

I

In which appears the Hand of Death

It was the heart of the dry season when warm days give way to brilliant nights, and the stars send down frost. I left my compound early that morning while the cobblestone streets of Cuzco still dozed in shadow, but thatch roofs glistened under a wakening sun. The sharp mountain air tingled my cheeks and turned breath to vapor. Warm smells from a thousand hearths met my footsteps, and the hollow moan of a conch shell trumpet called priests to worship. A cur wagged its tail and approached with head lowered, then pricked its ears at its master's call and scampered off. The holy city, my beloved city, welcomed another day.

Not even my maids knew of the charge being brought against me that morning. If all goes well, I thought, the incident will never be known outside the royal council. And if it doesn't go well the whole city will know soon enough.

A girl bent under a load of firewood entered the narrow street. I saw at a glance she was a Chupaychu native from the province of Wanaku, for her people's clothes and coiffures were as distinct as any of the hundred other nations that made up the Empire. When the girl saw me she went to her knees, head bowed. She was obviously new to the city, and awed by the great temples and palaces of those who ruled the world. Her humble reaction to my passing was overly polite. I wasn't accompanied by an honor guard with banners, or by maids shading me with feather parasols, nor was I carried in a hammock. Perhaps the girl wasn't yet aware of these distinctions, but if nothing else she should have noticed I wore the silver jewelry of secondary nobility. A polite bow in passing would have sufficed, but the need for showing respect to her Inca masters had been impressed on her, and she took no chances.

Another day I might have passed by with no more than a bemused smile, but seeing her that morning loosed a flood of memories that brought me to a halt. The ashlar walls of the House of Chosen Women rose behind her. I stared at the scene in silence.

I was this girl's age when I first came to holy Cuzco from a distant

province, as ragged and wide-eyed as she. Within the House of Chosen Women I spent years learning to be a proper Inca woman, and as full of wonder and hope as she was now. It was so long ago; I hadn't thought of it in years. From the House of Chosen Women I went in marriage to a minor noble, but by my own merit and daring I earned the gratitude of the Emperor. Now I had maids of my own and wealth beyond count. Royalty befriended me, they curried favor, and they trusted me. But would they come to my aid this morning?

I am Lady Qori Qoyllur, I thought, and I have earned my place among them. They should know I do not accept humiliation. I would rather die than live with their sneers. Will this day end with my execution before jeering crowds? Lift your chin high, and never let them see a furrowed brow.

The girl lowered her eyes, unsure what was expected as I stood before her. I extended my hand and she looked up in surprise. I nodded. She took my hand and I helped her to her feet. An old treasure came to mind, the copper shawl pin they gave me when I entered the House of Chosen Women, which always accompanied me as a talisman. It lay in the bottom of my bag. I fished out this cherished memory of hope and innocence, and fastened it to the girl's shawl. "Its name is Qori," I told her.

I emerged from the street into the sudden openness of the great plaza. Royal compounds of fitted stone framed three sides of this vast expanse, and at the lower end the cobble pavement continued all the way to the stone bridges over the Huatanay River. Across the river another plaza opened for the commoners, surrounded by the mud brick residences of provincial lords. Cuzco flexed under a warming sun, nestled in its basin at the head of the Huatanay Valley, and watched by grass-covered mountains now yellowed by the season.

Squealing children dashed by lost in an early morning game of chase, their voices echoing over the expanse. Soon the plaza would come alive, but as yet no more than a hundred strolled there, making the place seem empty. I inhaled the peace of another perfect morning, and if it was to be my last there was no place I would rather greet it. The stone façade of Emperor Wayna Qhapaq's palace compound faced me across the plaza, its high-peaked roofs layered with thatch waist deep. The great hall towered

over all, and within its cavern I knew lords and ladies from the ten royal houses already gathered, eager to hear the verdict of the Son of the Sun. But the council couldn't start without me.

While crossing the plaza I spotted two provincials squatting together, intent on something at their feet. I knew what the rascals were up to, and veered from my path to stand over them, arms crossed. One glanced at me nervously, but the other continued prying up cobblestones. They were pilgrims to the holy city, and sought a handful of earth from Cuzco's great plaza – the centre of the world. The devout placed tiny figurines of gold or silver in the hole before replacing the cobbles, but this annoying custom left the surface of the great plaza uneven, and that wasn't right. My city deserved better. I waited, tapping my foot, until the despoilers restored the stones properly.

“Lady Qori?” I turned to find a grandfather at my elbow, hunched near double with age and wearing the garb of a foreign lord. Gray hair hung beneath the cloak covering his head.

I bowed politely, and then with a start realized it was Zapana in one of his disguises. As head of the imperial spy web he never appeared in public as himself, and few knew his true identity.

He spoke in a loud, accented voice for everyone to hear. “I was just about to send my chamberlain to find you. The sarsaparilla root you prescribed for my aching joints eased the pain. I hope to get more.”

“Of course, Lord, I have some here in my bag.” Zapana stepped closer while I searched the musty packets of herbs and roots. My yellow healer's bag with its line of red llamas was ragged and soiled, and it didn't match my outfit, but it was my badge of station and I never walked the streets without it.

When Zapana met my eyes I saw a sparkle of mischief, and the knowing look that made me blush and duck my head. Being a widow I am accustomed to wishful glances, or outright leers, and it annoyed me to find that Zapana, even in disguise, could still heat my cheeks. But then, I wasn't expecting him.

Zapana gazed around the plaza in an unconcerned manner, while I made a show of searching my bag. We conversed in private tones.

“I spoke with the Emperor, Qori, and reminded Him of all you've done

for the Empire.” Zapana’s voice was serious now.

“I didn’t ask you to interfere,” I said. “Besides, what do you care?”

Zapana flinched as if I’d slapped him. “Qori, I’m doing all I can for you. I didn’t come to fight about us.”

“You didn’t come to fight about us? As if there ever was an ‘us’.”

Zapana looked so miserable I almost relented, but he only got what he deserved. “Very well,” I said, “you spoke with the Emperor. What did He say?”

“He remains torn. He says you are precious to Him, one of the few He can trust, and He would give you anything you ask . . . anything but this.”

“If I’m so precious, why doesn’t He refuse to hear the charge?”

“You know He can’t do that, not now. Soon He departs to inspect the southern provinces, and He will be away from Cuzco for years. The holy city must be left united. He needs the support of every royal house, and in front of the council He must appear impartial.”

“He’s throwing me to the scavengers.”

Zapana squeezed my arm. “Don’t, Qori. He needs us, all of us, and He will still do what He can for you, but He can’t over-rule the council and risk splitting loyalties.”

“Then I stand alone?”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

“Three youths! Three innocent, defenseless boys. She had them slaughtered, Lord, and stood there gloating while their throats were cut.” A gasp rose from the assembly in the Emperor’s great hall. Captain Atoco paused for effect, his arm outstretched and finger pointed at me. I followed the finger back to its owner, a lean man with a narrow face and tiny, nervous eyes, his lipless mouth set in outrage. He had waited long to make this charge, and he was well rehearsed.

A hum of disgust filled the cavernous hall and stares pinned me from every side. The Emperor sat on His imperial stool atop a dais covered in jaguar pelts, attended by concubines poised to serve with feather fans and golden drinking vessels. Wayna Qhapaq’s face remained impassive. He knew this was only the opening gambit.

I stepped forward and lowered my eyes. “Lord?” The Emperor’s

hand twitched, signaling his willingness to listen.

I spread my arms showing open palms. “Son of the Sun, those who died were young, it’s true, but they were Chachapoya rebels, Lord. If I hadn’t ordered their execution – ”

“Execution?” Atoco shouted. “It was murder!” The nobles standing with him howled their agreement and waved fists.

It had all started the previous year during the Chachapoya campaign. Atoco felt humiliated when the warlord Chalcochima placed me in command of the raiding party. “But, Lord,” he had protested, “Lady Qori Qoyllur? Do women lead Inca warriors? It’s impossible, Lord. I won’t follow a woman, and I don’t need her help on this mission.”

Chalcochima thanked me with a look for keeping my silence. I pulled my cloak tighter and lowered my eyes. The argument was expected. Mist clung to forested, jagged mountains behind which a pale glow marked the approaching dawn. Another troop hurried into position for the diversionary attack.

“We discussed this last night,” Chalcochima said. “I told you I would be sending a senior person with you.”

Atoco’s hands went to his hips. “A senior person, yes, but a woman?”

“Not just a woman, Captain Atoco. Lady Qori is a royal physician, and she has the Emperor’s confidence. Before troubles erupted in this province she made a healing mission among the Chachapoyas – unaccompanied and at great risk to herself, I might add – and she knows every trail beyond those mountains. She’s the only one who can lead you safely to the bridge.”

Atoco sighed. “Very well, as guide, but why place her in command?”

“Because that’s what I’ve decided. You know what’s at stake. The entire province is in revolt. If we don’t deal with these rebels others will be inspired to rise against us. How many victories have you delivered to the Emperor thus far?” In answer Atoco examined his feet.

Wayna Qhapaq’s father conquered the province of Chachapoya, but it is far to the north of Cuzco on the eastern flank of the Empire. This rolling land of forest and mist received little notice until the Chachapoyas slaughtered their Inca overseers, delivering the first serious challenge to Wayna Qhapaq’s reign.

Chalcochima knew what Captain Atoco and everyone below the rank of warlord didn't – Lady Qori Qoyllur, royal physician, was also the imperial spy Inca Moon. If Atoco's mission wasn't critical, I thought, the Emperor wouldn't be sending his best agent.

Atoco stared back at Chalcochima. "We'll smash them this time, Lord. I swear it on my life."

"It may cost your life," Chalcochima replied, but he looked at me when he said it.

"Our southern army is ready?" Atoco asked.

"Yes, and counting on you, as are we all. The Chachapoya host has gathered in a valley where it can be surrounded and destroyed – *if* we can prevent reinforcements from reaching them. What stops us from severing their northern reserve forces from the main body is that fort," he said, indicating the walls on the ridge above. "We've tried for days to take it at enormous cost, but it can't be stormed. Their armies move with impunity behind that line of mountains, and when our attack begins in the south the Chachapoyas will send runners up here for reinforcements. If those messengers get through our southern army will be flanked and slaughtered."

The warlord fell silent. I glanced at the men and saw their jaws set. Shadows hurrying through the dark around us took on the outlines of men. Sunrise was about to illuminate the ridge above, and a thousand Inca warriors muttered prayers and prepared to meet their ancestors. It would be another hopeless assault, men throwing themselves against sheer walls while boulders smashed heads, spears disemboweled, and arrows lodged in chests, or worse, in backs. All this to provide a diversion while I led Atoco and his ten men through a hidden pass and down to the river crossing on the far side of the ridge. The river plunges through a narrow gorge for a great distance, but in one place huge logs provide a rough bridge. This is where the Chachapoya messengers had to cross when the attack began in the south, and this is the place I chose to stop them. Chalcochima wanted to send a hundred soldiers with me, but that number would have been detected. Stealth and surprise were our best weapons. Besides, the plan was to silence the solitary runners, not engage the Chachapoya army. Still, I needed every one of Atoco's men to secure the bridge.

“My prisoners!” Atoco shouted to the nobles around him in the great hall. “They surrendered to me. It was my duty to keep them safe. And now my honor, and that of my entire lineage, is smudged.”

Insults and taunts erupted from both sides of the hall, sending startled birds darting among the rafters. Wayna Qhapaq remained motionless, never blinking. The royal fringe of emperorship draped his brows – a hand’s breadth of red tassels set with gold tubes, and earspools encrusted with precious stones framed his broad face. He sat on a black stool carved as a snarling puma, inlaid with turquoise and sacred red shell; His stocky form layered in brilliant garments. Though still young, He conducted proceedings with the aloof dignity expected from the Lord of the Four Quarters. We stood barefoot before Him.

A ripple began at the rear of the crowd and moved forward, with people turning to look and quickly stepping aside. A path opened. Lady Q’enti glided forth stealing the breath of those in her wake: a vision of copper beauty with huge, doe eyes, her slender neck erect and midnight hair cascading to her waist. Q’enti raised her voice to the assembly. “Peace. Calm yourselves my brothers and sisters. Remember we are in the presence of our holy father the Emperor, Shepherd of the Sun. Quiet please,” she said, imploring both sides with open hands. The commotion subsided when she raised her arms high, providing the men with a better view of her generous figure, and the women a chance to admire her finery.

My veins ran cold. What’s she doing here? I wondered. This only concerns Atoco.

Q’enti turned to the dais. Eyes down, she performed the much’a to the Emperor, bending low from the waist with arms stretched forward, palms up, then bringing her fingertips to her lips in a reverend kiss.

Wayna Qhapaq blinked once. He hadn’t expected to see Q’enti either. We both knew her arrival bode ill, but what did she want?

Q’enti addressed the assembly. “Brothers and sisters; let us not cloud the issue with anger. It’s true Lady Qori deprived Captain Atoco of his captives by ordering his men to dispatch them. She was in command, and she alone bears responsibility for the deaths. Captain Atoco is justified in his protest.” Q’enti exchanged a nod with Atoco. “And it’s true these captives were young men,” she added, “bound and helpless when they

were sent to meet their ancestors. But, on Lady Qori’s behalf let it be said, the circumstances were unusual ... indeed, desperate.”

Of course you’ll appear to take my part, Q’enti, I thought. You’re such a ‘sympathetic’ creature. Let them all remember how the magnanimous Lady Q’enti pleaded on behalf of poor Qori Qoyllur. What’s your real game?

I had led the raiding party safely through the pass, never stopping to look back on the slaughter below the fortress walls. We slipped through the dripping forest like shadows, bent low and silent, knowing the receding clamor of battle had been our best cover. Every step took us deeper into the lands of savage hordes where detection meant death for us, but worse, the annihilation of our southern army if the Chachapoya messengers got through. The snap of a twig brought us to a sudden halt – one of our men again, I exhaled slowly – and then off we went in a crouched run, hoping not to startle birds or blunder into an enemy patrol.

The game trails wound through bush-choked forest down to the gorge, and as the sun rose I hurried the men along, fearful the offensive would begin before we secured the crossing. Atoco insisted on staying at my heels, though I would have preferred him a stone throw behind. He and his men were alert to sight and sound, but they were too preoccupied with their surroundings. My senses projected ahead to the unseen and unheard. Then with a shiver, a familiar sensation tingled the back of my neck like the touch of a cold hand, and I thrust my arm up to signal a halt. The men stopped in stride, eyes searching the forest.

Nothing moved. There should have been birds fluttering and chirping among the trees, but the forest lay deathly still. Atoco tapped my shoulder and gave me a puzzled look. He didn’t hear the silence or sense the danger ahead. I signaled for him to wait while I went on alone.

The cold hand tightened its grip when I reached a fork in the trail. I cast my senses up each branch. Danger lurked in both directions, but was strongest on the path ahead. No time for hesitation. I raced forward, bent double and ready to drop behind cover. After a distance I paused for breath, jumping off the trail to crouch behind a tree and feel my surroundings. The careless thud of feet ambling up the forest trail reached my ears. I listened and counted. How many men? Four? Three? No,

two.

They came into view; two tall, light-skinned men clad only in loincloths and cloaks, and daubed with Chachapoya war paint. Barely awake, they strolled with heads down and unstrung bows dangling at their sides. Before setting out I warned Atoco not to engage the enemy before the river crossing, because I didn't want a trail of bodies marking our passage. I would have preferred to let this sleepy patrol go on its way, but they were headed toward Atoco, and we couldn't risk even one cry of surprise. Atoco's men were hardened warriors, but they weren't taught to deal swift and silent death. That was my duty.

I was well trained as an agent and had 'removed' my share of adversaries over the years, but it's easier to kill when there isn't time to think about it. My muscles tensed as I watched the Chachapoyas, and a rancid taste entered my mouth. The hilt of my dagger felt slippery. I held it in my right hand, blade down, and clenching my fist around the handle I used my left hand to press the fingers into a grip. Forcing myself to take deep, slow breaths, I prepared to spring.

The lead Chachapoya stopped and gestured to a side trail. I shrank back but kept my eyes on them. His companion shrugged, and then the two of them wandered off in a new direction, away from Atoco's men. I lay back with a deep sigh, heart pounding, and after a moment used my left hand to pry my fingers from the dagger hilt.

With the Chachapoyas safely gone I started back, but then up a head war cries split the morning air. Atoco's men! I ran for the screams.

The fight had been brief but deadly. Atoco grinned when he saw me; his spear still dripped gore. Ten Chachapoyas lay sprawled in the bushes, and three others – the youngest of them, hardly more than boys – huddled together on their haunches, hands covering their heads, whimpering. Atoco's victory had cost him three of his men – three more than I could afford. I questioned him with a look. The exchange that followed was in hushed tones.

"It was over in an instant," he said trying to look modest. "They hardly got off a shout."

"I heard them."

He shrugged, and then looked about innocently. "No Chachapoyas.

They don't know we're here."

"I told you, no fighting until we reach the river."

Again the shrug. "They came down that other path, and walked right into our ambush. They were so close I could smell them. Besides, I think they were just pretending not to see us so they could return with more warriors. I decided to finish them."

"But you didn't." I raised my chin at the captives.

"They surrendered."

"And what are you going to do with them now?"

Atoco looked unconcerned. "Bind and gag them, and leave a man to stand guard. We can pick them up on the way back."

I knew Atoco. He was only interested in the prisoners as booty.

"No guard. We were few enough to begin with, and now you've lost three. We need every man for the river crossing. I won't have this mission jeopardized further for the sake of your war trophies." Atoco's eyes narrowed. I added, "And I won't argue about it. I'm in command."

Atoco exhaled loudly, then swallowed hard. Staring me in the eye he said, "Very well, Lady Qori, then we'll bind them tight and hope they're not found."

"Can't risk it."

"Then what do you suggest?"

He saw the answer on my face and said, "But . . . but I protest."

I ignored him, and caught the eye of a soldier as he finished tying the prisoners. When I flicked my thumb under my chin the man looked to Atoco. "Do as Lady Qori orders," he said between clenched teeth. Then he brightened. "Let it be on her head. Obviously she's forgotten the Emperor's decree."

Now, standing before Cuzco's elite, it was Lady Q'enti who reminded the royal council of the Emperor's decree.

"Yes, the situation was desperate," Q'enti said imploring those around her. "Consider what was at stake. Consider those brave few deep in savage territory. Consider the outcome." Q'enti paused dramatically, and such a silence filled the hall that a bird could be heard fluttering in the dark rafters above. "But, it's also true that our Emperor in His wisdom had previously decreed that all rebels who surrendered would be spared." A

murmur rose from the audience. “With due respect to Captain Atoco, here lies the heart of the matter. Are there no circumstances under which the Emperor’s orders can be disobeyed?” A rumble swept the hall in answer to her question.

In spite of myself I admired Q’enti’s deftness at delivering an indictment while appearing to plead for mercy. It was brilliant, really, elevating an argument over war captives to a charge of treason. Q’enti savored every moment like a puma playing with a rabbit.

We took the river crossing. There were few guards on either side, and they weren’t expecting us. I had Atoco’s men wear the clothes of the dead sentries, and take their positions. The messengers suspected nothing when they sped onto the bridge, but none reached the other side. Their bodies vanished in the churning gorge below, and the Chachapoyas never knew of our southern offensive until it was too late.

At the Emperor’s camp I shifted all credit to Atoco, then I bathed at a waterfall, donned court dress, and sat demurely with the ladies. It didn’t matter to me. The important ones like Chalcochima and Wayna Qhapaq knew it was Inca Moon who delivered the victory. To the rest of the court I was simply Lady Qori, who served as guide to the brave Captain Atoco. I was certain Atoco’s vanity wouldn’t let him reveal I was his commander, and the incident of the Chachapoya prisoners would be forgotten.

After such an overwhelming defeat the Chachapoyas surrendered. The men, fearful of retribution, melted into the forests. Their families might have been massacred – Wayna Qhapaq was still furious over earlier losses – but a Chachapoya woman who had been his father’s concubine begged mercy for her people, and Wayna Qhapaq the All Merciful relented. He satisfied himself with moving some Chachapoya villages to the Cuzco region, and replacing them with loyal colonists to guard the frontier and keep an eye on the locals. Many Chachapoya girls, mostly the daughters of chiefs, were sent to the House of Chosen Women in Cuzco, and a new Inca governor came to rule the province. The Chachapoyas considered these terms fortunate, and Wayna Qhapaq had a military victory to celebrate when He returned to Cuzco – the first of His reign.

Atoco received a gold disk to wear on his chest, and promotion to captain of five hundred. A few days later he went north to Quito, and I

went home to my beloved Cuzco.

Wayna Qhapaq reaffirmed His control over other provinces, and then returned to Cuzco in splendor. The crowds in the great square thundered when He walked on the backs of defeated chiefs in the victory parades. But Atoco, determined to share the honors, also came back to Cuzco for the celebrations. Soon after, an official came in private to my compound and delivered Atoco's charge. Why would Atoco wait until we were both in Cuzco, and then insist on a hearing before the royal council? He lacked the patience and cleverness for such a move. I should have guessed someone else was behind it, and I cursed myself for not having seen this coming. Who could persuade him to acknowledge I had been his commander? There was only one person in Cuzco with that power, the one who now revealed herself as Atoco's patron – Lady Q'enti.

Q'enti wasn't Atoco's patron in any official sense – it could be said she was patron to half the men of Cuzco – but he craved her notice and she cultivated his lust, snaring yet another eager participant in her endless schemes. I could handle Atoco, but Q'enti was a power unto herself, and even the Emperor thought twice where she was involved.

It was now only days before the Emperor set forth on an inspection tour of the south; the perfect time for Q'enti's ambush. In the midst of all this activity Atoco's charge might have been a petty annoyance, but Q'enti elevated it to treason on the eve of an important expedition. Were the Emperor's orders subject to circumstance? Could commanders choose to interpret His decrees as they wished? By her own admission Lady Qori Qoyllur had ignored the Emperor's proclamation. The discipline of vast armies now depended on Wayna Qhapaq's verdict.

Q'enti played conciliator before the royal council in the great hall. "Please, friends, let us not judge our sister Lady Qori too harshly. She acted for the good of the Empire." But Q'enti herself had already spoken the critical charge, and her pleas were drowned amid shouts and fist shaking.

"She insults our Emperor, and through Him all of us."

"No one disobeys the Emperor's orders. Never."

"Traitor. Gut her here and now."

"Flay her alive."

“The House of Beasts. Send her to the House of Beasts.”

At mention of the House of Beasts the crowd hushed, but heads nodded grimly. It was a noblewoman, one of Q’enti’s admirers, who suggested this punishment. I knew then Q’enti had rehearsed them all, though she murmured, “No, no,” her hands clasped in pleading for poor Qori Qoyllur. Wayna Qhapaq sat erect and motionless as always, his gaze fixed at the far end of the hall.

It wasn’t death I feared, or even the means of death, but . . . disgrace? Those Chachapoya boys were an unfortunate incident – Atoco’s fault. I did only what was necessary, and I did it for my Emperor. No, Q’enti, I thought, I won’t surrender. I won’t let you win. You’ll never defeat Inca Moon.

“Lord of the World,” I addressed the Emperor, “the order to end those rebel’s lives was given to ensure your victory. Have I not served you faithfully in many ways?”

He knew what I meant, even if those gathered did not. I spoke as Inca Moon, the agent who worked quietly among His friends and His enemies, gathered information, thwarted coups, saved armies, and, yes, ‘removed’ those who threatened the peace of the Empire. He needed me.

For the first time Wayna Qhapaq looked at me, and spoke. “The healer Lady Qori Qoyllur has served us well.” He returned His gaze to the distance. Splinters worked my belly.

Q’enti gave an almost imperceptible nod to one of her followers, a man who said, “Yes, she has served the imperial family faithfully, until now. No one counters the Emperor’s orders.”

Shouts rose again.

“It’s treason.”

“Stone her.”

“Break her back.”

“Bury her alive.”

“Tan her skin for a drum cover.”

“The House of Beasts.”

Q’enti motioned Atoco with a twitch of her shoulder. His acting was poor, but he tried his best to sound forgiving. “Hear me. Lady Qori is guilty by her own admission and she must be punished, but in

consideration of her past services I will be satisfied to see her head displayed on a spear.”

It was a generous concession. A beheading is at least quick, though the display brings shame to the victim’s family.

Before anyone could respond Q’enti spoke again, this time summoning tears to her eyes. “Wait, please, anything but death. I implore you!”

This was the signal her accomplices waited for, and the moment she was leading up to, for in truth she didn’t want me dead. That was too easy. She wanted to watch me suffer to the end of my days.

A man at the back called, “Then let her continue to serve the Empire, as a soldier’s whore. She can line up her troops every night.”

Coarse laughter erupted, but it wasn’t dismissive. The noblewoman spoke again, her tone flat and final. “Our sons march with the army. She will not defile their honor. Put her in the brothel outside the city. Let the peasants have her.”

Stunned, I begged Mother Earth to swallow me. Q’enti’s face showed horror, but I saw in her eyes maniacal laughter. Yet still she wasn’t finished with me.

“There is one other alternative,” Q’enti said.

My mouth fell open. What more could she do to me? The nobles shifted in confusion. Atoco looked puzzled.

Q’enti waited for silence. “Our Lord Emperor, Lover of the Poor, has subdued those who rebelled in Chachapoya. But Captain Atoco has just returned from farther north, from Quito and beyond, where he heard stirrings of rebellion among the northern tribes. How long will it be before they rise against us?”

Q’enti paused again, basking in the attention. Not even the birds in the rafters moved.

“Lady Qori is guilty, it’s true,” Q’enti said, “but if she can secure the allegiance of the northern barbarians for all time, wouldn’t that be worth postponing the sentence?”

I noticed she said ‘postpone’ instead of ‘suspend,’ but it seemed irrelevant in the moment.

“Yes, of course,” Atoco replied, “but . . . but how?”

“By delivering into the hands of the Emperor the one thing the northerners won’t fight without – the Eye of the Condor.”

The assembly held an incredulous gasp, and then burst into laughter. I almost joined them. For a moment Q’enti had everyone convinced she was serious, but it was a cruel jest.

Wayna Qhapaq didn’t share the amusement. He remained stone-faced, staring over the heads of the assembly. He stood suddenly, and this unexpected motion brought silence while everyone held a bow.

“Lady Qori,” Wayna Qhapaq’s voice came loud and firm, “do you accept the quest for the Eye of the Condor?”

This is a trick, I thought, why is he asking the impossible? “But, Lord,” I replied, “it’s a jest. The thing doesn’t exist.”

“Do you accept?”

My thoughts whirled. Q’enti wouldn’t have suggested such nonsense unless it was another of her traps. “Lord, I . . . I . . .”

Wayna Qhapaq blinked twice. He never waited longer than that for an answer.

“If Lady Qori agrees to the quest I will postpone her sentencing,” He announced to the court. “If not, I will pass sentence on her five days hence.” Without another word He strode from the hall.