"There was a bluish wolf which was born having destiny from Heaven above."
-- The Secret History of the Mongols

Shuurgan traced his finger through the fireside dust and sidled closer to the embers. At his back, from within the canvas tent faintly lit with its own sacred fire, came the muffled grunts and moans of the young wife in her labor. He was relieved that these mountain people had their own idugan, and that he was not expected to assist with this female work. A lifetime as shaman still had not inured him to the fearsome power of a woman giving birth. It was dangerous for the unwary male to be nearby at such a time, when the portals between the worlds opened to allow the incoming soul to settle into its new form. He had told Saikhan so. Stay outside! Your male force will be ungrounded by such intense female powers whirling around the birth bed. But Saikhan had stayed with his woman.

Shuurgan knew already that the child would be male. The bones had foretold it on the very night that the woman now squatting over the birth bed had revealed that she carried Saikhan's child. He ran his thick fingers through shaggy, black hair, shot through with grey, and gazed northward. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had followed Saikhan across the vast distance between here and the Sayan Nuruu. They had led their small band of young warriors away from their fathers and mothers and the security of their northern homeland to seek adventure in a new land, and had found more than they had expected here in the Kunlun Nuruu. Soon after Saikhan and his comrades had come upon the smoking ruins of the village here nearly three years ago, the young chieftain had made it his personal quest to wage war on the Khyatad--the accursed Chinese--who had committed the massacre. Saikhan had transformed, and was now as if born of these mountain people, who called themselves Khangbaa, even taking a survivor as his wife. And now he was about to reap the fruit of that unusual marriage. What sort of man will be born of such a foreign union, Shuurgan wondered.

The shaman sighed quietly. Sometimes he missed his old home. But he knew his place was at Saikhan's side. He waited now for the moment that the fresh cry would split the silence of the dark morning hours. He would throw the bones again to foretell the forces at work in this boy's life. He glanced back at the glowing tent, and watched Saikhan's
silhouette weave slightly in the dun light as he wearily pressed his back against the canvas wall.

Suddenly, Saikhan's shadow jerked upright, and a drawn-out wail from the mother bled from the smokehole. Then silence. It seemed to Shuurgan that his heart stopped for that moment. And then, with a warm rush of blood from deep in his breast to his throat, he welcomed the squalling breaths of the chieftain's first son.

As the newborn cried, the shaman threw the bones onto the flat stone he had laid before the fire. A chill scuttled over his back. For an instant, as bones struck hearth, the sky seemed to bend close and flare an unearthly blue. He flinched, looked up, and saw nothing but the stars. And then, from the north end of the canyon, came a low howl. It rose slowly into the night, and was joined by others. The wolves seemed to answer the infant's wailing. The shaman shivered and drew his heavy fur closer around him, then turned his face downward to read the bones.

It was the Chinese Year of the Black Water Tiger, the Roman year A.D. 462 that his voice speared its promise through the pre-dawn stillness between the frozen canyon walls. As the idugan drummed and chanted her song of welcome and protection, the midwife swayed with the rhythm, smiled and massaged the wailing infant with a hot, wet chamois, washing the last of his mother's enveloping protection from his new skin.

"Listen to him howl!" she chuckled. She glanced up at the sweaty, red face of the woman who now gazed in flushed amazement at her firstborn. "Already he commands us!"

She held up the boy, and at the sight of him, the mother slumped against the furs. Her voice returned in exhausted, sobbing gasps, but she smiled. She watched the midwife's assistant take away the bloody bedding and afterbirth so that all surrounding mother and son would be softness and warmth. She held out her arms. The midwife, at last taking a moment to tuck her disheveled tufts of grey hair behind her ear, crooned softly to the child, sidled over on her knees and handed the baby to his mother.

Close to the doorway, quiet in the shadows away from the fire, the young chieftain stood, at once terrified and fascinated to be so close at the birth of his son. None would know from watching how his insides quavered at each scream, how he held his breath each time she bore down and strained to release the child. Now, in the peace following the birth, he wondered if his knees might buckle. The Guardian of the Great Tree of the Underworld had sent a new spirit to live in his son. He called up his strength and straightened so that none would know how deeply
moved he was. He pushed himself away from the wall and approached his new family.

His smile was steady, masking his relief, as he watched their child quieted at his mothers' breast. Tentatively he reached out, touched the head and bent to look into the red, temporarily misshapen face. The baby's thick tuft of downy hair was as black as his mother's, and showed no sign of the rusty sheen that colored Saikhan's own dark mane. His son's eyes were lighter than the deep brown of his mother's—but not so pale as the blue-green of his own. It was too soon yet to see what they would be.

Saikhan glanced at the sword lying above his wife's head. The weapon, shining and unused, was a replica of his own. By my side, my son, thought Saikhan, you will carry this blade, forged like my own. Together we will drive the *Khyatad* before us and destroy them.

Outside, haunches to the stone at the edge of his sacred fire, Shuurgan waited. He began to drum. His voice rose, softly at first, chanting the ancient birth rite and blessing, until his nasal voice rang high, as clear and strong as those of the wolves in the distance. He felt their attention turn to him, the bright-eyed watchers, and as the trance raised him above the rock and snow to look down upon himself, he joined them.

Inside, the young mother sighed and relinquished the child to her husband. She watched as Saikhan walked to the tent flap, gingerly cradling the child. He was tall, and had to stoop to leave the warmth of the firelit dwelling. His broad shoulders touched the edges of the door as he passed through.

Cloudy green flickers of eyeshine met him, and for an instant, the form of an enormous, blue-grey wolf flashed at the edge of the firelight. Saikhan dared not speak or threaten the silent, watching shadows. Though the shaman's body continued to drum and sing, his spirit might be among them.

"*We bring his name.*" Shuurgan's voice was distant, strangely deep and gravelly. "*We sing his name.*" His words trailed off to become a low, long howl. The wolves danced and growled at the edge of the firelight, their flanks flashing orange before they were off, racing back up the canyon. A moment later, their howls answered Shuurgan's.

The shaman raised his arms slowly towards the father and child, and it was not without trepidation that Saikhan handed him the baby. Callused hands lifted the naked boy high overhead, showing him to the ancestors and to the *Kunlun Nuruu*. The whitish birth caul on the baby's skin shone pale blue in the starlight. Saikhan's gaze followed the rise of the great
peaks. *So high,* he thought, *that the feet of the Khans of the Overworld must tread upon them. Look down, Great Ones. Bless and protect my son.*

"Khokh Chono," chanted Shuurgan, "Sayan Chono. Blue Wolf, Sage Wolf. The Seven Suns flashed for your coming, Chono. I give you the name of those who sing for you. And also will you be called Sayan, for the ancient mountains, the sage mountains of your father's homeland. If ever you are lost, the Sayan will call you home."

Saikhan's deep bass voice joined Shuurgan's, thrumming against the stone canyon as they chanted the name together so that the mountains and stars would hear and remember it. This boy would be chieftain someday. They must bind him to these stones and to the sky under which he was given his name, bind him to Tenger Etseg, Gazar Eej, to his own ancestors, and to the tenger, spirits, that crowded close at his birth.

The child raised his voice in protest as the cold bit him. The shaman lowered his arms, pressed him against the fur at his belly and rocked him. Slowly, his chanting softened and stopped. He stared, glassy-eyed at the boy he held, then slowly raised his face to Saikhan.

"An iron seed will come from these loins," murmured Shuurgan. "Seven hundred times will the winter come again, seven hundred years will our people struggle and die. Yet seven hundred springs will bloom when the Iron Son of the Blue Wolf of Saikhan will deliver them and be *Khagan* of the World."

Saikhan stared open-mouthed at Shuurgan's faraway eyes, unable to speak. Heat seared across the top of his scalp, and he knew that though the words had come from the shaman's lips, they had been spoken by the gods of the Overworld who saw past and future as if they were one.

Shuurgan blinked slowly, and the lines of his face relaxed. His eyes became his own again. He drew a long breath and gave a great, uncontrolled shudder. "Take him," he said, lifting the child to his father. "She will be able to feed him soon. You will come back here. I will read the bones."

Saikhan turned to the warmth of the tent, looked down in wonder at the lustily screaming boy in his arms. Wild joy flooded his heart.

"Great things will come of you, Sayan Chono," he whispered. "The Voice of the Third World has said it will be so. Tonight, it begins."

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