



## THE LEGEND OF SHAHBAZ

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Nobody gets through life without troubles but there was once a king who got himself into a terrible fix. He wasn't bad, just a man who lost his way. Nothing new there. Plenty of people, kings and commoners alike, head straight into trouble, never once looking back. This man did stop and think, and that made all the difference.

The land he ruled was far from the sea, far from the overland trade routes, far, it seemed, from any place anyone wanted to be. Still, his subjects were a sturdy lot. They endured, meeting hardship with a laugh and a smile whenever they could. The people comforted each other with the old saying, "A poor man living in peace is better off than a rich man in the midst of strife." Deep inside, they held the hope that, someday, things would get better.

Early in his reign, the king kept to his father's custom of moving among the people, listening to their stories, laughing at their jokes. He held court so that the people could seek justice from him. As years went by, the king set aside these old ways. He began staying up all night, scheming with his ministers and playing the lords and ladies against each other. Heavy black curtains were hung over the windows in his room and he slept till noon. After lunch he called for his falcon and went hunting. This he loved above all else. At dinner, his belly full of ale, he roared, "Shahbaz," for that was the falcon's name, "has never failed and that is more than I can say for any of you."

Life did not get better, it got worse. The kingdom grew disorderly. Fights broke out. Bandits patrolled the ridge tops and forests. Brother turned against brother, friend against friend. The people became afraid and Shahbaz saw it all. Her keen eyes found a house in flames, a woman crying, a child dressed in rags. She returned each day with game for the king's table but something was changing inside of her.

One day as she wheeled overhead in the sky, Shahbaz saw a man stumbling in a thicket. He had been chased from the roadway by a band of brigands and now had lost his way. Shahbaz lifted her left wing and arced toward the man as she came to the place where he was lost, she saw that he was cowering. In front of him was a mountain lion. The beast had him cornered and was now preparing to pounce.

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Shahbaz felt her heart as it filled with compassion for the old man. Then, as never before, this compassion filled her entire being. Compassion settled into resolve and Shahbaz tucked her wings and dove. Streaking out of the sky like some angel of mercy she thrust out her talons and buried them in the lion's neck. The beast whirled and roared as it struggled to free itself from the falcon's grip. Teeth claws, beak and talons whirled in a frenzy of struggle until, at last, the lion signaled her submission. Shahbaz released her grip and took to flight, the lion fled into the brush. The man was safe. Shahbaz returned to the king but without any game for the dinner table. The king berated her, never noticing how worn and weary she appeared.

The next day the king went out to hunt with Shahbaz on his arm. In the heat of the mid day he released the jesses and Shahbaz took flight. Immediately she set a course for where the area where the old man was lost. She found him even further from the road, in a ravine where there was no food or water. The old man looked wilted under the hot sun. Again Shahbaz brimmed with compassion, forgetting the task of bringing food to the king, she hurtled out of the sky and landed in front of the astonished man. Some kind of power filled Shahbaz and she knew what to do. With a short hop, she came to a stone. She struck the stone, once, twice, thrice and the rock split apart and water, clean cold water flowed from its depth. The thirsty man drank.

Shahbaz took wing and hunted, returning to the man with game. Then before leaving she approached a pile of brush striking it with her beak once, twice, thrice and with that it burst into flames. Having sustained him with food, water and fire she took wing and returned to the waiting king. Again she failed to supply the king's table.

"Perhaps I have been feeding you too well," he snapped, "a night without supper might focus your mind."

The next day the king took Shahbaz to the hunting grounds and released her. Again she hurtled skyward in search of the lost man. She searched long and hard for him and was ready to give up when she glimpsed him in the distance. Weak with hunger she made her way to him. He sat alone and in despair. Shahbaz came to rest on a branch near the man. He looked up at her through tear filled eyes. Here again was this remarkable bird that had fought off the mountain lion and fed him and given him water and a fire. The bird sat looking at him.

Thinking that perhaps this magical creature might understand his grief, he poured out his heart to Shahbaz. His brothers were dead, as was his wife and his children. He had been seeking the village of his father when the brigands had accosted him. He spat the name of the king and said that the man was a fool. As the great falcon listened, she was filled with compassion and her sense of rightness and justice boiled inside her. When the man finished his tale, the powerful sense of justice welled up and burst.

The falcon, in that moment found the gift of speech for the first time. She spoke of knowing love and loss. She spoke of all that she had seen in the many years she had soared above the kingdom. She told the man not to despair, because she knew the way home for him. She stayed with him through the night lulling him to sleep with stories of the great and noble people she had seen and known. When the morning dawned, she took flight and led the man to a stream that led to the river which flowed past the village of his fathers. This being done she returned to the king's castle.

Alighting on the wall of the castle she found the king preparing to begin his hunt, another falcon on his arm. As the hunting party rode forth, she settled onto a low branch that hung over their path.

The king saw her and called out that she was an unworthy traitor and that she did not deserve the right to be a royal falcon, another could take her place with no matter to him. The king raged at Shahbaz. The bird did not stir but concentrated her gaze on him. Finally, his rage spent, the king fell silent.

Then Shahbaz spoke. "I have watched you and I have watched your kingdom. You are full of your own bravado, but you have ruled poorly. The people suffer, they cry out from fear, from hunger and thirst, they are lost and yet you hear them not."

The entire party sat stock still and listened. A royal counselor cried out, "This is an abomination. A dumb beast can not speak, this must be evil of the most terrible kind. I plead with your majesty to destroy this foul creature at once." At this, an archer drew his bow and aimed at the falcon.

Shahbaz did not hesitate, did not move, she kept her unwavering gaze on the king. There was silence until she spoke again. "You are not a bad man, you could do much for the people of this land, even yet. But all must change."

Again the counselor asked for permission to kill the bird. The king waved him off. The truth of these words was powerful.

Shahbaz offered the king a partnership. She and her kind would sail in the skies above this land seeking always to protect, sustain and nurture the people. The king would set aside his scepter and become a royal falconer, and devote himself to the training and well-being of these great birds.

With time, the king was transformed into a great falconer. All of these great birds came to be known by the name of the first, Shahbaz. The people were comforted when they would look up into the great blue sky and see the Shahbaz circling gracefully overhead. The time of the King and his servants passed from memory and a new partnership was created which has endured since.