

TEN YEARS LATER

2 / Scars

Rattling the long pods of a golden trumpet tree, a flock of cave swallows lifted off its branches and flew together towards the coast. Hari Bhakti followed their flight, cracking a slight smile as he looked up from the wooden tresses that held his balance. Out in the Bay, amidst its glimmers, a long cargo ship with stacks of orange, blue, and off-white containers waited to call at the port in the distance. Another cloud approached the sun as Hari Bhakti dropped his hammer into the metal ring at his side and took off his hat to wipe his brow.

“Eh-oh!” called Danavir from below.

The tractor shimmied the tresses back onto its front forks, swung around, and lifted the load towards Hari Bhakti and Tarun once again. Danavir clamored up the ladder to help the other two set the tresses in place. They shouted to each other when they had the correct measurements or when they needed the operator to move the boom. “École, école,” one would call to the other when it was time to nail the runner to the tress or to bring down the next tress. Clack clack, beep beep. There was no shortage of sound nor adrenaline when the time came to focus.

Just as they were lowering the last tress, a plump figure—goofy and casual in his gait—was pulling a metal cart up the dusty path to the construction site. He wore a clean white shirt and a white doti, the long sheet that devotee men tied around their waist and between their legs, tucking it in the back to hold. “Even the hottest day on record can’t deter the devotees,” he shouted from the stack of plywood outside the house.

Tarun nailed the runner to tress, and at the last swing, Hari Bhakti shouted back, “But it made you late, Prabhu!”

“I’m always late,” joked Yamuna.

As the forklift backed away, retracting and lowering the boom, the carpenters climbed down the ladder one after another. Hari Bhakti, their leader, settled up with the operator as the younger devotees settled into their daily round of banter with Yamuna.

“El Quesote,” teased Hari Bhakti as he walked towards them. They called Yamuna ‘the Big Cheese’ on account of his pudgy physique and much lighter skin than most Noqueños. He stood at the side of the single-cab pickup truck decorated in blue letters that read ‘Krishna Construction.’ The paint was only two weeks old, freshly sealed a week after he’d received his contractor’s license. Krishna Construction had been operating under-the-table for years, but the remodeling gig was its first official contract. The crow’s feet around Hari Bhakti’s eyes and his sun-kissed skin were testimonies to his years of diligence and back-busting labor.

He had sharp, powerful eyes, variegated in brown and green. They sat under burly brows and above sculpted cheekbones. He was a handsome man, but the serious countenance he often kept on his face intimidated strangers. Stoic and stern, the devotees frequently told him to lighten up, but they loved him as a leader because he never failed them, neither in word nor deed.

Hari Bhakti glanced away from the logo and over at the plastic label-less two-liter bottle of homemade kombucha sitting on the tailgate. He watched the other carpenters sip the brew from short metal cups as he quietly wiped the sweat from his temples.

Yamuna handed Hari Bhakti a cup, and after he’d taken his first drink, he sighed with refreshment.

“What a treat, Prabhu,” said Tarun.

“Thank you, Prabhu,” said Danavir.

“You’re the ones on the roof,” Yamuna mumbled as he put the cup to his lips.

A car bumping cumbia whizzed down the street. The bass thumped throughout the neighborhood while it waited at the stoplight, then let all the neighbors know that its muffler had been altered as it took off again.

“So,” said Yamuna, “I hear there’s another *quesote* coming to town.”

Tarun and Danavir glanced at Yamuna puzzled.

“For Prabhu’s vows.” Yamuna nodded at Hari Bhakti.

“The Viyasa Puja?” asked Danavir. The annual festival was only a month away and all the more important this year because Hari Bhakti would take a lifelong oath of celibacy and service.

A hollow look seized Hari Bhakti’s face. He stared beyond Tarun and Danavir who were still waiting for context. “You remember the stories of Arjun?” he asked, still caught in retrospections. “His son Vrindavan lives in the North and, um, asked if he could come for the Viyasa Puja.” Glancing sideways, he added, “We kept in touch over the years, but I haven’t seen him since his father died.”

“Do they have a lot of temples in Hemrika?” asked Danavir, with the typical lilt of his Italian accent.

“I don’t think he’s a Vaishnava these days,” replied Hari Bhakti. “He’s some kind of hotshot BMX guy.”

“BMX?”

“You know, those trick bikes,” answered Tarun.

“That’s the guy you showed me?” Danavir asked Yamuna.

“Yeah, yeah,” replied Yamuna, “all those flips and stuff.”

“I thought his name was Indi.”

“That’s his nickname,” clarified Yamuna.

“Too bad he’s not a devotee,” interjected Tarun with a chuckle, then throwing a piece of watermelon into his mouth. He was not older than twenty-five, had a medium build and a thin, scraggily mustache. He hid dissent under a happy façade, would joke constantly in order to express sentiments that he was too reluctant to broach otherwise.

“Vaishnavism is the right path for *us*, Tarun, not for everyone,” mumbled Hari Bhakti.

“All I’m saying is that it’s too bad that *Arjun’s* son didn’t follow in his footsteps. That’s not a legacy I’d leave behind.”

The operator started up the forklift, shimmied the wheels towards the driveway—back and forth a few times—then trundled along the driveway past the devotees.

“Prabhu,” asked Dananvir when the noise had settled, “do you ever get nervous about taking sannyas?”

Hari Bhakti smiled at the enthusiastic devotee. Danavir’s features were dark—sunken eyes, black hair, thick stubble even when shaved—but his carriage luminous. He’d come from an affluent family outside of Rome, had lived by all the rules. The Vaishnavas of Torinoco were novel specimens, exotic twists of life. The novelty of Vedic philosophy had yet to fade for the young neophyte.

“I’m thirty-seven and had lived a thousand lives,” answered Hari Bhakti, his tone sober, his body brave but calm. “None of them have ever given me so much peace as this one.” A silence, a drift. “And answers about what we’re doing here—as humans. Guru Maharaj is the light unto my path. I’m only nervous because I want to serve him, not because I’m uncertain.”

“That’s why he’s the boss,” joked Yamuna. “Elevated.” El Quesote shook his head as if he could never take sannyas—the lifelong vow of celibacy. “That reminds me. I brought you guys some cookies.”

Yamuna shimmied off the tailgate and reached into his cart. As he pulled out small paper bags of various colors, Tarun said with skepticism, “Sannyas reminded you of cookies?”

Hari Bhakti reached into the small green bag he’d been given, but instead of pulling out a cookie, he pulled out a thick, blue card and read with the widest of eyes.



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“Prabhu!” exclaimed Hari Bhakti as he rushed to hug Yamuna. Tarun and Danavir then surrounded Yamuna and lifted their feet in dance. “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare,” they sang.

Yamuna was smiling ear to ear. “See why sannyas made me think of cookies!” He laughed, adding, “Because I’m too fallen to be celibate!”

Hari Bhakti watched Tarun rush to the truck and grab a small set of cymbals they called *kartalos*. As Tarun clapped out 4/4 presto, Yamuna’s face lit up, and the Big Cheese threw his hands in the air as he swayed side to side. Hari Bhakti smiled as he watched Tarun and Danavir sing Hare Krishna in the dusty driveway, but his eyes were distant, lost in the past again. Ten years had passed since he’d been with a woman.

Melimi.

They'd been head over heels for each other, and she just threw it all away.

Baa.

It was for the best, and he didn't have time to tangle up in what might have been.

Hari Bhakti pumped his fist in the air to pull himself from the mires of memory. He walked past the happy devotees singing at the edge of the truck and over to Yamuna. He nodded as he took a long look at the fat friar and said, "Happy for you, Prabhu. You're going to make a great husband."



The next morning, just past dawn, Hari Bhakti drove his small, white pick-up truck along the Elki highway and braked at the stoplight. In front of him, towering over the highway, stood a wide billboard with Connie Coneja giving a big thumbs-up for Nokivision's streaming service. "¡Todos tus favoritos en un solo canal!" read the caption coming from the purple bunny. She held an innocent look in her eyes and stood on her hindlegs with two big buckteeth protruding from her wide smile.

She was all over Torinoco these days—on billboards, t-shirts, even as costumed advertisements walking through the plazas. The Abyalan Free Trade Agreement had ushered in every kind of commodity from the North, from microwaves, washing machines, and roombas to smartphones and videogames, as well as endless music, movies, and t-shirts all in English. But Connie Coneja had been, hands down, the most popular icon to emerge from the North after the War.

Staring at the purple bunny, Hari Bhakti pursed his lips, took a big breath in, and yawned. A pinback button with a photo of Swami Siddharupa pierced a piece of yarn hanging from the rearview mirror. With a cocksure squint, he said to the picture of his guru, “Keep fighting, Gurudev.”

On green, he turned the wheel to the right and rode down Avenida Libertad, the median lined with tall palms. He cranked the windows down on each side and turned left onto Avenida del Mar, travelling parallel to placid waves breaking on the Monte Fe shoreline. Minutes later, he parked the truck, placed his beadbag over his neck, and got out. From the boardwalk, he looked inland towards the bus terminal, nodded, and turned towards the sea. Cigarette butts lay scattered all over the concrete and on the path leading to the beach. He shook his head in disappointment and chuckled at the sight as if the detritus were the leftovers of a silly game.

As he walked the wooden planks towards the sand, the thick, salt air clung to his skin, and the bowels of the Bay greeted Hari Bhakti with the stench of oil, gas, and garbage.

Dead seagulls—meat fetid, bones exposed—were common everywhere on the beaches of Bolivar Bay, as were washed-up fishing nets, razors, children’s toys, tampons, and wrappers of all kinds. Though not an everyday occurrence, anyone who lived in the Bay had also seen the rotting corpses of dolphins berthed on the beach—their eyes pecked out; their bellies filled with sand crabs.

As a monk, steadfast to the Order’s fastidious rules of cleanliness, Hari Bhakti never came to the beaches in town. They were filled with all the attachments he had vowed to renounce, or the behaviors he shunned. He was no stranger to the shore but preferred to make the trip outside of Bolivar Bay, where the sand was clean and bearded, hard-put bums didn’t ask

monks for change. But the bus terminal was only three blocks away, and even here some latent purity abided in the sounds of the ocean.

Vrindavan's bus would arrive in an hour—the overnight from the capital. The boy was in his early twenties now, not the wide-eyed child that Hari Bhakti had known for a few brief months before he moved to Hemrika with his mother. He'd contacted Hari Bhakti after a bike injury made him count his blessings and sparked serious inquiry into his father's legacy. In the face of death, everyone misses home; everyone misses family.

At the end of the boardwalk, Hari Bhakti watched a crane across the Bay pick up an orange shipping container waiting in the stacks. The port city, San Cristóbal, rested on a hilly promontory at the west end of the Bay; it guarded his eyes from the rising summer sun long enough to follow the arm of the crane from the stacks to the freighter beneath the boom. Not much of Torinoco's exports were ever sent anywhere but the country's northern neighbor. Coffee, beef, even women trafficked on the hush, were shipped north from Torinoco. As Hari Bhakti squinted at the sight, his face sunk, and his eyes grew moist.

He'd been a simple stevedore fresh out of high school, moving from an inland cattle ranch to the only city he'd ever visited as a child. University was the next stop after he had saved up enough money, but his parents' disappearance sent him back to the highlands. During his investigation, he found other small-time ranchers and peasants whose loved ones had also disappeared, all of them linked to land reform initiatives. Those disappearances, along with price gouging, paramilitary training centers, and pension cuts, sparked an overdue rebellion in northern Torinoco. It spread like wildfire throughout the country and was propped up by Concordia, Torinoco's socialist neighbor to the southeast.

A young man shattered by injustice, but what did it matter now? The temple was the university he never attended, and the War had led him back to God.

Hari Bhakti stepped onto the sand and turned away in direction of the distant hill that marked the eastern edge of the Bay.

As he headed east, Hari Bhakti drew closer to the water, the waves small and calm that morning. The strap around his neck held a green cloth beadbag that fell to his sternum, the contents of which bounced against his chest as he walked. Past the flotsam and litter, he took off his sandals and hiked up his work pants.

His feet shimmied into the wet sand. The water covered his ankles. He took the strap from his neck, holding the beadbag with both hands. The hardest part about chanting is getting started. The mind will give anyone a thousand reasons to avoid a challenge.

Out in the bay, three freighters shimmered in the morning sun. A cormorant hurled into the water for its breakfast. A gaggle of seagulls squawked overhead.

Hari Bhakti chuckled looking out and mumbled to himself, “God, I would have been an idiot if I’d gone to school.” He was temple president now, only a month away from taking the Order’s highest vows of service. He’d be a full-fledged Sannyasi by October. They’d been hard to come by, but there was no scarcity of blessings these days.

The sound of the waves drowned out the cars passing behind him on the strip. The silence engulfed him; seldom did he find it. He dropped his jaw; his shoulders relaxed. A tear of fatigue fell down his face, but he quickly wiped it away. The demands of Krishna Construction, the administration of the temple, every congregant who wanted his advice; he was ‘Comandante’ once again with little rest and all alone, even though he hardly had a minute to himself. He shook

his head wildly and said to himself, “Let’s do it,” as he pulled the beads from the small, green bag.

Minutes into chanting, he’d finally caught a rhythm—moving his body back and forth as he repeated the mantra again and again. Chant for chant, his voice grew louder. No one could hear him surrounded by water, granting him full license to yell out into the Bay. “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna,” he’d shout, switching into a mumble when his voice grew tired, then back to shouting, “Hare Rama, Hare Rama.” His eyes were half closed, his focus entirely on the mantra, and when he finished the round of one-hundred eight mantras, he said the prayer to his spiritual master and chanted another round.

“Eeh! Eeh!”

Whatever voice that sounded from the beach didn’t break his focus.

“Eeh!” A hand nudged his shoulder. Startled, Hari Bhakti jumped sideways. A man with short, greasy hair and red, leathery skin was standing beside him, his shoes immersed in the lap of the waves.

“Must be some good shit,” said the stranger smiling. “Look, look,” he said fiddling in his pocket, “my last two Lukas.” He pulled out a couple of crinkled, light blue bills, excited at the prospect.

Hari Bhakti turned to the stranger baffled, taking his right hand out of the beadbag and placing the strap over his neck again. He looked farther afield to see that the stranger had a friend who twitched in anticipation of a score.

“Just a hit each, and we’ll all come out here and scream.”

Hari Bhakti studied the stranger—his dire condition, the angry acne on his desiccated face, the languid carriage of his limbs, the abiding grin and twitching jaws common in

pasteheads. After several moments of bated breath, the stranger leaned sideways to study the wide scar on Hari Bhakti's upper left arm.

“Comandante?” asked the stranger.

From sheer surprise, Hari Bhakti's lips opened, and creases wrinkled through his brow. Ten, eleven years had passed since anyone had called him by that name.

“You don't remember me, huh?”

Hari Bhakti winced and shook his head no. He backed out of the water while wrapping up the beadbag and stuffing it in his pocket.

“Lolo,” shouted the stranger to other fiend on the beach. “Come meet Comandante Cifuentes, fierce leader of the rebel army.” Despite the playfulness of his tone and the exaggeration of rank, the stranger's words carried reverence nonetheless.

Lolo was sitting on the sand with his knees bent, legs wide, digging a hole in the sand. When Lolo didn't even lift his head, the stranger chuckled and turned back to Hari Bhakti saying, “The war had its toll on all of us. Lolo...” he sighed, twitching his chin. “Lost his four-year-old son when the greenbacks marched on Payzandú.”

“Payzandú,” Hari Bhakti repeated as his eyes flickered side to side, calculating the trace of his distant past. He looked again at the vagrant—his arms lanky and tired, the rings around his eyes mementos of war, prison, and beggary, his hunger for freedom masked by an appetite for intoxication. But beneath the shroud of torment and injury: dying embers of the young man who had rallied against unscrupulous soldiers to avenge his village and the child who'd protested the rape of his mother.

Beyond the stranger, in faint glimpses amongst the morning fog, were the rolling hills that led into the jungle. The bodies of his parents were out there somewhere. The mass graves

they dug for their fellow soldiers. All the Natives—the Hualcos, the Caluches, the Pucones—who'd been caught in the crossfire and had retreated farther into the jungle to avoid conscription and extermination.

“You're David,” realized Hari Bhakti, looking then to Lolo digging in the sand.

“And that's him,” affirmed David, looking backwards over his shoulder, “our sergeant.”

“Canales?”

“Yeah,” sighed David. “You sent him the squad and the extra rifles.”

“And then you bushwhacked your way down to Las Rosas.” Hari Bhakti paused in his recollection. “We called you ‘The Forgotten’.”

“But you remembered, eh?” acknowledged David.

“Yeah,” nodded Hari Bhakti, “that was what the War was about, wasn't it?”

Waves crashed on Hari Bhakti's bare legs, and towards the port seagulls were circling a carcass.

“You remember?” asked David. His tone turned sour, his eyes wilted. “We rode the HEMTT together.”

Hari Bhakti hung his head, saying, “Greenbacks left us in that truck for two days.”

“And your whole shit”—David nodded at the gnarly scar on Hari Bhakti's arm— “was getting infected.”

David's friend was now pouring sand over his legs and mumbling something to himself.

“We ain't much guerrillas these days,” reckoned David. “But fuck man, if we could just get a couple more lukas to hold us over. We gatherin' help tomorrow on the east end. We just need a little to get by, you know?”

Hari Bhakti chuckled at the junction of past and present, studying the sea, the bright rising sun, his old comrades desperate for relief from their wretched existence. “I’m not on paste, David. I was meditating.”

David raised a single eyebrow.

“I’ve been a monk for nearly ten years now.” He dipped his chin down and sighed. As he opened his mouth again to speak, David interrupted him, saying in his distinct coastal accent, “Weren’t you supposed to get married? That Indian girl that joined the troops? What’s was her name?”

“Melimi, yeah,” mumbled Hari Bhakti. “That was the plan. But, uh, everything worked out for the best.”

David’s eyes narrowed in on Hari Bhakti. They read up on the details Hari Bhakti couldn’t there disclose. “Glad to hear that, brother. Can’t say the same for us.” David looked down at the sand, then back up perplexed. “Man, Sergio, I wouldn’t ever’ve pegged you as a Krishna. Though you did like to preach.”

Hari Bhakti chuckled, partly at the play in David’s response, mostly in disbelief that they’d come face to face again. “We run a restaurant downtown. We can bring you leftovers. I don’t have much else to offer.”

“I just need a pack of cigarettes, man.”

“I keep vows, my brother. Can’t help you with that one.”

“It’s whatever. Keep on keepin’ on, I guess.” David turned away but stopped himself to leave a final comment. “Comandante, honestly, I’m a real good electrician. Just been hard to get work. If you know of anything, put in a good word.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Hari Bhakti.

“Thanks, boss. If you can’t find me, I might be back in the bush.” David spit off to the side and added, “I hear Hightower is hiring mercs so...you know.”

“Hightower?” Hari Bhakti asked with alarm.

“Yeah,” replied David, “I don’t know exactly what for, but probably some cowboy and Indian shit. Know what I mean? At least I’d be back in the highlands, right?”

“If that’s where you want to be,” nodded Hari Bhakti, looking past David towards the west end of the Bay.

“It was good to see you, Comandante,” said David.

“I’ll keep you in my prayers,” replied Hari Bhakti in rote recitation.

“Prayers ain’t shit if nothing become of them.”

David walked back up the beach towards Sergeant Canales playing in the sand. Another freighter was arriving to port. Another wave crashed at Hari Bhakti’s feet.

Mercenaries were up in the highlands. Vrindavan was back in Torinoco. Krishna was known for his mischief, and blessings always came with caveats.