

3. Rumors of War

Cuyaiya: Kuelap, Peru 444 Inti-raymi (winter solstice, June 1531)

Cuyaiya looked over at her black llama. Yana should be tired, but he was not resting. His behavior was most unusual: standing, humming in concern and shifting from foot to foot, clearly uneasy. “Yana is troubled, my aunt. Is there somebody coming?”

“No one can come near Kuelap without my knowledge. I have placed guards of our own people – your mother’s people. They are watching all the approaches.” Tumbai did not spare the llama so much as a glance. “He is uneasy because right now, at Machacuay’s holy hour, even the animals can feel the power of this place.”

The great idol of Machacuay, the two-headed snake, towered over them on its masonry pedestal. Until last year, Cuyaiya’s greatest ambition had been to see this ancient temple brought back to life with herself as its future priestess. But those hopes seemed distant and meaningless compared to tonight’s undertaking.

Her aunt would be angry if she knew how Cuyaiya had changed. Tumbai had been against her bearing children from the first: A priestess of the two-headed snake could not afford the softening of motherhood. And Tumbai must be pleased at all costs; it was she who knew the secrets that could lead to Churi’s recovery.

Cuyaiya distracted herself with lesser problems. “Can we come here to live once Churi is recovered, my aunt? ViraVira is all against me, since the curse.”

“Hold but a little longer, my daughter. Kuelap must remain empty until the day comes when the Cloud-warriors rise again. Then those of the priestess bloodline will be honored here as they were before.”

The doe-llama moaned in unison with Yana, but in her case there was no puzzle; they had just forced a gourd of potion down her and she would soon be giving birth. It must be at night, and it must be here. The spells that had been cast for Churi’s recovery required it. But births had their own timetables, even with all their help.

Cuyaiya prayed that they would not be disturbed as they carried out the necessary rituals. Everything depended on secrecy. “What if the Inca soldiers come to investigate?”

“The group that is assigned to Kuelap has been incapacitated, in a place where they will not be missed for a day or more. I was so late coming because of them.”

Cuyaiya looked at her in question. "Were they poisoned?"

"Only drugged. But they will be sick enough afterwards; for now we will not harm them further. It is one way to let the authorities know how limited their power really is, here in the lands of the Chachapoya." Tumbai chuckled. "When they wake they will know I have snared them again and the Inca official will mount another fruitless search."

Once Cuyaiya would have laughed with her. But all she could think of was the risk to her plans, the risk to Churi. Nothing must happen to Tumbai. If she had not known the proper spells, Cuyaiya's little son would have been lost to her forever. But the process of recovery was not yet finished. "I wish you would be more careful, my aunt."

"Never fear, my daughter, neither the Curaca nor any of the ayllu Camoyocs have caught me in these many years. In time we will defeat them, these knot-makers, these orderly, submissive dung-counters!" Tumbai snorted. "In days past, we would have taken a few of the soldiers' heads as an offering to Machacuay, and to add power to our spells."

Cuyaiya shuddered. Human sacrifice had become too personal. Tumbai was not happy at her reaction. "You have observed the rituals; soon you must perform them. It does not take more than one or two heads to get used to it. You must not be so squeamish, if you are to replace me one day."

"Will the Chachapoya accept me as their High Priestess? Could they ever forget I am half-Inca, a daughter of the hated conquerors?" Cuyaiya gestured towards the golden disks in her ears.

"Through your mother you are the last of the house of Yrca, the priestesses of Machacuay," Tumbai explained impatiently. "How many times must I tell you that under the old Chachapoya ways only the maternal bloodline matters?"

"Those ways are half-forgotten, while the Inca's oppression is renewed every year."

"Since you were secretly ordained as a priestess-apprentice, I have been preparing for your succession. Word of a daughter of Yrca who has renounced her father, an Inca Camoyoc, is being spread throughout our people. It adds to your prestige," Tumbai said. "They will know at once who you are when you show your crooked arm."

"This?!" Cuyaiya pushed back her long sleeve to stare at the awkward angle in the bone which shortened her right forearm. "People I have not even met know about Cuyaiya of the crooked arm?"

"They do not know you by that name. But it is also time you stopped being ashamed of that and see it for what it is." Tumbai indicated Cuyaiya should sit next to her on the stone bench. "Your mother, my sister broke your arm deliberately when you were a baby and set it that way. It was

done to disqualify you as a candidate for the five-year solstice sacrifice to the Inca's cursed sun-god."

Cuyaiya digested this with shock, glad she was sitting down. As long as she could remember, her disfigurement had been a source of misery. Not physical, for it worked nearly as well as the other and caused her no pain. But among those who practiced the sun-cult bodily imperfection, especially in children, was considered to be the curse of Inti on the one who bore it. From puberty on she had been made to go outside the walls with the other less-than-perfect people during every celebration, lest the mere presence of deformity displease Inti and make him withhold his warmth from the crops and herds.

"When you were old enough to learn the rites of the double-headed serpent, there was even more reason to be glad of your crooked arm. Do not forget that every solstice, every equinox, you were available for my training because of their stupid custom. Our people do not make such a fuss over physical perfection as do the Inca tribe and those they rule. When we reoccupy Kuelap and you come to dwell here, we will give you a new name, a Chachapoya name, and you will no longer be called Cuyaiya, sadness!"

The priestess stood and saluted the great stone statue of the snake god. To Cuyaiya's eyes it almost seemed to shiver with latent power. Yana hummed, high and troubled; the llama felt it too, as Tumbai had said.

There came a shout, a noise of running feet coming up the narrow channel that led to the high place. A Chachapoya warrior dropped to his knees before Tumbai, holding out to her a mop of colored, knotted strings. It was a quipu, such as were carried by relay runners, passing them from one to another along all the main roads of Tawantin-suyu.

"The Chachapoya from Pajaten," he gasped, "Have captured one of the Inca's chaski-messengers!" he took a moment to recover his breath. "He was carrying this quipu. Look, there are many strands dyed red, the color of war! So they have sent it to the High Priestess, since you alone have someone who knows the meaning of the knots."

"It is this very one, your next high priestess!" Tumbai pointed to Cuyaiya. "It is the doing of Machacuay that she is here at this very moment. Daughter, what does it say?"

Cuyaiya took the strings and held them to the firelight. "This string says that the message is from Inca Huascar to the mitima ayllus, the Inca towns scattered among the Chachapoya territory."

She frowned in concentration, examining the knots on the second string. "This one is about the Llama God. The Inca's brother Atahualpa in Quito has not sent him the Llama God he took from the dying hand of their father Huayna Capac."

Tumbai nodded. "Yes, the ancient Llama Conopa of the Sapa Inca. My mother once saw it; she said it was of rose opal and as large as your closed fist, the well deeper than most." She snorted. "It was captured from the Wari long ago, when it represented Pachacamac. But now Inti's priests would have us think it is theirs, a huaca of Inti the sun."

"We have heard of this dispute in ViraVira also," Cuyaiya said fearfully. "But the men say the Llama God assures victory. The armies are all with the Inca's brother Atahualpa now."

"Why should it trouble you if he makes war? Whose side are you on?" Tumbai said sharply. "It is well for the Chachapoya if the sons of the Inca fall to fighting among themselves. What do the knots on the red cords say?"

The younger woman bent over them carefully, then looked up with fear in her eyes. "The ayllus loyal to Huascar are to muster all the warriors and be ready to assemble at Cuzco."

Tumbai was triumphant. "My curse has taken root! First the death of the great Inca in the fullness of his power, then the plague that swept the land! And now the brothers will tear Tawantin-suyu asunder!"

"But if all our men are gone to war, what will become of the women and the children of ViraVira? What of Churi?"

"Leave that to me. When the Chachapoya rise against the invader's settlements, I will protect you." Tumbai was now all business. "Before we trouble about the future, we must deal with the present. If the cria is male, Machacuay will send us a sign if he is to be the means of Churi's recovery. Have you thought of an explanation for the extra doe and her cria when you return to ViraVira?"

"Last year a white weanling doe disappeared. I will say this is the same one, that I found her running with the wild guanacos and she must have conceived out of season."

"Can they be so easily deceived? Does ViraVira not know their own llamas?" Tumbai was scornful.

Cuyaiya felt unreasonably defensive. "The head michec and many of the others died in the plague, and it was a very young animal. Of course old Karu will recognize that it is a different animal, but he will keep silence on my account. He is the new head michec, even though he is Chachapoya, now that there is no other."

"That will do." Tumbai nodded her satisfaction. "Remember that this must be kept secret between us. The more people who guess, the weaker the spell will become. Until Churi's recovery is complete, even I do not know if I have enough power."

Cuyaiya was shocked at this admission. "But surely you have power of life and death, my aunt! You called the plague!"

“The plague was indeed an answer to the prayers of the Chachapoya. That it struck ViraVira the night of last year’s solstice was also because of my curse. But I did not call it to these lands, nor did I have control over it. If I had, only those belonging to the Inca tribe and their vassals would have died.” Tumbai shook her head regretfully.

“I have recently heard that two years ago, a prophecy was fulfilled: the legend of the light-skinned, bearded Viracochas coming over the waters from the west in a mighty canoe. These came to the Inca outpost of Tumbez; they sent a message to Inca Huayna Capac and then left again.

“He that told her who told me said the Great Inca’s death came only a week after those messengers brought the Viracocha’s gifts to him in Quito. The signs were the same as those in ViraVira: it is a sickness that begins with the skin and kills three out of four who are near it. From the north it has spread, and by now it has reached Cuzco, the heart of the Inca domain.”

“Then it was not my doing at all that ViraVira was stricken!”

Tumbai looked at her sharply. “Do you now regret those deaths?”

Cuyaiya could not meet her gaze. “Only that so many died who had no part in the wrong.”

“The numbers are to our purpose, my daughter. See how your father’s people fear you now! If they had understood my power, they would not have dared lay a hand on your child.”

Cuyaiya said no more about the empty houses of the ayllu or the stares of hatred she knew were directed at her back. Then a chilling thought occurred to her: If the sickness was not Tumbai’s, and the priestess did not have the power to protect against it—her son might be restored only to be lost again to this foreign scourge! “What if the light-skinned Viracochas bring back the plague?”

“Do not fear. I have questioned the skies and listened to the old ones tell of the prophecy. Machacuay sent these messengers only to kill the Inca in his prime so that his sons would destroy the empire between them. The Viracochas have accomplished what is appointed by the stars already.”

The old high priestess looked down from the high place of the majestic citadel of the Chachapoya. Far below the Utcubamba River gleamed like a broken silver ribbon in the moonlight. “The rest of the task is left for our people. The Viracochas will not return.”

Baseel Alcazar: Victoria, off Cadiz, Spain, June 1531

“Very well, I will hire you to accompany me on the expedition to Peru,” Don Luis told Elias. “In spite of your dandified looks, you plainly have plenty of fighting experience. And the horse likes you.”

Baseel shook his head at his employer's talent for understatement. If Elias had not just arrested Cacho's suicide panic, Don Luis would have arrived in the New World a foot soldier.

"But I'm not paying you more than passage and equipment! You can sign the four-year indenture contract tonight." Vaca started up the ladder, calling a last admonition over his shoulder. "Remember that your job is to see Cacho reaches New Spain in condition fit to ride." The deck hatch slammed after him.

"That was a gamble, going for him with your knife. But you read Don Luis right. If there is one thing Vaca respects, it is guts." Baseel sank to the deck in relief. "And I suspect he didn't really want to turn back either. Who knows how long the Inquisition would have held the ship?"

"Not that you and I would have been concerned with that, if we were taken." Elias replied in the street Arabic of Granada, their common birthplace. "Why did you use my real name?"

"An unfortunate choice," Baseel conceded. He had never had Elias' skill in manufacturing plausible lies on the spur of the moment. "It was the shock at seeing you still alive. I heard you died in Madrid."

Elias settled in the straw. The hold was newly cleaned and aired and did not yet reek of manure as it would by journey's end, but the quarters were close and the smell of the horses was strong. "That was as I intended. The Inquisition does not hunt dead men."

"Then the name is not so large a matter; Elias is common enough in Spain. We will just say your father was Garcia or Martinez or something ordinary and not in the least Jewish. De Pazia will be forgotten."

"Don't even mention my family!" Elias hissed. "Unless they are convinced that I drowned in Cadiz harbor, the Dominicans will hunt me to the ends of the earth."

Baseel recalled too well Elias' long vendetta with the Inquisitors. "Does Abbe Matias still care so much, after all this time?"

"No, the most Reverend Abbe will not be doing any more searching." Elias' smile in the dim light had no humor; it was more like a baring of fangs. "I am content to leave Spain at last. But the church authorities have a new and fresher reason to want me after today. And no doubt a generous reward to whoever turns me in." He directed a questioning look at the Moor. "And why are *you* still in Spain? You were bound for Morocco."

Baseel shrugged. "I went to Tangier for a while, then to Fez. But Cerra's arm is as long as his memory, and his operatives along the trading routes are efficient. I thought Spain might be safer if I stayed well north of the Mediterranean coast where Casa Cerra does business.

"Had I the means to travel, I would have gone at once to Istanbul and offered my services to Suleiman the Magnificent. But without money, even a learned man has little power to move his destiny, especially a fugi-

tive with an instantly recognizable face,” Baseel said bitterly. “I was hoping to leave poverty, the priests and Cerra behind.”

And memories. A New World, where nothing would be familiar, nothing to remind him of her. Looking at the well-known face opposite him, Baseel felt his heart twist again. No hope of that now. Here was her brother, back from the dead, an unwelcome reminder of a promise broken.

Thinking of broken promises gave him another reason to curse the fate that had cast him together once more with Elias de Pazia. If – or rather, when – the Converso deserted for his own purposes, Don Luis would remember that it was Baseel who had recommended that he take Elias as groom. So it would be Baseel who remained to deal with Vaca’s temper.

“Perhaps you can enlighten me as to the conditions of my new employment while my jerkin and hose dry.”

Baseel thought quickly. Elias might have as much motivation as all the rest for throwing his lot in with Pizarro’s expedition, once he heard what was to be gained. “You are more fortunate than you know. We sail to win treasure beyond your dreams, enough to get us free of Cerra and the Inquisition both.”

“If you mean the rumors that have been flying around Seville in the wake of this fellow Cortez, I have heard them,” Elias said. “But I have also heard that the first-comers have gotten all the gold that the crown did not claim, and I have no interest in land-grants. Where Spanish settlers go, the Inquisition will follow.”

“I am not speaking of Cortez and New Spain, but a land far richer, and we the first to divide the spoil!” Baseel did not need to feign his enthusiasm; he knew too well that poverty limited options and threatened existence. “El Dorado—the land of gold—is found at last! Three years ago Francisco Pizarro, the adventurer leading the expedition we sail to join, came to the borders of a great and wealthy land named Peru. Inca, their king, sent him incredible gifts of friendship. It is a mere few weeks of good sailing from the colony of Panama south down the coast of the Western Sea.” Baseel leaned forward in his excitement at the wonders. “The first expedition visited but one city, a small outpost by all reports. Even there they saw the temple walls covered with sheets of beaten gold. Gold and silver are so common the explorers were served from dishes made of them.”

Elias snorted. “Rumors like the wealth of the mythical African King, Prester John! The further the distance, the more fantastic the tale.”

“When have I ever moved without first investigating the matter?” Baseel countered. “I have spoken to men who saw with their own eyes the gifts brought by Pizarro to King Charles, beautifully worked articles of gold and silver, feathered cloaks and a pair of little humpless woolly camels with rabbit ears and tails that he was much pleased with. And now Pizarro has been granted permission to claim it for the crown of Spain”

Elias' face in the near-dark was unreadable, but his voice showed more interest. "Gold would be a very useful thing in my present position. I too am no richer than when we last parted, and in more danger. Still, I am surprised to find you part of such a venture. You were ever calculated in the risks you took."

"Since the Inquisition has increased in power and influence, it is safer for me than remaining in Spain. I prefer a death in battle to one on the rack and the stake," Baseel replied. "Don Luis is no worse a master than the next, and if he cannot pay well, he has provided the means to quit Spain. As it happens, I was in a hurry. Baltasar Cerra found me again."

"And if we succeed in winning this treasure?" Elias asked. "We cannot afford to stay where our presence will be conspicuous. How will we get this wealth back through Europe until we are beyond the reach of both Cerra and the Church?"

"I have thought of that too. Listen," Baseel lowered his voice. "When we make our fortune, we need not go back by way of Spain. The real India, and from there the Ottoman Empire, can be reached by a short sail further west. A man named Magellan set out to do that, and of his five ships, one has sailed all the way around the world."

"Surely you jest!"

"No jest. The lone vessel that returned is this very ship, the *Victoria*. One of the crew is from that voyage—he has told me some of his adventures. They are sure to send more expeditions soon, west from this new land. We will take our winnings to live at ease in the great empire of Suleiman, where learning and philosophy are welcomed."

"And until then? How much influence does the Inquisition have in the New World?"

"The Inquisition has already penetrated to Nombre de Dios, where we will land. We are not safe until we are clear of both Spain and Spaniards. For all I know, their informers are aboard this ship. But it will take a while for news to travel. By the favor of Allah we will be gone before they discover who we are."

Yana: Kuelap, Peru, 444 Inti Raymi (Winter Solstice, June 1531)

Yana could bear it no longer. His michec continued to ignore all his warnings as she sat with the old one on the flat stone directly before the great stone. The rumble was almost audible, but all three two-legs were absorbed in the mop of strings. When the earth began to move, it would surely topple and crush them. To the left of the stone it was more open, and further from the terrace edge.

The doe was in full labor now, but Yana could at least move her. And if she went to the open space, surely Cuyaiya would follow! He darted in and around behind the white female, nipping at her heels. Surprised, she

jumped and gave several stiff steps in the direction he wanted. The two-legs started up to interfere, but Yana bit at her hocks again, forcing her into a ragged trot.

Cuyaiya was driving him off, shouting. Yana did not care that she was shocked and unhappy with him; his michec was now away from both the towering stone and the terrace edge. The motion had speeded the birth, and now the doe was beginning to deliver her cria. Tumbai came over to watch, and within minutes a newborn slid down onto the grass, glistening wet in the firelight.

“It is male!” Cuyaiya exclaimed.

The newborn cria was a uniform color without markings, although in the darkness it could only be seen that his coat was neither very light nor very dark. Yana was surprised that a cria born in the wrong season, at the wrong hour, should be so vigorous. The newborn raised his little head and within minutes began struggling to his feet. Cuyaiya sat back to watch, Tumbai with her. Good. They would stay here, where it was safer.

The old stud nosed him helpfully. He rose to stand balancing uncertainly on his wobbling legs. His sire lipped over him, from his baby toenails still soft and rubbery on dainty two-toed feet, to the long ears which made parenthetical curves above curious eyes. Yana blew at the woolly fluff drying on his compact body where guard hairs feathered into a mane which ran the length of his neck. The cria gave an unexpected hop at the sensation, flicking his puff of tail where still more hair sprouted in curling abundance.

For several moments there was no sound but the eager noise of suckling, while the dawn light grew around them. At last the cria settled down next to Cuyaiya, his wide eyes fixed on her with wondering innocence. She fell back to her knees in front of the baby with a cry.

“Tumbai, the sign, the sign!” Gathering the little creature up in her arms, its tan coat blended with her own skin tones as she turned the cria so that the growing light shone on his lash-rimmed eyes: not dark, the normal color for llamas, but amber. As amber as the eyes of the woman who held him. As amber as the eyes of her son.

“Machacuay has answered!” The high priestess could not restrain her triumph. “It is also a sign that he is moving against our enemies! Have we not waited forty years?”

The rumble that was below hearing suddenly grew stronger. Even the humans at last became aware of what the animals had sensed all day. With a roar and a jolt that knocked all the two-legs flat, the earth began to shake beneath them.