



In the Dragon's Claws: The Story of Rostam and Esfandiyar from the Persian Book of Kings

Abolqasem Ferdowsi, Jerome W. Clinton (translator)

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The story of Rostam and Esfandiyar is one of the most moving tragedies in Ferdowsi's epic *Shahnameh*. In this story, Esfandiyar, the designated heir to the throne of Iran, has just returned in triumph from his campaign against the shah of Turan. He has slain Arjasp, Iran's greatest enemy, captured his family and treasury, and liberated his own sisters from their captivity. He expects that his father, Goshtasp, will now abdicate the throne of Iran in his favor, as he had sworn to. Goshtasp, however, is not yet ready to honor his promise. Instead he sets his son yet another task as a condition of his abdication. He must bring Iran's greatest hero, Rostam, back to the court in chains. For Rostam has neither come to court to honor Goshtasp nor sent him a letter declaring loyalty. Esfandiyar recognizes this task as simply a way to put his own life at risk, and says as much. Yet he cannot refuse his father's command. The story of Rostam and Esfandiyar displays a surprisingly modern skepticism about the values typically associated with Ferdowsi's epic. It expresses a profound ambivalence about the demands of heroism, and is sharply critical of a monarch who exploits the courage and loyalty of his heroes to further his own selfish ends.

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