

frightening bet. But he had been making risky bets ever since the day he had sold his sheep to pursue his destiny. And, as the camel driver had said, to die tomorrow was no worse than dying on any other day. Every day was there to be lived or to mark one's departure from this world. Everything depended on one word: "Maktub."

Walking along in the silence, he had no regrets. If he died tomorrow, it would be because God was not willing to change the future. He would at least have died after having crossed the strait, after having worked in a crystal shop, and after having known the silence of the desert and Fatima's eyes. He had lived every one of his days intensely since he had left home so long ago. If he died tomorrow, he would already have seen more than other shepherds, and he was proud of that.

Suddenly he heard a thundering sound, and he was thrown to the ground by a wind such as he had never known. The area was swirling in dust so intense that it hid the moon from view. Before him was an enormous white horse, rearing over him with a frightening scream.

When the blinding dust had settled a bit, the boy trembled at what he saw. Astride the animal was a horseman dressed completely in black, with a falcon perched on his left shoulder. He wore a turban and his entire face, except for his eyes, was covered with a black kerchief. He appeared to be a messenger from the desert, but his presence was much more powerful than that of a mere messenger.

The strange horseman drew an enormous, curved sword from a scabbard mounted on his saddle. The steel of its blade glittered in the light of the moon.

"Who dares to read the meaning of the falcon and the hawk?" he demanded, so loudly that his words seemed to echo through the fifty palm trees.

"It is I who dared to read," said the boy. He was reminded of the name Santiago Matamoros, mounted on his white horse with the infidel beneath his hooves. This man looked exactly the same, except that now the roles were reversed.

"It is I who read," he repeated, lowering his head to receive a blow from the sword. "Maktub. It is written here that you will see through the Soul of the World."

The sword didn't fall. Instead, the stranger lowered it slowly, until the point touched the boy's forehead. It drew a droplet of blood.

The horseman was completely immobile, as was the boy. It didn't even occur to the boy to flee. In his heart, he felt a strange sense of joy: he was about to die in pursuit of his destiny. And for Fatima. The omens had been true, after all. Here he was, face-to-face with his enemy, but there was no need to be concerned about dying—the Soul of the World awaited him, and he would soon be a part of it. And, tomorrow, his enemy would also be a part of that Soul.