

**VIRACocha (SAMPLE) – SHANE HULGRAINE**  
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“I don’t like it,” Ripley declared in his wimpy voice as he followed his mentor, Naiziri, blindly into the ancient fortress: Castilla de Jerez. Naiziri did not acknowledge the comment and pushed deeper into the oncoming void. Overstepping shattered rocks and debris, they pressed further inside the old structure in single file.

Ripley knew because he was the younger of the two by decades, and junior in rank by as many years, that his opinions held little weight. That’s how he figured Naiziri saw it anyway. Before leaving Sussex, Ripley had heard that, at one stage of his life, Naiziri had been a devout Jesuit priest, although Ripley knew him only as a controversially unorthodox explorer and mentor whose methods seemed as old and redundant as the foreboding limestone chamber that enclosed the two men. He constantly ordered Ripley to gather things and take notes.

“There, boy. And there. Take samples and mark them in the giro.”

Naiziri growled the words in his guttural Catalan tone before he stooped beneath the partially blocked doorway, only feet in front of his apprentice. Ripley watched him step fearlessly into the unknown. It had been built, Ripley thought, during a time when people’s heights were significantly less than his own, or indeed Naiziri’s. He silently damned the man, and debated whether it was Naiziri’s faith that lent him such confidence or the flask of sherry dangling from his belt.

“I’ll get them, sir,” Ripley groaned, the petulance in his final word was unmistakeable. Naiziri fully submerged himself in the chamber’s shadows, scuffing his forehead on the doorway arch as he progressed inside the misty brown cloud of stone and dust. Ripley bent to his knees and gathered what he could, careful not to drop his lamp. Absentmindedly, he grabbed at the ground, procuring a handful of blunt metal and sandal leather.

They were inside the first precinct; a broad space that followed the contours of the hulking mound that Castilla de Jerez was built upon somewhere between the towns of Faro and Malaga. Ripley did not understand why they could not simply plunder the spoils of nearby Egypt, which had been occupied by British Army since 1882. Considering that most of the country was still smarting

from 'El Disastre' in South America, exploring an Egyptian tomb was almost certainly safer than being mistaken for an American adventurer in the south of Spain. He wished that Naiziri had listened to his concerns.

Although he was not yet inside the armament, Ripley noted the crudely fashioned arrow heads and machete-like weapons strewn across the floor. Among these were skeletal splinters, scorched and darkened by time, which decorated both sides of the chamber on the left and right; skirting a trail that pointed in Naiziri's direction. Ripley thumbed one of these, unsure in the inconsistent lamplight whether it was shattered pottery or blackened bone. He thought about home and his family.

How had he wound up with Naiziri? He could not pin point the moment that it had happened. Some good this would bring him, he thought. Although, there was the question of the university fellowship – as good a reason as any to trail after and collect broken vases in the desert for an obstinate Spaniard. Still, something about it felt off centre. Ripley thought he heard running water beneath the surface of the floor now that he was down low to it. He recalled their journey on the Vilcanota River, coming ashore and the morning trek that had brought them to the Castilla earlier that day.