

“Why? Why shouldn’t I sleep with the others? Have I done something wrong?”

“No,” Armen said. His eyes—always sad, always worried—caught the orange of the campfire in them. “No. But I need you to do this. Obey me because I am your older brother.”

But why should he have to sleep alone? What had happened? He must have done something
wrong, but he could not think of what it was. “All right. But only because you are my broth-
er.”

* * *

Bashim went over the day in his mind: the falcon hunting, when he had followed in the chase
car and then served tea to the sheikhs afterward as they sat under their canopy. He had been
careful. Who could have complained about him? He had been faster than the other boys to refill
the tea. He had always been there first with a plate of baklava. He had snuck tea for himself from
the half-empty glasses of the sheikhs—but so had the others! Armen had drunk two or three
himself.

He remembered the falcons, quiet on their perches beneath their own canopy, cocking their
heads and scratching beneath their wings, taking squares of meat delicately from the fingers of
their minder—a personal servant of the sheiks, in a thawb so white it was like a glitch in your vi-
sion. Could there really be people behind the falcons’ gold and black eyes? Ancestors who want-
ed to feel what it was to fly?

Armen was silent while they moved and reset the tent. When they were finished, and Bashim
climbed inside, Armen said, “Sleep well,” in English.

Bashim replied “You as well,” doing his best to sound like Top Hat Avatar.

Armen smirked. “That accent is ridiculous.” He zipped the tent flap shut.

Bashim stared at the patched skin of the tent, listening to the wallahs talking at their fires and,
in the distance, laughter and music from the camp of the sheikhs. He was determined not to
sleep. He was determined to stay angry, wallowing in the unfairness of it all. But the wallowing
would only last for so long.

Still, he could not sleep. He opened the metal Twinings tea tin he’d bought off a scrap dealer
in Krasnovodsk. He carefully took the teaching oculus from its nest in a foam clam shell he had
carved with a razor blade from a piece of old mattress.

Armen had purchased the teaching oculus and the *English for All* program loaded into it from
an old Azerbaijani junk trader at the Russian Bazaar in Ashgabat last year. The oculus had been
Bashim’s birthday gift, replacing the malfunctioning Basic English textscreen Bashim had been
learning from. It was the most valuable thing Bashim owned—and perhaps the most valuable
thing in the wallah camp that night.

Bashim set the oculus on the uneven tarpaulin floor of the tent, adjusting it until it stood
straight. One origami leg had been bent when he’d purchased it, and Bashim had stupidly
snapped it off trying to fix it, but Armen had mended it with thermal tape.

The oculus whirred and clicked, loading, projecting a rotating 65 percent battery bar indica-
tor into the air. He had forgotten to charge it that day. But Armen had the charger. Oh well—it
would be good for an hour or two of study, at least.

The battery bar flickered out and a stream of yellow code and symbols replaced it. Then Top
Hat Avatar appeared, half the size of a man, standing twenty centimeters or so above the surface
of the tent floor. His hands were in the pockets of his pinstriped pants, and he was whistling
some tuneless little sequence to himself. He turned to Bashim and smiled. He took out his pock-
et watch and gave it a glance. “A bit late for studying, old boy. Cramming for an exam? Or just
can’t sleep?” The side of the tent was dimly visible through the translucency of the affable, mon-
ocle-facade shadowed by its namesake top hat.

“Hi, T.H. I just can’t sleep, I guess.”

“Well then, what shall we get up to? A bit of grammar? Some vocabulary quizzes? Or do you
just want to chat?”

“Grammar, I suppose.” Bashim was good at grammar.

“Grammar it is then. Let’s start with a review of the last lesson. Are you ready?” Top Hat Avatar
 glitched—his face, torso and legs disappearing, leaving just his waistcoat, his top hat, and the
gleaming disc of his monocle floating in the air. Then even these fuzzed out, replaced by a golden
scrawl of Arabic codescript. When he snapped back to sharpness, he was seated in a purple velvet
chair, dusting his hat brim. His black hair glistened with brilliantine.

“Sorry about that, old chap. Bit of interference. But we’re back in business now, as they say.
Shall we?"

They cycled through the present continuous and the present perfect, but Bashim was more
tired than he had thought, after a long day working under the Kara-Kum sun. He kept making
mistakes and drifting of in the middle of conjugations. Finally, he fell asleep.

* * *

And woke suddenly. For a moment he did not know what had woken him. Then he saw Top
Hat Avatar, floating in the darkness of the tent. Had he left the oculus on? No, he remembered
turning it off. Again, the avatar glitched and crawled with golden Arabic script. His face shud-
dered, snapped back into focus.

"Get up, boy. Now."

"What?"

"Get up. Pick me up. Run away from the camp. There is another outcropping of rocks, two
hundred meters from this one, to the south. Run to it. Now."

"What? I . . ."

"Up, boy!"

The authority in Top Hat Avatar's voice cut through the haze of Bashim's sleep.

"Take water in your pack. Take food. But move quickly."

There was a sound, outside, from the direction of the camp. It sounded like an engine revving
in the darkness.

"Now!"

Bashim was scrambling, pulling his pants on, fumbling for his plastic water jug, shoving it into
his pack. He had no food.

The sound came again: yes. An engine in the dark.

"Armen. He . . ."

"He will join you. There is a cave among those rocks. On the west side. You can hide there."

Bashim was outside. A rattle of small-arms fire in the night. A scream. From the direction of
the camp, a man's voice shouting, "Get on the ground! Face down!" in broken, Yomut-accented
Gulf Arabic. The deeper sound of an automatic weapon, then shouting, a long pause where
there was nothing but the sound of a man saying raja'—"please"—again and again. Then more
small-arms fire, engines revving, screaming.

The dust had settled from the sky. The stars were so clear now that Bashim could see the clotted
streak of the Milky Way. To the south, the low camel-humps of the outcropping were cut
out black against the sky and horizon. Bashim aimed for them. He realized he was still holding
the oculus in one hand. Top Hat Avatar remained beside him, upside down, pacing him through
the night air, floating absurdly just above the ground, with saxaul bushes visible through the
translucency of his face and his hat squarely on his head.

"Turn me off, boy. There isn't much battery left. I'll turn myself back on when needed."

_He never calls me “boy.”_

"How will you . . ."

"No questions. Run."

Bashim switched Top Hat Avatar off and ran. There was no moon, but it seemed as if each
star was a spotlight on his back. The saxaul bushes were thick here, and he had to dodge and
weave between them. He heard, also, things active in the desert night. Or perhaps he imagined
them.

Finally, he reached the outcropping of rocks. Rounded and sand-scoured, they jutted up into
a landscape that was otherwise without difference: hummock after hummock of sand and sax-
aul. These rare features in the Kara-Kum had always seemed, to Bashim, like the bones of a
buried giant the wind had revealed: the top of a skull, a shin, a hip bone.

The entrance to the cave was low to the ground, a triangular gap between stones no more
than a meter high. Bashim stood before it for a long moment, frozen with dread. He could not go
in there: here, in the desert, there was no cave, no hole, no place of shelter of any kind that did
not have a resident.

But then he heard the engines. Closer now? Certainly louder. He dug in his pack. Came up
what he was looking for: a small flashlight, the kind that was pressed between thumb and forefinger, more souvenir than functional, made of purple-painted metal with the acronym IMPITIS, half worn away, in white.

He pressed it: its dim blue diode lit little more than the edge of the stones.

Had they found his tent already? He bent down and half-crawled into the dark hole.

The hole widened almost immediately. Inside, the cave’s roof was high enough for Bashim to stand. Inside was a chamber floored with sand. Someone had built a fire here once, a long time ago: sand partially covered the charred circle. Here and there were rusted tins and mashed plastic water bottles.

Bashim had been afraid the cave would extend on into the darkness, but mercifully it did not: after five or six meters it ended. The chamber was no larger than one of the Arab tents the sheikhs had their afternoon teas in. Besides the fire pit, it appeared empty.

Then Bashim saw the falcon.

It was sitting near the right-hand wall of the cave. Its feathers were ruffled, and it looked dirty. Its head was cocked, one eye reflecting the meager blue diode of Bashim’s flashlight. It shifted from one foot to the other, and with a jerk of its head looked at Bashim with its other eye. Then Bashim saw the cobra, and nearly screamed despite the bravery he had been building up in himself. But the snake was lying still, kinked and broken. The falcon must have...

The oculus suddenly whirred in Bashim’s pack, its fan coming on. Had he left it in power save? No. He was always careful to turn it off. He took it out. It was on, projecting a 50 percent battery indicator as he set it in the sand.

Top Hat Avatar appeared, emerging out of a golden scrawl of hiccupping, distorted script. He was in a cricket uniform, leaning on his bat like a cane, half a meter in the air.

“Do you have a knife, boy?”
Bashim just stared.
“A knife. Something sharp.”
“Y-yes.”
“Good. Clean, I hope?”
“Y-yes.” He had cleaned it that morning after cutting up a persimmon he’d bought from one of the wallahs who had just come from their village with a sack full of them.
“And a lighter?”
“Yes.” All of them carried lighters—the sheikhs were always wanting their hookahs. The lighter was essential equipment, and the wallahs had to, of course, supply this equipment, along with everything else they needed for their work, themselves.
“Good. I’ll want you to sterilize that blade. Run the lighter along it.”
“What?”
“Do as I say, boy. If you don’t cut the homing chip out of me, they’ll be on us soon. I am sure they have nearly broken the encryption, if it is not too late already. Run the lighter along the blade.”
“Out of you? But you are a hologram…”
“No, boy. I am the falcon. I hacked this little toy of yours so I can speak with you. Now be quick.”

You could see it in the falcon’s eyes, too… the way it cocked its head at me. It really was a man in there.

He did not know how he did it—how he was capable of it—but under Top Hat Avatar’s instruction Bashim found the place where the chip was implanted, in the back of the falcon’s neck. The bird was warm to his touch, its eye on him as he cut the shallow incision. It winced, like a human, and flapped a wing, but that was all. Top Hat Avatar told him how to withdraw the chip and the fine wire it was attached to.

There was not much blood.

“Now I want you to go out into the desert. Run far away from the cave and the campsite. Toss the chip as far as you can. Then come back here.”

Bashim was about to ask a question, but Top Hat Avatar interrupted him.
“No time for theatrics, boy. Stiff upper lip and all that. Go!”

An hour later, Bashim lay on his side, on the sandy floor of the cave, with his arms wrapped around his knees. He could hear the falcon nearby—the occasional rustle of its feathers as it readjusted itself in the dark. Bashim was listening to the night outside: to engines in the distance and then nearby, then further away. It seemed like it had been several days already. He was terrified, but also so tired that, despite the danger, he drifted in and out of sleep.

“You could sleep anywhere,” he remembered Armen saying once, when they were in the blazing heat of a crowded bus wallowing across the Kara-Kum to a job line at a bazaar. Bashim had been deep asleep with his head against the hot glass of the window, sweating and dreaming. “It is a great skill. I wish I had it.”

Armen. Was he alive?

At one point there was the sound of an engine, quite close, and of voices that could not have been more than forty or fifty meters away from the cave.

While it was still dark, but very near dawn, the oculus whirred to life. Bashim gazed dully at Top Hat Avatar, floating in front of him in a chalk-striped suit, waistcoat, cutaway tails, and white spats.

“Get up, boy.”

Bashim was overtired, confused. “Where is Armen?”

“Who is Armen?”

“My older brother.”

“How should I know?” Top Hat Avatar snapped. “Perhaps he is dead. More likely he is run off somewhere with whoever else could escape.” The falcon flapped its wings in the dark. “Or maybe he was part of the plot. That would be typical. He’s a Turkmen after all. This sort of treachery is in your people’s blood. Every one of you is descended from slave raiders and bandits.”

At first Bashim could not understand what he was talking about. His people? He numbered among his people his sisters and brothers, his cousins and neighbors. At its maximum extent “his people” might include his village, and some people he knew from neighboring towns.

Sometimes he imagined another “people” for himself: an English-speaking people, bound together by aspiration, studying at some university in an imagined London. In the London of his mind there was a narrow cobblestone street being slowly buried in drifting snow, and the sound of church bells from some unseen cathedral. He was there, with textbooks under his arm and his breath a cold crystal cloud. Other students (everyone was a student) hurried here and there under an evening sky the exact color of a rough-cut ruby he had seen once for sale at a bazaar outside Ashgabat.

He liked to think of those hurrying students in that imagined place as his future “people.”

Then he realized Top hat Avatar meant “Turkmen” in general, including Bashim in that number. But who were the Turkmen? Bashim mostly associated that “people” with television images from the Ashgabat: men and women immaculately dressed in traditional clothes, whirling and leaping to some synthetic version of traditional music. The music on the television was completely unlike the songs Bashim heard played at weddings in his town on the dutar. Bashim was certainly not one of those people, from the television: he was just a wallah from a Yomut village where the nodding donkey oil wells had run dry so long ago that not even the oldest white-beards could remember a time when they had moved.

But anyway those Ashgabat Turkmen on the television screen were hardly “raiders.” They just lived out their lives in white towers clad in Italian marble. Towers that shone so white in the Kara-Kum sun you could still see their outline on your closed eyelids half a minute later. Those “people” were as distant to him as that snowy imagined London street. He couldn’t imagine their connection with the people of hundreds of years ago who had raided caravans in this desert, or the people who raided them now: people who were alien to him. People to be feared and run from.

“Get up, boy. Listen to me. There is an emergency beacon buried at the camp. We always
bury one, as a safety measure. If they haven’t found it and destroyed it, we need to trigger it. It will bring help. And neither one of us will live for long without help in the Kara-Kum.”

Top Hat Avatar’s battery warning light appeared over his head, like a lightbulb going off in an old cartoon, but red and flashing. Twenty percent.

“Armen isn’t a bandit. My brother isn’t a bandit.”

“There’s no time to argue, boy. This hacked interface is running out of battery life, and I have no other way of speaking with you. And you’ll have to carry me. I think my wing is broken.”

“My brother isn’t a bandit.”

“Hurry, boy.”

“My brother is good. He takes care of me. You don’t know anything about us. You’re just some rich sheikh. Some rich, dead sheikh, uploaded into a stupid bird.” Bashim was crying. He wiped his hand across his face.

“Yes,” Top Hat Avatar’s imperturbable English face glitched with golden script. He flickered and shuddered, warping into Arabic scrawl and then a stream of numeric static. “Yes, boy. You are right. I am a rich, dead sheikh. I am Ahmad bin Sa’id, in my winged afterlife. And you will be richly rewarded for saving me. I am sure your brother is hiding somewhere. I am sure he is safe. You do want him to be proud of you, don’t you?”

“My brother isn’t a bandit.”

“Of course not. Now hurry, boy.”

In the thin desert light of dawn, Bashim looked down on the camp. The sheikhs’ tents were torn and collapsed. A buggy was overturned, its carapace smoking thinly, filling the desert air with a carcinogenic stench. One of the Gurkha bodyguards lay face down on a sand dune, dead. The desert scavengers had not found him yet. He lay peacefully, one arm beneath his head, as if asleep.

Bashim was on his belly in the sand, on a small ridge, in a thin copse of saxaul that would hide him from nothing at all. The falcon was beside him, also looking down at the camp. In the light, you could see it was hurt, its feathers matted with blood and sand.

Where were the bandits?

Around hunting campfires and the dastarhans of his village, he had heard stories about terrible weapons the bandits and the sheikhs used against one another: drones that splintered into a whirlwind of a million heat-seeking needles, decoy falcons that were actually swarms of nanomachines that tattooed your face with a mask of acid, assassin rifles with DNA-locked self-guiding bullets that could be fired from Ashgabat and blow your head off in Dashoguz.

The falcons were worth millions in ransom. Their families would pay if you could force them to, but they would much rather kill you.

So the arms race continued. It was even said that the sheikhs enjoyed it: the risk of attack by bandits gave their hunting expeditions flavor.

One of the sheikhs put his hands to the sides of his mouth and whooped up into the sky in joy.

And the government in Ashgabat could not care one way or the other. It took no sides: officially, all of this was a nature preserve, where no hunting of any kind was allowed. Officially. But they knew what it was used for. They kept their cut and looked the other way.

The oculus whirred. Top Hat Avatar floated pale against the saxaul, the branches a venous web beneath his holographic skin.

“The beacon is marked by that triangle of stones near the tent furthest to the left. It is buried about twenty centimeters beneath the surface of the sand. The bandits will have scrambled everything else, of course, before they attacked, but this is a Muscovite military emergency beacon—Faraday shielded and hardened, undetectable until triggered. It is a black cylinder. Are you listening?”

Bashim had spotted the second Gurkha bodyguard, at the edge of the camp, behind the buggy. Something had sheared him in half, and the two separate parts of him, torso and legs, lay a few meters from one another. Bashim could not stop looking.
There were no other bodies in the camp: only the two bodyguards. Expendable men. The bandits would be holding the sheikhs captive, of course. They would not have killed them. Each was worth a small fortune. But the bodyguards were worth nothing, so they were dead.

*Your people.*

I should leave here, he thought. Leave this dead old man trapped in his wounded bird and go. But there was no way out: the sheikhs would find him later, if he returned to his village, and interrogate him. And it would be worse for him, when they found he had abandoned their ancestor to die.

"I am listening," Bashim said.

"Good. I would do this myself, but I cannot. You turn the top of the cylinder clockwise—you'll see a slightly ridged ring there. Once it clicks, you just flip it open and press the button inside."

"And then?"

The red warning bulb flashed above Top Hat Avatar's head. Five percent. "That's all. Then we wait for the response team. We can go back to the cave and wait there, where it is not too hot."

Top Hat Avatar was sitting in his velvet armchair again, floating at chest height, a ghost against the desert dawn. Across his knees was an onyx cane with a carved silver falcon head pommel. Had he had that before? Its emerald eyes glittered.

"How long before they come, once I do it?" His mouth was dry, but not from thirst.

"Not long. Your English is good, boy. Have you lived in England?"

"N-no."

Top Hat Avatar drew a window in the desert air with his cane. Beyond it was the spire of a church, wreathed in clouds, and from it the sound of the bells, muted by fog. The velvet chair dissipated, and he stood at the window, his hands behind his back, looking out.

"I used to live there. In London. When I was a student. I had an atelier not far from the British Museum. I would sketch the stones Lord Elgin stole from the Greeks. Stones torn from the Parthenon. I wanted to be a painter. But mostly what I wanted was to be English. What a wonderful people, the English. They have managed, somehow, to be faultless in all things: to rob the world of its wealth and never have to say they are sorry. Not so with us... no. Our wealth, somehow, is a stain." Top Hat Avatar shook his head, as if clearing it. "But enough of that. With your reward you could study in London, too."

"I—I could?"

The falcon was sitting like a bird guarding a nest, its head resting on the matted feathers of its back. Its eyes were nearly closed, but now one of them opened slightly to look at Bashim. Top Hat Avatar's voice seemed, almost, to come from the Falcon. The bird raised its head and tilted it, regarding Bashim with that single eye.

"Why not? With a little money, and a little help from me, you could do anything at all. London is a city built by thieves, but it is a beautiful city. A dream in fog and rain. Like living inside an old photograph. To my mind, it is superior even to the Istanbul Protectorate. And that city is paradise. Why continue to live here, in this waste? Who cares, here, whether you live or die? What can you ever be? I know your language—your name means 'Fifth'—just that, and nothing more. The fifth child in the family. Don't you understand? Even your name isn't really yours—just a link in a chain, a notation of your place in a series. You've had nothing all your life, boy. Had nothing and been no one. Do this, and you will have enough to leave this place forever. Now go. While there is time."

Bashim got to his feet. It was not far. Thirty meters? But his legs were weak, and his vision was dark at the edges.

The falcon flapped an irritated wing. Top Hat Avatar swung his cane in an arc.

"Go!" The English apparition, tall and thin in his chalk-striped suit, shuddered against the saxaul and sky. The empty crimson outline of a bulb appeared over his disintegrating form. The oculus' scalloped lens-shield contracted. He was gone. Out of power.

Bashim stumbled down the hill. As it always had, thinking of London calmed him. He felt as if he were almost there already. He saw the cobblestones and narrow streets of the dream city as if
it were a mod, a skin overlaying the Kara-Kum sand. In the cold desert morning, he could almost
see snow in the air and hear bells.

He reached the triangle of stones and began to dig, pretending it was cobblestones he was
pulling aside. There, underneath, would be the British Museum. The Treasure of the Oxus, an
articulated iron hermit crab made by Japanese craftsmen, a kava bowl stolen from a Hawaiian
priest, a pillaged African mask. He had taken a virtual tour of the museum once—one of his
lessons with Top Hat Avatar. The whole world was in there, collected and waiting for him. Now
he would see it for himself.

His fingers closed on the cylinder and pulled it out. He did not hesitate. He found the textured
ridge and turned it. The cap clicked open. He pushed the cool metal button, and closed the
cylinder.

Now all he had to do was wait.

Bashim stood up, brushing the sand from his knees. He felt happy, as if he had crossed
through something and come out the other side. As if he had taken an English test and passed.
Then he saw the figures moving down the sandy slope. Men. Four of them, all with rifles,
their faces wrapped and masked against the dust.

He had not even heard them. One of them, clearly their leader, had the falcon. He held it up-
side down by its legs. The bird fluttered limply.

Powerless. Pathetic.

The men's leader had his rifle over his shoulder. When the men were only a few meters from
Bashim, the leader pulled down the cloth shielding the lower half of his face.

Armen.

"Don't do it, Bashim."

Bashim could not speak, for a moment. Could not understand what was in front of him. His
mind whirled through a series of preposterous scenarios: Armen had been captured. Armen was
being forced to work for the Bandits.

But he knew.

Bashim, I want you to sleep away from the camp tonight.

"I hate you." Bashim had wanted to scream it, but his throat was dry from fear. It was nothing
but a dry whisper.

Somehow, the eyes of this bandit Armen, this man who could not be his brother but was, were
still as kind as they had been before.

The falcon twisted in Armen's grip and flapped a pitiful wing. Bashim saw a drop of blood fall
from its beak to the sand. Its glossy eye, black and gold, met his.

Armen's voice was calm. He even smiled, slightly, the way he always did when Bashim had
done something stupid, but forgivable. For a moment, Bashim thought he was going to reach
out and ruffle his hair.

And if he does, I will hit him.

"It's all right, Bashim. Whatever he told you—it's just lies. All they do is lie . . ."

"All you do is lie!"

Armen's smile faded. And for the first time, Bashim saw what he thought was the real Armen:
a hard, expressionless face that had been just beneath the surface. The face Armen had been
hiding from Bashim all his life. The face of a bandit.

Armen's voice, too, was hard.

"Put the cylinder down and let me explain. If you press that button . . ."

"I don't want you to explain!" Bashim was shouting now. He fell to his knees, clutching the
cylinder. "I don't want people explaining anything to me anymore. I just want to go from here.
I just want to be free."

Armen crouched down next to him in the sand and laid a hand on his shoulder. "I know,
Bashim. Brother. I know. And I want you to be free. Why do you think I am doing all this? This is
for you. Just give me the cylinder, and let's go. I won't lie to you anymore. I will tell you every-
thing. And you will be free. But not this way. Come."

Bashim looked at Armen. No. He had been wrong. That face from a moment ago—the cold,
hard face he had glimpsed—that was not the real Armen. That was just a mask. *This* was Armen—warm, caring. The brother he had always known.

Armen held out his hand. “Give me that thing, and let’s go from here. Together.”

One of the other bandits said, “It’s too late.”

The falcon stirred weakly in Armen’s grip, its eye still locked on Bashim.

*I am Ahmad bin Sa’id, in my winged afterlife. And you will be richly rewarded for saving me.*

Armen turned. “No, we still have time. They’ll be hours away.”

“No.” The man was looking at the sky. “No, we do not. The boy has pressed the button. He must have done it before we got to him. We are already dead.”

The desert sky filled with the moaning of propeller blades, and a thousand shadows crossed the sun.

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