



FICTIONAL
SHORT
STORIES

inspired by
1001 INVENTIONS

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Introduction

As part of its public engagement efforts, 1001 Inventions ran a creative writing competition that had writers from all over the world invited to submit a fictional short story based on the real lives of one of eleven scholars, adventurers and pioneers from Muslim civilisation.

Run between July and October 2011, the competition allowed entrants the chance to create a fictionalised account of the character and their history, while basing the story in historical fact. Entries could be up to 5,000 words long, and were in age categories 13-18 years and 19 years or above.

The stories of the winners in each category appear in this anthology, along with three other selected stories from the shortlisted entries.

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Foreword

Creativity, aspiration and achievement were values that inspired the scholars of the Golden Age of Muslim civilisation. In a period that saw huge advances in science, medicine and engineering, men and women of many faiths and cultures worked together to make discoveries that still underpin our lives today .

It was a time of inspiration for artists and authors, too. Most well-known in literature are the 1001 Arabian Nights - fictional tales which explored the past, present and future, much as modern science fiction authors do now.

1001 Inventions seeks to share the ideas and values of Muslim civilisation's Golden Age through peer-reviewed books, exhibitions and films. It also encourages fiction-writing to explore these same ideas. Literature and art are necessary to enhance public engagement with higher ideals, preparing the ground for a better future, which resonates with the aspirations of the young.

This book is a collection of winning entries in a 1001 Inventions' story competition, and is testament to the imagination of writers all over the world. Each tale explores developments in Muslim civilisation, bringing to life the impact of figures including Al-Zahrawi, Ibn al-Haytham and others to intriguing and powerful effect.

I congratulate all these winning authors, and thank all the many entrants to the contest. Enjoy reading these stories!

1001 Inventions Team

Masuda Begum (Author Biography)

Masuda was born and raised in London. In her spare time Masuda reads, writes and even bakes. She has her own website where she posts different recipes, such as for cakes and other wonderful delights. Masuda is enthusiastic about charitable work, and has set up a non-profit, non-partisan organisation called Souk of Hope, which is an annual charity bazaar that aims to raise money for the poor and needy. She has partaken in the student-led organisation Charity Week where she has had a lead role. She is interested in writing more stories, especially for children.

Adventure with Abbas ibn Firnas

By Masuda Begum

“Wow, Muhammad, have you seen this? It looks wicked,” exclaimed Ridwan, his nose pressed against the glass.

“I know, I want it so badly,” said Muhammad dropping his bag. “But my dad already bought me a train set, he won’t let me buy something else.”

Muhammad and Ridwan had just finished their football session, and were heading home when they came across the new Glider 1001 at Oliver’s Store.

“Oh I really want it,” said Ridwan. “Maybe I’m going to get my dad here to see it and, erm, hint at him to buy it for me.”

“Yeah, if you buy it, then I’ll be able to come round yours to try it out too,” said Muhammad, gazing at the glider.

“Yes, definitely,” said Ridwan. “Whoever invented planes must be a genius! I wish I could be a pilot when I grow up.” And with that, Ridwan drifted off into a little dream. He dreamt of flying the glider that he had just seen, flying it above Suntown Estate, up into the sky so high.

“Snap out, Ridwan,” Muhammad said, whilst clicking his fingers in unison. Ridwan gave a sudden jump, and it was clear to see he was back into reality. He almost wobbled over onto the road.

“Anyway, I can’t wait to tell Abdullah about that model,” said a grinning Muhammad, rubbing his hands. “And if you buy it and I get to play with it, he’ll be mega jealous.”

“Hmmm, yeah, I’m sure he will,” replied Ridwan, drifting back into yet another dream.

They came to Suntown Estate, where they lived. Muhammad lived at 28 and Ridwan lived at 32. They both knew each other from nursery.

“Assalamualaikum mum and dad, I’m baaaaccckk,” screamed a slightly over-excited Ridwan as he swung his bag on the stairs.

“Wa’alaykumassalam Ridwan, how was football today?” asked his mother, Mrs Ahmed. “Brother Zakariyyah called to say that you have a tournament in few days’ time against Thornfield FC, you must be excited.”

“Tomfield, mum, excited but nervous,” said Ridwan. “Zak told us to take plenty of water, it’s going to be tough but Insha’Allah we win.”

“Don’t worry, Ridwan, you boys always win, and regardless if they’re a good team or not, have team spirit and everything will be fine,” assured Mr Ahmed, Ridwan’s dad.

“Thanks dad,” said Ridwan. “I want to speak about somet...” But before Ridwan could say any more, the telephone rang and so he had to wait until another time to tell his dad about the plane. Ridwan went off to do some homework. He had a lot to do, but he kept on thinking about the plane, and that kept on distracting him. Another thing that distracted him was Mrs Ahmed’s cooking: a delicious smell carried itself up the hallway to Ridwan’s room. Ridwan could still hear his dad on the phone; he really badly wanted to tell him that he wanted the plane, which was one of the best he had ever seen.

“Ridwan, Ridwan, come on it's dinner time, come before the food goes cold”, called Mrs Ahmed.

Whilst going down the stairs to the dining room, Ridwan could smell the mouth-watering meat casserole that his mum had made... Ridwan’s favourite!

“Mum, isn’t dad off the phone yet?” asked Ridwan as he put the mashed potato dish on the table.

“Oh, I’m sure he should be done now,” replied his mum, taking the plates to the table. “Ridwan, get the pepper out from the cupboard please.”

Just then, Mr Ahmed appeared with a frown across his face. “What an absolute waste of time,” he exclaimed as he turned off his mobile phone. “I buy this iPhone from them and now they want me to buy everything else.”

“You should get the iPhone 5 when it comes out,” said Ridwan, who was interested in the latest gadgets.

“If it comes out,” Mrs Ahmed said. “My friend Vanessa told me that it’s probably just a rumour.”

“Masha’Allah this tastes delicious.” said dad. “I love it...what is it?”

“Lamb casserole, dad.” said Ridwan. He took this opportunity to ask his dad about the glider.

“Dad, have you seen the new Glider 1001?”

“I heard about it,” replied dad. “Mr James from cricket club mentioned something.”

“Oh dad, I really want it,” said Ridwan, and excitedly he dropped his spoon with a clatter.

“Sorry about that.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Mum. “It could be dangerous.” Ridwan looked horrified. He really wanted the glider and knew it was child-friendly.

“It’s not dangerous, Aminah,” said dad, to Ridwan’s delight. “Actually, I heard it comes with safety gear.”

“So, are you going to buy it, dad?” asked Ridwan. “Pretty please!”

“Of course,” replied dad. Ridwan jumped up, almost knocking over his water glass.

“Easy, son,” said Dad. “But there is a little condition.” Ridwan looked at his dad. A condition: what could it be? Homework? But I always do it on time. Cleaning the garage? It’s already clean...what else?

“You need to beat Tomfield FC,” said his dad, smiling. “When I was a young boy, I always lost against this team.” Ridwan’s dad had played for Suntown FC in the early eighties. He was club captain and had been their top goal-scorer.

“That might be a little difficult,” said Ridwan, looking worried. He really wanted the glider, but had to beat Tomfield FC for it.

“You can win, Insha’Allah,” said dad. “Allah will help, try your best.”

“All right Insha’Allah,” said a determined Ridwan.

Muhammad had called Ridwan.

“Hey, I got good news for you,” said Ridwan. Muhammad cried out in excitement.

“When are you buying it?”

“Soon, but there’s a condition, we have to beat Tomfield,” said Ridwan.

“That might not be too easy,” said Muhammad. Ridwan told Muhammad about the encouragement he’d had from his dad. “I think we can do it, Muhammad,” said Ridwan.

“Insha’Allah,” said Muhammad. “Oh yeah, by the way, I’ve done some research about gliders on the internet.”

“What did you find?” asked Ridwan. He knew Muhammad liked researching.

“Did you know, there was a guy by the name of Abbas ibn Firnas who was the first person in history to make a scientific attempt at flying. He actually flew a glider,” said Muhammad.

“Wow, that sounds exciting!” said Ridwan.

“He flew off a mountain, but didn’t land too well,” said Muhammad, reading off his computer screen.

“When was he around, in the seventies?” asked Ridwan.

“No, you silly,” replied Muhammad. “He lived in the ninth century.”

“Subhana Allah,” gasped Ridwan. “Abbas ibn Firnas - that rings a bell.”

“Anyway, get some sleep, we need to show those Tomfield guys how to play football,” said Muhammad.



“Suntown, Suntown, Suntown,” roared a large crowd. The match day had come.

“All right lads, this is it,” barked Coach Johnson. “We beat Tomfield and go top of the league.” Muhammad pulled his socks up. He was really determined to win against Tomfield after losing to them earlier on in the year.

The teams lined up against each other. Tomfield FC wore sky blue with yellow stripes. Suntown wore all black with red stripes on the sleeves.

“Hey Riddle boy, prepare to lose,” shouted out Morrison, club captain of Tomfield. Riddle boy was a name he called Ridwan.

“I am not Riddle boy,” said Ridwan. “Anyway, we have faith in beating you today.”

“We’ll see about that, Riddle boy,” laughed Morrison. His team mates laughed with him.

The referee blew the whistle. Tomfield FC went for the attack straight away and caught Suntown off guard. Goal! Tomfield had scored within a minute.

“Boys, stay awake!” shouted Coach Johnson. “You’re not Sleeping Beauty!” Ridwan had the ball. He looked around the pitch for his team mates. Just then he was pushed to the ground by Morrison.

“Yellow card,” called out the referee. Some of the Tomfield players protested, but their coach told them to carry on playing. The ball was in Suntown’s half. Pipin Williams took a long shot and found Muhammad on the left hand side. Muhammad sprinted with the ball, overtook two Tomfield players, and wham!

“Goaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” screamed the Suntown fans.

Very soon it was half time. The Suntown players had a hard team talk from Coach Johnson.

“We need a win, boys,” he said. “Don’t let me down, and don’t let my dad down.” Coach Johnson’s dad was ill in hospital. He was a big fan of Suntown FC and wanted to come to the match but had fallen ill.

In the second half, it began to rain. Morrison scored a well-shot volley for Tomfield, which Suntown goalkeeper Russell couldn’t save. It didn’t take Suntown long to match the score line. Muhammad scored from the penalty spot after Ridwan was fouled by Hernandez Joseph.

Both teams switched to attacking mode and tested out each other’s defences.

There were now only five minutes left. Ridwan looked along the sideline. His dad was there wearing a scarf around his neck and holding an umbrella, and he gave the thumbs-up.

“I need to score the winning goal,” thought Ridwan. Just then the ball came to him.

“Rids, it’s yours,” shouted out Roger, the midfielder. Ridwan looked at the Tomfield goal. There were forty seconds left. The keeper was standing just inside the six yard box. Without thinking twice, Ridwan, who was near the middle of the pitch took a shot. The ball sailed above the Tomfield defence. Everyone held their breath. Would it go in?

“Goaaal!” shouted the Suntown players. The crowd roared along. Ridwan had scored. His team mates came running over to him.

“Is the game over?” asked a surprised Ridwan.

“The ref blew the final whistle already Rids,” said Roger. “We won, we won the league.” They all picked Ridwan and Muhammad up and took them to Coach Johnson.

“Well done, lads, you proved those rascals wrong!” he said, hugging the boys. “The best display all season.”



“Well done, son,” said dad as he walked Ridwan to Oliver’s Store. “You actually won!”

“Every kid in the town wants one of these,” said the shop assistant as Mr Ahmed went to pay for the Glider 1001. “Mr Oliver told me to give you a 20% discount, sir.”

“Oh, that’s kind of him,” said Mr Ahmed who knew Mr Oliver really well.

Ridwan and Muhammad opened the package. It had a instruction booklet, some safety gear and a DVD.

“Are you sure it’s safe?” Ridwan’s mum asked, carrying in a bowl of popcorn.

“Yes mum,” said Ridwan, looking at the booklet.

“Ok, just play safely,” said Mrs Ahmed and went back to her desk. She was studying to get a degree with the Open University.

“Alhamdulillah, your glider is ready,” announced Mr Ahmed. There it was: the Glider 1001.

“Can I take it out to play?” asked Ridwan, very eagerly. His dad looked out of the window. It was quite a dull day.

“I’m not too sure, it doesn’t look like a good day,” he replied. Ridwan looked devastated.

“Oh dad, please, I really want to try it out,” said Ridwan. Dad thought for a while.

“All right, but take Muhammad with you and play on Tree Story Hill,” said dad. Ridwan and Muhammad rushed out of the house to Tree Story Hill. It was a lovely steep hill where children would gather to listen to stories.

Ridwan positioned himself at the top of the hill. He wore the safety gear. Muhammad helped to heave the glider onto Ridwan’s back.

“Here it goes,” said Ridwan. “Bismillah!” And with that, Ridwan ran down the hill. The wind picked up and was slowly lifting Ridwan up. It began to rain but Ridwan was eager to fly.

Muhammad was beckoning for him to stop. Just as Ridwan was about to lower himself down to the ground, a light flashed! It was lightning!

All of a sudden Ridwan began to spin. It was really fast and he couldn't see anything around him.

"Heeeelp!" he called out.

"Ridwaaaaan, where are you?" asked Muhammad. He went over to the spot where the lightning had flashed. But there was nothing to be seen except for Ridwan's jeans and his T-shirt, now burning. Muhammad ran over to Ridwan's house.

"Mr Ahmed, Ridwan disappeared!" he exclaimed, out of breath.

"Whatever do you mean, Muhammad?" asked Mr Ahmed. Muhammad explained how the lightning had hit Ridwan. Mr Ahmed ran to Tree Story Hill. He looked frantically for Ridwan, but to no avail.

"I must call the police," he said, taking his phone out. The police came at once. They organised a search party.



Thud!

Ridwan fell on top of a tree. He was hanging onto the glider with nothing beneath him.

"Are you all right young man?" called out a man from below. Ridwan looked down. The man was wearing a long blue gown and yellow trousers. He had a white turban. "Where did he come from?" Ridwan thought. Just then Ridwan looked at his own clothes. He was wearing a white robe with a brown belt. "What happened to my jeans and T-shirt?" he wondered.

"Let me help you down," said the man. Ridwan got down after some difficulty.

"Who are you - and where am I?" asked Ridwan dazzled.

"My name is Abbas, Abbas Qassim ibn Firnas," said the man, "and you are in ninth-century Al-Andalus." Ridwan couldn't believe his eyes. "Am I dreaming?" he questioned, pinching himself. "Ouch!"

"What's your name?" asked Abbas, brushing the leaves off Ridwan.

"Err... my name is Ridwan, Ridwan ibn Ahmed" replied Ridwan. Abbas looked up at the glider.

"I see you have been flying a glider," he said. "Has the world heard about my flying attempts?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Ridwan. "You are Abbas ibn Firnas."

"That is me, I thought I introduced myself already," said Abbas, looking confused.

"Did you really make a glider?" asked Ridwan.

"Well, it is almost like a glider, but with feathers," replied Abbas. "I made it in my workshop, at my house."

“But how much did it cost?” Ridwan asked. “Mine was £50 after a 20% discount!”

“£50? Discount? Whatever is that?” asked Abbas. “I just gathered the feathers from the poultry farms.”

“Where is it, can I see it?” asked Ridwan.

“It’s in my workshop, come, I’ll show you,” said Abbas. He led Ridwan down to a small town, along very narrow roads. A man was driving a donkey cart.

“Abbas, a friend, I see?” he asked hailing Abbas.

“Yes Zahir, from the 21st century,” replied Abbas. The cart driver looked confused, but Abbas didn’t wait to speak further.

“My workshop,” announced Abbas with his arms wide. Ridwan looked. It was nothing more than a small field with a broken wall built around it.

“It’s only a field,” said Ridwan, looking puzzled. Why would he marvel at an empty field?

“Not the field, look,” said Abbas pointing to a shed-like building. “I make my inventions in secret.” Abbas took Ridwan to the building. He pushed open the door. Creak! It was dark inside. Abbas took out a lantern. He lit it up and immediately Ridwan saw the glider.

“That is a glider?” questioned Ridwan looking unimpressed. “It looks like a big duck!”

“Well, it’s not finished yet,” said Abbas looking annoyed. “I’ll give you a close-up view, just don’t touch anything.”

Ridwan looked at ‘the glider’. It was made out of two wings and feathers, and it was big enough for one person to fly it.

“I just need to fix one final thing and it’s ready for flight,” said Abbas. He took his tool box out.

“What are you looking for?” asked Ridwan

“I need a clip to put the final rope on,” said Abbas, rummaging through the tools. Ridwan felt in his pocket. He found a clip, which belonged to his sister Jasmin.

“Will this do?” he asked. Abbas looked at it.

“This is exactly what I need,” he said excitedly. Abbas took the clip and used it to put the last end of the rope on the glider.

“The people will be at the mountain awaiting my flight,” said Abbas. “I must fulfil my childhood dream and make this fly. Perhaps one day I can fly to go for Hajj, my ultimate challenge. The first attempt at avi...avi...”

“Aviation,” said Ridwan.

“Yes that it is,” said Abbas, gratefully.

Ridwan helped Abbas take the glider to the mountain. Below a crowd had gathered to see the extraordinary flight.

“I will now know how a bird flies,” said Abbas. He put on the glider and got ready for flight.

“You can do it, Abbas,” called out the crowd.

“Go for it, Abbas,” encouraged Ridwan.

“Will you remember me for this?” asked Abbas.

“Yes of course,” said Ridwan. “I’m going to tell my history teacher about you, Connolly will be so impressed!”

Abbas took some steps back. He began to jog, holding onto his wings. Then he increased his pace. Finally Abbas began to sprint.

“So long my friend!” he called out to a marvelling Ridwan. Abbas was now flying like a bird. He flew over the crowd. He flew over his house, the local market, the king’s palace...

“I am flying!” he shouted. He went past a group of birds who were flying, heading south.

“I can fly like you!” he exclaimed.

Abbas swerved around, intending to land back onto the mountain. As he descended he got into some difficulty. Thud! He landed on his back.

“Aaaargh!” he shouted. “My back, ouch, ouch, it hurts.” Ridwan came rushing over to him.

“Boy, help me,” groaned Abbas.

“Erm, I’m not a First Aider,” said Ridwan. “Let me see if the others can help.” The donkey cart driver came up to help Abbas.

“You missed one essential thing about a bird’s descent,” said the man, “the tail.”

“Oh, if only you'd told me before,” said Abbas.

“A bird lands with its tail, Abbas, you should have known,” said the man. Just then the sun rays fell upon Ridwan.

“I think it’s time for me to go,” he said.

“Thank you for being with me,” said Abbas groaning. “Don’t forget, add a tail to your glider.”

With a flash Ridwan was back on Tree Story Hill.

A confused Muhammad was looking down at him. “Where did you go?” he asked. “And what are you wearing?” Ridwan was back in the 21st century. He had learnt a great deal about Abbas ibn Firnas and his flying mission.

“A long story,” said Ridwan getting up. His dad came up to him.

“Ridwan, son, I’ve been looking all over for you, the police are here, your mother is crying, are you all right.” he said.

“I’m fine, dad,” said Ridwan. “I just had a wonderful adventure, which was probably a dream.” Ridwan was taken home by ambulance. His glider had been hit by the lightning, but it narrowly missed him.

“Oh, my Ridwan,” cried Mrs Ahmed. “Are you all right?”

“I am fine, mum.” said Ridwan.

“Your father shouldn’t have bought that glider,” she said. “It would have been better to buy a train set instead.” Ridwan winked at Muhammad.

“You can always play with mine,” said a smiling Muhammad.

“Muhammad, I met Abbas ibn Firnas,” Ridwan said to Muhammad. Muhammad looked surprised. Ridwan told him all about the meeting.

Hajer Boudriga (Author Biography)

Hajer Boudriga was born in 1987 in Tunisia. As a young medical student, she's still training as a junior doctor in the university hospital of Sousse, where she's working to pursue a medical specialty. She has been a member of different national and international NGOs, where she has actively been participating in social and academic events. Enamoured with languages, she has been writing at a young age in Arabic, French and English. In addition to her writing skills, she also has some public speaking experience.

A Journey through Lights and Shadows

by Hajer Boudriga

It was another bright day in the Iraqi city, Albasra. The sun had gently spread its beams throughout the streets and lanes of the warm town, marking the first days of the eleventh century.

There were numerous houses and multiple shops and markets, with every building on top of another. The shapely palm trees that were gracefully scattered all over the city, made every bit more charming and were the very reason the city was known as the land of a million palms.

A little farther from the buzz of the city centre, was a hut that overlooked a small hill. It was in fact, Al-Hasan ibn Al-Haytham's favourite place. He was a man in his late thirties. His frame was slight. He had a bright steady gaze. He had a distinctively graceful gait and his manner was refined. He groomed himself carefully and took good care of his modest turban under which you could easily spot some black curls, some of which had already gone grey. His voice was quiet but firm. And when he smiled, you caught a glimpse of a row of impeccable shiny white teeth.

He was interested in reading and in writing his books, but he usually busied himself in manipulating the home-made gadgets and tools he had. Everything around him was so perfectly organised that he had no trouble finding anything he needed. It's as though he had calculated every inch. Indeed, he cleverly kept every object in its place.

In one corner of his workshop he kept his desk as tidy as he could, his parchments, ink and writing quills were always on the top. A few steps away, he had a dainty collection of things of interest to him: boxes, vials, bowls, candles and bottles, all of different geometric shapes: squares, circles, cones. One small piece of mirror was especially close to him though; it had a thin trail of dark blue glass spirals around the back of it, forming an irregular but amazingly harmonious pattern. Its decorated frame glittered with a mixture of lively colours.

The walls of his workshop were a true library, for there was no spare space on the shelves. It was full of books and manuscripts of all types, sizes and titles but what attracted the attention were the names that occurred again and again like Al-Kindi, Euclid, Archimedes, Ptolemy.

One could lose oneself simply looking around!

Ibn al-Haytham over the years had become a remarkable and brilliant figure in Albasra, renowned for his knowledge and wisdom. "Al-Hasan" as everyone called him, was held in great respect not only by those living in his own town but also by those of the surrounding areas. As

soon as he gained this reputation, Al-Hasan was appointed governor of the port city of Albasra and the surrounding region, a job that everyone on earth only dreamed of having.

Still, despite all his preoccupations, Al-Hasan realised how dull his life was becoming, all the excitement was slipping away and his energy was wearing off.

Maybe that's why he was driven one day to make a relatively strange but interesting declaration: "Had I been in Egypt, I could have done something to regulate the Nile so that benefit could be derived from its ebb and flow."

As the day advanced, the sky was tinged with a soft purple light and there was a fragrant balmy breeze. Al-Hasan was taking a searching look through his window, but turned from a long study of the sky as he heard someone knocking at the door. As soon as he opened it, his eyes rested on a man who couldn't have been more courteous when he saluted him.

The man asked, "You are Abu Ali Al-Hasan ibn-Haytham, I believe?"

Al-Hasan nodded and asked him to come inside. Once they were settled, the man went on: "I am the emissary of the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim Bi-Amri Allah, and I am here to deliver a message".

"It's my pleasure to receive it," replied Al-Hasan.

The messenger took a folded piece of parchment out of his pocket then started reading: "Peace be upon you. We, the governor of Egypt, after having heard about you and your reputation, are pleased to have you among us and we will be pleased if you accept our invitation."

The minute he finished reading, Al-Hasan couldn't believe his ears, he was wondering what had made the Caliph invite him "Assuredly, It must be something of great importance," he told himself thoughtfully.

That very night, just as the sun's light faded, and a thick blanket of darkness took its place, Al-Hasan had a strange dream that he could recall in every detail. He was in an open space and he could see nothing, because everything was blurry. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he heard a mystical voice saying: "How can I be a sun and shine through the light of my shadow without blending or bending?"

Al-Hasan tried to trace where it came from but he felt as though he was on board a stranded ship moving in all directions to finally end up nowhere. The voice kept repeating in an echoing tone till it faded and vanished.

Al-Hasan didn't waste any time. He packed as soon as he could and headed towards Egypt. He was so excitedly eager to meet the Caliph that he had many moods and impressions during his trip. Although he couldn't control them, he didn't want to make any illusions.

In Al-Hakim's presence, Al-Hasan moved towards the Caliph with distinct, steady steps.

Everything outwardly spoke of a normal calm but deep inside he was infused with a mixture of sensations that he himself couldn't understand. He thought he was happy, or rather lucky, to

meet so distinguished a ruler. Still, he was stuck in both sides of the situation: the joy of excitement and the fear of disappointment.

The Caliph gave Al-Hasan a very warm welcome as he received him with open arms.

“At last! It’s good to see you,” cheered Al-Hakim.

“The pleasure is mine to make your acquaintance, Prince of Believers,” declared Al-Hasan with a big smile.

“I suppose you don’t know yet why I summoned you?”

“Indeed, I haven’t got the faintest idea.”

“As you must know, I’m the kind of person that appreciates great minds and encourages any work of ingenuity. Receiving you here is part of my constant quest for knowledge, but first and foremost it is for you to prove your brilliance, for I heard you say you can do something to control the Nile.”

“O, prince of believers, it is so kind of you to say so. In fact, my idea is to build a dam to harness the waters. The point is we can prevent the floods that cause heavy damage and use the very same superfluous water to counterbalance the dry season to better grow the crops.”

Al-Hakim listened admiringly and attentively. No sooner had Al-Hasan said these words than he announced “Indeed, I ought to be amazed, and here I am giving you the chance to do such a thing.”

“It would be an honour.”

“I have not finished yet,” interrupted the Caliph. “The rules are very simple. If you do your job correctly, then you will be rewarded for it.” Then, his tone changing to one serious enough to make Al-Hasan think carefully. “Otherwise you must bear the consequences.”

“You can trust me for this mission.” Although his eyes radiated reliability, Al-Hasan wondered whether he’d just spoken recklessly. And for a moment he felt a bit uneasy.

“So be it. I hope you will be up to the challenge.”

These were the final words Al-Hasan heard just before leaving. No, nothing could have made him reject such a request; it was as though he felt a sudden compulsion to accept such a daunting task. There was something he knew for sure though. From that moment nothing was going to be the same again.

On his way to his quarters, he noticed a huge building as he passed before it; it had an impressively huge façade. His experienced eyes didn’t fail to notice every minute detail. Two small prominent towers were in the centre and marked out the entrance to Al-Hakim’s mosque. The doorway was decorated with a block filled with bands of decorative patterns and Kufic inscriptions. On both sides of the main front entrance stood two minarets. One minaret consisted of a base and a cylindrical body. Another one was made up of a square base. Some bands which contained verses from the Koran written in Kufic script surrounded the minarets from outside.

Standing in front of such an edifice gave him a serene impression of joy that he could never forget.

The next day, he gathered all the items and tools he needed and left for Aswan, where he was to undertake his scheme. Al-Hakim had equipped him with the necessary materials and men for the mission.

Once arrived at his destination, he took a deep breath; he could feel the air penetrating deeply into his lungs. It was so pure, so inspiring. He decided to have an exploratory tour all along the Nile. He turned his attention to the large crops that were growing on both sides of the river and he hurried to get into the boat.

The next day, as he was rowing, he looked over his shoulder at the shimmering water he saw. His heart soaked in the sweetness of the scenery of the old monuments that stood witness to the ancient civilisations of the past. Everything went so perfectly that he thought that this was too good to be true, and so it was. By the end of the tour, he was struck by the fact that the width of the valley to be filled with water was twice as big as the river itself, which made his plan clearly out of the question and unachievable with the resources available.

His thoughts moved swiftly and he sat by himself in a haze of terrible anxiety. And for the first time he felt that he had been betrayed by his own intelligence.

The days passed so quickly - putting an even heavier burden on Al-Hasan's shoulders.

It was daybreak when Al-Hasan and all the men he had at his disposal went back to Cairo. He was puffy-eyed and ashen-faced for he hadn't had a wink of sleep over the past two days. He just felt drained and tired, thinking how he was to announce his failure. His eyelids drooped very slowly as the sun rose again and he went to meet the Caliph.

"Peace be upon you. My man! Here you are again," greeted the Caliph with a small gesture, hugging him. "The trip must have been exciting, apart from the fact that it had left you weary as I can see," he added.

"Surely it was," replied Al-Hasan with a paradoxical mournfulness. He cleared his throat before he could speak again, struggling to string the words together. "But... but I am afraid the taming cannot be implemented." Then he went on after a short hesitation. "It's impossible."

"Impossible?" said Al-Hakim, pausing on the word.

"I'm sorry to say this, but it seems that the whole thing is unmanageable, besides it would demand a lot of material that you couldn't possibly afford," answered Al-Hasan while trying vainly to hide his face.

"That's enough," snapped Al-Hakim. "Given the fact that you couldn't carry out what you've been assigned, you leave me no choice but to execute you," he added while casting him a hard look.

"But, Prince of Believers, as I told you, in the current situation it's just not feasible. Unfortunately, it's utterly out of my hands," muttered Al-Hasan with a trembling voice.

Al-Hakim flew into a terrible rage and growled, "Indeed it is! But let's be quite clear: there are no circumstances under which that is acceptable. My judgement stands!"

As painful as these words were for Al-Hasan, it was hard for him to realise at once the real severity of the situation. The message was as cold as ice, and while the Caliph had that black look in his eyes - or at least that's how it felt - the poor man was sitting still where he was, staring strangely waiting for any other reaction to ease his pain. He was shocked by how the Caliph looked at him cruelly and bore no sign of compassion towards him.

Then at that very moment of dead silence, tens - or maybe hundreds - of questions invaded his mind: what was he supposed to do? Was he to say anything? If so, how was he to defend himself?

It might be true that Al-Hakim was the kind of tough and unpredictable governor, but Al-Hasan wasn't able to believe all the gossip and rumors about him being a tyrant or even a mad man. "He's just going over the top this time," he thought to himself.

Eventually, within the jumble of thoughts and questions, he stood up, stepped aside, moved backwards then forwards and lost his balance. And all of a sudden everything went black, as if the lights went out, everything paused so strangely and nothing seemed to be moving any more. He could hear nothing but some of the words the Caliph was uttering.

All that he could remember is that he was pushed and roughly thrown into a dark cell. Then he was locked inside. It was a dreadfully black chamber. He waited till his eyes got used to the dark, then tried to see what was around him. But much to his disappointment there was nothing but absolute obscurity. He started to question himself about his new situation. If anyone had told him only days ago that he would end up this way, he would have laughed at him.

The more he tried to look all around the more frustrated he became. "You got yourself into this mess," he kept telling himself, "and you had better get out of it."

As the long hours elapsed, a creepy hush fell over the place as he knew it was getting dark outside. He felt wretched at the thought of what tomorrow might bring. As his thoughts wandered, his eyes closed several times and he fell asleep. He finally realised how useless it was to struggle against fate.

As the next day was dawning, Al-Hasan awoke from a dream with his hands pressed over his face. He had a vivid recollection of what he had seen. It was exactly the same dream he had had a few days ago: it was, surprisingly, the same voice and the same words. He couldn't help them ringing in his head and he needed to be rid of the eerie feeling that possessed his soul.

His eyes now adjusted to the darkness, he rose to his feet and started to discover the room. He could feel it: a small room in its surface, whose walls were quite tall, parts of which were covered with sheets. He stood shivering and he trembled not only because he felt cold but also for fear of getting suffocated. Soon he realized he hadn't eaten anything for over two days. He slipped his hands into his pocket to look for something, anything that could ease his deadly hunger. But all he could find was his small mirror.

While he was fumbling over and over again in his pockets, he spotted a flickering speck. At first he shut his eyes quite firmly, not believing what he was seeing, but when he opened them the speck was still flickering. He stepped slowly towards it until it came into clearer focus: it was magical. He saw a long thin path of light in which tiny clouds of golden dust particles were gracefully dancing in a colourful spectrum.

As he tried to find the origin of the light's path he could see a pinhole, it was no bigger than a small bean. He got closer and had a look through it; nothing could have ever been more familiar to him, he saw: it was the very same minaret of Al-Hakim's mosque. He moved his head as he followed the end of the path till he reached the opposite wall, but it was softly disappearing in a magical path. And there he got the biggest surprise of all. The scene he saw through the pinhole was now drawn upside down on the sheet of the opposite wall. It was at once strangely beautiful and mysterious. And for a second, that helped him relax and made him forget his ordeal.

Suddenly, whilst he was plunged into a serene moment of contemplation and bewilderment, he was roused by the sound of heavy footsteps coming towards the room accompanied by some incomprehensible words. His heartbeat quickened and he knew he was finished, or as good as. He lowered his head with grief while the mirror was still in his hands.

At that moment when there was no way out of death but death itself, a brilliant idea crossed his mind like a flash. He painfully straightened his back, and with a brisk move he threw his mirror at the wall. Then he took a sharp-edged piece and briskly ripped up his clothes. It was only a matter of seconds till the door was opened. The guards were stunned at the sight of Al-Hasan. And before they realised what they had just witnessed, he let out a deafening scream that gradually turned into an unending cackle.

Without even thinking about it, the guards shackled him in chains and dragged him to the Caliph.

"Now what?" shouted the Caliph with his eyes wide open. "What on earth has happened to..?"

But before he could finish his phrase, Al-Hasan was turning and jumping up in circles, and out of the blue started talking gibberish and didn't seem to stop.

"He can't carry on like that, and I can't keep listening to any more lunatic ravings of a madman now," said Al-Hakim as his voice cracked. And while looking at him, he announced with a rather pitiful air. "I've made my decision, I am calling the execution off. But, in view of the current situation, and due to what he has turned into, he shall be confined to his quarters here in Cairo, till he comes to his senses. He will be assisted till the end of his days if necessary."

These words were to be Al-Hasan's only crumb of comfort after all he had gone through. He had undoubtedly had a narrow escape.

He was at his quarters by nightfall; he looked wonderingly at his dimly-lit room. Then he collapsed, feeling his head heavier on his shoulders than ever, and fell asleep on the spot.

At the crack of dawn, Al-Hasan once again woke up while the same words of his dream were echoing in his head - only this time it added: "Use your inner eye. Don't be fooled by what you

see.” Something was telling him it wasn’t just a dream. He just knew that this riddle added a little bizarre zest to what he saw in his prison.

Hours passed like days and days passed like months and months passed like years. Al-Hasan didn’t even know what 'normal' was any more. He often kept reiterating the weird dream words and wondering whether he had truly gone mad. It all seemed like walking on broken glass.

He got used to sitting by the fountain that stood in the centre of his house. It was the last resort when he felt his problems weighed too heavily on him. One day, when he was peacefully thinking about the sound of trickling water, he plunged a wooden stick into it. He gazed at it fixedly. At first, it didn’t come to his notice, but the stick had apparently bent. He was astounded when the stick kept bending as he kept dipping it into the water. But it didn’t take long for his face to crack into a big broad beautiful smile and he brightened up while saying: “Use your inner eye. Don’t be fooled by what you see”. He immediately made his way to one of the windows of his room and saw with sparkling eyes some narrow straight strips of sunlight that emerged from the shutters.

He rushed to fetch a long thin straight tube, dimmed all the lights and placed a candle in front of him, then stared at it through one end of the tube while the other one was directed at the candle. He could see it. Something that turned out to be impossible when he covered that second end. Then murmured with an even more joyful tone: “That’s how the light of the candle and the beams of the sun travel without blending or bending to reach my eye”. Then added with a note of determination “The time has come”.

He turned back to his ancient books and spent long hours and days studying them more specifically.

He waited for the appropriate moment to ask to be received by the Caliph. He knew this could mean risking his life. Al-Hasan was quite sure that Al-Hakim was appealingly attached to the extravagant things of life. Nevertheless that wouldn’t stop him from appreciating the true value of knowledge and wisdom. Al-Hasan finally decided to take the bull by the horns.

“You’re back!” said the Caliph, and Al-Hasan could clearly distinguish a note of guilt in his voice.

“Indeed. And my life is given back to me.”

The Caliph turned towards him with an interrogative gaze. “And I myself hope that your being in my presence now is for a very good reason.”

“O Prince of Believers, when I accepted the challenge to tame the Nile, I did it for my own vanity. But now, I realise that truth is sought for its own sake.” replied Al-Hasan. Then he stopped for a while before he felt gritty determination and added. “Finding the truth is difficult, and the road to it is rough.”

After a few moments of quiet, he pensively said, “May I show you something that will not only astonish you, but is also the kind of thing you will cherish from now on? Just give me the space of time I need.” Al-Hakim’s eyes gleamed. “Very well then, we will meet again in three months’

time. And just one more thing,” added Al-Hasan, “I want you to gather all the acknowledged scholars to witness it. I’ll choose the place and time.”

In due course and as everything was set, Al-Hasan called for the gathering to be held not far from where he was imprisoned. Everyone was looking with the utmost curiosity at a very small wooden shed with a small door, that could hardly fit a couple of people inside. On one of its walls Al-Hasan had made a small hole, and exactly on the opposite wall he hung some white sheets.

He turned to the dazzling sun beams then asked for the guests to go inside with him one at a time.

A pleasant tension spread as everyone stared and moved forward. Once inside, they got a glimpse of the upside down image Al-Hasan had seen in his obscure chamber.

It was only a matter of minutes when a faint noise gradually filled the atmosphere.

“You must all be wondering whether this is only some kind of magic or maybe a figment of your imagination,” said Al-Hasan, looking at all the upturned faces and the confused expressions. “But I can clearly affirm that this is a purely natural phenomenon.”

The scholars fixed their eyes on him, and a continuous stillness took over the gathering.

Al-Hasan continued, “Each and every one of us wakes up every morning, gazes at the sun, and looks at the world around them. Everything is always before our eyes, and we can’t argue that our eyes emitted a beam in order to see. Yet, this Qumra here stands as a demonstration of how we have been misled.”

At the mention of the word Qumra everybody’s attention lifted, and with a more resolute attitude, Al-Hasan added. “For light travels in straight lines only, something that can be observed in the dust that fills the air. And when rays pass through the small hole in thin material they do not scatter but cross and reform as an upside down image on a flat white surface held parallel to the surface, which broadly explains the very nature of sight.”

The more he spoke the more breathless the audience became.

Al-Hakim’s eyes glinted as he stated, “I am wholeheartedly in awe of you, you proved yourself to be a true intellectual, a highly skilled scholar, and a trustworthy man.” Then he said modestly, “And here I give you my sincerest apologies.”

Al-Hasan nodded positively and indulgently replied “Your apologies are accepted” as the audience burst into wild applause.

That night as Al-Hasan rested his head on his pillow, he peered at the horizon through his window to see the glow of the moon's tender light and to feel a soft breeze that touched his face. He couldn’t forget that wondrous feeling that he had, but he knew it wouldn't linger on, for he realised that his journey was only just beginning.

Muhammad Haris Hameed (Author Biography)

Muhammad Haris Hameed is a short story writer, an enthusiastic naturalist and a keen observer of life. Currently he is working as a Banker at the State Bank of Pakistan, Karachi. Apart from occasional dabbling in creative writing contests, he is working on a project to document modern life through a unique Pakistani perspective, at once aloof and enmeshed, constantly grappling with the myriad realities of today's Pakistan. And if he is not otherwise engaged, you can see him either marveling the mysteries of the universe or pining for a more humane world.

Abbas ibn Firnas

by Muhammad Haris Hameed

The Previous Evening

To soar like a Spanish hawk into the azure Andalus sky had always been a dream cherished by Abbas. No matter how much anyone else belittled his ‘inspired talk on becoming a birdman’, he could not stop dreaming nor could stop analysing his pet project from every conceivable angle again and again. Birds have wings; his machine had them too. Birds' wings are made up of light feathers intricately joined together by the hand of nature, perfected for streamlined air flow. His glider, called a taaera, had a streamlined canvas surface. Maybe he should have used qirtas instead, the white miracle fabric from Turkestan.

He took a sip of the sweet sticky sherbet, fragranced by cinnamon and sighs. It had been a costly affair, buying the requisite raw materials and fashioning them into a workable model. Some of the materials had to be imported from as far away as Turkestan and India. And that required spending solid dinars. It had also meant using connections to get high-quality material on a priority basis. Maybe he should have used Egyptian cotton, his trader friend Qasim would have been courteous and helpful, especially as he had once helped Qasim by producing a Spanish substitute for rare Kashmir indigo. That had been a good effort and it was also financially very rewarding. Abbas smiled to himself as he thought about it.

Just then, he caught sight of his friend Ahmed entering the small enclosed cafe. Ahmed was a fellow science enthusiast and a willing partner in the scientific experiments that were conjured up in Abbas’s stuffy chemist shop. Today, however, he looked worried as he seated himself on the divan next to Abbas. Abbas cheerfully gave him the customary greeting but was unable to detect a corresponding upbeat tone from Ahmed. He was going to ask the reason for such gloomy perspective, but was pre-empted by the latter saying, “are you finally going to do it tomorrow?”

“Yes, the taaera is ready and the Hill of Abdul Rahman Al-Dakhel would be the perfect launch pad because the wind from the north-east would not shift direction for the next two days.” Abbas was pretty sure because he had been collecting wind data on the mountain for the last three years and the prognosis was credible for the wind.

“So you are pretty sure about it? But I am worried, Abbas, you could lose your life tomorrow,” Ahmed intoned. “Do you find that acceptable? It is one thing to lose money down the drain for nothing but to lose one’s life for it too! Isn’t that going too far in pursuit of science? Your wife is already very displeased by your prioritising your scientific endeavours over family needs.”

Abbas gulped down a guilty feeling but tried to make it look normal.

“It is up to Allah to decide when we die. As for me, Ahmed you know once I have put a thing in my mind, I cannot sit back until I see it through. Besides, I have a duty to find out the truth about the nature of things - and so have you, my dear friend.”

Ahmed looked unconvinced, his eyes narrowed but then relaxed and he eased back in his seat. Abbas had the funny feeling that his friend was silently pressurising him.

“Oh come on, you know I have checked and re-checked the apparatus and God-willing it will not fail me tomorrow. Let me tell you why I am so confident about it.”

Without further comment, he plunged into the details of his plan. The taaera would be taken up the mountain on a donkey cart. It would be launched from the level, south-west facing, headland of the Jabal Al-Dakhel overlooking the plain of the Guadalquivir. The wind would be blowing from the north-east and would both provide the lift and driving force to propel the craft forward in the direction of the river. The distance covered would be a thousand yards and hopefully the craft would land on the mai-dan, below the mountain. The area to be avoided would have to be the river because of the plethora of vegetation and orchards that lined the river banks.

“And how do you expect the taaera will perform? Is it a safe machine to fly?” Ahmed put the question to Abbas.

“The taaera is sturdy enough. It can hold up to a donkey-load of weight and not break because of the iron rod reinforcement fixed to the pole. The wings are fixed because otherwise I do not have the strength to keep my arms straight for the whole duration of the flight. The horizontal pole is six and a half feet long with the wings fastened to it at three points along its length. It forms a kite-shape that is set at an angle to the horizon because no matter how much I tried, I couldn't make the craft fly with fully horizontal wings.”

“It will be safe, my dear friend, as safe as riding a mule,” Abbas tried reassure him.

“More like riding a mindless mule to me,” Ahmed chuckled and put a hand on the other's shoulder. “I sincerely hope you know what you are doing. At least I believe that you do.”

Abbas was relieved. It was one thing to do something nearly suicidal against the best opinions of the world but it would have been a harder task to do this against the wishes of his best friend.

“Tomorrow I will be there with the carter. And on the mountain. But from then on, you are in God's hands.” Ahmed held his hands firmly before departing from the eating-house.

“Aren't we all...” Abbas could not help frowning as he watched his friend's back receding into the street crowd.

The Next Morning

In the morning, Ahmed came early with Hasan, the portly carter. Together the three men spent the entire morning in Abbas's back yard. First Abbas had to re-check the various parts of the taaera and then carefully wrap it in waterproof tent cloth. Each wing was five feet across, and the whole apparatus was delicate enough to be easily broken by a jab or an unintentional smash. Fragile though it was, it had to be carted through the narrow alleys of Cordoba and across the bridge to the Hill of Al-Dakhil.

As the strangely-shaped wrapped piece of flying apparatus was taken out of the house and carted to the outskirts of the city, a curious throng of idlers and some onlookers started a procession behind the cart. Abbas led the way on his horse, while the carter followed on foot beside the cargo. Last came Ahmed to stop anyone from damaging the fragile craft. The inquisitive ones could see the device was something to do with the recent rumours circulating the city, rumours that said Abbas ibn Firnas the Hakim was building a new machine - a flying bird without a soul - or was it that Abbas ibn Firnas was going to transform himself into one of the dreaded birdmen of the barbarian folk tales. Such rumors had been frowned on by those in authority, but told and re-told in the cosmopolitan cafes and bazaars of Cordoba.

"Please stay clear of the mast," Ahmed shouted impatiently to some nosy youngsters who were trying to reach out and touch the wrapped machine. "It will be shown at the maidan, so don't ruin it."

Hidden among the crowd was a trio of kids that were shyly following the others but at a distance from the cart. However their eager faces and sheepish glances at the 'Flying Thing' betrayed a fascination with the spectacle. They were going to the maidan to see 'a man turn into a bird and fly away...' Just the thought of it made them imagine things.

Fadl was the one leading the others. He was a slightly-built child with an air of a know-it-all, probably due to being the eldest among his siblings. His sister Amina was somewhat younger and shyly followed her brother's lead. Their neighbourhood friend, Minhas, was a reserved one, who followed them more out of a sense of loyalty than any curiosity about the Thing. In their mind, all three remembered the story told by Amina's mother whenever they behaved badly. It was about a mother who patiently looked after her naughty children but when one cold night, they really hurt her by being extraordinarily mischievous, she prayed to Allah to take her away from her unruly children. Allah turned her into a nightingale and she flew away, leaving the children without a mother to look after them.

It was a disquieting thought, but their young minds were reassured by the fact that their mother was not coming to see the spectacle. Besides, as Fadl reassured the other two, it was a man who was going to fly away and the Qadi (the judge) was going to be there to see that the man was not

doing anything against the law. Nobody would dare disobey the Qadi, who could make a giant-sized thief tremble like a scared donkey.

The crowd gathered momentum as the cart cleared the Great Bridge and headed towards the maidan. A way was cleared for the imposing retinue of the Qadi that passed by and headed towards Abbas. As they approached, some of the policemen turned back to restrain the crowd. The others stopped at a respectful distance behind the Qadi as the latter reined up his horse alongside the technologist.

“Peace be upon you, nephew,” said the Qadi, with stern eyes.

“And on you too, uncle,” Abbas replied. He had a funny feeling that this visit was no mere family meeting. They exchanged the customary phrases and then the Qadi could get down to business. “It is quite a risky thing that you attempt, my nephew. God forbid if you injure yourself trying to imitate birds - who are Allah’s lesser creation than you, a human being.”

“I have worked out all the possible scenarios, uncle, and I can assure you that they are most positive.”

“As you wish, however in the interest of keeping the crowd peaceful, the Caliph has ordered me to supervise the occasion. So I will be there if you have any need. I have sent word to your brother and he will be coming soon after his daily visit to the Royal Palace. Where would you land if you do fly?”

“This side of the river, uncle. I earnestly hope so. I think I must go now, for the wind on Al-Dakhil will not stay in this direction throughout the day.” Abbas could not help but be impatient, yet he had to be polite to his uncle, the Qadi of Cordoba.

“Go now son, and may Allah protect you and make you successful.” The Qadi turned away on his horse and rode back to re-join his escort. Meanwhile Abbas and his paraphernalia had reached the mountain and were now steadily climbing it on the narrow winding path that would reach the cliff-top. The climb was slow, steady and methodical. Every now and then, everyone would halt to catch their breath, pause and then the walk resumed.

It took them the better part of three hours to get to the top. By this time, the sun had risen high into the blue Andalusian sky. But the worst of its heat was made tolerable by the steady wind blowing down into the plains from the mountain. Down below, in the broad maidan, the crowd was getting bigger and more impatient. To ease the boredom, an enterprising duo had begun a mock wrestling match. Another pair started a game of chess, and a throng of people would alternately advise, ridicule and gleefully appreciate the moves made by each side to out-manoeuvre the other. Many of the town hawkers were on the spot to cash in on such a massive turnout. Even the water-carriers and sherbet-sellers were doing roaring business as the level of thirst matched the sun’s march across the heavens.

The Flight

When he reached the top of the mountain, Abbas could not help but feel satisfied. So far the taaera had been carried safely to its launch-spot without any extensive wear and tear. A few scratches, that were insignificant, were a small price to pay for the safe transportation and he rewarded the carter handsomely. Sure, there had been moments when he thought the whole thing would be thrown down the mountainside, but Hasan had been a most skilful driver and ably averted such a fate.

Ahmed had a short meal that he shared with the other two and then it was time to set up the taaera. The flat area extended right up to the edge of the cliff. It was almost thirty cubits long but only ten cubits wide. If pushed with sufficient speed and run off the cliff, the glider would have enough speed to catch the wind and hopefully keep flying.

Abbas strapped himself into the makeshift harness, and hesitated only for a fraction of a second before calling the others to push the glider. After all, he had been planning this for years, and had been slaving over the design and the prototype for months on end. If it achieved nothing else, it was still an achievement to have brought it here - prepped and ready.

The headlong movement of the glider gathered pace as Abbas and his two companions pushed the machine forward. Now they were speeding up, running to keep up with the taaera until just before the edge of the cliff, where the two companions released their grip. Abbas kept running for a few more micro-seconds until he felt the earth fall away from under his feet. Instinctively, he pulled up his legs and looked forward.

It was an awe-inspiring scene. The whole world seemed to open up to him with its dirt-brown expanse. There were verdant blotches here and there, and a gleaming thick line of glittering blue. "That would be the river", Abbas nodded and checked his status. The machine was performing as he had forecast. The wind was strong and steady and it was carrying the taaera at a slight angle to the horizontal. This meant that he would be touching down somewhere but not too soon. He could even outpace the maidan, but that would have to be avoided as much as possible, for the river was in flood just beyond the edge of the maidan and it would destroy his craft, and probably kill him too, on impact.

Suddenly the glider pitched uneasily, and Abbas had to use both hands to keep it as steady as possible. He had not thought of the strong cross-wind that would play havoc with the flight path. There was always something he had overlooked as he mentally prepared and practised the intended flight. But he could not anticipate everything in such an endeavour. Besides, he was too busy enjoying this new sense of freedom. Freedom from everything attached to solid earth. It was altogether a new feeling to be in the air, among the birds and the jinn, a feeling of being alone

and above everyone. So perhaps, had the Egyptian Pharaoh felt when he climbed up his purpose-built tower to reach God.

The glider was steadily drawing closer to the earth and already he could see the line of the river broaden into an ever-widening expanse of glittering blue. So focused was he on it that he forgot there was a crowd going wild with jubilation, tracking his every move from down below.

It had been a young boy who had shouted that the alchemist was flying. The cry brought every soul in the maidan to its feet and staring at the mountain to glimpse the spectacle. Abbas appeared as a black spot against the backdrop of the hill and seemed to be holding aloft on the wind; now pitching to this side, now to the other, to keep up with the strong wind. He was moving quickly enough and as the crowd traced his progress across the deep blue Spanish sky, he seemed to be moving not towards them, but over them towards the river.

Speedily the taaera raced forward, its pace dictated more by the wind than the man within and at just twenty feet above the bank, it crossed the river. A collective murmur of admiration spread through the crowd - turning quickly into a cry of horror as the craft seemed to struggle at the tree line on the opposite bank and then disappeared among the vegetation. People rushed to get back to the bridge to see what had happened, but the policemen blocked their access. The Qadi had a hard time to keep the crowd orderly, while he sent four troopers to see if Abbas was alright.

Shortly after, a man on horseback came speeding out of the city gates and rushed towards the site of Abbas's landing. He was Abbas's brother Abdullah, and he had been watching the spectacle from the Victory Gate. He soon joined the search party and after a brief while, found Abbas slumped on the ground in a small clearing. Abdullah was overjoyed to see that Abbas was breathing. However he had badly injured his back and could not turn over on his side. Abdullah administered him some medical aid, cleaned and hastily dressed his wound and made him sit up to drink some water to gather his strength. It was a while before the dazed flyer was himself again. He told them of his miraculous journey by air and how the wind had carried him beyond his intended landing spot. He was having difficulty breathing, so his brother bid the guards to make a temporary stretcher and carry the injured man to the Bimaristan.

The Recuperation

Abbas had to spend a month in hospital to make sure that his injuries were properly healed. Meanwhile his exploits were told and retold among Cordoba's cafes, shops, coffeehouses and hammams. He was given various titles, but the two that stuck were 'the birdman' and 'the flyer'. His wife came to look after him and he had to apologise to her, in spite of being in no way regretful about his experiment. But he could not bear to see her so sad and tearful.

His family came to visit. They were happy to see him alive. His uncle the Qadi informed him that the people were going crazy over the exploit and were petitioning to have Cordoba named as the

City of the Flyer. Abdullah told him that the Caliph had heard of the incident and would soon be sending the Royal Scientists to find out the details regarding the flying machine. The taaera itself was badly damaged and was being kept at the Royal Library for safe-keeping.

Ahmed also came and could not help but mildly scold his friend for being so foolish. "Next time, I'll be the one to fly and you will have to look after me instead. It will serve you right." However he too was placated when Abbas apologised for not taking him into confidence earlier so that he could have participated in constructing the taaera.

The most important visit was made by the Royal Scientists. They were the top authority on all sciences and all matters pertaining to knowledge. Being laid up for a month without having anything to do, Abbas had a lot of time to think over why his landing went so badly. He regretted not having further researched the matter and not having taken a second opinion from an expert. Having said as much to the Scientists, he knew he had given more importance to the 'Flying' aspect of the phenomenon than that of the 'Landing', and had paid for it with a smashed glider and an injured back. The scientists thoughtfully listened to the analysis and took notes. They promised to help Abbas financially, and to reconstruct the taaera and utilise it for further field testing.

Lastly, after having listened to the entire operation being comprehensively described for the second time by Abbas, they congratulated him on becoming the first man to be recorded as having flown in the air apart from birds and jinn. Then they solemnly departed. Abbas could not help feel that he had just opened the door to a whole new sphere of scientific endeavour that would benefit everyone. However the matter still required further study and demonstration and he hoped to do exactly this as soon as he could. The dream of flying like a Spanish hawk had come true.

Ambareen Syed (Author Biography)

Ambareen Syed has been writing historical and science fiction for the past 15 years. She has participated in and won other writing competitions in the past for her short stories. She is currently entering into the realm of children's fiction, as she has five children who demand daily stories. She lives in Mississauga, near Toronto, Canada, with her husband and children.

The Prince's Garden

by Ambareen Syed

The messenger boy ran down the long hallway of the Aljama Mosque, clutching his letter and flying past the tall marble pillars, the beautiful multi-colored arches, and the large golden lamps that hung above. He ignored the noise of hammering and pounding that filled the mosque, even though he knew they signalled that prayers were now over.

Dozens of laborers and architects worked meticulously to ensure that the new expansion would be the mosque's finest, in line with Caliph Abdul-Hakam II's orders. Although there were plenty of spectacular buildings in Al-Andalus, the Caliph had promised that when renovations were completed, the Aljama Mosque would enrich the beauty and splendor that was the city of Medinat Azahara', and would be the greatest jewel in the Caliph's crown.

The boy's slippers slapped against the cool marble floor, and slowed as he reached the main prayer hall, where the men of the city had just finished gathering for the noon prayers. He caught his breath and scanned the rows of men getting up and leaving, looking for one in particular. A younger man wearing a white turban and white robes with a blue stripe along the collar was walking steadily towards the courtyard, head down and deep in contemplation. He stroked his short beard, still jet black, unlike many of the men in his company, and didn't hear his name being called until the boy came closer.

"Sheikh Al-Zahrawi!" The man lifted his head and turned in the direction of the messenger boy.

"Yes, what is it, my son?"

"A letter for you from Tulaytulah!"

"From Tulaytulah? Ibn Ahmad responds most promptly!" he replied, taking the letter.

"Also, His Highness requests your presence in the Royal Chamber, Sheikh."

"Return, and inform him that I will join him after the 'Asr prayers."

The boy hesitated. "But Doctor...he requests your presence before the qaylula nap for the afternoon."

Al-Zahrawi gave him a stern look, and seeing the boy's eyes widen, relaxed his face into a smile.

"Yes, very well then, tell him I will come immediately. Thank you, my son."

The boy nodded and kissed the man's hand, before turning and running back in the same direction he had come. Al-Zahrawi sighed and rubbed his tired eyes. He had spent the morning after pre-dawn prayers meticulously drawing some of his latest medical instruments, most notably the tooth extractor device. It was one of his earliest invented instruments, and was long overdue to be illustrated and the process of tooth extraction described in his personal notes. He

was looking forward to going home and taking the afternoon nap, but he knew he could not ignore the command of the Caliph when it came.

Al-Zahrawi slowly walked back to the Royal Residence while reading the letter that had just arrived. It was from his friend and colleague, Maslamah Ibn Ahmad al-Majriti, a brilliant astronomer, chemist, mathematician, economist and scholar. He was the Court Astrologer in Cordoba, and they often shared their expertise with each other, broadening their scope in their own fields as a result. For now, however, he was visiting Toledo, and had written to him about an important thought that had struck him.

“My Dear Abu al-Qasim, May God’s Peace be upon you! I pray that the Almighty elevates you in this life and the next. We have received news from Baghdad, surely you must have heard of the murder of Al-Mutanabbi a few weeks prior. Such a loss! The world of poetry has died with him in this year of 965. There are gatherings being held here to remember his works and his name is on the lips of many in Tulaytulah. To God we belong, and to Him we return.

On another note, in this city of light and learning, I have had the opportunity to converse with many scholars from different backgrounds and specialties. In the field of medicine, however, none can rival your understanding and skill. I behoove you to begin inscribing your knowledge in a book, one that can benefit not only Cordoba, but also all of Al-Andalus, and perhaps even beyond.

I understand that you are a practical doctor, preferring to treat patients, yet sometimes academics are necessary to spread the benefit of one’s God-given abilities. Nay, I would say in your case it would be an obligatory duty to both the Creator and the created! May God bless the Prophet and send peace and blessings upon him. Your Friend, Ibn Ahmad.”

Al-Zahrawi entered the Royal Residence, folded up the letter and placed it in his pocket, mulling its contents. Al-Majriti was correct in his analysis: writing pages upon pages and spending even more time making illustrations was not what he wanted to do as a physician. Although he enjoyed designing and implementing new surgical instruments, he did not like the idea of spending hours hunched over a desk instead of helping actual patients. Yet, he was duty-bound to share his knowledge for the benefit of others.

He prayed a silent prayer for guidance in the issue and was lost in thought. He did not have much time to ponder, however, as hearing panicked screams from the Royal Chamber made his heart pound and his steps quicken.

Upon reaching the Reception Hall, the guard at the entrance announced loudly, “Here enters Abu al-Qasim Khalaf ibn al-Abbas Al-Zahrawi, Physician, in the Court of the Honorable Caliph Abdul-Hakam the second!” A murmur arose in the crowd that had been standing in the Hall, with many Court members and even the Vizier previously at a loss on what to do about the screams coming from the Royal Chamber. With the arrival of the doctor, they parted and thankfully let him through. The same messenger boy from the noon’s encounter emerged

running from the direction of the Chamber, and forgetting all protocol, grabbed Al-Zahrawi's hand and pulled him urgently towards the room.

Entering the Chamber, he found the Caliph hunched over a moaning figure on a gilded chair, a pool of blood seeping out slowly onto the ground. It was the Caliph's wife, Subh, and she was pregnant with their first child. She occasionally let out a loud shriek as a spasm of pain filled her belly, while midwives and servants milled around her, trying desperately to stem the flow of blood from beneath her clothing, bringing in water, mopping her forehead with cloths, and attempting to clean up the bloody floor.

Al-Zahrawi did not waste any time. "Peace be upon you, Caliph! Please order these extra servants out of the room, except for the few most strong-hearted and experienced with midwifery. I need them to carry your wife up onto the bed immediately!"

Caliph Al-Hakam did what the physician ordered, and, visibly shaken, moved to the side of the room. Al-Zahrawi looked over the gasping woman, and knew that this would involve an invasive surgical procedure, something he was not sure would be approved of without consent.

"Honorable Lady, do you give me your consent to examine and treat yourself and your baby?"

Subh nodded faintly, unable to speak. Al-Zahrawi looked to the Caliph to confirm his approval. The Caliph nodded tersely, and continued pacing between the two corners of the room. Al-Zahrawi also knew that he could not work with a nervous husband in the room.

"O Leader of the Faithful, I kindly request that you..." he hesitated, not knowing how it may seem to give orders to the Caliph. "Please step outside, for some air, and to calm your nerves...as well as to give some privacy to the patient."

The Caliph stopped pacing and stared at the surgeon. His gaze was met steadily by Al-Zahrawi's calm and serious expression. Abdul-Hakam relented, and strode out of the room.

As soon as he exited, Al-Zahrawi called for his set of tools he kept in the palace, and calmly called out orders of things he needed.

"Towels!"

"I need my box of solutions from the Throne Room!"

"Place these tools in a tray and pour this wine over it."

"I need two bowls of clean warm water. Hurry!"

The maidservants scurried about following orders, while Al-Zahrawi worked feverishly to save mother and baby. The time for the afternoon prayers came, and the intense sounds of childbirth mingled with the call to prayer. The Vizier requested the Imam of Aljama Mosque to request the congregation to pray for the Caliph's wife, and the crowds in the Reception Hall swelled with people.

After what seemed like hours, an exhausted Al-Zahrawi emerged and requested the Caliph.

"He is in The Prince's Garden, Doctor," informed the Vizier.

Al-Zahrawi mopped his brow. "Please ensure the patient is not disturbed – she needs her maximum strength for healing." After further instructing the head midwife about the details of patient care, he offered his afternoon prayers and then made his way up to the private garden in the Royal Residence.

The Caliph was at the balcony, looking out over the slowly spreading dusk, and turned slightly when the doctor entered the room. "Is she alive?" he asked wearily, before turning back to look at the horizon.

"Yes, Your Highness. She required extensive stitching, and I have used catgut for this purpose, as it is the only thing that can dissolve within the body without any negative effects." Al-Zahrawi folded his hands and waited respectfully at the gate to the balcony.

"Is this something new, O Abu al-Qasim?"

"Yes, indeed. Or rather, using catgut for suturing is something I have discovered, and I tested it just last week with excellent results."

"And...the baby?"

"Your son is alive. I was able to deliver him safely with a new instrument I have invented called forceps." Al-Zahrawi smiled. "He has come a little early, but he is healthy and well!"

The Caliph breathed a sigh of relief, "Praise be to God!" He turned around and motioned for the doctor to join him at the balcony, and placed his hand on his shoulder. "We are truly blessed to have you in our city! I command you to write a book of medicine for the benefit of our people. Indeed, my entire library, despite being over 400,000 books, is empty without your knowledge!"

Al-Zahrawi paused. He had hundreds of drawings and notes, but most were scattered around the house and randomly ordered. To properly collect, write down, illustrate and organise all of his knowledge and research would be a massive undertaking, something which could take years.

"You hesitate over the orders of your Caliph?" inquired Al-Hakam firmly, reading the conflicted thoughts on his face.

Al-Zahrawi caught the tone in the Caliph's voice, and looked up quickly, "No, O Honorable One, I accept your orders without question. I....just, well, I don't know how I can undertake such a heavy task while at the same time treating patients. I have many poor people who come to my door seeking treatment at odd times, not to mention seeing members of the Court, as well as those at my regular clinic in the city. How shall I balance all this while fulfilling this necessary and honorable task?"

The Caliph nodded. "It is indeed a great responsibility that the Almighty has placed upon your shoulders. But you are young, only a year less than thirty, and many a wise men have spent their lives compiling such knowledge, releasing it to the world before their departure to God Most High."

Al-Zahrawi nodded and was silent. He watched the brilliant colors make their way across the wide sky, and the outline of the mountains in the distance. The city was behind them, and The

Prince's Garden overlooked the vast plains ahead. It was a stunning sight, fit for a prince, to be sure.

The Caliph cleared his throat. "What is this about a letter from Tulaytulah?"

Al-Zahrawi smiled thinly, "You know about my letter, O Honorable One?"

"Not much escapes my attention, dear Doctor! Are the viziers in other palaces attempting to woo the son of our great city?" The Caliph's eyes glittered cleverly.

The Doctor smiled. "I am a Zahrawi, born in Madinat Azahara', not a Tulaytili! But the letter was from Al-Majriti, exhorting me to undertake the very task that you have commanded me."

"Well then, it seems as though God has settled your fate!" The Caliph thought a moment, and then added, "However, to assist in this, and to make sure those viziers do not steal you away, I will build a grand clinic for you within the Court's administration area, where you can have as many supplies as you need, where both the poor and rich can come to you and be healed."

Al-Zahrawi turned to the Caliph, startled. "You are most generous, O Caliph!"

The Caliph smiled and held up his hand. "No wait, there is more. You have saved the life of my wife and the heir to the throne. That is the least I can do for you. In addition, I will appoint a handsome salary for you, a residence for you and your family near the Royal Residence, and make you my official Court Physician."

He turned and gazed intently at the Doctor. "And, you will have a fixed time every day where you shall not be disturbed, so that you may work on your book."

Al-Zahrawi was stunned into silence. He stared at the vast landscape ahead, his mind reeling at this incredible opportunity, unable to absorb it all at once.

"What say you, O Abu al-Qasim?"

Al-Zahrawi knew that God had answered his prayers for guidance. The path ahead of him shone as brightly as the white moon rising steadily above the plains. He turned and kissed the Caliph's hand, and yet the words would not come to his lips.

The Caliph smiled and nodded. "You may linger here in the Garden, Doctor. May God bring great benefit to this world through you!" He turned and left, leaving Al-Zahrawi to his thoughts about the future.

Al-Zahrawi finished his thirty-volume encyclopedia of medicine called *Kitab al-Tasrif* in the year 1000. It had information gathered during a career that spanned almost 50 years of training, practice and teaching. *Al-Tasrif* actively shaped the discourse and practice of surgical procedures up until the Renaissance, and many practices and instruments are still used today. Al-Zahrawi is considered as the Father of Modern Surgery.

Aban Mulla (Author Biography)

Aban Mulla wrote his stories at the age of 13, fulfilling an ambition of his to be an author. He studies at Madani High School in Leicester, where he also attends the Madrasah (Islamic Education) classes and is currently studying to memorise the holy Quran. In his spare time he is a keen football supporter and also enjoys playing badminton with his two older brothers.

Flight: Inspired by the work of Abbas

ibn Firnas

By Aban Mulla

The Beginning

Abbas ibn Firnas stared out of the window. His teacher, Mrs Carole, was rambling on about the Tudors and Abbas, like the rest of his class, were not interested. Of course, Mrs Carole had no idea about this. Abbas was 10 years old and in his last year in primary school. He had moved over from Africa with his mother, and they were now living in a two-bedroom flat in Birmingham. His mother had never had to go out to work back home in Africa, but since coming to England, she found that unless she worked, they would struggle to make ends meet. This was very stressful for her but she always kept it to herself and wouldn't tell Abbas, but he had guessed what was troubling her. Abbas's father had not been there through his childhood, he had left shortly after Abbas was born. Abbas shook his head and got his mind back into the lesson. Mrs Carole was now giving everyone the task for the day, just as the bell rang for end of lesson. They wrote the task in the exercise books for homework, and the children ran out of the classroom, it being the end of the school day.

Abbas trudged out of the room; he felt he had nothing to look forward to, just dinner, TV and then bed. Abbas loved his mum, but these past few days she'd been very troubled. As he entered the building, he used the lift to go to the sixth floor where their flat was. His mum was there cooking vegetables and boiling a soup. He threw his bag into the corner, and slumped onto the sofa and switched on the TV. TV did not excite him, it was just a pastime. His mum didn't ask the usual "how was school" or anything of the sort, she called him roughly for dinner and they sat and ate in silence. Abbas didn't like the food, but he had given up asking his mum to cook anything different, he just ate it silently. He would constantly remember the days in Africa where his mum would cook huge portions of chicken in the evening, and they would laugh and play together in the park after school. She used to come and pick him up, and they would race to get home first. Those childhood times were fun and exciting. Abbas missed those times.

So time went on, Abbas lived in Birmingham with his mother but times started to get worse. His mother was acting more strangely than ever before, and was looking worse. She wouldn't speak properly, nor move properly and would argue every other day. Abbas offered to help in whichever way possible, but this just enraged her. Abbas still didn't understand. He didn't want to go school, tried to say he was ill so he could stay home and look after his mother, but she didn't understand

this; and Abbas was forced to go school and worry constantly for the health of his mum. Abbas couldn't think of losing his mother, the thought of it just brought tears to his eyes. But one day Abbas's life changed forever. He was called out of lessons and was told his mum was seriously ill and in hospital. Abbas was extremely scared and as he was driven to the hospital he prayed there was nothing wrong, hoping she was all right. He entered the ward, and his mum was lying on her bed pale-faced but asleep. Her hand was limp on the bed's edge, and his uncle, her brother, was sitting on a chair beside her. Abbas dropped his bag but couldn't move for a moment. He walked over silently, every footstep in time with the pounding of his heart.

"Mum?" he whispered. "Are you ok?" He tried to sound normal, like nothing was happening.

"Uncle? Is she going to be ok?" he whispered silently. "No son, she's been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. There's no hope left, the doctors say there's no found cure," he replied, in the most comforting way possible.

Abbas's heart's pounding was silenced, his brain stopped thinking, this could not be true. "W-w-what?" He felt light-headed, and more than just tears swelled up in his eyes. He felt he could cry forever, for the rest of his life, he didn't want to be moved, didn't want to be told he couldn't see his mum's smiling face ever again. He shouted out in suffering, in agony, the reality was too harsh to understand. He felt heartbroken and petrified, he felt stabbed and the feeling inside was gut-wrenching.

"It'll be ok son, I'm here for you." His uncle patted Abbas gently on the shoulder; he was now also crying hot, beady tears. His sister had been there for him, from early childhood. She would play with him, comfort him, and she had been always by his side. He couldn't have asked for a better sister.

"A-a-bbas? Abbas?" His mum was awake, but only just.

"Yes?" Abbas talked as gently as he could.

"Oh Abbas, I'm so sorry, so sorry for the ways I've been treating you, please, please forgive me. Just promise me one thing: you will follow your dream, and reach for the stars. I love you Abbas." And the last breath escaped from her lips.

Abbas sobbed harder than ever over his mother's dead body, and whispered, "I promise, I promise, please mum don't go, don't go where I can't follow."

Abbas cried violently, and wouldn't let go of his mother's hands. He felt them go cold as he was pulled away. His uncle consoled him with comforting words, but Abbas wasn't listening. His head was buzzing in confusion. His mother had just died.

Abbas turned away as the coffin was dropped six feet under. He loved his mother, more than he loved himself, more than anything in the world. And every day after school Abbas would visit his mother's grave and pray endlessly for her body to be at peace. Abbas was bewildered, his grades dropped, and he didn't know what to do with his life. He went and stayed with his uncle, but he was not nearly as nice as his mum.

The Bird

Abbas then started to hate school, he wouldn't talk to his friends, wouldn't speak in lessons, and going back home would just be depressing. He hated living with his uncle and his family; the food was not as nice as his mum's and his cousins were not at all welcoming. He felt like an unwanted child, an unwanted son. Remembering his cheerful mother was a knife that had been pierced through his body, a scar that would remain with him for life. The pain of his mum leaving was unbearable, like it was just... not fair. During his school days, Abbas became fascinated by birds and the way they fly. He wished he could copy, but he knew it was not possible. He would sit and watch them fly high in the sky; the way they glide, rise and drop just amazed him.

One day when on his way home he stood watching a bird fly among the trees. It soared through every branch, rising and ducking, but suddenly it clipped its wing against a sharp branch, and came tumbling down onto the hard ground. The bird looked hurt and its wing was in a awkward position, but he could see it was still alive. As all the other kids laughed, Abbas went over and picked up the helpless bird. It was still flapping and twitching one wing as he bent down to lift it up as kindly as possible. Abbas felt warmth in his hands as he stroked the bird to calm it, and then he rushed to the vet. He visited the vet every day – before and after school, and spent hours watching as the doctor cared lovingly for the injured bird, coaxing it to drink a little water, and eventually tenderly fixed her a splint which amazingly helped the bird recover fully. Abbas and the vet took the bird out into the garden almost a week after it had been injured, and watched as it flew off into the morning sky. Abbas smiled in satisfaction.

A few months passed by, and Abbas was back into his normal routines at school and home, and again the feeling of loneliness and anger came back. He felt angry as he lay awake in bed, he wasn't angry at anyone or anything, just at the fact of being an orphan. Why him? he thought angrily. Did he do something wrong? Was he not kind enough to his mother? Was he supposed to have helped his mum get well? Was it HIS fault she died? All these horrible thought swirled round in his head as he tried to get to sleep. He knew he had to push them away, if he wanted any sleep that night.

Abbas was on the verge of dropping off when he heard the flapping of wings settle beside his window. He got up and saw a bird – he was sure it was the same bird he had helped to recover – it looked like it was smiling at him from the window ledge! Abbas didn't know what else to do but to smile back. The bird looked like she was saying thank you, and Abbas slid the window open so the bird jumped onto Abbas's lap. Abbas laughed at this, and stroked the soft feathered head, and tickled her beak. The bird squeaked happily, jumped back onto the window sill, and took off into flight towards the starry night sky. Abbas had always believed one of the stars was his mother; he used to lie in bed staring up at the sky and believing that the twinkling one was his mother looking down upon him, watching him from above. He watched as the bird flew into the sky,

higher and higher until it went out of sight – and that’s when he realised, he knew what he had to do – he too would fly, fly high into the sky, up to the stars, so he would one day reach his mother. He would fly up to her like a bird, and he would hug his mother one more time. That was his dream. A dream that he knew he had to achieve.

Reach for the Stars

Abbas was now 18 years old, and at University studying mechanics and engineering. He had attained average grades in his GCSEs but had excelled in his 'A' levels during college. He had a passion, though, for learning about birds, their anatomy, and their lives. The more he studied about birds, the more he would be fascinated by them. He would study them all day long, and he would be constantly learning new things, about the wings, the structure, and their flight. It was all just miraculous. During his spare time, Abbas would love to make wooden sculptures of birds; he would draw sketches of birds, and would make mechanical structures of how birds fly. Abbas was totally immersed in his studies about birds, but he never forgot about his mother, and he would pray for her, just as she would always pray for him as his mother many years ago. Abbas hadn't forgotten about his childhood dream about flying like a bird, and when he looked back at it, he would smile to himself. Abbas had moved out of his uncle's house, and was living in Manchester in a small apartment, where he could concentrate on his studies and was fairly close to his university.

Abbas was sitting in his apartment, reading a book while watching a documentary on TV. A storm was thundering outside, thrashing against the window, and the wind howled among the rustling trees. Birds were rushing into their nests, and the leaves of the trees were shelter. The storm grew louder and louder and now he could hear the pattering of hailstones hitting the concrete ground. All of a sudden, a pane of glass shattered as a bird came crashing through, stunned, yet alive. Abbas rushed over to the bird, picked it up, and gently patted the flapping wings, and stroked the terrified animal. He nailed a strong piece of wood to the window, and tended to the bird which was now just sitting on the floor, eating a few rice grains. Abbas waited till the rain stopped, and he saw that the bird had recovered. He took the bird out into the garden and tickled the bird goodbye. The bird gave him a little sharp-clawed squeeze on his thumb. Abbas felt this to be not a coincidence, but fate. He knew he had to concentrate on his studies and ensure he accomplished his dream. He was going to fashion himself a pair of wings.

Abbas threw himself into his work after this incident. He rented out a small garage from his next door neighbour, and collected all his materials. He made very precise plans, and after finalizing the end product, he set to work. It was clear in his mind what he was going to do. He worked on his 'human wings' for about 3 months, morning, noon and night. He made changes, bought new materials and built a small prototype. He was happy with it. He started on the huge product, first measuring his own arm length, and then multiplying that a few times to come up with the right

size and measurements. He was inspired by the huge wings of the eagle, and modified his wings in accordance to that. After finally making a set of metal and wooden wings, Abbas picked it up and gave it a few knocks, to test the strength and weight. To his horror, the structure cracked apart in his hands. The construction was not strong enough. This disheartened Abbas, but by planning a new model, bigger and with better materials, Abbas actually learnt from his mistake and constructed a better model. This also took him a few months, but by knowing what to do, he felt pleased with his handiwork. After finally building his perfect model, he decorated it in the colour of an eagle. Abbas stood back and smiled at his achievement. He felt excited, but he had to make a few tests, testing the strength, weight, and if it would actually support his body. It passed all the tests, and Abbas thought he was finally ready for flight.

Human Flight

Before even considering putting the wings to flight, Abbas made a clear plan. He listed all the possibilities of where he could go wrong. Abbas felt very strongly about this, and didn't want to be too hasty. He called up his uncle, and told him everything he was planning on doing, and what he was about to do. His uncle laughed at him and said in a stern voice "Abbas, do not do anything stupid, and do not toss away your life like that." He said this in a firm way. But Abbas laughed and replied, "Don't worry uncle, nothing will go wrong, this is my destiny..." and he hung up the phone.

Uplifted by this little conflict with his uncle, Abbas got up on the morning of the last Friday of September, feeling more than excited. He had bubbles popping in his belly, but a small part of him was also a bit worried. Was he being a bit too hasty? A test he had done wrong? All these thoughts swirled round his head as he scoffed down breakfast in his apartment. He had made the arrangements to go to the nearby countryside, where he knew of a great hill, not too high, but neither too low. He walked over to the garage where his wings were sitting under a sheet of cloth, ready. Abbas placed them in a trailer, handling them with extra-special care. The weather was bitterly cold and the sky was grey with clouds as Abbas drove to the countryside, and carefully walked to the top of the hill.

As he looked out at the busy city below him, he strapped the wings to his arms, and looked up into the sky. "Mum, I love you." And he took one last deep breath, and took a running jump off the edge of the hill. The strength of the wind smacked him in the face, the icy cold wind scratched his eyes and mouth. His heart pounded hard against his chest as he soared over the green grass of the countryside below him. Abbas could feel himself slowing losing height, but just the feeling of this flight was truly spectacular and magnificent. He truly felt like a bird. Abbas tilted slightly to the side, and avoided hitting a tree. Now he was really close to the ground, but was coming in too fast. He knew this was going to injure him. The flight had been largely successful, but the landing was bad. He closed his eyes as he hit the ground hard, and he felt a

bone crack under him. As he lost consciousness, he could see a few people running towards him. He felt soft hands lift him up, but he couldn't stop smiling. He had accomplished his dream, he saw his mum walking towards him smiling, and with her arms outstretched ready to envelop him and hold him forever – and that was exactly where Abbas wanted to be.