



THE LUMINIST

A Novel David Rocklin

Introduction by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Author of The Deep End of the Ocean





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THE LUMINIST IS a warm dazzle of a first novel – a profoundly human story of shadow and light fixed in the searing simplicity of David Rocklin’s diamondbright prose.

SUSAN TAYLOR CHEHAK, author of *Apocalypse Tonight*

NOT SINCE TINKERS have I read a book which, in its sheer beauty and mystery, has carried me off the way *The Luminist* has. Every sentence is a small miracle, every character glows with a complex elegance, as if seen by candlelight. David Rocklin’s lush rendering of raw, unstable, colonial Ceylon will be etched in my memory for a long, long time. Superb.

MYLÈNE DRESSLER, author of *The Deadwood Beetle*

IN THIS EXTRAORDINARY debut, David Rocklin takes us to the heart of photography’s unlikely origins through language that shimmers like the art of light itself. As creative obsession fuses with political crisis in colonial Ceylon, the result is one unforgettable story. *The Luminist* is a gorgeous evocation of eras, place, and human passion.

AIMEE LIU, author of *Flash House* and *Cloud Mountain*

THIS BOOK IS one of those few in which an author’s specific sensibilities nourish the text, as Abraham Verghese’s multi-geographic heritage and his physician’s life inform *Cutting For Stone* and Andrea Barrett’s fiction, from *Ship Fever* to *Servants of the Map*, owes its density and savor to the botanic and historiographic facts that beguile her. David Rocklin’s *The Luminist* is a weave of legend and history, science and art, politics and domesticity that are symphonic themes in the main title, the story of an enduring and forbidden friendship.

JACQUELYN MITCHARD, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*

CEYLON OF THE 19th century is more than the setting for David Rocklin’s richly imagined and deeply moving novel. It is the central character, a world no less alienated and scarred than the people who inhabit it. That Rocklin chooses to capture the rawness of those lives through the nascent lens of photography is even more impressive, lending the novel a lyricism that comes as both a shock and a comfort.

JONATHAN RABB, author of *Shadow and Light*, and *The Second Son*



For Nina, Ariel and Kavanna, always and forever.

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To my family and friends, too numerous to mention. Thanks for understanding whenever I seemed to be far away.

To Starbucks, for the perfect blend of writing space and chai tea.

The *Luminist* was initially inspired by an installation of Victorian-era photography at the Getty Museum in Southern California. The character of Catherine Colebrook is very loosely suggested by the life and work of Julia Margaret Cameron, one of the first photographic pioneers. Her pictures of children were especially haunting, at once warmly immediate and bittersweet; those lives are, after all, lost to us now. What followed - research into colonial life in Ceylon, the traditions of Victorian photography, a plunge (inadequate, I'm certain) into the religions, cultures and customs of India - really began there, with photographic relics and writerly imaginings about the woman who made them. Though the novel deals with matters of history and the origins of photography, I have taken broad liberties with each. My apologies for tampering with these worlds in the interests of fiction.

Introduction

Jacquelyn Mitchard

PHOTOGRAPHY IN ITS INFANCY WAS A DANGEROUS GAME.

As they do now, practitioners of the mysterious art, named from root words that literally mean “drawing with light,” went into the darkness to do it. But in the 19th century darkroom, they worked by candlelight, coating glass plates with flammable substances, breathing ether, mercury, and ammonia, because the necessary absence of light also meant a lack of ventilation. They got stains on their hands from silver nitrate, and to remove them, used the even more toxic potassium chloride. Matthew Brady, who made the images most of us call to mind when we picture the battlefields of the Civil War, had to kneel or lie down in his field tent to do his processing. Sweat streamed, eyes smarted and muscles ached from hauling water, chemicals and the camera and plates, which were both bulky and heartbreakingly fragile. Such was the potency of this infatuation that we modern-day purists, who bristle when we pass a smoker’s miasma in a parking lot, have to wonder how much these pioneers understood, or cared, about the damage that they inflicted on themselves. We ask ourselves if the majesty of the experience was so great that, like Marie Curie’s fatal obsession with radiation, they went forth, no matter what.

Photography comprises the bright, tensile thread in the sweep of David Rocklin’s novel, *The Luminist*, drawing tight a narrative that shifts between the prejudices and passions of Victorian England and those of colonial Ceylon. It binds the destinies of Catherine Colebrook, the proper wife of a fading diplomat, who rebels against every convention to chase the romance of science through her lens, and Eligius, an Indian teenager thrust into servitude after his father is killed demanding native rights.

Thus, this book is one of those few in which an author’s specific sensibilities nourish the text, as Abraham Verghese’s multi-geographic heritage and his physician’s life inform *Cutting For Stone* and Andrea Barrett’s fiction, from *Shiver* to *Servants of the Map*, owes its density and savor to the botanic and

historiographic facts that beguile her. David Rocklin's *The Luminist* is a weave of legend and history, science and art, politics and domesticity that are symphonic themes in the main title, the story of an enduring and forbidden friendship. Catherine and Eligius must each struggle with internal forces that inspire them and societal pressures that command them. Uprooted to Ceylon with her adolescent daughter and her newborn son, a twin who survived his brother, Catherine is expected to do good works and host luncheon parties to further her husband's career. All the while, her turbulent soul, in part informed by the loss of her child and her inability to keep his likeness, embraces photography with the fervor of alchemy. Eligius, named for the patron saint of metalworkers, is trapped by the strictures of his class. Hired as a laborer by British gentry, he is ashamed and excited by finding the intellectual fulfillment he aspires to in the Colebrook home, not his own.

So different, Catherine and Eligius are twinned in torment. She loves her orphan and failing husband, her moody daughter, and her lonely young son, yet all of them impede her obsession. Eligius is duty-bound to his widowed mother and ailing baby sister; his father's comrades urge him to rob his employers, the usurpers of his nation.

Still, his relationship with the Colebrooks deepens, and the bigotry of the oppressed cannot survive. Catherine's beautiful daughter, Julia, becomes Eligius's confidant. He sees that Catherine's husband, "the old lion," despite his upbringing, brings on his own ruin trying to do the right thing. The British matron, raised to a famous reserve, invests photography with a holy power. The separate peace, however, has a price. Catherine is an outcast, Eligius a traitor. Yet their photographs draw more attention, and attract more and more patrons. When, at virtually the same moment, the tide of armed revolution breaks over Ceylon.

Rocklin's is a bold landscape, against which an intimate drama is poignantly played out. *The Luminist* recalls *Out of Africa*, and Karen Blixen's bond with her house manager, Farah, from whom she learns how little she can control, but their relationship is not in vain. It comprises a doom made glorious, a failure in the midst of grandeur, a loss imbued with hope.

Just in this way, our minds recall in every detail the photo snapped at the moment of pain, while all the lovely scenes seem to run together.

Ceylon, from whatever direction it may be approached, unfolds a scene of loveliness and grandeur unsurpassed, if it be rivaled, by any land. The Brahmans designated it by the epithet of Lanka, the resplendent, and in their dreamy rhapsodies extolled it as the region of mystery.

SIR JAMES EMERSON TENNANT
Ceylon: An Account of the Island, Vol. I, 1859

Must we always object to science, that it leads its servants to doubt the immortal soul? No, this is my prayer: enlighten my mind so that I may be enabled to see more clearly the illuminations of mortal Man, and behind it, the immortal Light.

SIR JOHN HOLLAND
Preliminary Discourse on a New Mechanism of Portraiture, 1835

Imagine, arresting beauty at the very moment beauty comes into being and passes out of the world. Imagine if life could be held still.

Letter from Catherine Colebrook to Sir John Holland
February 22, 1836

The End of This

THE NOISES OUTSIDE HER WINDOW WERE OF WIND AND the near sea, of clay chimes kilned to crystalline tones. Natives not opposed to Britishers had strung them at odd heights from the thatching of her bungalow roof to ward off demons during her pregnancy. Their sound filled her sleep and informed her dreams.

Ewen and Hardy nestled against her still-swollen midsection. Before, when the pains of labor had ruled her, this would have filled her heart.

She took her babies into her arms and bundled them. Folding the letter carefully, she brought them to the carriage and placed them next to her. At the flick of her reins, the old bay stumbled into motion.

She gazed at her newly-arrived sons and tried not to think of the future.

THE RIDETO the Maclears' home in Table Bay was not ritual, yet her passage through the Cape of Good Hope's sifting littorals possessed equal weight and hollowness. She struggled to think of the right word for this, her second foray along the sea path to the lonely Dutch outpost of stone imposing itself on the African sky.

Her sons jostled alongside her. She wanted simply to place the letter in Sir John Holland's hand and leave, and be whoever it was that she would be tomorrow.

When the bend in the road opened onto the sea's turquoise at the mouth of the Agulhas, she thought of Sir John's lecture. That night at the Maclears' he had marveled at how the Cape marked the place where a man traveling from the equator ceases traveling southward and begins traveling eastward without even having changed direction. The world changes without changing. Wondrous, he had said, his shock of white hair a cloud above his face.

The world is capable of such things, she thought.

The road was rutted. Ewen cried out. Catherine brought her children close and told them that they traveled over the same dirt and lichens, past the same proteas as the Voortrekkers who fled the sea to escape the rampaging Xhosa, and found peaceful vistas inland where they grew their rye and gathered their wool. Boys, she thought, are fond of narrow escapes and bloodthirst. These are the sorts of things they will remember as men, when they find themselves soldiers or surgeons: once as a child, they made believe they were brave.

She regarded Hardy's face for the first time since the mote of light slipped from his eyes.

They passed through the port market, a slipshod constellation of many-hued fruits, dyed cloths, hung meats, animals braying at the blades of the butcher, macaws on horsehair leads, natives porting crates to and from ships on callused feet, swearing under their breath in Capie and broken English.

The Maclears' home stood next to the Cape lighthouse, atop a red rock jetty. It

view of the whalers and tall mast ships was the envy of the expatriates. A line of carriages filled the road at the base of the house. Porters brought the parcels of a voyage from the front door. Sir John's departure on his star map travels was imminent.

The Maclears' servants fell silent at the sight of her binding her horse to the low boughs of a fig tree. She was late in her forties, but still possessed a severely weathered beauty. She was unadorned of jewels or those impractical satchels other colonial women carried, and all the more striking for it; there was nothing else to consider but the shaded hollows of her cheeks, the quartered mango of her lips, the expanse of her slender neck. She'd pulled back her brown hair and fastened it with mother of pearl sometime in the long night, but strands had come loose to brush her skin. She was swathed in local cloth, shod in sandals, uncaring of her appearance.

She took her babies to the front door.

Sir John came shortly, still wet from bathing. A towel was loosely draped about his neck. His eyes were crinkled with age and recent sleep.

Early, she realized. In another time, I would think a visit at this hour quite inappropriate.

"My lord," Sir John whispered when he saw Hardy.

She hefted her babies higher against her chest. Ewen protested, but she needed a free hand to extend the letter.

"I hope you remember me," she said.

Inside the house she saw the Wynfield boy, George, portraitist at seventeen and already of some renown. He would be accompanying Sir John to fashion a painted record of their travels. The sights and ports of call, the map itself.

"You know who I am," she called out to George. He was intent on his canvas. "Your father and my husband are allied in Ceylon."

"I am aware, madam. Your Julia has sat many hours watching me work. A delightful creature. I've spoken of her to my father."

"I should like to commission you to paint my children."

He regarded her from across the expanse. He could not see clearly. "Of course," he said.

Distantly, she felt herself bleed.

"I am so glad to see you before you leave South Africa," she said to Sir John.

"We met some months ago, did we not? You're Catherine Colebrook."

He could not look away from her boys.

He will remember, she thought. What I ask will be tied to this moment. He will carry it with him.

"I'm grateful that you recall. It is important that you understand, I am not married. I am a woman. We let go of nothing."

She declined his offer of food and a doctor's attention. "I have a daughter, a little younger than George Wynfield by the look of him. She's alone and afraid."

"But you are not."

"The worst has passed."

In time, she returned to her cart and her home in the Cape. The shanties

around the port were coming to life. A steady current of vendors made their way along the water. They sold fish and shells, flowers and exotics fresh from the tethered boats newly arrived from places she once imagined she'd visit. Here and there she saw the other European expats, their easels, open pages of poetry, unfolded letters of distant news and regrets passed across months at sea. They sat in makeshift tents, hoping to sell their foreignness and continental birth for food and the means to remain far from home.

She'd extracted promises from the scientist. That he would pray for her. That he would read her letter and remember her.

Feldhausen

Cape of Good Hope, South Africa

February 22, 1836

To the kind attention of Sir John Holland:

My name is Catherine Colebrook. We were first and recently acquainted at the home of Thomas Maclear, Astronomer Royal here in the Cape. I was most fortunate to attend his party in your honor some months back. You spoke eloquently of the comet Halley and her path among the heavenly bodies, and of your curiosity at the application of Lyell's geographic principles to mapping the celestial. Ever so briefly, you shared the first murmurings of a nascent science. The ability to arrest a moment of the world, on types of tin and copper. Crude, you called it. But the beginning, perhaps, of something wondrous. I am certain you recall how forward I was. For I was at this gathering without my husband Charles, an eminent barrister and man of letters. We are here in the Cape these thirteen months so that he might recover his fragile health - oh, stalwart man that he is. Even now he is in Ceylon at Andrew's request and that of the John Company attending to matters of importance to the Crown, beyond the ken of a woman like me. Soon we will be journeying to that land to join him.

Much has transpired since we met. For these past nine months I have been with a child until just yesterday. Twins. Two boys, Ewen and Hardy. They are with me as I write to you. I held Hardy as long as I could.

This would, to any decent woman, bring to mind our Father's admonition to abide our deficient minds. We cannot grasp all that He does. Were I truly as decent as I have long thought - I attend church, I pray there and elsewhere, I accept unquestioningly the existence of my soul after I pass to dust - I would see solace in the answers we faithful believe we already possess. Yet all that comes to mind, all that now remains with me, is your presentation of the science of image. Of arrest. To hear you is to understand that currently, this science languishes in the confines of possibility. Impending, perhaps, but no more. This I cannot endure. God blessed me with a moment worthy of holding. A mote of light in my Hardy's eye. There, then gone. Light is a capricious thing. Perhaps God curses me now with my frail and fracturing memory of it. Its contours, its size and precise hue

my own shadow within it. All leaving me. I have begun my own inquiry. My modest bungalow here is filled with daguerreotypes, tintypes, all manner of that nascent science you described. It is remarkable what can be acquired at the bazaars. They are precisely as you said. Crude. Lifeless. They hold nothing divine. They cannot be the end of this. I wish to correspond with you. Let me assist in finding what can be. I don't know where I will be. Ceylon, for the foreseeable future. A man of Charles' stature is required in many ports. For myself, I remain ill with the effects of my sons' emergence. Soon, I shall be restored. In truth, composing this letter to you is curative. You will find me indefatigable, Sir John. This I promise.

Yours,
Catherine Colebrook

JULIA MET HER at the door to their bungalow. She was still and wary while the chimes made their hushed music. Behind her, a gracefully folded linen lay on the table, next to a basin of water. "I bartered for a sheet at the bazaar," she said. "I hope you find it suitable."

Her hazel eyes were rimmed red. Her oft-brushed hair was matted against her scalp. She tried to stand as tall as her mother, but her shoulders were rounded with lost sleep.

Another should not weigh on her child, Catherine thought. She took up the cloth. White as blanched bone, soft. "You are a blessing to me."

Julia's jaw clenched. "You shouldn't be up."

"I'm well," Catherine said. "We must pack."

"Travel? Oh, mother. Your health."

"We are expected at your father's side. It's right, to be there."

"Mother, you brought Hardy with you."

"Fetch the priest, Julia. The Anglican. He is all we have to choose from in this place."

"I'll go if you lie down."

"Very well. You're a good daughter."

"Mother, where were you? Where did you go?"

"To have time with him. To say one day that I showed him the sun and the sea."

Julia left, satisfied. Catherine returned to her bed with her sons. Nursing Ewen, she unfolded Charles' letter and read the parts directed to her. The rest - Council doings, musings on the amendments needed to align Ceylon's regulatory infrastructure with the needs of modern commerce, the map he'd enclosed; and that he rebuilt himself by - she would leave to him.

Say you'll come, he'd written. And if you will not, raise our children. Julia, and the child who has arrived since last I saw you. I will send money quarterly. Do not send our children to Ceylon. This is no country for the motherless.

In a week there would be a ship, and the clouds and the sea storms blowing south to southeast, and she would not hold any of it forever. Each day she would pick up a moment and sacrifice the one before it. Each day something fell out of the world.

The priest arrived at dusk, redolent with the nightblooming flowers that grew along the sea road. By then she had lain Hardy in a separate bed fashioned from sheets of washed cotton that were patterned with all manner of woodland scenes befitting a boy. Boys, she imagined, longed for forests to explore. To wander through, with the sun always overhead, broken by leaves into bits of light. Boys needed to look for signs of hiding light.

“I wish to bury my son,” she told the priest. Julia sat at her side, rocking Ewe. “His name was Hardy Hay Colebrook. He never breathed.”

Aipassi

EACH MORNING OF ELIGIUS SHOURIE'S LIFE, THIS HAD been the world. The women of Matara cooked what they foraged and mended what the village's men hadn't torn beyond redemption. The youngest children mewled from their huts, in thrall to hunger and the cholera that swept in with the previous summer's monsoons. The older ones who survived such things by Kali's grace communed with their futures. Girls painted errant mendhi and dreamed of betrothal. Boys gathered near the banyan trees where their fathers met each morning to smoke before breaking themselves against the flesh and bone of the country. If the men spoke at all, it was of the taxes. Which of them would lose their hut next and leave Matara behind, to beg on the streets of Port Colombo.

Things had begun to change after the colonials' celebration of their new year, 1836. There had been no particular day, no one moment. One night, he simply noticed what he hadn't before. That his father Swaran, still in his servant tunic, ministered tirelessly to books of colonial laws, the Britishers' paper reasons for being in Ceylon. The man who walked with him at Diwali and mimicked the chatter of monkeys to make him laugh, now read feverishly through the night hours that once belonged to endless bedtime conjurings of Ceylon's past, its gods and hymns. His father could make so much come with nothing but a candle and a bit of broken glass to magnify the light into a nova; just outside the circle that illuminated them both, the night would move.

It frightened Eligius to see that there had been something in his father that he never guessed at. A burning to exchange his life.

One night his mother told his father that she no longer knew him. "I want to make things different for you," his father said. "It's in their words." His eyes were so bright; he was a man in terrible love with an imagined better day.

He gathered the totems that shaped love for his father. The pieces of glass, splintered free from discarded lihuli bottles at the sides of the drinking men's huts. He brought the glass to his father, and before his father could protest that there was no time for childish diversions in this coming world, Eligius moved the glass until the delicate candlelight shivering in his father's eyes grew across the pages. There the Britishers' words bowed beneath a sun of his making.

His father smiled. The first in who knew how long. "Ah, I can see them so much better now. Shall I tell you what they mean?"

After that, Eligius didn't leave him alone at night anymore. Outside their glasse light, the night moved for Matara, but differently for them.

While he stayed up late by his appa's side like a man, the colonials' words came to him. Over the last of winter he learned the secret heart hiding in the language of English law. That they'd come hundreds of years before as merchants and warriors who showered the Mughal Jahangir with riches and rarities until India's arms opened wide. "In whatsoever place they choose to live," the Mughal

decreed, "in whatsoever port they arrive, let none molest their peace and prosperity." One trading post became legions, became the East India Company, a nation within their nation possessing the power to tax, to make war and peace, to send India's wealth across the sea.

Spring 1836 came. His father told him that in Aipassi, the colonials' October, the East India Company Governor and its Court of Directors would meet to renew the Company's Charter, and with it bend India into the ornate, locked gates of empire.

Their neighbors' lives still turned simply from season to season. The taxes, the villages lost to the currents of the Britishers' expansion; these newer maladies were no different than the old diseases and droughts that came on the tides of passing time. They didn't seem to notice that this new world was an unreadable sky stretching over their country.

His father called Matara's men together at the nirayanam, in the colonial April. He told them he'd go to the East India Company Court six months hence. He would argue for the Charter to be amended in accord with colonial law, for the lagaan to be lifted, and for a greater Indian voice in their own affairs. The Director he'd served had allowed him to study books of English law. For what reason, if not to invite Indian ideas?

The village men laughed at him. Matara's leader, its grama sevaka, called him naïve and even dangerous. Eligius didn't believe his father was dangerous, but he thought his mother did from the way she held her pregnant belly when his father read statutes aloud, as if she were swept up in a surging crowd.

Chakran came to Swaran on a summer evening and asked him to explain it once more. "Tell me again. What are you trying to do?"

His father spoke to the grama sevaka all that night. Nothing more than words, but words weighed more than the sea when a man has lived too long in quiet grief that his life must, and won't, change. That was what his father said later to his wife, his Sudarma, while Eligius listened to them from the next room, his cheek pressed against the cool wall. "These words, Swaran," his mother worried.

This is how Matara begins to hope, his father said to her, like a lover.

When he stole a glance, Eligius caught them kissing. He realized he'd begun to hope as well.

Then the rains came, then the fall again, and then the first day of Aipassi, 1836, when Swaran said that he'd read enough. It was time to speak.

ON THE MORNING of Court, Eligius sat in front of his hut, watching the dawn light wash Matara's landscape with gold. It was well past the usual hour of the men's departure from the banyans for the Overstone fields and the John Company quarry, yet still they paced restlessly in the rain-promising air. "Eligius!" one of the neighbor women called. "For your appa Swaran, and all of us! Tell Sudarma to give thanks for a good man!" She clasped her hands together.

He returned her anjali mudra. One more prayer. Another frail light joined to the multitude.

Sudarma came out into the street. She made a fire like the other women. Navigating herself onto her haunches, she melted ghee, then poured a cascade of

reddish grains into a heavy pot. They hissed against the slickened iron before bursting.

He held up a shard of glass and sent the sun where he pleased. For a moment he lost himself.

Sudarma's hands flew to her belly. Her face cinched up. She clutched herself as if the plateau rising from her might break open. "Restless today. Like you. Another few days, I think."

"Will he stay?"

She smiled her quiet smile; when she was happy, her smile chimed in him. "I'm not so sure it's a boy. Go to your father. Tell him the men are still here, and the women all pray for his success at Court."

"Yes, amma." He went inside, where Swaran madly displaced ragged tomes of British law.

"Appa, the men haven't left. I think they're waiting to go with you."

"Is grama sevaka among them?"

Eligius peered outside. "Yes appa, I see him." Chandrak was easy enough to spot. Tall, lean, dark as charred teak, he shared a jar of lihuli with the men congregating around him, who waited to see what he would do. A leader in Matara, revered among its lower-born, he had elemental, wanting eyes.

"Keep your mother company," Swaran said. "We're almost ready to leave."

"Are the men coming with?"

"I'll ask it of Chandrak. We will see." He chose from a sheaf of papers. "Put these with the charter."

Eligius took his father's notes outside, reading them silently and allowing the stone-on-stone noise of them to fill his mouth. They were nothing like Tamil, which moved like a quiet tide to shore.

"Just like him, I see."

Chandrak eyed Swaran's notes without comprehension. Kneeling near Sudarma, he poked at her cooking fire with a stick. "How old are you now Eligius? Fourteen?"

"He'll be fifteen soon," Sudarma said. She put her dull knife to the slope of an onion.

"I was a year at the foundry in Sufragam at his age, pulling black oxide from the ground."

Eligius heard his father sighing at books the way laboring men like Chandrak sighed in the colonials' endless fields.

"I had to break rocks against my body." Chandrak ignored Sudarma's smirk. The muscles on his forearms twined. "Look at my hands. A man like your father who does nothing but pour other men's coffee, doesn't have hands like these. Such hands break men but make leaders."

He's more of a man than you, Eligius thought as his father emerged. Anger passed through him like rings of warm light.

Chandrak raised a fist. The murmurings of the men fell away. "Swaran, why do you think the Britishers will listen to you in their language or anyone else's? We've talked and talked and still I don't see. Becoming like them does nothing but

hold you apart from your own.”

“If I know nothing beyond pouring their coffee, grama sevaka, why should they make time for such a man? But they have made time for me today.” He removed his glasses and wiped his eyes. He was no older than Chandrak, yet to Eligius he aged terribly in the last months. “We cannot settle for shouting at their gate. We must walk through their doors. I ask your blessing.”

“If their soldiers come through Matara, what would become of us if we follow you? The answer isn’t in those books, Swaran. We can put nothing between us and them but men and the promise of what men can do.”

The others grunted assent. Some of them bore limbs torn from the banyan grove ringing Matara.

“Do not come if you intend to cause trouble,” Swaran told them. “I’ll go alone. My son and I. I would do this even in defiance of you. We will die if we remain the way.”

“Come.” Chandrak extended his hand. “Why are we fighting?”

Swaran took it. “I’ll go with you if Sudarma wishes me to,” Chandrak said with a wink.

Eligius saw his father pull his hand back, with some effort. Chandrak’s grip was field-strong.

He stood, taking his father’s notes and the East India Company’s charter. “I’m ready, appa.”

Sudarma spilled pieces of onion into the simmering ragi. She guided her knife back through the bulb, her hands precise, her fingers slivering near the promise of blood. “Go because you’re men of Matara who know each other all your lives. And if not for that, then stay in the fields and do nothing.”

Swaran kissed his wife’s forehead. She gazed up at him and put both hands on her stomach, but he’d already turned to face Chandrak and his fellow villagers. “To have you with me would be a blessing. Among these Directors, there may be an honorable man. He is new. I don’t know him to say that he will listen to me, and make the others listen. But there is time enough if I fail for you to tell me how wrong and weak I am. Then we can see how well your way works.”

Chandrak conferred with his fellows. “We’ll go with you.”

Eligius carried his father’s most precious notes. They fluttered in the breeze he stirred as he ran across the road towards the jungle. A ribbon of runoff water passed beneath his feet and he stepped in it, bursting the reflection of the sun.

Matara’s women called after their men. Admonitions to be safe, to come home when it was done, to tell them how it was.

“They think your father’s ideas will save us,” Chandrak said when he caught up with Eligius. Swaran walked ahead, alone with his thoughts. “And if he fails, what they already suffer will be blamed on him, as if it was always his fault. This is the way of the world. You shouldn’t grow up weak and believing in nonsense. Do you understand?”

Eligius stared at the banyan limb in Chandrak’s hands.

“Now we have everything we need,” Chandrak said.

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