

### 3 / Empire

Her waist-basket was getting heavy. The bright red coffee cherries didn't look as supple as they did in the soft rays of the morning sun covered with dewdrops. High on the hillside, the sun beat down on her golden-brown skin. The waterskin at her side had no water, but from time to time she would lift it to check, simply out of habit.

The veteran pickers were assigned the toughest spots and rewarded with the highest pay, but even higher pay came with a price. A single flask of water—Melimi Deloso should have known better. She had worked these hills for twenty-five years now, ever since she was old enough to walk down from the mountain with the rest of the Hualcos.

All her life she'd been nothing but a coffee picker, another Native with a drug problem. But the stereotypes the foremen waged against her were, these days, protection. They had every reason to write her off, never suspecting duplicity. Never aware of her allegiance to anything other than addiction.

Except that she never told anyone that she'd given up paste.

From here, Melimi could see the vast valley that sat between Cerro Barrera and Cerro Rivera. This time of year, thin, humid clouds from the coast tended to cover the skies, tempering the strength of the sun for the hundreds of laborers who moved along the hills for as far as she could see, like worker bees buzzing from plant to plant to bring about the harvest. Sometimes they'd stop to wipe their brow under the shade of a shaggy banana tree or on rarer occasions, under the aegis of wide-trunked ceibas. These jungles had been slashed and burned so many times in the last five hundred years that only a few of those ancient specimens survived. Now the parts of the Elka Valley that weren't reserved for coffee crop or palm oil plantations were home to grazing cattle, roaming bulls, and a state-of-the-art milk factory.

In the distance, at the eastern end of the valley, a fleet of cowboys rallied the herd towards a narrow, shaded stream. The riverbed in which it sat was still as wide as it was when she was a girl, but the rapids were gone, the current emaciated.

At eight years old, when Melimi first began her daily treks from the small Hualco village to the Barrera plantation, lianas as thick as anacondas hung over the footpaths. Giant ferns lined the sides of deep ravines, and lush gullies hosted choirs of grasshoppers, as parrots and motmots answered the singing insects with their own incantations.

After the Civil War, Torinoco reopened trade with the Hemrikan Federation, whose voracity for coffee and beef sparked more production than ever before as well as foreign investment. In the fifteen years since the War, coffee and beef production brought on new meaning for the everyday Noqueño. The people of Torinoco enjoyed economic boom, technological advancement, and a growing middle class. But they also endured foreign influence, inflation, shifty politics, depleted soils, and drought. The lush gullies and fertile ravines of her childhood were now brown scrublands. In the last five years, water trucks had become the lifelines for the highland villages surrounding the valley while coffee and cattle took the rest.

Watching the herd in the east, Melimi lifted two fingers to her mouth and inhaled, though she had no smoke. She threw the invisible cigarette to the ground and turned back to picking. But as she spun, a Humvee appeared in the pass between the mountains. Melimi shielded the side of her face from the bitter sun, and as she followed the truck's path around Cerro Rivera, the friction in her teeth and the creases around her eyes held a deep rage she'd inherited long ago. She had never been a patient person, but it was composure and moderation that her grandmother asked of her. There was no margin for error, not this time. She would find the angle to prove her mettle through poise, not by wrath. Thus, with heavy qualms, she turned back to picking,

keeping an eye on the big black box winding through the valley towards the *hacienda*—the Barrera house.

Farther into the coffee shrubs behind her, a portly woman was dropping round coffee cherries into the deep basket tied to her waist with a wide leather belt. After work, Fernanda was the life of the party, could never keep a thought for herself once the paste hit. It was known for its effects of giddiness, openness, and verbosity.

A big grin stole across Melimi's face. To breed subversion, gossip was often more potent than outrage, but its power required caution.

She stayed picking in the intense heat for a few minutes, listening to the old folk tune that Fernanda hummed as she worked. When Fernanda moved close, Melimi looked her shoulder to watch for foremen, then unfastened her waist-basket, and walked through the coffee shrubs ruffling a few leaves.

“A la mar fui por naranjas,” sang Fernanda at the top of her lungs. “Cosa que la mar no tiene.”

Just as the truck drew near the Big House, Melimi made her move. “Eh, Fer!”

Fernanda moved to the next shrub singing, “Metí la mano en el agua...”

The Humvee down below pulled up to the thick iron gates that guarded the entrance.

“Fernanda!” called Melimi, turning her head.

Simón, the head foreman, appeared in the driveway walking towards the gate.

“*Fernanda!*” shouted Melimi as loud as she could without screaming.

“Ayyy, amiga,” retorted Fernanda, hoisting her fists to her hips. “What now?”

“You gotta see this.”

Fernanda sucked her teeth and studied the skinny, sweaty woman on her haunches peering through the shrubs at whatever was happening at the bottom of the hill.

“Fernanda, come on,” Melimi insisted.

Fernanda grunted, unfastened the belt, set down the basket, and walked through the shrubs teeming with the bright red cherries she had yet to harvest. Out at the edge of the field, the hillside became a steep bevel of half buried stones where only cows could roam. No shade guarded them from the intense summer sun. Fernanda was reluctant to even be there, exposed to the vigilance and spite of the foremen and their minions.

Down below, Aurelio Barrera, great-grandson and legacy of Rodolfo Barerra, stood in front of the cowboys’ barracks pulling at his short mustache. At fifty-three years old, he was still ambitious. His leathery skin was proof enough that he too was no stranger to work, though his pot belly and chronic cough suggested he was no stranger to pleasure either.

The Humvee slid into the space in front of Don Aurelio. Three similarly dressed men got out of the truck. They wore dress shoes, slacks, and golf shirts. Their hair was cut short, styled with product. One of the men looked Noqueño but could have been Virginian, Georgian, or from any of the Erodarian states; the other two were White and definitely English-speakers from the North.

“Bakras,” announced Melimi, indicating the three men talking to Don Aurelio.

“ ‘Miga,” quipped Fernanda, still panting heavily, “I had to stop work for this?” She turned away.

“Fer, this deserves more suspicion than you think.”

“Melimi,” scoffed Fernanda, turning back around, “how many times has a Bakra showed up at Finca Barrera for ‘business advice’ and found himself drinking with a cute Velanita in town?” She laughed. “I mean, Bakras love Torinoco—coffee, women, drugs.”

“But these guys have a Humvee.”

“Ay, Melimi, they’re just cattle brokers,” replied Fernanda in a huff.

“Not a chance,” Melimi mumbled, watching the men below greet each other. She dropped to a squat.

Standing behind Melimi, Fernanda’s face dropped the intensity of its frustration and spawned a hint of pity. A rumble rolled in her throat. “Has the paste dried up, Mel?” she asked, lowering her large frame to the ground.

“It’s terrible, Fer. Supply is shit, cut with detergent and baking soda.” She let her chin tremble. “Hadn’t had a good high in months.”

“Nothing on the Reservation?”

Melimi lifted a hand to cover her face in attempts to maintain character. She hung her chin, saying, “Everything’s dry these days. The worst part is that even if I had all the paste in the world, there’s no escaping this.” She looked past the Valley towards the sea. Two vultures were circling the herd in the east. A thin breeze whipped back the wisps of their sweaty hair. “The state gave some geologists permits to dig inside the Rez again. Some legal loophole to look for aquifers. Those assholes”—she nodded to the suits down below—“showing up at the Finca, probably means they found something.”

One of the visitors held a cigarette in his mouth as Don Aurelio lit it for him.

“And that’s bad?” asked Fernanda perplexed. “Like you said, the Valley’s been drying up since the War.”

Melimi looked over at Fernanda in disbelief, squinting against the midday sun.

“The Valley’s been drying up since the War because of them. With enough water, they’ll divvy up Payzandú into parcels and turn it into a resort in a couple of years. Or turn the whole jungle into coffee plantations and cattle ranches. We’ll be living on the side of the mountain in huts and running paste just to feed our babies. And not just us Natives this time. You too.”

Fernanda snickered, deflecting. “And what do you know about raising babies?”

Melimi chuckled aloud. “Not much, I guess.”

“You did go to the Reservation, didn’t you?” Fernanda reasoned.

Melimi glared at Fernanda briefly before looking again at the Finca below.

“Ever met a Mamu, Fer?”

Fernanda shook her head no.

“Lot of weird stories out there about them. The Spanish, the Noqueños never really knew what to make of them. They got their own science—things I’ll probably never understand—but I think they’re right about this one: they will be the last generation of Mamus in Torinoco.” She sighed. “Unless there’s enough of us.”

“You’re so dramatic,” scoffed Fernanda. “There’s like a thousand laws protecting the Rez.”

Shaking her head, Melimi replied half mumbling, “Only pawns play by the law. The knights”—she lifted her chin towards the Bakras below—“jump and crush and bring the king to glory.”

Two maids dressed in light teal uniforms came out of the Big House holding trays of rum and chocolate—typical Noqueño delicacies.

The men, both Noqueño and Hemrikan, happily indulged. One of the Erodarians dallied with the younger of the maids. Even from a distance, it was clear that she was intrigued.

“Ppp,” Melimi jeered, fluttering her lips, but Fernanda took a deep breath as if sweet aroma floated between the two of them. She sighed to the pleasure within.

Melimi cranked her head sideways and squinted at Fernanda with scorn, though her look demanded an explanation.

Fernanda was reluctant to relate, almost ashamed of her sympathies. She opened her mouth but didn’t know how to tell Melimi what she couldn’t bear to hear.

“It was a summer fling. I was…”—she chuckled at her past—“working as a waitress in San Cris before the War broke out. Sailors were a dime a dozen—rowdy and arrogant, especially Bakras. God, they were the worst.

“One afternoon I went into work, and a Bakra comes to the door. I told him we were closed, but he said, in almost perfect Spanish, that he’d left his phone. I probably would have never given him the time of day, but at least this guy was trying.” She took another deep breath. “And what can I say, Mel? Anyone has the potential to be charming, even Bakras, I suppose.”

“Uggg,” Melimi rejoined, the depths of her jowls holding generations of disgust.

Fernanda lifted her t-shirt to wipe her face. Some fifty or sixty meters to their right, another worker moved through the shrubs, picking cherries and studying their huddle. Fernanda regarded Melimi with pity, then turned around away from the ridge, placed her hands on the ground, and stood. “It’s Thursday; we’re playing cards later if you want to join.”

“Nah,” said Melimi dismissing the invitation with the back of her hand.

“Melimi,” Fernanda sighed, not knowing how to show her heart, “I’m worried about you.”

Melimi looked sideways to Fernanda. “You ought to be worried about these Bakras.”

Fernanda, frustrated again, pushed herself up, took a few steps towards the crop, stopped, and turned halfway around. “A change would do you good, you know? And I don’t just mean a good score.” She dropped her hands in exasperation and took a long look at Melimi. “I know you ain’t had it easy, Mel, but you don’t have to push people away all the time.”

Several beads of sweat trickled down Melimi’s chest. A furrow formed in her brow. Her eyes flickered side to side. To Fernanda, the suggestion had no purchase; Melimi’s disgust remained just as dense as before. But out on the ridge, still squatting on her haunches, Melimi’s eyes grew wide. She smiled with mischief.

Fernanda, defeated, brushed through the row of coffee shrubs back to her basket.

Outside of the Big House, Don Aurelio motioned to the men to go inside. The Erodarian smoking a cigarette took a hard drag and flicked it into the ditch nearby. One of the maids opened the tall, mahogany door constructed centuries ago and smiled as the men entered the two-story hacienda with its twenty-two rooms, porch bannisters painted in bright blue and yellow, empty hammocks handwoven by Indigenous women, thatch rooves over the kitchen and patio, endless rows of barrel-shaped tiles over the main edifice, and its lush courtyard with palm trees and a central fountain.

Melimi rolled her eyes and looked out at the vast domain that seven generations of Barreras had maintained and expanded—orchards, fields, pastures, woods; dormitories, dining halls, stables, greenhouses, barns; drying yard, roastery, milk factory; tractors, mills, harvesters, pulping machines, grading machines, hulling machines, fermentation tanks, and irrigation systems.



Out of the West, on horseback came Julio Barrera charging towards the hacienda. Muscular and dark in both looks and demeanor, Don Aurelio's second son was the lead wrangler and as rowdy as any in his charge. Melimi watched the stallion's graceful gallop—the effortlessness of its effort.

Clop clop clop.

“That’s it,” exclaimed Melimi in a whisper. “Mmm,” she remarked as Julio slowed to a trot and approached the pasture’s gate.

“You don’t have to push people away all the time, Melimi.” A touch of devilment wrapped around her chuckle. “Bring him close.”