

Prologue
Peru, 1572

Achik came to a halt, shrouded in deep shadows cast by interwoven branches that made a thick ceiling high above his head. His chest heaved, his heart thudded rhythmically in his chest and blood rushed in his ears. His body was bathed in sweat, dirt and blood. Some his own, most belonging to his enemies and his friends in equal measure.

He knelt silently on the jungle floor, his knees sinking into damp earth and leant as far back into the shadows as he could, trying to keep his shape small while at the same time keeping his upper body straight so he could suck air into his lungs.

He waited, letting the rushing in his ears fade and the listening for the jungle sounds to return. The heavy rain that had hidden him from his pursuers for the last few hours had passed off and pale moonlight was beginning to filter through the canopy. His feet were bare, one sandal had broken as he'd crossed the first of three, high passes the day before. He'd discarded the other and blood leaked from several small cuts. His long, legs trembled from his journey, the muscles twitched and writhed spasmodically beneath his skin and his stomach growled from hunger so loudly he feared it would give him away.

For two days he had been running, sleeping only a few minutes when he felt it was safe and eating only what he could pick from the trees along his route. The invaders had taken control the roads and so he was forced to use little known paths through the mountains that were small and far from straight.

When he had set out from Vilcabamba, the last refuge of the Empire, he had been sent with four other Chasqui. Now he was the last. His quipu was still tied about his waist but he had lost the pututu at some point during the previous night. Not that he needed it anymore. He was the last Chasqui and there would be no need or possibility to use the conch shell all Chasqui carried to call others to their aid when it was needed.

He was alone.

On one wrist his sling was tied, the thin leather wrapped loosely and cinched in such a way that he could have it unlimbered, and a stone fitted in the time it took to blink an eye. Other than that, he carried only a small bronze dagger. A circular, dark orange stone, flecked with gold, hung on a leather thong threaded through a hole in its centre around his neck. If they had weighed any more than they did he already would have dropped the dagger and the sling. The stone and the quipu were all that mattered. And the message he had to relay.

For centuries the Chasquis had been the personal messengers of the Sapa Inca, the strongest and fastest of his people. Only they were given the right, the responsibility, to carry the words of Sapa Inca. Only they were taught to read the knots and strings of the quipu that, combined with the words Sapa Inca had passed along with them, formed the entire message.

He looked up, imagining the stars as they would have appeared if they had not been hidden behind leaves and branches, and offered a silent prayer to his ancestors. For generations his family had proudly been chosen to carry the quipu, to serve Sapa Inca and now he feared he would dishonour them by not only being the last, but by failing to deliver his final message.

An orange glow flashed through the dark trees and he leapt to his feet. In just a few strides he was back at his top speed, ignoring the pains in his stomach, legs and feet as he leapt along the twisting paths. He moved with the fluid grace usually reserved for pumas, his feet barely stroking the earth, propelling him along faster than most men could ever dream of running.

His movement had been seen, behind him he heard raised voices, shouting in an alien language he had only ever bothered to learn a few words of. His pursuers' weapons were strong and their arrows accurate, but they were unused to the heat of the jungle and the fire they carried took their ability to see through the darkness. Achik knew that his only chance was to exploit these weaknesses. With superior speed on his side he prayed it would be enough to see him through to the mountain city.

In times past there would have been a whole network of Chasquis stationed along the route so that messages, parcels and the quipu could be passed from one to the next. Now they were all gone, the Chasquis killed, the roads held by the invaders and the chaskiwasis, the shelters they used to rest and eat, either destroyed or occupied.

He and his companions had been pursued from the start. The invaders were almost in sight of Vilcabamba when Sapa Inca had passed along his final message to the five of them. Each had carried an identical quipu. Each had been given an identical message to go with it. The stone they had passed from one to another as they ran. When one had fallen while wearing it the others had stopped only long enough to pluck it from his neck before they ran on.

The invaders were slow, but their horses were fast. His people, under Manco Inca, had tried to take their beasts in the past, tried to use them against the invaders but they were unskilled in riding. His father had told him the story of his people's defeat, and Manco Inca's

murder by men he had agreed to protect. Achik preferred to trust his own feet and legs. The invaders he trusted not at all.

Huaman, who had the swiftest feet in the empire, had been the first to fall. As they climbed from the valley, following game trails and herder's paths, they had been surprised by a group of outriders from the approaching army, sent to scout the land. They had not expected to find the enemy so close and had not been paying attention. As they had scrambled to the top of a ridge they had burst from the trees and seen the riders at the same moment they themselves had been seen. Huaman had yelled a fierce cry and launched himself at their enemy, yelling at the others to run. Achik remembered the pain of following his companion's orders, but he had done so. Huaman had been his brother, they had run and trained together all their lives and as he turned his back and ran, he heard his brother's screams of fury and then of pain.

One by one his other companions had fallen. The horsemen they had initially encountered must have sent word somehow to their armies, because they were pursued relentlessly. Three times they had stopped and laid ambush and three times they had killed. Each time they thought they were safe, more soldiers appeared.

On the second morning only three remained. Soon after the sun had risen, Acahuana had been felled by a flying arrow that had pierced his back and continued through his chest.

When they had reached the high passes, they had begun to pull ahead of their pursuers. The Spanish horses were swift, but the steep slopes slowed them, and the thin air slowed the soldiers. For almost a day they had seen and heard nothing. Believing they had escaped they had stopped to rest and sleep for a few hours.

Atoc, who had drawn watch, woke them with his death cry as he was ridden down. The thunder of horses' hooves had been loud in the darkness and Achik had run with his final companion.

Cusi had been the eldest of them. As they ran he had pressed the stone into Achik's hand. Achik had stopped, wondering why, but Cusi pushed him on, then turned, his knife drawn, and waited. Achik had hidden behind a tree and watched. When the Spanish rode into view, Cusi tossed his knife in the air, caught it by the blade and flicked it towards the nearest soldier. The dagger had sunk into the soldiers' eye and his body slumped without even a cry, its horse continuing, unaware that its master was already dead. Cusi screamed a war cry and darted away, leading his pursuers into the trees and away from the direction Achik was to travel.

Now he was alone.

As the third night of his final run had commenced, he had heard the sounds of his pursuers returning. Now their torches flashed in the darkness, their cries echoed through the trees and Achik knew that he would not make his destination. The land was rising again and he would soon be running up steep slopes, his body already weakened by exhaustion and lack of food. He knew he could not outrun the horses. But he had to try. The future of his people, his culture depended on it.

He had one final chance, he knew what he had to do was forbidden but he had no other choice. The stone felt warm against his chest. He knew what it was, and he had seen its use. He did not know if the gods would allow him to use its power, but he had to try.

The sound of hoofbeats grew behind him and to either side he saw lights flashing through the trees as he pulled the stone from his neck, the leather thong breaking with a single hard tug.

He stopped, his chest heaving and closed his eyes.

In his hand the stone grew warmer. He felt no different and waited.

Then he knew.

There was a way. He saw it open in his mind.

The land sloped up and he set off again, pushing his tired legs to give as much speed as they were able. Behind him a loud cry told him he had been spotted.

Each breath felt like fire in his lungs, His head swam and his vision darkened with the effort. He ran even faster, ignoring the pain.

A crack split the air and he felt something speed past his head as a sharp pain stung him and he felt warm blood gush to his shoulder.

The lights to either side suddenly angled in towards him and he felt the thunder of more hooves joining the chase on the path behind him.

Ahead, stone rose in an almost vertical wall fifty feet into the air. The path turned right and tracked up the sheer slope in switch backing turns cut by his forebears in the distant past, but he ignored it. Instead he leapt from the path and into the dark trees.

Behind him he heard the horses crashing through the branches as they followed.

A second crack split the air and fire erupted in his leg. He cried out and stumbled but managed, by some miracle to keep his feet. On he stumbled. One of the horses screamed, a terrible, almost human sound and he knew it had gone down, most likely with a broken leg.

The rock wall rose in front of him and he slowed, looking for the thicker darkness that he knew was there. If he could make it to the cave their horses would mean nothing. Their

numbers would mean nothing. He would fight to his last breath and if he could win, he would be free of them.

He rounded a large outcrop of rock and there, silhouetted against the rock face and half hidden behind thick, creeping vines was a pool of inky darkness. Achik darted forward, aiming to dive for the entrance.

Something hard struck him. Thick metal that protected his enemy's forearm smashed into his face, he felt his front teeth shatter and warm blood fill his mouth. His feet kept moving forward and were swept from beneath him. Achik hit the earth with a bone shuddering crash, his breath left his lungs in a rush and as he struggled to draw fresh air. The blood in his mouth rushed down his throat and he began to cough violently to avoid choking on it.

His vision swam and he looked up and a shape sank down, his face inches from Achik's. An acrid stench of sweat, grease, animals and dirt filled his nostrils. The man's hair was dark, an unkempt beard and moustache covered his face and the rest of his features were hidden in the shadow of his helmet's brim. He said something in their alien tongue which Achik could not understand. He had no chance to reply. The man's sword whispered from its sheath and Achik knew nothing else but pain as it was driven through his chest. He felt the blade pierce his back and sink into the soft earth beneath him.

The man's weight left his chest. Above his head he saw the dark sky, the stars gleamed like bright rain and in an inaudible whisper he told them he was sorry.

He felt the man tugging the quipu from his waist, felt his bronze dagger taken from him and finally felt fingers pry his hand open. The stone taken. Achik closed his eyes and let the darkness take him, praying for his ancestors forgiveness.

