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## Hamad

The ride home in the school bus seemed to take forever. *This will never end*, thought twelve year old Hamad, who had good news to tell his parents. The bus made its way through the city, circling roundabouts and gardens, past shops and warehouses, through tunnels and over bridges, stopping now and then at traffic lights or to drop children off. The route had never been a short one, but today it was taking much too long! Hamad couldn't wait to tell his parents the good news. He had done exceptionally well in his end of term exams, and they would be very proud of him. He felt wonderful. Now that the exams were over, he had eight days of freedom; no school, no studies, no responsibilities. Free as a bird, he thought as a pigeon flew overhead. No, he deliberated. Free as a falcon!

His mind wandered a little, then suddenly it flew. Lifted upon the wings of a falcon Hamad soared, past the streets and buildings, beyond the city commotion, out to the peaceful Arabian Desert of his mother's stories. That beautiful desert where two young children, Afra and Muttar, had their home.

Although Hamad had never lived in the desert, he thought he knew *exactly* how it would feel. Mother's tales spoke so well of the Barr desert and its Bedouins, the feel and smell of camel-hair tents, the exciting 'qans', or hunting, of the mysterious houbara bustards with trained falcons, the gathering of firewood from the 'al-ghadha' tree which they used for cooking. He felt that he knew those nomadic people and all the plants and creatures around them. He felt he knew their desert life. He even yearned for the desert sometimes, as if he had once lived there with Afra and Muttar; as if it had once been his home too.

The noise of traffic pulled him back to the city. The bus was nearing the street where he lived. Hamad felt a surge of excitement as the bus finally stopped in front of their white villa.

"Happy holidays!" he shouted to his friends as he jumped off, his black hair blowing in the breeze.

"You too," they shouted back as he waved at them from the pavement.

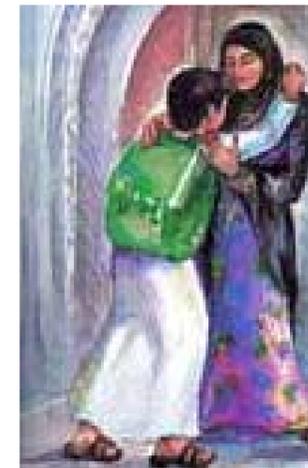
*I wonder if I'll enjoy my holidays with my family*, thought Hamad. *I only hope that Father isn't too busy, as usual.*

Hamad's mother, Maryam, was waiting for him at the front door.

"Mama, Mama! I got the results! I did very well! Look!" He waved his report card at her as he kicked off his sandals by the door. She took a quick look at the card before bundling her son -- backpack full of books and all -- into her arms for a big, big hug.

"Wonderful, darling!" she said. "May God always grant you good fortune!"

"I am going to phone Father. He'll be so pleased!" Hamad said, rushing towards the telephone.



Maryam followed him and took his backpack off gently.

"Slow down, child! You can't talk to your father yet." She looked into her son's questioning brown eyes. "He's on a plane right now."

"A plane? Is Father out of town *again*?" Hamad felt all the excitement drain out of him. He was very disappointed. His father was always busy, hardly having time to talk to him. He knew that his father's work was important, but the news he had for him was very, very important.

Hamad felt his robe being pulled. It was his little sister.

"Aisha!" Hamad looked down at her. "Father isn't here, and I have something important to tell him! Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Uhum," Aisha nodded sweetly. Of course she didn't understand. How could she; she was only three years old. Then she suddenly shook a pointed finger at him, frowned and pouted her lips. Hamad laughed. She was imitating his expressions! He bent down and lifted her up, twirling her around as she giggled loudly, her dress and braids flying. Little Aisha was so funny!

"When is Father coming home?" Hamad asked, throwing himself down on the sofa and casually turning on the TV. Although he rarely spent much time with his father, it felt lonely not having him around for the holidays.

"It'll only be a couple of days, sweetheart," Maryam answered. "Your father will be back before you know it." Hamad sensed a ring of sadness in his mother's voice. *Did she miss him too?* "Hamad!" she warned, interrupting his thoughts. "Careful with that remote control!" Only then did Hamad realise that he had been punching its buttons fiercely, switching TV channels, one after the other.

### Where do Houbaras come from?

The phone rang, raising Hamad's hopes. Could it be Father? Hamad was pleased to see his mother smile.

"Really? When? You will be boarding the plane shortly. No, Khalifa is out of town. He'll be back soon, though. Oh, welcome, dear brother, ahlan-wa-sahlan!" Maryam put down the receiver. "Hamad, guess what. Your Uncle Saeed just called from Beijing. He'll be here early tomorrow morning. Isn't that wonderful?"

Hamad could hardly believe it. Uncle Saeed! Hamad hadn't seen his uncle since he left on an assignment many months ago.

"Beijing?" Hamad murmured, a puzzled look on his face.

Maryam smiled. "Beijing is the capital of China. Your uncle went there as part of a research expedition to study the houbara and the falcons on their breeding grounds and help ensure their protection. Do you remember what I had told you a while back about the houbara and the falcon?"

Hamad nodded. *Of course. He remembered everything his mother had told him about those two extraordinary birds.*



“Actually, your uncle discovered that most houbara and falcons only come to the Arabian Peninsula in winter. In spring, when the weather here becomes hotter, they migrate back north to breed.”

“So that’s why Uncle Saeed went northwards to China. Beijing,” Hamad repeated, with a twinkle in his eye. “What a musical name: Beijing! Houbara and falcons always lead Uncle Saeed to places with musical names. First we had names ending in ‘aan’, and now we have names ending in ‘ing’, and this might very well be just the beginn...ing! Get it?”

Maryam laughed, although she did not really ‘get it’. What do you mean?”

“Well, remember when Uncle Saeed travelled earlier to conduct his research in Pakistan? He then went on to Iran, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan! And, Mother, don’t forget that Uncle Saeed works at the National Avian Research Agency, in the town of Sweihan!”

Now Mariam really laughed. Hamad’s way of connecting one thing to another never failed to surprise her.

Hamad knew how close Maryam and her brother Saeed were. His father, Khalifa, also had a deep friendship with Uncle Saeed, dating back to when they were childhood classmates. Maryam was quite young when Saeed moved to the city to attend school, and she followed him there after their parents’ death a few years later. The young men became such good friends that Saeed later welcomed the idea of Khalifa’s marriage to his sister, Maryam.

Maryam’s hazel eyes were sparkling as she prepared the guestroom for her brother. “Saeed is returning home, safe and sound,” she beamed happily.

Hamad remembered how well he and Uncle Saeed got on together. “*Little Saqqar*” he used to call me, Hamad thought, with a smile. “*Little Falconer!*”

Hamad went cheerfully to bed that night. He had looked China up in his encyclopaedia, and was amazed at what a big country it was, with an area of 9,596,960 square kilometres, and a population of 1,232 million! Located in Eastern Asia, China shares borders with fifteen countries and three seas! Uncle Saeed would surely have interesting stories to tell about his travels. Hamad could hardly wait.

Maybe Afra and Muttar will be in my dreams tonight. Or I might fly to China with the houbara. Hamad sighed contentedly. The holidays seemed to be off to a good start after all!

### **Uncle Saeed, the Researcher**

Hamad was coming down the stairs the next morning when he heard loud laughter. Uncle Saeed? Mother? Never before had he heard his mother laugh like that. He entered the living room to find them both sitting on the floor with their backs to the sofa, a pot of coffee between them. They were sipping a little, chatting a little, and laughing a lot.

“Uncle Saeed!” Hamad ran to his uncle. Maryam rescued the coffee-pot and cups just as her son fell into his uncle’s arms in a wild tumble.

“How is my beloved nephew?” Saeed asked, tousling Hamad’s hair. Hamad looked at his uncle questioningly. *Doesn’t he remember?* “My little falconer,” Saeed added. *He remembers,* Hamad thought happily.

“How was China, Uncle? Did the houbara fly all the way to Beijing?”

Hamad asked.

"No, not that far". Saeed laughed. "Besides, Beijing is crowded; there are too many people living in it. Houbara like unpopulated and undisturbed desert areas. It flew over Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, to the flat, dry deserts of the Xinjiang Province ... what is it with both of you? "

Saeed had barely pronounced the name Xinjiang, when Hamad had to cup his hand over his mouth to stifle his giggles. Maryam, too, was trying to control herself, pursing her lips together firmly. No sooner had Saeed asked what was wrong, than they both burst into wild laughter. Saeed joined in when he heard the story.

"And what exactly were you doing there, Uncle?" Hamad asked.

Saeed put his hands on his knees and bent excitedly towards him. "Well, we were studying all sorts of things about houbara: their behaviour, what they eat, where they lay their eggs, and how many chicks they raise. But what I really enjoyed was catching the houbara, and then equipping them with solar-powered satellite transmitters."

"Satellite transmitters?" Hamad asked.

"Yes. That is part of our ongoing studies on their migration routes. It would be easier to explain if I could show..." Saeed glanced at his sister, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"I wouldn't mind, dear brother," she replied.

"Really?" Saeed smiled. He turned to Hamad. "Come then, let me show you our tracking procedures on the computer."

Saeed led Hamad into the adjoining room where he had already set up his computer. Hamad saw him connect the computer to the telephone line.

"I'm accessing the main computer in France, using this modem," Saeed explained.

Whenever Saeed typed in commands, the screen would become alive with different figures, texts and maps. Hamad wanted to know what was happening. Saeed replied that, in answer to certain questions he was typing in, the main computer was relaying the signals it was receiving from the transmitters on the backs of migrating houbara! Hamad studied the map on the computer screen as Saeed pointed out the tiny dots that showed the flight path each bird had taken.



"This," Saeed said softly, "is why we travelled to China this year." Hamad listened closely as his uncle went on.

"Last year, here in the Emirates, we caught a wild houbara, put a transmitter on its back and then released it. See this line here," Saeed continued. "As you can see, the houbara flew all the way from the Emirates to the Xinjiang region of China. Not only that, but after staying on its breeding ground for six months, it flew all the way back to winter here, in the same place where we had caught it the year before!"

"Wow!" Hamad was impressed.

"This showed us that China has an important breeding population of houbara, and..." Saeed paused to make an important point. "And made the U.A.E. the *first country in the world* to track a houbara to and from its wintering and breeding grounds." His eyes were shining with pride.

"Bravo!" Hamad said. "That must have been an incredibly long distance for a houbara to fly!"

"It certainly was." Saeed answered. "Twelve thousand and three hundred kilometres to China and back!"

"And how fast was its flight speed?" Hamad asked.

Saeed smiled. "The houbara has shown exceptional flight endurance and excellent speed, at an average of thirty kilometres per hour. Don't compare a houbara's speed to that of a car, Hamad. Compare it, rather, to your own running speed, bearing in mind your ability to maintain the same speed across continents under all weather conditions!"

Only then did Hamad understand Uncle Saeed's admiration for the houbara's speed and flying ability. But he needed to know one more thing. "What does the transmitter look like, Uncle?" he asked.

Saeed showed him a picture. It looked like a little box with an antenna sticking out. "The houbara carries it like a backpack, Hamad, similar to the one you take with you to school."

Hamad frowned. "Poor bird. My backpack is heavy!"

Saeed smiled, sitting back in his chair. "Please fetch it, Hamad. Let's take a look."

Hamad got the backpack for his uncle, and watched as Saeed emptied everything out. Then his pencil-case and two copybooks were put back in.

"There. Try carrying it now," Saeed said, holding out the backpack. "It isn't heavy, is it? The transmitter weighs 34 grams, approximately the weight of a small egg. Compared to the houbara's weight, that would be equal to what you are carrying now, compared to your weight."

"Oh, I see. That's not so bad. How much does my backpack weigh now?" Hamad asked, shaking his shoulders.

"Around 700 grams."

"I wish they'd let us carry so little to school every day," Hamad said, jumping around the room with his bag on his back.

Saeed laughed. "The goal is to carry a lot of knowledge *on* your back for a short while, so that you'd have it *inside* your head in the end."

"Don't expect too much of that," Hamad giggled.

Then Uncle Saeed told Hamad more about the tiny transmitters. He explained how the transmitters relayed the location of the houbara, as well as the surrounding temperature, to satellites orbiting the earth. Hamad was amazed to learn that those satellites were 900 kilometres away.

"It takes only 102 minutes for the satellites to orbit the whole earth, from the North to the South Pole, all the while relaying incoming information from the transmitters to the main computer in France, and from there to our computers," Saeed said.

"So *that's* how you get all your information," Hamad marvelled.

Uncle Saeed's job was so interesting. "I would love to be a con-serv

*(something or other) when I grow up*, thought Hamad, as he looked through one of his uncle's books. Yes, there it was, a *conservationist*. That was his uncle's job. He was a conservationist and researcher who specialised in houbara and falcons. Hamad didn't fully understand what 'conservation' meant, but it had to do with nature, the desert and all its animals and birds. Hamad loved them all. The book was so interesting. It said "National Avian Research Center" on the cover. Hamad didn't have trouble guessing what 'Avian' meant. *Avian has to do with birds*. The book had the picture of a falcon on its cover, and more pictures inside with important information about houbara and falcons. *Father would know about all those things, of course*. Hamad missed his father. He wondered what his father was getting him this time. *Could it be the gift I'm dreaming of?*

That night Hamad's thoughts were of satellites, computers, and messages sent by tiny transmitters from the backs of houbara. Technology, Uncle Saeed called all of this. Hamad wondered whether there would ever come a day when he would learn this technology and be able to use it to help the world, just like Uncle Saeed.

Hamad drifted off into a dream. He was riding the back of a houbara, his arms flapping in rhythm with its wings, high, high up into wide space.

### **Khalifa, the Businessman**

The next morning, Khalifa arrived! Hamad was delighted to see his father and uncle hug and kiss each other several times.

"How are you doing, dear friend," Khalifa asked, smiling broadly and clapping Saeed on the back. "It is so good to see you! How was your trip to China?"

"Alhamdulillah-Lah! Thank God, it was a fantastic experience," Saeed answered. "The wildlife there is absolutely magnificent."

"What's your current project?" Khalifa asked.

"I am sure you recall the falcon release programme of our president, Sheikh Zayed. Well, we are setting up a training-camp in the desert to train falcons, after which we will release those that will no longer be used in Arab falconry."

"Training *falcons* before release?" Hamad echoed. This was so interesting!

"Yes. We train them to catch their own food so that they can survive on their own in the wild again. Of course, we fit some with satellite transmitters so that we can track them on their migratory routes. Last year we released fifty-nine falcons in the country of Kyrgyzstan, and we satellite tracked two falcons. One flew to China and the other to Russia!"

Khalifa turned away, mumbling a quick, disinterested "Excellent, excellent." He reached out for Hamad's hand and led him towards a big box standing in the entrance-hall. "And what do we have for you, my little businessman?" he asked, putting his arm around his son's shoulders. Hamad looked at the huge cardboard box. It seemed to be ... a computer! "Oh my!" he squealed. "For me? *My own computer?*"



"Don't you want to be a businessman, like your father?" Khalifa asked.

Hamad smiled silently at his father. *I'd rather be a researcher, like Uncle Saeed*, he thought.

"When we were your age we hardly knew what a computer was," Khalifa added. "Now computers are a very important part of modern life."

Hamad nodded as he unpacked his new treasure.

"I'm so happy for you, Hamad," Saeed smiled. Then he turned to Khalifa. "We've been computing our research on houbara and falcons since 1989." He paused. "You know, the sensitive data regarding the birds; their nesting sites, migration routes, health details... very difficult without the computer. As a matter of fact, we'll all be out in the desert today with our--"

"Enough, Saeed!" Khalifa interrupted. Although Hamad hadn't been listening to the men, his father's sharp tone caught his attention.

"I am sorry," Khalifa apologised, "but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention this subject in my presence." He put his hand briefly to his chest.

*Is Father all right?* Hamad wondered.

Khalifa smiled at Hamad and walked over to him. He held him gently by the shoulders. "Son," he said. "We will spend the whole day together. We'll go

wherever you want."

Hamad voiced the second question that popped into his mind. "Could we go to the zoo, Father?" he asked. The first question -- which he dismissed just in time -- was whether they could all go out to the desert with Uncle Saeed.

"To the zoo? All right," Khalifa answered, a little reluctantly. "To the zoo it is."

"Too zoo, too zoo!" Aisha echoed, as the others laughed.

### At the Zoo

Hamad hadn't expected to find so many people at the zoo. It seemed that everyone wanted to be outdoors, enjoying the beautiful spring weather.

"Mother, Father, let's visit the aviaries," Hamad pleaded.

"Later," said Khalifa. "Let's see the wildcats first. Look! There's a little cheetah cub, right there, hiding behind its mother!"

Aisha, who was riding on her father's shoulders, saw it before Hamad and squealed happily, "Down, Aisha! Down!" Khalifa put her down, and she ran eagerly towards the cheetah enclosure.

"The fastest animals on earth," Khalifa whispered to Hamad.

"Not as fast as a falcon!" Hamad argued. "Peregrine falcons can fly at 100 kilometres an hour, and dive at 320 kilometres an hour!"

"How do you know that, Hamad?" Khalifa asked.

"Uncle Saeed told me. Father? Please? Let's go to the aviaries." Hamad asked, once again.

"Okay, son. Okay." Khalifa answered, shaking his head in surrender. Maryam told them to go on ahead because Aisha wanted to stay and watch the

cheetah cub.

Hamad led the way, reading the signs as he glanced briefly at the noisy feathered inhabitants of each cage. "Father!" he exclaimed, pointing to the sign that said "houbara bustards". Hamad ran towards the aviaries.

"Why do houbara interest you, son?" Khalifa asked, catching up with his son.

"Because even though I know so much about houbara, I've never *seen* one in my whole life! Look, Father. Here they are. Look!" Hamad put his face against the mesh that surrounded the large area housing the silent birds. On the inside, the aviary looked exactly like the desert, complete with sand, rocks, and shrubbery.



"Yes, they are magnificent birds," Khalifa agreed, spotting a few birds here and there. "And they're well cared for. You can see they have alfalfa plants to eat."

"Look, Father. Here's a female." Hamad pointed to the sand-coloured bird crouching nearby, next to a low bush. The bird was so well camouflaged that

she could hardly be seen. She got up as he spoke and trotted shyly away on her three toes.

"How do you know that it's a female?" Khalifa asked, incredulously.

"The neck and chest feathers of males are darker, and much longer, and they display them to attract females in the mating season."

Khalifa opened his eyes wide in appreciation while Hamad continued. "And you can tell by her size as well. Female houbara are smaller than the males. Unlike falcons, of course, where the females are almost twice as large."

This time Khalifa couldn't hide his amazement.

"Well done, son!" he said. "Now, tell me. Where does a female houbara build her nest?"

"She doesn't build a nest," Hamad laughed. "She makes a scrape! She scrapes the ground with her claws and then lays her eggs. She might lay two, three, or four. Up to six, usually not more."

"True... true." He looked quizzically at Hamad, "Who taught you all of this?" he asked.

"Uncle Saeed," Hamad answered. "And look at them! They would rather walk than fly. You might think that they cannot fly, until you see their flying skill, that is. Once they're in the air-- whee!" He put his arm up in the air. "Only falcons can catch them."

Khalifa looked at his son with deep thought. Hamad hesitated, then timidly asked. "Can't they?"

"Not always, son. The houbara can twist and turn whilst flying at great speed."

"And falcons can, too!"

"When they're well-trained, yes. But a houbara's wing and tail feathers are nearly twice the length of a falcon's, which often helps them climb in the air faster."

"Really!" It was Hamad's turn to be surprised.

Khalifa smiled, and gave a deep sigh. "That is, if they both are in the air. But if it is a ground struggle, the houbara will never allow the falcon to take off after it, and will shoot a rocket at the falcon before flying away."

"A rocket? What rocket?" Hamad asked, enjoying this conversation with his father.

"The houbara aims a thick, slimy discharge at the falcon, called 'Taml'."

"Ugh!" Hamad exclaimed. "A slimy 'Taml' missile! Wow! I had no idea."

Khalifa smiled. "You're still very young, son. Time and experience will teach you a lot. When you are my age you will realise that you can never *really* know all about something until you've experienced it yourself."

"And what happens afterwards?" Hamad asked, eager to get back to the subject of slimy rockets.

"The falcon is grounded because it can't fly with its feathers glued together. The slime has to be cleaned immediately if the falcon is to fly again."

"Subhanal-Lah! Glory to God, nature's Creator! How I wish I could go out to the desert to be a part of nature!"

"You don't have to go to the desert for that. I'll take you one day to visit your uncle at the National Avian Research Center, where he works. You will see for yourself how they breed and rear the houbara in captivity."

"That *would* be very interesting," Hamad agreed. "But Uncle Saeed is out in the desert now, and I do have a holiday. Couldn't we go out to the desert, Father?" His father was silent. Hamad persisted. "You just said that I can never *really* know something until I've experienced it for myself."

"We'll see, Hamad," Khalifa answered curtly. "Where are your mother and sister? Let's go find them."

Hamad knew better than to argue. It was apparent that Father did not want him to go to the desert with Uncle Saeed. Maybe later he could ask his father why he disliked birds, yet knew so much about them.

### The Houbara Dance

Back at home, Hamad helped his father set up the new computer. There was so much he could do with it. The programmes and applications were fantastic, and there was an encyclopaedia, complete with pictures and maps. Everything Hamad had wished for was at his fingertips! He spent a wonderful time with his new electronic friend.

Aisha disturbed him at times. She wanted to 'play' with his computer too. Sometimes, if Hamad felt like it, he would let her punch a few keys and move the mouse around. At other times he would have to carry her out of his room, screaming. Aisha was a little clown, and they often had many laughs together. Funniest of all was when she imitated Uncle Saeed's houbara walk.

Earlier, Uncle Saeed had shown Hamad how male houbaras pranced around, displaying their black and white neck feathers to attract the attention of females.



"You see, these feathers, of striking black and white, are usually hidden. They fan out only when the houbara twists his neck and lays his head on his back. To attract the female's attention even more, the houbara starts running about in a crazy zigzag, like this. He usually is so busy with his dance steps, plus the fact that he can't see where he is going, that he bumps into anything in his way."

Uncle Saeed was so funny! He had pranced around that day, just like the houbara, as Hamad and Aisha laughed uncontrollably.

Aisha remembered that well. Once, when Hamad was working quietly at his computer, she took him by surprise. He tried not to laugh as his little sister pranced about wildly, her lips pouted into a beak, her arms flapping like wings as she bumped into the furniture because her head was turned and she couldn't see where she was going. Realising that her brother wasn't laughing, she added her own touch to the act by quacking, just like a duck. "Quack! Quack!" Poor Hamad! It really was too much to bear, and he exploded into such laughter that he fell off his chair.

Hamad hadn't noticed their mother standing by the door. She was laughing with tears in her eyes, and Hamad knew that she had seen everything. He wished his father had been there too.

### A Change of Heart

"I have enjoyed my holiday so far," Hamad thought as he woke up on the morning of day three. He ran downstairs, hoping to join his father for breakfast, but nobody was there. Aisha was probably still asleep in her room. Hamad was thinking of waking her up when he heard a car in the driveway. His parents came in, looking very tired.

"Is anything wrong, Mother?" Hamad asked anxiously.

Khalifa answered. "No, son. Alhamdulillah, thanks be to God, nothing is wrong."

"Yet." Maryam said, as Khalifa turned to look at her. "Nothing is wrong, yet." She seemed upset.

"Maryam," Khalifa protested gently. "Take it easy." He looked at Hamad. "It's all right, son. We've been to the doctor." Khalifa pointed to his chest. "Mild pain, that's all. Come, now. Let's have breakfast."

After breakfast, Hamad was surprised to see his father settle down in the living room with a newspaper, instead of rushing off to work. But the real surprise came just before noon when Uncle Saeed appeared at the door!

It was wonderful having the whole family together for lunch.

"Mmm, dear sister. I miss your cooking," Saeed mumbled in appreciation as he ate.

Maryam smiled. "I am glad you like it, considering."

"Considering what?" Saeed asked.

"Considering the fact that there is no oil or butter in the food today," Khalifa said. "Doctor's advice."

"It's delicious," Saeed said.

"Khalifa, why don't you tell Saeed *all* that the doctor advised," Maryam insisted.

Khalifa took a drink of water. "He also said that I needed a vacation."

"Not just a simple vacation. He talked about a *change* in your entire lifestyle," Maryam corrected.

"Yes, that's true," Khalifa admitted.

"And?" Maryam urged.

"And that I should pursue an outdoor hobby."

Maryam nodded meaningfully.

Saeed raised his eyebrows as he helped himself to another serving. "How about the hobby of your youth, Khalifa? Those were wonderful days."

Maryam nodded slowly. "Oh, how I wish he would take up fa--"

"Maryam!" Khalifa protested, stopping her in mid-sentence.

Saeed looked seriously at his friend. "I know how you feel, Khalifa, but you *do need* to get away from work once in a while to relax and recuperate, don't you."

Khalifa nodded reluctantly, as Saeed continued.

"Your body has rights over you. Bear in mind the saying of Prophet Muhammad, may God's blessings be upon him. It's the best advice for us all."

Hamad didn't want to speak with his mouth full, and swallowed quickly. "What saying?" he asked.

"You tell us the whole story, Khalifa," Maryam encouraged her husband.

Khalifa began. "Well, this is how it happened. The Prophet Muhammad,

peace be upon him, sent for one of his companions --Othman Bin Math'oon- who was spending his days in fasting and his nights in prayer. The Prophet addressed him saying, "Othman, do you renounce my Sunna --my way of life? Othman answered, "No, by God O Messenger of God. It *is* your Sunna --your way of life-- that I seek." The Prophet then said, "But I do sleep and pray, and I fast and break the fast.....so fear God O Othman, for surely your family has a right over you, your guest has a right over you, and your body has a right over you. Therefore fast and break your fast, pray and sleep."♦

Khalifa stopped, thinking about what he had just said.

Saeed wiped his mouth. "Your body has a right over you," he repeated. "We have the responsibility of caring for God's gifts, and what greater gift is there than good health?"

"*And* the love of family and friends," Maryam added quickly.

"True, true." Khalifa said, sitting back. "Enough of this. What's for dessert, Maryam?" He had changed the subject.

It seemed, however, that Khalifa was thinking of their talk all day because later that afternoon, after an earnest discussion with Saeed, Khalifa called for Hamad.

"Hamad, come here son."

Hamad approached his father, wondering why both men looked so serious.

"Saeed," Khalifa put one hand on Saeed's arm, "I want you to take --" and he reached out with his other hand and held Hamad's. "I want you to take this young man with you to the desert." Hamad felt his heart leap. *Young man? Desert!*

"And," his father continued, "I don't want my son back until he knows enough to feel that he knows nothing. Understood?"

Saeed nodded. "Understood," he replied with a smile.

All that Hamad understood was that he was given permission to go out to the desert that evening with Uncle Saeed.

### **The Desert**

Hamad couldn't believe himself as Uncle Saeed's 4-wheel drive came to a halt after a long ride. The desert at last! He took a deep breath of the cool evening air. Everything was so calm. Silence. Miles upon miles of unspoilt nature.

They had reached camp at dusk, in time to witness the sun melt into a fiery horizon. The trees and bushes made dark silhouettes against the pale glowing sands. The tent flaps were open as their inhabitants moved about, many getting ready for the Maghreb, or sundown, prayer.

After exchanging warm greetings, the mats were laid out in the open, on a stretch of ground cleared of stones. Hamad joined in the prayer line next to his uncle. Each time the prayer leader, or Imam, said "Allahu-Akbar, God is Greatest", Hamad repeated from the bottom of his heart, "Allahu-Akbar!"

Hamad couldn't tell whether the slight shiver he felt was due to the cool evening breeze, the excitement of being here, or because he felt small and humble as he stood in prayer surrounded by such a magnificent expanse of desert. It probably was a blend of all three.



Uncle Saeed then took Hamad around, introducing him to the others. There were about twenty men in camp. Hamad was surprised at the combination. Some of the men were old, while others were young, probably still in college. There were some Bedouins and some city-folk, like himself. There also were a few Europeans, one American and a man from Africa.

"Ours is a unique group," Uncle Saeed explained. "Some of my colleagues are veterinarians and scientists, while others are falconers. However, we all share the same interest in falcons and in wildlife conservation." This seemed obvious to Hamad as they sat on the ground in a large circle, discussing the day's achievements.

This was Hamad's first night away from home, and he felt a mixture of pride and homesickness. He slept well, nevertheless.

The whole camp was awake at dawn, and as the first light appeared over the horizon, Hamad realised that the desert was even more beautiful than he had imagined. He strolled away from the others, his footsteps crunching into the moist sand, until the camp disappeared behind a huge sand-dune. Hamad

climbed up the dune. He contemplated the wide panorama and then sat down, pretending to be alone in the desert. He was aboard a tiny ship navigating a huge ocean of sand. A little bush caught Hamad's eye. Was it a 'hath'? Hamad clambered down to take a look. It actually was the 'hath' his mother had spoken of, with its little white blooms called 'safeer'! Upon approaching the 'hath' Hamad got another surprise when, all of a sudden, a little greyish-brown hare bolted out of the bush and raced off, springing on its long hind legs. It then dived under another bush, farther away. Hamad was pleased. He felt quite lucky because this was the first wild hare he had ever seen!

Hamad made his way towards the camp, enjoying the cool morning breeze. He could see everything clearly now. Here was a 'thmam' bush, its crown of morning foam giving it away, and the distinctive 'arta', with its red fruits strung upon green stems. He paused to watch a spiny-tailed lizard drag itself out of its burrow to bask in the sun.

Hamad walked slowly, appreciating the pleasant sights and sounds around him. The twittering of birds, the chatting of friends, the hum of a Bedouin song, and a strange drum-like beat, 'rat-at-tat-tat, rat- at-tat-tat', all in perfect harmony.



### A Day of Discovery

This was a day of discovery and learning. It seemed to him that all he did was ask questions. Maybe too many!

"What's that sound, Uncle?" Hamad asked, pointing to the tent where the

'rat-at-tat-tat, rat- at-tat-tat' sound was coming from.

"Let's find out," Saeed answered.

Hamad knew what it was as soon as they went in. Coffee grinding!

"Ah! There is nothing as refreshing as the smell of fresh roasted coffee in the morning! Huh, Ghanem?" Uncle Saeed smiled at the old man who was pounding the coffee into a powder.

"Wait till I add the cloves and cardamom!" Ghanem answered, with a vigorous 'tiki-tak, tiki-tak'. He had changed the tune!

"You believe you saw a hare?" one of the young Bedouins asked.

Hamad nodded.

"It is a privilege to see one of these shy creatures," the man answered. "Actually, they became rare a few decades ago so, Sheikh Zayed introduced a law to protect them."

"Jaber," Saeed addressed the young Bedouin. "Tell us why the hare became so rare that they needed protection. "

"They were over-hunted. Mainly by rifle." Jaber shook his head sadly. "They were almost totally wiped out in some regions, but now thanks to the law, their numbers appear to be increasing again."

Hamad was thoughtful as he shared the Bedouins' breakfast, which seemed really more like dessert. Ghanem brought them dates, a bowl of 'chamy' (which was a cheese-like curd) in the centre of which was a pool of melted butter. Hamad ate as the others did, holding a date-half with three fingers, pressing it into shape with his thumb, and using it as a spoon to scoop the 'chamy'. Delicious! A tingle of pure pleasure worked its way up his spine. At last I'm living the life



of a Bedouin, Hamad thought. Afra and Muttar, here I come!

A very tall European joined the group, crossing his thin legs in front of him as he sat on the floor. Hamad found out that he was a veterinarian, and that his job was to make sure the falcons were in good health before they were released.

Ghanem, who was going around with the coffee, stopped at the European's side. "I can get you tea, if you like" Ghanem said.

The man laughed. "Only if *you* drink tea with me, Ghanem."

"No," Ghanem answered. "You know very well that Bedouins drink coffee."

The man smiled. "Then, I am a Bedouin too!"

Hamad was amazed at this blond man with the accent he could barely understand, calling himself a Bedouin? But he noticed the twinkle in Ghanem's eyes as he raised the 'dallah' coffee-pot high, pouring the steaming coffee into the man's cup in a long thin stream. *Today we are all Bedouins!* Hamad said to himself, taking another bite of date-dipped-in-chamy-and-butter. The European did the same, and their eyes met.

"I have a son your age," the man smiled. "I'm training him to be a falconer, and hope to bring him here one day. He would learn so much."

"What's his name?" Hamad asked.

"Yusuf."

"You mean: Joseph?" Hamad asked, remembering how the name is pronounced in English.

"No, no: Yu-suf. I like Arabic names, so I called him Yusuf."

"Then I'll call you Abu Yusuf!" Hamad said, as everyone joined in their laughter.

### The Ashgar Falcon

Hamad held his breath as the majestic falcons were brought out of their large tent. Each bird wore a hood made of soft leather that covered its head and eyes, leaving an opening for the beak. This was the 'burquh' his mother had told him about! The falcons were tethered by strings, called 'saboq', from their legs to the wooden perches they were standing on. The strings bound them to the perch so they wouldn't fly until released.

"What do you call this?" Hamad asked, pointing to a perch that had just been driven into the ground.

"That's a 'wakir'," one of the falconers answered.

"And this?" Hamad pointed to the string.

"That's the 'mirsal'."

Hamad learnt a few other new words. He bent to touch the soft cushioned top of a wakir, brushing his finger against its edge, carefully avoiding the sharp talons of the falcon perched upon it.

"Masters of the skies," he marvelled, "upon their thrones."

Masters of the skies they were indeed, as his last day in the desert was to prove!

That afternoon, Hamad went with Saeed and Abu Yusuf to visit the falcons in their tent. A beautiful golden falcon caught his attention.

"Yes," Saeed said. "You have an eye for quality, son. This is an 'ashgar' falcon, believed by many to be the most powerful and courageous of them all." Uncle Saeed had a faraway look on his face.

"What is it, Uncle?" Hamad asked.

"Nothing, son. She just reminds me of another like her that died a long time ago, in an accident."

"Would you like to meet the falcon, Hamad?" Abu Yusuf asked.

"Oh, yes! What is its name?" Hamad asked, coming closer.

"Mash-hoor, the famous one," Abu Yusuf answered.

"Mash-hoor? But that's a masculine name, Abu Yusuf! Isn't this a female? Shouldn't her name be Mash-hoora?" Hamad reasoned.



Saeed laughed. "Mash-hoor is a traditional name, Hamad. Arabs of long ago, who had never seen falcons breeding, assumed that the larger falcons were males, and gave them masculine names."

"Oh," Hamad answered. "So it's just a tradition. Can't people now simply change those names to feminine ones?"

"Just a tradition?" Abu Yusuf echoed, raising his eyebrows. "Tradition is a science in itself, my friend. The *reason* why people long ago did something, the way in which they did it. Traditions tell you so much about them."

Hamad frowned. There was a lot that he didn't understand.

"What is it, Hamad?" Abu Yusuf asked. "A dirham for your thoughts."

Hamad shrugged helplessly. "I am just trying to understand tradition. I know so little about it!"

"Come." Abu Yusuf sat on the ground in the middle of the tent, and his two friends joined him. "As I said, young man, tradition is a science, and it *can* be learnt, just like anything else. Your country is so rich in tradition, it constantly amazes me."

"That's exactly what I mean," Hamad nodded.

"Did you know," Abu Yusuf continued excitedly, "that Arab falconers are the only ones in the world who can bring their falcons back from the skies just by calling out their names? Or that they can tame wild falcons much faster than anyone else?"

"Really!" Hamad was impressed.

Saeed smiled. "We can tame a wild falcon in less than a month, you know."

"Is time that important, Uncle?" Hamad asked.

"Of course. Time is everything! The houbara and the falcons arrive at about the same time every year on their migration route from Central Asia, China, and Mongolia. Since they only stay in this area for winter, falconers have always had to work fast, taming and training the falcons to hunt houbara, as well as other birds and animals, such as the stone-curlew, and the hare, thereby making use of the season."

"Couldn't they use the falcons they had captured and trained the year before?"

"That wasn't possible in the past because most of the falcons were set free at the end of each hunting season."

"Set free? After all that trouble!" Hamad's face was one big exclamation mark.

Abu Yusuf laughed. "It was for the birds' own good that they let them go."

"Falcons are delicate creatures," Saeed explained. "They need a cool climate and special food to survive, especially during their breeding season. It was impossible to provide that care during the hot summer months, and anyway, summer was when some people turned to pearl-diving for their livelihood. Nowadays, of course, things are different. Thanks to air-conditioning, medicine, and adequate care, most of the birds *can* be kept till the next season."

Abu Yusuf nodded. "You see, Hamad. *Traditionally*," he smiled at the word. "Traditionally, Arab falconers have always been conservationists. As hunters, they never hunted beyond their needs. Their motto was that a good hunter isn't one who *catches* the largest number of prey, but one who has the wisdom to *leave* a

large number for tomorrow."

"Is that what conservation is then?" Hamad asked. "Leaving something for tomorrow?"

"In a way, yes," Abu Yusuf answered, gazing with admiration at the young Arab lad. "Conservation means using natural resources in a disciplined manner, allowing nature to sustain and replenish itself."

That night Hamad dreamt that a beautiful falcon was perched on his arm. Then, because its strings were not secure, the falcon took off. Hamad ran after the falcon in an attempt to call it back, but couldn't. He seemed to have forgotten its name. He awoke, startled, from his dream.

### Afra and Muttar

Hamad enjoyed watching Uncle Saeed and Jaber bring out the falcons the next morning. He recognised Mash-hoor. *Mash-hoor*, he thought. *You're a girl*.

"Maybe falconers thought that girls- I mean female falcons- can't hunt as well as males," Hamad persisted, still trying to reason out with his uncle why masculine names were given to female falcons.

"Not so!" laughed Saeed. "I know of a certain girl and her falcon who hunted better than most males!"

"Who was she, Uncle?" Hamad asked as Saeed smiled mysteriously. "Come on, Uncle! Who was she? Jaber?" Hamad turned to the young bedouin.

"Do you know who she was?"

"I have no idea," Jaber chuckled. "But I'm sure you'll eventually get it out of your uncle."

"Uncle?" Hamad pleaded. "Please tell me who she was."

"Her name was Afra," Saeed answered, giving in. "That's all I can say."

"Afra? I know Afra! Isn't she Muttar's sister?" Hamad asked eagerly.

"Yes! How did you know that?" Saeed asked.

It was Hamad who smiled mysteriously this time. *How did he know about Afra and Muttar? He had spent his whole childhood with them!*

"Did Maryam tell you?" Saeed asked, still surprised.

Hamad nodded.



"I should have known that she wouldn't be able to keep a secret from her inquisitive son!" Saeed laughed.

"Secret? What secret, Uncle?" Hamad was confused.

"Oh. You don't know then," Saeed said.

"What's the secret, Uncle?" Hamad asked again.

"Oh, let me be, child! You're dragging too much information out of me!"

"Isn't that why Father sent me here? To learn?"

Saeed looked deeply into Hamad's eager eyes. He thought for a moment then relented.

"Okay. I shall only tell you this: your mother and I had secret names for each other when we were children. We called ourselves Afra and Muttar. That's all I can say."

*What?* The startling announcement left Hamad speechless. The whole day passed by in a daze. Although he did take part in the general activities, he couldn't pay much attention to what was going on. His mind was elsewhere.

He lay awake in the tent that night after everyone was fast asleep, thinking of the new revelation. *Afra was his mother.* Hamad went through all the stories he could remember, one by one. *Yes. It was possible. It must have been Mother in those stories, when she and Uncle Saeed were children. But why hadn't Mother told him that the stories were about her own childhood? Why had she let him think that she was talking about another girl?*

Hamad drifted off to sleep, dreaming of the desert where two Bedouin children lived. Only now the dream was perfect. Now the desert was real, and so were Afra and Muttar.

## Falcons, Houbaras, and Humans

Hamad stood completely still, his left elbow at his side with his hand stretched out. He was wearing a sleeve made of leather and cloth, open on both ends; a mangalah. Ghanem carefully transferred a falcon onto it. Hamad's heart beat wildly as he felt the weight of the falcon on his arm. It was a breathtaking experience that reminded him of his dream. Soon, Hamad felt brave enough to stroke its beautiful feathers. He did so, gently, with his right hand. He could hardly wait to tell his friends and cousins about all this. It felt absolutely wonderful!

"What's its name?"

"Baraq," Ghanem answered.

"When will Baraq go hunting, Uncle?" Hamad asked. Ghanem silently took the falcon off Hamad's arm. He began to tear strips of meat with his fingers and started feeding it, addressing it by name. "Can't we take Baraq out now?" Hamad persisted.

"We can't do that now, Hamad. We usually take the falcons out to hunt either in the early morning or in the afternoon," Ghanem replied.

"But I'll be leaving soon! I might *never* get a chance to see Baraq hunt!" Hamad said, disappointed. "Can't we have a short hunt now?"



"Impatience will never make you a hunter! Carelessness will always make you sorry!" Ghanem spoke openly, in true Bedouin style. Don't you know the old Arab saying, 'In caution there is safety and in haste there is regret'? You could lose your falcon forever!"

"Even if I'm careful!"

"That's what people say, but things don't always work out as expected. A falcon is not a machine you can programme and then run efficiently. A falcon has feelings and moods, likes and dislikes, similar to us humans. Unless you are smart, and your falcon is well trained, it will refuse your orders and do as it pleases. Your falcon could ultimately leave you, flying away on its own, never to return."

Hamad couldn't hide his disappointment.

"Listen, son." Ghanem tried to cheer him up. "We'll be here again next year. You could join us as soon as your vacation starts. Besides, this hunting season is not over yet. You could still go out with your father on weekends."

"My father doesn't hunt," Hamad mumbled sullenly.

"Anyway, *you* still have a lot to learn before you can become a falconer." Ghanem cut the discussion short. He got something from the dark end of the tent and sat down in the sunlit doorway.

Hamad felt disappointed. He had always thought he knew so much, but he realised now that what he *did* know was very little indeed. And Ghanem made him feel ignorant, as if he knew nothing at all. Then he remembered something. What was it Father had said to Uncle Saeed? "*I don't want my son back until he knows enough to feel that he knows nothing.*" Was this why Father had sent him here? To feel that he knew nothing? Hamad was so engrossed in his thoughts

that he almost jumped when Ghanem started chanting:

“O the beauty of setting camp  
In a winter desert. Our camelhair tents  
Offer warmth and shade, as familiar sounds  
Resonate with the coffee pound  
Let us light the fire, perfect the blend  
Fill cups of welcome to the brim  
Our customs make of strangers friends  
In a land of bounty where roam the gazelle.”♦

“Roam the gazelle.” Hamad repeated the last words to show appreciation in true Bedouin fashion. Ghanem’s poem was beautiful, and it touched Hamad’s heart. Maybe it was the way Ghanem sang it, soft and proud. Maybe it was the sight of the old man working as he sang. At first, Hamad hadn’t realised what Ghanem was doing. He seemed to be making a tethering string for the falcons! Is this how ‘mirsals’ are made? *Did Afra and Muttar have a grandfather like Ghanem? How lucky I am to be with such an extraordinary person*, Hamad thought. *How silly I was to feel upset by his manner towards me!* Thinking of all the wonderful things Afra and Muttar would have learned from their grandfather, Hamad sat down eagerly next to the old man.

“Grandfather,” Hamad began. “I mean, Uncle Ghanem, what is the relationship between the Arab falconers, the houbaras, and the falcons?” Hamad had decided that asking questions was one good way to learn.

Ghanem was slow to answer. Hamad was about to repeat his question when Ghanem spoke. “It is a historical relationship, Hamad, one that is both challenging and unique. It takes us back to earlier generations when life was closer to nature. Our forefathers had a strong attachment, let’s call it an infatuation, with the desert and all it held, and with the skills that suited their desert environment, most important of which was falconry. Falconry has always been a noble sport. For a hunt to be successful, there had to be complete harmony between the falcon and falconer. The falconer had to understand his falcon well. He had to respect its feelings, neither scolding nor mistreating it. He had to be sensitive to its needs, knowing when to feed it and how much to offer, since food has a direct bearing upon the falcon’s flying skills and even upon its motive in chasing the prey.”

“What would happen if the falconer scolded his falcon, or was insensitive to its needs and didn’t feed it properly?”

“The falcon would escape, the first chance it gets --and fly away, never to return.”

Hamad nodded thoughtfully. He hadn’t realised how delicate the relationship of falconer to falcon was!

Ghanem continued, “A well-trained falcon, on the other hand, will always obey its falconer. It can recognise his voice even when it’s hooded.”

“I see! Good training benefits both the falcon and the falconer!” Hamad exclaimed.

“Exactly. Yet there is more. The actual falcon training process --with all its difficulties --teaches young people important virtues. They develop a respect for nature and its conservation, they gain self-confidence by making thoughtful

decisions, and they practice patience and perseverance. They also learn to appreciate sharing and communicating well with others. Thanks to these noble qualities, parents continue to train their children in the art of falconry even though it is no longer a necessity."

"And the houbara?" Hamad asked. "How does the houbara fit into all of this?"

Ghanem laughed, and Hamad wondered what he was laughing at.

"I'll tell you something, Hamad. A falcon in pursuit of a houbara is the best example of the good training we've been talking about. You see, falcons don't normally hunt houbaras, and they have never considered them prey."

"What!" Hamad exclaimed in surprise. "You mean that an untrained falcon would not think of hunting a houbara?"

"Never! Falcons prefer jirds, a kind of desert rodent, or birds that are smaller and less agile in the air than houbaras, such as doves, for example."

"Goodness," Hamad sighed. "I didn't know that. Then it is the *falconer's* desire for the houbara and its availability in the past that made it a falcon's prey."

Ghanem resumed his handiwork silently, but Hamad didn't mind. He had enjoyed this conversation tremendously. Feeling pleased that the old Bedouin was taking him seriously, he boldly went on. "Uncle Saeed told me that scientists at the National Avian Research Center are trying to encourage the houbaras to stay longer in the U.A.E., not just to pass through on their mig-migratory route," he added, stumbling over the difficult word.

Ghanem nodded. "That's true. We've been improving the natural habitat for wild houbaras, setting up protected areas where there is limited hunting and

human disturbance."

"But I thought that hunting is the worst kind of human disturbance!" Hamad exclaimed.

"No, it isn't, or should I say *wasn't*." Ghanem shook his head. "My son, ours was the generation of true falconers! Some who call themselves falconers these days are actually bad sports in search of a quick thrill."

"What do you mean, Uncle?"

Just then, Jaber, the young Bedouin, walked in.

"Assalamu alaykum," he smiled broadly. "Uncle, can't we share the work?" He gestured at the twine which Ghanem was making into tethering strings for the falcons.

"God bless you, Jaber. Work is pleasure. Come, sit beside me," Ghanem answered.

"I hope I haven't interrupted your discussion," Jaber said, sitting down.

"No, not at all. We were talking about wildlife and human disturbance," Ghanem answered.

"Oh, I understand," Jaber answered. "I know exactly what you mean. I have seen what human disturbance does to wildlife. Just look at the desert around us, Hamad. Think of all the plants and creatures that live in it. Then imagine groups of buildings sprouting all around, replacing all the trees, and roads of black asphalt winding here and there instead of desert tracks, and then erect a few bridges to cover the beautiful hills and sand dunes. What happens to the wildlife? " Jaber swept his palms one against the other. "Gone. Nothing left. Even if you *have* banned hunting by then, it would already be too late. *That* is human disturbance!"

Hamad realised how much this issue meant to his friends, and how much the destruction of wildlife upset them. It was time to change the subject.

"Abu Yusuf holds the falcons with a long leather glove, not a mangalah like you do. Why is that?" Hamad asked eagerly.

Jaber laughed. "Because he isn't from around here, that's why!"

Hamad smiled, trying to understand what that meant.

"Each country has its own traditions, son." Ghanem explained. "All the falconers in Abu Yusuf's country use those long gloves, called gauntlets, and have done so for hundreds of years, just as we've always used mangalahs."

Hamad frowned. Here was that word popping up again; tradition! "What exactly is tradition? Is *all* tradition good?"

Ghanem seemed puzzled. "What a strange question, son!"

Jaber put his hand on the old man's arm. "It's not that strange, Uncle. Our generation often asks the same question. We would like to know what *you* think?"

Ghanem bit his lip in thought, as both Jaber and Hamad awaited his reply. "Tradition," he said, "is a combination of time-tested practices resulting from the experiences of our forefathers as they dealt with their environment. It bears the fruit of their life's experience."

Hamad repeated his question, "But is all tradition good?"

"Most of it suits its people," Ghanem replied. "But we certainly cannot generalise and say that all tradition is good for everyone in any circumstance."

Jaber smiled. "I knew you'd say that. Experience, science, and knowledge differentiate between good and bad traditions."

Ghanem agreed. "True. And experience, science, and knowledge often confirm the validity of certain traditions and encourage people's attachment to them."

"I know!" Hamad exclaimed, suddenly thinking of something. "That is why adults are more concerned with tradition than we are! People seem to get attached to tradition as they grow older after having gained experience and knowledge, despite not understanding a thing about it when they were children. Just like me!"

Jaber burst out laughing at Hamad's theory, and Ghanem's broad smile almost turned into a laugh.

Hamad felt pleased. He had done well today. He had asked the right questions and learnt a lot from these wise Bedouins. Besides, he had almost succeeded in getting Ghanem to laugh.

### **Around The Campfire**

*"Nightfall joins us with dear friends*

*Amusing tales around a campfire*

*Coffee beans roast by a camel-hair tent*

*Cardamom crowned*

*The stimulating scent*

*Lures tired travellers from beyond the hills*

*And brightens the moon*

*So its beams descend  
Through silken clouds  
Eager to join  
Our lively crowd”♦*



Hamad looked at the glowing faces around the campfire that night and knew that he would never, ever, forget this holiday. It wasn't just the welcoming warmth of the fire that made the evening special. Enjoying the sound of a Bedouin song, the smell of fresh roasted coffee, and the chatting of friends broken by outbursts of laughter, made Hamad realise that he belonged here. But there was something else, he thought as he looked at the Arabian hunting dogs, or 'selouqis', who were just as much a part of the picture as the falcons perched nearby. I have become a part of nature. I am a desert child, just like Afra and Muttar.

"Ghanem," Saeed joked with his friend who had slowly started pounding the roasted coffee grains. "You seem worn out. Was my nephew that tiresome today?"

"Tiresome, no. Inquisitive, yes." Ghanem answered.

"And what did you learn today, Hamad?" Abu Yusuf asked.

"I learned a lot about falcons and houbaras and about human disturbance."

"And what can you tell us about human disturbance?" Saeed asked.

Ghanem stopped pounding to listen.

"Well," Hamad hesitated. "I can tell you that failing to protect the wilderness leads to a disturbance in the balance of nature, which has negative consequences on the whole wildlife population. This includes insects, birds, reptiles, and other animals, even plants."

Abu Yusuf nodded in appreciation. "You really did learn a lot today."

"Thanks to Uncle Ghanem," Hamad said as his eyes met the old man's.

Ghanem resumed his pounding. Tat-a-tat tat, tat-a-tat tat.

Saeed sighed sadly. "We should have made a disciplined effort to allow nature the chance to gradually replenish herself."

"I know that people needed to hunt in the past," Hamad said with a frown on his face. "Food was scarce, then. These days hunting is just a sport."

"No, son," Saeed answered emphatically. "Hunting isn't just a sport. Hunting is a God-given privilege. Hunters, just like everyone else, should appreciate this earth which God has given us as well as the balance of nature He has created. They should hunt with a discipline that helps sustain the balance of wildlife."

Hamad opened his eyes wide. "I had never thought of conservation in that way, in a religious way, I mean."

"But conservation is a religious duty. Mankind has abused natural resources,

causing holes in the ozone layer, acid rain, deforestation, and the extinction of various wildlife, yet a verse in the Holy Qur'an states:

*"The heavens has He raised high and He set up the balance  
In order that you do not transgress the balance."*

"Sadaqa Allahu Al-Atheem," Ghanem whispered. "True are the words of God Almighty."

Everyone fell silent. For the first time in his life Hamad realised what a responsibility humans owed the world around them. What a responsibility *he* owed.

### **The Little Conservationist**



"I wish I could see a houbara," Hamad thought the next morning as he stood in his favourite spot on top of the sand dune. "But I doubt it. Even if there was one nearby, and it's a *big* 'IF', it would be crouching somewhere,

motionless. Or it would have moved away upon my arrival, disappearing behind the bushes."

Hamad felt that he had begun to understand wildlife now more than ever before. He felt that he had really begun to understand conservation.

Gazing at the beautiful desert stretching all the way to the horizon, the smell of fresh dew in his nostrils, Hamad thought about the Qur'anic verses his uncle had mentioned last night. He had brought the Holy Qur'an with him today to look them up himself. There, on top of the sand dune, he turned the pages carefully. Surat Al-Rahman; Chapter 55, verses 5-10. As the cool morning breeze stroked his hair and cheeks, Hamad read:

*"In the Name of God, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful  
The heavens has He constructed and established the balance  
Therefore do not violate the balance  
And establish due measure and tip not the scales..."*

Hamad stopped, as visions of extinct Arabian animals, like the ostrich and cheetah, and others endangered, like the oryx and tahr, leapt before his eyes. Yes, he decided. *We should not violate the perfect balance of nature that God has created. We should not tip the scales.* He continued reading:

*"And the earth He has made receptive to all creatures  
Therein is fruit, and palm with sheathed clusters  
And grain with husks, and perfumed plants*

*Therefore which of the favours of your Lord will you deny?"*

*None of Your favours will we deny, O Lord,* Hamad thought, shutting the Holy Book reverently.

### The Surprise

Hamad was bent over his notes when he heard a car drive past and crunch to a halt behind the tents. The car door slammed shut. *It couldn't be Father. He usually shuts his door carefully.* Anyway, Hamad got up to investigate. Just as he'd thought. It wasn't his father.

"Uncle Saeed, shouldn't we telephone home?" Hamad asked as he sat down again to continue his writing. "I'm getting worried. Father did promise to come for me today."

"It isn't too late yet, son. Don't worry. I'll take you home myself tomorrow if your father doesn't come," Saeed replied.

Hamad continued writing. "I have a lot of work to do on my computer," he said, not looking up. "School starts the day after tomorrow, you know."

The notes he was taking were very important. Some of them would serve as an outline for an essay. Their teacher always asked them to write one at the end of term. Hamad was sure that this would be the best essay he had ever written. Besides, he was writing down everything he had seen so that he wouldn't forget, keeping himself busy in the meantime so as not to worry about his father's delay. Would he come as he promised? Oh, how Hamad missed his family! He had so much to tell his mother. How pleased she would be! Hamad wasn't sure how his father would feel, though.

Hamad heard another car drive in and crunch to a halt. He waited for the sound of a slamming door. Nothing. The driver did not get out of the car. *It isn't father,* Hamad determined, trying to refocus on his notes when suddenly, his father was standing right beside them saying, "Assalamu-alaykum!" Saeed embraced his brother-in-law and lifetime friend warmly.

"Father!" Hamad jumped up and threw himself at his father. He had barely kissed Khalifa's hand when he was taken into the strong arms for a big hug. "Father, I missed you so much. You were right, father. I know nothing."

Khalifa held him closely, and was about to say something when Abu Yusuf came around from behind the tents. "Someone has left his car door wide open," Abu Yusuf said. "He must have been in a hurry."

"I am Khalifa, Hamad's father," Khalifa said, putting out his hand.

"And I am Abu Yusuf, Hamad's friend." Khalifa looked questioningly at the tall European as they shook hands. "Your son bestowed the title Abu Yusuf upon me," he said. "And I will never give it up. "

Khalifa laughed. "It wasn't the olive-green car, was it?" he asked. "I never leave my car door open."

"You did, this time, father," Hamad said, looking his father in the eye mischievously.



## The Hunt

Hamad took his father around camp, introducing him to everyone, and explaining what Uncle Saeed and the research team were doing.

"They will be setting these falcons free in a few weeks, Father. Isn't that wonderful?" Khalifa agreed that it was, and he seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself.

Later that day after the Asr prayer, Hamad and Khalifa heard someone call, "Yallah, yallah! Let's go!"

"What is it, Father?" Hamad asked.

"They're going out to hunt, Hamad."

Hamad was surprised. "But... I mean... I thought..."

His father interrupted, "This hunt is taking place in your honour, son. Let's follow them."

*In my honour,* thought Hamad. *Glory to God!*

And so they followed the hunting party. Father and son, each with different feelings.

Hamad observed the methods of tracking stone curlew, or karawan, while Khalifa explained what was happening. Jaber began by examining the bird's tracks.

"Look, son," Khalifa explained. "This is where the karawan was feeding last night." Then Jaber pursued the tracks until he found the direction in which it had taken off. "It headed in that direction!" he shouted. Hamad was amazed to see the entire party charge off in their cars in the direction opposite to that which Jaber had pointed out! Khalifa laughed. "It is typical of karawan to head off in a direction opposite to where it actually plans to spend the day!"

True enough, they found four karawans crouching beneath the low-lying bushes, as motionless as stones. As soon as they were flushed, they took flight, tucking their yellow legs beneath them. The men allowed three to escape into the distance before releasing a falcon to hunt the last one. Hamad's heart beat fast with excitement as the two birds sped, one after the other, on two sets of wings; the karawan's of pointed black and white, and the falcon's rounded with brown and white streaks. It was a formidable chase, but the gap was closing, the falcon being a little faster than the karawan. The falcon reached to grab the karawan, but the karawan dipped to the left and distance separated them again. Once more, the falcon caught up, both birds flying almost wing to wing. The falcon dipped slightly to the left, then unexpectedly to the right. The karawan had already dipped to the right to escape the attack from the left, and in a flash it was clutched in the falcon's powerful talons. The falcon soared down and landed with its prey, while everyone, including Khalifa, gave the traditional cheer of support.

Hamad hugged his father happily. He ran to Uncle Saeed and the others to thank them for granting him this wonderful opportunity, and joined in their



cheering. *The falcons will have a freshly caught dinner tonight*, Hamad thought as everyone was returning to camp. He realised, for the first time, what it meant to be a hunter. *Yes, hunting is a privilege. Nature should be respected and we should not tip the scales. I hope I can explain all this to my friends at school.*

### **Khalifa's Story**

"That was a magnificent chase, wasn't it?" Khalifa asked.

"Yes, Father, it was. It would have been disappointing however, had all the karawan escaped."

"Disappointing? Not at all. The chase is the most important part of the hunt, son. The catch by itself is not an achievement. The chase, on the other hand, shows us nature at work and provides a chance to observe the falcon's hunting skills. It is a fight for survival, where the fittest ultimately survives. The prey's escape to safety poses a challenge that makes the next chase even more exciting."

"But it is the falcon that always does the chasing, isn't it?"

Khalifa shook his head. "Not always. Sometimes, if a falconer isn't careful, his falcon becomes the prey."

"Prey to whom?"

"To a larger, stronger bird, such as the eagle."

"Ooh!" Hamad sucked in his breath. "Father?" He hesitated, wondering whether he should ask.

"Yes?" Khalifa smiled at him encouragingly.

"It is obvious that you do know so, so much about falcons. Why have you never talked to us about them before?"

Khalifa's smile disappeared.

"It's okay, Father." Hamad apologised quickly. "I'm sorry I asked."

"It isn't you who should feel sorry, Hamad, God bless you. I do believe the time has come for me to tell you something." Khalifa looked into his son's eyes meaningfully.

"I know a place where we can talk," said Hamad, taking his father's hand and leading him to the sand dune.

As soon as father and son sat atop the dune, Khalifa's beautiful and sad story began to unfold.

Hamad learned that his father had been training Khalifa since childhood to be a falconer like himself, and had given him a magnificent golden falcon.

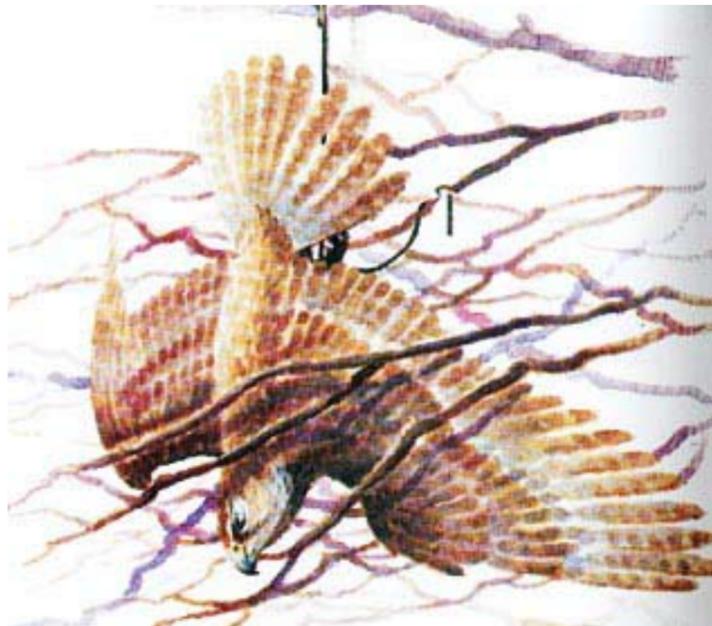
"Ashgar was his name," Khalifa said, as Hamad had already guessed. "I loved him very much, and spent a lot of time with him. I thought I knew more about him than anyone else did, including my father. I couldn't wait to be a real falconer out on my own, so one day I disobeyed my father's orders. Actually, I still had a lot to learn before releasing my falcon all on my own ... I shouldn't have done it." Khalifa's voice shook. "I went out to the desert. Although it wasn't noon yet, the weather was extremely hot. It was too hot to fly a falcon, but Ashgar, who was on my arm, kept flapping his wings to be released, so I released him. That was one of many mistakes that day. After swinging the 'tilwah', the lure, I discovered another. I had overfed Ashgar, and he wasn't hungry enough to go after the lure. He ignored it, and flew skyward, higher and higher towards the cooler currents. That is when a dreadful realisation hit me. Ashgar had flown

off with the mirsal still attached to the sabooq! I hadn't properly fastened the sabooq to the mangalah, and it pulled free."

Hamad could say nothing. His father continued.

"The air was warm, and flying was difficult. The cooler currents were higher up in the sky, and that's where Ashgar headed. He flew away, higher and higher. I called out, again and again at the top of my voice, but it was no use. He simply ignored me as he sped upwards and away." Khalifa paused. "I searched for him in the desert but couldn't find him, neither that day nor the next. I found him three days later, dead, hanging from the branch of a 'ghaf' tree by his 'mirsal' which was wound around it. Apparently he had exhausted himself trying to break loose, the mirsal and sabooq getting more entangled in the branches with every move. My Ashgar died a horrible death, and it was my fault. All because of not having listened to my father's advice!"

Hamad was moved by his father's story. *So that's why Ghanem had refused*



*to fly the falcon at noon! My inexperience could have caused the loss --or death -- of a falcon!* Remembering his own dream, and knowing how guilty his father must have felt, Hamad put his small hand into his father's large one.

"Right then and there I swore never, ever, to go near a falcon again!" Khalifa added emotionally. "The desert brought back sad memories, so I avoided the desert too, to the extent that I did not wish to ever speak, or hear, of the desert again."

"But now you are here, Father. In the desert."

"Yes, now I am here, in this magnificent desert. Goodness, I had forgotten how wonderful it is!"

"Me too," Hamad said sadly.

"You too? You too what?"

"I mean - I had almost forgotten how wonderful it is for us to be together, Father."

Khalifa's eyes misted. "We haven't been spending much time together lately, have we? I apologise for that. But things will change from now on. Trust me."

"I do trust you, Father. Haven't you come all this way, deep into the desert, just to fetch me."

"That's not the only reason why I am here. I want to help you fulfil a dream of yours, which may be similar to the dream I once had. That is, if, after this desert experience, you still wish to become a falconer."

"Of course, Father! That has been my dream ever since I was small, ever since Mother told me stories about Afra and Muttar!"

"Afra and Muttar? Who are they?"

"The sister and brother who lived in the desert."

"Oh, so *that's* how she did it!" Khalifa laughed. "Women always get their own way in the end. Because of the incident with Ashgar, I had asked Maryam never to tell you of her childhood with Saeed in the desert. She seems to have found a way around that by telling you stories about 'someone else'! Afra and Muttar indeed!" He shook his head. "Yes, your mother truly is a smart lady."

*So that's why Mother hadn't told me the whole truth,* Hamad realised, as his father continued.

"Maryam has always been a desert girl, and she knows all its secrets. She will be of great help to us when we all go out into the desert."

"With Aisha?"

"With Aisha," Khalifa agreed, as he and Hamad stood up and got ready to return to the others.

"But, Father?" Hamad hesitated. "My dream has become much bigger after what I've seen. I want to be a conservationist too."

Khalifa put his arm around Hamad's shoulder as they walked slowly back to camp. "You already are, son. You already are a conservationist!"

Khalifa spent that night in camp with the others. Early the next morning, after bidding their friends goodbye, Khalifa and Hamad started back to town. Hamad's four and a half days in the desert had passed by like a dream. Too short a dream. They both knew that although Hamad's school holidays were almost over, his days as a young falconer had just begun.

### Back to the City

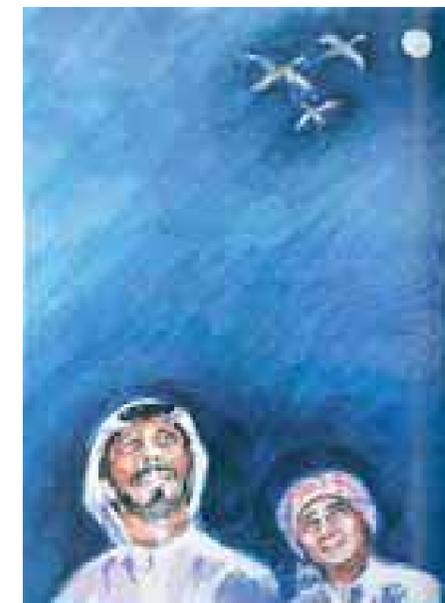
The ride home seemed so short! First, the desert track, then the road to town with its roundabouts, gardens, traffic lights, and bridges. Through wide streets and narrow streets. Past shops, warehouses, restaurants, tall buildings and low buildings --all whizzing by at high speed.

"Father?" Hamad asked just before they stopped in front of their small white villa. "Should I tell my friends about last night's surprise?"

Hamad was not referring to the hunt, but to the unexpected event which took place later, when the moon was full. Lying quietly next to his father atop the sand dune, observing the sky, its stars and the full moon, they had spotted three migrating houbara heading northward, their graceful silhouettes outlined against the clear moonlit sky. It was a rare scene of pure magic!

"You could, if you wish to," Khalifa answered.

"I think I will," Hamad said decisively. "But I'll tell them first how special



the houbara is. I'll tell them everything *I* have learnt so they *all* become conservationists!"

"Good idea!" Khalifa laughed., as he got out of the car. "Yallah, Hamad, come on," he added as Hamad lingered inside.

Hamad jumped out. "You know, Father? The houbara could be flying back to China. One of them might very well be wearing Uncle Saeed's transmitter!"

"Yes," Khalifa laughed. "That *is* a possibility. We could phone Saeed tomorrow and see what they've found out."

"Yes. We must phone Uncle Saeed tomorrow!" Hamad exclaimed happily.

He stopped for a moment and looked up. The sky was so wide, so clear, and so blue. *Subhanal-Lah, Glory to God*, he thought. *What a wonderful universe.* "I shall never stop learning," he promised himself out loud.

"*That*, I am sure of," Khalifa smiled, as hand in hand, father and son walked up the driveway and into the house.

**THE END**