

1. the Plague Comes

Inca Ayllu ViraVira, Tawantin-suyu year 443, Inti Raymi
(ViraVira, a community in Peru, Winter Solstice, June 1530 AD)

Six-year-old Churi was the one chosen to bless Inti the Sun-God at the festival. For this one day, he was the very most important person in his ayllu. The whole population of ViraVira lined the path as the procession of boys and girls, dressed in their brightest alpaca-wool tunics, followed him up the slope to the ceremonial high place. Their sweet childish voices sang the hymn of praise that they had practiced for so long.

Churi's only disappointment was that his mother had not returned in time to see him as he walked in the place of honor at the front, carrying the sacred cup for the offering. His stepfather Wayko had told him that after the sacrifice, it would be Churi who would help fill the sacred cup for the people of the ayllu to drink from. But he must not tell his mother Cuyaiya. It was to be their secret. A surprise for her.

His mother would be so proud of him, when she knew. Of course, Cuyaiya was always proud of him; he was her one and only.

At the top he met the high priest, a stranger who had arrived at the ayllu gates just yesterday to officiate at this once-in-five-years festival. The beaten gold nose-piece that masked the lower half of his face directed foul breath towards Churi with a faint whistling noise, fast and irregular as though he had been running. Churi blinked at the light flashing from the priest's magnificent robes, so heavy with gold and silver that the wearer seemed unsteady beneath the weight. The hand that he reached out had an odd lumpy texture on the skin; it trembled so that the fluid in the small golden cup he offered splashed over the rim.

The child shrank from it with an involuntary shiver of fear. His stepfather, watching with the officials, frowned and shook his head curtly.

Churi was more afraid of Wayko than this masked stranger. He drained the ceremonial cup obediently. It looked like ordinary chicha, but there was an odd, mouth-drying aftertaste.

He took his place at the priest's side as the chant to Inti began. Although the pale winter sun stood at noon, Churi's head began to nod. The boy struggled to stay upright, ashamed that he might fall asleep in the middle of his starring role. His hands felt weak. What if he dropped the heavy cup when he was serving the people of ViraVira?

His sleepiness must have been noticed. The stranger-priest gripped Churi's wrist stiffly in his damp, lumpy hand as they went together up

the steps of the stone platform. Wayko came forward and pulled Churi's decorated tunic off.

Churi felt unsure of this; it was the special one his mother had made for him. He was too big to go unclothed in public. Wayko lifted him to a seat on the table of granite; the priest helped the child recline on the stone, facing south. It was so good to rest. The cold surface on his bare skin roused him only a little.

There was the rustle and chink of the Inti-priest taking off his heavy outer robes. Churi could feel feverish heat radiating from the man's side as, clad only in a loincloth, the priest stood chanting next to the altar.

His quavering voice as it intoned the Sun-Anthem made Churi's lids drift shut despite the objection which flitted through his drowsy thoughts: he would get in trouble for sleeping here. This was Inti's sacred stone where llamas and alpacas were sacrificed.

A premonition made the boy's eyes flicker open. His head was turned towards the sheer cliff that bounded the high place. Over the edge, as if in answer to the chant, climbed a disheveled woman, clothing torn, hair wild. The priest did not notice.

Then Churi recognized her. His mother had come at last! She rushed towards him, arms outstretched, eyes filled with fear. The child followed the direction of her gaze and saw a bronze-bladed knife poised above his heart.

He sat up, all the drugged stupor gone. "Mama!" he cried in terror. The priest pushed him back down, unaware of the figure racing towards them. "Mama! Mama!" Churi screamed, struggling against the hand that pinned him to the altar.

The knife descended just as she threw herself at the priest, knocking his blow wide. Then Churi felt his mother's arms close around him.