

Vilcabamba

J.D. Lanctôt

Here on the side of the mountain far above Cusco, the morning lighting and rain made it appear as if the Christian Spaniards never had arrived to Peru as they call it but Tahuantinsuyu as us Inkas called it. The bright sunlight glimmered through a break in the clouds, and off of the sacred stone that us Inkas call a huaca. This huaca composed the platform upon which I stood with along with scores of the bravest of my Inkan brothers and sisters. We all risked our lives for being here today, but it was worth the risk because there was stillness that no god other than Inti, or as the Spaniards call him “the sun” provided. The moon, the Inkan God called Quilla, was in the sky with him too, towering about the layered clouds. Our gods were there and spoke to us as though to tell us that everything would be okay even though we all knew that things were not okay and would never be okay. The only thing that could make it better was if I was with my father.

Oh, how I miss him, how I miss my father everyday. That brave man.

I stroked the band on my head that my father gave me before the battle where I was taken captive by the victorious Spaniards and given to Señor Oñate who has been my caretaker ever since. My father is said to have disappeared into the snowy mountain with the remnants of his defeated army to city of Vitcos, maybe even to a new city that was

called Vilcabamba where all dreams came true. But in this forbidden gathering in the hill called Huacayman, my fellow Inkas celebrated the way it could be and should be, where Jesus Christ, Pizarro and King Charles didn't exist.

I heard a clear and crisp voice carry through over the crowd and land upon my ears as though it was spoken to me "We are all here to celebrate important ritual of Huarachicoy, where the boys among us become men! So they can join the rebellion and fight the Spaniards."

I was hoping to be one of the boys that were to be one selected to undergo the multi-day tasks and journey required to become a man. I pushed myself to the front of the crowd to see where the man was standing. I was so excited that I may have hurt a couple of people as I pushed through the dense crowd, but finally it was my turn. I was to be anointed in the same place where my father, and his father, and even his father were anointed, each of them heroic leaders.

The crowd was too dense and wouldn't let me through to the front. I retreated to find another way to penetrate it.

The ceremony in the days of the Inkas was days long. But today, it was brief as to escape any attention.

"Titu!" Yelled Huallpa. He launched himself upon my shoulders. "It's something else up here, isn't it! Have you been before? We are so close to Inti here!"

Huallpa was a farmer from an indian community near Cusco. And just as he appeared in the fields, he was here with dirt encrusted in his dark skin, and fragments of his day's work stuck in his long pushy hair. He dressed in the same torn canvass that he was

always in with a bright red cloak. The thing that stood out most about him was his brilliant teeth, one of the few indians to have such perfect white teeth and today, those teeth were all I saw because he was so happy to be here. We all were.

He lowered himself from my shoulders and grabbed my hands.

I nodded no.

“Señor Oñate let you come? I can’t believe it,” said my good friend, Curi. There’s no way.” He came up from the other side of me than Huallpa stood. “What lie did you tell him this time?”

I smiled, “Why do you assume I lied?”

Curi was essentially the opposite of Huallpa. He was bald, without a hair on his entire body. His skin always remained red and did not darken no matter the amount of sun he received. He worked in Cusco with me, coordinating the housing of the Spanish-allied indians that were permitted to live in Cusco, such as my uncles and cousins.

“You always lie!” said Curi. “He’s one of the strictest Spaniards in Cusco, there’s no way he would let you out of Cusco. He’ll strangle you like Pizarro strangled Atahualpa if he finds out you came here.”

“It’s not so much Sñr Oñate I have to be careful of, it’s my cousin Carlos Inka. He has been watching me closely, and I think he wants to have me imprisoned. I just get that feeling,” I said.

Huallpa pushed some chicha into my hands, “Drink brave boy! Drink to your wild imprisoned future. Carlos Inka and his father your uncle Paullu Inka always get what they want.”

“You know I don’t drink,” I said and pushed the drink back to him.

“You and your Christian principles,” said Curi. “One of these days you’ll realize that there’s no point to their strict moral code.”

“How about when Inti’s warriors start winning wars against Jesus Christ’s armies?” I said.

Curi opened his mouth to respond but Huallpa butted in, “So, what did you tell him?” said Huallpa.

“I didn’t tell him anything. He’s in Lima right now and I told his servant that I had to work extra today because of the increased tribute arriving.” I pushed the vessel of chicha back into Curi’s hands and then slapped his face playfully.

“The Spanish believe anything, ANYTHING, if gold or tribute is involved,” laughed Curi.

We refocused on the voice of the strange man. He resumed talking in his distinct voice, “Vilcabamba does exist, and we are raising an fighting force there that will once again rise up against the Christians. We will fight forever—”

“—His name is Atoc,” said Huallpa.

“We arrived early and met him,” said Curi.

Huallpa nodded in agreement and said, “You have to meet him too. He’s an incredible person, if the rumors are to be believed, he is an advisor to your father, Titu—”

“—Or he’s another angry and crazy old man traumatized by the war and lives in a cave up here somewhere and makes up stories,” said Curi.

“He probably is from Vilcabamba, why wouldn’t he be?” Said Huallpa. “He is probably here to figure out who are spies and who aren’t. If Titu’s father is going to fight the Spaniards again, he need to get more men to join them.”

I smiled at the thought of meeting someone that knows my father, “Well, I’m going to go return to my father no matter what.” I patted Huallpa and Curi on their shoulders as I walked past them. “I’ll take my bet on this Atoc guy.”

Empowered by the hope of speaking with this Atoc guy, I pushed through the crowd and those blocking my way were no match for my new strength. I pushed a young man off of a tall stone halfway through the crowd and saw the strange man who stood up straighter when he noticed me, as though he was looking for me.

He was definitely Inkan although the clothes he wore were humble, a simple checkered tunic, a chuspa on his arm made of mediocre cloth. His long bristly thick black and white hair was messily mashed together, crowned with an llautu, a cloth crown that important Inkas wore. He had large gauges in his ears, large enough for me to fit a few fingers in. If he was faking his position, or if it was real, his confident posture, along with the llautu and gauges showed that he was an important person in his own mind, or in actuality.

“Did you hear that?” Said a girl to the side of me. She dropped her drink and peered into the distance.

I heard nothing.

“RUN!” Yelled one of the indian scouts standing far above us.

The crowd, including Atoc, went silent. “Calvary are coming toward us fast! We’ve been discovered!”

The crowd scattered like spooked fish in a pond.

Atoc vanished as if he had never been there.

I glanced back at Huallpa and Curi. They were gone as well. I assumed they jumped off of the platform that they were standing beside so I ran after them and jumped off of the platform. They were not there. I ran back and forth looking behind every bush, tree, and rock where they might be hiding. They were gone. Gone!

I saw the horsemen that the scout saw. There were two groups of several men and horses galloping toward the hill that we were upon. It was not clear, but it looked as if they had guns with them and were ready for a fight.

I will find Huallpa and Curi in Cusco.

My focus shifted to my own quick escape. I spotted a ledge below me protruding from the side of the hill, it offered a good hiding place. I slid down rocky hillside to the ledge but in doing so the rocks gave way. I sprinted down the hill to get ahead of the rocks but they were coming down quickly. I jumped off the ledge and hid in its shadow as the rocks flew over me. Several other Inkas were there that I recognized, some of whom I had collected tribute from while performing my duties.

“Quick, they will have seen the rock slide,” said one of the women. I didn’t recognize her. “We’re exposed. We have to run.”

I stood up and was pulled back down by a stranger, he had a large mole in middle of his scalp. A final rock flew off of the ledge where my head had just been. It missed the unknown woman by a fingers width.

“Now you can go,” said the man with the mole.

I sprinted down the remainder of the hill and the others went their own way. Once at the bottom, I hid behind the stump of a dead tree and peered back up the hill. There was a cloud of dirt where the rock slide had occurred but beyond the cloud along the side of a ridge line far above me I saw Huallpa’s red cloak traveling with a few other figures. One walked with a large stick. It was Atoc. They figures disappeared over the ridge line into the mountains, they were not going to Cusco. As they disappeared, the earth darkened again as the rain clouds thickened.

The horsemen were still approaching, making incredible speed across the altiplano, as though they were racing the impending rain. Ahead of them I saw the indians that were quicker than I in descending the hill and who were already upon the altiplano happened upon the impending horsemen. The short indians dispersed like ants ahead of the enormous horsemen once they came into view. The slaughter was about to begin.

“RUN!” I yelled at myself. But I remained frozen like an animal in a trap.

I hated that there were so many of us indians, close to one hundred, and that we must run from just a few horsemen. Where was our bravery? Our strength? Our gods? But it didn’t matter about us humans, it was a war among the gods. It was the Christian Trinity against Inti, Pachamama, Mamaquilla, and the other Inka gods. And each time, Christ’s followers won no matter how hard we fought and our numerical advantage. I understood

why my Uncle Paullu, and his son Carlos Inka allied themselves with the Christians, the Trinity was made up of the stronger and wiser gods. At least thus far.

These knolls and hills were once covered in trees which would have useful to hide in, but since, the trees have all been removed the only thing to do was to run given the chance even though I the safest thing would be to remain hiding all day and return after dark. But my lie of being at the tribute desk was at risk of being discovered at any moment, I had to return.

Eventually, the horsemen disappeared from view, hidden by a knoll. With my temporary cover I took off running toward Cusco. It was a long run but mostly down hill. I had to get as far as I could. The rain was getting heavier, I would be expected to be home. The mud was making my feet heavy and I was slowing down.

I came into view of the distant road leading to Cusco and with it a line of horsemen coming from Cusco, assumingly to reinforce their comrades on the altiplano that I had running from. I ran back and forth looking for a place to hide. The reinforcements were nearing me. I saw a crevice nearby and went to it. Before I jumped in, I noticed that the group of horsemen were led by my uncles, Pallu, Huaspar, and Inquill. I don't know who the others were. When I noticed who they were, they all turned toward me.

My heart beat so fast I thought it physically hurt me.

How they saw me from so far away. I'm in so much trouble.

I arrived at the small crevice and dived into it. I calmed my breath, and as it slowed, the rhythm was replaced with horse hooves approaching from behind me mixed with the

applause of pouring rain. The sky cracked with thunder. The rain overtook me and drenched me.

If only I led a small band of men, I could ambush these devil and kill him like they have killed so many Indians. How is it that my Grandpa Huayna Capac ruled armies of over 100,000, and I, only years later, was alone?

The horse hooves turned away from me and were growing more distant. After several moments, and with a jerk, I forced my head above the crevice and snuck a glance. The rain grew thicker and the group of horsemen grew dim into the gray. They were approaching the other group of horsemen.

Two of the men flew in the group being led by my uncles flew off their horse, backwards.

Thunder split the sky.

The remaining horsemen that my uncles led took position and shot at the other group. One fell off of his horse.

Lightening struck within the same field in which I stood.

The horsemen gave into a running fight and abandoned those that fell.

This is my chance to escape! Everyone is distracted.

I went on my way to Cusco, and the sky opened up over city. Inti shined upon Cusco and from my position, I saw Spaniards running from the city in each direction.

My mind went back to the horsemen that were on the ground, injured or dead. I wanted them dead. I wanted them dead more so than I wanted to return to Cusco. I went toward them in the rain. I thought I heard one groaning. I ran over to where I thought

he'd be, but he was gone although his gun as still there. I picked it up. It was heavier than I expected, I never touched one before. I went to where the other horsemen fell, it was close by.

I saw him on the ground, the rain pooled around him and created an awful red lake. He was facedown. He was dead. To the third one I went. By this time, the gun was getting heavy. I saw them! One was assisted the other, carrying against his shoulder.

I sat down in the mud and held the gun like one of the Spaniards did. I pointed it at the man supporting the other and pressed the trigger. The gun pushed incredibly hard against me and hit me in my shoulder. I fell backward onto my back. My ears rang.

I sat back up and saw the one Spaniard running away and the other one on the ground.

I laughed to myself, "I think that's what the Spanish call 'a natural!'"

I didn't know how to put another shot into the gun so I threw it and took a jump for joy! I ran back Cusco, and tried to stay distant from the increasing exodus of people. I no longer attempted to conceal myself and I was spotted several times but no matter who saw me each Spaniard was more concerned about themselves and ignored me. The final stretch, I simply walked along the road to Cusco as if I was a proud Inka. No one stopped me.

The sun was about to go down by the time I reached Cusco, long after I was supposed to be home. Someone would have noticed my absence.

It was eerily quiet in Cusco, the streets and alleys were vacated and there were no sounds. I made my way to the center, where the tribute building was located, and where I was supposed to have been all day. I was nearing the main square when I heard a voice,

“Cousin!” said Carlos Inka. “What are you doing out here? You should be hiding.”

“I was just—wait, what are you doing out here, shouldn’t you be hiding?” I said.

“I’m waiting for my father to return. I told him not to leave but you know him, always has to be involved.”

I wanted to ask “involved in what?” But it seemed that everyone that had been in Cusco that day, like I should have been, knew something that I didn’t.

“I’m sure he will be okay, he always is. He’s a smart man, he knows how to watch out for himself,” I said.

“I know, but without him, I don’t know what I would do. I mean, I would be the Sapa Inka technically, and oh god, I would die under such pressure.”

Carlos Inka enjoyed pointing out that according to the Christians, Paullu was the Sapa Inka, not my father who is the rightful Sapa Inka. And since we were in Cusco, I was expected to agree that Paullu was the Sapa Inka.

“You would be a great Sapa Inka, but I don’t think you have to worry about that, not today,” I said. I started my way away from him.

“Titu,” said Carlos, “Be careful. Look, you don’t trust me and I don’t trust you but in times like this we have to fall back on familial ties. No matter what, you will be my cousin. No matter what, we are both indians.”

“Of course, I’m going to get to safety,” I said and left. I relaxed when he didn’t call after me.

I dared not go back home until I learned what was going on, or else my venture to the mountain would surely be discovered. I could just picture it, the yanaca saying, “What do you mean, you don’t know what happened, weren’t you here in Cusco?”

Martín would fill me in, and if I knew him at all, he would be exactly where I thought. I went into the grand hall of the tribute collectors building. It was empty. I guess I didn’t know Martín as well as I thought. I turned to leave.

“Titu! You’re okay!” Martin ran toward me. “I was so worried.” He was hiding.

He hugged me with his long skinny arms. “This is not good, not good at all. I’m so scared, but I’m so happy you’re here with me.” He held me.

“You have to fill me in on everything!” I said as we held onto each other longer than we would have if the Catholic priests or his parents were around. “Martin,” I squealed, “What is going on? And I need help coming up with an alibi, no one is going to believe anything I say no was why I wasn’t here today.”

“General Almagro, the Spaniard that captured you from your father, the man that conquered Peru with the Pizarro’s and then led the civil war against them and ultimately lost—”

“—I know who he is, what about him?”

“With no authorization or permission, Hernando Pizarro pulled him out of his prison cell, brought him to the main square, and chopped off his head for everyone to see. He’s dead. The invisible and evil General Almagro is dead!”

I looked around, no one was around. I grabbed Martín’s head and kissed him.

He kissed me back for a second but then pushed away and blushed.

“But now what?” I said.

Martín was where I was expecting him, he always was. He was standing in the tribute hall gathering tribute from the indians who gave a large portion of their crops, textiles, tools, animals, or whatever else they produced. The stress was high today because fewer indians were paying tribute to the Spanish and were instead paying it to my father in Vitcos. His rebellion was gaining strength the months since Alamgro’s beheading, and the Pizarro brothers were losing control of the highlands quickly. The indians that paid tribute kept me informed of what was going on.

Martín’s job was to assist the secretary to the men in charge, master Gumiel and my Uncle Iniquill. He called Martín “the chasqui,” which he liked, being compared to the legendary runners of the Inkas. The other Spanish boys, however, called him errand bitch. He didn’t like it and often complained to me about them. I told him things would work out. He didn’t know that I was slowly poisoning them to death. I made sure to put poisonous herbs into their food which I obtained by friendly indians which I would then give them a break on their tribute. No one would harm or make fun of Martín.

The line where the indians waited to pay their tribute was made of elderly men carrying twice their weight upon their backs, widowed women carrying thrice their wait upon their back. Their faces all scared like mine, from smallpox, some had their nose missing from the cancer emerging from the coco farms. Others, who I’d conversed with over the years carrying gold and silver to give when I knew they didn’t have gold or

silver and thus had to part with a child to work in the fatal mines. It was no wonder they were abandoning the Christians and instead allying themselves with my father.

But this did not matter, not when I was with Martín. The love I had for him numbed any wrong doing that I was doing, it wasn't wrong actually. Something that felt as good as what I felt for Martín wasn't wrong and if it was then it didn't matter. What mattered was us, and those of my countrymen that felt betrayed by the actions in my position did not understand the feelings I had for him.

"I'm going to run home and tell Sñr Oñate that I am out at an activity with the Friars. We can have the night together that way," I told Martín.

"One day you'll be caught," he said. "I hope I'm with you though when it happens—"

"—and then we can run away together," I finished.

When I returned, I entered the dark hall. Not seeing anything, I tripped on a sac of maize that someone had paid as tribute and I forgot to put away.

Martín was in the right place as he always was and helped me up. My mind was so caught up with Martín that I didn't notice how bad it hurt me until I picked up his bag of maize to put it away. Blood streamed down my leg.

Martín cut a strip of cloth off of the bag, tied it around the wound and we forgot about it.

I followed Martin to a hidden side room. We were no longer shy about our affection for each other, we stopped resisting long ago. He was the only person I trusted in Cusco now that Huallpa and Curi left with Atoc over a year ago.

We sat in the chairs of Uncle Paullu and spoke about random things and time went by like it did every day, in an instant. We left for our respective homes well after dark each night after gazing at the mountains where my fathers rebellion was gaining new vigor.

“You are going to go join him, aren’t you” Asked Martín almost every night.

“Only if you come with!” I always answered.

And as he always would, he created a reason why he was unable to. This night it was, “I’m a Mestizo, I wouldn’t be welcomed in Vitcos.”

“Well, if I was in charge, you would be second in power next to only me.”

Another nightly ritual, we poked our heads out of the door, no one was there. We kissed again. Each night a little longer than before. If it was minutes, or hours, we didn’t know. We didn’t care. I didn’t understand why the Christians were so against love. It felt so right for being so wrong. Maybe they never experienced it themselves. I understood not drinking chicha, not chewing coca, and conversing with the goddess Pachamama after partaking of Ayahuasca, but loving another. What was the danger in that? What was the danger in loving Martín.

I pulled him closer to him and I kissed him. I pulled him closer into me.

“I knew it!” said Carlos Inka. He jumped into the room and laughed.

Martín and I pushed away from each other.

“Don’t pretend you weren’t just kissing” he said. “I’ve been watching. Just be happy it was me that saw you and not Friar Valverde, he’d send you to the mines to be worked to death.”

“So you’re just spying on me?” I asked.

“Yes and no. Yes in that I had my suspicions and I was right, again, not that I care but I was right. No in the way that Sapa Inka Paullu wants to speak with you. Oh, and he knows about you two as well. You might want to find a better place to make out than the tribute hall. That’s in full view of his quarters. I have an idea of where.”

I furrowed my brows at him, not sure what his motive was but my best interest was absolutely not it.