

*THE SHORT STORIES OF ZAKARIA TAMER*

“My weapon is unique – you cannot put a price to it,” said the scholar.

The king frowned and said harshly: “Say what you desire without beating around the bush. I know very well that those who come to me have nothing in mind but robbing my treasury.”

“I do not want money.” said the scholar.

“Then what do you want?” asked the king furiously. “Do you want my crown?”

“I offer my weapon at no cost. All I want is to save Damascus from her enemies.”

The king laughed gleefully and addressed his ministers, wise men, and aides who were surrounding him: “What do you say to what you have heard?”

A man with a long beard spoke first, saying in a tremulous voice: “It is heresy and apostasy for man to imitate God’s creation and defy His will. The bird flies because God created him to fly and gave him two wings. But man must not fly. The heavens belong to the angels and the birds. God created man to walk upon the earth, and the Earth he must continue to walk until Judgment Day. If God had intended man to reach the heavens, he would have given him wings.” Then the bearded man pointed at the scholar, his finger trembling with rage: “This is no scholar. He is the Devil in disguise! He wants to tempt us and lead us astray from our religion.”

“But it is God,” the scholar said, “who created my intellect that invented the flying machine.”

The bearded man did not deny the scholar’s words, but turned to the people around him, then wondered aloud: “If the Devil leads us to victory over our enemies, will we not have gained the world and lost our religion? Is there one among us who would reject religion in favour of an ephemeral world that cannot endure?”

A chorus of voices rose up rejecting this ephemeral world.

The commander of the soldiers then said: “Our forefathers, and our forefathers’ forefathers fought thousands of battles, as you know, and came out victorious in all of them. Their weapons were the sword and fine morals. This new weapon does not befit our values; it is foul perfidy devoid of the valour and boldness of men and goes against our customs and traditions. What would be left of us if we abandoned our customs and traditions? If we truly want to survive, we must cling to our heritage and follow its guidance.”