



BOOK ONE

BRONZE WINGTIPS FEATHERED AIR SHIMMERING
*with ice crystals as a golden eagle hovered,
then screamed, and plummeted earthward
toward an unsuspecting mouse.*

*Like an echo of her hunting cry came the
raw wail of a woman's birth ecstasy and the
shrill, reedy mew of a newborn's cry. A girl-child
was born to the wife of Tashih Shaymak, Great
Chagan of the Golden Igren.*

*Again, the eagle climbed soul-blue skies above
the Pamir Mountains and soared along cliff
rims and canyons, far out over high mountain
valleys. Her jubilant "scr-eee-ee-e-!" rang out
on the banner of wind for all the steppe-land of
Central Asia to hear.*

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IN WHICH AN HEIR IS BORN
626 A.D.

IN THE IGREN BIRTH-TENT, LANTERN LIGHT FLICKERED around the encircling painted and embroidered felt walls. A midwife bathed the glowing baby with mare's milk, rubbed her with warm sheep's fat, then wrapped her snugly in soft woolen blankets.

"See how strong, how healthy she is!" The midwife said, laying her in her mother's arms. The baby turned her head, looked around her and smiled at this world of light and air.

"Look, beloved husband," said the mother proudly. "Our beautiful daughter, our first child. Is she not wonderful?"

"She is, well, wonderfully little!" The Chagan lifted the baby and shifted her around in his arms until her head was cradled in his left hand. Tentatively, he touched the silken skin of her wrinkled fingers, tiny fingers that instantly clutched his rein-hardened forefinger.

"She holds on so tightly!" He laughed with delight, "I think, though, it is not my finger, but my heart that she has really taken hold of!"

People gathered outside their leader's tent. There were only a few dozen family members still in this permanent winter camp, most were with the vast horse herds, trailing up to summer pasture.

Tashih Shaymak smiled tenderly at his wife. "Honey of my life," he said, "it's time for us to share our blessing."

Cradling the baby beneath his embroidered, scarlet cloak, he lifted the tent flap and stepped outside. "Behold, my friends! I bring you a new child of the Blue Wolf—my daughter Talima!

"Hear my prayer, O Everlasting Sky! May my daughter's days be filled with the sunlit sounds of happiness! May she ride the winds bravely!

May her spirit dance on the mountains like a flame! Grant these boons, O Sky, to my daughter, Talima!

“As you have made me Chagan-sha, Keeper of the Igren Hearths, I now proclaim Talima, my firstborn, heir to all my rights and titles.

“May she drink the dew of night’s wisdom, moon’s wisdom, preserving *The Yasa*, our sacred law, all the days of her life. Witness the birth of my heir Talima, O Great and Everlasting Sky!”

The Chagan held the baby high over his own head, her swaddled body silhouetted against the star-pricked sky. His clansmen’s cheer reverberated against twilight-purple hills, echoing an ancient joy.



A NEW MOON CRADLED THE VENUS STAR. The eagle still circled above Igren valleys that intersected trade routes that radiated in all directions like spokes of a great wheel—the many trails of the Silk Road. Traders endured hardships that the high Gobi Desert and ice-crested mountain ranges imposed, and hazarded their lives against immense odds, answering the demand for silk, the shining cloth prized above gold. Every country along this far-flung trading route, great or small, came under the hegemony of China, or Chian as it was then called, the wealthiest most brilliant culture of the time.

In the capital city of Chian, far to the east of the mountain valley where Talima’s birth was cheered and celebrated, in Changan, at the beginning of the Silk Road, other people celebrated, other people cheered. Multitudes from a far-flung empire gathered to swear allegiance to their new emperor at the commencement of the dynasty called T’ang in this year, 626 A.D. The vast wealth of China was spread at the feet of his Peacock Throne, and as the Chagan’s people acclaimed Talima, so the Chinese people acclaimed Tai Tsung.

On this spring evening of his inaugural, Tai Tsung, that great warrior, did not know, nor would have cared, that a girl-child had been born to a vassal nomad chieftain three thousand miles to the west. Concerned with royal rituals, processions and speeches, he did not dream how intertwined his life would be with hers.