

from the **Shah-nama**
Firdawsi

from **Rustam and Suhrab**

translated by Arthur and Edmund Warner

Historical Context: *Shah* comes from the Persian word *sāh*, which means rule. *Shah* is the title of any of the former rulers of Iran.

The following excerpt from the *Shah-nama* tells the story of the tragic meeting between Rustam, a famous Persian warrior with incredible strength, and his son, Suhrab. Prior to the meeting, Rustam had been unaware of his son's existence. However, Suhrab's mother had revealed to him the identity of his father. Knowing of his father's reputation as the finest warrior in the Persian army, Suhrab devised a plan that he hoped would enable him to meet Rustam. Joining the Turkmans, a people from an area east of the Caspian Sea, in a war against the Persians, Suhrab desired to meet his father in battle and to reveal his identity to him. Suhrab challenged the Persians to send a warrior to meet him in single combat, expecting them to send his father. As it turns out, Rustam is the warrior who comes to meet Suhrab. Yet, because Rustam wears unmarked armor and refuses to reveal his identity, Suhrab is uncertain whether the Persian warrior is, indeed, his father.

The bright sun shone, the raven night flew low,
Great Rustam donned his tiger-skin cuirass¹
And mounted on his fiery dragon-steed.
Two leagues divided host from host, and all
Stood ready-armed. The hero with a casque²
Of iron on his head came on the field.
Suhrab on his side reveling with comrades
Had thus addressed Human:³ "That lion-man,
Who striveth with me, is as tall as I am
And hath a dauntless heart. He favoereth me
In shoulder, breast, and arm, and thou wouldst say
That some skilled workman laid us out by line.

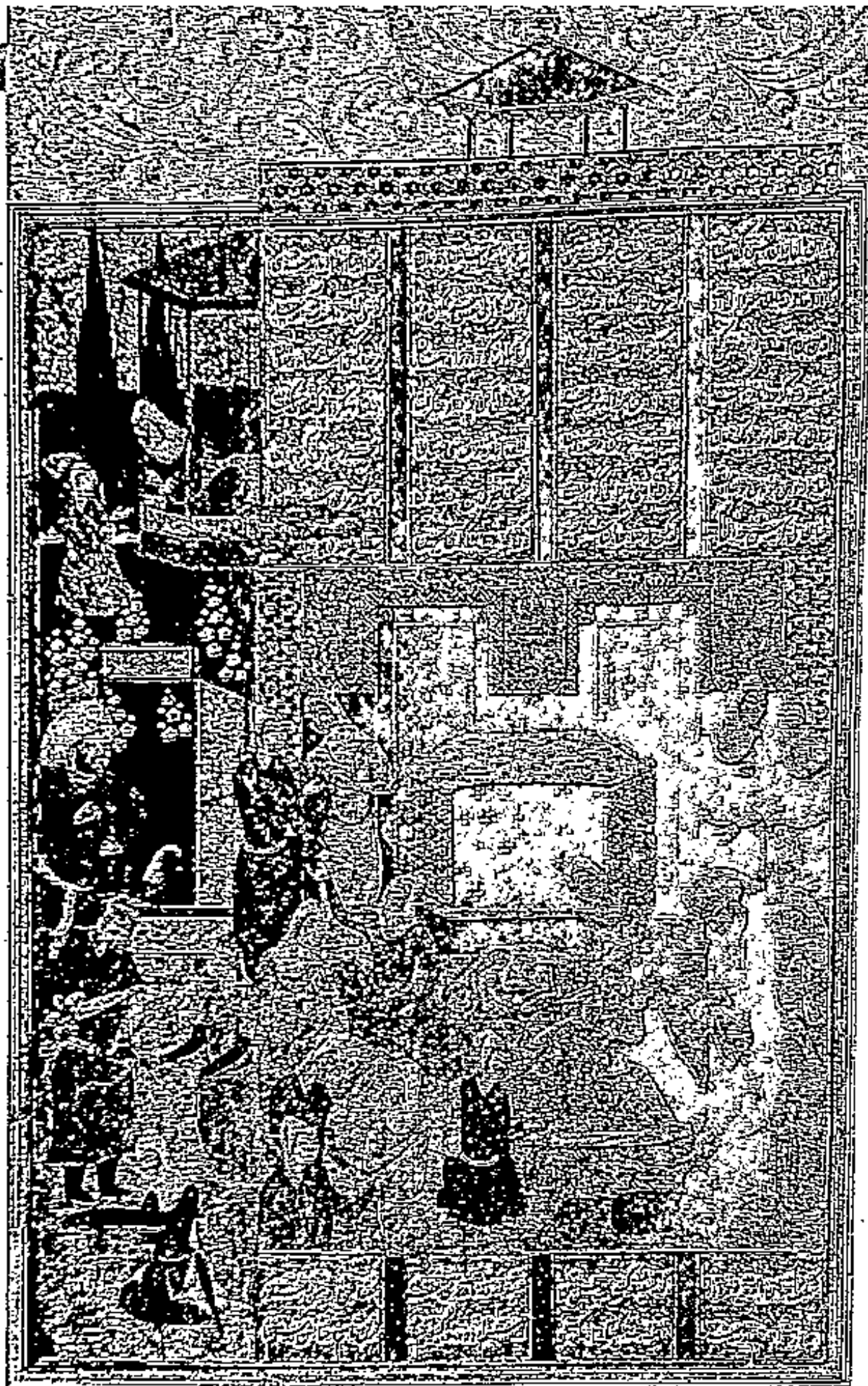
Literary Context: The battle that is about to take place is just one of the vast number of episodes in Firdawsi's monumental epic poem. This episodic organization is a common feature of epic poetry.

1. cuirass (kwi ras') n.: A piece of closefitting armor for protecting the breast and back.

2. casque (kask) n.: A helmet.

3. Human (hoo' mǎn): Suhrab's friend and fellow warrior.

BIRTH OF RUSTAM
The Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York



Suhrab

His very feet and stirrups move my love
And make me blush, for I perceive in him
15 The marks whereof my mother spake. Moreover
My heart presageth⁴ that he must be Rustam,
For few resemble him. I may not challenge

4. presageth (pri sā' ith) v. Foretells; predicts.

Narrator

Suhrab
Human

My sire or lightly meet him in the combat."
Human said: "Rustam oft hath countered me:
This charger is like his, except in action."

At sunrise, when they woke, Suhrab arrayed
Himself in mail and, mirthful though resolved,
Set forward shouting, ox-head mace⁵ in hand.
He greeted Rustam smiling, thou hadst said
That they had passed the night in company:
How went the night? How is't with thee today?
Why so intent on strife? Fling down thine arrows
And scimitar,⁶ and drop the hand of wrong.
Let us dismount and, sitting, clear our faces
With wine, and, leaguings in God's sight, repent
Our former strife. Until some other cometh
To battle, feast with me because I love thee,
And weep for shamefastness. In sooth thou comest
From heroes and wilt tell me of thy stock,
For as my foe thou shouldst not hide thy name.
Art thou the famous Rustam of Zabul,
The son of valiant Zal the son of Sam?"

Suhrab

Then Rustam: "Young aspirant! heretofore
We talked not thus but spake last night of wrestling.
I am not to be gulled, attempt it not.
Though thou art young I am no child myself,
But girt to wrestle, and the end shall be
According to the will of Providence.
I have known ups and downs and am not one
To practice guile upon."

Rustam

Suhrab

Suhrab replied:
"Old man! if thou rejectest my proposals . . . !
I wished that thou shouldst die upon thy bed,
And that thy kin should tomb thy soulless corpse,
But I will end thee if it be God's will."

Narrator

They lighted, tied their chargers to a rock,
And cautiously advanced in mail and casque
With troubled hearts. They wrestled like two lions
Until their bodies ran with sweat and blood.
From sunrise till the shadows grew they strove
Until Suhrab, that maddened elephant,
Reached out, up-leaping with a lion's spring,
Caught Rustam's girdle, tugged amain as though,
Thou wouldst have said, to rend the earth, and shouting

Historical Context: The type of one-on-one fighting in which the two warriors are about to engage occurred frequently in early wars, such as the one involving the Persians and the Turkmans.

Cultural Context: In this episode Firdawsi depicts the ongoing struggle between good and evil that is an important part of ancient Persian belief. If the forces of good win out, Rustam and Suhrab will be united. In contrast, if the forces of evil win out, the two will engage in a battle with a tragic result.

Literary Context: Note the use of metaphors and similes—two important elements of epic poetry.

5. mace (mas) n.: A heavy, armor-breaking club with a metal head.
6. scimitar (sim' a tar) n.: A short, curved sword.

Cultural Context: This was not really a Persian custom. Rustam is actually trying to deceive Suhrab.

Cultural Context: Rustam's deception of Suhrab and Suhrab's reasons for letting him go are indicative of the ongoing struggle between good and evil.

Narrator
 60 With rage and vengeance hurled him to the ground,
 Raised him aloft and, having dashed him down,
 Sat on his breast with visage, hand, and mouth
 Besmirched with dust, as when a lion felleth
 An onager,⁷ then drew a bright steel dagger
 To cut off Rustam's head, who seeing this
 65 Exclaimed: "Explain I must! O warrior
 That takest lions captive and art skilled
 With lasso, mace, and scimitar! the customs
 And laws of arms with us are not as yours.
 In wrestling none may take a foe's head
 70 The first time that his back is on the ground,
 But having thrown him twice and won the name
 Of lion then he may behead the foe:
 such is our custom."

Rustam

Narrator
 Thus he sought to 'scape
 The dragon's clutches and get off with life.
 75 The brave youth hearkened to the old man's words.
 In part through confidence, in part through fate,
 In part no doubt through magnanimity,
 Suhrab let Rustam go, turned toward the plain,
 Pursued an antelope that crossed his path,
 80 And utterly forgot his recent foe.
 When he was far away, Human came up
 As swift as dust and asked about the fight.
 He told Human what had been said and done.
 Who cried: "Alas! young man! art thou indeed
 85 So weary of thy life? Woe for thy breast,
 Mien, stature, stirrups, and heroic feet!
 The mighty lion whom thou hadst ensnared
 Thou hast let go and all is still to do.
 Mark how he will entreat thee on the day
 90 Of battle owing to thy senseless act.
 A king once spake a proverb to the point:
 'Despise not any foe however weak.'"

Human

Narrator
 He took the very life out of Suhrab,
 Who standing sorrowing and amazed replied:
 85 "Let us dismiss such fancies from our hearts,
 For he will come to fight with me tomorrow,
 And thou shalt see a yoke⁸ upon his neck."
 He went to camp in dudgeon⁹ at his deed.

Suhrab

7. onager (än' ə jər) n.: A wild ass.

8. yoke (yōk) n.: A mark or symbol of subjection or servitude.

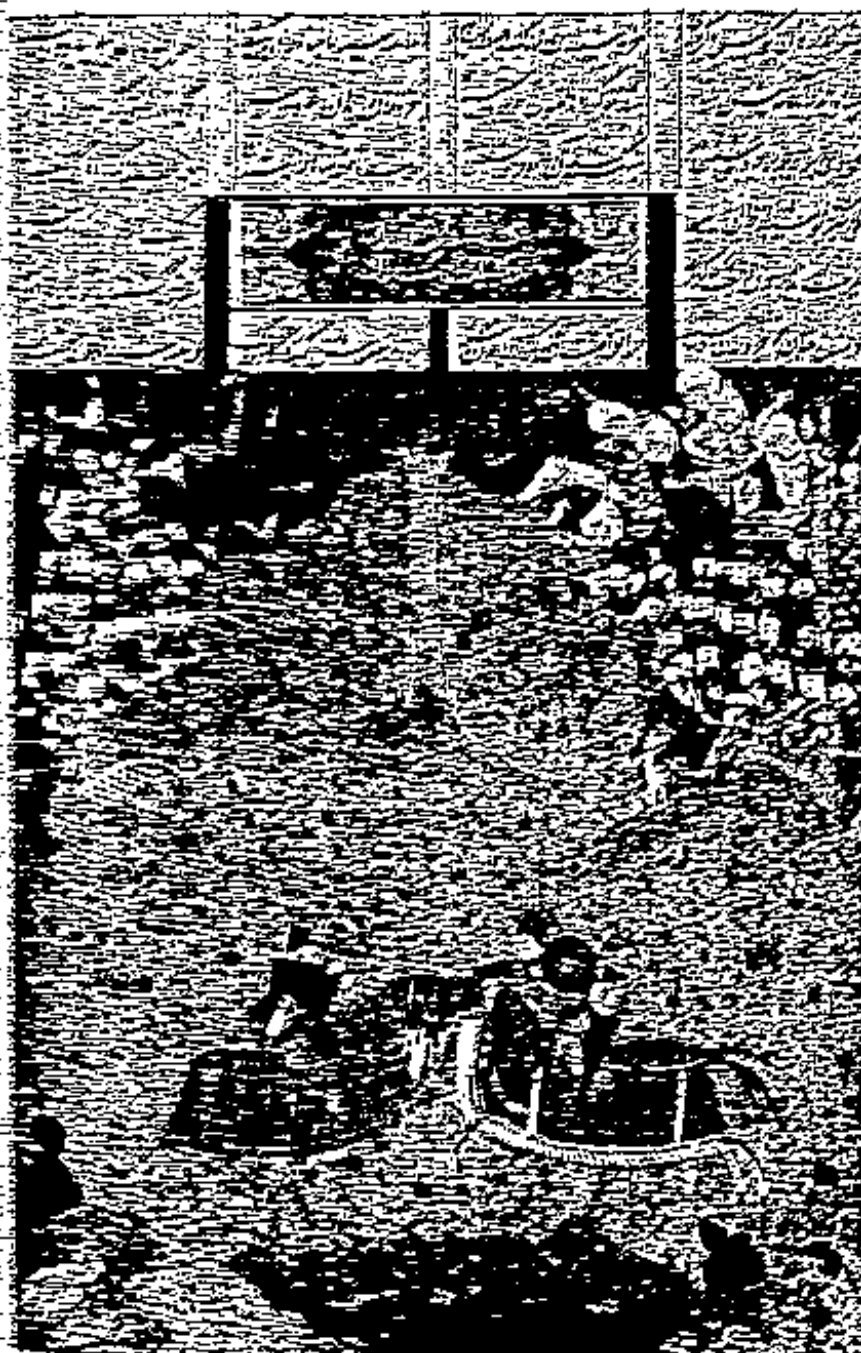
9. dudgeon (duj' ən) n.: Anger or resentment.

When Rustam had escaped his foe's clutch
 He was again as strong as a mountain of steel.
 He went toward a rivulet as one
 Who having fainted is himself again.
 He drank and bled, then prayed to God for strength
 And victory, not knowing what the sun
 And moon decreed, or how the turning sky
 Would rob him of the crown upon his head.
 The tale is told that Rustam had at first
 Such strength bestowed by Him who giveth all
 That if he walked upon a rock his foot
 Would sink therein. Such puissance¹¹ as that
 Proved an abiding trouble, and he prayed
 To God in bitterness of soul to diminish¹²

11. puissance (poo-ah-see) =: Strength, power.
 12. diminish (dim-ah-see) =: Diminishing, make small.

Narrator

Literary Context: This passage reflects the myth origin of this episode. As a myth or legend, Rustam is depicted as being larger than life.



SCENE FROM SHAH-NAMA (BOOK OF KINGS).
 The Iranian hero Zal slays Khazarvan,
 the leader of the invading Turanian
 army, with his father's ox-head mace.
 Attributed to 'Abd ul-Vahhab
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Narrator

His strength that he might walk like other men.
According to his prayer his mountain-strength
Had shrunk, but face to face with such a task,
And pierced by apprehension of Suhrab,
He cried to God and said: "Almighty Lord!
Protect Thy slave in his extremity.
O holy Fosterer! I ask again
My former strength."

Rustam

Narrator

God granted him his prayer,
The strength which once had waned now waxed in him.
He went back to the field perturbed and pale
While, like a maddened elephant, Suhrab,
With lasso on his arm and bow in hand,
Came in his pride and roaring like a lion,
His plunging charger flinging up the soil.
When Rustam saw the bearing of his foe
He was astounded and gazing earnestly
Weighed in his mind the chances of the fight.
Suhrab, puffed up with youthful arrogance,
On seeing Rustam in his strength and grace,
Cried: "Thou that didst escape the lion's claws!
Why com'st thou boldly to confront me? Speak!
Hast thou no interests of thine own to seek?"

Suhrab

Narrator

They tied their steeds while fate malignantly
Revolved o'erhead, and when dark fate is wroth
Flint rock become like wax. The two began
To wrangle, holding by their leathern belts.
As for Suhrab thou wouldst have said: "High heaven
Hath hampered him," while Rustam, reaching, clutched
That warrior-leopard by the head and neck,
Bent down the body of the gallant youth,
Whose time was come and all whose strength was gone,
And like a lion dashed him to the ground;
Then, knowing that Suhrab would not stay under,
Drew lightly from his waist his trenchant¹² sword
And fished the boom of his gallant son.

Suhrab

Narrator

Suhrab

Whenever thou dost thirst for blood and stain
Therewith thy glittering dagger, destiny
Will be a thirst for thy blood and ordain
Each hair of thine to be a sword for thee.
Suhrab cried: "Ahi!" and writhed. Naught recked he then
Of good or ill: "I am alone to blame,"
He said to Rustam: "Fate gave thee my key."

Suhrab

Narrator

12. trenchant (trans' chunt) adj: Sharp.

155 This hump-backed sky reared me to slay me soon.
 Men of my years will mock me since my neck
 Hath thus come down to dust. My mother told me
 How I should recognize my father. I
 Sought him in love and die of my desire.
 160 Alas! my toils are vain, I have not seen him.
 Now wert thou fish, or wrapped like night in gloom,
 Or quit of earth wast soaring like a star,
 My father would avenge me when he seeth
 My pillow bricks.¹³ Some chief will say to Rustam:
 165 'Suhrab was slain and flung aside in scorn
 While seeking thee.'

Then Rustam grew distraught,
 The world turned black, his body failed; o'ercome
 He sank upon the ground and swooned away;
 Till coming to himself he cried in anguish:
 170 "Where is the proof that thou art Rustam's son?
 May his name perish from among the great,
 For I am Rustam! Be my name forgotten,
 And may the son of Sam sit mourning me!"
 He raved, his blood seethed, and with groans he plucked
 175 His hair up by the roots, while at the sight
 Suhrab sank swooning till at length he cried:
 "If thou indeed art Rustam, thou hast slain me
 In wanton malice, for I made advances,
 But naught that I could do would stir my love.
 180 Undo my breastplate, view my body bare,
 Behold thy jewel, see how sires treat sons!
 The drums beat at my gate, my mother came
 With bloodstained cheeks and stricken to the soul
 Because I went. She boun'd this on mine arm
 185 And said: 'Preserve this keepsake of thy father's
 And mark its virtue.' It is mighty now,
 Now when the strife is over and the son
 Is nothing to his sire."

When Rustam loosed
 The mail and saw the gem he rent his clothes,
 190 And cried: "Oh! my brave son, approved by all
 And slain by me!"

With dust upon his head
 And streaming face he rent his locks until

13. pillow bricks: Blocks of wood or stone, contoured to fit a person's head,
 used as pillows. When a warrior died, his pillow blocks would be returned to his
 family.

Literary Context: Note
 that this passage reveals
 different side of Rustam.
 Despite his actions in this
 episode, he is by no means
 an embodiment of evil. In
 fact, he is the most
 important hero in the entire
 Shah-nama.

Narrator

His blood ran down.

"Nay, this is worse and worse."

Rustam
Suhrab

Suhrab said. "Wherefore weep? What will it profit
195 To slay thyself? What was to be hath been."

Narrator

When day declined and Rustam came not back
There went forth twenty trusty warriors

To learn the issue. Both the steeds were standing
Bemoiled with dust, but Rustam was not there.

200 The nobles, thinking that he had been slain,
Went to Kaus¹⁴ in consternation saying:

"The throne of majesty is void of Rustam!"

noble

A cry went up throughout the host and all
Was in confusion. Then Kaus bade sound

Narrator

205 The drums and trumpets, Tus¹⁵ came, and the Shah

Said to the troops: "Dispatch a messenger

That he may find out what Suhrab hath done,
And if there must be mourning through Iran.

None will confront him with brave Rustam dead.

Shah

210 We must attack in force and speedily."

Narrator

While clamor raged, Suhrab said thus to Rustam:

"The Turkmans' case is altered since my day
Is done. Use all thine influence that the Shah
May not attack them. They approached Iran

215 Through trust in me, and I encouraged them.

How could I tell, O famous paladin!¹⁶

That I should perish by my father's hand?

Let them depart unscathed, and treat them kindly.
I had a warrior in yonder hold

220 Caught by my lasso. Him I often asked

To point thee out. Mine eyes looked ever for thee.

He told me all but this. His place is void.

His words o'ercast my day, and I despaired.

See who he is and let him not be harmed.

225 I marked in thee the tokens that my mother

Described, but trusted not mine eyes. The stars

Decreed that I should perish by thy hand.

I came like lightning and like wind I go.

In heaven I may look on thee with joy."

Narrator

230 Then Rustam choked, his heart was full of fire,

His eyes of tears. He mounted quick as dust

And came with lamentations to the host

Suhrab

14. Kaus (kā' ōs): The ruler of Persia.

15. Tus (tōs): Troops from the region called Tus.

16. paladin (pal' o din) n.: A knight or a heroic champion.

historical Context: The Shah reveals that even if Rustam has lost in one-on-one combat, the Persians will not concede defeat to the Turkmans.

In grievous consternation at his deed,
 The Iranians catching sight of him fell prostrate,
 And gave God praise that Rustam had returned;
 But when they saw the dust upon his head,
 His clothes and bosom rent, they questioned him:
 "What meaneth this? For whom art thou thus troubled?"
 He told the fearful deed, and all began
 To mourn aloud with him. His anguish grew.
 He told the nobles: "I have lost today
 All strength and courage. Fight not with Turan;
 I have done harm enough."

noble

Rustam

Literary Context: This episode is considered by many readers and critics to be among the most tragic works ever written.

17. Turan (tūrān): The Turkmen.

Reader's Response What thoughts and feelings does this selection from the *Shah-nama* evoke in you? Can you imagine the depths of Rustam's grief?

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

- Why does Suhrab begin fighting even though he realizes that he may be battling his own father?
- The heroes of epics such as the *Shah-nama* generally embody many of the dominant attitudes and values of their culture. (a) If we assume this to be the case with Rustam, what is revealed about ancient Persian attitudes through Rustam's use of deception to avoid losing his battle? (b) What else can you infer, or conclude, about ancient Persian values from Rustam's character?
- (a) What is the significance of the frequent references to fate in this episode? (b) What do those references suggest about Persian beliefs concerning the role of fate in people's lives?
- What lesson could be learned from the tragedy of Rustam and Suhrab? Explain.

Applying

- (a) What literary works can you think of that involve tragic struggles between members of the same family? (b) In what ways are those works similar to and different from "Rustam and Suhrab"?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Irony

Irony is a contrast between what is stated and what is meant, or between what is expected to happen and what actually happens. Irony is often painful like the twisting of a knife in a wound. In what way is the truth of the ironic outcome in "Rustam and Suhrab"?

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing a Letter

Putting yourself in Rustam's place, write a letter to Suhrab's mother explaining what has happened. Try to make your writing style consistent with the manner in which Rustam speaks in the selection. After you have finished writing, revise the letter, making sure it clearly expresses Rustam's feelings. Have you used the proper tone—one that will help Suhrab's mother come to grips with the tragic event? Once you have revised and proofread your letter, share it with your classmates.