Sam, Zal, and the Simurgh (Shahnameh)

One of the most famous accounts from the *Shahnameh* tells the story of Sam, Zal, and the Simurgh. Sam was a hero and ruler of ancient Persia. He had no children, and lamented his misfortune. He hoped that a beautiful woman he favoured at court would bear him a child and, soon enough, she indeed gave birth to a son. But the boy, Zal, was born with white hair - Sam thought this a sign of ill fortune and was grief stricken. Zal was banished to a mountainous land far away which was home to a simurgh – an immense bird with feathers of rainbow colours. One day, the simurgh was flying high overhead, looking for food for her chicks. Catching sight of Zal, she picked him up in her claws, and took him to her nest. Taking pity on his weeping face, the simurgh fed him the finest food, until Zal was a strong and vigorous young man. Soon, news of this glorious youth reached Sam’s court. Overcome with shame at rejecting his son, Sam set out for the mountains to bring Zal home. With a mother’s breaking heart, the simurgh released Zal, giving him three magical feathers that he should burn to call her if he ever needed help. Zal returned with Sam to his father’s kingdom, where the people rejoiced in celebration.