

I

**In which the Events that begin this account
Commence without hesitation.**

The south wind drove us before white-fringed waves. Cold spray lashed my face. Another echoing boom of thunder rolled across the lake taking my breath with it. Now just four lengths behind us the lead boat swooped in like an eagle. Its flankers, slipping from sight and then rising on the crests, gained steadily. Lightning laced the darkness. I huddled in the stern of our reed boat watching the great sail of our pursuer coming up on the right. They're going to take us broadside, I thought. Capture is inevitable. Better to die by my own hand.

When the rain hit I looked back at the island of Taquile, only to see it vanish behind the gray-black veil racing toward us. I pulled my cloak tighter and drew my knees under my dress. Something whizzed past my ear. A shout jerked my head to the bow. The bowman gestured wildly over the side. He was alone, his mate gone. A second volley of sling stones whistled by, one catching the helmsman in the thigh, but he held on. The eagle boat, now two lengths out to our right, began closing. Pitching and rolling in their craft, the spearmen poised and the slingers reloaded.

I heard them shouting. They were Aymara speakers, but at first I couldn't tell from which nation. Qolla? I wondered, or Pacaje? No, Lupaqa. It doesn't matter; they're all against us. I slipped a hand under my shawl seeking Eagle Woman - my spirit-sister, and gripped the reassuring outline of her wooden tube. She lay snug against my breast, suspended from a cord at my neck. Her deadly secret can save me from the dishonor of capture, I thought. Be brave and unsheathe her now.

The squall hit with a blast that snapped our lines leaving the square reed sail flapping helplessly, pinned only to the top of the mast. The bowman leapt to catch a trailing rope, but the boat pitched sending him over the side. I grabbed a pole and held it out to the flailing arms in the water, struggling to keep my balance while the boat heaved and rolled

sideways against the wind. The eagle boat fared little better, but her sail was intact and her crew worked frantically to lower it while the warriors huddled together. The wind threw a cold, cutting rain in my face, which then became a sheet-downpour of such intensity that the eagle boat turned to a shadowy blur, its flankers lost to sight.

“Take the steering oar,” the helmsman shouted.

“I can’t let go of this pole,” I called back.

The rain bounced off the water blinding me. The man alongside tugged frantically, almost pulling me overboard. The stern swung out leaving us broadside to the wind, near capsizing. Suddenly the pole went slack. Nothing. He’d lost his grip. The lake was his bed now.

I lunged for the stern and took hold of the steering oar. “To the left,” the helmsman shouted in my ear, “try to turn the bow.” He scrambled to the mast, fighting to bring the sail under control.

The rain turned to stinging, bouncing hail, and in moments the craft filled with frozen pellets. The eagle boat slammed against us but no one tried to board, all hands there occupied bailing hailstones. I crouched over the oar, chin on my breast against the pounding, biting ice stones, unable to see more than arm’s length. The helmsman appeared on his knees in front of me, frantically casting handfuls of ice over the side, but we sank lower under the weight while the waves rose around us.

An avalanche of water crashed over me tearing the oar from my grasp. The boat rolled, floundering sideways. Then a second wave hit and in a blink I found myself in the water, thrashing to reach the surface.

Reed boats float, at least until they become too sodden, and when I poked gasping to the surface I glimpsed the long bottom of our craft bobbing nearby. Beyond it the mast of the eagle boat wavered, and then above the din came shouts and the mast vanished. All this in an instant for the hail bounced off the water into my face, and then another wave plunged me under. Fighting hard I surfaced once more, but I could no longer see our boat or knew in which direction I faced. A hand thrust up beside me. I grabbed. My helmsman came up, sputtering and swallowing as much water as air.

“Kick your legs. Keep your head up,” I shouted. He clung to me in

terror pulling me down. “Your tunic,” I yelled, “take it off.” But he ignored me, eyes wild with fear. My wool clothes weren’t made for swimming, and their weight alone was enough to drag me under. I took a deep breath and let my head sink, pulling the tupu pins and shaking loose from my heavy cloak and dress. Sandals, shoulder bag and bonnet went with them until I was naked, except for Eagle Woman who remained on a cord at my neck. When the weight of my clothes passed from me, so did the helmsman’s grip. I surfaced gulping air, and for an instant I saw him clutching my empty dress. Then a wave passed over and he surfaced no more. I drifted alone with the night and the storm.

They can’t swim, at least none I’ve ever seen. Though the people of Lake Tititqaqa pass their lives beside it and on it, the waters are too cold for play. Since I was raised on the shores of the ocean I could swim as well as a seal, though it was years since I’d done so, but once learned it’s not forgotten. Now free and alone I floated easily on the swells. No cries for help, no wreckage, no sign of other survivors. The pursuit boats had met the same fate and vanished with their crews. The hail turned back to rain and slackened, but continued in a steady downpour. The worst of the squall passed but the night remained black.

Drift with the wind, I thought, and eventually you’ll reach the north shore. But how long can I last in these frigid waters? My teeth chattered and I could no longer feel the water against my skin. I pressed my fingers together but felt nothing.

Swim! I ordered myself. Keep moving. You’re the only one who knows the plans of the Aymara lords. The Emperor depends on you.

Even while forcing my limbs to move I knew I’d never reach shore. But there were reed banks at the shallow north end of the lake, and, it was said, even floating islands.

I had heard of the curious floating islands on the journey to Lake Tititqaqa. They are the domains of the Uru people, a nasty, brutish lot by all accounts, many of who hire themselves out as laborers on the mainland, though they stay apart and are despised by everyone. They speak an incomprehensible language, quite unrelated to any of the civilized dialects of the region, and no one knows where they came from, though they claim to have been there since creation.

Were the floating islands somewhere ahead, or was I in the wrong part of the lake?

For an eternity I thrashed in the icy water until my arms became too heavy to lift. I rolled on my back and tried kicking my feet, but they hardly responded. I wasn't even sure I was headed in the right direction. Only the rain and the swells and the blackness witnessed my struggle, and they didn't care. I envisioned myself as a tiny lamp flickering in a cold, black, cavernous room, and sputtering into blissful sleep. The face of my brother Qhari floated beside me. He held out his arms, beckoning me to rest. . . and drift with him. . . forever.

Something. . . something pressing against me. I was with Qhari now and didn't want to leave, warm and sliding off to sleep. I moved a hand to brush the thing away. It wouldn't leave. My eyelids fluttered open. Reeds? I floated over a bed of them, rising and falling with the swells. I clutched a handful and rolled over. A dense mass lay just ahead. With numb hands I pulled my way toward it, and with the last of my strength heaved my arms over the bank. Pressing my face against the spongy mass, I let my legs float free. The bank itself moved with the swells. I realized I had reached one of the floating islands, land of the despised Uru.

"Well, well, look at the garbage the lake washed up." The hostile voice spoke in the Lupaqa dialect. I looked up wearily. He towered over me, hands on his hips, legs set apart against the roll of the island.

There were other survivors, after all.

"There weren't any women in our boats," he said, "so you must have been in the one we chased. I thought I saw a woman just before we went over."

"Please," I said in Lupaqa, reaching a hand to him.

"Do you know how many men died trying to stop you? No, you evil bitch, there were no orders about taking prisoners."

He knelt over me and unfastened the mace hanging at his side. I dug my toes into the bank below water and slipped numb hands to my breast. Eagle Woman hung there, but I could scarcely move my fingers to unlock her stinger.

He raised his mace. "Now, this little fish goes back in the lake, forever."

Eagle Woman came apart, and with newfound strength I lunged upward, driving the stinger into his thigh. He yelled in surprise, covering the wound with his left hand, his right still raised and holding the mace. His eyes bulged, looking at me curiously, then his mouth fell open, tongue out, croaking for breath. Eyelids fluttering, the mace fell from his hand, his raised arm flopped at his side and his chin slumped. Still kneeling upright, all movement ceased.

I dragged myself out of the water and lay panting beside him, feeling the roll of the island beneath me. Overhead the sky remained dark and the wind blew, but the rain tapered to a drizzle. I was on land, or a sort of land, and alive.

I had been told the Uru live in small groups on some forty of these floating islands - their undisputed homelands, for none but they can live in such places. They build their islands by harvesting reeds and heaping them waist high, where they rot, providing the spongy ground on which they live.

“Look, there’s someone over there. Isn’t that. . .?” The voice trailed off. I found myself staring up at two more Lupaqa warriors, eyes fixed on their motionless comrade.

There wasn’t time to replace Eagle Woman’s stinger, even if I had the strength to raise my head, which I didn’t. I lay on my back and stared up at them like a cornered doe. They peered down at me warily. One of them shook the kneeling man. The body fell sideways.

“Not a mark on him. What did you do to him? Who are you? Speak.”

“Uru,” I replied weakly.

“Uru? Uru women don’t lie naked out in a storm. No, you’re off that boat we chased. What did you do to him?” he asked gesturing at the fallen man.

“I found him so. Please, cover me. Help me.”

The two exchanged looks. Their faces remained hard.

“Should we kill her now, or take her back for ‘questioning’?” the short one wondered aloud.

“Why bother?” his companion replied. “I’m cold and wet. Let’s tie her hands and roll her into the lake.”

“Wait.” I heaved myself up on one elbow. “I’m worth a hundred llamas.”

“You? Why?”

“Reward. Your lord wants me alive.”

They looked at each other again. The short one shrugged. “She’s probably lying, but - ”

The pole caught him full on the back of his head laying him flat, face down. The other whirled but took a pole butt in the stomach. A second blow laid him beside his companion. The Uru emerged from the night - short, stocky men, their only weapons the long raft poles they held upright like spears. One placed the end of his pole against my forehead, taking aim.

“Thank you for killing our enemies,” I said in Runasimi, the Inca tongue. The man lifted his pole from my head and looked at the others. A babble began, of which I didn’t understand a word. He turned back to me and raised his pole again.

I looked up at him. “Those filthy Lupaqa should sleep well tonight, and all the others I sent to a watery rest,” I continued in Runasimi. He paused again, uncertain. Suddenly a woman pushed her way through the crowd and shoved my captor aside, shouting angrily at him. He shrank, showing deference. She knelt and removed her cloak, covering me while muttering in that strange language.

“Thank you,” I said with relief.

She spoke to me in Runasimi then, or an accented, broken version of it, which I won’t attempt to imitate, but the sense of it was this: “You speak the Inca language? I thought so. I was in service at an Inca garrison once. Here, cover yourself.” She wrapped her cloak around me, and I was so relieved I paid no heed to her next remarks. “You’re not much to look at, but it’s not good for our men to see women naked, even skinny ones. Are those breasts? Well, at least you’ve got proud nipples.”

Male nakedness didn’t trouble her. When the men finished stripping the three Lupaqa and began arguing over the spoils she spoke sharply to them. Reluctantly, a cloak and tunic were handed over. She pulled me to my feet and retrieved her own cloak from around my shoulders, spreading it wide to shield me from the others. “Now put those on,” she

said nodding at the pile of sodden clothes. "I know they're wet but you'll soon warm up, and you won't be needing them for long anyway."

It was embarrassing having to put on men's clothes, and three sizes too big, but what troubled me more was the way she suggested I wouldn't be needing them for long.

One of the Lupaqa groaned, and promptly had his head smashed in. The same treatment befell his companion, and even the one I killed received several whacks, because they couldn't find a fatal-looking wound and wanted to make sure. They rolled the bodies into the water and pushed them down with the poles, maneuvering them under the bank. None reappeared. I imagined them floating against the spongy underside of the reed mass. A practical means of disposal, I thought, and a useful addition to their floating island. My hostess grinned. "There will be good fishing here for a while."

"Did any boats land?" I asked, wondering if there were more of my pursuers about.

"One overturned vessel washed up with a few half-drowned Pacaje clinging to it, but they didn't last long," she said, nodding to where the Lupaqa had vanished. "My husband is busy searching for others. We found many drowned bodies in the weeds. The fish will have a feast. No craft could survive that storm, unless, of course, it was manned by Uru."

"Thank you for saving me," I said, but she cut me short with a look.

"You treat us like animals on the mainland, but this is our land," she said pointing at the undulating ground. "Here you are at our mercy, and mercy is something our neighbors never show. Why should we? No, Inca, I covered you out of decency, but don't expect mercy. You'll join your friends -"

"My friends? I hardly speak their barbarous tongue. They were trying to kill me."

"Kill you? But you were among them."

"No, I was trying to escape in another boat. They would have caught me had it not been for the storm."

"Is it true?"

"Have you found other Incas? No, you haven't, because I'm the only

one. Like you I hate the Aymara.”

The Uru village clustered on a rise at the other side of the island, a collection of huts hardly more than a sling throw from where I'd crawled ashore. But in the darkness and storm the huts were invisible, being made of the same reeds as the boats and the island itself, and the Uru were snug in their dwellings while the storm blew over, unaware at first that strangers washed up nearby. Upon discovery their reaction was swift.

The rain ceased and the wind died to a breeze as we entered the village. The night sky brightened with stars again. My hostess wasn't convinced by my story, but thought her husband, the headman, might be amused by it, and decided to let him pronounce whether or not I would live to see the dawn.

A girl added rushes to the fire. Everything around me was made from those plants: rope, baskets, sleeping mats, hats, cloaks, door, walls, and roof, and a handful of green shoots even simmered in a pot by the hearth. The Uru, I realized, literally lived on reeds, and whatever else the lake provided.

The headman peered suspiciously at me across the fire. “Why were they chasing you?” he asked through his wife, who appeared to be the only one with a few words of Runasimi on the island. Most of the others - at least the men - seemed to have knowledge of the Aymara dialects, but I thought it best to insist on Runasimi. Awkward though the translation was, it set me apart from their hated masters who, I gathered, were exploiting them long before the Incas came.

“They were trying to kill me because I discovered their secret.”

“What secret?”

The truth would mean nothing to them, so I tried to think of something they would understand. “They've been stealing llamas from the Incas - the Qolla, Lupaqa, Pacaje, all of them, thieves!”

When the woman translated the people crowding the hut laughed and the headman said, “You've only just discovered they're all thieves? Tell us something we don't know.” When the laughter died again he leaned forward and fixed his eyes on me. “What makes you any different, Inca?”

I knew my answer would determine whether I lived or died. As a

people the Uru were less than minor players in the great game of empire, and cared nothing for who succeeded to the Royal Fringe in Cuzco, but they hated the Aymara even more than the Incas. How to turn this to my advantage? Silence fell on the room, all ears waiting to hear me defend Inca rule.

“You know the Inca are more powerful than all the Aymara combined. If I can get word of this thievery to my master, they’ll be punished. Imagine a row of poles topped with the heads of Aymara lords. Would you like to see that? And, the Incas will reward you with one hundred llamas.”

The translation met with a round of approving murmurs. An elder stood and babbled to the assembly, and then another and another, each accompanied by much nodding. The headman seemed content with the collective decision and all eyes settled on me again, this time with a measure of respect, I imagined.

The headman’s wife turned to me smiling. “You’re going to make us rich,” she said.

“Indeed, Mother, a hundred llamas is a fortune.”

“Llamas? What would we do with llamas? Do you think we have room on our island to graze a herd? No, no, my dear, if the Incas will pay that much for your news, then the Aymara will give us anything we ask to keep you silent.” She smiled sweetly. “We’re going to sell you to them.”

The Uru bound me with reed twine and shoved me into a storage hut, fastening the door behind them. At least they allowed me to keep the Lupaqa tunic and cloak which, though still wet, kept me warm. Eagle Woman remained with me, for the Uru recognized her as a charm and wouldn’t risk running afoul of a spirit guardian, but with my hands tied at my back she was useless to me now. I stared into the darkness, weary beyond sleep.

It’s hopeless, I thought. There is no escape from this floating prison - the Uru know their lake too well - and soon the Aymara will come for me. Will it be a quick death? No, they’ll torture me first to be certain of how much I know, and then they’ll entertain themselves with what’s left of me.

I should have used Eagle Woman on myself when I was still able.

That's what I was trained to do - an imperial agent is never taken alive. I've failed my emperor, and all those who had faith in me when others declared women unfit for this work.

Does it all end here on this cold lake, so far from home, alone with no one to know the truth? Has it been for nothing - the years of hiding my family secret, so many times missing death by a whisper, and all those throughout my life who died defending me?

I cast my eyes inward across the years, summoning the faces and events that led me to this floating island. So many faces, and so few of them still alive. It began when I was a girl in the first blush of womanhood on those long-ago ocean beaches.

I imagined myself in the hills behind those beaches looking down on a hut. I saw a family - a man and a woman, and their two children. They were the only people in the world. It was a world of sand and rock, sun and wind, and the eternal pulse of Mama Qocha, Mother of All Waters, incessantly washing the beach in front of their home. They awoke to Her rhythm each morning, and when Inti set the sky ablaze seeking rest beyond the horizon, they cuddled together and fell asleep to Her whispering sighs. The people were happy.

I could see those shores now, stretching on and on under a warm, hazy sun - the rocky headlands thrusting into the blue swells of Mama Qocha, hear the sea birds crying overhead, smell the tang of seaweed and salt air, grip the sand with my toes.

This was my world, until the strangers came. . . .

They came out of the eastern desert. Two figures pressed in the shimmering band where earth meets sky. Hardly more than wavering specks at first, momentarily slipping from sight amid the dunes, they came on.

"He might send soldiers to make a formal arrest," father had said, "but I doubt it. It's not a public spectacle he seeks. . . no, not retribution, only my silence - assassins more likely. Expect them at any time, from anywhere."

Closer, two men covering ground at a determined pace. I squinted and shaded my eyes, peering cautiously from the hills separating the

great desert from the ocean shores.

“They’ll try to force me to betray the others first,” he had said, “but I swore with them never to be taken alive. For myself I’m not concerned. I’ve had more than my count of years. My fear is for you. If they discover you’re my children. . . expect no mercy.”

I dropped to my knees. Had they seen me? Were these the assassins, or simply lost travelers? I raised my head and watched them disappear behind another dune. Soon they would be close enough to see clearly. Somewhere behind me father gathered birds’ eggs along the sea cliffs. Where was he?

I crept back to scan the shores. Far down the beach smoke curled from the village at the mouth of the River Ica. The beach was empty - no danger from that direction. The strangers hadn’t yet crested the dune. Looking up the coastline, I searched the barren, gray-brown hills and rocky headlands. Nothing moved but the wind and sand. Qhari was posted somewhere farther along. He must have seen the strangers too, if he wasn’t fishing or caught up in one of his games. Had he already warned father? Should I hide, or call out? If mother were alive she would have known what to do. She lived long enough to see me through my first month of womanhood, and then she was gone, consumed by her illness.

I had never asked why we lived a solitary life by the sea cliffs, far up the beach from the village, or why we spoke one language with the villagers and another at home - a secret language Qhari and I were forbidden to use around our village friends - and our parents had never offered, or mentioned a world beyond our shores. And this we accepted like fish accept water. A child’s world simply is.

The strangers came in view again, making straight for the hills above the cliffs - much closer now, moving with purpose. Both carried spears. One had long hair, but the other wore his short - very short. The danger was upon us.

Crouching low, I darted between the hills and down their seaward side toward the nesting crags, frantically searching for father. There was little time. The strangers would soon clear the hills.

Still no sign of Qhari. Was father’s fate in my hands alone? I

unwound the sling that held my hair against the wind, and snapped it taut. If I had to, I would face them alone.

Where the sand gave way to rock I climbed a promontory and saw father standing at the edge of a headland in the distance, resting his weight on his good leg. I shouted and waved but the wind blew my words behind me, and he was distracted by the angry gulls swooping and crying around him. A surf-washed bay lay between us. The strangers had not yet appeared.

I lost sight of him when I scrambled down and ran as fast as I could across the bay, slipping on rocks and nearly being swept away as waves stole my footing. And in the eternity it took to cross that bay and climb the opposite cliff, father's words came back to me.

"Know then, my children, that we are Incas from the village of Choqo near the sacred city of Cuzco. Our ayllu, which is to say our lineage, is called Añawarqe. We are nobles of second rank, related by marriage to Iñaca Panaqa, the royal household of the old emperor, Pachakuti."

Thus spoke father on the day Qhari returned from the village with news that Inca inspectors would soon arrive to take a census, and thus ended our life of innocence.

Father smiled at our astonishment. "I know; your mother and I kept this from you for your own safety while we sought refuge here on the edge of the world. But now the world has found us, and it's time for you to know all. Here is the mark that proves your birthright." He wore his hair long like the men of Ica, but with a flourish he now drew it back and for the first time we saw his ears clearly. The lobes drooped low and each was perforated by a large hole.

"That must have hurt," I said, hand at my mouth.

Qhari frowned and fingered his own lobes. "Father, why do you have holes in your ears?"

Father chuckled. "It's the sign of manhood. At the end of the initiation every young man has this done so he can wear earspools, the mark of an Inca warrior. And, unlike other nations, we have the honor of wearing our hair short, which also shows our earspools to best advantage."

Qhari and I sat entranced while father explained our true place in the world. It wasn't real to us then, no more than an exciting story, but we were swept along by the pride in his voice. Our people were the Children of the Sun, divinely ordained to bring light and order from chaos. Accordingly, our emperors forged an empire from many nations and now ruled the world, even to the sun-drenched lands of Ica - still independent when father arrived, now but one province among many.

And the cause of his flight? No, not our people he insisted, or the Emperor or gods - one man; one man with the power to reach out and destroy others to hide his crimes - crimes that father and his comrades had unknowingly witnessed, and nearly paid for with their lives before they guessed the truth and fled beyond the Empire's boundaries. But now those boundaries had expanded and there was no place left to hide.

Father sighed and replied to Qhari's protest, "Plead with Emperor Thupa Inka? You don't understand. One does not simply pay a visit to the Son of the Sun. We were soldiers on campaign and there is a chain of command. The murderer stands between us and the Emperor's justice."

At last I reached the final shelf and poked my head above the cliff edge, only to have the wind throw a blast of sand in my face. But it also carried voices.

"Don't bother lying. That scar on your forehead betrays you. You're Sayri. Admit it."

These words were spoken in Runasimi, father's language, but he replied in the Ica tongue, "Lord, I do not understand what you say. I'm but a simple fisherman of these shores."

My eyes cleared. I saw them standing in profile just ten paces away. The strangers pointed their spears at father, their cloaks snapping in the wind. Father wore only his loincloth and a gathering bag at his side. The splinter of whalebone he used for a walking stick supported his bent leg. He stood with head bowed, his back to the precipice.

"What did he say?" the tall one asked his companion.

"He said he's just a local fisherman," the man replied in Runasimi, "but he speaks our language with an accent." His long hair and the narrow bands of embroidery on his tunic marked him as a man of Ica.

“Shall I kill him now?”

“You were detailed to guide and interpret,” the tall man answered. “If there is to be any killing, especially of Incas, it will be by my hand.”

He turned to father and shook his head, his wobbling earspoofs exaggerating the motion. “It’s no use, Sayri. You’ve aged, but you match the description perfectly. You are Sayri of Choqo. Now come, no more games. Where is your brother? Tell me that and I’ll let you and your children live.”

“My children,” father shouted in Runasimi. The ruse was over. He pulled himself up to full stature and stared the assassin in the eye. “How did you know about them?”

“That’s better, Sayri,” the tall man said with a smirk. “Your children? Oh, your friends in the village were most helpful once the inspectors posed the right questions. They simply asked if there were any strangers in the region. It’s a standard inquiry, especially when a new census is taken. The report that reached us was that two foreigners, a man named Tobacco and a woman called Silver Moon, came here years ago. The woman gave birth to twins - a boy, Valiant Cougar, and a girl, Golden Star, who come to get water and play with the children at the river mouth. The villagers themselves remarked that these are strange names, quite unlike those of Ica. But they made sense to us when translated into Runasimi; Sayri and Qolqe Killa, Qhari Puma and Qori Qoyllur - all good Inca names.” He looked pleased with himself.

Father sighed. “Was it really that easy?”

“Yes, it was,” he replied, gloating. Father’s shoulders sagged. The man’s eyes narrowed with interest. “I’m told you took elaborate precautions to sham your death and vanish, yet you overlooked this simple detail: You left your people but you couldn’t leave your name.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head again. “If a proper census had been taken when we first conquered this land we would have had you then.”

Father shifted letting his bent leg dangle free, and stared over the man’s shoulder as if digesting this news. But when I followed his gaze I saw what he was already aware of - Qhari, moving on his belly like a lizard, slowly creeping up behind the strangers. He, too, wore only his

loincloth, but he dragged his casting net. Father's gaze flickered back to the men as he continued to stall.

"Who sent you?"

"Who? What does it matter? Your crime has found you out."

"What is my crime supposed to be?"

"Rape, murder, and desertion."

Again father measured Qhari's progress. He was close now. I flexed my sling.

Father held the man's eyes. "So it's being blamed on us. Did it ever occur to you that someone else murdered those women?"

The tall man balked. "A desperate ploy, Sayri. They warned me of your tricks, but we know the truth about you."

While the man spoke father kept his gaze level, but gestured with his left hand toward the guide. Qhari bobbed his head in understanding. I opened my pouch and withdrew the largest stone.

Father said, "Yet you offer to let me live if I tell you where the others are?"

"I'll be honest. You're a dead man. The villagers said your wife died a while ago, but if you cooperate I'll spare your children, and give you a swift end."

The wind gusted furiously now, and the men held their spears loosely in one hand while they wiped grit from their eyes. Father remained silent, hanging his head as if accepting defeat.

Qhari rose and circled the net above his head. I tensed.

The tall man shifted impatiently. "Well, Sayri, I can't stand here forever. What's it to be? Your children's lives. . . or death for all?"

Father lifted his head and glared at the assassin. "What's it to be? You rush me. I was trying to decide whether to kill you slowly or give you a swift end," he said snapping his left hand closed.

In that instant Qhari's net flew through the air. I leapt over the top in time to see it cloak the guide from head to waist. Father's stick had already bloodied the assassin's nose, and the two were locked in a struggle for the spear. Father's bent leg, the assassin now learned, wasn't so badly crippled. I took aim and threw hard at the assassin. The stone

smacked father's ribs.

"Thank you, Qori," he managed between clenched teeth, "now go and help your brother."

Qhari charged the guide as soon as the net was thrown, catching him at the waist and tumbling him to the ground. The man tried to rise but Qhari remained glued to his back, keeping the net over him.

"Get his spear, Qori," he yelled.

I snatched it up and threw it to father, who broke from the assassin and dove to the side, coming up with the weapon in hand. The two faced each other, spears leveled.

The netted man stopped struggling for a moment. Qhari looked up at me calmly. "That was very clever, Qori. But now, what are we supposed to use? Do you think you might have given this one a poke first, or do you plan to tickle him to death?"

Suddenly the man came up on his knees with a roar, sending Qhari sprawling behind him. I grabbed a rock, straining to lift it chest high. The guide struggled to free himself of the net. I heaved the stone at his head. He slumped with a groan. The second blow laid him on his side . . . with the fifth his skull exploded like a ripe squash.

Qhari appeared at my side. "Well done, Qori! Now you're thinking. Quick, help me get the net so we can snag the other one."

If he hadn't pried the rock from my hands I would have kept dropping it on the oozing mass that was once a head. I trembled, looking down at the red and gray slime splattered on my legs. "Is he. . . is he dead?"

"Very. Now hurry. We must get this net off him."

We pulled at the net and rolled the body. I tried not to look at his shattered skull, while Qhari muttered something about how interesting it was to see the inside of a head. I looked over my shoulder at father. He was in a crouch with his back to me, maneuvering the assassin to the precipice with the tip of his spear. The assassin no longer smiled; his left hand covered a gushing wound in his side. Father was unmarked.

Qhari had the net free and gathered it for a final throw. I turned to watch the duel.

"Now speak, you worthless piece of shit," father said. "Who sent

you?"

The assassin's heels found the cliff edge. He fell forward on his knees. "Spare me," he said, his voice catching in a whine.

"Drop your spear."

The man laid his weapon at his side and raised his hands to beg. Father stood over him with spear poised.

"Mercy, and I'll reveal everything. I'm sorry my guide killed your daughter."

"What?" Father's head jerked toward us.

"No, father!" I screamed.

As if in a dream I saw the assassin's eyes narrow, his right hand retrieve his spear, and the long blade vanish in father's stomach.