

## The Falcon in the Sky

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Thirty-year-old Jani was a brick maker at a kiln but every year in winter he would go falcon catching. One falcon could bring between one and two million rupees and Jani yearned to be rich. He needed a big amount of cash for his wedding.

This was his third season of falcon catching. He would get up when the muezzin called to Morning Prayer, then take only tea breakfast while his mother prepared a lunch for him which usually consisted of fried eggs and chapattis. He would hang an ancient telescope around his neck and sling a water canteen over his shoulder. He would strap a live young chicken to the handlebar of his rickety bicycle, and onto the rear carrier rack he would tie a white-eyed buzzard plus a wire cage known as a *bal-chatri* trap. Thus equipped, he straddled his bicycle and headed towards the hunting ground, a strip of stony plain five kilometers from the village, arriving just as the sun peeped up from the horizon.

He would park his bicycle in a straw hut and tie his lunch to a rafter. Then to the legs of the buzzard he fastened a feathered lure bristling with plastic snares, and he would toss the buzzard into the air. Its wings were hobbled with strings so it would come down to the ground after a hundred metres. The idea is that a falcon should see the hanging feathers and think the buzzard has a dead bird in its claws. Swooping to steal the dead bird, the falcon becomes caught in the snares sewn into the lure.

Jani would keep hurling the buzzard into the air until noon when he returned to the hut to eat lunch. Afterwards, another session of falcon catching would begin, this time using method number two, which entailed placing the chick in the *bal-chatri* trap. Its squawking would attract the falcon, which would swoop down and get caught in snares attached to the cage.

Those were the two methods to catch a falcon. But of course neither of them worked if no falcon showed up.

Towards sunset Jani would turn his steps back to the village.

One month into the falcon-catching season, and a hazy noon it was, an unusual bird appeared in the sky. Jani's heart gave a thump of excitement. He lifted the telescope to his eyes and pointed it at the bird — it was a peregrine falcon. Jani hurled his buzzard into the air, but the falcon, displaying no interest, royally winged its way towards the hills and was swallowed by the haze. But after some time it returned, growing bigger with each wing beat. Jani's eyes lit up with anticipation. Elegantly the falcon glided past the fluttering buzzard, then it circled and did a second glide-past, then it swooped. Falcon and buzzard wrestled in mid-air. Jani held his breath. He felt as if a stack of banknotes, a new mini truck, and a pretty bride were all dangling before him. The birds, interlocked, started spiraling down. They were a few metres from the ground when the falcon gained the upper hand. It soared off into the bluish dusty dome, majestically, with the buzzard wriggling in its claws. Jani dashed after them, as a marooned person pursues a vanishing rescue helicopter. The falcon grew smaller and smaller until it melted into the haze. Jani's eyes were watering, partly from concentration and partly from disappointment. The October sky whirled in his eyes, he felt dizzy. He plonked down on the rubbly ground.

Next day Jani stumbled upon the bloody remains of his white-eyed buzzard among the rocks: a few splinters of bones, a scattering of feathers, a tangle of snares. He picked up the remnants and closed his hand over them. They smelt of the precious peregrine. They felt alive and warm to the touch. He felt as if he were holding the falcon itself.

He was startled by the noise of the hunter jeeps that stopped near him. They carried bird-hunters from the Gulf Emirates who had come with their Pakistani guides and their trained falcons to hunt the houbara bustard, a sort of partridge whose meat is supposed to be an aphrodisiac. One of the guides strode up to Jani. "Brother, did you see any houbara bustards in this area?"

"No," Jani replied curtly. He cast an envious look at the eagles and falcons perched on the gloved hands of the Emirati hunters as the guide returned to his jeep and the caravan drove off.

A fortnight passed. Jani had bought a new buzzard to toss into the grey-blue sky. After lunch break, as usual, he shoved the chicken into the *bal-chatri* coop. He had hardly turned away when he saw a shaheen falcon frantically pecking at the plastic nooses and thin wires of the cage while the chick squealed in terror. During its struggle the falcon's right foot got ensnared in the plastic nooses. Flapping its wings desperately it tried to get airborne again, but in vain. Jani scrambled into action, his heart racing a mile a minute. He took off his turban, tossed it like a sheet over the

falcon, then pounced on it. The bird let out an indignant screech. Jani was scared that he might have damaged its wing or even killed the creature. He fumbled in his pocket, took out his knife and cut the bird free of the nooses. The bird was heavier than he expected. It scratched his wrists and hands, but he did not feel the pain. He pressed it to his bosom and kissed it on the head.

“Mom! We’re rich,” he hollered as he entered his home holding the falcon above his head. “This bird can bring us a million rupees or more.” The house rang with jubilant voices and neighbours poured in to extend their congratulations. Jani’s parents, his elder brother and his sister-in-law started planning to bring Jani’s bride because now they would be able to buy the jewelry for her and arrange the marriage feast. Jani heard wedding music in his head and pictured the imaginary bride’s henna-painted hands. He perched the bird on a post and served it with cow meat. His nephews brought a noisy squadron of their buddies to have a peek at the falcon and Jani gave them a lecture about the art of falconry.

News of the precious catch spread like wildfire through Jani’s village and all the neighbouring villages. The village chief passed crackling telephonic messages to the well-known falcon dealers of the district, and next day just after sunrise the villagers crowded into the courtyard of the community centre to witness the historic event. The children outnumbered the men. After a long wait two Datsun mini trucks rolled up. The falcon dealers stepped out of the trucks, followed by their falcon experts. A third dealer arrived on a chestnut horse. Jani’s elder brother brought syrupy tea and boiled eggs for the dealers and experts. The dealers were richly clad. Their aristocratic faces and thin noses dripped with grace and contentment, compared to the sunburnt, malnourished faces of their experts.

The village chief gestured to Jani to bring out his falcon, which was locked up like a crown jewel in the community centre. An exclamation of amazement burst from the crowd as Jani strode proudly with his falcon perched on his gauntleted hand. But a scarcely-heard moan went up from the experts. With their measuring tapes they measured the bird from head to tail, carefully pulling open one wing then the other, scrutinizing the neck feathers and talons. The villagers held their breath. Jani’s heart was coming to his mouth. A smile of approval on the face of the expert could transform Jani’s life.

But the experts were not impressed. Without troubling to mention a price the first two dealers and their men stood up and left.

The third dealer, the one who came on horseback, took the bird from Jani and sat it on his hand. “My friend, you’re new to this business,” he said, wrapping an arm around Jani’s shoulders. “This is a male falcon and the males are smaller than the females. The male falcons aren’t tough hunters, they don’t fetch good prices. Anyhow I will offer you five thousand rupees for this one.”

Jani’s face grew pale. This amount did not even meet the expenses he had incurred during the falconing season. Jani snatched the falcon from the dealer’s hand, slammed a leather hood over its head and stomped off. A murmur rose from the spectators and they melted away. When the news reached home, Jani’s mother swooned and his father fell into a fit of chanting verses from the holy book.

Keeping the falcon was no joke. It had to be served meat, its bowl had to be filled with fresh water twice daily, its perch had to be cleaned of droppings. It was moody and choosy in its diet. When Jani took the falcon to the bazaar or the community center, the villagers would ask questions about it, and some would tentatively stroke it. Jani harangued against the dealers and their so-called experts. “My bird one day will get me a fat price,” he insisted.

Jani reported back for duty at the brick kiln. Now that people realized the falcon was worthless, they started making fun of him. One day as he was sipping tea in a café three fellows nearby nudged one another.

“A sheikh is flying from the Emirates to buy his falcon,” the first man declared.

“A zoo in Lahore wants to buy his bird,” the second man blustered.

“I think he should just kill it and make kebabs of it,” the third man tittered.

Incandescent with anger, Jani flew at them. There was a punch-up, some passersby intervened, Jani stormed out.

He lost interest in the falcon. He could not afford to buy meat for it. Sometimes it went without food for a day or two and no one bothered to clean its perch. Its talons were chipped, its wings were droopy, its feathers and quills were losing their shine. A cloud of flies buzzed around it.

Jani’s elder brother took the falcon to the village outskirts to set it free. An army of boys followed along. He untied the jess and asked the kids to howl and clap hands to rouse the bird,

but it sat glued to its place, its wings drooping like a sick condor. He scooped it up and sat it on an acacia tree. He and the boys returned to their homes.

Next morning when they woke they saw the falcon back on its old perch. Jani hurled a shoe at it. “Don’t be cruel to Allah’s creature!” his mother admonished. “You took it into captivity and now you are responsible for its care.”

One afternoon Jani’s nephews caught a mouse in a live-catch mouse trap. They pushed it towards the falcon and the bird lunged at the mouse and started tearing at it. From that day, Jani’s nephews and their friends fed mice to the falcon and when they could not trap a mouse they brought discarded animal parts from the butcher.

The falcon in effect became the pet of Jani’s nephews and its health improved. They flaunted it in the streets. Their friends asked to sit it on their hands and caress it. Then one day one nephew was flaunting the falcon when a column of SUVs rolled into the village. They were returning from hunting in the foothills. One SUV pulled over near the boys, the tinted window rolled down and a goateed face popped up. An Emirati sheik. He slipped a gauntlet over his right hand and asked the boy to show him the falcon.

The sheik sat the bird on his hand. “It’s starving, poor thing,” he observed. He took a slice of cold mutton from a plastic cooler on the back seat and dangled the meat before the falcon. It gobbled the delicacy in one go.

“It belongs to my uncle,” the boy said.

“Bring your uncle to me. I want to have a chat with him,” the Emirati said.

The boy sprinted home and in a few minutes returned with Jani.

“Greetings, brother,” the sheik said. “My aviary back home has several falcons but not this variety, the shaheen falcon. I used to have one but it passed away. I need your bird for breeding purposes...to make the lady falcons happy, hahaha. How much do you want for it, my friend?”

Jani felt as if he was in a dream.

“Fifteen thousand dirhams will be OK?” the Emirati asked.

Jani’s ears buzzed, he felt as if he was floating on air. His vocal cords had become immobile and despite his best effort sound would not issue from his mouth. The Emirati was bigger than a mountain and the falcon was bigger than a camel.

“You don’t want to sell it? Speak up, my friend. We have to catch a flight back to Dubai.”

Jani wanted to nod his head but his neck muscles had jammed.

“OK, I will give you twenty thousand dirhams,” the Emirati said.

At last Jani managed to nod his head.

“Great!” said the Emirati. He shoved a wad of crisp notes towards Jani.

The SUV drove off in a cloud of dust. Jani held the strange-looking notes, still uncertain whether they were real or fake.

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