

1 / The Others

As spring approached each year, there were several beats of the day in which the shine from the sun beamed directly down into the depths of the well, reflecting off the cool, clear water and mirroring the clouds or the faces that peered down into the gifts from below. The excited shouts of his son from afar prompted Arjun to peel his countenance away from the water's reflection and look to the dusty dirt road on which the race had already begun. At twelve, Vrindavan was both strong and strongheaded. He loved the liberation that his bike brought him and never turned down a race, even though his older cousin was stronger.

Arjun smiled as he watched his son's skinny legs glisten in the midday sun, working against friction and competition. The bike in front of Vrindavan was powered by Arjun's nephew, Tomás—fifteen, furry, and full of himself, but not too entangled up in puberty to dismiss his younger cousins and their Saturday tradition. The War had brought such chaos, doubt, and destruction to these sultry hills that simple pleasures were the finest, and life itself was sweet, even six years after the armistice. Land redistribution didn't turn out as planned, nor did the politicians who promised the peasants better access to water, government grants, and farming co-ops, but Arjun and his family had enough. The cows were productive; the carpentry contracts usually paid well; the gardens were prosperous, and his friends were kind.

All blessings counted, but the joy of being a father stood head and shoulders above the rest. On occasion, he had sheltered wounded rebels on their land, watched them lose limbs, teeth, and guts, watched souls depart their bodies—light on, light out in an instance. The miracle of a child's healthy frame, bright presence, and fragile innocence was hardly lost on any parent in Bolivarian highlands.

Nor were the ever-expanding coffee plantations seizing the hills or the cattle ranches conquering the valleys. The Barrera family had taken the stage this time, adding another generation of chicanery and politesse to the five hundred years of conquest that characterized the continent.

Arjun's land had also been in his family for several generations. His grandfather, Álvaro, had started with two and a half acres and a small herd of cattle. He named the ranch *Hidalgo*. The tenor of the name itself conferred a sense of strength, but *hijo de algo*—*Hidalgo*, the son of someone—also suggested that though Álvaro and his family were poor, they would still hold on to dignity.

When Álvaro passed *Hidalgo* to Arjun's father, bigger ranchers were sucking up most of the business. Instead of tending coffee and breeding cattle, his father learned to brew corn liquor. With plenty of money from its sales, Eusebio Casteñeda bought up the land around him, mostly for pride, but also to leave his family a durable inheritance. Torinoco's politics had been volatile since the country's inception. The *sol* had tanked twice in the last fifty years, each time bailed out by Hemrikan banks which further compounded Torinoco's debt to its northern neighbor. Eusebio knew that land was the only stable tender and moneywise enough to buy seventeen acres of prime real estate.

As Eusebio lay dying inside his country home, he asked Arjun and his brother not to cut down the ceiba tree. It was an *abuelo*, he said, and if it were ever cut, its absence would destroy the whole valley. Arjun and his brother dismissed their father's request as highland folklore—remnants of Indian juju passed down over centuries of cultural fusion. But they honored his request.

That tremendous tree—the ceiba—stood in the field behind the boys’ ongoing race. Its trunk was bigger than Arjun’s bedroom, hosting protrusive ridges that reached into roots and between which grew villages of vines, ferns, and colorful bromeliads. It towered into the heavens some ten stories high and was the namesake of the narrow valley that the Castañedas called home.

The sloping field around the ceiba held patchworks of coffee and maize plants and the occasional wide-leafed banana tree. Past the field and into the forest, another hill, almost perfectly conical, sat above the rest of the valley. Arjun and the boys had found shards of clay pots, the bones of llamas, and rectangular stones there. In the Bolivarian highlands, the vestiges of ancient times lay dormant everywhere and carried countless chronicles for the curious.

Back on the road, Vrindavan grit his teeth and spun the gears as much as he could bear to catch up to Tomás. Vrindavan’s front wheel edged towards the back of Tomás’s bike. “Not today, boy!” shouted Vrindavan, catching up.

Tomás pumped his bike towards the finish line, but Vrindavan worked just as hard. As the younger boy took on his cousin side by side, Tomás let out a war cry, bore down on the pedals, and overcame Vrindavan’s best efforts, crossing the finish line half a bike before his cousin.

“Damn,” said a low voice near the edge of the forest.

Arjun looked left to discover Sergio across the yard standing beside a horse named Kentucky, brush in hand. His eyes were fixed on the boys catching their breath at the intersection of two dirt roads, their weekly finish line. A halfways grin stayed on his lips, bunching up the creases in his weathered face. Arjun watched the gaunt Commander revel in the experience of youthful enthusiasm, fully aware of the contrast of the boys’ innocence to the horrors Sergio had

seen in the War and its artful aftermath. The battered soldier looked back at Arjun and grinning he said, “Best one yet.”

“He’s getting close,” said Arjun, squinting.

“I’m going to need some more nails for the shed, Prabhu,” called Sergio, resting a hand on Kentucky. ‘Prabhu’ was a term of respect for a male devotee, and in the four months that Sergio had been staying with Arjun and his family, he’d already picked up the habit.

“For sure,” said Arjun rotely, in deep analysis of the erstwhile guerrilla.

The Commander was still terribly skinny. Five years in the roughest prison in Torinoco had been hard on him. Perhaps even harder were the scars of having sacrificed everything for naught. He was quiet these days, withdrawn and unsettled, but he didn’t mind working. In fact, he craved it and loved to build. He was a good woodworker, but more than physical constructions, he relished sculpting ideas to life, and Hidalgo had plenty of projects to foster his healing.

War and prison aside, Arjun’s furtive and fickle niece was enough to drive anyone to the brink. She’d been the Commander’s girlfriend during the War, his betrothed during prison, but during his five years of lock-up, she never confessed her addiction to paste. When the Commander came to the highlands to live with her, Melimi was already too far gone for hope. Arjun and Sergio took her to rehab kicking and screaming—that hollow shell of the woman they once adored.

“Prabhu,” ventured Sergio. The question in his tone propelled him several steps towards Arjun with Kentucky trotting behind.

The Commander had been fleeced of his historical merit, traded like a horse by the General of the Rebel Army, but in the highlands near Payzandú, the locals remembered him and addressed him as ‘Comandante,’ as did Arjun.

“Sí, Comandante?”

“Madre Jiva is always talking about your guru, you know?” Kentucky fluttered her cracked, black lips as if in protest. “But you never say much,” said the Commander.

Arjun looked away and sighed. He couldn’t disturb Sergio with the truth, the secret that plagued him, the one he even kept from his wife. “We’ve had some differences of opinions over the years.”

The Commander’s eyes were brimming with curiosity; a host of questions waited eagerly behind the vanguard of his first inquiry. Arjun turned back and added, “Finances and perspective. But he brought the Holy Names to Torinoco, and for that, I’ll always be grateful.”

A silence filled the space between them. A ladybug crawled about the rim of the well, and Arjun again saw his reflection in the water below. “*Prasad* will be ready soon,” he said after he’d gathered himself.

“Prasad? asked the Commander.

“Lunch.”

“Right. See you in a bit.”



His wife was standing at the kitchen window when Arjun entered their modest country home. There was a pot of split-pea dahl simmering on the stove. Traces of incense still lingered in the house from the morning service, now masked by the fused scents of cardamon, cumin, coriander, and turmeric that decorated the dahl. The sounds of sitar and tabla eased out of a small speaker on the windowsill, low enough to still hear the birds chirping in the distance.

Madre Jivananda, his wife, was dressed in violet sari, adorned with a golden fringe. On the bridge of her nose and up through the center of her forehead, she wore a thick yellow clay called *tilak*, signaling that she had gotten up early to attend the deities and pray.

At the window, Jivananda had a clear view of the well and the barn beyond it. “How is he?” she asked Arjun.

“He’s sad,” Arjun sighed, “but he’s tough.”

“He’s lost,” said Madre Jiva, raising an eyebrow.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” warned Arjun as he placed his shoes on the shoe rack. Devotees were prone to proselytize, to spread their foreign form of worship to those who’d tired of the trappings of consumerism and the exploits employed to prop it up. Comandante Cifuentes was ripe for the preaching, but Madre Jiva often came off as eager. Arjun knew that seeds could be planted and nourished but not obliged to grow.

Jiva turned back to the stove, uncovered the pot, and stirred the dahl. “Did Guru Maharaj confirm that he’s coming to the farm?”

“Mmm,” grunted Arjun, nodding his head slightly.

“I was thinking that Vrindavan and me could stay here, and you take the Commander with you to Monte Fe.” Madre Jiva looked over her shoulder at Arjun, then over to the window.

They could hear the boys in the distance meandering back to the house. “Me and Vrindavan—we could use the time to ourselves.”

“That’s fine with me.”

“I just need you to run a couple errands for me.”

“Sure.”

She tapped the wooden spatula on the pot, placed it on the spoon rest, and turned around.

“Now might be a good time to ask Gurudeva about the letter.”

“The Lusix letter?” Arjun scoffed. “They’ve got no basis for expropriation.”

“What if they do, Prabhu?”

“That Worthington character is just a puppet for the Barreras. When Bakras get involved, you know there’s something fishy. No offense.”

Jivananda shuddered at the colloquial, often derogatory, term for the people from the Hemrikan Federation. She herself was only half ‘Bakra,’ her father hailing from the country across the northern sea.

“Look, Madre,” Arjun reasoned, “we managed to stand our ground the entire War. We can manage a little intimidation.”

“I’m not saying you’re wrong. Still, don’t you think we should consult Guru Maharaj?”

“He shouldn’t be bothered with mundane matters, my love.”

Jivananda cocked her head to the side, questioning Arjun’s position.

Arjun rubbed his eyes saying, “I’ll see what he says.”

Rubber skidded along the path towards the house. Gravel popped out from beneath the tires as they rode their bikes towards the shed, Arjun and Jivananda watching the boys from the window as they dismounted.

“Hola Comandante,” shouted the youngest of the three to Sergio as he was leaving the barn.

“Bueno Jorge,” called Sergio.

“Hola Comandante,” repeated Tomás, then Vrindavan.

“The Commander carries a lot of weight around here,” said Jiva to Arjun. “Think what he’d do for the congregation.”

“Man proposes, God disposes, my love,” said Arjun. “All in due time.”



“You’re saying that children shouldn’t go to school?” scoffed Sergio. There was a burn in his eyes, a hatred of the wrong.

The two men sat at either end of the table, with Tomás and Jorge on one side and Jivananda and Vrindavan on the other.

Arjun chuckled to mask his fear with an abiding sense of calm. Sergio wasn’t a big man, but his presence commanded authority, and his ability to think several steps ahead made him a formidable contender in debate. “Not at all, Prabhu,” Arjun replied. “I’m saying that schools—most schools anyway—don’t provide children with a real education, and as I mentioned, real education is to prepare young people for the entire scope of the human curriculum.”

“What all is included in the ‘entire scope of the human curriculum’?” mocked Sergio.

“Obviously, people need skills for functioning in the world, but they also need skills for dealing with trauma, with death, with pain. I mean, if trauma is one of humans’ most fundamental experiences, why don’t we have the skills to deal with it?”

“And what skills are those?”

“Understanding our emotions. Creating role plays for kids about them. Techniques for processing them.”

“Like what?” The Commander had his guard up, eager to find any angle to rupture Arjun’s argument.

“Breathing, exercise, music, art.” Arjun nodded at his nephew, saying, “Tomás used to punch holes in the wall at school. He used to tackle kids on the playground, and the teachers just yelled at him. What do you do now, Tomás?”

“Throw rocks in the woods,” mumbled the boy in response.

“But his teachers didn’t offer that to him as an option. Madre Jiva did.”

“Now Tomás got everybody in the whole sixth grade throwing rocks at recess,” added Jorge. “But Soledad still won’t give him her number.”

“Shut up. At least I don’t have warts,” quipped Tomás at his younger brother.

Jorge quickly hid his hands beneath the table.

“Alright,” said Madre Jiva, “it’s going to be extra kitchen duty if you two don’t settle down.”

Tomás and Jorge made snide faces at each other in silence while Jiva turned to Sergio, saying, “Arjun is saying that schools as we know them only teach you the skills to be productive in a growth-based economy. And because their graduates don’t know how to provide for themselves, they have to rely on corporations to suffice their every need. But what happens when power grids or stock markets crash? Will those kids know how to grow enough food to survive? Know which plants are medicine and which are poisonous? Know how to make their own clothes?”

To the right of Jiva, Vrindavan was spreading dahl onto a piece of bread and dousing it in homemade hot sauce.

Arjun watched Sergio's eyes shower his wife with skepticism. She was much lighter-skinned than most Noqueños, like the blue-blooded elites who controlled the economy and military from the capital—those who'd sent troops to squash the peasant revolt in northern Torinoco nine years earlier.

“So your solution”—Sergio sniggered—“is for eight billion people just to drop everything and live like hunter-gatherers? First of all, they'd never all agree to do it, and secondly, even if they did agree, most of them would starve.”

Jorge, with a face full of bread, interjected, “I'd live out in the forest.”

“You wouldn't last one minute in the forest,” replied Vrindavan from across the table.

“Prabhu,” answered Arjun, leveling with the salty veteran, “I'm not saying that Jorge here go live like a hunter-gatherer. Most modern people wouldn't survive the first year. So let me be clear: I'm not proposing a single formula to make everything better. No one person or ideology can address climate change or greed or the multitude of human perversions, but we can teach young people the techniques and principles to address the generations of trauma they hold inside while still giving them the skills to function in the world.” He paused. “It's not an easy fix, but we got to start somewhere.”

“Yeah! It's just like our Guru Maharaj says”—Madre Jiva glanced at the photo of Swami Siddharupa on the altar behind Sergio—“the work of the devotee will take seven generations to come to full fruition.”

Arjun grimaced while Jiva was still looking in the direction of the altar but quickly found his composure. “Commander, I don’t have to tell you that the game is rigged, but how can we play a new one if we don’t teach people the rules?”

“A new game, huh?” mumbled Sergio in contemplation.

Tomás smirked, looking across the table at Vrindavan. “Somebody’s gonna need *new game* if he ever wants to race me again.”

Vrindavan stood, pushing his chair back behind him. “Let’s go right now. I was just warming up.”

“I’m ready,” barked Tomás as he stood. “Round two.”

“Hey hey,” demanded Arjun from his seat, looking sternly at the boys. “Sit down. Both of you should know by now that... Well, there’s no match for the champ supreme.” In jest, he tapped his chest with his fingertips. “I drive the chariot. I got the reins.”

Tomás and Vrindavan glanced at each other, then burst into laughter. Madre Jivananda shook her head at the dad joke and noticed that Sergio didn’t understand the reference. “Arjun is the name of Krishna’s chariot driver in the *Bhagavad Gita*. He’s one of the best warriors in the world, but this one”—she pointed to her husband—“he’s got some work to do.”

Sergio chuckled and looked up at Arjun. “I think he’s doing pretty good.”

Arjun the Noqueño opened his hands up at Jivananda boasting. Vrindavan scoffed, slapping at his father’s hand.

As they laughed and the boys began to talk again, Arjun watched the Commander dip his spoon in the dahl and take a bite. By twenty-seven, Sergio Cifuentes had survived five years of jungle combat and four more of violent confinement; he had no home, no family, no purpose that he knew of. His heart was broken but tenacious still. He was ripe for almost anything.

II

At the front of the sanctuary, the altar glistened with bright golden hues. The deities Gaura and Nitai stood nearly a meter tall wearing handmade garlands and headdresses of live flowers. Behind the flowers extended replicas of peacock feathers, and golden necklaces hung higher than the long garlands like the sapphire-colored beads and violet pendants beside them. The stoles on their shoulders fanned out beyond the garlands, pinned to the wall to represent the ecstatic dancing and chanting that drove their medieval insurrection against the strictures of the Hindu caste system and the rigidity of their Muslim governors.

Of all the temples in the entire Abyalan continent, Gaura and Nitai were secondary deities, or sometimes Gaura stood beside Krishna and Radha—God and his earthly counterpart. But Bhaktivedanta Siddharupa, the swami who'd brought the religion to the Abya Yala twenty years before, installed Gaura and Nitai as the principal deities in the Monte Fe temple because that small coastal city at the very north of Torinoco had been the birthplace of the Noqueño revolution—the revolt against Hemrika and the marionettes they propped up in Torinoco.

During the four months that Sergio had been living with the devotee family near the small town of Payzandú, Arjun shared with the Commander how a young Bengali swami in the late fifteenth century preached that anyone, regardless of caste, creed, or sex, could chant the Holy Names. His name was Chaitanya but was often known as Gaura because of his golden complexion. His followers carried around simple clay drums called *mirdangas* and took their movement to the streets, alarming the high-caste Hindu priests and the Muslim magistrates that ruled West Bengal. Men and women, rich and poor, high-caste and low, Muslims and Hindus joined his egalitarian movement, organized and fomented by Lord Chaitanya's most distinguished disciple Nitai.

Arjun studied Sergio as he gazed into the pageantry of the altar's golden gloss. Maybe the backdrop of rebellion wouldn't make the Hindu rituals and Sanskrit terminology seem so foreign; maybe it'd even spark his interest. But very little aroused the soured soldier these days. The only laugh he'd relinquished in the past few weeks had been hours before in the truck. Either his past had rendered him lifeless, or he was in shock at the swarm of shaven devotees in saffron robes with their open hands in the air roaring mantras at the top of their lungs, some of them swaying side to side, some jogging in place, some bouncing their shoulders against their fellow devotees.

At the front of the sanctuary, a German man with the build of a bear led the rapturous hymns. His belly sloshed side to side to the rhythm of the fiberglass mirdanga that hung from his shoulder. A wireless microphone was hooked to his right ear and lay across his coarse beard. He would call a line of mantra to the crowd, and they would repeat in unison.

Around Swami Siddharupa were other devotees playing an both ancient and contemporary instruments. A young woman with ears full of rings and pink hair played the electric guitar in the corner. An older devotee played the harmonium on the floor beside the guitarist. Two young men played tall drums from Mazaul called a *timbaus*. Another devotee at the front played large, handheld cymbals while several madres in the back of the temple played small cymbals called *kartals*. Another madre played the flute, while another the tambourine.

Commander Sergio Cifuentes stood at the back of the crowd of men, taking stock of the enraptured devotees and madres, entirely surrendered to the boisterous singing, dancing, drumming, and wild symphony of instruments. The room smelled of sweat, tilak, and sandalwood. Some of the men's kurtas were wet from neck to tail. Though the crowded

sanctuary was clammy and oxygen scarce, no one even entertained breaking away from the uproarious crowd.

Joy spread and rebounded and seeped into their skin, mantra after mantra. A sportive revival, an infectious frenzy. Even the Commander himself cracked a smile thirty minutes into the zealous kirtan. It was hard not to be smitten with the devotees' charisma; it was hard to doubt the magnetism of Swami Siddharupa, even if it were a vile veil for vice.



Later in the evening, Arjun excused himself from the long dinner table where a score of devotees sat conversing. Sergio, to his left, was deeply engaged in a discussion with another devotee. The energy of the evening had clearly pierced his shell of distrust he'd fashioned from the years of betrayal and captivity. Such sparks of excitement shone in him that he hardly looked up when Arjun told him that he'd be back soon.

The distinguished devotee left the dining room and walked down the long hallway to Guru Maharaj's private quarters, the small room they reserved for no one else but him. When given permission to enter, Arjun opened the door, folded his hands in prayer, and bowed to the heavy swami in saffron robes sitting crosslegged on a large cushion beside another monk—Govardhan Maharaj, the president of the temple in Colón.

Govardhan acknowledged Arjun with a poisonous glance, considering that before their conversation had even begun, Arjun stated his position by not dropping to his knees to bow, not touching his head to the floor in surrender to their guru. But Siddharupa, whom everyone else invariably called 'Gurudeva' or 'Guru Maharaj,' didn't take offense, at least not ostensibly. Instead, he extended his hand to Arjun in indication of the empty cushion across from them.

When he'd taken a seat, Siddharupa offered him a plate of pastries, but Arjun declined with a soft show of hand.

"Glad to see you here, Prabhu," remarked Siddharupa.

Arjun winced but caught himself and said, "I share dignity with my spiritual brothers and sisters. I came for them, Maharaj."

"Guru Maharaj," corrected Govardhan.

Arjun nodded but in dismissal of the correction.

"It's been five years, Prabhu. Can't we put this behind us?" said Siddharupa, ignoring Govardhan's admonishment. With his fat, pale finger, Siddharupa picked up the clay bowl and clay plate in front of him and handed it to Govardhan to put aside.

"I haven't said a word. Not one," replied Arjun. "*You're* the one scratching old wounds."

Though Govardhan shifted between scowls, Siddharupa was smiling. "I'm offering you an opportunity. In gratitude for your loyalty," he said.

Arjun chuckled with disbelief. "Loyalty? You think I'm loyal?" His eyes glanced to the long stick covered in saffron cloth and propped against the wall beside Swami Siddharupa. In Indian tradition, when a devotee took life-long vows of celibacy, he was bestowed a *danda*, harkening back to walking sticks of ancient jungle renunciants. "Maharaj," said Arjun, "the *only* reason you still carry a *danda* is so that all those beautiful people out there will still have temples to go to. I show up for Krishna, not for you."

"Why is there such hatred in your heart, Prabhu?"

"Drop the act, Maharaj. Aurelio Barrera is a parasite. He'll infect all of Bolivarria with plantations. He'll ruin the entire state. Look what he's done to you."

“Prabhu,” interjected Govardhan, “what you don’t seem to understand is that Guru Maharaj was looking out for the congregation. Financially, we were barely keeping the temples afloat. We had you and a handful of followers. Now there are temples all over Abya Yala; thousands of fallen souls chanting the Holy Names.”

“Why are we even having this conversation?! I came to you when Julio approached me. And you said, and I quote, ‘Devotees don’t get involved in mundane matters.’ Then months later, there are three new temples going up. You didn’t think I’d put the pieces together?” Arjun shook his head. “What’s worse is that you knew that Barrera was bankrolling Federal forces in the north. That land—that land he took belonged to humble villagers and Hualco families. You talk about protecting the Indigenous, but you’re just another goddamn conquistador.”

Guru Maharaj’s eyes suddenly spread wide in surprise of such strong words.

“Prabhu!” shouted Govardhan. “How dare you—” Govardhan’s nose twitched in efforts to wipe away his snarl. Swallowing, the sweaty friar quickly recovered the same guileful brow he’d learned from his master. “Prabhu, this is just a misunderstanding. Here we are with a brand-new initiative to support the Hualcos.”

“That’s right, Prabhu,” added Siddharupa with a crafty grin. “We borrowed a bit, and now we’re repaying our debts. Barrera himself has created a platform of reconciliation.” He paused and fiddled with the wooden pendant hanging at his chest. “And there’s not a single day that I don’t wish I had done things differently.”

“Look,” said Arjun, resolved and confident, “having a temple in Payzandú isn’t worth letting that imperialist dry up our state so that bankers in Jefferson can have their triple-shot lattes and juicy steaks. So, you can go on gallivanting from country to country having everyone

bow at your feet, and I won't say a damn thing, but neither will I support Barrera's campaign just to cover your ambition."

"Oh, Prabhu," reasoned Siddharupa, "I was wrong. Barrera was wrong. But we get back up and try again. As must you." He deliberated his next move while calmly thumbing his mala. "It'd certainly be a shame for all the madres to hear that Jivananda doesn't support the expansion of the Holy Names in Payzandú. Income doesn't come easy for devotees on their own."

"We'll be alright," replied Arjun. He then joined his hands at his chest, bowed slightly to both Govardhan and Siddharupa, and left.

III

Days later, after they'd returned to Hidalgo, Arjun took to the forest to chant. Over his right hand, he wore a small cloth bag holding the rosary of one hundred eight tulsi beads. On each bead, using his thumb and middle finger to hold it, he recited the Maha Mantra—the chant that, according to the Vaishnavas, possessed the highest vibrational frequency that any human could utter.

As Arjun walked the path farther into the highlands with his steps methodical and measured, he threw himself at his faith with each round of mantra, sometimes shouting at the top of his lungs, sometimes mumbling in a hoarse whisper. With his eyes open just enough to maintain his stride, Arjun climbed farther uphill and further into his meditation.

It was common for devotees deep into *japa*, chanting, to tune out the sounds and activity around them. The sounds of the birds and monkeys traipsing amongst the trees didn't penetrate Arjun's concentration. Nor did the crunching of leaves beneath his feet, nor the rustling of a snake or lizard in the underbrush. It wasn't that Arjun wasn't aware, just that activity around him didn't bait his attention.

In the distance, a branch broke, but its fall didn't warrant exiting his contemplation. "Hare Krishna," he chanted, "Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare."

Just as he entered the second part of the mantra, his eyes shot to the periphery. A figure there amongst the leaves of a sapling. A blowgun to its mouth.

Whut.

Arjun staggered backwards. The beadbag slid off his forefinger, but he caught it by the strap midfall. With the other hand, he reached for the dart piercing his neck, yet before his fingers could wrap around, another dart punctured his ribcage. A third to his stomach.

The wooden beads inside bag clacked together as they struck the earth. Arjun staggered once more trying to save his balance, grasping at branches at the edge of the path, but the poison was strong and sent him plummeting to the ground.

On his back, he lay looking up into the canopy of highland jungle. Even as he struggled to breath, saliva spilling from the side of his mouth, he mumbled, "Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama." From his throat, he emitted a bleat like a goat, then opened his mouth and for the last time uttered, "Rama.

"Rama Ra..."

IV

The sun had risen over the eastern mountain, the new rays glistening in the spring dew and lighting up the varied faces that followed Madre Jivananda through lush gardens and into the forest.

She wore a crown of white and pink carnations over half-up braids and over her biceps, copper armlets with turquoise center stones. Persistent in poise, she advanced in methodical steps as she carried Arjun's silver-plated urn engraved with Sanskrit mantras.

Beside her strode Vrindavan, solemn and alert. He'd been scared to return, but his father's followers had changed his mood, as had the handful of police officers stationed around the property.

Behind Jivananda and Vrindavan were Arjun's brother, Felipe, and Felipe's wife Constanza. Tomás and Jorge followed behind their parents, the boys' eyes red and cheeks long with grief.

Though he was three rows back from widowed wife and fatherless son, it wasn't lost on Sergio that Jivananda carried a small pistol in her waist. Ahimsa, non-harming, was a key tenant in Vaishnava thought, but few philosophies ever trumped preservation.

To Sergio's left walked Madre Radha, Jivananda's best friend. An occasional tear streamed down Radha's face, but she held her head high and let the droplets fall upon her white sari, ignoring their weight the way an athlete ignores their sweat.

At the footbridge across the creek, Jivananda stopped and gazed far into the trees, down the path where Arjun used to take his walks. Puzzles and horror awaited there, but the crowd waited here.

"Just there by the bend," she said to Sergio and Maharaj Govardhan.

The two men then worked to give the family space and spread out the crowd of devotees, Catholics, townspeople, and family members who'd come to pay their respects.

At the bend in the creek, Jivananda descended to her knees and set the urn down on the bank, half a meter above the water. Vrindavan stood behind her, tears running down his cheeks, though upright and strong against the pain.

“Maharaj,” said Jivananda, looking up at Govardhan dressed in saffron.

Govardhan stepped towards the creek, singing, “Om ajñana timirandhasya / Jñanañjana shalakaya...”

When he finished, the creek's chatter carried the rest.

Jivananda lifted the urn up to her son, who, with his mother's grace, sank to his knees to commit the ashes to the water.

“Beloved devotees and friends,” Govardhan said after a spell of silence, “please give the family a few minutes alone.”

Constanza and her sons gathered around Felipe—speechless and crestfallen—as he stared into the water that carried his brother's ashes to the sea.

Radha stepped forward to comfort Jivananda and Vrindavan, and Sergio turned to follow Govardhan, but to his surprise, Jivananda grabbed his arm and nodded in the direction of the creek.

Jivananda swallowed and lifted her head, the carnations bright in the morning sun, her copper armlets glistening in the light. She took her time to look at the seven of them, transmitting to each of them the tenacity she held inside. “We can look at this two ways,” she said to Vrindavan, though the other six knew that she spoke to them as well. “Either we kill our

curiosity and keep our heads down, or we see your father's death as evidence of how much work still must be done."

Vrindavan wiped his face and looked at his mother with queries on his brow.

"Arjun was taken from us simply because what he stood for threatened someone else's power," she explained. "Those are the rules of the old world. So we can swallow them, or we can change them, and changing them is obviously dangerous."

Sergio looked up at Jivananda and said, "But what's the use of all these practices if they don't prepare us for death?"

Radha glanced at Sergio, impressed with his understanding of the philosophy in such short time.

"None at all," replied Jivananda, radiant and courageous. "They give us the strength to stand."

"You want revenge?" asked Vrindavan.

Jivananda chuckled. "Not at all, baby. I want healing, and to heal, we need to find the others."

"The others?" asked Constanza.

Jivananda nodded, looking now into the water. "They don't play in tribes. They play so that everyone else can keep playing. For generations to come."

After a pause, she raised her gaze to Sergio, and added, "Our time tucked away here is over. Arjun gave me strength; what good is it so far removed from influence?" A deep grin stole across her face. "It's my turn to take the reins. I'm driving the chariot this time."

Sergio and Vrindavan looked at each other and smiled.

“I haven’t known you very long, Sergio, but you’re a good man,” said Jivananda. “Arjun was sure about that. Felipe will be looking after things while Vrindavan and I are in Colón, but you can stay here on the farm as long as you’d like. Arjun would be happy for you to follow in his footsteps.”

Sergio watched the water careen over smooth stones and crash into the pool beyond. He heard Vrindavan step away from his mother and stand at the creekbed beside him. The Commander looked sideways and smiled at the boy. “Sooner or later,” he said, “I’ll find a way to play.”