

2. the Unwanted Child

March, 1534 (twenty years later)

ViraVira, an Inca community in Northern Peru

Elias held the spoon to Cuyaiya's lips. "Take just a little more," he coaxed. She swallowed obediently, but when he brought it again her head had relaxed against his shoulder in sleep. He put the utensil down and carefully eased her upper body back onto the bed. Standing to stretch his tired muscles, he measured the shallow breaths of the pregnant woman lying before him. Over the last month the thinness had been replaced by an unhealthy swelling that reached from her feet to her face. Not even Tumbai, Cuyaiya's witch of an aunt, was giving her much chance of surviving this pregnancy. And the locals thought he would be better off without her.

A mounting sense of frustration drove him outside to stand on the citadel wall. Elias looked down over the lovely panorama of Cocha Huayabamba. His eyes did not see it. Habit kept his face as still as the lake, but the thoughts that raged through his mind were as restless as the storm wind. If Cuyaiya died, he would never be able to find where they had hidden the Inca's Ransom. He would be trapped in this austere land, always on the run from his fellow conquistadors, from the Inquisition.

The golden opportunity that dangled before him these many months had brought out his most convincing performance yet, although he had never dreamed that keeping one woman alive could be such trouble and effort. But having invested so much into her, he was determined to succeed. And he had to admit that he welcomed the challenge. It gave him a sense of purpose again.

For twenty years he had lived for his revenge on Abbe Matias, shaping his course to it like a mariner to the polar star. And in the end he had been successful. It was to have been the moment that healed him. But he had not had time to savor it then; there was the frantic effort of flight, the fortuitous escape from the country of his birth. At some point afterward he had expected to feel elation, freedom from the hatred that consumed

his youth. Elias pushed down the tide of disappointment that rose again and threatened to break through his defenses. The chains that had bound his mind all these years had not fallen off with the death of those who had forged the first links.

Worse, he now found himself floundering without purpose. Perhaps that was why the treasure had become so important: he must fill his empty days with a new goal. What made more sense than evading the Inquisition while acquiring the means to set himself up in power and luxury? He resolutely turned his mind from probing too deeply. Introspection was dangerous, disrupting to the only thing that counted: focus. Focus on the next step: keep the woman alive. Focus on winning her trust. And dispose of the newborn child.

He climbed down from the wall and went to move the tether of the old black llama to a new grazing spot. The picket was not to keep him nearby; a spoken command would do that. But available grazing within the citadel walls was a limited resource which must be managed. Elias scratched the side of Yana's neck affectionately and felt him lean into the pressure, asking for more. This one reminded him of Cerra's camel, old Fatima, with his deep experience of people. He liked these small camels. He liked all animals; within the boundaries of their understanding and self-interest, they could be trusted to behave rationally. Unlike their masters.

Even when a certain animal seemed hopelessly warped, examining its background revealed a traceable corruption through human activity that was at the root of the poor beast's problem. Cuyaiya's pet Cuti, for instance. The little tan llama plainly thought humans were his herd; he spit at people over food and space issues; he wanted to fight with men and breed with women. That had not occurred of itself. The animal must have been given the wrong impressions from the beginning. Elias had not yet fathomed the link between Cuyaiya and Cuti but it was something more than merely a pet-mistress relationship. Why would a woman with her experience in handling llamas have allowed for such an outcome?

Even after Cuti attacked her, and Elias had been going to do the only reasonable thing and dispatch the berserk young stud, Cuyaiya had interfered. The old witch Tumbai said Cuti was the key to getting the gold, although she had not explained why. Very well, he would humor his wife and deal with Cuti later. He should even be grateful for the circumstance. Now that he was the only one who could handle the crazy animal it gave him more leverage in persuading her to take him to the treasure, and he needed all the influence he could bring to bear. For it was clear that Cuyaiya was fearful even at the thought of the Inca's ransom, and he dared not

push the issue until he had more influence. It would arouse her too-ready suspicion.

Within minutes of meeting this woman, Elias recognized that in her his cynicism about human nature had met its match. Through their mutual language lessons he had soon discovered that her mind was as keen as his; he had to admit that the time spent learning had been enjoyable as well as useful to his purpose. But that wariness and wit made it much more difficult to charm her. He could not, as he had done so often with other women, simply lull Cuyaiya into the fantasy that he had fallen in love with her hidden beauty. She was the sort that he had always been careful to avoid in Spain. Never before had he needed to go to the length of marrying his victims. But never before had so much been at stake.

In any case, what did these ceremonies matter to him? In this instance it had been the only way to his objective: the long slow process of proving himself through protection and care. That she had swallowed Fray Juan's religious prattle was to his benefit, mellowing her almost more than he dared hope. He wondered again how much he had set back his purpose that day last month when his anger had burst out. But he had pleaded concern for her. She seemed to have forgiven him like a good little Christian.

With a final pat on Yana's back, Elias turned to go into the house again, glad the fifty pounds of weight that he had carried these three months was no longer on his shoulders. Since the equinox last week, he had been able to remove the double burden which was the punishment for their supposed adultery. It had been tiresome, but had suited his purpose admirably as a constant reminder to Cuyaiya of his sacrifice for her. And it had increased his standing in ViraVira. He remembered the day he faced them down when Chuya objected to Elias carrying his wife's share.

He had heard of Cuyaiya's curse, knew now why they all hated her. But he also knew that smallpox was not hers, nor the witch-priestess Tumbai's, to command. It was another difference between himself and most of the other denizens of ViraVira: most would just as soon see Cuyaiya dead, and he needed her alive. He heard a stifled whimper from inside and went in quickly, concerned. Cuyaiya had rolled onto her side and was holding her belly. He took her hand as she moaned and convulsed. "Is it time?" He asked.

She shook her head, her teeth began to chatter. "No," she gasped. "It is still too soon." But her body convulsed again as she lay on the alpaca hide, and he saw a wet stain seeping through the blanket below her waist. "Hold on, Cuyai," he said, using the shortened form of her name. It changed the

meaning somehow, but she had not told him what Cuyai meant. Anyway, it was easier to say and seemed to please her. "I'll get Pailin."

He dashed down the ayllu slope to the head weaver's home and was gratified that she caught his urgency, snatching up a bag of supplies and running up the hill to help her friend. Out of breath, Elias returned at a calmer pace, racking his brains for anything else he might do to assure Cuyai survived the delivery. The priests' house loomed up on his left, jogging his memory. He would ask Fray Juan to come and pray for her. It did not occur to him that he might pray himself.

The unlikely coincidence that had brought this old acquaintance to their meeting place halfway around the world from Granada at exactly the right time sometimes niggled uneasily at his thoughts, but Elias pushed it firmly aside. He had many storerooms in his mind into which disturbing issues were locked; the only questions that mattered were how the task in front of him was best accomplished, and to make the most of each opportunity that presented itself.

And he had made the most of this one. What power being the only person who was able to read gave him! As an adult, Elias had never been in the position his skill now raised him to: a man of consequence in the community, a respected, even revered leader. It made his plans so much easier. He did not even need to convince these people of his good intentions. To them, he spoke for God; they would supply a whole pack-train of llamas at his word. He was confident he could also bend Cuyaiya to take him to the ransom, between Juan's bit of scripture that ViraVira worshiped as a sacred huaca, the llama conopa-thing the Indios all set such store by, and Cuti. *If* she lived.

He ducked as he came through the low door. When the priest's native disciple Pedro was out working the potato harvest, as he was now, the old man sat against the wall staring into space. For a moment Elias was afraid Fray Juan was in one of his crazy spells, debating doctrine with his imaginary two-headed snake.

He started at Elias' entry. "Ah, my son. I am glad you have come. I have been in prayer for your wife. It is her time."

Elias no longer asked how Juan came by his knowledge. If it was sent by some supernatural source—Elias had seen too much of the unexplainable these last months to deny that some such thing existed—it was enough that the source did not see fit to expose his duplicity to the holy man. "Yes, father. Please come. And may I bring the Word also? The sight of it comforts Cuyaiya greatly."

Juan nodded. "You can read it to encourage her, and I can trans-

late into Chachapoya if you become too distraught to remember enough Quechua.”

As Elias helped the priest up the hill, he debated on whether he should also hedge his bets by sending for Tumbai with her medical skills. No, better not to mix the two religions. Cuyaiya’s aunt was still not welcome in ViraVira, and she had such a volatile temper. Besides, it was better that they not be seen together; Fray Juan must not guess at their collaboration. He felt his belt-pouch for the bag of herbs she had given him. Such a simple and elegant solution!

He reviewed their private discussion in his mind. She had told him that because Cuyaiya’s pregnancy began with violent rape it was draining the life out of the mother. That was obvious enough, Elias reflected, even factoring in all the other shocks to her system. At this time, she wanted the child in the same elemental way that any female creature desired the fruition of her body; but once it was born, animal instinct would be done and human reason would take over. According to Tumbai, it would become a curse to her, a constant reminder of pain and violation. Elias agreed with the witch-priestess for his own reasons; it would be that much harder to win Cuyaiya’s cooperation if she had an ever-present cause to dwell on the wrong some unknown Spanish rapists had done to her. And a sickly nursing infant was sure to impede his planned expedition to find the treasure.

Still, if he had learned anything from the affair with Cuti it was that Cuyai could be stubborn beyond all persuasion in such matters. He was not yet so sure of her affections that he could afford to antagonize her. But Tumbai, his new ally, had provided the answer. All Elias had to do was rub the herbs in the little bag on the infant’s skin right after birth, when Inca custom dictated that the father must take the newborn alone for the first ritual cold bath. It would weaken and die within a day and no one would be the wiser.

Inside the house, the atmosphere was tense. Cuyaiya writhed on the bed, gasping, while Pailin held her hand. The woman looked relieved that they had come. “Praise Jesus Apu-Rimac you are here! She is going into convulsions, and someone must hold her down to keep her from wasting what little strength she has left.” As if to confirm Pailin’s words, the pregnant woman’s body arched involuntarily and began to thrash about.

Elias quickly lay down next to Cuyaiya and held her. At times the convulsions were so strong that he had to lean his weight half on top of her to keep her still. The physical contact and the urgency reminded him of the alpaca birthing season that had so recently ended, and he schooled

his mind to screen out the worry and the gold and treat her as though she were another animal. This was a doe, a supremely valuable creature, and she was giving birth. He was here to help, and it was important to keep her calm. Automatically he began crooning the low Spanish tunes that he used around horses, who liked to always hear you and know where you were. The hand that lay across her ready to hold her through the next convulsion kneaded her muscles, distracting from the pain. Elias felt immediate relief from his helplessness in action; this at least was something he knew how to do well.

After the convulsions came stronger labor contractions, which seemed to go on forever. The day turned into night, Cuyai grew weaker, and the baby did not come. Fray Juan prayed and slept and woke to pray again. Elias held her hand, massaged her back, read her the Word in the Quechua she had taught him so well. As she grew weaker he bathed her forehead, hushed her and denied every statement when between contractions she apologized for her ugliness and quick temper. Investing himself in the battle for her life, the hardened cynic found that her survival mattered even apart from the gold.

Elias pitted his will against a malicious fate, and for once he desperately wanted to win. But the tide was ebbing again, the sand slipping from under his feet grain by grain.

He had lost Eva.

He was losing Cuyai.

If there was a god, he must relish the suffering of his creatures.

Pailin, watching the place between the laboring woman's bent knees, cried out in triumph. "The head is coming. Thank Apu-Rimac, it will soon be over!"

But her cry threatened to be prophetic in more ways than one. The child was quickly delivered, a tiny scrap of female flesh that refused to die; the bleeding came after. Elias had seen two alpaca does go down in this manner that season, but he and Karu had saved three others. He directed Pailin to pack cold cloths to stop the blood and elevated Cuyaiya's hips. It slowed the flow, but did not stop it. "Quick! Get the cria to nurse!" he ordered, remembering Karu's teaching but unaware of the switch in terms. "It will help the womb contract."

Pailin placed the infant at the mother's breast. "See, it is a girl, with eyes like the sky when it is green with morning. And so much hair!"

Cuyaiya stroked the baby's cheek listlessly. It made a small mewling sound, then rooted for the nipple and lay quiet, sucking with energy. "A girl," she said dispiritedly. "Not my son Churi." Tears dripped unheeded

down her face. “Fray Juan, I must prepare myself to meet my husband.”

Elias realized that she had never referred to him by this title before. It took Fray Juan a minute to understand the Quechua words. When she realized this and repeated the request in Chachapoya, he came forward and made the cross over her. She smiled and looked up at the corner of the room, her amber eyes focused on something distant that they could not see. They spoke softly together in her mother’s tongue. It was only when the old man drew the cross on her forehead that Elias realized with a sinking heart that Juan was giving her the last rites.

“No!” he said, as strongly as he dared. “*I* am her husband. She must live!”

“Peace, my son. It is not for us to counter the will of God,” Juan replied mildly. “In His grace He has left a child to comfort you.”

Elias felt the old uncontrolled anger begin to rise. He pushed it back; now he must focus, focus, channel the energy. He pushed Juan rudely away, sat down next to Cuyaiya and took her hand, grateful the last month’s coaching had made him so fluent that the words came at his command. “Fight to live, Cuyai! You must fight! I will *not* raise this child without you; it is *you* I want. It is *you* I have worked for all these months. Don’t leave me here with a baby not even mine!”

From another place, an idea came to him completely formed, and in desperation he blurted it out before he thought better of it. “Listen Cuyai. The huaca, the holy box I divine for the Lord Speaker. If you will stay, I will teach you how to interpret for yourself the markings that are the very words of God. You too will be able to call on Jesus Apu-Rimac. It is a great power, you will see!” He found to his surprise that his face was wet. Was he crying?

This statement brought a spark of interest to Cuyaiya’s eyes. Her focus came down from the ceiling in the corner and rested on his face. Elias read the movement of her lips. “Yes, I promise. Before God I swear it!” A tremulous smile cracked his features. “It is really much easier than learning Quechua.”

“The bleeding has stopped,” Pailin said softly.

After Cuyaiya had gone to sleep, Pailin brought him the tiny bundle. “She has not cried yet,” she explained. “Inca babies must cry lustily at birth and get it over with, for they are not allowed to cry later. It is the duty of the father to take her out and bathe her in the spring. Has Cuyaiya spoken of this?”

“Cumbi has explained what I am to do,” Elias said, accepting the blanket-swathed object. As he set out, news of the birth ran ahead of him

and everyone withdrew into their houses to give him privacy.

As Elias stepped carefully along the path, cradling the bundle on his arm and trying to look sufficiently paternal, a tiny hand reached out from the cloth and curled around his thumb in a vigorous grip. He could not help examining it, struck with amazement at the miniature perfectly formed fingers. Quickly he removed his thumb from her fist; he must not see this misbegotten chance product of a violent crime as a person. It is merely an impediment to your plans, he told himself, rehearsing the litany of harsh logic in his hardened heart. It is huarizo, a cross-bred, belonging neither to Spain nor Peru. It is weak, premature; the mother has already tried to kill it once, it almost killed Cuyaiya. She will come to hate it, it has no father, this is really mercy, the child will be better dead.

Elias reached the spring in the center of the ayllu, and laid the baby on the stone lip—ever so lovingly, lest anyone was watching—discreetly palming the small pouch of poisonous herbs Tumbai provided him. He unwrapped the mewling bundle and looking away from the perfection of her little form, dipped her in the cistern.

The icy water produced the desired effect, and the baby began screaming in shock and outrage. Her tiny face went purple and the little limbs flailed. Elias laid the wriggling, dripping body back on the blanket on the stone ledge and picked up the bag. A ray of light from the rising sun illuminated the spring, and in the brightness, Elias saw it.

The extra little toe on the left foot.

Like his own, before it was cut off.

Like his sister Eva's.

He stood as though lightning-struck while the baby wailed and thrashed, then he snatched up the child, wrapping her as though covering the foot would hide from everyone the irrefutable evidence of his complicity in her existence. She quieted against his chest while his thoughts spun in circles. Cuyaiya's tale of assault and rape; the drunken episode that night in Condor Huasi. His periodic binges and what he did in his uncontrollable anger were always blacked out of his memory, but it had been just over eight months ago. This child was his blood, his daughter.

With trembling uncertainty totally foreign to him, the new father pulled back the wrap and examined his baby. There was the sixth digit of his mother's line, and the head full of dark-red curly hair, the oval face, but thank heaven she had Cuyai's nose. The tiny girl turned her head and looked at him with Eva's eyes.

Elias had never, to his knowledge, fathered any children; in fact the opportunities for him to have done so were rare. Nor had he spared any

mental space for fatherhood, except to hate his own sire. This brought another realization to his consciousness: Cuyaiya also hated the anonymous man who had done this to her. How was it she did not know him? What if some day she recognized him as her assailant? He could not claim his daughter as his own; her mother must never, never know that he ever set foot in Condor Huasi.

The child put out her tiny hand again and grasped the little bag of poisons which were still in his palm. Elias snatched it from her and threw it from him with all his strength. Frantically, he put the child's whole arm in the water and washed it again and again. She burst into more wails, until at last he was satisfied that no trace could possibly remain. He wrapped her like the most precious thing he had ever had and carried her up to the sacred place.

Elias instinctively jiggled the blanket until she quieted, crooning an old Arabic lullaby his mother had once sung. The hardened man looked at the newborn face in his arms and its beauty wounded his soul. His daughter gave him the unselfconscious stare of the innocent. His spirits lifted with the sunrise that spilled up the slope in liquid gold; the morning sang in his ears with bird-notes he had never heard before.

He felt tears and laughter bubbling up together from a place so long closed that they burned like fire, but he let them come. She was worthy of all the treasure he would find. With the Inca's gold, he would take her out of this savage land, make a new start for himself in India. He would see his daughter raised like a princess. Here was his true purpose at last!

At the ceremonial place, Cumbi waited to greet him, along with other ayllu residents who had drifted in to witness the naming. "You have brought a daughter to strengthen ViraVira," he said formally. "May she live and grow strong. How is she to be called?"

Elias held the child proudly, holding back the flap of blanket so everyone could see her lovely face. "Her name is Eva!" he announced, grinning from ear to ear.

The ayllu caught his joy and smiled with him, marveling that this good man should be so pleased with a child everyone knew was not his own, trying out the foreign sounds. "AAA-vah."