

## Chapter 1: A Small Sacrifice at Pachacamac

A priest knelt before her, a feather from his head-dress tickling her face. His musky odour of old incense and stale blood was rank, even here on the windy summit of the pyramid. Four other priests held her body tipped slightly forwards, and the pressure that this put on her tired old joints hurt far more than the fine, cold bite of the knife at her neck. Quick blood ran thick down her chin and splashed into the waiting bowl. Then the flow weakened, the strength went out of her and she died, content.

Seven elderly pilgrims had set out for Pachacamac, following their familiar river down to the coast and then trudging North through the desert sands. Two of the very oldest of them needed to be carried in litters, but most were able to walk with no more than a stick to help them in the sand. Lesser members of the community had been delegated to carry what was necessary. These would return home. The elderly would not.

The better-regarded families of the town were expected to die as was proper, sacrificed at the Pachacamac shrine for the betterment of the community. Such was to be their last contribution of ayni, of the reciprocity that assured communal harmony and health. It was also their guarantee of a smooth return to the community's soul, to the deep, impersonal structure from which they had sprung at birth.

The Pachacamac complex appeared to them quite suddenly from amongst the coastal dunes. They paused to marvel at its mountain range of pyramids, its teeming myriad of ancient and holy shrines.

Over the millennia, one particular pyramid had come to process all of the pilgrims who came from their valley. They were duly welcomed, and guards resplendent in bronze and shining leather took them safely to its precinct.

They had been expected. The priests were kind, welcoming them with food and drink, helping the infirm, leading them all by easy stages up to the second-but-last tier in their great, ancient pyramid. The full extent of the meandering ancient shrine unveiled itself like a revelation as they climbed. Then, as whatever had been mixed with their meal took its effect, they were wrapped up snug in blankets and set to doze in the late evening sun, propped together against the warm, rough walls of the mud-brick pyramid. Their dreams were vivid, extraordinary, full of weight and meaning.

The group was woken before dawn, all of them muzzily happy, shriven of all their past cares, benignly numb. Reassuring priests helped them gently up the stairs to the very top tier. In the predawn light, the stepped pyramids of Pachacamac stood sacred and aloof in an ocean of mist.

Each pilgrim approached their death with confidence. A quick little discomfort would take them back to the very heart of the community from which they had been born. They had been separated from it by the act of birth, each sudden individual scattered about like little seed potatoes. Now, ripe and fruitful, they were about to return home, safely gathered back into the community store. It was to be a completion, a circle fully joined. Hundreds of conch horns brayed out across Pachacamac as the dawn sun glittered over the distant mountains. Seven elderly lives drained silently away as the mist below turned pink.