

## The Seven Stages of Isfandiyar (Shahnameh)

The *Shahnameh* tells the story of the young hero Isfandiyar, who set out with his army to rescue his two sisters from captivity at the Brazen Hold, the prison of his enemy King Arjasp of Turan. Each day Isfandiyar left his army at camp and went forth alone to face a number of trials. On the first day, he fought a pair of rhinoceros, each as large as an elephant. At dawn on the second day, he killed a lion and lioness with his sword. Warned of a fire-breathing dragon on the third day, Isfandiyar and his troops worked through the night to build a chariot bristling with sword blades. The dragon, swooping down over the camp at dawn, swallowed the chariot with Isfandiyar at its helm. The dragon lost much blood from the blades, and the hero was able to cut himself free and kill the monstrous beast. The next day, an evil witch disguised herself as a beautiful girl, to ensnare the hero. Isfandiyar, not fooled by her appearance, encircled her in a steel chain and slew the witch. The fifth day brought a simurgh, a huge bird born of fire with feathers of many colours. Like the dragon before, the simurgh was entranced by the chariot of swords, and tried to pick it up in its claws - but was instead pierced a hundred times by the blades. Isfandiyar delivered the final blow. The hero's last two trials were a dreadful snow blizzard, and an arid wilderness of dust, sand, and intolerable heat. Struggling through the terrible terrain, Isfandiyar and his army eventually reach the Brazen Hold. Setting a cunning trap, Isfandiyar slew his enemy King Arjasp, and rescued his sisters – every night of the trials giving thanks to God for his success and their eventual safe return.