

# ekleksographia wave two

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## Zahhak

### We'd Need To Hear His Mother's Story

An Arab monarch named Merdas  
made his home, in those days, in the desert.  
Generous and just, he trembled before God,  
and his fear turned his prayers into sighs.  
Each of his herds—camels, cows,  
goats, milk-giving sheep—  
numbered a thousand head or more,  
and anyone who needed milk  
received it. Righteous Merdas had a son,  
Zahhak, who was courageous but lacked kindness.  
Turbulent, tending towards evil,  
Zahhak was called by his father's people  
Bivarasp, "ten thousand horses" in Pahlavi,  
because ten thousand Arab steeds,  
each with a golden bridle, were his.  
Zahhak devoted his days and nights  
to horsemanship, not in the heat of battle,  
but to shine, sublime and wealthy, in people's eyes.

Eblis presented himself to this prince  
one day at dawn, disguised  
as a wise friend. He said, "There are secrets  
I can share, that only I can show you,  
but first you must swear to tell no one  
what I say to you today."  
The words flattered Zahhak's vanity,  
so he agreed.

"What need is there,"  
the deceiver asked, "for a leader here  
besides yourself? Your father's years  
stretch beyond their proper end,  
leaving you to live much longer  
in his shadow than is right. His rank and riches,  
all his bounty, believe me, should be yours.  
My advice is your advantage.  
My words will make *you* the world's monarch."

Zahhak took what he heard to heart  
but he was unwilling to kill his father.

Ekleksographia:  
Wave Two

"What you want me to do is wrong,"  
he replied. "Rethink your plan! I refuse!"

The fiend responded, "Fail to follow  
my advice and you will violate  
the good-faith oath you made. Break  
that promise and prepare to remain  
humbled and hidden by the high regard  
your father the king will continue to command."  
That net trapped Zahhak's head.  
"Tell me what to do and I'll do it,"  
the prince replied. Eblis answered,  
"Leave the details to me. At dawn,  
your head will rise towards heaven, like the sun."

The palace grounds housed a garden  
where Merdas purified himself for prayer  
before sunrise. The servants attending him there  
lit no lantern to light the way,  
so the Devil dug a deep pit  
where he knew the king would walk.  
The noble Arab leader, eager  
to maintain the good name his praying  
earned him, hurried in the pre-dawn darkness  
to fall on his face before God.  
Instead, he fell into Eblis' trap,  
where he lay at the bottom, his body broken,  
until life left him. Then Eblis refilled  
the grave that pit became and walked away.

Merdas, that noble man, had made  
a cherished treasure of his son, raining  
comfort and wealth upon him. The wicked  
child, however, failed these gifts  
and shed his father's blood. I heard  
a sage once say that however savage  
a lion a man might be, to murder  
his father will still be beyond him. To find  
the answer to what happened here,  
we'd need to hear his mother's story.

Thus Zahhak took as his own  
Merdas' crown, making himself—  
unjust and headstrong man that he was—  
the Arabs' giver of good and evil.

Pleased with his success, Eblis  
set a second, more sinister plan  
in motion. "Because you've obeyed me," he said,  
"you have all you've ever wanted;  
but a greater treasure is yours if you're willing.  
All creation will call you king—  
the wild beasts and the tame, the birds

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and the fish, the people, all will fall  
to their knees and obey you—if you obey me."

*A passage from the section of the Shahnameh, the Persian national epic, soon to be published by Junction Press in Richard Jeffrey Newman's translation. It is the beginning of the story of Zahhak, the epic's first evil king.*

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