

## Message from the Inca

He prayed and drank the coca tea, preparing himself for the run. He concentrated only on the task ahead of him, blocking out the sound of the fire sticks which sounded outside in the streets. The city of Cuzco, the capital city of the Inca, was under siege. The barbarians, speaking a strange tongue, had come, casting fire and death from their pointed sticks.

Even now the runner could hear the cries and screams of the people, and the terrifying curses of the barbarians. These bearded sorcerers were too powerful to stop; they rode huge beasts which trampled the people in their path. The runner had caught a glimpse of the carnage before the priest pulled him into the secret rooms beneath the Inca's temple. But even these sacred rooms would soon be discovered, and the barbarians' wrath destroy everything.

Through the small window cut into the stone wall he could see the glare of the holy city as it burned. The sight saddened the runner. All the Inca's warriors were powerless to stop the calamity. If Cuzco fell, the empire of Inca would be lost.

Outside the cell the runner heard the footsteps of the priest as he approached. The priest opened the door and looked at the young man. This young man had been taken from his parents when he was a child and trained to be a runner in the service of Inca. He had run up and down the Mountains of the Gods, even to the sea coast. Now he was the only runner left in Cuzco. The others had been sent in all directions, carrying messages to the people. They had been sent from Cuzco, and none had returned. One, as he tried to escape from the

city, was attacked by the dogs of the barbarians. He died in the arms of the priests, crying there was no way out.

This runner was the last one left, and the message he would carry to Machu Picchu would be the last message to leave Cuzco before it fell. The salvation of the people of the Inca depended on the message.

"Are you ready, my son?" the priest asked.

"Yes," the runner replied.

"Cuzco cannot be saved," the priest said. There was no fear in his voice, only finality. "Come," he said, and the runner stood and followed the priest down a dark corridor.

Outside, the runner could hear the faint reports of the fire sticks, and the cries of women. For a moment he thought of the woman he had known as a mother as a child, then he shook the thought away.

He shivered. A horrifying time had come to the land of the Inca. The priests had warned the people that the bearded barbarians would destroy everything in their search for gold, but it was worse than they could have imagined. Time itself was ending.

The young man and the priest entered the room of the Inca, the room of gold. Here the torches reflected the glitter of the precious metal. This metal used to create the art of the Inca, this gift from the Sun God used as decoration to please those one loved, was the obsession of the barbarians.

The runner bowed, low to the ground, not daring to look into the face of the Inca. Even so, he had caught a glimpse of the noble family, huddling in the shadows of the room. Only the Inca remained unperturbed. He sat on his throne like the god he was.

"My house is about to fall," the great king spoke, and again the runner shivered. He had never before heard words from the Inca.

"My time is ending," the Inca said. "I accept my destiny, but we must keep the Sun God crossing the heavens and giving warmth to the earth. Otherwise the earth will die. Send my son, the runner, to Vilcampa. Send him to the mountain of Machu Picchu, there where the virgins tie the Sun God to the post on the mountain. Let him warn them of the barbarians; let them guard our secrets."

The runner felt the eyes of the Inca upon him, and heard the words entrusting him with the last message from the Inca.

"Leave no trail, cut the bridges behind you. Here we accept death at the hands of the barbarians, but we must save Vilcampa. We have been told, even time dies, but a new time must be born. Our knowledge is also for the time which is being born," were the Inca's last words.

The priest pulled the runner away from the presence of the Inca. In the corridor he handed him an intricately knotted cord, the quipus which contained the message from the ruler.

"This is the message for the virgins of Vilcampa," the priest said. "It tells the chief priestess how long they must remain hidden from the world if they are to escape the wrath of the barbarians. The city of the virgins must be sealed; no one must pass through the portals of Machu Picchu. The city clothed in mountain mists will now be clothed in secrecy for all time. There the virgins will guard the knowledge of the Inca. Perhaps in a future time someone will read the message in the quipus and shed tears for the Inca."

Outside the thunder of the fire sticks grew louder, the murderous shouts of the barbarians closer.

"Go now," the priest hurried the runner down the corridor and to the secret door. "Take the message to the priestess of Vilcampa. Do not fail us."

The priest opened the door, the screams and thunder grew louder. In the air floated a strange, acrid smoke. He pressed a pouch of dried coca leaves into the runner's hands. The runner would chew the leaves and they would deaden the pain during the long run to Vilcampa. Many of the tambos, the rest houses along the trails in the Mountains of the God, had been destroyed. Now there were no runners to help relay the message; this runner would run a full day and a full night.

He climbed out of the mountain bowl which was the Valley of Cuzco without incident. The Inca had thrown all of his warriors into one last stand against the barbarians, a distraction to allow the runner to slip out of the palace. Now as the runner stood on the edge of the cliff looking down on the burning city, a great sadness filled him.

The people of the Inca were being destroyed, there was no family left. Frightening sounds filled the air, sounds which echoed across the

centuries of time. Cuzco was dying, now there was only the hope of Vilcampa in Machu Picchu.

Panting from the climb, the runner opened the pouch and took out the coca leaves. Now he would run continuously, stopping only to cut the bridges that spanned the mountain ravines. These bridges constructed of lianas, the vines from the Amazon, were the most valued possession of the Inca. The runner's instructions were to cut all the bridges on the trail to Vilcampa. He would not take time to rest.

He touched the quipus. There at the end the priest had tied a piece of metal, perhaps a piece taken from one of the breastplates the barbarians wore. This hard and cold object was the symbol of the new age. The virgins of Vilcampa would shiver when they touched the metal.

Into the evening he ran, climbing higher and higher, following the hidden foot trail above the river valley. Behind him plumes of smoke rose into the orange sky, the fires of Cuzco burning. In the sky the runner saw a strange omen, a silver bird flying over the mountain. Below him he saw a giant snake made of metal twisting its way along the Urubamba valley. He shivered. These were the strange omens of the new time the Inca predicted.

He entered the dusk, knowing his world had come to an end. Who would read the quipus when the children of the Inca were dead? Who would know the glory of Vilcampa and the virgins who tethered the Sun God at the Post of the Sun? Who would keep the calendars of the Inca, and the memory of the people?

He ran along the plain of the Urubamba, and all around him the terraced fields of the people were deserted. The people had fled into the mountains. He had tied the quipus to his belt, and as he ran the corded string bounced on his thigh. The piece of metal at the end of the cord beat against his leg, bruising and then cutting open his flesh.

He ascended the mountains, pausing only to cut the foot bridges, sealing off the road to Vilcampa. He did not rest. The tambos on the trail were deserted, the ashes in the fireplaces cold. All runners and warriors had been called to defend the Inca. He was the only runner on the trail to Vilcampa.

He ran to the rhythm taught the runners of the Inca, and still his lungs began to burn. He chewed the coca leaves, swallowing the bitter

juice. The rhythm he kept and the deadening effect of the coca produced a new rhythm, a new awareness. He sang the songs of the Inca as he ran; his heart grew happy and he knew he could run forever.

He could fly, yes, this is what the runners of the Inca could do. They had been taught by the shamans to fly. The runners are birds circling the Mountains of the Gods, the priests of the Inca said, the runners are the sons of the Inca, sons of the sun.

Below him the mighty waters of the Urubamba raged and rumbled as they surged down the mountains. The runner heard the sound of the river, and he heard another sound. It was the sound of the iron serpent winding its way along the valley. A dark plume of smoke trailed the iron serpent.

Very well, the runner thought, I will run faster than the serpent of the barbarians. Let the new time come to the land of the Inca, I will deliver my message.

All night he ran, and visions came to him. He moved out of the time of the Inca into a new time. The old priests had taught him to run, and they had taught him that visions would come as he ran.

He spoke to his father as if he was running by his side, remembering the stories his father taught him. He moved back into the navel of time and spoke to runners of the past, runners who had run from the ocean to Cuzco, bearing fresh fish for the Inca's dinner. He moved so far back in time that he saw the first people arriving to settle the mountains, the first Incas in their thrones of gold. He saw the first stones laid to construct Vilcampa, the city guarded by Machu Picchu. Then the ultimate vision came, and he saw the virgins of Vilcampa tie the Sun God to its post. With perfect clarity he saw the golden disc tethered for a moment on the solstice day of rest, and peace filled him.

For a moment he saw the harmony, the earth and sun as one, the prayers of the virgins answered. Then visions of the future came, and he saw the devastation of his people. The people were enslaved, the old calendars of the sun were broken. The runner felt fatigue spreading in his muscles, and the visions became a clutter of people swarming around him, people from another time and place.

The light of dawn glowed around him, and still he had not stopped to rest. Into the new day he ran until there before him was the gate of Vilcampa. He had broken the stream of time to arrive with the

message. He did not feel the exhaustion, even though the muscles of his legs quivered. He thanked the sun for his swiftness and safety; he had brought the message to Vilcampa.

He slowed to a walk as he passed through the stone gate. Just below an alert sentry waved him forward. He paused to look at the city of the votaries of the sun, the virgins who cared for Vilcampa. The Urubamba river cut a wide curve around the promontory on which stood the city; the city was a fortress of the sun protected by the mountains Machu and Picchu. The barbarians could follow the river, but from below they could not see the city. And he had cut the bridges and obliterated the signs on the trail. Now Vilcampa could be sealed off and exist in its own time.

Just below the sentry hut was the entry door. There in the middle of the city was the meadow where the dances were held. To the left stood the houses of the virgins, and nearby the temple. And there was the sun dial! Here was the center of the universe, the ombligo of time. He gazed upon the sun dial and felt he was returning home, as other would come in future times. Vilcampa would stand for all time, and belong to all people. That is what the Inca meant, that the message was also for the time being born.

Here, it was known, the virgins could tie the Sun God to the Post of the Sun. Only for a moment, only to renew its energy. Here the sun gazed on the altar of sacrifice, the smooth monolith where prayers and penance were done. Here the sun had intercourse with the virgins, penetrating their flesh, blessing the fields they cultivated, renewing time. This was the navel of the world where time converged.

The runner stood transfixed, feeling the luminous moment. The quality of light was so pure it was as the light of the first dawn on earth. The air was clear and scintillating. The green mountains of the Urubamba rose around him, clouds drifted across the peaks, dappling Vilcampa with bright sun then shadow. An immense peace filled the runner's heart. Below him he could see the stone masons working at the quarry, and on the terraces those who tended the maiz and potatoes. It was a serene image, and he wished he could sit and rest, but he had to deliver the message from the Inca.

He descended and was met at the sentry hut by a young woman. She greeted him. They had been expecting him.

"You are hurt," she said and looked at his thigh where the piece of metal on the metal tip of the quipus had drawn blood.

"It is nothing," he answered. "I bring a message from the Inca."

"Follow me," she said. At the gate she called to the others, and many stepped forward to help push the large stone into place. The city was now sealed.

"Our chief priestess had a vision," the young woman said as they walked toward the temple. "Strangers have come to burn Cuzco. We hear strange sounds in the valley."

She paused and looked at him.

"Behind me, everything is destroyed," he said sadly. "The time of the Inca is no more."

"And Vilcampa?" she asked.

He saw the fright in her eyes, and he wished he could say that Vilcampa was forever. But nothing was forever, only the path of the sun and the knowledge of the virgins. A weariness filled his body.

"For now, Vilcampa is safe. I will live here," he said.

He wanted to tell her that while he ran he had a vision of others trudging up the slopes of the mountains to the secret city, new generations who came seeking the knowledge of the Incas.

"The quipus carries the message," he said, "it will be passed on."

She led him through the narrow streets of the city, turning left toward the altar. There she invited him to sit. She left him for a moment and returned with water. She cleansed his wound, washing the blood away, and she washed his body. He closed his eyes while she washed him, enjoying the softness of her hands. Around him gathered other women, the virgins who kept Vilcampa, eager to know what message he brought.

"Now you may deliver your message," the young woman said and led him toward the temple. They passed the sun dial, the Post of the Sun which was carved from one piece of stone.

She led him to the temple where the chief priestess waited. She was surrounded by other women, priests of the sun and workers from the fields and the quarry.

"Welcome, runner of the Inca," the priestess spoke and stepped forward. "Welcome to our home. We have been waiting for you."

The runner undid the quipus from the leather thong at his waist and handed it to her. She received it tremulously.

She read the message in a loud voice, and the wind of the mountain carried the sad words down the canyon of the Urubamba. She read the date the barbarians had come to destroy Cuzco, and the many warriors of the Inca who had been killed. In the words of the Inca, time had come to an end, now a new time had to be born. Vilcampa was to keep the calendars of the sun and the knowledge of the Inca.

A deep silence filled the air. Only the moan of the wind could be heard. Then she showed them the piece of metal tied to the tip of the quipus, and she told them this was the cause of all the destruction.

"Did you cut the bridges on the mountain passes?" she asked the runner.

"Yes," he answered.

"The Inca has commanded," she said to all gathered, "no one is to leave Vilcampa. No one can enter. Our fate is sealed. We are the last city of the Inca, we will praise and renew the sun as always."

All nodded in assent. The time of the Inca had died, and now Vilcampa was a capsule anchored to the mountains of Machu Picchu. How long they survived was not for them to say, for time on earth was short and the visions of the priests forever. They knew the secret of Vilcampa, and in the future others would come to know it. Of that they were sure.

The priestess returned the quipus to the runner. "It is yours," she said. "A message to be passed down through the centuries. Many people will come here seeking the knowledge of the Inca. They will want to know how we were attentive to the Sun God. They will seek knowledge of the harmony of our world. We will share that message," she smiled.

The runner nodded. The message of catastrophe and chaos had been received with courage. These women, these votaries of the sun, were all women of courage. They accepted the end of time because they knew a new time would be born. In their wombs they carried the rays of the sun, the penetrating light of the Giver of Life.

"Take the runner to the eating area," the priestess said to the



young woman. "See that he is fed. See that he has a place to rest. He is one of us now. This is his home."

The young woman bowed and took the runner's hand. She led him through the open meadow, past a flock of alpacas and the houses of the workers.

"There," she said, "is the place to eat. The women will serve you. I will return for you."

He turned to look at the terrace where people were eating. They were clothed in garments he had never seen; they spoke a strange language. For a moment he was afraid. Was he too slipping away from the time of the Inca? Was there no spot of earth which was fixed forever? Had he died in Cuzco or in the mountain ravines? Was this his ghost moving across time to come to sit with the strangers?

"Do not be afraid," he heard the voice of the young woman. "You are one of us."

The runner's hand tightened on the quipu, as if holding tight to the cord he could hold on to reality. His body ached with fatigue, the effect of the coca had worn away. He felt hunger. He walked to the eating area. There was an empty chair, and the man next to it motioned to the runner.

"Sit here," the man said. He spoke the language of the barbarians, but his smile was kind. "I have come a long way to listen to the memories of Vilcampa," he said. He had been writing on the notebook which lay on the table.

A woman served the runner food and drink. The drink was cold and bitter. It was served in a marvelous glass bottle. The food was cold and tasteless; he couldn't eat. A swarm of people moved around him. Who are these strangers, he wondered. What has happened to the Vilcampa I knew? He looked for the young woman, and spotted her near workers who stood by the large metal huts. Smoke poured from these cabins even as people stepped out of them.

"Too many tourists, too many buses," the man sitting by the runner whispered. He pointed to the long line of people disembarking. "We come looking for the magic, and we find only each other," he smiled.

It was a kind smile, the runner thought. This stranger from another country had dark, curly hair and a dark face, but he was not a

child of the Inca. The children of the Inca were the workers who spoke Quechua as they ate their lunches by the side of the road.

The runner looked at the quipus. He understood now what had happened during his run, and that it was time to pass on the message. This man, too, was a messenger, he wrote his stories in the notebook. The runner pushed the quipus across the table to the man, and the man took it. Their eyes met for a moment, and in that instant each knew the message from the Inca would never die. It would be passed on, generation to generation.

The runner nodded and rose. He bowed, and the man responded. Then the runner walked away from the eating place to join the workers. These were his people, men of strong backs and honest, brown faces. They talked and joked in a language he could understand. They were cleaning the road that led down to the valley, but they had paused to eat their noon day meal. They accepted the runner easily into their company.

The young woman he had met when he entered the gate of Vilcampa handed him Quechua food, and he ate. Here he felt at ease. These men had been in the Mountains of the Sun a long time. They were the new workers in the city of Vilcampa. They ate and talked in the shadow of Machu Picchu. They would be here forever, the runner thought.

He relaxed, looked at the young woman and smiled. He had delivered the message from the Inca, now it was in the hands of the man who sat at the table. He would read the secret of the quipus, record it in his language, and pass it on. Each new time had its runners, those whose work carried them into new visions of reality.