Chapter 1

The story begins with praise of God, who erected the turning heavens. He illumined the world with sun and moon, distinguishing day from black night. In this way, he created the world in six days, he who hid fire inside stone and created spring after the month of January. Sugar appeared within the canes at his command! The world’s place is not beside his, and no one is privy to his secret, for why would he enthrone one like Kush and crown the head of the Tusked?1

Everyone who knows the secret of this story knows that to set your heart on the world is foolishness. Kush gained satisfaction from the world that no one could match. No one ever endured upon the earth like him. Who has seen five times three hundred years, every year in comfort and wealth? And yet, he bit the dust—this is the way of the world. When you learn his secret, you will be astonished. A wise person would learn from it. 930

The experienced sage told me the following:2

1. “Kush-e pil-dandan” can be literally translated as “Kush the elephant-toothed”; for the sake of brevity, this epithet will henceforth be translated as “the Tusked.”

2. The reference to the sage here marks the beginning of the main story, and the preceding lines have the standard form of the preface to a book—Iranshah is describing the book he has, ostensibly, translated into New Persian verse. Here and a few other times in the main text of the epic, Iranshah refers to the person from whom he learned the story of Kush as “the experienced sage.” It is possible that this is merely a narrative device. Given the probable Sassanian-era origins of the story, it seems that Iranshah intended to draw attention to his and his readers’ need to rely on archaic, possibly
“What I heard is that when Zahhak called on Kush he sent him to China from the west, and gave him rule over the east. He said to him:

“Wherever you find any sign of Jamshid’s descendants, those fools, destroy them, for they are wicked and malevolent. At the time that I killed him, he said, in front of the troops, “A king will arise and avenge me.” You must ensure that there is no one left from the seed of the wayward ones. Do not let even an infant escape, for even the dragon starts out as a snake! If you underestimate your enemy, he will cause you great suffering. No kindness will come to you from an enemy even if he is of your own skin and blood. He may deceive you with his tongue at first, but you’ll soon find out his true nature. A sweet, oily tongue, and a heart full of enmity are a trap set by a devil. If he gets you, he’ll kill you, and though you plead with him, he will not let you go.””

When Kush and his army arrived in China, he looked all over for them. In every forest, mountain, and sea, he looked, but saw no sign of them.

Fearing the malevolent Kush, they were in flight year after year over fields and mountains, fleeing sometimes like leopards into the mountains, sometimes like whales into the sea. They endured this hardship, lamenting bitterly the whole time. When six hundred years had passed, Nunak died. His son predeceased him, and destiny had left his throne empty. His son’s name was Maharu, and he and his other relatives loved him dearly. Maharu’s wife bore a child near the time he died, who was given to the wet-nurse. When Nunak saw him, he named him Abtin. He brought joy to man and woman. Since he valued him dearly, he was so attentive to his needs at all times that even his relatives could scarcely tell that it was not his own son but his grandchild.

When Nunak fell ill, he summoned people to him, and spoke at length about Abtin. He said, “This year, this month will be my last. Abtin is now your king. Devote yourselves to Abtin just as you were

unreliable texts for knowledge of the distant past. These asides by the author of course raise the question of where the frame tales we have just read came from. Most likely, both frame tales were largely Iranshah’s own inventions, the first having clear parallels to events of the eleventh century, the second inserting the epic’s title character into more widely familiar, accepted narratives about Alexander. See introduction for further discussion.
devoted to me, with your property and life. For from him comes the king who will bring ruin upon the serpentine one. He will empty the world of demons and sorcery, and place upon his head the kingly crown. He will adorn the world with justice and faith, and hasten to take revenge on the vile Zahhak.” The troops showed their devotion to Abtin and remained in that forest.

When Kush saw no enemy from any direction, he led his army against the elephant-eared people. He killed and captured many of them, and distributed the captives among his men. He found a girl from among them, so bright of spirit and pure of mind, her coquettish glances were Babylonian magic, her face a blooming Zabolian rose. Her stature was like a cypress crowned by the moon, her presence put camphor and ben oil to shame. That moon made the king’s heart bubble over, his every wish and thought was of her. After a year, she bore a child the like of which the creator never created: two boar tusks, two elephant ears, a red face and hair, and two eyes blue-black as the Nile. Between his shoulder blades there was a mark, black like the bodies of sinners.

He saw him and was very afraid, and said to his wife, “Low-born, ill-omened woman! People give birth to people—men and women. How is it that you have borne a devil-child?”

His heart was so filled with anger that he cut off her head with his sword. Such is the way of the world, which hides many secrets. Secrets emerge every day from the fog, and what did the king get? A warthog! Secretly, then, he took that child down the road to the forests of China. He threw him away there and returned, and kept the secret. An unaccomplished deed remains unknown, but one accomplished becomes known to the world. Every secret, even one between two people, someday becomes public.

The next day when Abtin and his troops were out hunting, they came to that spot. He heard the cries of a child from the thicket. He hurried towards the voice and saw him, and was astonished by the sight. His spirit was troubled by what he saw. He said to himself, again and again, “This can be nothing other than a devil-child.”

He ordered his servant to pick him up and returned to the camp. He threw him before a dog, and the ravenous beast fled from him. He threw him before a lion, but the lion did not eat him, and Abtin’s face turned yellow with fear. They threw him into the fire, and it did not
burn him. Everyone’s jaw dropped. Whoever God, the just, protects, will not be destroyed by sword or fire. He ordered that the baby be thrown out the door, or else his head be removed from his body. 990

His wife said, “Noble king, do not commit rank injustice before the creator! There must be a secret behind this phenomenon—he will surely be someone of great importance. Give him to me and I will care for him like my own soul, I will bring him a caring wet-nurse.”

He said to her, “Raising him would not benefit us, do you not see how his head and neck are like a boar?”

Because of how his wife entreated him, he gave him to her, and she turned her attention to rearing him. She sometimes called him “Tusked One” and sometimes “Ears,” these being the only two names that described him.³

She sent him to a tutor when he was seven—he was already growing up strong. Two years passed and he had learned nothing, being more disposed toward the bow and arrow. He was a brute who took gargantuan satisfaction in beating up the other children with his fists. Everyone called him a demon. The teacher complained about him, and went to Abtin and wailed about all the trouble he caused.

Abitin said to him, “My good man, get a hold of yourself, and keep your distance from him. He is demon-born, an ill-tempered brute, the demon’s heart is blind to culture. Wait and see how he turns out, and we can find him work befitting his appearance. He is hard-hearted, bad-natured, and ugly. Know that his character was forged in hell!”

When the child passed ten years of age, he took his bow and arrows out to the plain, hunting and trapping whatever beasts he saw. He could chase them and catch them on foot, he could grab their legs and pull them to the ground. Abtin was amazed by what he could do. His game was lions and leopards—he could catch a leopard as easily as if it were a fox.

When he reached fifteen, he was as strong and as tall as a tree. 1010

His bravery was so great that none of the soldiers dared face him. Fly-

³. Because the letters K and G were not differentiated in medieval Persian, ear (gush) was orthographically identical to Kush, so while there are legendary precedents for the name Kush, it is also possible Gush was the intended pronunciation. For readers of the text, as opposed to those hearing it recited, the ambiguity may have been significant in its own right.
ing birds could not escape his arrow, no dragon could escape his blade. Thus did heaven’s great wheel turn: Kush never tired of bow or lasso. He rode with great endurance as his age passed thirty-five. [194a]

One day, the commander of China made a surprise attack on Abtin. They encountered him when he was outside the forest, and suddenly a melee broke out. There were more than ten thousand of the Chinese, and of the Iranians, only three hundred riders. The battle was joined and before long a number of the Iranians were wounded.

When Abtin saw his forces’ situation, he ordered them to take flight into the forest. He threw on his armor and sprang onto his horse. 1020 He roared, “You honorable warriors must survive the day! If you show the slightest weakness, you’ll find no quarter from the enemy! And as you stand and face them, never lose trust in God. From him alone are all victory and strength, and not from any army. These men are sinful and corrupt by nature, under the command of Zahhak the sorcerer. Many times, a great host has fled suddenly from battle with a small force.”

He spoke these words, and with all the speed of his fast horse he turned on the enemy army. Wherever he struck with his mace he laid low a man, and where he struck with his blade, he severed heads and limbs.

When Kush saw King Abtin in this situation, he let out a mighty roar. He had a bow and ten arrows, and no other weapon in his hand. 1030 With ten arrows, he took down ten great, brave Chinese warriors. He looked sadly at his quiver when his arrows finished, and called out to a proud man of his army. He took his armor, his helmet, and donned them the way a weed sprouts leaves, planted his feet in the stirrups and, roaring, he routed the enemy forces with a single charge. He was like a raging elephant. The whole field was filled with arms, legs, and heads.

When the Iran-army saw Kush’s coup against the enemy, his energetic, ferocious action, they all rallied and attacked and pushed that army across the river. His blade left a creek of blood along the ground, enemy heads were like polo balls to his horse. Whoever his mace landed on, their souls departed their bodies. His arrows drove all life from the air and the ground turned deep red from his sport. 1040 Whoever he came upon by surprise, and they saw him, their hearts beat rapidly like madmen. Fleeing, they prayed to God. Their hearts would not be the same for many months.
They killed more than five hundred brave men in that attack, and Abtin gained the upper hand. The Chinese commander was saddened with shame, his spirit within him turned its back.

He said, “You famous warriors, you have brought shame on yourselves, what have you to fear from foes so few that you could kill them even if you were unarmed? It has been a full three hundred years that the king has searched for these foes! And you’re going to just turn around, now that you found them? We have hurried here from China for this very task, what will you say tomorrow before the king, if you retreat from the Iran army?”

His words roused his forces, their drums raised a clamor, they unsheathed the blades of ferocity from their scabbards—no time for delay or debate! The air filled with cries of deadly vengeance, blood flowed in rivers. Men of the Iran-army were killed, and they lost some ground with each casualty. The fighting went on until nightfall, and then the two armies disengaged. The Chinese commander dismounted there.

Abtin went into his tent. He sent for Kush, kissed him, and bade him sit beside him. He said, “Good child of mine, dearer to me than my own family and relations. What you did to my enemies truly brought joy to my body and spirit.” He gave him generous gifts, with which Kush was nicely adorned: horses, a sword and shield, a helmet and cloak and a royal girdle.

Abtin said to his men, “Tonight, the Chinese commander is troubled. Tonight we must go to the forest, where we will be hidden from the enemy. We must not allow them to disgrace us when they fight us tomorrow.”

Kush said, “There is another way. When they see we have abandoned our position, they will be encouraged and come after us, and both army and king will be lost. If the king would entrust me with command of some troops, his best riders from this company, I will make a nighttime raid on them, fill field and valley with their blood. For their army will all be fast asleep, none of them is afraid of us now.” Abtin was encouraged by what he said and praised Kush profusely.

That night, he gave command of his forces to Kush, and they quickly departed. When half the night had passed, Kush blew the battle horn. A cry rose up. The brave warriors drew their swords, the Chinese were half-drunk in their deep sleep. One came charging