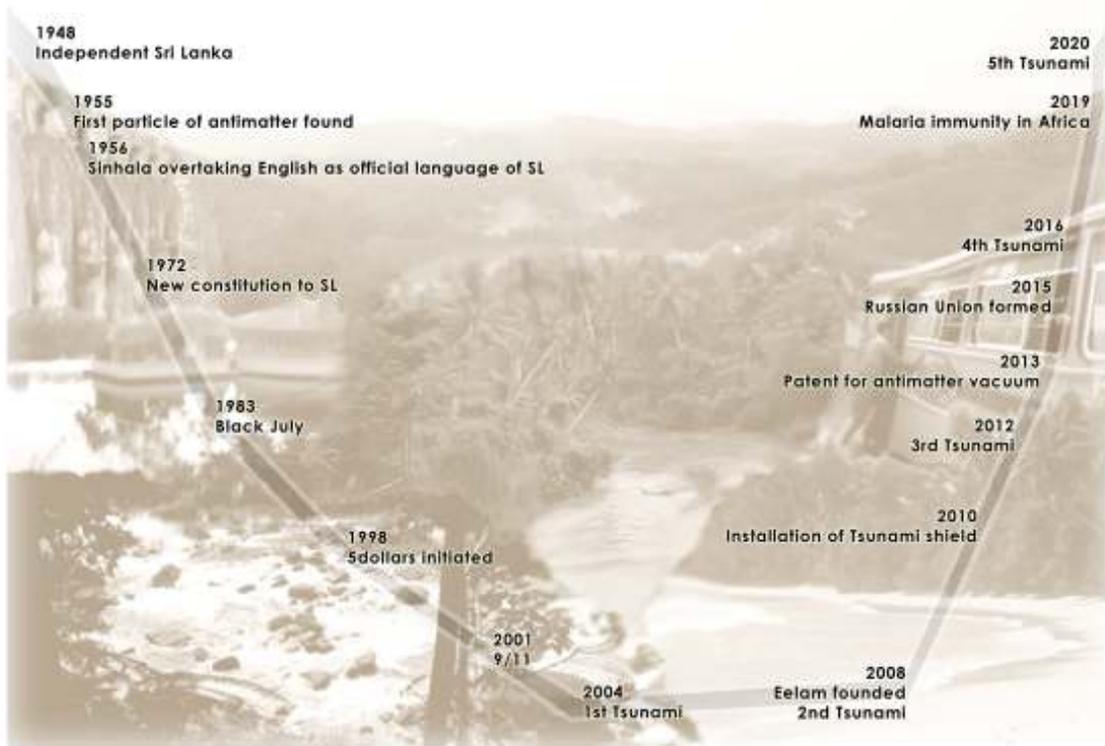


REPUBLIC OF EELAM LTD



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*For every Tamil,
Sinhalese, Moslim, Burgher
and Suddha
in Sri Lanka*

Republic of Eelam Ltd

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Note: If you wish to have a clearer contextual understanding before reading the book, please go through first the semi-imaginary “State of the world” chapter in the end.

PART 1:

**The good, the bad and
the young**

1 - Alex

February 4, 2008, 6:13 a.m.

Flight AF4456 approached Bandaranaike International Airport. Alex Jefferson was suddenly woken up from her sleep by a short brown-eyed flight attendant who was smiling genuinely at her. 'Miss, we are landing soon. Would you be so kind and pull your seat in an upright position?'

'Sure.' Alex responded and wondered why there was not a least bit of pretentiousness in the flight attendant's smile. She lifted her seat up obediently and opened the plastic curtain covering the airplane window. Bright rays of light penetrated through the glass and Alex was blinded for a split second. When she looked out the window again she saw Indian Ocean paving way to a series of small islands that led towards her destination. 'They look like stepping stones, don't they?' a thick American accent behind her startled Alex. A chocolate-skinned and curly-haired girl was staring at Alex, her right cheek pressed against the window. 'Yeah, I guess so.' She answered indifferently.

'My name is Cindy. I'm going on a vacation with my real dad. He's born in Kandy but now he lives in California. I live in Houston, Texas, with my mum. What's your name?' *Real dad? Candy?* Alex wondered for a while. 'I'm Mia... Alex. Nice meeting you.'

'It's nice to meet you too Mia Alex.' Girl answered and went back to her seat, picked up her comic book and smiled seemingly satisfied having had a conversation with even a complete stranger after a long flight.

A voice in the speakers announced: 'This is your captain speaking. On behalf of the whole staff, I wish you had a pleasant journey. We are about to land in eleven minutes. The weather in Colombo is nice and bright. Temperature is 36 degrees Celsius and a clear blue sky welcomes you to your destination. Enjoy your stay. We hope to see you traveling with us soon again.'

Plus 36 degrees Celsius, he said...How much is that in Fahrenheit? Should I wear my pull-over or take it off? Alex's thoughts were like any other tourist's, though her reason for being here was something completely different.

Yep, shirt goes off. Alex removed her shirt immediately as she entered the airport premises. The line in front of the security control was already at least 30 people. *I don't have time for this again.* She was still angry due to the events that took place when she changed planes in Paris. She thought she had read the tightened security instructions carefully enough before her departure but boy was she wrong? The airport security had asked if she had any fluids in her bag. She said there was a bottle of Coke she had just bought, nothing else. 'No fluids allowed.' They had responded bluntly. Her bottle was thrown in a bin instantly.

As if it had not been enough, the security officer had announced: 'Miss, we need to examine your backpack. You have a lot of fluids in there.' *You prick! You already threw away my Coke. What more do you expect to find?* As the officer had rummaged through her bag he loudly announced every item that was considered a fluid. Alex couldn't believe how rude they were going through her personal belongings and spread-

ing them out in the public. When she had asked what she was supposed to do with all that disallowed stuff – like toothpaste, deodorant, medical cream and so forth – they had said she could go and buy a plastic bag for them from the main entrance. As the main entrance had happened to be about 500 meters away and her patience was nonexistent by now, she took all of the stuff and ran through the metal detector leaving it beeping wildly and threw all her stuff in the nearest trash bin.

At that moment Alex had decided to avoid Europe as much as possible.

Interrupted by her beeping wrist watch Alex returned from her unpleasant memories. Reminded by her watch she noticed she doesn't have much time to leave the airport. Alex stuffed her pull-over inside her backpack and hurried towards the security counter. Most of the people in the line were Sri Lankan. They didn't say anything as the young American bypassed them and took her place in front of the line, though most of them were staring at her bewildered. She handed over her passport and a middle-aged official took a glance at it with his bored eyes. 'Landing card?' The official demands.

'Pardon...?' There was no response, just an empty fleeting look. Then Alex remembered that the flight attendant had asked her to fill in some sort of a card, but she had ignored it completely. She took her bag and rummaged it around. She tried to smile at the official who didn't respond but just stared without a word. He was clearly waiting her to step out of the line and do her homework somewhere else, but Alex ignored it. *There!* A landing card for Bandaranaike International Airport was at the bottom of her bag.

Surprisingly people behind her didn't show any signs of frustration, as if they had all the time in the world for waiting. Alex decided to take the opportunity to ask a pencil from the gentleman behind her. She leaned over to the counter to fill in the card. *Am I bringing in any illegal substances? No. Do I have any prescription drugs? Not anymore. Am I smuggling firearms? No, taken care off.* After about a dozen of questions she handed over the card and her passport again. 'Are we done?' The official seemed to wake up from his daydream and finally stamped the passport. Alex took her documents and rushes towards the exit.

As soon as she left the building a wave of heat and humidity swept over her and left her dumb-founded for a while. Approximately 35-year old man approached her with a smile, holding a bunch of green leaves in his hands. 'Ayubowan! Welcome to Sri Lanka.' She had heard some rumors of all sorts of villains who try to rip you off so she ignored the stranger and walked away. 'Madame, Madame, can I help you?' the voice behind her demanded. Alex turned. 'In fact, you could help me. Where's the subway?'

'I beg your pardon?' Alex repeated her question thinking he doesn't understand American. 'Madame, you mean the underground?' *Yes, God damn it! And stop calling me Madame, I'm not that old.* 'We don't have one, Madame. Taxi okay?' *I guess that'll do.* 'Sure, take me to Hotel Taj Samudra.'

The man seemed to be pleased and offered her the Bida leaves he was still holding. Alex accepted the welcoming gift reluctantly. 'Come.' He started off towards his cab with hurrying steps, his legs wiggling eerily. Alex went to the backseat. As soon as the driver started the engine a freezing wave of cold air filled the car. *Damn, it's cold. But I don't complain.* Alex wiped off sweat from her bare arms and forehead. As the car turned to leave the airport the driver started to blabber about his name and other irrelevant in-

formation. Alex ignored the guy, took her earplugs, and connected them with her Nintendo DS. Animated Middle Eastern country appeared on the screen and capital letters “HUSSEINS” exploded onto the screen.

2 – Jay

Present day: March 6, 2023, 7:30 a.m.

Somewhere in Toronto a Hover Bed Sound System started playing Alice Cooper’s classic Poison. Volume increasing every 10th second Jay Fleury had to get up, or in fact down, from the bed.

Hover Bed was a revolutionary product developed by a world-renowned innovation workshop Eye Dee Ventures. It virtually hovers in the air around the heating pipes that shoot water through the building at immense speed, taking care of the energy and heating of the house. All this powered with one small pill. Hover Bed is the most pleasant sleeping experience where you lie on your belly, face down, and the bed practically treats you while you sleep. It monitors your body heat and muscular tension and lulls you to deep sleep within minutes. When you wake up after four hours of deep hibernation you feel more relaxed and energized than sleeping 8 hours in a conventional bed. Countries that have adopted Hover Bed technology as a standard in new buildings were now showing extreme productivity growth and virtually happier citizens who don’t have to use their life sleeping all night.

For Jay and others who like to party all night but still go to work next morning Hover Bed is irreplaceable, though his living habits are so unhealthy that he managed to break down Hover Bed version 0.92. Now he has upgraded to Hover Bed v. 1.98 that truly learns how to treat its owner.

No matter how practical the bed was, it didn’t really suit in Jay’s apartment that was otherwise full of old Rock ‘n’ Roll collectibles, antique leather sofas, TV dating back to 2010 when they still had screens, and most importantly; his messed up kitchen with all the new-age equipments replaced with old gone carrots, empty cans of beer and an inflatable life partner stuffed in the trash bin.

Jay rolled over to his sofa, grabbed a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and downloaded the morning newspaper. There was something wrong with his receiver and he got only the first two pages. *Great! I have to return this damn thing.* He went back to the previously downloaded magazines and started flicking through December issue of “World”, the paper he worked for. He read once again his own article about Santa’s On-Line Wish List, a new Swedish company that spreads lies and deceit amidst the kids and makes them to do good deeds around the year to gather Santa’s Good Will points that they can use to order their favorite gifts for Christmas.

I got to get something decent to report about. This is complete BS! Admittedly, for the past year Jay’s promising career as World reporter had been in decline. Somehow the editor just didn’t feel like giving him the breakthrough headlines. Maybe it was because he had found out who was the guy that banged his gorgeous wife when he was attending corporate strategy retreat. *Hell! After that half of the management girls were all over him. Hard to guess how he spent his time in the retreat. He knows that I know, and I*

know that he knows. Lips are sealed, but at least he could fix me some juicy stories already. It's been a year now. Jay decided to go back to his Hover Bed and take "just a short nap" before going to work.

As Jay entered the World office it was strangely silent everywhere. *Shit! It's first Monday of the month and I come to the office at eleven. All the good stories have gone already.* 'Good morning Mr. Fleury. It's an honor to have you here.' the editor grinned as Jay stepped out of the elevator. 'Look who has missed the Lucky Day again. All other reporters drafted their headlines already and are out there working their ass off. What is your excuse today?' *Drop dead Macintosh!* 'I was celebrating the end of an excellent weekend in Two Corners. Your wife was sloshed, so I had to take her home. She wouldn't let me sleep before sunrise.' Jay passed the editor with a nauseating smirk on his face, went directly to his booth and slammed the door behind him. *There! Rip humor out of that.*

Just as he had made himself comfortable on his chair, the door opened again without a warning and the editor waltzed in. 'You leave my wife out of this or else...' *Or else you have to organize another management retreat?* 'I know I haven't been too generous with the topics you've covered lately, but now I might have something better for you.' Jay became all ears. *No, wait. If this really is something good I cannot show my enthusiasm. It's a trick. He wouldn't give me jobs I like.* 'There is a new type of a train called Eelam Star that is going to be released on 14 March, that's eight days from now, in Jaffna, Eelam.'

A variety of feelings took over Jay's mind. *Eelam. That's were Hover Beds come from. Cool. Wait, Eelam is neighboring Sri Lanka. Mom died in Sri Lanka. I've always wanted to go to Sri Lanka but couldn't afford it.* 'Yawn!' Jay interrupted.

'Let me continue: This piece of a shuttle goes from Jaffna to Prague in two and half hours. It's a friggin' rocket! All the other papers are going there just for the launch and report on the spot. I want you to go there and dig out everything you can about this thing: You interview the engineers, potential passengers, PR people, scientists, whoever. We'll make a ten-page report of it. World brings you the best in the world, eh?'

Jay played on. *I couldn't care less about the damn train, but I want to visit the place where the first Tsunami took away my mother.* 'I don't know man, sounds a bit boring.' Jay addressed.

'It's not boring.' *Wait a minute; Jessie wrote an article about those 5 Dollar dudes who had a major impact on what Eelam is nowadays. Sri Lanka is in a total havoc while Eelam flourishes as the innovation centre of the world. No one is paying attention, yet. Maybe those guys are now making big bugs out of Eelam. Maybe they were fraudulent after all. Maybe this could be my big one...*

'I'll do it on one condition. You let me make another article while I'm there.' The editor was perplexed. 'What would this another article be?' *How the Beelzebub shat on the backyard of God? How the university kids pulled a billion dollar trick on the whole world? Nah, I got to tone it down a bit.* 'The socio-economic differences between Sri Lanka and Eelam after the division of the country back in 2008.' *I can't believe I said that.* 'Sounds interesting Jay, we got a deal!' *Really? It might be my lucky day after all.*

'Oh yeah, one more thing Jay: Do you think you could drop by in Colombo while you are at it? One local paper has some support material reserved for us. Could you pick it up?' *Well, that's on my way.* 'If you insist...'

‘Good. They’ll be in touch with you.’

3 – Marie

March 6, 2023, 7:37 a.m.

On the outskirts of Montreal a woman in her early thirties entered a gigantic industrial building. *Let this be my last job. I’m tired of serving The Company. I’ll do it once more, out of loyalty... and for the biggest paycheck of my life... Then I retire to Bahamas.*

She had had these thoughts so many times before and not least when she was walking down this aisle all too familiar for her. As she was asked to sit down to wait behind the monstrously large wooden doors she sighed of agony. *Why am I here again? How many times have I convinced myself this would be the last time?* She felt a heart-grueling pain inside without knowing if it was physical pain or purely her conscious playing tricks on her. Images of the past assignments came swooshing back to her mind, images that not even the wittiest shrinks of The Company could eradicate.

It feels like just yesterday. Career of my dreams... Future laid out for me... Being independent young woman... All thrown down the bin... Where have all the years gone?

Marie Thibault was completely astray from the contemporary beauty concept: slim and tall girls were the news of yesterday. Moreover, her perished parents being from Kenya and Vietnam, there was nothing European about her. There were hardly any men left who would even bother to look at this kind of women. Now the magazines, ads and roadside holograms were filled with chubby girls from Eastern Europe who were showing off their curvy behinds without a shame. “Fat means wealth!” Oprah Junior guided the young Americans in search for a spouse.

Still, or maybe because of all this, Marie enjoyed flirting with guys. There was, however, one guy not to flirt with. And she was about to have a meeting with him right now.

‘Marie, I heard you have passed the advanced training with exemplary results.’ A whale-like old man behind a large oak desk rejoiced in a thick French accent. ‘It went ok.’ Marie summarized. ‘You know that I love hockey, don’t you?’ *Man, you’ve never been on skates. I bet you love watching it with a bucket of KFC wings.* ‘Yes Sir.’ *I hope this is over soon. I’m sick and tired of this guy.*

‘Look at the wall behind me. What do you see?’ the man inquired. ‘Umm... they are old Montreal Canadians hockey shirts.’ Marie grew anxious. ‘Yes, my darling. But they are not any kind of shirts. Osgood, Sienna, and Koivu were all captains who made a difference in the team. I prefer to think of myself as a captain. I’m ready to make a difference. But not even the captain can do it alone. I want you to be my assistant captain on this one.’

‘Yes Sir.’ Marie bellowed. ‘Now, what is your mission?’ old man interrogated. ‘To collect feasible information on the possibilities of buying the land, make cost-evaluations and tie relationships with potential business partners.’ *That sounds so pretentious.* ‘Good girl. Everything is ready for you to fly there. When you land you’re on your own. Now, let’s celebrate this with a cake. Come and have a slice.’ *He has got to be kidding me. I’m not touching that sugar pile.* ‘Maybe next time Sir; I have a train to catch.’

Marie knew there would be no next time. The sheer presence of the old fart made her disgusted. But one thing was for sure; she did have a train to catch.

4 - Professor

March 6, 2023, 3:12 a.m.

Somewhere up north, Professor Tom Hardwick was wide awake, staring at darkness. It was pitch-black but his eyes were by now used to it and he was measuring the bedroom walls, unable to sleep. He could hear the clock ticking on the wall and his wife snoring adorably beside him. A few beams of moonlight entered the room amidst the curtains.

It's still too early... but my back is killing me. Hardwick felt how years spent on non-ergonomic workstations now reminded him as he lay in the bed. He removed the mushy blanket carefully, turned to his wife and gave a gentle peck on her cheek, trying not to wake her up. The snoring stopped; she licked her lips tenderly, swallowed making a gulping sound and hugged her pillow. Hardwick could see a trait of smile on her lovely face. *Sleep darling, sleep. I have to go, but I will be back eventually.*

Hardwick rolled over back to his side of the bed and stood up. He took a candle from the drawer, slipped a matchbox to his pocket and quietly stepped out of the room. Lighting the candle he prowled to the next room where the kids were sleeping. Their bedside light was still on so the candle wouldn't wake them up. He bent over Sara's bed. Sara was their first child, already 12 years of age, sleeping beautifully between her Donald Duck linen. He touched soothingly her hair and gave a fatherly kiss on her forehead.

With careful steps he moved to another bed where their five-year-old son Samuel was slumbering. Samuel was adopted from Sierra Leone at the age of two. It had been a long, costly and burdensome process to get him to Finland – maybe more difficult than Sara's delivery – but when Samuel finally arrived, the family was complete. Everyone loved each other more than anything else in the world. Thus, it was not easy for Tom Hardwick to leave.

As Hardwick was observing his baby, Samuel suddenly opened his eyes without a warning. There they were gazing each other for a moment that seemed like eternity. *Please don't cry.* Instead of crying, Samuel giggled silently and raised his arms towards him. Hardwick picked him up in embrace and lulled him back to sleep. After a few minutes he tucked him in again, took his candle, and left the room with a few droplets of tears running down his cheek.

Hardwick went downstairs with mixed feelings. He opened an old wooden closet and took his luggage out. Once more he examined that everything needed was there; mosquito spray, slippers, t-shirts, shorts, tickets... *Good to go.* He put his winter shoes on, wrapped a scarf on his neck, rummaged around a basket to find his bonnet and finally buttoned his jacket before leaving to cold winter night.

Dragging the luggage was not easy in the thick moist snow. Sand and snow mixed and rattled in the luggage wheels. All of a sudden, Hardwick stopped. *I might need one more thing.* He left his luggage there, next to the gate, and hurried back home. He cautiously turned the key in the lock, trying to keep quiet. The door clicked open. Hardwick undressed and dashed in to his den. He checked his watch and realized there was more than enough time. He lit an oil lamp, though he could have just switched on the lights. He liked the smell of slowly burning lamp oil. He opened a drawer and produced his cigar

collection. He carefully selected the most expensive one, cut the end of it, scratched a match and took a few puffs to make sure it's lit properly. He generously poured himself a glass of his favorite 16 years old single malt and lay back to his lazy boy. After a few sips and puffs he reached out to the back of the chair and produced a worn-out shoe box.

Inside the box were scraps of newspaper articles. *I can't believe we're still printing the news. Even Samuel's biological mother must be downloading her news. But in a way I like it; smelling the ink and touching the paper make it more real.* Hardwick was perplexed why his thoughts drifted at this level. Something much more important was to be done. He tucked all the articles in his pockets, finally leaving the box empty... except for a gun that was placed at the bottom. Hardwick stared at the hand gun for a while and then placed the open box at the table next to him. He emptied his glass of scotch without hasting too much and enjoyed his cigarette. But his gaze never left the open box with a gun inside. When the glass was finally empty he sighed deeply, closed the box and put it back in the safe behind the armchair. Somewhere in the distance he heard a tooting of a horn. *Cab...*

5 – The Flying Fox

March 6, 2023, 8:52 a.m.

A rugged figure was sitting against the wall in a hut made of clay, sharpening his machete and sipping once in a while the juice of a king coconut. 'Sir, Flying Fox has landed.' A tender female voice nearly whispered at the hut's entrance. 'Ok. Thank you.'

Rohan was a proud son of one of the last Veddahs in Sri Lanka. Veddahs are said to be the aboriginals of the island. Still in early 2000s there was some couple of hundred of them but now they were either extinct or mixed with the rest of the population. Now Rohan's only aim was to re-unify the island and give everyone an equal stance in society. Flying Fox could help him do that.

'Madame, welcome back. How does it look like?' *I hope I'm not intruding her privacy too early.* 'Hello Rohan, good to see you. We are proceeding in schedule. Tunnels are almost ready, the lookout points are camouflaged and workers share a high morale. There has been minor shaking of the ground in urban areas due to the beaming of the tunnels, but I don't believe anyone suspects anything. How was your small recruitment campaign?' *Should I tell her everything or just part of it? Maybe she gets angry; the figure is not exactly what we agreed on.* 'Good. Most of them came willingly. Some had to be talked into it.' *I cannot reveal the whole truth.* 'So, how many are we talking about Rohan?' *Ayoo...here we go.* 'Three.'

'Only three hundred, that's not a number we fixed.' Rohan was blushing. 'Try three thousand.' *She's going to scold me.* 'You got three thousand people? How did you manage to do that? We don't have space for all of them. Where did you plan to accommodate them? This is not a concentration camp!'

'We were targeting 300 but at first got only 120. The rest of them attended The Convention that was hugely successful. As soon as they went back to their offices, they started recruiting their friends and relatives subtly but effectively. They were really convinced of our message. Two hundred are in the jungle, some key people here at the camp and approximately 2800 of them are ready in Batticaloa and Ampara districts. We just blow the whistle and they are here.'

‘Excellent. Rohan, I think our common mission will be easier than expected. Next step is to get the vessels and find that document.’

‘I know Madame. I’m working on it. Yesterday I found something that I believe to be the final clue. “Bonaparte” it says. Does that ring a bell?’

‘No, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out.’

6 – Mercedes

Encouraged by her American father, Mercedes Bauer had started her own business in early 2005, at the age of 14. With her father’s contacts it was not exactly tough to gather the initial capital needed and she had a good idea, so she thought giving it a try. Her company quickly hired the sexiest models in Brazil and launched tempting advertising campaigns in targeted US companies. She was offering them an opportunity to outsource their advertising to Brazil where photo shoots and music video productions would take place without the client having to do anything else but fill in an online query. The start-up was promising indeed and Mercedes got orders from a couple of mid-sized companies in southern United States. These initial assignments were successful, but for whatever the reason, the consequent advertisements didn’t have the desired effect. For three years she tried running the business with loss, but eventually she had no other choice but to close it down.

Mercedes thought it was a good learning experience, however, and that she would never be an entrepreneur anymore. After high school she applied to newly opened Harvard Industrial Engineering University in Rio de Janeiro. At the age of 24 she was done with her studies, having achieved the best qualifications possible and a wide array of competence due to her active participation in extracurricular activities.

Young Miss Bauer started a rigorous job hunt. She had heard wild rumors about a new and funky enterprise that was looking for the best of the best people worldwide to take part in their in-house leadership development program while working.

One day she was flipping through job offers as she spotted a full-page ad by Republic of Eelam Ltd. It said: ‘Recent graduate, do you want to be a CEO of a global organization in five years time?’ Mercedes thought for a while. *Not exactly, but sounds promising.* She dialed the recruitment number instantly and before long she was greeted by an automatic message: ‘Welcome to RoE Ltd job offers portal. If you want to be CEO in five years time, press one, if not, press two.’ Mercedes pressed two. ‘If you are looking for a part-time job, press one, if you’re looking for a full-time job, press two, if something else, please press three.’ Mercedes pressed three. Now a deep and sensuous male voice answered: ‘RoE Ltd, Magnus Arvedsson; How can I help you?’

‘Umm... Hi, this is Mercedes Bauer from Rio de Janeiro. I saw your ad and called this number.’ *What am I doing? RoE HQ in Eelam is on another side of the world... Perfect!* ‘Hello Mercedes. According to your choices with our lovely answering machine, you’re not looking for a part-time or full-time job at our entry level. What *are* you looking for?’ *Future, that’s what I’m looking for.* ‘Umm... You were looking for CEOs, but I was wondering if you have anything better than that?’

Now Magnus was perplexed. *What is this girl talking about? ‘Come again, I didn’t hear you properly?’ She must be nuts... or exactly what we are looking for.* ‘Ok,

maybe I wasn't clear enough. I heard about this leadership program of yours. It sounds really intriguing. I'm willing to put in long hours and full effort to become the Worldwide President of RoE Ltd in ten years time.' *Bingo!* 'Hold on, I put you through to Mr. Keller'.

One week later she moved to Eelam and started her job as an R&D specialist in navigation equipment. Her employer was Just a Sec, a part of RoE group specializing in security, R&D, monitoring and control devices.

7 - Henry

March 6, 2023, 5:14 p.m.

Former spokesman of EU 10 and current president of Republic of Eelam Ltd Henry Yorke was driving by himself first time in a long while. No bodyguards, no protocol, no assistants, just Yorke himself hurrying 100 MPH to a meeting with a Jaguar he had rented at the airport.

A distant "thud!" sound emerged under the hood and the engine stopped. Yorke's Jaguar slowed down and finally he had to pull over to the side of the highway. For a passing moment, Yorke thought it was a disagreeing opinion from God. *What is wrong with the Jag? It was supposed to be a trustworthy car. What would my driver do in a situation like this? Ah, yes, the glove compartment...*

Yorke reached out to the glove compartment that withheld the registration module and an odd hand-held dispenser. He took out the dispenser and examined it for a while. Yorke stepped out of the car, closed the door and searched for something next to the tire. *Ah, there...* He plugged in the dispenser, clicked, unplugged and moved to the other side of the car. He repeated the same maneuver at each tire, stepped back into the vehicle, put aside the dispenser and voiced out: 'Engine start'. The Jaguar hummed again like nothing had happened.

This AM stuff must be the best invention of human kind. Well, of course it is, because we made it. AM – or antimatter – was maybe the most researched substance in the near history, and without the biggest success story and business accelerator of RoE Ltd.

Before going public with their latest, and the most groundbreaking invention the RoE leadership, led by CEO Henry Yorke, had personally visited almost all the countries in the world in order to have them sign an agreement that they would not misuse AM. That was not an easy lobbying round. Even the President of the United States of America, however liberal she was, had expressed her doubts on this new technology.

But the voice of reason had spoken: When used correctly AM would be *the* answer to stop the climate change and eventually the destruction of this planet. Thus RoE had promised to assist countries in adapting to the new technology and provide "pills" free of charge.

While driving soothingly on the freeway Henry's thoughts wandered back to where it all started: the press conference in Brussels back in 2008 where every possible noteworthy media was invited, and where everyone invited came. He could still see with his mind's eye how all the cameras were pointing at him holding a six billion cheque as the whole world was watching. He still remembered his speech as it was yesterday: 'The EU 10 is glad that the world media in its totality has gathered here to listen what we have

to say. Though you might have come here doubting what our motives for Republic of Eelam Ltd are, or thinking that we have completely lost it, I hope that after this press conference you are convinced of our genuine willingness to leave a positive legacy for our grand children. RoE is a tool for that.’ In the flickering of flashing cameras the crowd of reporters had gone berserk and started shooting questions from every corner of the conference room.

Henry remembered how he had remained silent and just smiled calmly. It had taken at least 10 minutes for the furious press to understand that the time for questions would be later. He recalled how he evenly continued: ‘As I was saying, the top 10 corporations in the world have decided to donate six billion for the rebuilding of Eelam. When it comes to the flow of critique from the international lawyers’ community, I say: shut up! Sri Lankan law is so complex and outdated it couldn't be used as a reference point, and there is nothing in the international law that prevents us from carrying out our plans. To make our point clear enough, I have remarkable news for all of you.’

Henry smirked when he thought back to the great publicity stunt they had pulled off: how he had removed the white paper covering the space next to the numbers 6,000,000,000 and how it revealed a Euro sign. He could still see how the audience had stood in awe, without saying a word and how he had majestically announced: ‘Instead of 6 billion dollars initially planned, we have decided to invest 6 billion Euros. That is nearly 50% more than the original sum. It’s still not much, but we want the new venture stand on its own soon. We will use this money to launch the shares of Republic of Eelam. The EU 10 companies will keep 39% of the shares. 10% of the shares will go to the RoE fund, that we will use as incentives to drive the productivity of the newly formed country. That leaves me with the faith of the majority of shares: 51% of the shares are equally divided between the citizens of Republic of Eelam. Thus every single individual has a part to play in the development of the society. This will also discourage any attempts to harm the fellow citizens, because that harms the corporation, and finally shows in the value of the stock. Now, who would want that to happen? I promise you, with these arrangements the productivity of the country will skyrocket and Eelam will be a great place to live and work in. There will be no law as such but we will govern RoE with strongly values-based leadership. Control mechanisms are replaced by advanced management practices. As we speak, the brightest minds across the globe are flying here in Brussels. They will nominate initial management team among themselves, but it will be gradually replaced by Eelamese employees during the next 10 years, leaving us only as investors and advisors.’

Henry realized he had just repeated his old speech, word by word, though just for himself and the open road ahead. He recalled how he with other nine representatives of the EU 10 had remained seated for the next 12 hours relentlessly discussing the benefits and possible negative repercussions of the new endeavor. Some had thought it was insanity to put six billion euros down the drain, but Yorke and his colleagues had managed to convince them that this is not any kind of corporate social responsibility but a well thought out business-case; that every cent invested in RoE would pay back in the long-term. He could still smell the ink of the next day’s newspapers that all touted the same message: ‘RoE is the way of the future.’, ‘Down skepticism, go RoE!’, ‘RoE is what world has been waiting for!’ Henry rejoiced with the images of the happiest day in his life fading away as he pulled his car to the driveway. After a long while he would meet the man who had helped them to beat the American superpower.

Marc Lecavalier was enjoying his fresh pineapple juice on the poolside of his private residence as Henry parked his car.

‘Good to see you buddy-boy’ Lecavalier smiled somewhere behind his multiple chins.

‘Well, yeah. I was just on my way to take a plane back to Eelam when I got your call.’ *By now I would be already back home.*

‘I see. I wanted to meet you personally to make sure we share a same understanding of the events taking place soon.’

‘So, you mean the presidential election. Don’t worry, everything is taken care of and all the candidates should be supportive of continuing cooperation of Derlingo and RoE.’

‘Good, good.’ *He cannot see through that American bitch. Well, she’s taken care of in no time.* ‘But there’s something else too.’

‘What would it be?’

‘I was wondering what your plans are now that you are leaving RoE finally. I could always use a good man in our top management team.’

‘Hmm... I don’t know Marc. It might be time for me to step aside of the everyday leadership of RoE but I still feel a lot of sympathy for the country and the company. I’ve been thinking of taking up a position in the advisory board.’ *How can he even suggest something like that? He knows I don’t trust him much anymore.*

‘So, you wouldn’t be interested even though I offered a lofty welcoming package. You know I’m a generous man.’

‘No Marc. To be frank with you, I’m still a bit shocked how things went down in the beginning.’

‘What do you mean Henry? I thought we’ve talked this through. And without me taking action you would have never become the CEO of world’s most respected company. Hell, there would be no RoE without me!’

Ok, that’s enough! ‘Excuse me, but your cruelties have nothing to do with the birth of RoE. The EU 10 would have done the same thing sooner or later; maybe not in Eelam but somewhere else anyways. It was time for us to get a playground for innovation.’

‘Playground for nailing the Americans, you mean?’

‘Well, that was the initial motive, but later on loftier goals drove us forward. We realized how we can serve as an example for the rest of the world to make this a bit better place.’

‘Henry, Henry, Henry... Aren’t we forgetting something?’

‘Like what?’

‘Like you playing mind games with your own niece to get things rolling?’

‘Oh come on. You know I still regret that but it had to be done in order to turn world’s attention towards Eelam. And in fact, now Alyssa is proud of RoE. She thinks we are doing great things. She doesn’t have to know I used her.’

‘Not unless I tell her.’

‘Are you blackmailing me?’

‘Now, why would I do that buddy-boy? I’m just saying there’s a good career opportunity waiting for you at Derlingo.’

‘No Marc! I won’t join you. Not after you sending that young girl to do something so horrendous.’

‘Oh come on! Most likely she didn’t even do the job. She was nothing but a good scapegoat. I hate Americans as much as you do. See, we are not that different.’

‘Now wait a minute! What do you mean she didn’t get the job done? The president of Sri Lanka was assassinated!’

‘Let’s just say my success in business and life in general has always been a good plan B. See.’ The argument was stopped by a young blond girl in yellow bikini who brought a drink to Lecavalier without saying a word. Yorke gave a pretentious smile for the girl who seemingly had replaced Lecavalier’s wife and now walked away with the tray.

‘Ok, whatever. I don’t want to talk about your personal life. The bottom line is that you took extreme action just to get your hands on the oil reserves in Sri Lankan soil.’

‘And you got your small innovation playground, didn’t you. That makes us partners in crime then.’

‘I never approved that kind of approach.’

‘Oh yes you did. You said I had free hands in making the necessary arrangements. That’s all on a disc. You know I have a habit of recording my business conversations just in case I might potentially have to prove myself later on.’

‘Are you recording this conversation, too?’

‘Of course not; I stopped the practice once Chevez’s men came and turned the place up-side-down and took the disc.’

‘What? You never told about that?’

‘I didn’t need to. My men liquidated anyone who knew anything about the disc and Chevez ended up taking the blame.’ Lecavalier was about to burst in his oh-so-typical maniac laughter but Henry’s question interrupted him.

‘You’re not telling me everything, are you?’

‘You’re right... The disc was never found. Lately I’ve heard that just before his unfortunate death Chevez wrote a certain letter proving his innocence. That letter is said to include the disc and now someone in Sri Lanka has found it. They were asking me to pay ridiculous ransom money... So...’

‘So you got them killed?’

‘Yes, but I never managed to retrieve the damn letter.’

‘Do you know where it is now?’

‘Approximately...’

‘Marc! What do you mean approximately? We got to find it! It cannot be revealed or it’s the end for both of us.’

‘I’m well aware of that. It’s just that they got quite cautious after the last transaction failed.’

‘Well, cannot blame them. Now what is your plan?’

‘We agreed that both sides are required to use at least two middle men so that the people making the transaction are unaware of the contents of the letter.’

‘So you ended up paying them anyways?’

‘Of course not... I delivered them a cheque that they are not allowed to cash in before the transaction has been carried out.’

‘A cheque... No one is using cheques anymore. And what if they do cash it before?’

‘If they do they will find out it is not valid. That’s the beauty of cheques.’

‘Ok, no matter how crooked you might be at times I trust you in matters of importance.’

‘Good. I already have a man on the task. He should be landing in Eelam any time soon. And he’s completely unaware of what his real duty is.’

‘Isn’t that a bit risky?’

‘Not at all... Let’s just say that an old friend owes me a favor. He knows he cannot fail... or else.’

At the same time in Mexico City a 16-year old Pablo Hernandez was jumping out of joy. *Cool! This Eye Dee Satellite is the best birthday gift ever!* Unknowingly Pablo had just recorded a meeting between some of the most influential men in the history of mankind.

8 – Galle Face

Back in 2008, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

10250 points and I still haven’t slain Saddam. Where is he hiding this time? Screeching sound of the breaks interrupted Alex’s game session and only then she realized where she is. On the right side opened up the Indian Ocean and on the left was a colossal building with fancy decorations, palm trees and a bunch of heavily armed security guards. The car accelerated one last time and stopped in front of the doors leading to Taj Samudra Hotel. The staff that welcomed Alex with now familiar “Ayubowan” was all dressed up nice, reminding her that this in fact was a British colony once. For the first time today she felt like being on a paradise island as she greeted the doorman who was equipped with a widest smile imaginable. As she entered the hotel she could not help thinking how nice it would be to spend a few days here before getting the job done. She took a glance at her watch and the thought was gone.

A bellboy came to her and asked if he could take care of her luggage. ‘I don’t have any.’ Alex snapped, realizing her words came out a bit too sharply. Nonetheless, she was soon holding a drink next to the reception and filling in a guest registration card. ‘Welcome to Taj Samudra Miss Jefferson.’ The receptionist gave Alex a key to her room and walked her to the elevator. ‘Top floor, am I right?’ Alex queried and saw the receptionist smiling and wiggling his head bizarrely from side to side. *Was that “yes” or “no”?*

As she entered the suite reserved for her, she could not help but gasping her breath. A spacious luxury room decorated with flowers and a basket of fresh fruit with champagne waiting on the wide glass table was exactly what she didn’t want to see. She didn’t have time for enjoying this lavish lifestyle. Soon she would be back at Oregon, with her family who were blissfully unaware of her little voyage across the world. Well, maybe she could take the whole family here as soon as the job was done and the special

lottery jackpot waiting behind their door. Now, however, priority number one was to find the suitcase.

Lurking through the door carrying “Emergency Exit” sign, Alex entered a staircase leading up to the roof. She hoped and prayed that the last door between her and the roof top was not locked. *Someone inside was supposed to open it.* She reached carefully for the door knob, grabbed it slightly, and turned it... Click! *Thank God it's open. Now I just need to make sure there's no one at the roof.* Alex opened the door just a bit and took a cautious peek on the roof. Her heart bumped and she got back inside in an instant. *Shit! There was someone, wasn't there?* Alex was sure she saw movement at the rooftop. *No way. My imagination is playing tricks on me. This is what they told in the psychological training. There's no one.* She took another peek and saw nothing. Without hesitation Alex hurried to the roof and quickly spotted a ventilation channel that she was supposed to find. As soon as she started removing the grid blocking the channel she noticed a military helicopter approaching directly at her from the ocean. She prowled behind the ventilation channel and her pulse started pumping heavily. The sound of the rotors was approaching every second. *Mom! I want to come home.*

Soon the intimidating sound became less and less distinct and finally vanished behind the tooting horns of the traffic and the splashing of the waves against the shore. She got back to the other side of the channel, violently grabbing the grid and pulling it off with all her strength. She looked inside. *Empty!*

A moment of despair was about to paralyze her but out of the blue she spotted another ventilation channel. As she approached the channel she noticed that there was no grid in this one. She looked inside and the suitcase was there. She grabbed the suitcase and ran back to the staircase. Carefully she locked the door behind her and started descending the stairs. *Shit! I'm not alone. Someone is coming up the stairs.* She looked down vigilantly, avoiding to be seen. *Guard... What the hell is he doing up here?* Alex turned and rushed back up, hoping she had not locked the door properly. False hope; the door was shut and stayed like that. She could hear the guard coming closer and closer. As she was pressing her back against the wall, holding on to the suitcase, and closing her eyes in agony, she realized there was no way out. The guard was only one storey down and continued ascending. *Think, think, think!*

‘Excuse me, Madame. What are you doing up here?’ the buffed security guard insisted. It was not every day he saw a white young woman wearing just her bra, especially not in the emergency staircase of his workplace. ‘Ayubowan! It's so hot in here. I was trying to find an ice cube dispenser.’ She chirped with as erotic voice as she could, while taking a few seductive steps closer to the guard. *He's not convinced.* ‘What is your room number Madame?’ the guard asked reaching for his walkie-talkie. *Ok, I'm screwed. He's turning me in.* ‘It's the suite right over there.’ Alex almost whispered, pointing the door one floor down. The walkie-talkie made a crackling sound as the guard hastily spoke something in Sinhalese. *Is he getting angry? What happens to my family if I fail? Should I run?* The guard straightened his right arm towards Alex and smiled: ‘Let me take you to your room Madame. The ice is on the way.’

As they came back to the corridor, Alex saw a room service fellow running down the aisle with a container full of ice. ‘Sorry Madame.’ He handed over the ice and smiled. They were now right next to her suite.

Ok, this girl has some work to do... and soon! She took a cube of ice and pressed it on her forehead while opening the door. ‘Thank you very much for your help gentlemen.’ She took ten dollars from her pocket, gave it to the guard and disappeared to her room.

Thousands of school kids had gathered to sing Sri Lankan national anthem. It was a historical day in the 60 years history of independent Sri Lanka. There was a ray of hope in the country torn by a continuous civil war, tearing the country apart for the past 25 years. First time since the mutually broken Peace Agreement in 2004, both LTTE and Sri Lankan government were meeting on the soil of their home country. If only for one day, the violence had ceased and the leaders of both parties were ready to shake hands to celebrate the independence.

Right after the national anthem the cannons shot thrice for the honor of the country and Kandyan dancers started their rhythmical drumming and dancing performance. Dozens of gloriously decorated elephants were quietly watching the show. Tanks were lined up at the Galle Face green. Helicopters hovered in the sky overlooking the parade. Security was taken care of to the highest possible level. Or so everyone thought.

Then it happened: Three consecutive explosions right in the shore broke the harmony of the event. Water splashed up in the sky and towards the audience wetting the first few rows. People screamed and started running in different directions to take shelter for further bombing. As the haze of panic finally settled down, there were no more explosions. For a moment nothing happened until one of the presidential security forces shouted: ‘Taj! Go to Taj! President is down!’

The army officials quickly understood that the explosions were just a distraction for the sniper to get the job done, but it was already too late: Three topmost leaders from both sides had been shot dead right between their eyes, including the president and The Leader of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

PART 2:

A land like no other

9 - Jaylon

Jay couldn't believe that though he was going to probably the most technologically advanced country in the world, he still had to bear with frustratingly long lines at the airport and he still had to sit god-knows-how-many-hours in an uncomfortable jumbo jet, no matter how AM-powered it was. Even the selection of in-flight movies was as crappy as when he was traveling with his dad back in the childhood with the very same Canadian airline.

One thing was better though; meals in the airplanes were amazingly delicious, and time was flying – Jay giggled at his unintended pun – when you just had your Eye Dee Receiver with you. At the airport you could download whatever it was that you wanted to read, fold the light-weight receiver in your pocket and unfold it back in the plane. Jay was still amazed how all the data remained unharmed and the resolution as sharp as ever, no matter how you twisted and folded the “paper”.

For this flight Jay had naturally selected a random bunch of articles that he had found from World archives about Republic of Eelam. As soon as he wiggled himself next to a 90-year old granny he started his research. *No chatting with babes on this flight; might as well be prepared... for once.*

‘Republic of Eelam: 18.2 million citizens (or employees, depending on the source). RoE is one of the world’s most multinational countries with 62.1% immigrants. The amount of Tamil population has been in steady decline, as the young people follow their parents’ advice to go and see the world, something that was not possible in their youth. Birthrate is speculated to come down to zero during the next five years as procreation is badly frowned upon by the public opinion.’ *Jesus, what is this country? I admit Hover Bed is not ideal for my favorite leisure, but what is it with these people?* ‘Foreign workforce that wishes to embark on a career in RoE is expected to go through a rigorous selection process after which granting a citizenship is just a matter of hours.’ *Wow!* ‘Productivity in RoE is all-time high and it doesn’t show any signs of decline. The share value of RoE Ltd just broke another record: it is now valued 200 times more than at its date of issue fifteen years ago.’

*Ok, let’s see what news we’ve covered on this dream country. 1999: ‘Wonder Kid Jay Fleury sees the daylight’... as if... 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003... nothing... 2004: ‘Peace in Sri Lanka!’ Boring... ‘Tsunami kills 160 000 in South East Asia.’ Tell me about it. Should have been 159 999. Jay touched “see related articles” tag. 2008: ‘USD 600 M donation for the rebuilding of Tamil Eelam’, ‘The EU 10 forms a super-nation’, ‘2nd Tsunami leaves 112 000 victims in South East Asia’. 2009: ‘RoE and Derlingo Energy join hands: The world needs to be prepared!’ What’s that about? 2010: ‘Tsunami shields provided free to all risk zones by Derlingo and RoE Ltd.’ Oh yeah... that one. Slipped my mind... ‘Sri Lanka and Thailand protest the Canadian-Eelamese joint venture: Ban instead of shields’... Jay finally stopped to read the full article instead of flicking through the headlines. According to the article Sri Lanka and Thailand had expressed their disapproval for the good will project of Canadian energy giant and newly found Republic of Eelam. *Dumb! What could be possibly wrong about saving human lives for free?**

Jay went back for the headlines. *2011... nothing major... 2012: ‘3rd Tsunami sweeps off only 36 000 casualties. Singaporean Tsunami shield malfunctioning.’ 2013:*

'Antimatter Vacuum patented by RoE Ltd: "We shall save our children" world rejoices'. 2014, 2015, some new species found, a few thousand old ones lost... nothing major... 2016: '4th Tsunami on its schedule; God's will or a horrible scientific experiment?' Whatever... that baby had an effect only on 9 000 people'. 2017: 'Major improvements on Tsunami shields by RoE and Derlingo – Cost 5.2 billion Euros'. 2018, 2019... zilch... 2020: '5th Tsunami powerless against the shields. 1042 people reported missing.' 2021: 'Four countries to test out AM-stations, dispensers and vehicles'. 2022: '128 countries approach RoE to ignite their future'. 2023: '29-year old President Candidate Ganeshan Shivakumaran: Thank you EU, now Eelam can go on its own'... Jay was having forty winks already.

'Darling, wake up.' A granny next to Jay was gently poking him on the arm. 'A few more times honey...'. Jay opened his eyes. 'Umm... oh, thanks. Are we there?' *What did I say to her?* 'Yes honey, we're in Jaffna. I'm continuing to my vacation in New Trinco but I checked from your ticket over there; this is your stop. I hope you don't mind.' *Not at all; thanks grandma.*

As Jay stepped out of the plane warm winds of Indian Ocean caressed his body. A fleet of semi-luxury yachts were waiting for the last passengers. *Woah! This is what I call service.* Jay climbed on board and received his welcoming drink from a chubby smiling Tamil girl. 'Nandri!' *I hope that was thank you in Tamil.* The girl giggled charmingly and moved on to serve the next customer. The yacht appeared to be a real speed boat that took him across the ocean in less than five minutes. In the shore, he slowly finished his delicious drink letting other passengers to disembark first. He was in no rush. He had clearly come to a paradise.

The airport hardly resembled an airport. It was a wide open space with fountains, lawns and small artificial waterfalls. Jay was standing in awe measuring every little detail in these lovely retreat-like surroundings.

'Is this your first time in Eelam, Mr. Fleury?' Jay was startled by a kindhearted female voice. 'Umm... Yes. How did you know my name?' For a while Jay thought this was some state-of-the-art "Eye Dee Welcome-To-The-Airport-System", until he realized a short well-dressed woman watching at him and flicking her eyelashes. 'That's what it says in your press card hanging on your neck. May I help you?' *As a matter of fact you can little lady.* 'Yes, how can I find my luggage?' Without a word the woman produced a hand-held device and started scanning the environment. 'Oh yes, follow me, please.' *What the hell is that?* 'What the hell is that?' Jay realized he's thinking out loud. 'This one is an Eye Dee luggage identifier. It can spot all your belongings tagged with Eye Dee mark on 1 kilometer radius. Would you like to have one?' *Would I? Of course I would, but even the Hover Bed is out of my budget. Luckily, it came with the condo.* 'No thanks.'

They walked about 300 meters across a beautiful park where monkeys were playing in the trees and tourists were "accidentally" dropping half-eaten sandwiches and bananas for them. Jay wasn't sure if the tourists had stopped to see the monkeys or vice versa. 'There you go, Mr. Fleury. Have a pleasant stay in Eelam.' Jay took his luggage. 'Thank you.' Jay was about to leave, until he realized he didn't know where to go. 'Excuse me, how do I get to the city centre?'

Jay felt awkward sitting on a chair, pulled forward 50 km/h by some sort of an escalator, his long greasy hair swooshing in the wind. He had been instructed to place his luggage on the back, sit comfortably on the chair, fasten the seat belt and strap a leash onto a rail. He had followed instructions and in a few seconds the chair had slowly nudged forward, quickly accelerating to its top speed. *Am I dreaming or is this a friggin' sci-fi movie?* Soon a screen in front of him illuminated and a western woman appeared on the screen. 'If you wish to exit in Tellippalai, please release the straps attaching you to the conveyor belt and press the green button on your left.' Jay paid a glance around just to be on the safe side. *Thanks but no thanks.*

Jaffna area was hot and dry for 11 months of the year, getting monsoon showers only in December and January, so open transportation like this was ideal for the weather. Jay was actually enjoying the ride. He could see the beautiful nature and breathe in the fresh ocean air. He had thought that a city of this size would be at least a bit more urban, but this baby was a real oasis. It was nothing like the war-torn dry environment he had seen from the old press photos of late nineties and early 2000s. *Correct me if I'm wrong but they have started rebuilding from the least obvious place: the environment.* Since there was no one to correct his thoughts, Jay felt a bit stupid nearly talking to himself, though he was pretty much enjoying the discussion.

'If you wish to exit in Chunnakam, please release the straps attaching you to the conveyor belt and press the green button on your left.' *Nah, Jun-a-come doesn't sound like my kind of place.* Even Mahippalai didn't catch Jay's attention. He was on his way to Jaffna.

Finally, on the fourth time he obeyed the instructions and smoothly slid on another rail, little by little reducing speed. 'You will soon reach Jaffna city centre. In case of danger, please press the yellow button on to your right.' *What "danger"?* Jay worried in vain. The chair stopped and the woman on the screen asked him to unlock his seatbelt. 'Have a nice day Mr. Fleury.' Jay left the chair but turned back after a few steps. *How did the chair know my name? Did it read my press card or what?* Too late, the chair was gone.

No matter how sophisticated and natural the city was, there was something outright odd about it. Jay felt like he needed a drink. Easily he found his way to a roadside café. It felt like a cozy place so he decided to stay. 'Excuse me, do you speak English?' Jay enquired from a young bloke sitting alone in a table. 'Who doesn't? Have a seat, man.' Jay sat down and kicked his sneakers off. Leather jacket and jeans were too much in this kind of weather, no matter how worn off and well-ventilated the jeans were. 'Are you from Spain?' the young man asked casually. *How did he come into that conclusion?* 'No, I'm Canadian.' Uncomfortable silence surrounded the table for a while.

'Would you like to have something to drink, Sir?' *Would I?* 'Can I have a cold beer, please?' The young man burst in a soundless mirth and looked away, as the waiter blushed in embarrassment. *What did I say wrong?* 'I'm sorry Sir, we don't have beer.'

'Oh, ok. Can I have a long-island ice tea then?' *Ah... even better choice. Why it didn't occur to me earlier?* By now the young man was giggling out loud. 'What kind of tea would you like to have?' *What kind of tea would I like to have? Forget about the tea, just bring me the booze.* 'Dude; alcohol is illegal here. It's bad for you.' *Alcohol is illegal?* 'Sorry, I didn't know. Can I see the menu please?' The waiter went back inside to

bring the menu and came back with a thick black-leather covered book. *Is that the menu?* ‘Sir, we have 53 different kinds of tea to choose from. Take your time choosing.’ Jay was astounded again. He reached for his pocket and raised a cigarette onto his lips. The young man sighed, stood up and walked away shaking his head. Jay looked at the waiter already knowing the answer but asked anyways. ‘You are going to ask me to leave if I light this up, aren’t you?’ The waiter nodded. ‘Fine, just bring me a glass of water, ok?’

Jay sipped his ice-water still baffled of everything that had happened in such a short while, until he was interrupted by another white person. He was a middle-aged faintly tanned guy with an emerging beer belly and a pony tail. ‘Is this free?’ *Definitely, I could use some non-local company.* ‘Sure, sit down.’

The stranger turned out to be more of the quiet type, but after shooting a series of questions Jay managed to find out his companion was a Finnish professor, studying the leadership of RoE Ltd. *All kind of hippies they approve as professors nowadays...* Jay confessed that he didn’t know much about the country or leadership for that matter. ‘No one seems to know much about Finland.’ Jay had actually meant Eelam and corrected politely.

By now he was even more confused because the little he did know didn’t make any sense anymore. ‘Professor, there are supposed to be 18.2 million people in Eelam and we are pretty much in the centre of the capital city, right? But I don’t see any sky scrapers. Where are all these people living in?’ This seemed to trigger professor’s verbal talents and he started explaining. ‘First of all this is just the commercial capital – the heart of Eelam. The official capital was for a while Kilinochchi but soon New Trinco took the mantle. Many people make this mistake. Anyways, back to your question: All research done in Eelam builds on two principles: Either the best solution or theory has already been introduced long ago and then forgotten, or the contemporary view is pretty much the opposite of the best solution.’ Jay didn’t understand how this answered his question. ‘Ok, let me rephrase: how did you come here from the airport?’ *I came in a friggin’ strap-on chair, dude.* ‘I believe I used the same transportation as you did.’ *I can’t wait where this leads to.* ‘Right, you didn’t come in a bus, tram or any other mass transportation but in a single chair. This individualized mass transportation is just one of the breakthrough ideas introduced by RoE.’

Only now Jay paid attention to the traffic on the street. Horses pulling wagons, people on foot, bicycles swooshing by, and a lot of... skateboarding kids. ‘See, my friend, all those fabulous inventions were forgotten amidst the technology boom. Until an eight-year old Eelamese boy asked a critical question at school: “why don’t we use horses anymore”. Eye Dee innovation trackers realized the simplicity of the solution and now you see horses here again.’ *Jay was stunned. You cannot be serious. An eight year old boy... Innovation trackers... What else?*

‘Now coming back to your original question: There are no sky scrapers because they were obsolete technology that was too fragile for being a sustainable solution.’ *So what do they have?* As if reading his mind, the professor continued. ‘Eelam is full of earth scrapers...’ *Excuse me?* ‘Earth scrapers are the complete opposite of sky scrapers. What meets the eye is a one or two storey building like this one here...’ The professor was pointing at the café for a while, and then lowering his finger towards the ground. ‘...But down there are at least 100 families in 20 floors of living space.’ *You are kidding*

me. 'Wouldn't they feel claustrophobic?' *This guy must be nuts.* 'That's exactly what I thought when I heard about earth scrapers the first time. What they do is that they project soothing images on the walls to "create" more space. These three-dimensional projections serve also as interior decoration. Wouldn't you like to gaze over the green hills of Ireland or have your TV on the cliff of the Grand Canyon for just 9.99 a month?' Jay gulped: 'Sounds tempting.'

'Actually, now that I'm talking with a man of knowledge, I'd like to get an answer to a bit less sci-fi question.' *I got to get some rest.* 'What would that be?'

'Do you know where Ashok-Hilton hotel is?' For the first time Jay saw a trait of smile lurking on the professor's face. 'Certainly, it's only two blocks away from here; behind the café, in between Kankesanthurai Road and Palali Road. You cannot miss it. It's the building that looks like a dome, but is actually a ball.' *Why I'm not surprised... a ball.*

Jay thanked the professor for the interesting conversation, gathered his belongings and started off.

'Most likely it's already fully booked because of Eelam Star and other interesting events taking place soon.' The professor hurried to inform.

Suddenly Jay could feel the good old anger towards his boss lurking into his consciousness. *You go there a week early and get a ten-page report. Everyone is doing the same... You just wait asshole.*

10 - Rendezvous

Marie Thibault was on her way to Hotel Ashok-Hilton when unexpectedly the earth below her feet started shaking a tad. *Is it an earthquake?* Marie looked baffled as the shaking continued for just five seconds or so. 'Don't worry about it. There have been some quakes lately. They are harmless.' A passer-by noted. *Don't worry about it? How could I not worry about it? It's a damn earthquake.* People on the street didn't seem to mind so she let it go off her mind.

From the outset Hotel Ashok-Hilton looked like a giant tennis ball cut in half. Eloquent electronic advertisements were like works of art spiraling on the convex walls. Marie waltzed in to the hotel lobby. She was stunned by the sheer amount of public flocking by. Most of them had cameras, folders, notebooks or other recording devices in varying degree of sophistication. Hundreds of international reporters had arrived in Jaffna to cover one or more of the newsflashes soon to illustrate the magazines all over the world.

Marie pushed herself through the mass towards the reception counter. She could swear that dozens of hands were groping her from all directions as she proceeded through the crowd. Her ebony skin was lightly sprayed with transparent Eye Dee Sun Spray that she had received from some haphazard facer on her way. It felt weird on her skin. Or actually it didn't. It made her arms slightly numb. She was sure to wash it off as soon as she got into the room.

'Hey, I'm here. I'm here.' *I can't believe I made it through all those reporters.* 'Well, hello Madame. How can I help you this busy afternoon?' *Where do they teach these stupid phrases for the service people? That sounds more British than in England.* 'I

have a reservation by name Thibault.’ The receptionist swept the surface of the desk with his finger tips for a while and was looking for the reservation. ‘I thought Mr. Thibault is alone. Are you his wife?’

Marie had turned her concentration on a somehow comical character idling next to her about a meter away. A long-haired young man was maybe unknowingly showing off his banal angel and devil tattoo and chewing gum while leaning on the desk. He tried blowing bubbles effortlessly and Marie got annoyed by the sheer sound of it. ‘Do you mind?’ she snapped in a cockier manner than intended. The man stopped chewing, took a glance at her from tip to toe and slid away for a few meters without saying a word but still measuring her with his eyes.

The receptionist cleared his throat and Marie realized she had completely forgotten what was going on. ‘Excuse me?’ *What was he asking?* ‘I was wondering if you are here with Mr. Jacques Thibault...’ *Jacques Thibault?* ‘Nope, not related... can you just give me the key so I can go to my room?’ The receptionist glanced at the reservations list once more. ‘I’m afraid we’re fully-booked Madame.’

Now Marie’s frustration started taking over. ‘What do you mean “fully-booked” I have a reservation with name Marie Thibault.’ *Come on, I made the reservation myself.*

‘I’m sorry Madame. It doesn’t show in the system.’

Now the greasy-haired oddball slid himself back right next to Marie... even too close. ‘That’s what they told me too. I had a reservation but now they claim it’s not there. I heard your name is Thibault. Are you also Canadian?’ Marie shrugged and ignored the intruder.

‘Ok, that’s enough. Let me speak with the manager?’ *Can’t believe this...*

‘I am the manager. There must be some double-bookings that have taken place due to this rush. I’m terribly sorry. Let me see if I can find anything...’

The manager was double and triple checking the system as the herd behind the desk just thickened. ‘Ah, there is one room that just became vacant, but I’m afraid you’d have to be on the second floor.’

What’s wrong with the second floor? ‘Alright, I’ll take it.’ The manager was about to give her the key card when the Canadian oddball interrupted.

‘Excuse me. I’ve been patiently waiting for a room for umm... one and half hours now... I should get the room! She just came ten minutes ago!’

The manager was holding the key card in front of them without knowing to whom to hand it for. More and more people tried to get his attention as they were populating the desk-front. ‘Listen, why don’t you just share the room? I must serve the other clients now.’ He left the key card on the desk and moved on to a group of Korean reporters.

For a split second both Marie and the Canadian were staring at each other in the eye and then glancing at the key card. All of a sudden they both tried to grab the key and ended up holding hands for a while. ‘Listen dude! There’s no way I’m sharing a room with you.’ Marie hollered in anger.

‘Do we have a choice? My name is Jay, Jay Fleury.’ He offered his hand for a greeting.

Jay Fleury. What a coincidence. Maybe we could share a room. ‘Ok, hi Jay Fleury. My name is Marie Thibault. Shall we go to our room?’ Jay was stunned by the sudden change of her mood, but couldn’t refuse the offer.

Marie found herself dragging her suitcase across the aisle. Surprisingly there was no bell boy to take care of their luggage this time. Jay was right behind him minding his own luggage and holding the key card firmly. He was measuring Marie's athletic body with his eyes and undoubtedly liked what he saw. "*Old school*", *papa would say*. Marie's bare fit thighs were glimmering in the natural light that came through piercing the glass ceiling. Jay was spellbound staring at her nearly see-through white skirt. Marie's short top unveiled her enticing curved back, covered in tiny droplets of sweat here and there. Her dark-brown curly hair was loosely drifting in the air delivering a scent of jasmine to Jay's nostrils. Or at least he thought it was jasmine; one of those weeds anyways.

As soon as they entered the room, both gasped in astonishment. It was beautiful! Walls were covered with lush green natural ornaments, the glass wall paved way to the balcony overlooking the ocean in the distance and a huge bed was tidily made for the new guests to arrive.

Jay kicked off his shoes, unintentionally spreading a reek that vaguely resembled old gone eggs, hoping Marie wouldn't notice. Marie shoved her suitcase under the bed, took a peek inside the washroom that had a posh marble floor. She threw herself on the bed sighing deeply and taking a few deep breaths to relax. Jay started unbuttoning his washed-out jeans that were by now soaking wet as a result of the humidity.

Wow! He doesn't waste too much time. Marie was lying on the bed and observing Jay pulling off his trousers and socks. *Better ass than face.* Marie giggled silently at her grotesque thoughts. Jay changed to his well-served cargo-shorts and sat down on the white sofa next to the mini bar, glancing in despise a decorative "No smoking" sign placed on the wall.

For the past ten minutes or so they had not changed a single phrase. 'Can you please get rid of those jeans? They smell like shit.' Marie tersely opened the conversation. 'What, you don't sweat at all in a tropical country?' Jay snapped bluntly and stood up. 'What's your problem?' Marie murmured. Jay dragged the balcony door open and threw his jeans there fiercely. 'Look, if my company doesn't please you, you're free to go and sleep on the street.'

'Maybe I will.'

'Fine...' Jay snapped arrogantly.

'Fine...' Marie responded, turning to her other side facing the wall.

Why it is that all the good-looking old school women are such jerks. Jay pondered, dropped back on the sofa and started rummaging around his rucksack to find a packet of cigarettes. As soon as Marie heard the lighter snap she turned back and stared at Jay. 'What, you're against smoking too?'

'Can I have one of those?' Marie asked softly. 'Sure...' Jay replied in surprise and held the pack in the air. Marie jumped off from the bed and tiptoed to Jay barefooted. She picked up a fag and placed it carefully between her lips. She bent over to get light to her cigarette and unintentionally confused Jay with her open cleavage. Nothing happened. Jay was just looking intently at her boobs. Marie noticed this and couldn't help smiling. 'Ahem... Light, please...' Jay blushed and offered light. As she stood up, took a puff of her cigarette and threw her hair back, Jay realized how strikingly beautiful Marie was. *I got to get that drink.*

'So, where do you come from Marie Thibault?' Jay asked while opening the mini-bar with high hopes. *Juice... a lot of it.* 'I'm from southern France.' Jay could spot only a

trait of French accent. ‘Nice. I’m from Canada but I never learned a word of French. What brings you here?’ *If it was still 2010 I could swear she’s a model.* ‘I’m an analyst for a company that is specialized in mergers, acquisitions and economics.’ *Splendid, whatever that means.* ‘But I don’t want to talk about work now. I’m sorry I was a bitch at first. It’s just this heat and stress. It’s driving me nuts.’ *Woah, she really needed that cigarette.*

‘Did you know that there’s no alcohol in this country?’ Jay asked changing the topic. ‘As a matter of fact I did...’ she replied and went back towards the bed. She knelt down temptingly, letting Jay rest his eyes on her every move. Marie pulled out her suitcase and clicked it open. ‘Fancy a glass of red wine?’

Jay was staring in admiration. There was at least four bottles of wine in the suitcase. ‘Ok, you’re definitely French.’ They both laughed out loud as Marie swiftly unscrewed a bottle of Merlot.

For the rest of the evening, Marie and Jay chattered and giggled while gurgling down her wine, glass after another, a bottle after another. They seemed to enjoy each other’s company after all. Marie’s arrogance was now just a distant memory and she was openly flirting with Jay. Every time Jay cracked a joke, she laughed wildly placing her hand on his knee, as if unintentionally. And every time she did that, Jay’s heart made a few extra bumps. By midnight they were both smashed, trying to hide it from each other, but failing miserably. They were knocking off things from the table, “accidentally” falling over each other and cackling hysterically.

‘You know Jay; you’re not that bad after all.’ Marie thought Jay looked quite mature, though didn’t behave like a responsible adult. She could have never guessed that they had a ten year age difference. Marie calmed down and wiped a few after-laughter tears from her oriental eyes. ‘Thanks, I try to take that as a compliment.’ Jay smiled. They looked at each other deep in the eye for a moment that seemed like eternity.

Suddenly the phone rang. *Ignore it, ignore it, please!* Marie was too stirred up to let him go, but Jay stood up nonetheless and walked up to the phone. ‘Come back, it’s most likely just room service.’ Marie demanded.

‘Hello, Jay speaking...’ Someone on the other end was breathing heavily. ‘Mr. Fleury, what you are looking for is in Colombo. You must leave there tomorrow or else...’ A mysterious male voice was gasping.

Marie observed Jay’s reactions. He was taken aback. ‘Who was it? What was that?’ *Good question. Was it a wrong number? How could he know my name? How many Fleuries are there in Ashok-Hilton?* ‘It was reception; they wanted to know if we wanted some dinner.’ *She’ll never believe that.*

Jay was just about to get back to Marie when there was a knock on the door. At first they paid no attention to it. *Must be room service...* Marie thought. The second knock was much louder. Jay was startled. *Is it the caller?* Jay grabbed a vase from the table for self-protection and approached the door carefully. ‘Who is it?’ Jay demanded. ‘Suresh, I’m Marie’s assistant. Can I come in?’

11 – Candidates

A bunch of reporters from various countries had gathered in front of Jaffna Municipal Council. They didn't have to wait long; soon a respectably long red limo hummed in front of the building. As soon as the doors were opened for the three Presidential candidates to exit the car, the cameras started flickering all around them.

The three were pretty much ignoring the reporters; it seemed that they had really good time with each other. Nothing implied that they were rivals for one of the most called for posts in the world.

29 year old Ganeshan Shivakumaran was the only candidate born and raised in Eelam. He had grown in the RoE ranks because of his unmatched ability to communicate with both business-minded and technologically savvy people. Shivakumaran was holding a Master's degree from respected Delhi IIT that he had passed with exceptionally good grades. He was wearing a stylishly black light-weight jacket, dirt-expensive Armani shades, light blue jeans and a casual white collar t-shirt with some ornaments in both sides of the buttons. He was constantly amusing the girls with his snappy below-the-line jokes.

165 cm tall and 89 kg heavy brunette Anita Striegl was a well-fed German with curves beyond imagination. She was wearing a colorful orange and yellow sari that exposed her belly for the guys to drool after. She had been living in Eelam for already 15 years, out of which nine years she had served RoE. She had started her career in a venture capital consortium specialized in financing good start-up ideas that could one day become global franchises. Franchises were definitely something she knew about since her father was sitting in the board of Starbucks. She used to have highly intelligent conversations with him till the early morning. He was more of a mentor to her than just a father. Anita came into the awareness of general public when she single-handedly managed the acquisition of well-established Sri Lankan pastry shop Silva & Sons. In six months she made it a global franchise catering to the needs of chili lovers and cake fanatics across the world. "Nita" was quickly recruited to lead a team at Eelam Crane that suffered from the lack of business acumen. She was also 29, had a very laid-back attitude and a constant smile on her face.

Mercedes Bauer was three years older than the other two candidates and a clear favorite in the race for presidency. Her looks emphasized her personality. She was a strictly-business, no-nonsense type of a young woman, holding her hair back, wearing edge-less Gucci glasses and a smart business attire. She had been brought up in Rio de Janeiro to respect others and eagerly learn about new cultures. After all her father was American business man and mother Brazilian lawyer. Mercedes was known to be a strong supporter of feminist values; she didn't allow any man to mess up with her career. Unfortunately that had repercussions also on her personal life. She had never been in a real relationship, nor had any kind of a boyfriend. She was recruited directly from the university, mainly because of her ambitious attitude. Already eight years ago she knew that one day she would become the President of RoE Ltd.

As the last reporter had entered the building a hurrying group of Canadian and American reporters barged in from the door. Seemingly they had lost their way badly and had to run back to the right address. There was murmuring among them about how the locals had given them completely wrong directions. The Presidential panel was ready to start.

An elderly lady welcomed everyone and officially opened the event: ‘We have gathered here for our fifth and last questions and answers event, where the three presidential candidates will be evaluated based on the answers they give. This is the first time the international press can test the candidates. Because we are quite pressed on time, we allow only two questions per candidate, but all questions will be later on answered in writing by all three candidates. We have appointed six reporters from six different countries to be eligible for asking questions. Let us start with Canada.’

‘Hi, my name is Lin Wong and I represent The Rapport. I’d like to pose a question for Ganeshan. How would you evaluate the leadership philosophy of RoE Ltd?’ He made some notes before answering. ‘Actually Ganeshan is my family name, so I’d appreciate if you just called me Siva. I think the leadership pipeline built by RoE is exceptional. Young people are groomed to take on a challenge after another to grow as people and as leaders. Coaching and help provided for these people is never compromised by their own leaders. That makes you feel special and also accountable for developing the people under your wings. One more benefit is purely a business case: The organization develops on an ever-growing pace as the leadership in every position is changed annually. This has enabled us to become a world leader in many of the businesses we run in such a short period of time. Actually I don’t believe that any other organization is so focused on leadership development as we are. In our diverse business, it’s the only focus area we have.’ The crowd were astonished by Siva’s well-structured answer and led by the two other candidates they engaged in huge applause.

‘Off to Russia...’ the moderator commented bluntly. ‘Good morning. My name is Pavel Zhamnov, I’m representing The Star. I’d like to know what Miss Bauer thinks about the plans of Russian Union, China and India to open up a similar Innovation Centre to African continent.’ Mercedes knew this question would come so she was prepared. ‘Thank you, it’s a good question. I would be lying if I said I didn’t see it coming. I’ve been thinking about it quite a lot. It makes sense to start by looking at the history. First I’d like to congratulate the former Russian president’s decision back in 2015 to recognize the separatist groups and grant independence for the 82 new nations. The Russian Union has proven that reducing concentration in military actions and concentrating on playing by the rules of business is the only way for building a sustainable future. What the South African diamond monopoly Yvelle did for the continent is a good example of how we can use good business leadership to tackle the most alarming social and environmental issues. Their decision to fund the project of treating the whole African continent with Malimune, an injection for Malaria immunity, was for me the greatest event in year 2019. Based on this reasoning I would encourage these countries to join hands and make their plans reality. As a president of RoE Ltd I would do my utmost to support and guide them in their endeavors. They should learn from our mistakes and successes. Of course they would become our competitor but I see this development benefiting the whole world in the long run. A little bit of competition would also prevent us from falling into the trap of complacency, like what happened with the rise and fall of business in Middle East in 2010s. Nonetheless, I’m quite skeptical of China’s possibility to take part in this big

project, though, as they have their hands full with the space project.’ *Is this criticism going to cost me?* Both Anita and Siva jumped off from their podiums and came to hug Mercedes. ‘Great answer...’ Nita was cheering. ‘Superb!’ Siva added. Some people in the crowd were so touched by the team spirit of these three that they had to reach for their napkins. Mercedes received wild cheers from the whole audience.

‘Thank you Mercedes. Coincidentally, we go for China.’ The moderator left the mike. ‘My name is Lee Harris. I’m from TV3 news. I believe our nation is capable of handling two major projects simultaneously Miss Bauer. However I’d like to address Anita and ask what does she think about our endeavor of building a very own planet orbiting sun.’ Nita’s smile was gone for a while as she concentrated on her answer. ‘I cannot say I’m expert in space technology, so I’m not able to comment on its technical feasibility. However, as an ideal building an artificial planet from the scratch and populating it with one billion people by year 2060 is a really ambitious goal.’ *I couldn’t expect they would ask this from me... I might have blown it big time...* The crowd was silent. She decided to continue. ‘I don’t see anything unethical in shaping our solar system, though there has been a lot of criticism about it. When India declared 90% of the country as a natural reserve it was a clear sign for others to preserve this planet. We have destroyed most if just by ignoring the effects of our actions. I believe in systems thinking. Everything is interrelated...’ She completely lost her point and the audience was seemingly unsatisfied with the answer. Nita’s chances to become a President of RoE had just dropped drastically. She didn’t break but Siva and Mercedes knew her well enough to interpret the lost smile as major emotional turmoil.

‘Thank you Miss Striegl. Let us hear a question from your home country Germany.’ Anita was trying to gather herself. ‘Guten tag, my name is Henry Schroeder and I’m a free lance journalist from Berlin. Nita, you mentioned that we have destroyed our planet enough. How would you comment on the ongoing political debate between Sri Lanka and Eelam?’ A smile came back on her face. *Thanks Henry!* ‘I fell in love with this island already in early 2000s when I came with my family on our Christmas vacation to Sri Lanka. I was astonished by the beauty of the country. I still remember the clean air of the hill country. I remember how the endless savannahs in Uda Walave reminded me of Africa, where I always wanted to visit. I can still feel the sand between my toes and smell the salty winds embracing me in the long stretches of beach in Unawatuna. And unfortunately I can also remember the petrol fumes and trash on the streets in Colombo. I remember how sad I felt when I saw a flamingo caught up in a roll of plastic in Beira Lake. I was asking from my parents why Colombo was so dirty and the rest of the country still so beautiful. Mother answered that it was due to the market economy that had been introduced to Sri Lanka quite lately. I didn’t understand it then but now I know what she meant. When a country faces a rapid change like that, it is unable to grow in a sustainable manner if its leaders and citizens don’t share the same value system. I believe RoE is a good example of holding people accountable to shared values like care, cleanliness and community. As a President of this country – yes, for me it’s more of a country than a company – I would make it my number one priority to help our brother Sri Lankans to introduce proper waste management systems, to bring back the free education and to make people understand it’s never too late to start caring for the environment.’ This personal story touched people so deeply that they were shouting ovations in English and in their own languages. Nita had saved the show. *Yes!*

‘Two more questions remaining, let’s give a turn to Mexico.’ the moderator interrupted and managed to spoil Nita’s celebration. ‘Buenos Dias! I am from the national news service of Mexico. My name is Juan Osorio. We have observed Siva’s career closely and there is one thing that really bothers us. It all seems just too perfect. Siva, what has been your biggest setback in life? How did you get over it?’ Mercedes was thankful for having the honor to be the last in line, but she would have liked to answer this one. Her entrepreneurship try out was more important learning point for her than any degree, training seminar or any other leadership experience later in her life. Siva noticed this and decided to give a bit of credit for her. ‘To be honest my biggest setback is that I have been too busy succeeding. I know it sounds weird, but I know how invaluable a solid failure can be. My colleague here started her own company at the age of fourteen, hit her head against the wall for three years and then had to pay her dues, admitting it was never going to succeed. That’s what I’m lacking. I can see how mature Mercedes has been all these years just because she dared. I hope one day I will get the same experience, no matter how much it would hurt at that moment.’ The audience saluted him respectfully. Giving credit for Mercedes had been an unexpected but honorable thing to do.

‘Now, can we have the last question from the United States of America?’ The moderator collected her papers and moved aside. ‘Hello there. My name is Willy Okocha and I come from Herald Tribune. Mercedes, is it true that you had a sexual relationship with one of the female models in your payroll?’ *How dare you? True or not that’s my personal stuff. Idiot!* The reporters were chattering madly.

‘Ahem... That’s not exactly a question we agreed beforehand Mr. Okocha. Can I ask for some decency, please?’ *Thanks!* ‘Okay, okay, relax... I couldn’t resist. My final question has to do with another rumor: How do you see the threat posed by a group that calls themselves HTS – High Tide Soldiers?’ Mercedes was still flabbergasted by the outrageous comment from the reporter but she collected herself smoothly. ‘It is highly speculative if this kind of group even exists. The press has jumped into conclusions based on rumors, not facts. If a few employees from RoE had resigned lately and there were speculations about the existence of this kind of secret society or whatever it is, it doesn’t mean that it is a real threat.’ Mercedes stood her ground perfectly although deep inside she felt fear. *It’s not just a few, but a few thousand employees. Where have they gone? Is this really something I should be worried about?*

All three candidates first hugged and congratulated each other, and then each of them individually retired backstage in their dressing rooms. The event had come to its closure and the reporters were apparently satisfied on the material they had collected. Now the real rankings could start, with less than two weeks left till the selection.

Mercedes was mentally exhausted by the selection process, but she knew her dreams were close to come true. Most importantly she enjoyed the trust and respect from her fellow candidates who had become her closest friends during the past year.

As soon as she entered her dressing room she went for the fridge and popped open a bottle of mixed fruit drink. She sat down in front of a large mirror with old Hollywood style light bulbs illuminating her carefully made up face.

She took a sip from her drink. Then suddenly a silent clanking sound interrupted her. Two brawny hands emerged below the table and grabbed her both feet. She screamed and fell backwards with her chair, hitting her head on the floor and losing consciousness.

Next thing she knew was that she was tied up under a palm tree on the beach somewhere far away from Jaffna, with two of her colleagues accompanying her. All of them were wearing gags so all they could do was to mumble and try to get clarity into the situation. *What the hell had happened?*

12 – Morning After

Jay woke up in tremendously comfortable bed in incredibly uncomfortable manner. Suresh's fist had found its way directly to Jay's right eyebrow as he had unknowingly reached out to him in order to hug. *Jesus! What was that?* Jay jumped in an upright position holding his sore eye. He saw a stranger sleeping tightly next to him. *Who is that? Where am I? What happened last night?* Things had not exactly gone as planned.

Jay didn't have much time to worry about the stinging in his eyebrow because the headache was much worse than that. He lay back down and scanned the environment leaning on a big mushy pillow. As he saw the messed up sofa and six empty wine bottles he remembered that Marie had passed out on the sofa. This guy had welcomed himself in as soon as Jay had opened the door. Being so sloshed Jay had thought it was better just let things pass. He had tucked Marie in and wobbled to the bed. That was his last trait of memory before being assaulted by a complete stranger just a minute ago.

'Jay, look at this... ' Marie's laughter got his attention. She was pointing at a monkey that was in the balcony examining Jay's jeans. If he had any energy left in his body he would have interrupted the cousin, but now he just rest his eyes in Marie's bare rear side. Her thong was almost invisible; just two thin threads uniting at the lower back and disappearing in the lovely tight crack. *Did anything happen last night? Who is this woman anyways? How old is she? God, she's stunning...*

After a while Jay's concentration turned away from Marie to his very own mouth. He was clearly going through a full five-sense experience. First the feeling, then the sound, third the sight and now the disgusting taste in his mouth. *Too many cigarettes, too much wine and God knows what has been in my mouth...* Jay trembled to the bathroom trying to figure out what was the fifth sense that was yet to come. *No, it's definitely not balance.* He was seeking support from the walls. As he entered the bathroom he instantly remembered the fifth one. Someone had not flushed the toilet. *Marie? No cannot be, she wouldn't be that gross. That guy...* Jay hasted back to the living room, pointed at the new arrival and demanded: "Marie, could you explain me who this guy is and what is he doing in our bed?"

Our bed... That came out of the blue... 'He's my assistant Subramaniyam Pillai Suresh.' *He's assistant super what?* 'Machang, just call me Suresh.' He had woken up. 'I'm helping Marie in her... in her work. You're Jay, no?'

'We work in the same company.' Marie added. Jay nodded at Suresh and was seemingly satisfied with the answer. For a while he had thought he has a competitor...

Jay went back to the wash room. He had to get rid of the ghastly taste in his mouth. He grinned at the mirror and was taken aback how dark his teeth were. *Red wine,*

I hope... He took his toothbrush and found toothpaste next to the sink. As he started brushing it took a moment for him to realize that the toothpaste had a peculiar taste. *Is it just me or is there chili in this?* He looked at the tube. “*Supirivicky – the ayurvedic toothpaste*”... *What the hell is this?* Jay spat it out and gurgled with water several times. As he opened his mouth again to see if his tongue was in fire he was startled by the sight. *White, my teeth are nearly white!* He grinned in front of the mirror for a while, proud of his improved chewing compartment. Then he realized that Suresh was behind him, beaming seemingly amused.

‘Yep, that is good stuff. Just put it on your finger and brush again so you might get rid of that yellow stuff.’ *What yellow stuff? I’ve never had teeth this white.* Jay didn’t have time to get offended. He obeyed and started ferociously rubbing his teeth.

Finally all three of them went for breakfast. Both Marie and Jay felt better after a hot shower. Though both of them silently thought it would have been even nicer to have it together.

‘What are all these dishes Suresh?’ Jay was pointing at bowls of rice, several different color gravies, some rice cakes and something that distantly resembled pasta. ‘It’s Sinhalese breakfast. They are serving it here once or twice a week. Sinhalese cuisine has some pretty good stuff. You should taste. Try at least kiri bath, it’s that milk rice cake. They also have amazing fish curry. You might want to avoid pol sambol though.’ Jay couldn’t believe that Sinhalese ate this heavily early in the morning. He could have gone for the western egg and bacon but figured he can get it anywhere else. He compiled some curries randomly on top of his milk rice and then he asked from the chef which one was “pol sambol”. Of course he had to try it now.

When they sat down, Suresh started shoveling up his food using only his right hand. It didn’t look that disgusting so Jay and Marie tried the same. The waiters who passed by grinned at the westerners trying to do as the Romans do.

Shit, this is hot! Jay was gasping air and trying to find water. ‘So, you took pol sambol anyways, no? Here, have some bread with it. It should stop your suffering after a while.’ Marie and Suresh laughed whole-heartedly as Jay decided to go and get some egg and bacon after all.

Marie was the last one enjoying her desert – pudding-like yoghurt with some sweet brown liquid on it that remotely reminded her of honey. She liked it a lot. ‘Jay, one thing has been bothering me about last night.’ Jay was almost panicking and thinking if something had happened between them, something that he couldn’t remember. ‘What was that phone call yesterday? It wasn’t reception; you looked so baffled.’

‘Oh that one...’ *Thank God...* ‘It was just some weirdo who had issues with breathing’ *He was most likely some tout, trying to offer me a ride to Colombo.* In fact, Jay could have used a ride. He wanted to go to Colombo and get his article done in time.

‘What did he say?’

What was it? ‘He said something along these lines: “What you’re... ssh... looking for... ssh... is in... ssh... Colombo.”’ Jay was imitating a person with perspiration problems. They all chuckled.

The letter is in Colombo? Marie was lost in her thoughts.

Suresh's receiver blinked and vibrated as a sign of an incoming call. 'Excuse me.' He stood up and walked away from Jay and Marie to pick it up.

'It's me. I heard you have identified and engaged the courier already. Care to explain? Isn't it a tad too early?' someone demanded in French-flavored English.

'Oh, hi boss... Well, "M" met him accidentally and had to take a swift decision whether or not to engage. I also thought it's too early, but it's her call as first in command. Then again, only the quick survive as you say...'

'...and even the quicker ones reproduce.' A sickening laughter filled the line.

'Yes, right... Anything else boss?'

'You've got the explosives?'

'Yes, they are stashed in a safe place for later use. Am I still supposed to withhold that information from her?'

'Yes, make sure you're the only one who knows about the objective C. Carry on then.' The call was promptly disconnected.

In Toronto Mr. Macintosh was impatiently waiting at his desk. His eyes were fixed at his Eye Dee Walkie that was resting on its charger platform. His fingers were tapping the desk and his heels stomping the floor anxiously. Finally the walkie started radiating blue light as a sign of an incoming call.

'Mc Intosh, "The World".' He picked up the walkie. 'Ssh... They are about to leave to Colombo. Your reward is on your account in ten seconds. Ssh...'

13 – A9

Marie, Jay and Suresh were on their way to hire a car and ride down to Colombo, the former commercial capital of Sri Lanka. In 2010 Kandy had been nominated as the capital again, without much explanation. The government had just announced that "an era had passed and it was time to move on". *So, they decided to go back to the old capital?* Jay pondered what the logic in that was.

As the group advanced in a wagon pulled by two horses Jay was astounded by the futuristic yet natural state of the city. Latest technology was gleaming out of the constructions and all commercial works were carefully planned as if being part of the landscape. They merged into the walls, patios, buildings, statues, light posts and the street itself. Jay was amused seeing people trying to avoid "a hole" in the street that from further away proved to be only a painting. 'Go to well!' hired facers were shouting around the "hole". Suresh informed them that The Well was a new day club growing in popularity among Creative Thinkers, the part of society who had chosen a path of life where they work at the office only four or five hours a day and get paid only half of the basic salary. Some of these people were still filthy rich because of the stock incentives they got every year from the RoE employee fund due to their innovations. The rest of them were people who just valued time for themselves and their families more than money or achievement. Back in the history they would have been labeled as "lazy", but now this choice had become an accepted social norm. As a matter of fact through SPREAD – The RoE technology and social structure transfer program – the norm was quickly adopted in many corners of the world as a good case practice.

As they reached the outskirts of Jaffna the wagon pulled off in front of vast building that had no walls and was lit by gigantic Car Hub neon lights. Suresh thought it looked tacky and so 2000s but Jay liked the decorative lights. A smiling clerk welcomed them and offered them to sit down in the lounge and browse their catalogues. 'Would you care some apple juice?' *Here we go again, extremely good service.* Jay was overwhelmed.

'No thanks. Do you have any Daimler Z9s vacant?' Suresh requested before Jay could say anything. Jay would have really appreciated that apple juice on a hot day like this. 'Certainly Sir, what color would you like to have and where do you wish to travel?'

Suresh thought for a while and then replied: 'The color doesn't matter. We're going to Vavuniya for a few days.' *Vavuniya... I thought we're going to Colombo.* Jay was baffled.

'Ok, Sir. Here is the key slip. A dispenser can be found from the glove compartment in case you run out of fuel. It would be 50 pounds per day. Do you wish to pay now or as you return?' Suresh took the slip. 'We'll pay later. Don't know how many days it will take exactly.'

'As you wish, Sir...'

Suresh was driving like crazy, but the hung over two didn't mind the speed. After all, the once disputed A 9 road was now like a one-way street upgraded in breadth and quality. A bit of speeding was ok. They seemed to be the only ones going southwards. There were hardly any vehicles coming north either, but nearly every 100 meters there was a lonely guy or a family walking on the right lane. 'They are refugees from Sri Lanka.' Suresh noted bluntly. That sounded ironical to Jay who knew that once Sri Lankan Army had caused over 2000 casualties just to capture this road.

Suddenly he pulled over slightly decreasing speed, as if pretending the AM vacuums were empty. *There was no "thud", we still have fuel.* Marie and Jay were perplexed, just observing Suresh's swift action. He took the AM dispenser from the glove compartment and glanced inside his vaist bag that contained a few small tools. He went out for a few minutes, kneeled next to all four corners of the car and came back. Marie and Jay were stunned. 'Now we're out of their radar. I did some adjustments in the navigation system.' Suresh explained confidently. *Out of their radar? Why should we hide it where we are going?* Jay's mind was full of questions. 'And why did you pretend refueling the car, man?' Suresh grinned. 'Sometimes if people don't pay in advance they observe from their surveillance system for a while, making sure that the customer is going to the stated direction.' Now Marie hastened to ask. 'Why can't they know we are going to Colombo?' Suresh now looked Marie wondering if she really was that ignorant of how things are. 'Are you mad? If I said we're going to Colombo we would have had to take an expensive insurance. Didn't you see that I used fake tag in the registration form? Now they think it was someone called Dinesh who rented the car. I'm not that sure this car will ever get back to Jaffna. It's crazy down there.' Suresh seemed to know what he's talking about. Certain restlessness took over Jay's mind. Marie didn't seem to mind.

Everything went smoothly until they reached Vavuniya. It was a cozy looking little town from the outset. Modern apartments followed one another, each of them having a nice modest garden and a flawless lawn. It was a sleepy town with a few groceries, a bank and

a Hindu Kovil right in the centre. Right after the city the scenery changed drastically. Jay could see a never-ending fence bordering a once united country and people trying to cross through or over the fence illegally. Guards in their Just a Sec jackets were bouncing them right back.

The customs intersecting the road was something Jay had never before seen in his life. On the other side there were vehicles parked along the roadside as far as he could see: mopeds, three-wheelers, cars way beyond their expiry date and awkward lawn-mover-like vehicles Jay couldn't put a name on. Tents and shacks had been put up for temporary housing. They stepped out of the car as a Sinhalese policeman demanded them to do so.

'What is the problem officer?' Suresh asked in English. 'No problem, just a routine check. Why do you want to go to Sri Lanka?' It was a good question. They were the only customers on this side whereas on the other side well-dressed gentlemen were lining up to sort their things with the Eelamese officers. Jay commented briefly: 'We are reporters. I'm... We are going to do reportage of contemporary Sri Lanka in order to wake up the world to see the inequality between the two countries.' *Did I go too far in my explanation?* 'Hari hari, in that case we must get a move on the process.' *What process? How could this take any time? We are the only ones...* Oh heavens, how wrong he was.

The officer returned with three paper forms with three pages each. He handed them over to Marie, Jay and Suresh in that particular order. 'Fill in please. Once you are done you can get them stamped over there.' The officer pointed at a small cabin next to the fence. The trio obeyed and started filling in the forms patiently. Jay noticed Suresh's form was different, it was for the car. Suresh was desperately trying to find the required information: engine number, chassis number, tire size, registration number, type and model of the car, year of manufacturing, and twenty odd questions about the passengers. Also Jay and Marie had their hands full in filling in the forms carefully. Finally after fifteen minutes or so they went to the cabin.

'Hey, we are done here.' Jay said to a bored looking woman behind the desk. She took the papers and asked them to wait. They sat down as the lady was going through the papers slowly. After half an hour Suresh asked: 'How is it going? Is everything ok?' The woman lifted her eyes and bluntly noted: 'Hari hari, wait a moment.' She handed the papers to a younger male clerk who took them to the back office. Suresh sighed. They waited for another half an hour until Marie's patience gave in. She waltzed to the woman and demanded: 'Can you hurry up a bit? We have been waiting for an hour.' The lady didn't respond. She reached down to a drawer and produced a sign that said "At lunch."

Nearly three hours had passed. Marie, Jay and Suresh were thinking if going to Sri Lanka was worth all this. Suresh had explained them how low productivity rates Sri Lanka had had previously, and that the situation had definitely not improved since that. According to Suresh, the business life had had more motivated employees than these government officials but even there the productivity was really low. He explained how he previously had half-jokingly concluded that the low productivity was due to the fact that people were really slow in typing. 'Put together a country run by millions of that kind of employees and managers who just happen to think email is the way of the future, and all you get is a bunch of undone work.' Suresh criticized.

Suddenly, they were called in to the back office. Their papers were finally stamped. A big smile lurked on Marie's face. *Finally we are good to go.* 'Here you are. Now you can go and pay in the main building.' The group hurried outside and headed for the main building. Marie and Jay had to pay 23 000 rupees each. It was equivalent to approximately 100 Eelam Pounds each. *They are ripping us off.* Jay's annoyance grew stronger. Suresh didn't have to pay. 'Can we go now?' Jay asked from the police officer. 'No, you still need the entry permit. Can you wait in the car, please?' Jay thought waiting in the car was a good idea. *This shouldn't take too long if we're asked to wait in the car.*

After another four hours, numerous rounds of stamping and waiting in frustration, they finally passed the border. People flocked around the car, knocked on the windows and were begging for money. They were all nicely dressed and looked too sophisticated for begging. 'Why are they so well-dressed if they are begging and lining up to flee the country?' Marie asked from Suresh. 'For once, they love to dress up. Second, the entry process to Eelam is an important event for them. Since so many Sinhalese people see Eelam as a safe haven, RoE has been forced to restrict their entry. They have to produce a well-laid business plan in order to get in.' Jay was confounded. 'A business plan you say?' Suresh shrugged: 'Yeah, RoE wants them to be productive citizens from the day one. The ones that do get the permission to immigrate are held accountable for their business plan and supported by RoE consultants.' Jay had recorded the comment with his walkie. This would definitely go in his article.

From Vavuniya to Anuraddhapura Marie and Jay were fast asleep. Suresh woke them up: 'Do you want to see the ruins of Anuraddhapura kingdom?' Only Jay could open his eyes. 'What? No. Just drive.' His headache had come back and pretty much the only thing he could think of now was sleeping. There was another thought also. *Marie looks so cute asleep.* At that moment she leant her head on Jay's shoulder and mumbled something in her slumber, something incomprehensible about "marsh dash and a letter"... 'Ok, go back to sleep. I'll go through Puttalam. It should be faster.' Suresh's eyes were firmly fixed on the road as Jay fell back to sleep.

'Shit, shit, shit!' Suresh's cursing and the car coming to a halt woke up Jay and Marie. 'What happened?' Marie asked in surprise. 'Now we are actually out of AM'. Suresh had pulled off to a shady spot on a small road just off A12. 'Where are we?' Jay demanded to know, making a quick surveillance on the surrounding coconut trees and lush vegetation. 'We're somewhere on the outskirts of Puttalam. I just parked here so we can cover up the vehicle.' Jay didn't say a word. 'Cover up?' Marie requested to know. 'You see, if it was visible it would be gone in about an hour. This isn't exactly the richest of countries.' Without trying to object Jay and Marie joined Suresh in collecting fallen branches, moss and whatever they could find to coat their Daimler. After a good 15 minutes the work was done and everyone was clear on the plan: Suresh would go back towards the border to find a refuel pack, whilst Marie and Jay would stride to Puttalam and find a place to stay for the night.

Since it was just a couple of kilometers away and the dark wasn't about to come in a couple of more hours the couple didn't see a reason to hurry. They were strolling along the somewhat empty street, getting occasional stares from a few passers-by. Though they were clearly the only white people around they didn't feel that threatened. A

herd of curious goats was pretty much the most endangering situation they faced on the way. An occasional stray dog followed them until losing interest when noticing that they had finished the delicious egg hoppers they had bought on the way.

The ancient trading, pearling and fishing town of Puttalam didn't offer much to see so they headed towards the beach that lay in the lagoon. Supposedly there was a guest house or two. They found a place called Dhammika's where an eager service boy, probably a son of the owner, greeted them in perfect English. 'Ayubowan' a deep sound resonated behind them in the doorway. A pitch-black well-built man in his late forties or so was extending his hand for a welcome. 'Hi, umm, do you have any rooms available?' Jay inquired. 'There's one room.' The guy was pointing at a decent-looking bungalow. 'That'll do. Can we have a key and a couple of towels please?' Marie asked. 'Let me clean it up for you. It will take a while, if you don't mind. Meanwhile you can take a stroll on the lagoon. I leave the key on the door once I'm done.'

Without seeing another option they started off towards the water line. An evening sun was lighting Marie's face and her curled bronze hair was softly moving in the wind. Jay looked at her and smiled. 'Yes?' Marie had noticed she's been observed. 'Umm... you are so beautiful.' Jay blurted out and made Marie a bit perplexed. 'Thanks, I don't get that often. Nowadays men just don't appreciate girls like me.' Marie smiled. 'Old school...'. Jay thought aloud. 'What?' Marie didn't know what it meant. 'Nah, it's just something daddy used to say.'

They strolled silently for a while until Marie started off. 'You know Jay, I guess I don't have too many people to open up, but you seem like a guy I can trust.' *Though, you should never ever trust me.* 'What's on your chest?' Marie shrugged and seemed to be lost in her thoughts. 'Jay, I just broke up with my boyfriend, or fiancé to be exact.' *Well, ain't that good news?* 'And...'. Marie was fingering a few strokes of her thick bronze-color hair that wind had blown on her face. 'And it's just consuming my mind all the time. I came here for a job, but I just can't focus on it.' *If I hadn't failed to interpret girls so many times before I'd guess she's hitting on me.* 'So, what could take your mind of from that?' *Me?* 'Weed...'

That wasn't exactly the answer Jay was hoping for but he wouldn't mind taking a puff either. After all, it had been an eventful two days on this peculiar but beautiful island. Nothing had gone as expected, though he hadn't expected much. But in the end, here he was, walking on the beach with a girl he fancied and she was ready to relax in his company. 'I guess it's next to impossible to get weed here if this is anything like Eelam, don't you think?' Marie was giving him a disappointed look. 'Guess so...'

'Maybe that will cheer you up though.' Jay was pointing at a ramshackle hut on the beach that had already been lit up with plain color lights though the evening sun was still giving its light on the stretch of beach they were on. 'Lobster?' Jay was amused. 'No, silly you, look below the food menu.' Marie took some time reading the board placed in the sand. 'Fresh fruit juice, Lassi, Coca-cola, Fanta, Sprite, Ginger... Ginger Beer! What is that?' Jay was smiling like the hero of the day. 'I have no clue, but at least it's beer. Shall we?' Marie was convinced and answered with her feet. She was leaping through the straw bushes that paved the way to the hut, and Jay followed.

'Could we have two of those ginger beers please.' Marie smiled at the shopkeeper. Perplexed of hearing a foreign accent – in an apparently long while – the shopkeeper didn't say a word. He just passed the brown bottles and pointed at the price on the calcu-

lator. ‘Shit! You know what Marie?’ She had a question mark drawn all over her face. ‘We didn’t exchange any money.’ Now the shopkeeper opened up. ‘Euro okay sir!’ Jay looked amused. ‘No Euros mate, but do you accept Canadian dollars?’ The shopkeeper didn’t seem to care what the currency is, as long as it’s something more valuable than rupee. That in itself wasn’t an achievement since Sri Lankan rupee had sunk rock-bottom due to the poor financial politics of the country.

Marie took a long sip of her drink and Jay followed. ‘This is quite good.’ Marie commented. ‘But it is not beer.’ Jay added. Marie nodded and now started giving a weird face. The gingery aroma had filled her throat and for a while she was nearly unable to breath. The local delicacy had taken her by surprise. As Marie was coughing and put the bottle away, Jay was just laughing and finishing his one. ‘I quite like it.’

‘Suddha!’ Without them noticing the shopkeeper had gone to the back of the hut and come back with a bottle of white rum. ‘Wow! How much is that?’ The shopkeeper just smiled. ‘Just give him something. He’ll be happy with it.’ Jay passed on an amount that he reckoned would be a fair price for a bottle of rum and some cokes. They retired with their purchases a bit further away to an abandoned swing that was still holding up next to a pile of wood that looked like a potential fire place. ‘Shall we light that up?’ Jay asked as the sun was setting into the horizon. ‘Sure, though I thought you’d keep me warm.’ Marie sat right next to Jay and smiled.

After putting up the small bonfire they opened the rum that tasted surprisingly good even with the warm coke they had. Marie was telling in detail how she had foolishly thought that she would settle down with her boyfriend – Philippe was his name – and how she would cut down on work. She continued how he was judging her placing the income of the household before the relationship and how they would have fights nearly every day. Jay shared some of his experiences and former girlfriend stories, trying not to reveal all of them. *Gosh, now that I think of it I’ve been a real slut.* Jay couldn’t help being amused by his own thoughts, but kept it to himself.

Their feelings-based conversation was soon cut off by a stranger that wobbled down the beach and greeted them vaguely. A young man with long black hair and no shirt took his place next to a fire place without asking for permission. ‘Machang, you want to buy some ganja.’ He addressed Jay. Marie was about to reach for her purse to strike a deal with the beach boy, but Jay held her back and whispered he’d get it for free. He was right. After a casual conversation and passing on a bottle the fellow rolled up a joint and lit it up. He passed it on to Marie who by now was overjoyed of getting what she wanted. A random conversation and relaxed laughter followed as the joint was passed on between the three of them. ‘Look he’s so stoned he doesn’t remember we already have one.’ Jay was whispering to Marie and pointed at the guy who was already sealing the next spliff with the tip of his tongue. ‘Hari machang, I got to go. You enjoy.’ He passed on the other joint to Jay and wandered off.

Marie was puffing along and Jay tried to keep up. ‘He didn’t remember we already have one.’ She burst out laughing. Jay was perplexed. ‘But that’s what I told you.’ Marie stared at him holding the short remains of the first joint in between her thumb and index finger. ‘What?’ Jay was amused that she couldn’t follow a simple conversation anymore. ‘You’re gone baby.’ She smiled. ‘Good stuff.’

Jay decided to save the second one, put it in his pocket, and made his move. He reached out his hand on her shoulder. ‘Marie, don’t think I’m trying to take advantage of you or anything...’ She kissed him, just out of the blue. Her lips lingered on and she didn’t feel like letting go. Jay caressed her hair while responding to every moist movement. *Feels so good... Don’t ever let go.* And she did.

Marie distanced herself from him for a moment and reached out for the half-done coke bottle placed next to the swing. She poured it in the rum bottle, just for color, and took a sip. Jay was observing her every move, pushing his patience and waited her to come back next to him. She didn’t. Instead she straightened her arm and offered him a hand to stand up. He obeyed like spell-bound. Marie took him closer to the beach and found a nice sandy spot to sit down. Jay followed.

‘Now take a drink Jay. You don’t have chance for it any time soon.’ *That sounds promising.* As soon as he had lowered the bottle Marie was already all over him. She kissed him passionately, unbuttoned his shirt and caressed his groin gently. They rolled in the sand taking turns facing the moon that had taken over the star-lit sky. Jay lingered his hands on every part of her body and enjoyed traveling his fingers on her almond skin. Their passion mixed with the sounds of the nature; singing birds, soothing wind, howling dogs, calm lagoon, noisy geckos, crackling fire, herd of grasshoppers, Marie and Jay...

Something was holding them back though. Maybe it was the fact that they were intoxicated or maybe there was really something else consuming their minds. Nonetheless, there would be no sex. Tonight they would just enjoy the proximity, kiss, and hold each other tight in embrace... until the first rays of sun came up in the morning.

14 – Emergency

The president of RoE Ltd Henry Yorke had called upon an emergency meeting with the CEOs of Just a Sec, Night Train, Soft Goods, E-money, Eye Dee Ventures, Eatlam, Trans Eelam, Eelam Crane and Eenergy. Many of them had to cancel their business trips, important meetings or whatever was scheduled for that day. President Yorke couldn’t go this one alone. He needed to have the whole leadership of RoE present, or what was left of it...

The RoE headquarters was strikingly ordinary looking building. Even the top management meeting room was nothing special, though it was equipped with latest technology to enhance possibilities for virtual cooperation.

A couple of CEOs were still to arrive and there was discontented murmuring before the meeting started. ‘Why are we here?’, ‘What can really be so important that I had to call of the Nike negotiations?’, ‘Can we get this over with soon?’...

Finally all CEOs were present and Yorke said the meeting could start. Instantly someone asked ‘Aren’t we waiting for the Group Directors?’ Someone added: ‘Yeah, are they too busy lobbying for the presidency or what?’

Indeed Group Director Finances Anita Striegl, Group Director People Issues Mercedes Bauer and Group Director Infrastructure Ganeshan Shivakumaran were absent. ‘That’s exactly what this meeting is about. Let me be frank: We have lost them. This

morning they had their final press conference before the selection, and somehow they just disappeared.’

‘What do you mean disappeared?’ Lin Yan Ming, CEO of Night Train, demanded clarification. ‘That’s exactly what happened. They went into the Municipal Council building, held the press conference successfully, went into their dressing rooms and after that no one has seen them coming out of the building.’ The CEOs went berserk in complete confusion how something like that could happen.

‘Calm down, calm down, we don’t know how they did it but we have an idea who’s behind this.’ Henry Yorke took a deep breath. ‘Who is it?’ the CEO of Eelam Crane Robin Quivers insisted. ‘Before going into that I guess I need to apologize to all of you. There is something I haven’t told you.’ Now the whole room was all ears. ‘Like you know, many of you have had some people issues lately. What we have told you is that the people who didn’t show up at work were taking a personal leave as part of “Ease the Burden” campaign and didn’t want to be disturbed. We also said that thus we have removed their locators. That’s not exactly true. In fact, there never was such a campaign. I’m sorry.’ Now the silence was broken by amazed discussion frenzy. The CEO of Eelam Crane, Rebecca Morani, stood up. ‘You owe us an explanation. I never believed that 428 people from Crane would suddenly feel like taking a vacation, all within the same month. Henry, what is going on?’ CEO after another was now nodding in agreement.

‘I bet you have heard the rumors of a group called High Tide Soldiers, haven’t you? At first we didn’t believe it was nothing but a sick prank, but now we have gathered evidence that the group actually exists. We believe that all 2987 RoE employees who are reported missing have been recruited by them.’ The restlessness grew again. ‘How I could have been such a fool. If I just knew it was happening also in the other RoE companies, I would have been alarmed. Now I just bought the BS you were feeding us!’ Oladibubo Adebe, the CEO of Soft Goods yelled.

‘Like I said, I’m sorry that we kept you in the dark. We thought it was best not to go public with this information. We thought that’s exactly what High Tide Soldiers want: major publicity. Now that most of the world press is gathered in Jaffna, it was an ideal timing for them to strike. Eventually, however, the truth had to be told. I hope you understand and keep this as internal information of the management team. I know you feel betrayed and helpless at the moment. Many of your good people are gone. I also felt feeble in the beginning. Now I’d like you Amelie to gather your troops and make sure Just a Sec finds our presidential candidates and they will lead us to the rest of the people. The High Tide Soldiers will be punished.’

15 – Colombo

Marie woke up as Suresh was banging their door impatiently. He had returned from a successful AM-hunt. His half-open eyes rounded by sheer black rings told an unspoken story of poorly spent night. ‘Shall we?’ he asked promptly, making it sound like an order rather than a question. ‘Oui... Just a moment.’ Marie shut the door in front of his eyes and went to wake up Jay. They packed quickly though still being half asleep. As soon as they settled down on the back of the car both of them started snoring heavily.

Marie got almost a heart attack, when Metallica's "Frantic" started booming in the Daimler's massive sound system. 'What is that noise?' she was shouting. 'What?' Jay stopped his juvenile head banging and leaned back to hear what Marie had said. 'Turn off that noise!!!' Suresh heard it and decreased the volume. 'You call Metallica noise? How dear you? It's a classic! I heard that Kirk Hammet has passed away late last night. It was in the paper. I'm playing this for his memory.' Jay was holding out his receiver that he had updated through the Daimler's Info Link. 'I don't know who Kirk Hammet is and honestly I don't care. Can you just keep the volume down?' Jay was silent. 'Just one more song, I kind of like it.' Suresh commented and turned up the volume again to enjoy "St. Anger". This was something he had never experienced before in the serenity of Eelam. Marie was defeated and let the boys have their fun.

The aggressive music suited well with the imagery they saw out of the car windows. The road from Negombo to Colombo was filled with soldiers, tanks, army jeeps and a few cows. The sky was covered in grey smog inland and thunderstorm was approaching from the sea. 'What's happening here? Are they in war with someone?' Marie interrogated. 'Nah, it's nothing; just some army rehearsal.' Suresh replied. 'Why do they have such a massive army? There is no threat from anywhere.' Jay was curiously recording the gloomy parade with his Japanese Cam Zio 4000, one of the best new professional cameras of 2023. 'That machinery was one of government's biggest investments back in the old days. They don't want to admit that it was vanity, so they keep showing off with their guns and all. Moreover, the president is always preaching that any day there might be another war, and that they need to be prepared to protect the homeland.'

It took them quite a while to get past the parade and by the time they got to Colombo, it was already evening. Jay was shocked how eerily empty the city was. It had started raining and the dirty streets were completely empty. The road sides were filled with garbage; animals were roaming freely on the streets or sleeping in the middle of the road. Marie thought the city was disgusting. 'Do we really have to stay for the night?' Jay was only just listening since he was so concentrated on recording an excerpt of an endless pile of plastic rubbish that was dumped right in the lake. In the middle there was a lonely looking temple on top of a decorative small bridge. 'Hell yeah we need to stay. I want to see how this city looks like in daylight. The world needs to see this.' And he was not talking about his employer.

Suresh stopped the car next to the temple. 'That, my friend, used to be Beira Lake. They dried it and filled it with garbage. Sometimes they burn the plastic and some of that toxic smoke comes all the way to Eelam. Citizens of RoE hate it and there's a huge debate around the issue. It's not only the garbage, but also the factories and traffic that are still powered with coal and oil. These people just don't care.' Jay gulped and tried to refrain from showing others that he had tears in his eyes. *It's a horrible sight.* Suffering coconut trees next to the trash pile were reminding of the old days.

Suresh found his way to Vajira Road where his Sinhalese and Muslim friends were living. It was a crippled old building in the need of some serious refurbishing. Suresh parked the car in carage that was full of empty bottles, spare tires of different sizes and an assortment of oils, lubricants and elapsed paint buckets. On the yard there was an aged AC unit that looked like it had flown down from the balcony.

Aslam Anvar welcomed them to his home. Strong scent of a bunch of burning incense sticks was trying to cover the mellow odor of mildew and mere filth. Three other guys in their early thirties were living there, and the place looked exactly like that. *This crib desperately needs a woman's touch, though I'm not going to be that woman.* Marie was shocked. Aslam showed them their mattresses in the living room. *Well, it definitely isn't Ashok-Hilton.* Jay felt repugnance. Since it was so late Aslam just gave them some left over rice and curry and headed back to bed. Only Suresh had guts to touch the food. Marie and Jay kept their clothes on though it was terribly hot. The AC was busted and even the fan flapped only on half its speed. Jay tried to adjust it but it just got slower. *Better not touch it again.* They lay down next to each other on a wide mattress and sought comfort from each other. They were almost dosing off when Marie screamed and jumped up...

'What's the matter?' Aslam was standing on the doorway with only his dirty sarong on. 'There's a rat! It ran over my neck!' Marie was screaming. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I'll give you guys my bed and sleep here with Suresh.' Jay tried to explain it was not necessary but Aslam insisted. Marie went to the toilet to wash her face after the shocking experience. She knocked on the light, opened the door, stared for a while, turned on her heels and tiptoed back to the living room with her hands up. 'That's it. I'm out of here. This place is revolting. There's a huge cockroach in the wash basin.'

Jay tried to convince Marie to stay, saying there's no other place to go, while Aslam went to the toilet to get rid of the roach. He looked a bit offended by this demanding guest. When he returned with a cracked cockroach still twirling slightly on his palm, Marie was screaming hysterically. Jay was using a broom to swoosh away a mammoth spider that was darting from one wall to another, jumping towards Jay, missing him just by an inch and landing on their bed. It ran off to a crack in the wall and hid inside. Marie was crying feverishly. 'I want to go home.' Jay took him in his embrace and spoke to her words of encouragement in a hushed voice. Aslam felt helpless. He had never met such a timid woman who was scared of "little" bugs.

Jay Managed to convince Marie to sleep in Aslam's bed. At least there was a mosquito net so there should be nothing more than a few bed bugs bothering them. It was extremely hot inside the net, but they didn't want to risk being surprised by any more creepy-crawlies so they decided to keep it on.

Marie and Jay took off all their clothes and there was hardly anything erotic about it though it was their first night together in the same bed. Even back at Puttalam, after all that smooching and caressing, Jay had been a gentleman and insisted sleeping on the hammock. But now it had all happened so quickly: no explanations, no questions asked, they just felt so normal getting the same bed... Though, right at the moment they couldn't think of anything else but how to survive the heat.

Before falling asleep Marie turned to Jay and gave him a long tender hug. 'Thanks for saving me, my hero. I lo... I like you a lot.'

I love you too. No matter how awful their dwelling was, Jay had not been this happy in a long time. And it was not raining anymore.

Jay could barely sleep that night. Every time he was woken up by the sheer heat or the various sounds of nature coming from outside, he took a glance at bare-naked Marie who was sleeping on her belly and again muttering something unfathomable about "marsh-dash".

Aslam was wide awake in the morning and was startled by Marie who sneaked in to the kitchen only in her short t-shirt and hipsters. She was asking if it was ok to take a shower and if she could get some toilet paper. Aslam hid something below the table. Marie could have sworn it was a bottle. ‘Umm... Of course you can take a shower, but sorry, I forgot to buy toilet paper since you came on such a short notice. I don’t use any so I don’t normally buy it. Try to manage with the hand shower.’ *He doesn’t use any toilet paper? Why I’m not surprised?* Aslam’s eyes lingered on her long legs as she vanished to the bathroom.

After everyone had taken a cold shower, they headed for a ride around Colombo. As soon as they came on the road, they were stuck in the traffic. Tooting of horns was insane as the archaic semi-damaged cars were trying to avoid getting crushed under the overcrowded buses where people were hanging outside from doors and windows. Moreover, the three-wheeler drivers didn’t seem to have heard anything about traffic rules. They just swung through practically any opening in the stream of steel they could find while mopeds and motor cycles filled the last empty slots. Jay kept his Cam Zio rolling.

Before long Jay’s photography became more and more difficult as the passers-by noticed the white skin inside the car; a modern car that itself stood out from the mass. They had been forced to stop like every other vehicle and even pedestrians due to the VIP escort that cut through the city on an immense speed. These guys were riding old but well-maintained Land Rover Defenders and had orders not to stop for anyone or anything. Suresh told that many people have lost their mopeds, cars and even limbs for the nutcase drivers of the escorts. And they were not liable to cover any expenses, nor were they bound by the law. Orders were orders.

More people had gathered around their Daimler. Jay and Marie were horrified when the beggars started knocking on the windows and soon gripping tightly on the handles. They were like predators. Jay thought they would come through the window, but still he could not resist taking a few artistic shots.

Someone ripped off the left mirror and that made Suresh furious. He pressed a red button next to the light switch and a noisy alarm went off. A few of the vehement beggars split out, but half of them were ignoring the clamor and blinking lights all over the car.

‘Maybe we should give them some money...’ Jay’s sympathy took over. ‘Dare to do that and I’ll throw you out personally.’ Suresh exclaimed. Jay didn’t have to think twice. The alarm had attracted police who now came with their tazers and batons to whack ruthlessly everyone who had the courage to approach the car. Suresh thanked the officer with a slight nod, but Marie was weeping at this human tragedy. *Why do I feel this bad? How come I’ve been crying so much lately? I was supposed to be a tough girl.*

Finally they reached Havelock Road that was a bit less crowded and they could hold on to some 15 km/h speed. Jay was astounded by the amount of abandoned buildings that used to be varying small businesses judging by the wrecked and stained company logos, advertisements and signs. Now the estates served as meager shelters for the homeless people. Marie and Jay were starving because they had politely refused eating anything at Aslam’s place. After seeing the ants occupying the kitchen and dirty dishes lying all over the place they had lost their appetite. ‘Can we stop somewhere to have a bite?’ Jay posed. ‘I don’t think it’s such a good idea. Can you wait until we get out of this

god-forsaken city?' *My stomach is twisting up side down.* 'Not really. I got to have something to nibble.'

Suresh tried to find a safe place to park the car. He spotted a police station, so he thought it would be ok to leave the car there for a while. *Better still make it quick.* 'Kirulapona police station...' Marie spelled out loud. Jay was looking around and recording images of the environment: a couple of short blocks of flats with windows stoned in, a large Buddha statue behind a glass radiating whiteness, a three-storey building with no wall to the road side... *There are actually people living in there?*

They crossed the road hastily trying to avoid any contact with the poor old men taking up the streets. A few odd dogs followed them. Marie took a look at one of them and it sent shivers down her spine. The dog was limping badly and it seemed to have only one tooth that was right in the middle of its upper jaw. Then she realized that there was no upper jaw, only the tooth hanging loosely! *That's disgusting!*

For their disappointment the Silva & Sons was closed. Actually the door was barred and it didn't seem like opening any time soon. Now Marie spelled words "High level Road, Kirillapone" in the yellow and blue Silva & Sons sign. 'Don't they know how to write the name of this part of the city?' Suresh looked amused. 'They have at least 20 different ways of writing it.'

The smell of petrol fumes was oozing into their nostrils and mixing with the stench of burning trashes, excreta and their own sweat that was pushing through every pore. Even Suresh was a bit nauseated though he had visited the city quite a few times and this was nothing new to him. They walked some 100 meters and found a place called Matara Tasty Food. Marie recognized the odor of incense sticks that she had first experienced at Aslam's place. In fact the same fragrance was everywhere. The restaurant was advertising Sri Lankan and Chinese cuisine. 'Hey, that sounds good.' Jay pointed out. 'I hope it is tasty. I'd love to have some good Chinese. The place looks a bit scruffy but I guess it'll do.' Marie was also hungry. The waiter told Suresh in Sinhalese that they didn't have Chinese at this hour. 'I hope you are fine with good old rice and curry.' Jay looked let down. *Not again... Don't these people eat anything else?* 'It's fine.' He said not really meaning it.

They went upstairs and in less than ten minutes they were spooning down the delicious curries: beetroot, lady fingers, potato, onion and beef. Only the beef curry was something they couldn't swallow. It was really sticky and felt awful to chew. There was only a few other clients upstairs and they were observing the foreigners persistently. Marie felt really unpleasant under their examination. Suresh noticed this so he turned to them and snapped: 'Epa!' *Don't!* They turned their eyes away for a while but continued immediately as Suresh turned his head. They were whispering something, laughing mutely and drinking their ginger beers.

By the time they had paid their bill and walked out to the street, they realized a bunch of scavenging old people were waiting for them. They held their hands out and smiled awkwardly. Marie felt aghast looking at their reddish black teeth of which quite a few had fallen off. They deliberately increased their pace and hurried back to the police station. Z9 was gone.

Marie, Jay and Suresh felt helpless. The flock of beggars had followed them and now they were demanding: 'Sir, Sir, 5000 rupees please...' An increasing mass of people

surrounded them, approaching them slowly. Jay and Marie took a few wavering steps back just to see that there was more of them. *Shit! They look like zombies, men and women alike.* This time the police didn't help them. They were too busy playing cricket in the yard. 'Suresh, do you have any good suggestions?'

'Run!' Suresh replied single-mindedly. 'Run where?' Marie asked. 'I don't know, just run!'

They sprinted off through the poor elderly unintentionally pushing a couple of them to the ground. They started shouting angrily and jogged behind them. Someone threw Jay with a rock and it hit badly on his left temple. They crossed the road again and were almost hit by a car. More and more angry Sinhalese mob gathered behind them. They ran down a half-asphalted road by a filthy canal that was filled with trash. Exotic birds were dwelling in a pile of trash in the curve and a couple of drowsy cows were eating the garbage ignoring the passers-by. It seemed losing the fierce horde of unpaid pensioners was an impossible task. A somewhat younger man cycled towards them and as soon as he saw that they were followed, he turned and also started chasing them. Without an explanation he started bashing Suresh with his fist still pedaling forward. 'Pissuda?' *Is he crazy?* 'Fuck off! I haven't done anything to you.'

Now the guy continued towards Jay a stern gawk in his yellow eyes. Though he was running like fool, Jay saw it coming and he did the most unexpected maneuver: He took a few pictures of the mad man chasing him and then kicked him on the wheel. The bike rolled over and the bloke fell over hitting his head to the asphalt. He stood up and Jay saw blood dripping down his cheek. Now the poor man was out of control and raged towards Jay. Marie and Suresh continued their run without looking back.

At last Marie noticed Jay wasn't following them anymore and he turned to shout: 'Jay, come!' She saw how Jay protected himself by smashing the guy's nose in. Jay had had enough. He tripped the guy on the ground, kicked him unconscious, lifted him up easily and threw him over the barb-wire fence towards the canal oozing of nauseatingly green water. Now the mob was only 10 meters from him. *The bike...* He jumped on the bike and pedaled as fast as possible. Soon he reached the other two and uttered in exhaustion: 'We need to get a ride.'

Jay dumped the bike and they continued on the other side of the canal, crossing an old stone bridge. The smell of the canal was repulsive. In the distance they saw a green three-wheeler. *Please, let there be a driver who doesn't want to kill us.* Sweating all over they reached the vehicle. There was a grey-haired driver on the front seat. He was almost sixty years old. Without time for bargaining they jumped on the back and asked him to drive. 'Where do we go?' The driver requested. 'Anywhere, fast...' Marie shouted. They could hear the loud pack closing in. Suresh noticed a few stickers with Hindu Gods in the windshield. He said something in Tamil. The old man smiled at them generously. Only thing Jay and Marie could understand was "Galle Road". The three-wheeler sped off leaving the heated tramps ruthlessly behind.

Some time passed and no one said a word. They were now on Dickman's Road steadily rolling towards Galle Road. Suresh looked lost in his thoughts. *Shit! Aslam... The letter... How could I forget to remind him?* Suresh broke the silence. 'Jay, you got what you came for?' Thinking that he was referring to the article contents Jay was happy that he was still holding all his equipment and had not left them in the car. *Article would be great even with this material, but I need to do the pilgrimage down south.* 'What I

came for is in Mirissa.’ Suresh held his mouth open in astonishment. ‘It’s in Mirissa?’ He motioned the driver to turn left on the junction. ‘Is it far?’ Suresh looked disappointed. This would take more time than expected. ‘Hell yeah it’s far. But we are going the right way.’

16 – Mirissa

Mercedes saw roughly a 40-year woman approaching them with a machete in her right hand and dragging some luggage in the other. The closer she came, the more Mercedes panicked. *What is she going to do with that knife? Is this the end?* The warm ocean breeze was embracing her and made the situation paradoxical. Was this the paradise lost?

‘I’m sorry we had to take extreme measures to bring you here. You can call me Fox. I’m going to untie you if you promise not to do anything stupid. Do we have an understanding?’ Mercedes nodded as Anita and Siva just observed breathing heavily with water in their eyes. She took the machete and clipped the ropes dexterously with just a few pinches. Mercedes, Anita and Siva removed their mouth gags. Fox put her weapon aside and it calmed them down a bit.

‘Most likely you are wondering why we have confiscated you. You are going to help us in our mission. I will let you in on details later but for now I just want you feel like home.’ *Feel like home? No one has ever brought me home tied up and gagged!* ‘Over there you see a hut. That’s the kitchen. Behind it are the showers in case you feel like taking one. In the kitchen there’s more than enough food you can have whenever you want.’ Anita was pleased to hear that. She was starving. ‘We have collected some clothes for you. Choose your favorites. You are going to spend here a few days before all the preparations are done and we can proceed.’ She opened the luggage revealing a bunch of entangled women’s and men’s clothes.

‘We have no intention to harm you, so you should not be afraid. There are some rules though, so that everything goes without a hassle. You don’t try to escape and you don’t cause trouble. The jungle is filled with our people so escape plans are worthless. That’s all. Oh yeah, and stay in the shadows in the jungle. The beach is a no-go zone. The big brother sees all, if you know what I mean.’

‘I let you now to settle down.’ Without leaving any room for questions she disappeared in to the woods. Siva, Anita and Mercedes looked at each other silently. Their eyes then traveled around in the environment and finally landed on the clothes. ‘I don’t know what this place is, who the hell these people are, or why we are here but somehow the entire situation doesn’t feel that threatening. What do you say we just go with the flow and start with sorting out the clothes?’

Girls agreed and they found Siva’s slightly irrational determination hilarious. They started fumbling the luggage. Siva found a blue sarong and fit it on. He walked around with it as if being a model on the catwalk. ‘Can I keep this?’ Girls laughed. Anita got fond of a long white dress and tucked it in a cotton bag basically stating it would be hers from now on. Mercedes couldn’t find anything that she would normally wear. A time had come for her to change her style. She picked up two identical sets of small orange bikini. They would be too small for Anita anyways. Then she chose a short black

mini skirt and a worn-out towel with elephants and text “Sri Lanka” on it. ‘I’m traveling light.’ She entertained her colleagues.

Without knowing what else to do they headed towards the hut that was supposedly kitchen. Mercedes found a ready made Caesar salad that proved to be delicious. Siva didn’t feel like eating anything so he lay down on a bed in the corner to rest for a while after all these absurd events. As Mercedes had finished her salad, Anita decided to linger on for a while and experiment with the contents of the fridge.

Mercedes went for the shower that didn’t really do justice for the definition of the word. It was just a tap of cold water hanging in the open air. There were three walls made of old plastic that gave a bit of privacy. She hesitated for a while but then courageously stripped off her clothes, twisted the tap and ice cold water sprayed on her. She felt like screaming but soon she got accustomed to the water temperature. Her skin was still on goose bumps and nipples erect as she sponged the dust off from her body. It actually felt like heaven now: scorching sun caressing her every muscle and the cold water spraying down her body. She washed her long hair quickly and concentrated traveling her hands all over her skinny legs, round bottom, perky breasts and long neck. She let her hands linger long on her groin and inner thighs. Her thoughts wandered off as she soaped her carefully shaved patch of pubes and let her fingers play on the clit. She had not experienced this in a long while: Time just for her own pleasure. In the background she heard an age-old classic “No woman, no cry” echoing from the distance.

The three presidential candidates were lying on the grass and eating strawberries Nita had found from the cupboard. They were discussing what should they do to get out of here. Mercedes didn’t say it out loud, but she thought the place wasn’t that bad after all.

They saw a familiar looking figure approaching. The Flying Fox had returned. ‘Mercedes, can we have a chat.’ She asked. ‘Sure.’ *What does she want from me?* ‘In private, please!’ she motioned her to follow. Fox and Mercedes left, leaving the other two on the yard. They walked for about half a kilometer and reached an abandoned hotel. It was in a terrible condition from the outside, but for Mercedes’ surprise the interior was completely refurbished and glimmering of cleanliness. ‘Welcome to my humble home.’ *It’s not that humble.* The public area was filled with latest Eye Dee Ventures gadgets from navigation equipment to most imaginable techie equipments even a RoE Group Director didn’t recognize. Mercedes followed her to one of the rooms. It was spacious and organized room... with a Hover Bed. They took a seat next to a wooden table.

‘Would you like something to drink darling?’ *Don’t call me darling. That’s what dad calls me.* ‘Sure, give me a bottle of your finest scotch.’ Mercedes said ironically. ‘Well, we don’t have scotch but I hope you are fine with arrack and king coconut juice.’ She went to the balcony, swooshed her machete a few times making a hole in a coconut. She poured half of the contents in a glass, added some arrack and ice, stirred with a spoon and handed it over to Mercedes. She took a sip doubtfully... ‘It’s excellent! How did you get alcohol? Aren’t we still in Sri Lanka?’ Fox sat down next to her. ‘We make it... among other things.’

‘Anyway, I wanted to speak to you first because you are the favorite presidential candidate. You have a gift that has taken you far. People love to hear you speak. You are convincing. Am I right?’ *Well, thank you.* ‘I guess so. What is your point?’

‘As I said earlier, we want you to help us achieve our mission. If the other two back out we need to count on you. And don’t worry; you will be back in time to get selected. I’ll take care of that personally. What I’m about to tell you is top confidential, still for a couple of days. Are you willing to hear it?’ *You definitely got my attention Fox.* ‘Tell me.’

‘When this country was divided in 2008, I was a key ingredient in the events that led to that. Soon after that I realized I had not considered the repercussions at all. I had just done what needed to be done in order to start over a proper family life and secure my boy’s future. They never paid what they promised and I couldn’t get back to my family. I stayed here. As years passed I saw that my deeds led to one country rising to the top of the business world and another one being destroyed from within. All these years I have tried to remedy the situation and now finally everything is ready for us to make our point across: The Island needs to re-unite!’ *This is so confusing. There seems to be nothing evil about this person. Still, she’s leading a revolution.*

‘And what is my role in that?’ Mercedes took another sip from her drink. She loved it. ‘We have developed an infrastructure that can help people in Sri Lanka move around without polluting the air. We have gathered 3000 people who are willing to rebuild the southern part of the island and be with us when we voice out our opinion. You, my friend, will be the one getting this message across.’

They still discussed for about twenty minutes and Mercedes became more and more convinced of the worthiness of their cause. *And I was thinking these guys are terrorists!* ‘Can I ask you one more question?’ The Fox nodded. ‘What is your real name?’ She didn’t answer first, thinking it would be too risky to reveal. But she trusted her. ‘Miriam.’

When they left back to the camp Mercedes was confused: How would she explain this new agenda to Siva and Nita, not to mention the rest of Republic of Eelam. Suddenly the Fox picked up her walkie. The voice in the other end belonged to Rohan. ‘We have a leak. They are on the run.’ Flying Fox grabbed Mercedes’ arm and started running determinedly. She had no choice but to follow.

Nita and Siva had decided to flee. They started examining the area for a possible way out, as if moving around casually and just looking around. They noticed that guards in the trees were watching their every move; Tamils, Sinhalese, Muslims and even immigrants with their tanned white skin revealing their non-Sri Lankan roots. Behind a wooden shack, they almost stopped, but Siva motioned them to continue. Nita whispered: ‘Did you see what I saw?’ Siva moved slowly forward. ‘There was a hatch. Should we check it?’ They started turning back slowly. ‘If it leads to a tunnel it could be our escape route. But we don’t have much time. The guards will notice us instantly.’

Siva had already made his move. He went directly for the hatch, turned a lever and the door opened making a screeching sound. ‘What is that?’ They were both staring at a futuristic sledge that was attached to a single rail. In the back part of it, there were two large cylinders that vaguely reminded them of... ‘Rockets! That thing should move pretty fast. Maybe that’s how we got here.’ Siva was beaming of excitement. He had always had a thing for technical gadgets. They started climbing down the ladder, without

noticing a rugged shape behind them. 'I'm sorry.' Rohan said apologetically and knocked them both unconscious.

17 - Galle Road

The adventurous bunch of Eelamese-Canadian-French origin had just reached Bentota. They had successfully avoided mugging in Colombo and they didn't have any intention to go back... ever! Jay had enough and more material for his story. The country was in havoc and his pictures and video clips would prove it on thousands, maybe millions, of receivers as soon as next month's issue of *The World* would be launched.

Jay had decided to go and check the area where his mother had perished. He didn't tell the real reason for the others explicitly but they were more than willing to join him.

The three of them were sitting tightly in the back of the three-wheeler, Marie in the middle of the two guys. Jay sat on the left his shoulders squeezed in front and his right hand on Marie's knee. Suresh kept his arm around Marie. If it wasn't that cramped way of transportation, Jay could have sworn he was trying to make a move on his girl. *My girl... What am I thinking? We just met.* Last night Jay had at some point gotten rid of the mosquito net so it would be at least a bit cooler. Now he was paying the dues. Dozens of mosquito bites in his legs were itching badly. He scratched them continuously.

Warm ocean winds were bringing fresh air on the shore. It felt good after Colombo's thick polluted air. 'Jay, tell me about your childhood and teenage. What kind of family do you have?' Marie was prying, but Suresh looked indifferent. 'Well, what should I tell? My mom had me when she was just seventeen. I'm the only child of my parents. We lived in a quite frugal way, I've been told. Dad had a harmless mental illness that developed worse quickly after mom was taken by first Tsunami. She used to be the one taking care of me...' Marie was taken aback. 'Your mom died in Tsunami? I'm so sorry to hear that. Poor you...' Suresh was sighing and took his hand away. Marie didn't pay attention to that but urged Jay to continue. She gently swept his cheek showing her sympathy.

For a moment Jay was silent, thinking what to say and trying to remove black dust under his fingernails. 'Well, yeah. I was only five then. I can only remember her from old photos. You know those paper things they used to have.' Now only Marie realized she was ten years older than his new friend... boyfriend maybe. *What am I doing with this kid? Well, whatever it is I think he's going to help me reach what I want.*

'Go on.' Jay was in his thoughts for a moment. 'My dad was taken to an asylum for the next 15 years. Now he's much better and I'm actually in the process of getting to know him again. We've been boozing together twice. It's a lot of fun. He's an absolute womanizer though.' Marie giggled at his surprising remark. 'I was brought up in a foster family. I never really connected with my new parents. They made me work home quite a lot. I had to earn every penny of my weekly allowance. But I had a cool brother. He was five years older than me. He used to play me all these hard rock classics and educate me on the history of rock 'n' roll and heavy metal. That's where the noise comes from.' Marie was smiling warmly. 'He died in a tragic car accident last year. He hit a deer that went through the windshield.' *Why am I telling all these details? I know nothing about her...*

‘Anyways, in between I went to high school where I was pretty much left out. I didn’t feel like belonging anywhere. In the university I was studying journalism and I was also an editor in our school paper. It was a lot of fun, though I made a lot of enemies. Let’s just say their thinking didn’t match mine. I have a tendency of pissing off people. But that’s ok, it’s purely intentional.’ Marie listened. *There is something about this guy that makes me tick.* ‘I thought I would never make a career in journalism since I was a very controversial character in the school paper. As soon as my contract there ended I applied to The World and to everyone’s surprise – not least my own – I was selected. They said they liked my vivid style of writing and willingness to seek for debatable topics. Now I’ve been rotting there for god knows how many years. So, that’s my life in a nutshell. What about you?’

Before Marie could answer the driver reached out to the back and fiddled something between Jay’s legs. ‘Hey! What are you doing man?’ Suresh asked him to cool down and explained he’s opening another gas tank. It was also just about empty so they had to pull off to a nearly deserted gas station to fill up the tank. The station ran by an old hag who was seemingly pleased to have customers. The driver changed a few words with the station owner, but hurried to continue the journey.

As soon as they got back on the road the conversation went to lighter topics like Sri Lankan weather – that was always pretty much the same, as long as it wasn’t raining – and their eventful visit in Colombo. Jay never got a chance to know more than Marie’s favorite food, band and color. They were grilled fish, Tutankhamen and white respectively. For half an hour they argued if white is a color or ‘just a surface that reflects all the light away’. Jay lost the debate three to one, since even the driver was convinced that of course white is a color. Only then he realized how stupid topic it was to argue about. In Kalutara they passed a police checkpoint. The officers were keen to know where they are going, and noted bluntly that from Kalutara onwards they would drive on their own risk. No one lived down south anymore. It was too dangerous because Tsunami could hit any time. That was like a warning for deaf ears.

The beach strip was there and then spotted with abandoned small houses, resorts and a railroad track that was now covered in lush undergrowth. Coconut trees were swinging slowly on the beach and fauna had taken over the human habitat. Anything from peacocks to water buffaloes to a couple of elephants could be witnessed along the way. They continued until a series of fallen trees cut their way somewhere after Hikkaduwa.

They stepped out of the vehicle to examine if there was any way around the trees. All of a sudden Marie shrieked. ‘Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph... Come look at this! Quick!’ The rest of them rushed where Marie was, between two fallen trees. No one said a word. What they saw was hundreds and hundreds of rotten human skeletons, still with their clothes on, occupying the street. ‘Why no one has bothered to bury these people? Which Tsunami was it that drowned them?’ Jay was calling for answers. No one answered. Silently they went back to the three-wheeler and the driver said he would take them through the jungle instead.

The paths were snaking around flourishing jungle. Sometimes the driver stopped to scratch his head. The passengers didn’t know if he was lost or just wondering if his three-wheeler could make it through the wildest parts of the forest. Finally someplace near

Galle they found back on the asphalt road. They drove through the deserted city where they didn't want to spend too much time in. It was ghastly. The ancient Dutch fort was still standing in the harbor. Not even Tsunami could knock it down... or even five of them.

They passed Unawatuna, a once-popular holiday destination among backpackers. They drove down past Kogalle where they saw an abandoned air strip that dated back to the World War Two. Suresh told them that the Japanese had tried to conquer the island but the Sri Lankan army was able to defend it. Some had said that this battle was a turning point in the history. It was supposedly strategically very important island for Japanese to capture. They never did. 'Otherwise we might live in different kind of future.' Suresh explained. Marie and Jay found it hard to believe. They had never heard about this battle.

They drove through Weligama that had apparently been a busy fishing town. There were still fishing boats in the shore, though most of them smashed in pieces of wood and plastic. The three-wheeler bumped over a bunch of sticks. The driver slowed down and commented that those sticks had previously been an important way for the local fishermen to stand on in the water and socialize with their "colleagues" throughout days while catching their livelihood. They had lived very simple but evidently happy lives. Jay noticed a black smoke coming from the three-wheeler's exhaust pipe. He wondered how ethical it was from them to travel in an air spoiler like this.

A couple of kilometers after Weligama the driver made his maneuvers again in both Jay's and Suresh's feet and tried if there was any petrol left in the tanks. There wasn't and they stopped.

'Now what...?' Jay queried in disbelief. 'Now we walk.' Suresh told. 'Walk? How far is Mirissa?' *There's no way I'm going to walk... but is there an option?* 'Not that far... It should not be more than a few kilometers.' They waltzed off, leaving the driver with his vehicle. They had insisted he'd join them, but he didn't want to leave his wheels. They passed half-destroyed buildings that carried signs with the flags of different countries. Those were houses donated by foreigners after first and second Tsunamis... They were houses that were now demolished by the later waves.

'I have this uneasy feeling that we are being followed.' Suresh whispered. 'Followed by whom? There's no one here.' Marie was perplexed. 'I don't know but it doesn't feel right.' They accelerated their pace.

'Stop right there!' a male voice with edgy accent demanded behind them. Jay thought it sounded oddly familiar. They were about to turn around when they suddenly heard a sound they recognized from old movies... Someone had just loaded a shotgun.

A long-haired gentleman had planted an alarm system on the road. It wasn't that up-to-the-minute: just a transparent thin string going across the road and the string leading to a bell inside one of the abandoned concrete shacks. He had thought it's highly unlikely for anyone to spot him from his hideout, but now the alarm had gone off. He had taken a two-barrel shot gun that he had found on his way and went after the intruders.

'Turn around slowly.' The male voice demanded. Now Jay saw who it was. 'Professor, what are you doing here?' By now everyone was confused. Jay had no idea why the same Finnish pony-tail was now in Mirissa. *He's definitely not here to sell the renowned Nokia Brainmory cards.* Marie and Suresh didn't understand how they could possibly know

each other from before. And the professor was dumb-founded to see this young Canadian again.

They didn't have much time for explanations. Jay looked even more surprised by now. 'Umm... professor... you might want to lower your gun.' Four red spots were circulating on his chest. Someone was aiming the professor with rather more advanced weapons than a shotgun.

As soon as the professor noticed this, he lowered his gun carefully on the ground. *I should have stayed in the house. Now they found me, before I found them.*

Two figures, one male and one female, came out from the bushes. The four pointers were still fixed at professor's chest. The 40 something female instructed her "left hand" to deal with the intruders: 'Take this man's weapon and tie all of them. Until we know who they are, we treat them as a maximum security risk.' The unknown woman gave instructions and moved on to Marie. 'You are trespassing on our property. Do not try to run or we have to take you down. Understood miss?' Marie nodded. Jay started thinking there was something distantly familiar about this woman's face... and especially voice.

PART 3:

Puzzled

18 – Aslam

Aslam was flabbergasted by the morning's events. Actually, it was only *an event*. This peculiar but somehow impressive French girl – Marie – had left her mark into his mind. Aslam thought he must have been too drunk already: *All this confusion because she happened to walk in to the kitchen in her hipsters and a t-shirt*. Why couldn't she be like any other girl, chubby and superficial? No, this woman had been different. She was slim, tallish girl with Asian-African origin. Aslam's mind was still lingering in the sight of her legs and whatever followed...

He opened the bottle again.

He had an odd habit of closing the bottle every time he had taken a drink. Allowing for that he didn't keep the bottle cap on more than 15 seconds, this behavior didn't really make sense. In actuality, a lot of his life didn't make sense. He was born and raised in a remote Muslim village somewhere down of Nuwara Eliya. His parents didn't drink, smoke, eat pork or do any of the things that were now Aslam's favorite pastimes.

Taken into account that the main income of the family was cultivating vegetables it was an achievement for Aslam to even be where he was now. He had managed to explain it to his parents on a very early age how important it was for him to get an education and see the world. He had explained his willingness to move out from the green windy valleys of Hill Country and start a new life in Colombo where the proper universities were. Somehow the parents had agreed to his wishes, the decision highly accelerated by uncle Mohamed who was a gem dealer that had taken initiative to help out financially in getting Aslam to stand on his own two feet.

As the time came Aslam moved to Sri Jayawardenepura, a suburb district of Colombo that still in early 2000s held the title of a legislative capital of Sri Lanka. As soon as he started his studies Aslam realized it was not all that rosy as he had expected. The university of "Japura" had a long-lasting tradition of ragging. It meant that the new students were molested, mostly verbally but sometimes also physically.

Aslam being a kid who came from a rural village – and not from Colombo or Galle where most of his peers originated – his welcome was even worse. During the first week he had been taken to a shed in the university perimeters by the senior students and asked to take off all his clothes. Innocent as he was he had responded 'I don't see it as necessary'. After an initial laugh, the peculiar answer was rewarded with a bleeding punch on his nose. Finally left alone by the bullies Aslam sobbed on the shed's floor and thought he should have just obeyed their orders. But his willpower took over. He made a pledge for himself that he would not obey; he would not break, no matter what they did to him on the following weeks.

On the outset he didn't break. He didn't take any of the orders forced upon him by the ragging crowd but instead let the bullies to beat him up consecutively. Appearing on the lectures with half-crying or with an occasional black eye, it seemed that the only ones who cared were the ones who had experienced something similar. Everyone else just looked away, even the lecturers. As a matter of fact the tradition of ragging was believed to be good by many and even supported by political instances that had extended their power among the once innocent teenagers.

Deep inside Aslam was in turmoil. He wished he had stayed with his family in the Hill Country and be contended with his fate; plucking potatoes day and night over, playing with his younger siblings and cousins, and taking care of his parents who were getting older and older by the day. But he didn't give in.

Finally his willpower took him to an organization that enabled him to do a short internship in Eastern Europe, something unheard of among most of his peers. The eight months spent in Poland were a turning point in his life, for better or for worse that's for Allah to decide. He soon got introduced to Eastern European drinking habits. After a few crazy parties in Krakow he thought he's the king of the world. A whole new perspective opened up for Aslam: the life of independence. After several conversations with other interns he started a deep soul search. In less than three months he decided that "Islam religion was not just his thing". He fell in love with Polish meat dishes. Though he always had to find a way to add spices to his food, pork tasted to him like a piece of heaven. He fell in love with independent European girls just to have 101 crushes and a few short relationships. After some disastrous experimentation he also learned to control his drinking and became a social drinker. Social as he had become, his farewell party was filled with people who genuinely said they would miss him.

Coming back was not easy. The same old reality was there, though the bullies were either gone, or had forgotten about him. Sri Lanka just didn't feel like home anymore for Aslam. He never revealed to his parents his new ways of living. And he never quite found soul-mates who would socially drink with him, unless it took seven days of a week. He definitely had had a life-changing experience. Nothing was like before anymore, except for his parents who still thought he's the same old decent boy.

Aslam was lost in his thoughts. *There's something I forgot.* His eyes were traveling on the flower tapestry walls He was trying to make sense of all that but failed miserably. He had had a crush on a girl who was by no means adorable.

Now he noticed an envelope on the table with a green post-it note attached to it. "J-A-Y" he spelled, but couldn't figure out what the letter was for. He threw it in the trash bin and opened the bottle again.

19 – Captured

Rohan was desperately swooshing through the lush vegetation to make his way to a forgotten paddy field. He had left Miriam with the unexpected visitors. He had more important things to attend to. *Bonaparte. Why didn't I think about it before?* He had finally figured out what the last clue meant. It was most probably referring to the large paddy field that was once owned by Mr. Heenatigala, or Napoleon as everyone knew this peculiar character.

Rohan had heard the first clue from his dying father and it had taken him to the chilling climate of Nuwara Eliya. It was his father's will to find this letter and spread the word for everyone on the island... and beyond. Unfortunately Rohan didn't find what he was looking for from the beautiful hill hideaway that resembled an English village. The next clue had taken him to the tea estates of Badulla, from where he just had to continue down to Haputale and onwards to Tissamaharama, Hambantota and finally Mirissa, tack-

ling a clue after another. Now he was sure that there was only this paddy field standing between him and the highly important letter.

But the paddy field was endless. He couldn't believe his eyes. Now this field really was standing on his way. There was no way he could find anything from here. He stood still in frustration and just observed the environment: A line of enormous Hana plants next to an old stone fence, lots of high coconut trees sticking out here and there, a lonely Bo tree in the middle of the field, some kind of a hut with only half of its roof still in place next to it, a few water buffaloes minding their own business, a small tea plot on the east, a handful of Arecunat trees sticking out next to a small stream and a majestic Na tree giving shade to Rohan. *I have failed.* Rohan dropped his head between his shoulders and slowly started his return.

Meanwhile Miriam had returned to the camp site with the intruders. They had not exchanged a single word during the one-kilometer walk. Soldiers around them were carrying modern guns and were all dressed up in camo-pants, black boots and vests. They referred to the woman as Flying Fox and treated her like their leader.

Miriam was clearly frustrated that at this point of their mission, there were unknown faces popping up unexpectedly. *Can it be that RoE has already figured out where their missing candidates are? And who is this hippie who was aiming them with a pathetic shotgun? There is no way we can let these people to go and tell our location? Not at this point, not anymore.* Miriam had searched them and confiscated all their communication equipment. As they reached the main building she had made up her mind.

'Are you working for RoE?' she demanded. 'With that low salaries... are you crazy?' Suresh mumbled in Tamil. 'Look, Madame, we are just passing by. We are no threat to you, whoever you people are. I'm a reporter, he's a Finnish professor and these guys are financial analysts. How could we possibly harm you?' Jay pleaded.

'I honestly don't care who you are or what you are doing here. Now that you have crossed the line, you need to stay. There is no other choice. You will join us, want it or not.' Miriam exclaimed convincingly.

'But I just wanted to see the place where my mother drowned...' Jay turned emotional. 'No buts... We will... What did you say young man?' Miriam looked curious. 'I said I wanted to see the place where my mother lost her life in first Tsunami. It was back in 2004 and the place was called Mirissa, I've been told.' Jay explained.

Miriam was quiet. Marie and Suresh were surprised by the sudden change in her behavior. Jay noticed that something consumed her mind. 'Did I say something wrong?'

'You say you are a reporter. What is your name and where are you from?' she moved closer and almost whispered the question, examining every inch on Jay's face. 'I'm Jay Fleury, 24 years of age, Canadian, from Toronto, favorite food Pasta Carbonara... Why are you suddenly so interested of who we are? Just a moment ago you didn't care about anything.' *Jay?* Miriam asked the guards to untie the captivities and left them without explanation.

By now all of them had figured out that High Tide Soldiers really was more than a myth. Awhile they were looking around for a possible escape route, but armed soldiers in trees all over the place made their hopes empty. Not that they had too much time to think of escape or the odd behavior of Flying Fox: Now they were all standing in awe and staring

towards a set of palm trees just ten meters from them. There were three people lying on sun-bathing chairs that everyone knew. They were discussing softly and once in a while paying a glance at the new arrivals. *The presidential candidates... What are they doing here?* Marie, Jay and Suresh were speechless.

Mercedes was hugging Nita long and warmly. 'Are you sure it's okay for us to leave? What if they are going to shoot us as soon as we get to the jungle?' Mercedes had updated them about their deal with Miriam. She would stay at the camp and help them any way they want, as long as Nita and Siva were released. 'You just keep your mouth shut when you get back to Eelam and everything is going to be fine. Promise me that you don't tell anything about HTS.' She stared persistently in Nita's eyes. 'I promise.'

'But what happens to you girl?' Siva was now embracing Mercedes almost tears in his eyes. 'Don't worry about me. As long as you keep silent, I'll be fine. But if you fold, all three of us are going to suffer. They have eyes and ears everywhere and we are disposable if we are threat to their cause.' Siva nodded in understanding.

Siva took Nita's hand and they left towards the main building. Suddenly Nita turned back to face Mercedes. She yelled from distance: 'What about your campaign?' Mercedes smiled. 'I'm still on, girl!'

Since nothing happened for a few minutes and the guards didn't seem to care what the "prisoners" do, Marie asked if she could go and talk to the young woman on the beach, pretending she doesn't know who she is. The guards looked at each other and shrugged. 'Do whatever you want. Just don't try to escape.' Marie was surprised how laissez faire the heavily armed lot was. 'See you guys.' Marie went to meet Mercedes. They shook hands and started chatting something as if they had known each other for years. Suresh was lost in his thoughts and retired under a tree to chew on a straw of grass.

Jay and the professor looked at each other and decided to have a look at the place. Though the out of the ordinary man had just threatened them with a shotgun, Jay didn't feel in jeopardy in his company. As a matter of fact, he was fascinated to know what this guy from a remote country up north really did in Sri Lanka.

Before Jay could start a dialogue with the professor they bumped into a fellow that they had seen already before. Rohan looked grumpy. 'What's the matter puta?' Rohan gathered himself due to this unexpected question. Jay wondered if the professor had just insulted this guy in Spanish.

'You speak Sinhalese?' Rohan was astounded. 'Not much. I've been to this country on and off many times during the past 20 odd years. Why do you look so disheartened?' Jay was clearly out of this conversation. 'I don't know if I can talk about it... well, why not. Machang, I was trying to find a certain letter. And I almost did. But now I cannot figure out the last clue.' *What is this guy talking about?* 'A clue, you say? I'm pretty good with riddles. How does it go?' Jay thought the professor is being a bit too nosy.

Rohan hesitated. 'Bonaparte. It says Bonaparte. I found a paddy field that was once owned by a guy called Napoleon, but it's impossible to find anything from there. It's just too big.' *What is a paddy field?* Jay still felt left out. 'Bonaparte... doesn't ring a bell now but why don't you take us there and we'll see if we can help.' The professor was on to something. Unintentionally he had invited Jay along and since Jay didn't have any-

thing more urgent in his schedule right now, he was ready to join. Rohan was suspicious for a while but then asked the duo to follow him. Somehow he got an extra injection of hope of professor's words.

Now Jay wanted to know what was going on. Why was the professor so interested about some letter and riddles? 'Can you explain me what we are up to?' The professor replied bluntly: 'I have no idea, but it sounds interesting. Do you have anything else to do?' Jay couldn't figure out an answer for that so he just followed.

After some fifteen hundred meters of rushing through the jungle Jay couldn't take the silence anymore. 'So, when did you come here the first time?' The professor explained he had been working in Sri Lanka when he was about Jay's age. 'And now you are studying the leadership of RoE if I remember correctly.' *Why do I find it hard to believe when this guy is down south in a whole another country barricaded in a shack with a shotgun?* 'That's right. It's very interesting in fact. One of the best models of leadership succession I've ever studied.' Jay thought it is better not to engage in provocative questions about his motives to be in Mirissa. 'Ok, right, maybe we can discuss that later. It seems that our guide has led us to that paddy thing...' Indeed they had come to a large paddy field that clearly had long ago been cultivated to provide lofty crops of rice. 'Good observation, son.' Jay didn't like the expression really. 'I believe we didn't introduce each other the last time around. I'm Jay.'

'Hi Jay, I'm Tom Hardwick.' The professor noted and jumped easily over a ditch on to the side of the paddy field. Jay realized this conversation was over.

'So, can you tell me what "Bonaparte" means?' Rohan enquired impatiently. The professor didn't respond. He observed. *Bo... THERE! Na... Na... Na... Wait, this is Na... Par... Te...* 'I need time to think.' Jay was sure that the professor had figured out something. He could see it in his eyes. Still, for some reason he just sat down on a stone and appeared confused. Soon he maneuvered Jay to sit on the rock next to him.

There they were, sitting silently and looking around the field. 'Well?' Rohan asked raring to go. 'Just wait, will you... I'm thinking.'

Minutes passed and Rohan's patience was giving in. He started moving around and little by little his concentration on the other two yielded. He was now just observing butterflies that flocked on the side of the field.

'Jay...' Hardwick whispered. 'Yes?'

'I think he cannot hear us now... he's too far away.' *Are we going to escape?* Jay felt thrills. 'Bonaparte, I know what it means.' Though it didn't mean any escape plans Jay was now all ears. 'Bo is a tree. There's only one Bo tree here. See that large one' Hardwick was pointing on the other side of the field. 'I see it.' *This is exciting...* 'Na is the national tree of Sri Lanka. We are right under it.' Jay looked up. Hardwick pinched him and Jay lowered his gaze. 'He's watching us.' Hardwick mentioned looking away from Jay. 'Not anymore... what does the rest of it mean?'

'Te... it's "tea". So, basically the letter should be somewhere where the Bo tree, this Na gaha and that tea plot are in line... in par with each other.' He showed to the gently ascending hill on the other side of the field. 'We need to go there but I don't want this machang to get the letter. I don't know what it contains but it might prove to be valuable in later negotiations.'

'Ok, I'll distract him when you have spotted the stash. One more question though.' *This must be about the letter...* Hardwick thought. 'What does "machang"

mean?’ Tom Hardwick smiled. ‘Literally it means brother-in-law in Tamil, but people use it like “dude”. That you have heard, haven’t you?’ Jay nodded.

‘Machang, I want to see the field from the other side. Maybe it gives some perspective.’ Rohan was looking at the professor in disbelief. ‘Do we have to?’ Still he motioned them to follow him and they proceeded through the muddy banks of the field on to the other side. As soon as they reached the Bo tree, Hardwick saw a collection of stones that was exactly in line with the Na, Bo and the tea plot. He winked for Jay who nodded slightly.

Jay went to rest under the tree. For a couple of minutes nothing happened, but then Jay started screaming like crazy and rushed off back to where they came from. Rohan was first startled but then started running behind him shouting him to stop. Meanwhile Hardwick went to the stones and vigorously pushed them aside one by one. On the bottom of the stone collection was a broad plank of wood. Hardwick removed it and some sort of a package wrapped in thick garments and tied with a ribbon emerged. He took it and pushed it inside his pants.

Jay stopped under the Na tree. Rohan captured him and shook him with both hands. ‘What the hell are you doing?’ Jay looked distressed. ‘There was a huge snake! Didn’t you see it?’ Rohan let go off him. ‘You saw a serpent? Are you that scared of small serpents? And no, I didn’t see it.’ Jay was breathing heavily as professor Hardwick joined them. He had overheard the last part of Jay’s monologue. ‘It was huge. I couldn’t move, I thought it’s going to attack me. We better go back to the safety of the camp.’ Rohan sighed. ‘So, you didn’t find anything. No Napoleon, no Bonaparte?’ Hardwick spread his arms. ‘Not even a white horse... sorry.’

In the evening some of the soldiers had put their weapons away and they had gathered around a small bonfire that was made under an open tent-like structure. Tom Hardwick was with them, holding a bottle and passing it around. The ocean was serenely beautiful as the full moon illuminated the sky. Placid winds were bringing waves gently to the shore. It all seemed paradoxically perfect to Jay, regardless of the fact that they had been captured by a terrorist organization.

Mercedes joined the festive multicultural group and took a sip of the bottle, something she would not normally do. Jay could barely recognize her. In all the pictures and press conferences she was highly professional feminist with her hair tied back giving her face a firm, even a tense, look. Now as the bonfire flames were coloring her face, her hair let loose and wearing nothing but a short piece of cloth resembling a skirt and the top of orange bikini, she actually looked... sexy.

Jay got startled as Marie approached him from behind and nibbled his ear with her teeth. ‘Are you looking at other women?’ Jay was embarrassed but had an answer ready as always. ‘During the day it seemed to me that you are more interested in her. If I didn’t know you better I could have sworn you are out of my league, if you know what I mean.’ Marie giggled. ‘You stud...’

Marie didn’t look bad either. As they stood there in the moonlight, smiling at each other without saying a word, Jay knew he was about to fall in love. Seemingly the feeling was mutual since Marie raised her hands on his cheeks and gave him a long moist kiss without a warning. ‘Come, let’s join the fun.’ Jay could do nothing but obey as Marie grabbed his hand and took him to the bonfire. He didn’t know if Marie’s kiss was for real

or was it just the hunch of grass he had smelled in her breath. In any case, he was head over heels of happiness.

Hardwick had had quite a few drinks already and his silent appear was long gone. He was singing half-English half-Sinhalese songs with the others. As he saw Jay he suddenly stopped singing and dragged himself next to Jay. Marie didn't want to listen to his drunken gibberish so she went for Mercedes who was left alone.

'You know Jay, today was a successful day. We should celebrate.' Hardwick handed over the bottle. 'What is this?' he took a sip and couldn't figure out whether to hate it or love it. 'That's toddy machang. If you don't like it I know where these guys keep their vodka.'

At first Jay couldn't believe they had vodka in a place like this, but then he saw that each soldier had night vision goggles hanging on their neck. *If they can afford all that equipment, why they would not have vodka?* 'Sure, show me the stash.'

Instead of quietly separating from the group, Hardwick was shouting and yelling how they would go with the boy and take a sip of something harder. Everyone was laughing at his hollering. Hardwick took Jay behind a pile of fire wood and produced a bottle of Russian vodka. He first took a long sip himself before handing over the bottle. 'That's what I call cough medicine.' Jay took a mouthful and another. He had some catching up to do.

Suddenly Hardwick told Jay to sit down. He dug out some kind of a parcel from his trousers. 'See, this is the result of our teamwork today.' Jay was astonished. 'You found it.' Hardwick laughed out loud. 'Of course I found it.'

He opened the ribbons and removed the cloth. Inside there was an age-old envelope with a large red seal. Jay leaned forward and in the moonlight he could see letters "RC" standing out clearly. 'Shall we open it?' *What is in that letter? Why Rohan wanted it so badly?* 'Not yet my friend; patience is a virtue. I want you to keep it before I need it again. If that Rohan fellow goes back to the paddy field and sees the rocks scattered around, he will first come to me. He doesn't know to suspect you.' Jay slipped the letter to his pocket without asking a thing.

'What makes me think that you are not who you say you are?' *Now he's drunk. Now he will sing.* 'I am an honest man, a professor. I come from Finland and my name is Tom Hardwick.' *That's not exactly what I meant.* 'Fine, but you didn't come here to study leadership, did you?' By now Hardwick's drunken grin was long gone. 'Can you keep a secret?' *Of course not; I'm a reporter.* 'Sure.'

Hardwick took the bottle again and gulped it down like water. 'You know, one of the best ways to understand the interconnectedness of scientific phenomena is to simply put them on a timeline.' *What is that supposed to mean?* 'In a similar manner the world events can be put on a timeline. Alone many of them, say a civil war, appear irrational and sporadic. But together they comprise a whole that makes sense. If you do that, you know why I'm here.' Jay was perplexed. 'So what do you want me to do again?' *Is there a point in this or is it just drunken scientific blabber?* 'Do what I said. If we look at the last 15 years, what was the major world event each year?' *Ok, let's play his game.*

'2008 was the second Tsunami; 112 000 dead in South-East Asia, if I remember correctly.' *It's good I did my homework in the plane.* 'Unfortunately that is true. It was also the year that this island was divided in two. What about year 2009?' *Umm... Finland*

won Eurovision song contest? 'I can't think of anything big.' *And I call myself a journalist?* 'Was there anything related to Tsunami?' Hardwick was examining the bottom of the empty bottle. 'Oh yeah, Derlingo and RoE got a lot of positive publicity by joining hands to start the Anti-Tsunami project.'

'Exactly and in 2010 Tsunami shields were provided for free to all countries in South Eastern Asia by RoE Ltd Derlingo NRG. These buggers didn't accept them, but instead banned the area. That's why it's still so untouched.' Jay was already thinking the next year. 'Ok, 2011 has nothing to do with Tsunami. The biggest event was the announcement from the EU to close down all nuclear power plants and coal mines by 2020. Next year the third Tsunami swooshed over the shores. Now people were prepared.'

'Fine, but who won the Nobel peace prize because of that?' Hardwick was sobering up or just acting like that. 'It was the CEO of Derlingo... What's his name again?'

'Marc Lecavalier.' *Yep, that one ... I'm really bad with names...* '2013 is easy, right?' Jay didn't have to think for long. 'Yep, RoE Ltd got the patent for AM vacuum.'

'That's correct. What happened in 2014?' Jay was thinking back. 'I cannot think anything else but the Octagon case. The republicans opened their own Defense Ministry in California. They thought that if they have more corners than Pentagon, they are going to be better than the democrats.'

'That's how it was... and the world event of 2015?'

'Russian Union?' Jay was guessing. 'That's exactly correct again. You are good with remembering years. 2016?'

'Of course there was one more Tsunami, but I think the major event was the China's announcement that they have started building the artificial planet.' *Or was it the next year?* 'That's correct, but isn't it alarming that you pretty much ignored 9 000 dead people caused by the fourth Tsunami?'

'Compared to past figures, it's a good achievement. Public awareness campaigns, alarm systems, new building rules and of course the Tsunami shields really kicked in. Nine thousand Asians are nothing compared to what happened next year!'

'And what was that?' Hardwick played dumb. 'Oh come on, there was a civil war in the states: short and effective like all the wars by our dear neighbors. After two months of riots and assassinations, Octagon Republicans launched a small warhead on Democrat-filled Pentagon, leaving nearly 12 000 dead.'

'Fine, it was a terrible sight. What did India do the next year?'

'They declared 90% of the country as a natural reserve. That was much due to the politicians waking up to what was going to happen to the country if the development stayed the same. At least one lesson learned from America.'

'Do I even have to ask what the great deed of 2019 was?'

'That's definitely Malimune, the anti-malaria drug.'

'Of course... and what happened three years ago in 2020?'

'Nothing major...'

'Nothing major... Are you serious?'

'Well, of course there was the fifth Tsunami but only some 1 000 people were reported missing. It's not that bad.'

'I believe it is quite bad for those 1 000 people and their families. Anyways, did the EU plans work out?'

‘You mean the energy thing... Yeah, they did close down all the nuclear plants and stopped using coal. But they couldn’t figure how to replace all that energy. Maybe they were waiting for the antimatter.’

‘Right. So next year Eelam, Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand tried out antimatter in transportation, followed by the rest of the world. But where did EU get all its energy?’

‘I think they bought it, right?’

‘But from whom?’

‘Derlingo I guess...’

‘Bingo!’ The professor stood up in order to find the next bottle and returned to the bonfire, where singing and dancing had begun.

Jay was puzzled. What did this have to do with anything? How did all this Tsunami talk link with EU’s energy challenges? And why was Hardwick in Sri Lanka? The professor’s exercise had not helped Jay at all. Now he was just more bewildered.

20 – Alyssa

Alyssa Keane was the founder and CEO of Sweet Organic, a global sweet meats chain that had gained popularity due to its innovative advertising campaigns and pure ethical and ecological ideology.

Alyssa – a convincingly heavy girl – had made herself irrelevant, what all the leaders should do. Now she could spend her days as she wanted and the business was running smoothly without her having to adhere to every single detail. Still, she liked to go around the SO stores in London, serve customers for half an hour like any other shop assistant and give an occasional freebie to a little boy staring the jar of Indian style sweets. Her employees loved her because of her humble attitude. Even the salary she paid for herself was reasonable. She was not a kind of girl who would let success get to her head. Family, fairness and health of the world were more important values for her.

Now she was getting back to her office after her tour in the retail stores. Her assistant said that there was someone called Lecavalier waiting for her. For a while she wondered who this gentleman was but then concentrated on her first priority: To change her soaking wet jacket that was pretty much ruined after walking about the damp streets of London. As she entered her office an elderly fat gentleman was browsing her photo album.

‘Excuse me... Do I know you?’ *Who is this fellow?* ‘Oh, hello Alyssa, my name is Marc Lecavalier. I’m your uncle’s old friend.’ *That doesn’t ring a bell.* ‘Lecavalier, you say. Is that a French name?’ *Maybe he’s some EU fatso.* ‘It is originally, but I’m from Canada. You must have heard of Derlingo NRG?’

Now Alyssa was embarrassed. ‘Do you mean you are *the Marc Lecavalier* that won the Nobel Prize for the Tsunami shields?’ *Get him a cup of tea quickly...* ‘That’s me: the same man.’ Alyssa was rushing to get him a clean cup, but was interrupted. ‘Could we get down to business? I don’t have much time.’

‘We have developed something that will change the world. I’d like you to become a spokeswoman for Derlingo NRG on our new renewable energy source. We are launching it soon, and I want you to hold the press conference.’

‘Well I’m flattered. But why do you want exactly me to do the job?’ Years in business had made Alyssa a bit reserved for sudden proposals like this, though by nature she didn’t have much skepticism in her. ‘You would give a good name for all of us. In fact, you are the one who the rest of the world is trying to copy in ethical practices. That’s exactly the image that suits our product.’

Suits your product or covers up something that you are not telling me? ‘With all due respect Mr. Lecavalier, I don’t know if this is the right thing to do. You know, I have a business to run.’ That was a poor excuse because her reputation was going before her. She didn’t need to work a day in her life anymore if she wanted it like that.

‘Would you do it if your uncle was behind the idea also?’

‘You mean Henry? I trust my uncle 100%. But why he has not been talking with me about it? If he asks me, I want to support him but I don't know if I could join Derlingo right now really... and not without you giving me a better explanation.’

‘Don’t worry about that. I’ll give you all the details as soon as you say yes. I’ll ask your uncle to give you a ring. I believe I got what I came for. We will have much more time to chat in the future. Thanks for seeing me.’

Without any further explanations Marc Lecavalier found his way out. As soon as he reached the elevator, he took a small recording device out of his pocket. He pressed a few buttons and in a moment “data sent” message appeared on the screen.

Alyssa sat down on her chair and warmed her hands on both sides of the enormous tea cup of hers. She took a couple of Africa Spirit sweet meats from her desk and chewed them down with the tea. She was thinking of Lecavalier’s suggestion for a while but then her thoughts traveled back in time to her teenage... and to Henry Yorke.

Henry Yorke had always been more than an uncle to Alyssa. When she was a child they would go fishing together, make day trips to ice cream parlors or just spend time in an amusement park. Henry had quickly understood how mature his niece was. Already at the age of three she was selling cakes made of sand to passers-by on the street. ‘5 dollars’ she would say when they were asking for a price. The amused strangers would give her ample amounts for her half-baked sand cakes, without having a heart to tell that the currency was pound.

Later in the university she was sharing this story with some of her friends and after some initial laughter they decided to develop the idea further. If complete strangers would give 5-10 pounds to a little girl just like that, they would surely have money aside to spend on more grand purposes. Thus the initial idea of 5dollars was born.

Henry was an advisor who was always willing to guide and help. He would selflessly share his precious time with young Alyssa who wanted to learn the ropes of business. He was always there... until recently she had realized RoE was consuming more and more of his time, and likewise Alyssa was overly devoted to SO. Though they were not anymore in that constant communication, Alyssa knew that Henry would always hold a special place in her heart.

Somewhere in Brussels Henry Yorke entered his condo and saw that Hover Bed had received a new message. He blurted out “play message” and the sound system activated:

‘Hi uncle! I was talking with Lecavalier. I really want to support him 100% and join Derlingo, but not without you. I know this is the right thing to do.’

21 – RC

A blond girl was sitting on a comfortable private jet on her way to Toronto. If there was anyone to see it would have been an irregular sight: She looked like a girl next door who could never afford a private jet. But there she was, sitting tightly on the seat and observing the weather outside. The sky was sunny and clear above the clouds, a complete opposite of what it was down there; rain and wind sweeping the streets and making people’s lives miserable. She connected her walkie to the plane’s secured communication system and dialed a familiar number.

‘Lecavalier speaking.’ She pressed off the speaker and picked up the walkie. Even here in complete solitude, she wanted to make sure others would not know anything of what was discussed.

‘It’s me. What’s happening?’

‘Nothing much, nothing much... I’m just figuring out where to get a proper meal. I’m sick and tired of these fish and chips packets.’

‘Marc, listen: is it anyhow possible we could accelerate the launch of UWCT?’

‘Why?’ Lecavalier was munching on something in the other end.

‘Darling, can you put that chicken wing down for a moment? It’s disgusting. We need media publicity urgently; it seems this courier of yours has not received the letter. I just received an alerting message from S that they have frozen the operation until further notice, though they have a constant visual on the courier. In case we fail to get the letter, we need a major distraction.’

‘So we need something big, eh?’ Lecavalier got the point.

‘Go public!’ she left Lecavalier with these words and disconnected the call. They were landing in less than fifteen minutes.

Suresh slipped a minuscule messaging device back into his shoe. He was proud that the guards didn’t find it when they were confiscating all their personal belongings.

Regardless of several warnings, Marie and Mercedes had decided to enjoy the sunny day on the paradise beach. For the first time they had come out of the camouflaged camp site in to the open stretch of sand. Mercedes had lent Marie a pair of bikini since she had two similar ones. They looked like twins in their matching apparel, though Mercedes was nearly white, coming across just barely Latin American and Marie clearly appearing as of African origin, with only her modest height and pretty face inherited from her mother.

‘Marie, could you also put some on my thighs. They sometimes burn easily.’ Marie was spreading sunscreen on Mercedes’ back. *What a waste, she’s such a beautiful young woman.* Marie took some more cream in her hands and spread it evenly on her legs. Mercedes could feel the soft hands caressing her shins and making their way towards her bare buttocks. She took a glance over her shoulder and saw Marie smiling at her. *I really like this girl. Once the campaign is over and I’ve fulfilled my promises to Miriam, I’m going to ask her out.*

‘Mercedes, can I ask you a question?’ Marie came lying down right next to her, leaving her hand rest on her lower back and looking Mercedes directly in the eye. ‘Sure.’

‘You said yesterday that you are not going to forget about the presidential campaign, although you are now here supporting the HTS.’ Marie thought if she was being too direct.

‘Yeah, so...’ Mercedes was measuring her face that was glimmering in the sunlight. ‘So, how did you plan to go back to Eelam from here? If you go by road, someone will recognize you and it will soon be on the cover of all papers.’

‘Can I trust you with a secret?’ Mercedes felt she could. Marie nodded smilingly. ‘You remember the shack next to the main building? Behind it there is a hatch that leads to a network of pathways that connect this place with all the major cities on the island and some other strategically important places.’

‘You’re kidding me...’

‘No, it’s true. These guys have been working on it for quite a while. They’ve got a lot of help from RoE experts in designing and building the system. It’s one of the solutions we are going to propose to re-unify the country: pollution-less means of transportation that takes people quickly from one side of the island to another. These guys no longer have to use their ancient busses, trishaws and God knows what they are traveling with.’ Mercedes seemed convinced of the worthiness of their cause.

‘Tell me more... I like it how you are so passionately behind your words.’ By now Marie was openly flirting with Mercedes, running her hand on her back and touching her hair seductively.

‘That’s all I know for now. And why are we talking serious things as we have this whole paradise beach just for ourselves?’

Jay had been resting in a shady spot right next to the beach trying to figure out what the last night’s conversation with the professor was all about. Now, however, his concentration was on these two girls playing with each other on the beach. At first it had seemed like an innocent moment between friends relaxing together in the sun, but now it was getting really interesting. They were all over each other, taking turns covering each other in sand. The bikini tops were long gone and Jay couldn’t deny he liked what he saw. Now the girls were chasing each other and once one of them caught the other they would fall down in the sand and let the waves sweep over them. Finally, they decided to go for a swim. Jay saw how they were caressing each other among the waves and holding each other in embrace. *If only I had binoculars... Wait, what am I thinking? Ok, stalker or not, this is so cool...* The girls went further and further away from the shore and now it was hard for Jay to spot them as the waves covered his sight occasionally. In fact, now he couldn’t see them anymore. *Where are they?* Jay got worried for a while, but then he saw Marie coming towards the shore... alone.

As soon as Jay jumped out of the bushes, he could hear Marie hollering in panic: ‘Someone, please help!’ Jay started running towards her. ‘Jay, come quickly! I cannot find her! Oh, dear God...’ Jay saw Marie crying helplessly as he reached her. ‘What happened?’ Marie could barely speak. Jay thought she must be in shock. ‘A wave came over us and she disappeared...’ she sobbed.

Jay ran into the waves and dove around. The salty water going to his eyes felt nasty but he had no other choice. He found nothing. Looking back to the shore, he saw Su-

resh running in to the water. 'Come here!' Jay shouted and wildly swung his hands in the air. As he turned back, he saw something in the distance. He started ferociously swimming forward. Waves were hitting hard on him but he proceeded with determination. *Oh, please let her be there... and let her be alive.* In a minute Jay dove again. Now he saw clearly a human body floating in mid-water motionlessly. *Shit... I'm late.*

Together with Suresh they dragged her onto the shore and started first aid immediately. Marie was crying next to them, unable to help. Suresh was pumping Mercedes' chest, as Jay was tilting her head back and exhaling into her mouth. Little by little they managed to pump at least one liter of water from her lungs... but there was no activity in her body. Suresh was trying her pulse: Nothing. They continued for another ten minutes and finally Jay could do nothing but bang her chest with his fist and cry out loud: 'Come back! Come back!' Mercedes was gone.

Minutes of silence followed. They took turns staring into the distance. One of the presidential candidates, a seemingly nice young woman, was dead. Though Jay didn't know her, he felt immense sorrow. As if at the moment the life went out of her body, they became as close as two human beings can possibly get. Looking at Marie with water in her eyes, he realized he should now push away his own pain and concentrate on comforting her. He took sobbing Marie in his caress and held her head on his chest. Suresh silently carried the body away. Jay and Marie lingered on at the beach for what seemed to be an eternity.

In Toronto Lecavalier's girlfriend had entered a high-class apartment kicking the door in. She had showed what was the marching order by putting a bullet in the Rottweiler's head that was barking behind the door. In an instant she had tied the resident in an armchair with a metal wire that cut sharply in the flesh even from a slightest movement, thus making any resistance a futile attempt.

It was an eerie sight: He was a tallish man wearing the most expensive suit money can buy but still he was feeble as a little kid in front of her. His mouth was gagged with an apple and a hand gun was pointed at his head.

'So, Apple Macintosh... What shall we do with you? We paid you a lot of money to get the job done, but you failed. Our source tells us your reporter never got the letter he was supposed deliver back to us.' Mr. Macintosh was mumbling something. 'Say what?' Again he mumbled but louder. She removed the gag.

'I'm sorry I didn't catch your name honey.' Macintosh tried to loosen up the threatening atmosphere though he was still in a bit of shock seeing his dog lying stone cold dead on the floor.

'I'm not sorry and for sure I'm not your honey.' She pulled a trigger and a bullet went right through his knee-cap. Macintosh was screaming in agony but he had to calm down when he felt the cold steel of the gun barrel in his mouth. He was in pain but managed to keep his cool. She took the gun off so he could speak.

'Before you do anything irreversible, let me call him.'

'So, you've seen your old movies, haven't you? A prisoner is entitled to one phone call, is it?' No matter how pretty on the outside, at this very moment she must have been the least sympathetic character at the face of the earth. 'Fine, have your call.' She untied Macintosh so he could reach for his walkie. For a passing moment Macintosh

thought he would call the police, but what good would it do. He would just end up dead and by the time the police arrived the apartment would be nice and tidy. This girl knew what she was doing. So he called Jay.

In Mirissa, Rohan had heard the news about their spokeswoman being flushed away by the waves of Indian Ocean. He didn't know whether to feel sorrow or anger. Well, at least these courageous guys had tried to bring her back. Now Rohan would have to use other, more diplomatic, methods to get Siva and Nita to speak for their cause. And that would be a stretch now that they were gone.

His contemplation was interrupted by a remote melody. *What is that sound?* It was a sound coming from a bag that withheld the private belongings of the latest captivities. Without hesitation he took the bag, looked for the ringing walkie and saw that it was an overseas call. He started off to Jay. *That man doesn't deserve any more hardships. This might be an important call.* What Rohan didn't know, was how correct he was. A man's life was dependent on this call.

Macintosh and the girl were staring at the walkie that was set on a speaker mode. They could hear nothing but the empty ringing tone. No one was picking up. 'So, that's the end of the line for you then...' She smirked.

'Let it ring!' Macintosh yelled in desperation. *Pick up Jay or I will come back from my grave to haunt you for the rest of your life.* With every unanswered ring, Macintosh felt his death coming closer. The walls around him were closing in as Sheenan took a few determined steps towards the phone in order to shut it.

'Jay Fleury.' A voice in the other end announced as she was about to disconnect the call. *Thank God...* Macintosh was relieved for a moment though he didn't know what to say.

'Jay, it's good to hear your voice.' *Good to hear your voice... Damn, I've never been that polite to him.*

'Macintosh, is it you? What do you want? This is not really the best moment.' Jay was still holding Marie who had not spoken a word since the unfortunate incident.

'Listen, I need to know if you are in possession of a certain letter.' *How could he possibly have it?*

'Oh that... yeah, I got it.' *How does he know that? Is he watching me with his satellite?* By now Jay had completely forgotten that Macintosh had asked him to pick up something from Colombo.

'Really, you have it? What does it say?' *Let it be the right one...*

'I haven't opened it. It says RC in the seal.'

RC... Renee Chevez... Former Canadian prime minister... Thank God... 'Good, don't open it. Deliver it to Henry Yorke – the RoE CEO – as soon as possible. I have a lofty bonus waiting for you.'

'Fine...' Jay hung up indifferently.

22 – Reunion

Henry Yorke was confused. His career at RoE would soon be over and now Alyssa had contacted her. He dialed Marc Lecavalier's number.

'Hey Marc, I've got to speak with you.'

'Hi Henry, I was expecting your call. Have you heard anything from Alyssa?'

'Yep, I got her call. She had left me a message. She was saying that she wants to join Derlingo, but only if I join too. She sounded a bit weird but I could not tell what it was. We haven't talked in a while. Maybe she had caught flu or something.'

'So, what's your decision Henry?'

'You want to know my decision? To be honest with you, Lecavalier, I have some fears and doubts if your project can make this world a better place or if it is exactly all that ethical what we are doing. Your approach is not always that innocent. But if Alyssa is so keen to join us, I can think about it. I thought she had planned something else for her life, but now she sounded convinced about this. I want to help her and forget how I used her before. I am in only if she confirms.'

'Excellent.' Marc Lecavalier hung up the phone. Again he had recorded the conversation and sent it forward as a data file.

Miriam was trying to get some sleep, but all her attempts were in vain. She was an emotional roller coaster. Her son was here. Though she didn't recognize him by looks, it could be no one else. She had been following his career and read every article Jay had ever written. There couldn't possibly be two 24-year-old Canadian journalists called Jay Fleury, whose mothers have gone missing in Mirissa.

This was a completely unforeseen turn in Miriam's life. She pondered if she should tell him who she really was. *Of course I will tell. This is just the worst possible timing. When we go public, anything can happen. Maybe he really loses his mother if Just a Sec decides to use violence to stop me. At least I end up in prison.* She thought how to approach Jay. *How will he react when he learns that his mother is alive and has been hiding from him all these years?*

Miriam was trying to figure out what kind of speech to give him, but this was no place or time for speeches. She would just have to confront him and see what happens. But did she have guts for something like that? *I have been the worst possible mother. I placed myself, my life, my happiness over Jay's future. What could he be today if I had been there for him?* Miriam felt restless and couldn't even think of sleeping anymore, no matter how comfy her bed was and no matter how much she had enjoyed leading her life of purpose just until recently.

What if I forgave David for all the things he did... could Jay forgive me? No, I will never get back to that man; a cheater, a womanizer, a heavy drinker that he was. Miriam's thoughts wandered off to countless good times they had had together with her husband. She thought about their vacation in Maldives; the candle-lit dinners in light sea breeze, the walks in the forest, the shopping in the boutiques, even the variety of all the colors of the rainbow portrayed by the fish they saw while diving. Tears filled her eyes as she was fiddling with the time-forsaken picture of three of them together in a snowy skating rink in Toronto.

She fell in shallow slumber without really knowing if she was asleep or awake. Images of strangers filled her vision, strangers getting hit by a bullet, strangers falling down in the ground lifeless, leaving just a small cloud of dust hovering in the air. Images changing suddenly to new ones where David was holding her in his arms and carrying her to their new apartment right after the wedding; Images of their shining red cabriolet on the yard; images of the swing lulling in the early summer wind; Images being replaced again by the horrors of death, bloodshed, desperation and tears.

Miriam couldn't take it anymore. It was as if she was heavily on drugs, though it was just the haunting past shredding her inner harmony. Finally, she took action. She got down from her Hover Bed, pulled on her robe and headed out of her apartment. She hurried towards the hut where Jay was sleeping next to Marie. For a while Miriam just stayed there next to the bed and observed her son's blissful slumber. She felt pride and was pleased that he had found a nice girl friend. They were a lovely couple, though Miriam couldn't accept Marie's practically non-existent threads of underwear.

Miriam knelt over to whisper in Jay's ear: 'Jay, wake up.' He didn't. She softly touched his cheek but it didn't help either. She repeated her words trying not to wake up Marie at the same time. Now Jay opened his eyes and was a bit bowled over seeing the Flying Fox next to him in the middle of the night.

'Jay, I need to discuss with you. Come, let's go on the beach.' Jay didn't say a word. He glanced at Marie who was still sleeping tight. He got up from the bed, put on his t-shirt and followed Miriam into the night, without knowing what's going on.

'What's happening?' Jay interrogated as Miriam had placed herself on the sand.

'Come... sit. I need to tell you something.'

'What is it?' Jay took his place next to Miriam, keeping a safe distance just in case, not that she appeared threatening in any way.

'Since you came here I haven't been able to concentrate on anything. I know who you are but you don't yet know who I am... I was trying to find the words to tell you this, but I couldn't. I'm just going to say it directly. Please, don't go mad.'

By now Jay was both interested in hearing what she had to say and utterly puzzled. 'So... what is it?'

'My name is Miriam Fleury. I'm your mother.' She blurted out bluntly in a shivering tone.

Some seconds of silence followed. Jay was looking out to the moon lit ocean. Coconut trees were mildly swinging in the wind. Somewhere in the distance a stray dog howled its loneliness. 'Is this some kind of a sick prank? Who are you really?'

'No, it's true. When I left to Sri Lanka, it was not a holiday with girls like I said. It was a... business trip. I was an unofficial agent... Gosh, that sounds so innocent. Let's face it: I was a contract killer. I did jobs all around the world but kept Sri Lanka as my base. There was some ground work to do here, intelligence as they'd put it. After a few years I was hired to assassinate the leaders of LTTE and Government of Sri Lanka.'

'Yeah right... Now that is a mouthful... I don't believe you.'

'Ok, you need proof. How many people know that you have a birthmark in your left hip? Or who could possibly know that you were such a cocky little kid that you even returned your birthday present – a red toy tractor – into the store because you didn't like

the color? Jay, I am your mom. All these years I've regretted that I left. I've been following your career and I do love you a lot but I could never come back home. Not with my resume.'

Jay's eyes were slowly watering. He was shivering as suddenly the gust from the ocean felt like going down his spine. A moment of silence surrounded them.

'How could you... How could you leave me and dad like that? Are you aware that he was taken to an asylum shortly after you had been reported dead; that I wasn't allowed to see him? Are you aware that I was living in a foster family all those years?'

'I have no reason to lie to you anymore... I know you hate me now... But I need to tell you more. Your dad and I were working in the same company. He was an agent too, but his specialty was industrial espionage, not assassination. He was not mentally ill and he was never taken to an asylum. He was living with me here. We missed you a lot, but we had our own life here. If anyone knew you were our son, you wouldn't be sitting here now. They always use the agents' families for blackmailing when push comes to shove. We just went a few steps too far. I regret the day I left Canada. I hope you understand...'

'I don't... I know dad. He could have never been an agent! He's an old drunk.' Jay was half-crying, half-shouting.

'So, he got back in touch with you?' Jay nodded still sobbing. 'I thought we were so much in love but he had for years cheated on me with the local girls. He always spoke his way back to my heart but by the time I got to know that one of those girls is pregnant it was the end of our story. I made him leave although he was trying to convince me that he would change.'

'How could you abandon your child?' Jay's hatred-filled eyes were like daggers that pierced Miriam's heart.

'Jay, I love you. You can stay with me here with your girlfriend. Life here is good. I will never leave you again.' Miriam was stuttering emotionally.

'No, but I will leave you. You're not my mother...' Jay stood up, wiped his eyes and ran back to the hut, leaving Miriam crying on the beach.

Jay took Marie's clothes from the chair and shook her up. 'Marie, we are leaving now.' Marie woke up and noticed how emotional Jay was. She didn't dare to ask what was wrong, so she just obediently got dressed and followed him out of the room. Jay woke up also Suresh and soon all three were on their way to the hatch.

Rohan's alarming voice disturbed Miriam's grief: 'Madame, they are about to escape.'

Miriam raised her walkie to speak. 'Let them go...'

Alyssa Keane came home after an eventful day. She put a kettle on and fell on her favorite easy chair exhaling deeply. She lifted her feet up on the table, took her hand bag and grabbed her walkie. 'One voice message received'... She pressed "play".

It was Henry's voice. She could recognize it though the quality of the message was not that good: 'Alyssa, I am in. I want you to forget your fears and doubts. Join us and we make this world a better place. This is exactly what you have planned all your life. Now is your chance. Think about it. Call Lecavalier to tell your decision. I am convinced about this.'

23 – Kithulgala

Marie and Jay were waiting Suresh to close the hatch behind him. Marie was holding a torch and Jay was examining the eerie gadget attached to a single rail. Jay was a bit claustrophobic in this hole that was the start of a seemingly vast network. Before her death Mercedes had told Marie everything about the new means of transportation and the basics of how it could be used. Though she had shared this groundbreaking information with Jay and Suresh, they looked a bit skeptical of actually having to use a sledge with rockets. ‘How many people this thing can carry?’ Jay was examining the sledge.

‘Two. I’ll go first with Marie and you follow us then, ok?’ Suresh had been acting weird lately. Jay could have sworn he was jealous of Jay having so close-knit ties with Marie.

‘It’s better if you go first and then we follow with Marie.’ Jay was insisting. Suddenly dim electric light filled the tunnel. Marie had found a switch.

‘Guys, stop arguing. Look, there’s a bigger sledge over there.’ Marie was pointing towards the bend. They had to keep their heads down as they crawled over to the sledge. The three of them were positively surprised when they saw a color coded rail network map on the wall. If all those tunnels really existed it was amazing what HTS had done. This new method might revolutionize the very concept of transportation. The tunnels were quick to build with the directed antimatter rays, there was no pollution whatsoever and these things were said to go fast. And they should... because someone was just about to open the hatch.

‘Shit, we are being followed. Get in.’ Suresh pushed Marie inside the sledge and Jay followed. They all buckled up, switched on the control panel and without leaving room for hesitation Suresh pressed start. The sledge took off.

They were going amazingly fast in the dark tunnel where only small led lights were showing the way in the roof. Jay felt nausea but was able to keep the dinner inside. He had had an excellent dinner in fact; something called kotthu. It was like pasta but better and spicier. The best thing about it was how the chef had prepared it; chopping it with two plates against the frying pan. Jay thought that the rhythmical clatter of the kotthu plates had sounded like music.

The sledge slowed down and little by little stopped in the dark. Apart from the lights in the control panel, it was pitch-black and there was no sound whatsoever. In the control panel it said: ‘Thank you for traveling. Please refill the AM vacuums.’

‘Ayoo... Did we run out of fuel?’ Suresh was shocked.

‘No, no, no... It cannot be. Mercedes told that the sledge will not start if there’s not enough power to reach the destination.’ She was looking for her torch.

‘But we cannot be in Jaffna yet? I admit it’s a damn fast thing, but not that fast! We’ve come only ten minutes or so...’ Jay had a point.

‘So, where are we if not in Jaffna?’ Marie lit the torch.

‘There’s only one way to find out.’ Suresh was pointing at a piece of metal that appeared familiar to all of them.

‘It’s a hatch!’

In less than a minute all of them were pushing the hatch open and a roar of rapids took them by surprise. This was definitely no Jaffna. This wasn't even a city. Actually, the moonlight was enough to see that they might have been the only ones in this abandoned village. Marie showed her torch towards an old sign: "Sumal's Cool Spot. Kithulgala."

'Cool spot.' Jay laughed out loud.

'Ok, we made a mistake in the rush. We were supposed to adjust the destination color from the control panel. We didn't and now we are stuck here.' Marie was reasoning.

'Do you guys have any AM with you?' Suresh was asking. They both shook their heads. 'Well, it seems we're staying for the night then. We'll figure out tomorrow how to proceed from here.'

'Do you have any suggestions where to sleep?' Jay asked doubtfully.

'Let's find out.' Suresh started to walk, holding the torch. In its simplicity that was the best advice they had at the moment. Soon they reached a rusty padlocked iron gate. It was blocking their way to an old mansion-like structure. Jay tried to shake the gate open but it didn't help. He was holding on the iron bars and put all his powers to crash the gate. Suresh kicked the gate but it stood still.

'Umm... guys, what are you doing?' Marie asked from a few meters away. She was standing on the white wall surrounding the area. Jay and Suresh were embarrassed and followed her climbing over the wall.

They crossed the lawn that was growing wild with different kinds of weeds. Seemingly the place was abandoned. No one had taken care of the building or the yard in many years. They took a peek inside. As soon as Marie walked in, a huge uguduwa jumped on her head screeching like a devil. Marie was hysterically screaming and hitting the long otter-like creature with her both hands. Its thick soft fur didn't do justice for the infernal voice. The vociferous animal was about to sink its claws on Marie's face, but Jay's swing with a cricket club sent the creature up in the air and it finally landed on the porch with a silent thud.

'That's what I call Softball.' Jay smiled ironically. Marie didn't think it was funny, no matter how soft the ball had been. 'We are not sleeping here.' Marie made a decision for all three of them.

They continued looking around the surroundings. It was a lovely natural place; the sound of the river mixing with the chirping of hundreds of grasshoppers, pure air indulging their nostrils and wooden constructions paying homage to the nature. 'There are some tree houses!' Suresh had found an option B. They accelerated their pace to go check his findings. Indeed there were several lovely tree houses just waiting for them to step in. First few of them were locked but then they found an open door. They looked inside. It was a very simple rustic room with a king-size bed and a see-through wall on the river-side. 'We'll take this one' Marie announced taking Jay by hand and stepping in. Suresh sighed and found himself another open door. Jay was secretly happy to see the disappointment on Suresh's face. *Victory!*

As soon as they closed the door Marie hugged and kissed Jay eagerly. 'You're my savior! Thanks for helping with that creature.' *Is she talking about Suresh or the animal?* 'You're welcome. Now could you just repeat your thanksgiving? It felt really nice.' He

didn't have to ask twice. Marie was now all over him, kissing passionately and pushing him towards the wall with her thigh resting on his crotch. As Jay's back met the wall the room was suddenly filled with light. Jay had accidentally knocked a light switch and though the place was abandoned there was still electricity. *Excellent choice!*

After a moment of confusion they continued where they had stopped. In a nick of time they were getting it on, just a dusty mosquito net giving them shelter. *I've been dreaming of this since I met her in the hotel lobby...* Marie got rid of her panties, unzipped Jay's fly and without hesitation sat on his lap. The two bodies became one. Marie removed her shirt and let Jay caress her breasts. All this time they were looking each other deeply in the eye. It was heaven. Marie could see how important this moment was for Jay, interpreting of a few droplets of tears that appeared in the corner of his eye. *This is much better than I expected. No rush. No crazy drunken sex. Merely two bodies intertwined and a lot of... love.*

Afterwards they were just lying on the bed exhausted but happy. Marie leaned over to Jay and embraced him. He gave her a peck on her forehead. 'Jay, I'm not who you think I am.' Marie whispered her eyes closed. 'You are who you are.' Jay responded nearly asleep. 'I love you Jay.' Marie spoke softly. 'I love you too.'

24 – Current events

Henry Yorke was walking in rage towards the town hall in Brussels. Just yesterday he had heard that Derlingo NRG was holding a press conference on the launch of their new energy source that was mystically named UWCT. Yorke easily figured out what the abbreviation meant: Underwater Current Trap.

RoE research center had told him speculations of someone testing an underwater energy source. Yorke had asked Lecavalier if he had anything to do with it, but he had managed to change the topic to something else. Also RoE had initiated the research a few years back but it was internally banned due to the ethic questions that arose: Is altering or capturing ocean currents too much fiddling with Mother Nature? What would be the consequences? Who would be held responsible if unexpected, maybe even disastrous, effects would emerge?

Nonetheless, RoE admitted that being able to capture the power of the oceans, would fit well to their innovation scheme. Energy as well as all other RoE companies were constantly researching for next decade's solutions no matter how competitive they were at the moment. If they wanted to be a pioneer in saving the world with the tools of capitalism, they couldn't allow complacency for one day. In fact, they didn't: every day at least one breakthrough idea was filed to improve their internal processes, customer service, people systems or products and services. And those ideas were screened among the employees and executives in the first few levels of the organization, not at the top. Leaders' responsibility was solely to build and maintain environment for others' success. And that they did well.

Yorke was the last one in the company who had not gone through the in-house leadership development from the scratch. No matter how successful the company was, he was happy to let go of power after the presidential selection was done. It would fulfill one key part of the vision set in the beginning.

Originally the idea was to get rid off the initial management in ten years time. Soon they realized that the strategy has to be modified. A decision was made that RoE Ltd would be professionally run for the first five years: Putting systems in place, stabilizing functions, grooming talent and ensuring profitability. After all, it was a business decision. A lot of money had been invested in this goose that was expected to lay golden eggs.

Building the leadership supply at all levels of the organization had taken fifteen years but still it was a good achievement. Now they were a role model for any leadership-centered organization at the face of earth. Finally even the common housewives, single fathers, mechanics and gardeners understood what leadership is and how it can make outstanding results happen as long as everyone is willing to bear the responsibility posed by it. Leadership was finally everyone's business, and the business was good!

No matter how good leader Yorke was, now he didn't have any trait of rational reasoning left. He was furious of what was about to happen because of this arrogant Canadian prick... and what might have happened already. Yorke had taken the first flight in the morning to come and hear the lies of Marc Lecavalier. He would personally make sure that the world heard the truth.

However, as Yorke took his place at the hall where the press conference was just about to begin, Lecavalier was not there. He was confused. *Why is Alyssa standing behind the podium? Did she really make her decision to join Derlingo this quickly? How can she be speaking about UWCT?* Alyssa Keane was not only Henry's niece. She was genuinely one of the young role models that Yorke respected... together with the rest of the world. She was the business owner whose picture was next to every second article about ethical practice and visible integrity. She had an absolutely spotless reputation and now she was about to represent a technology that could potentially be against all her convictions. *That's it! Lecavalier has somehow manipulated this fine young woman to join them to get a good face for his cause. Now I need to play cool. I cannot shout and insult my own niece.*

The press conference was officially started and the murmur of reporters calmed down. Alyssa clicked on her wireless microphone and thanked everyone for coming in such large numbers. After a few minutes of necessary small talk she cut to the chase: 'I have both personal and professional news to tell you. I hope you have your notepads ready.' The crowd was all ears. 'Starting with personal news: I have decided to quit as the CEO of Sweet Organic Ltd.' Reporters were baffled, but no one could ask a single question. They were just waiting for her to continue. 'I will continue as the chairperson of the board, but the operational responsibilities I leave for the best suitable candidate. At the moment I'm not willing to reveal any names, since the position is only now officially opened.'

'What will you do in the future then? Does it have something to do with Derlingo?' a pale female reporter asked. 'Indeed it has. I have thought it over and I am convinced that I can have the best positive impact on society by joining Derlingo's top management team.' The cameras were flickering in the dimly lit conference hall. Yorke was biting his tongue not to speak yet.

'But how would you feel working for a company that is competing with your uncle's company?' someone from audience asked.

Alyssa continued: ‘That leads me to my next point. I have heard from trustworthy sources that our dear competitor and partner Republic of Eelam Ltd, and specifically Eenergy, is dealing with an unreliable and potentially hazardous energy source and my uncle has been in dark considering this information. Antimatter is not a safe choice for the future. Moreover, the monopoly status and dependence they have managed to build with their propaganda and decade long lobbying is harmful for the interests of consumers. They have managed to lock in the consumers and businesses to use their product and if they suddenly decided to raise prices of AM, there’s nothing we can do, is there? My uncle is supporting me 100% and wants to join Derlingo also.’

‘Girl has a point...’ someone whispered in the front row. ‘How come we have been so blind?’ someone else said. Henry Yorke was boiling inside but managed to keep his cool. *That Lecavalier asshole has brainwashed Alyssa. I never said that.*

‘Not to worry though. Through years of research and testing Derlingo NRG has been developing an alternative energy source that is completely safe and renewable. We call it an Underwater Current Trap, or UWCT. It harnesses the power of the ocean currents around the globe and generates the immense water flows into pure energy. Testing phase is over and we are ready to install the rest of the equipment in Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. We appeal to all consumers in the world to choose this wonderful energy source. Make that choice for your children. Derlingo is ready to serve you and answer all the questions you might have.’ That was enough encouragement for the reporters to engage in a yelling competition. Now everyone had suddenly their questions ready, though it was impossible to comprehend what they were since everyone was shouting at the same time.

Alyssa managed to calm them down and answered professionally questions like “When is the UWCT generated energy available”, “How much will it cost” and “How it can be stored and delivered effectively”. After about half an hour, though, came a question that no one – least Alyssa Keane – was expecting. A grey-haired gentleman stood up, removed his fake beard and goggles, and demanded: ‘Could it be possible that altering the currents might actually lead into a formation of dangerously big waves... shall we call them, say, Tsunamis?’ For a moment no one said a word. It was hard to guess if the silence was due to the fact that nearly everyone in the room recognized who the questioner was, or was it merely the question itself that caused the hush.

As everyone was just waiting for someone to say something, Marc Lecavalier walked to the podium from the back-stage where he had followed the event until now. He carefully clipped on his mike: ‘That is an outrageous claim, especially from you Mr. Yorke. First you ask your niece to join us and tell me about your career aspirations at Derlingo and then you turn your coat so suddenly.’

Yorke saw that coming and threw another curveball, now addressing the audience more than Alyssa or Lecavalier: ‘Marc Lecavalier is nothing but a good speaker and a deceitful businessman whose only motivation is money. Why do you think he was suddenly so eager to fund a CSR project to build, give away and maintain Tsunami shields? I didn’t see it back then but seemingly he was just covering up his dirty deeds.’

‘Yes that might be possible in your twisted wonder world Henry, but you see that even your niece is so convinced of our technology that she’s willing to put her reputation at stake. Could it be that you are just becoming old and paranoid Mr. Yorke?’

The reporters laughed at Lecavalier’s joke and pretty much ignored Yorke’s claims. They concentrated on a series of questions to probe Alyssa’s future with Derlin-

go, and the possible other breakthrough ideas that were under development. Alyssa felt a bit sad for her uncle but was more than happy to answer, in length and in as much detail as possible. As time passed, Yorke felt left out of the conversation. Though he was even more furious than on his way here, there was nothing much he could do at this point. Lecavalier's plan had worked out. The attention of world press now turned to a new savior: Derlingo NRG. Lecavalier had stolen the show and Eenergy could soon be history. Henry Yorke felt betrayed and disregarded as his long-term partner and his beloved niece stood side by side at the podium, seemingly enjoying their fame.

25 – *A tout le monde*

Jay woke up in a gecko's relentless high-tone noise. He loved those little creatures. They were useful for getting rid of other bugs and they were beautifully harmless. Jay crawled off the bed, leaving the dusty mosquito net hanging loosely over the bed. He pulled the rope and a hatch in the floor opened. He descended down the ladder to what had got to be most natural man-made toilet he had ever seen. Sitting on the toilet seat he could watch through the window into the forest and listen to the sound of the river. Walls were made of stone somewhere in the 20th century he figured. The best thing was that though the place had been clearly abandoned years ago, there was still running water. It was damn cold, but still running water. He undressed and went under the ice cold shower. Soon he got used to the water temperature and it felt soothing after long and sweaty night. He was observing a few fist-size snails that were attached to the stone wall. Then it struck him: *Where's Marie?*

He toweled himself in a rush, ascended the ladder, closed the hatch, dressed up and left the tree house.

'Marie! Marie!' *No response.* He prowled the area as if Marie was playing hide and seek with him. No sign of her. 'Marie!' he continued relentlessly, until he spotted footsteps in the mud and familiar apparel lying on the ground. *Those are Marie's slippers.* Jay followed the footsteps in the mud until they ended in the grass.

Jay hurried down to the riverbank. He twirled through the vegetation-filled path that once had been a small road. Kelani Ganga was raging determinedly and the sound of the rapids overcame everything else the closer Jay got. No more birds chirping, no more monkeys squealing, just the notorious rumble of the river.

Abruptly Jay had to stop dashing down as his left leg sank almost knee-deep in the mud. Good news was that he was more or less in the shore. Bad news was that he couldn't remove his leg from the oozing mud without help. He looked around looking for a tree branch to grab. Suddenly he spotted something else that required his attention. Approximately ten meters from here was a monstrously tall Kithul tree that had something inscribed in its bark. Jay couldn't figure out what the red letters said exactly but as he lowered his gaze a bit, he saw familiar clothes, neatly folded on a rock. That moment sent shivers down his spine. *Those are Marie's clothes. Why are they here?*

Another thought interrupted Jay's confounded moment. *What is that unbearable pain in my right foot?* Jay looked down and realized his bare foot was covered in leeches trying to lurk under his skin. There must have been a dozen of them... vicious little crea-

tures sucking his blood. With all his strength he wedged forward, grabbing tightly to a bunch of weeds, and finally managed to pull himself out of the mud.

At any other moment he would have screamed in terror and done his uttermost to get the damn things off, but now his priority number one was that longstanding Kithul gaha that delivered a message he never would have liked to see:

*A tout le monde
A tout les amis
Je vous aime
Je dois partir*

Blood! It's written in blood. But what does it mean? 'Here you go friend.' Suresh's words startled Jay. Suresh was now standing right next to him and offering a small china elephant. 'Pissuda?' *Are you mad? What the hell am I to do with souvenirs right now? I'm standing at the river bank somewhere in the middle of nowhere, staring at something that was most likely written by a woman I love, something that oddly resembles a suicide note and my foot is covered in these blood-sucking slimy creatures...*

Suresh sensed Jay's confusion and started shaking the china elephant. *Is it salt?* Jay realized that one by one the leeches let go of his foot and hurried back to where they came from. 'Stuhtee Suresh. Stuhtee!' *Thank you!* Jay was genuinely relieved that he didn't have to worry about the leeches anymore, though his foot was by now covered in blood and the wounds didn't show any signs of recovery any time soon. Still, it was not his biggest worry at the moment. Marie was gone.

Suresh finally realized the words painted in the bark. 'Is that French? What does it mean?' Jay was ashamed of his poor French skills. 'A tout le monde... For the whole world, I guess... A tout les amis je vous aime... For all the friends I love... Je dois partir... I have to go.' Jay's eyes were watering and his whole body was shivering. Suresh understood what the message is about, sensed Jay's grief and didn't have a heart to bother him. 'Man, I'm going back to the hatch. Come there when you're done.'

As soon as Suresh had gone, Jay burst in tears. *What have I done to deserve this? First my long-lost mother appears from out of nowhere and completely shatters my heart. Then the love of my life writes a suicide note and disappears in the river.* Hundreds of more questions consumed Jay's mind, but only thing consuming his heart was disappointment. He cried and cried endlessly but it was all in vain. No one could hear his grief. No one was there. No one at all...

After an hour or so a sad character moved up the hill, staring in the ground, his head hanging deep between his shoulders. He wandered off towards the hatch. It was wide open in the middle of the road. Ironically, no one could possibly find it here. No one was here to find it. Jay soon realized that even Suresh was gone. Even the sledge was gone. *How? There was not supposed to be any AM left? Why did Suresh leave me here? Who is he anyways? What's going on? Is Marie really dead? What did she say last night? 'I'm not who you think I am...' What was that supposed to mean? How do I get out of here? Macintosh... The letter...*

Jay was feeling his pockets. They were empty, except for a black hard candy that was wrapped in transparent plastic. *Weird. I can't remember putting this in my pocket.*

Right at the moment Jay had other worries than a useless sweet. He was sure he had not dropped the letter. *Someone took it... Marie? No. Suresh? Most likely.* For a while Jay thought he would go back to the tree house to check if it was there, but realized that would be in vain. Then, suddenly, he smiled.

This would not be the first time that I'm lying to my boss... He took out his walkie and dialed the number of Macintosh. He picked up immediately. 'Hi there, it's Jay. Listen, I'm in a place called Kithulgala. It's somewhere in Sri Lanka. Don't ask me where. Don't ask me how I got here. Just get me out of here if you want your stupid letter. Did you get it: Kithulgala, Sri Lanka. Send me a ride quickly.' Jay hung up without giving him any possibility for questions. He sat down on the road side, lit up a cigarette, and started waiting...

26 – Two out of three

Siva and Nita had traveled back to Jaffna safely, and insanely fast. Still, they had had time to agree on a cover-up story. They couldn't let others know what had really happened. They were loyal to Mercedes, without knowing she didn't exist anymore.

Of course, as soon as they saw the Eelamese daylight, someone spotted them and came for autographs. Just a Sec having eyes and ears everywhere, it took about 15 minutes for them to spot the missing candidates. A well-dressed gentleman wearing a Just a Sec pin on his suit informed them he had orders to bring them to RoE headquarters. They could only follow.

In RoE headquarters Amelie Callas, the CEO of Just a Sec gave them a warm but worried welcome. She was asking where they had been all this time and what had happened to them. Siva and Nita stuck to their story how they had commonly decided it was time to take some time away from the spotlight, and how they had disguised themselves and walked away with the press. It took some time to convince Amelie, but in the end she bought the story. Siva and Nita hated lying to one of their good friends but it was now the only way. They told her how all three of them had gone to the country side and just spent time together without thinking of the upcoming selection, and how Mercedes wanted to have some time for herself also.

Amelie had offered them a ride to go back to their homes, but they refused saying they were ok with greeting people at the street after a few days of being away. They walked to Siva's place without security and indeed were stopped by many asking how they are. These guys were really in favor of the public. Though it took some time to go by foot, they finally reached Siva's place on Karativu Road. It was a nicely fresh building overlooking the sea, right in the shore.

'Do you feel the same?' Siva asked. '...As if someone followed us?' Nita continued. 'Yeah, did you see anyone?' *Are we just being paranoid?* 'No, I think we're just being paranoid after everything that happened lately.' Siva smiled. 'What are you; a mind reader? You know what they say about people completing each other's sentences?' Nita smirked. 'Get out of here, you flirt.'

They tried to relax over a glass of orange juice, but too many questions were circulating in their heads. *When would Mercedes be back? What should we tell public about the High*

Tide Soldiers? How should we take them in our agenda next term? Siva's ringing walkie broke the silence. 'Hi, this is Henry. I heard you're back from your little hide away. I thought even you were captured by the HTS. Good to have you back. Listen, I need to meet you as soon as I get back from Brussels next morning. I have some worrying news of Derlingo. Why don't you check today's paper so you know what I mean?'

After the short and snappy call, Siva downloaded the paper. As the cover page appeared on the white wall he used as a screen, both of them were struck by surprise. "Derlingo NRG launches a new energy source: Underwater Current Trap is the way of the future." *Those bastards... It cannot be safe!* Siva and Nita read the whole four-page article in complete silence and then engaged in heated discussion. It seemed that whoever is selected as the new president will have more than a handful to deal with.

Chime of the doorbell cut short their discussion. Both Nita and Siva were shaken. 'Who can it be?' *Was there really someone following us?* Nita was scared. 'Should we open the door?' Siva asked. Nita said nothing. Siva collected his guts and went for the door. He took a glance out of the door eye and saw a familiar long-haired character. Still, he couldn't recollect where he had seen him before. Cautiously he opened the door, keeping the safety chain on. 'Hi Siva, remember me? We were at the HTS camp the same time, but didn't have a chance to talk before you left. My name is Tom Hardwick. Can I come in?'

PART 4:

Claridipity

27 - Scapegoat

Back in Colombo 2008.

Alex took a look at her watch and there seemed to be 32 minutes left before action. She traveled her eyes across the flawless suite and circled her finger in the container of ice cubes. *Hell no! I'm not letting this opportunity pass by. I'm in a fantastic suite, all alone, far away from my religious parents and there's a bottle of champagne waiting for me next to the Jacuzzi.* Alex didn't think twice. She removed her shorts and bra and ran to the Jacuzzi that was placed neatly next to the window. She turned the knob and hot water started flowing in. She placed the ice container next to the Jacuzzi and jumped in without patience to wait for the bubbles or to remove her white silk thong.

Alex took a bottle of bath foam and emptied the whole thing in the water. She was laughing by herself as the foam filled the tub and overflowed to the floor. Alex felt the least bits of tension go away as she pressed the button that turned on the bubbles. She relaxed tilting her head backwards, enjoying the bubbles caressing her. Sun was warming her black hair as it glimmered in the reflection of the window. She grabbed another ice cube to wipe of the sweat on her forehead. The mixture of hot water and cold ice felt so good on her skin.

Though her eyes were closed she could find a bottle of champagne that she popped open with her thumb. She giggled of joy as she poured champagne down her throat, her body being caressed by bubbles and nose treated by the sensuous odor of the luxury bath foam. The whole world around her disappeared for a while. This moment was just for her and it felt like heaven. Rhythmical Kandyan drums lulled her in sweet sleep.

All of a sudden three successive blasts broke her blissful slumber. She was shaken up as she looked down from window. Crowd was running wildly and looking for cover. Elephants were barging into the crowd alarmed by the detonation of bombs. Alex was just staring out of the window completely taken by surprise. *Is that the president lying on the ground? What am I doing? Or better yet, what am I not doing?* She saw dozens of heavily armed security guards running towards the hotel and one of them pointing right at her. Alex jumped out of the Jacuzzi just to run around the room, naked and without a clue what to do next. *What should I do if they come here? Are they suspecting me? I was supposed to shoot them but someone else did... Who? It doesn't matter. I need to defend myself.* She sprinted toward the suitcase, opened it by inserting an agreed on combination and started putting the pieces of the gun together, swiftly, as she had learned in the training. *Wait a minute Mia... You cannot just go shooting all of them. There are too many of them. And I haven't done anything wrong. What is the best thing I can do now? Bath...*

In less than two minutes the suite door blasted open and dozens of militia rushed in, shouting incomprehensible Sinhalese words. They all stopped when they saw Alex sipping champagne in the Jacuzzi. Just to confuse them a bit more, she got up so they could see everything. 'What's wrong?' she exclaimed helplessly.

Behind the troops emerged a figure that was dressed up in more flamboyant attire and was only holding a hand gun. 'Miss, what did you do five minutes ago?' *Finally*

there's someone who's speaking English. Must be some sort of a commander. 'Umm... I fell asleep in the bath tub.'

'Sir!' a shout came from across the room. The commander turned to look at an open suitcase that was partly dribbling water and contained parts of a fully-automatic sniper rifle. His glance followed the wet footsteps back to the Jacuzzi. He gave a final look of despise at the American girl, produced his gun, aimed directly at her chest and without hesitation pulled a trigger.

The half-full champagne glass splashed against the window and shattered in pieces as Mia (aka Alex) fell dead in the tub. Her hand touched the control panel and the bubbling stopped. Water in the Jacuzzi slowly changed its color to crimson red.

28 – Suresh

The afternoon was turning into evening in Jaffna, as Suresh came from the shower and hopped into his sarong. He took a seat on the balcony and lit up a joint. He took a puff or two to relax. His mind was elsewhere. *Why did Marie kill herself? She was one fine woman, just with a wrong guy. I hate that Canadian loser. It must be his fault.*

Suresh had reported Marie's death but got nothing else in response than orders to proceed with objective C. He opened a brown casket that contained a timer, detonator and some wires to be used in a seemingly powerful explosive. He practiced putting together the bomb with a piece of soap. He carefully installed the wires in correct order and concentrated on his every move though it was just practice. Suddenly the soap slipped off from his hands. 'Damn it!' he was shouting. *As long as the fucker roams free my concentration on any other job is in danger. He has to go.*

Suresh collected the electronics back in to the casket and started glancing at a neatly decorated booklet that contained all the necessary information of the hotel's services, menus and such. As soon as he opened the booklet to browse different dinner options, an envelope fell on the floor. Though it was just a feedback envelope for the hotel's management, it made Suresh's blood boil. It reminded him of something. *Where the hell did that fool hide the envelope? I went through his pockets while helping him, returned to the tree-house and checked every place. Where can it be? He must still have it.*

Suresh dialed a number in his walkie. 'Ssh... yes?' heavily breathing deep male voice answered. 'Machang, I have a job for you...'

29 – Kandy

Jay had been sitting on the road side for about half an hour. Funnily enough his mind was not anymore consumed by thoughts about Marie or his mom, or not even how he would get out from here. His main worry was where to get more cigarettes. He silently thought how pathetic it was, how addicted he was and how could something like that take away his thoughts of much more important issues. Still, for now it was good. It gave him something else to think.

From the distance he could hear a helicopter approaching. He stood up and looked up to the sky. Indeed a helicopter painted in yellow and black Just a Sec colors was soon hovering above him. ‘Mr. Fleury, we cannot land here. Go to the yard up the road.’ A voice in the megaphone announced. Jay obeyed the orders and hurried back to the big white building where he had “played softball” before. He still found the thought amusing.

Helicopter was waiting for him at the yard with the rotor running. Jay held his head down as he ran towards the helicopter. ‘Mr. Fleury, my name is Kumara. We were told to pick you up from here. Where should we take you?’ Jay checked the date from his walkie. *The big day is already day after tomorrow. I’ll do this one more piece and then I’m out. Stupid train...* ‘Can you take me back to Jaffna?’ Kumara lift his thumb up and said ‘Certainly, Sir.’

The helicopter took off and Jay queried if Kumara or his co-pilot had any cigarettes. Only then he realized he was talking to Eelamese citizens who wouldn’t touch such illegal substances. *I need to suck on something...* Suddenly Jay remembered the candy in his pocket. He took it out, opened it and slid it on his tongue. It didn’t taste that good, but at least it was something to replace cigarettes. Jay observed the lush green environment below in the ground. *Beautiful.* Though he had seen the dirt and filth covering the streets of Colombo he didn’t have a heart to throw away the candy paper. He was rolling it in his fingers and reading the letters printed on it. *“Hacks”... Wait a minute... Where did this come from? Could it be that someone intentionally placed it in my pocket? Could it be poisoned?*

Jay was about to spit the candy out of his mouth but realized he was being paranoid. *Could this be a message from someone? Who would put a candy in my pocket to send me a message? “Hacks”... What could it mean? Police? Nah...Marie, could it be from Marie? Candy... Kandy? That’s it!*

Jay tapped Kumara on the shoulder and he turned to listen. ‘I changed my mind. Why don’t you drop me in some hotel in Kandy town?’

‘Sir, how does Hotel Suisse sound to you?’

‘Perfect, as long as it’s in Kandy.’

The helicopter landed on the roof of Hotel Suisse. Jay felt like a rock star when the manager was welcoming him and took him to the reception. Jay managed to book a single room easily. The hotel was nearly empty. It was located on a once beautiful spot on the hill just south of the Kandy Lake. It was pity how smog was now covering the view to the lake, though there was nothing really to see anymore, if one was not a fan of temple ruins, trash and plastic waste.

Jay had come to his room to take a short nap and a shower. The nap lasted for several hours until it was interrupted by Kandyan drummers that paved the way for the monks who started their chanting in the ruins of Sri Dalada Maligawa, or the Temple of the Tooth.

After a nice long bath, Jay organized his reporter’s tool bag and was about to leave for the dinner downstairs, as the phone rang. ‘Mr. Fleury, a call for you...’ the receptionist’s blunt voice informed. *Could it be Marie? Maybe she’s not dead.* ‘Hello.’ There was no answer, just a click on the other end. Jay pondered for a jiffy why someone was trying to contact him, and how that someone knew where he was. He had not told anyone he would be checking into this particular hotel or even that he would come to

Kandy. His rummaging stomach, however, made him to put the thought aside and grab some food.

In the restaurant downstairs Jay enjoyed a spectacular buffet, although he thought it was a bit sad sitting in a nice restaurant alone. He was missing Marie. After the dinner he returned to his room. The door was slightly ajar. *Always double check...* Jay was blaming himself of his own carelessness.

He entered the room and slid the key chain on its place to put the lights on. He turned to close the door. As he was fiddling with the safety chain, something hit the back of his head. A grueling pain went through his neck and down his spine all the way to his legs. In a fraction of a second, Jay fell on to the floor and was about to lose his consciousness.

He fought against the pain and managed to keep his eyes open, just to see a pair of black leather shoes. The shoes belong to someone who clearly had difficulties breathing. The intruder had already turned the room up-side-down without finding what he was looking for. The only place left to look for was Jay's jacket... a jacket that he was wearing. A firm hand gripped Jay's collar and the other one reached to his pocket. But Jay's hands were also in action. He found a pen from the floor and without hesitation swung it up in the air. The pen found its target on the intruder's throat spilling blood all over the place. Jay went unconscious.

As Jay opened his eyes he realized he's in the hospital. The back of his head was still sore but otherwise he felt pretty much alive. The place wasn't in exactly tiptop condition. The walls once used to be white; now covered in black streaks of something that had dribbled through the ceiling. The hospital equipment was old-fashioned and there were hardly any personnel.

He couldn't recall what had happened so he decided to ring the bell that he thought would call the nurse. It worked and soon there was a Sinhalese nurse attending to him with a wide smile on her face. 'Ah, Mr. Fleury has woken up.' *Duh... Stating the obvious.* 'Umm... yes... What happened?' *I can remember the struggle, but nothing after that.* 'They found you lying next to a body from your hotel room. The whole room was rummaged around, so the police figured it was an intruder. They think it's obviously self-defense and will hear you later. You shouldn't worry about it too much. Now could you please pay your stay and sign here?'

Jay saw the nurse holding a credit card receipt that she had so helpfully prepared for him. *This is outrageous.* 'Shouldn't the hotel pay for this, or my employer, or a friggin' insurance company?' The nurse looked taken aback. 'It's between you and your insurance company, but we need the payment now for our services. Could you just please sign here?' Jay signed, took off the blanket and stood up. 'Where are my clothes? I'm out of here.'

30 - Pact

Nita and Siva had invited the stranger inside, because he came alone and didn't feel at all threatening. Professor Hardwick had introduced himself, got their trust and made himself at home. Now he got ready to explain the whole story.

‘Listen kids. In the early 2000s I heard from my colleague, professor Jayasuriya of Colombo University, that new kind of energy source was under development. We were in correspondence around the topic for years and he gave me all the details, though it was against the university rules and regulations to disclose any sensitive information about ongoing research. Over the years the scientists were trying to prove that altering the ocean currents would not change the operation of nature. My friend, however, wrote in one of his letters that “it is likely that altering ocean currents that drastically leads to a formation of a huge wave”. The university banned further research as too risky.’

After taking a sip of water he continued: ‘Soon Jayasuriya was recruited to Derlingo NRG to work in solar and wind power research. However the real reason according to him was to get the specifics of how to make the Underwater Current Trap function effectively. He refused to give them initially but he was threatened continuously, at first subtly and later even physically. All this time he kept me updated of his poor lot and I tried to help him from distance. Then, some time ago, I stopped hearing from him. I got really worried and found out that he has been drowned accidentally during a fishing trip. I refused to accept that explanation. He didn’t particularly like water, so I doubted he would go fishing willingly. Do you still want to listen?’

‘Yes, go on...’ Siva and Nita were nodding. This was possibly breakthrough information for them.

‘By now I was convinced that Derlingo had been testing the UWCT and just today we got a confirmation for that. In this briefcase I have all my correspondence with professor Jayasuriya and it serves as waterproof evidence, excuse the pun, that Derlingo’s actions have caused all the Tsunamis.’

Siva and Nita gulped simultaneously. ‘So, you are saying that Derlingo is responsible for the deaths of all the Tsunami victims?’ Nita asked with shivering voice.

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘So, what do you want from us?’ Siva queried.

‘Good that you asked. You know how the media sometimes is; you give them the facts on a silver platter and they ignore them if it’s not sexy enough, am I right?’ They both nodded again and let him continue. ‘So, we need the right time and place for getting major publicity. In the meantime I was staying in touch with the local news of Sri Lanka and Eelam, because I was working in the country when I was young. Recently I had heard some rumors about HTS, and though it was just a slight chance, I decided to find out if they really exist. That’s why you saw me in Mirissa.’

‘Ok, now you lost me.’ Siva interrupted. ‘What does HTS have to do with Tsunamis and Derlingo?’ *What’s our part? Why is he telling us all this?* ‘Machang, everything in this world is inter-related. In the beginning I thought that maybe there is no strong relation here but there has to be something. Then I found out what is the background of the Flying Fox. She has actually been working for Derlingo. Plus, I have something that might be of interest for Rohan, the second leader of HTS.’

‘What is that?’ Nita asked.

‘It’s a certain envelope that he was dying to find. I just happened to find it before him. I don’t know what it contains but it seems to be of great value to him. I figured maybe we can hook up with them and help them go public. What do you say?’

‘What do you mean? We have no role in this... Mercedes is dealing with them.’ Nita explained.

‘Oh dear... You haven’t heard.’ The professor buried his face in his hands.
‘What?’ Siva leaned forward.
‘I’m just going to put it bluntly. Mercedes is dead. She drowned in Mirissa.’
Siva and Nita couldn’t believe their ears. Nita started sobbing. ‘Who killed her?’
Siva demanded.
‘No one, it was an accident. I feel your pain. I know you were good friends. But now is not the time for sorrow. Are you in or not?’
Nita continued sobbing and Siva kept her in embrace. ‘Of course we are.’
‘Good, I’ll come and meet you with some people day after tomorrow. Now I feel like having a bit of vacation. It’s been a bit too adventurous lately, no? You guys get some rest too.’

31 – Candy woman

In the blistering sun, Jay was walking beside the shores of Kandy Lake and wiping sweat out of his forehead. *What the hell am I doing here?* The ruins of once-glorious Sri Dalada Maligawa reminded Jay about the decay of the country. *Why did I think Marie would still be alive?* An odd looking creature was sunbathing on the dirty grass behind the once white stone wall. ‘Is that a fucking dinosaur?’

‘No, Mr. That’s a water monitor.’ A passer-by answered. *Did I think out loud again?* ‘Ah, right. Of course it is.’

‘Would you like me to take a picture of you and the water monitor, Sir?’

‘No thanks.’ Jay continued his stroll thinking that he should probably find his way back to Jaffna if he wanted to get anything done with the Eelam Star story. The sun was scorching from the clear sky and diesel fumes filling the air made Jay feel nauseated.

Suddenly, three men came out of the blue and surrounded Jay. They all were wearing “Just a Sec” vests.

‘Yes, can I help you?’ Jay asked.

A young security guy wearing shades and rolling a toothpick in his teeth stared at Jay. ‘I believe you can. We know you are in possession of a certain letter that belongs to us.’ The man stated firmly in broad American accent.

Shit, the letter...I told Macintosh that I still have it. ‘Actually, I don’t have it anymore. Someone took it from me. See, I was attacked last night.’ Jay was pointing at the bandage in his head.

The American was standing right next to Jay, looking very intimidating. He took his walkie and informed someone: ‘He says he’s not in possession of the letter anymore; that someone took it. Can we use force?’ Jay was frightened. *No force, no force needed...* The walkie rattled and Jay could barely hear the answer: ‘It’s ok, we deal with him later. Proceed.’ Jay didn’t know what it meant but he was relieved as the security guards left him alone.

Jay was wandering aimlessly at the streets of Kandy, while people were giving him looks. It wasn’t every day that a white man appeared in the town anymore. A slight tap on his shoulder made him stop. Jay was startled thinking Just a Sec fellows were back to give him a good beating.

For a while he thought he was hallucinating. *Marie?* Jay rubbed his eyes.

‘Yes, it’s me. Seems that you got my message after all...’ Regardless of how much he had hoped for it, Jay was stunned Marie was still alive. ‘You could have just asked me to go to Kandy with you. Why did you have to play all these games?’

Marie seemed unwilling to explain anything right now. She dragged him to a three-wheeler that she had “borrowed”. Jay got into the backseat completely overwhelmed by the situation. Marie pulled the lever on her left twice and the motor started. She drove off a few blocks and they came to a road that took them up the hill towards the woods. An old sign welcomed them to Udawattakelle Sanctuary.

‘What is this place and why are we here?’ Jay demanded to know. ‘This is an old natural reserve. It’s a quiet place where I can explain you everything.’ They stopped the three-wheeler in front of a locked gate that served no purpose because they could just pass it from either side.

They entered the park and Marie motioned him to follow. There was a map that showcased the area. As they passed it Jay saw that they are pacing on the “Lovers’ walk”. *How convenient?* The suppressed emotions started to come into surface again. Finally they sat on an aged wooden bench. Marie kissed Jay without a warning and he remained baffled. She took his hand and just watched him in the eye.

‘Right, umm... what was the suicide note all about?’

‘You didn’t get it? That was to mislead Suresh to think I’m dead.’

‘Mislead Suresh? Well, it definitely misled me. I cried for over an hour.’

‘Sweet, now I know you really love me. But you were supposed to get it. I woke up early that morning and browsed through all the stuff that I had collected of those old heavy metal bands that you dig. I tried to find a way to make Suresh think I’m gone but give a message to you.’

‘Wait a minute... Why did you have to fool Suresh?’ Jay interrupted.

‘I wanted to be with you. I wanted my employer to think I went missing in action. Anyway, as I was going through the old lyrics that you might know, I came up with this song from Megadeth called “A tout le monde”’.

‘Those were song lyrics? I’ve never been much of a Megadeth fan. But of course I know the song, now that you mentioned it. Ok, fine... but why did you need to get rid of Suresh? You didn’t answer my question.’

‘Right... That’s what I tried to tell you the last night. I told you I’m not who you think I am. How to put this...’

‘Why don’t you try straightforward honesty for a change? I’m tired of all the games and tricks.’

‘Ok, let’s start with the basics. I’m not French. I’m Canadian too.’

‘What? Why did you lie about that? And your name is...’

‘It’s Marie. That part I didn’t lie. I know it sounds a bit rough, but I can’t lie to you. I love you. I really do. I’m not a business analyst.’

‘Why I’m not surprised? So, what are you: a contract killer, too?’ Marie went silent. Time passed. No answer.

‘Really? This is too thick! My mother comes out of nowhere and says she was a contract killer and then my new girlfriend happens to have the same unfortunate job. You must be kidding me.’

Marie didn't quite understand the "my mother" part. 'Excuse me? Now you're not telling me everything. You said your mother was dead.'

'That's the reason why I wanted to leave Mirissa in the middle of the night. It turned out that my mother was not dead, but instead a leader of the High Tide Soldiers. Can you believe it?'

'Are you saying Miriam Fleury aka The Flying Fox is your mother?'

'Seems so... but don't try to change the topic.'

'Oh, sorry... Yep, that's who I was: a cold-hearted killer trained to do my job and move on. But when I met you I found much more delicate side of myself. Suddenly it was ok to be afraid of spiders and I knew I could open up to you.'

Jay kept his distance. 'So, who were you supposed to kill here? My mom?'

'Not your mom silly. Umm...'

'Yes, be honest...'

'Mercedes Bauer.'

Jay jumped up from the bench. 'What? You killed Mercedes? Why? I can't believe this. So, all that "vulnerable little me, lost my friend in the waves" was just an act?' He was walking around restlessly and buried his face in his hands.

'Please, Jay, forgive me. And it wasn't an act. It made me realize I cannot do it anymore. I had changed. When you were trying to bring her back I hoped she would be saved. I was shocked of what I had done.'

'Yeah, right...'

'Oh, come on! If I could act something like that I would be making millions in Bollywood. I know you cannot trust me, but there is something good that I did also.'

'And what would that be?'

'There was this certain letter I was supposed to find and destroy it.'

'So your good deed is that you used me to find it, huh?'

'No, listen. I didn't know that you are anyhow involved in the beginning. I was supposed to find the Canadian journalist who would take me to the letter, but I met you by accident. It was faith. And I genuinely fell in love with you as soon as we met. Only later I realized you are the guy.'

Jay went silent for a moment when he realized that he was here not to do a story about Eelam Star but to find the letter. *Fucking Macintosh! He fooled me again.* 'So, how does that make you good?'

'Well, I was changing a few words with the professor and I knew you had the letter. I also knew that Suresh was about to fulfill that part of the mission for me if he ever found the letter. At this point I realized that the easiest way to do the good thing is to prevent Suresh doing anything that he was supposed to do. Or what I was supposed to do in the first place. So, when I left Kithulgala I delivered the letter to the professor. He was the one who was following us. Can you believe he stayed the whole night in the dark hatch?'

'Fine, so your mission was to find the letter and destroy it and make sure Mercedes Bauer is not selected as RoE president. You killed Mercedes but saved some stupid letter. Who are you working for then?'

'Marc Lecavalier from Derlingo NRG.'

'Lecavalier? Why has that name been popping up so much lately? And why on earth was I put on this mission without me knowing it?'

‘Well, he has a tendency of having contingency plans and making sure everything goes as he wants. For whatever the reason; you were the plan A; I was the plan B; and Suresh the plan C. But all that is irrelevant now. I don’t have to do this stupid work anymore. They think I’m dead. Let’s go to Europe and settle down there.’

‘You think I’m interested in dating a murderer?’

‘I’m not a murderer anymore. Come with me, Jay. I’m head over heels for you. I have more than enough money to provide a decent life for both of us. Let’s take Eelam Star to Prague and disappear. I already have the tickets for us.’

‘Thanks but no thanks. At most, I’ll give you a ride to nearest police station where you can turn yourself in.’

After a minute of silence and sobbing Marie noted shedding tears: ‘I rather walk.’

Jay was furious. All he heard was monkeys screeching in the trees. All he tasted was a bitterness of bad local cigarettes in his mouth. All he felt was droplets of sweat running down his temples and mixing with an occasional tear sliding down his cheek. He started off to the gate, jumped inside the three-wheeler and tried to ignite it. It wouldn’t start. He kicked the front wheel and continued by foot down the road. He swore he’d leave the country as soon as possible, and would never return. It was a cruel place, where everything revolved around deceit and betrayal. His heart was crushed.

32 - New alliance

Henry Yorke had not slept that night. He was sitting in his lazy-boy drinking rum with coke. At this moment he couldn’t care less for the rules and regulations of Eelam. He was waiting and waiting for Alyssa to call him, but the call never came. *They must have had a long press conference and a good after party with that back-stabbing fatso.*

He was already so intoxicated and tired that he almost missed to notice the illuminating lights of his walkie. He looked at it and the numbers on the screen didn’t look familiar. *It’s not Alyssa.*

‘Yes, who is this?’

‘Is this line secure?’ A deep female voice asked.

‘Of course it is. It’s my personal walkie. How did you get this number and who are you?’

‘Who I am is at the moment irrelevant. I believe we have a common enemy though. Mr. Yorke, would you like to bring down Marc Lecavalier?’

Henry’s senses sharpened. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I take that as a positive answer. This is Miriam Fleury speaking.’

‘Miriam who...’

‘Miriam Fleury, also known as Flying Fox...’

‘Is this some sort of a prank? Flying Fox is said to be the leader of High Tide Soldiers. You hardly sound like a terrorist.’

‘Well, I’m not a terrorist, but yes I am the leader of HTS. Now could we get to the point? One particular young Mexican approached me. He said he has been following you and Lecavalier for a few weeks now.’

‘Excuse me? I don’t know any Mexicans.’

‘Well, blame your own products. He has used his personal Eye Dee Satellite to record a meeting between you and Lecavalier, a meeting that brings to light some very burdening facts of your history.’

‘I don’t get you. Even if this particular recording existed there’s no way he could have captured sound on it.’

‘It’s worrying how little you know of your own products Mr. Yorke. Eye Dee Satellite version 8.02 that you launched last year was a big hit with the rich kids just because it has the voice zoom and audio-clutter removal functions.’

‘Ahem... right. So, cut to the chase Miriam.’

‘Can we meet face-to-face to discuss this further?’

‘Well, of course. Is tomorrow morning at my office fine with you?’

‘No, how about you just opened the door?’

The door bell rang and Henry Yorke was shaken up.

Henry went to the door and peaked through the door eye. There was a middle-aged woman waving at him and holding a walkie in her other hand.

33 - Serendipity

Marie spent what felt like an eternity on the park bench just sobbing and wiping her tears. She was punishing herself of deciding to be honest with Jay and thus losing a potentially wonderful relationship. But more than that, she felt disappointed that Jay didn’t appreciate her honesty or didn’t show any empathy. *Why did he walk away? Why wouldn’t he let himself fall back in love with me? Do I deserve all this?*

In the distance Marie saw a park ranger and decided it’s time for her to leave. She noticed the forgotten three-wheeler but didn’t even try to start it. She walked down the hill in misery. *I need a drink.*

‘Excuse me; is there a pub in this town?’ Marie asked from the first by-passer. He said something in Sinhalese and motioned towards the Buddha statue that was gleaming in the distance. Marie walked at least 500 meters but couldn’t find what she was looking for. She asked again and now she was instructed to go back where she came from. *What’s wrong with these people? Don’t they understand what I’m asking or are they just incapable of saying “I don’t know”?*

Marie walked back to where she came from and decided to go on the main road, Dalada Vidiya. She thought she’d give it one more try and went to a pastry shop. She approached the shopkeeper behind the counter. ‘Excuse me; is there a pub nearby?’

‘Vegetable?’ The fellow asked looking baffled.

Marie felt as much amused as hopeless. *What kind of answer was that?* She stepped out of the pastry shop and took a few steps just to see a sign ‘The Pub’. *Well that was close... and what a witty name for a pub.* Marie climbed upstairs and went inside. European style interiors and air conditioning took her by surprise. She wasn’t ready for that kind of a culture shock suddenly so she was almost turning back on her heels. Then she noticed there was a cozy looking balcony, so she decided to give it a try.

She sat down on a table where someone was browsing the menu. She didn't bother looking at the menu. She knew what she wanted. 'Could I have a beer please?' she ordered.

'Well, well, well... If it isn't Marie Thibault herself! It seems our farewell in Kithulgala was a bit premature.'

'Professor Hardwick! I thought you are in Jaffna already.'

'I was, but I got my business handled easier than expected. Now I'm taking some time off before going to see the Eelam Star honeymoon.'

Honeymoon... Marie went silent.

Hardwick could see that she has been crying. 'What's wrong dear?'

'Nothing, I'd rather not talk about it.'

'Well, it has got to be something if there is something to talk about. Why don't you open up to me? For now I have all the time in this world to listen.'

Maybe talking would help... All these years I've kept everything inside. 'Can I trust you?'

'Of course you can trust me dear.'

'It's just that I've learned not to trust anyone. I never thought I would meet you again. This is quite a coincidence meeting you here.'

'There is no such thing as coincidence. Serendipity, dear, serendipity... I'm meant to be right here for you. Why don't you start from the very beginning?'

Marie got the beer she had ordered in a nicely chilled glass. She looked around and there was no one else to listen so she decided to get everything off her chest.

'As I was a kid I was quite a boy-girl. I read stuff about technology and science when other girls were playing with dolls and reading comic books or love stories. I was into all kinds of martial arts. I lost my parents on quite early age and though I was living in a foster family I still kept closely in touch with my grandfather who used to be a real fighter. Later on I spent a year with him in Vietnam, but as he passed away too I moved back to Canada. I never cried; though I had lost everyone I loved. I buried myself in books and got finally selected in a reputed university to study energy technology. I passed quickly and with good marks. During my last year of studies I was recruited as an intern in Derlingo NRG...'

'Derlingo?' Hardwick interrupted looking surprised. 'I wonder if we are once again proving my theories of inter-relatedness right.'

'What do you mean?'

'Nothing, please go on. I was thinking out loud.'

'So, for the first couple of years at Derlingo I went through different job roles and rose quickly in the ranks. When I got my first management position a very unfortunate event happened. A manager from another department, a completely repulsive fellow, started harassing me. I was afraid to tell anyone and let him continue it for several months. Then I couldn't take it anymore. I decided to show him who's the boss the next time he made a pass at me.'

'So you beat the shit out of him?' Hardwick smiled.

'That's not the kind of language I was expecting to hear from you, but I guess you could put it that way. For a while it seemed like it was the end of my career. I was forced to resign from my position and take back my old duties. I went through a couple of counseling sessions but they were cut short by an order from someone higher up in the hie-

rarchy. For my surprise I was offered a job from a secret R&D department. I didn't hesitate a second though I should have; it was like a dream-come-true and foolish that I was I didn't question why they wanted to keep me after all that I had done.'

'Let me guess. The job wasn't exactly what you expected.'

'Correct. They were testing my liability in the beginning and as soon as I had proved to be a person who don't blabber anything about "the company internal stuff" it cleared to me what the real nature of the job was. They selected a batch of some dozen kids and took us through a rigorous "training period", that now in retrospect feels more like brainwashing than training. They made us watch torture tapes and tested our ability to tolerate the violence. They made us first fight monkeys and dogs that were just furious because they were injected with rabies or something like that. Over time our group got smaller and smaller as people cracked mentally. They said we can leave the group at any time if we wish. Many did, but I never heard of them afterwards. In the last phase it was just me and Suresh left. You met him already.'

'Yes I met him. Never really liked the guy...'

'Is this too much for you? Do you want me to continue?'

'Please.'

'So, in the last phase we were already so numb for violence that we could do pretty much anything they asked us to do: like slaughtering innocent hobos on the street. Suresh and I passed the training and we became a pair, though he struggled to pass all the tests. I even helped him to cheat a couple of times and covered up his mistakes so he could pass. I didn't do it for friendship or anything; I just thought one day he would be there for me. All in all, it was good money and I think we even started to believe some of that ideological bullshit they were feeding us all the time. I could see a trait of bitterness in Suresh. I was always the one they trusted first, Suresh came second. For the first time in my life after my grandpa's death I felt important. As if someone respected me. So, we started doing jobs that were more and more demanding. Every time before a new assignment we were trained and tested again. It's not that long ago as I passed what I believe was my last training. You know, I came here to do my last job. But this Jay fellow made me think twice.'

'Ah... Young love.'

'Thanks, but I'm not that young anymore. Being 34 you start figuring out what really counts in life. I know that if I could leave the job now I could easily provide a good life for myself and my family. I have more than enough savings. A good thing about Le-cavalier is that he always pays in advance. But that's pretty much the only thing.'

'So, do you mind if I ask what your mission here was.'

'Are you sure you're not a cop? You seem very interested in all the details. I could still back out and say that this all was just a well told story that never happened and that I'm indeed a French analyst.'

'No I'm not a cop. I am who I say I am: A professor who is tired of waiting and ready for direct action. But please, finish your story.'

Marie looked around and made sure no one else was listening. 'Ok. My mission here was to get hold of a certain letter and destroy it.'

'Just a letter... It doesn't sound that bad, does it? And wait a minute... are we now talking about the same letter that you handed out to me willingly?'

'Yes, I believe so. That was the point where I had decided to retire and disappear.'

‘What made you do such a decision now? Was it Jay?’

‘Yes... but there’s more to it than just the letter. My secondary objective was to liquidate Mercedes Bauer.’

‘Oh my God... You killed her?’

‘Yes, and I regret that. Now that is something you are not supposed to tell to anyone. Gosh, I don’t even know why I’m telling you all this.’

‘As awful and wrong as it sounds, I’ve given you my word. So, now what happens?’

‘If I only knew... I’m completely in love with Jay but I don’t know if I’m just using him to get out of my old life. You know he just walked away when he heard the truth about me.’

‘Well, I can’t blame him.’

‘I know... But what if tomorrow I fall in love with someone else? What if I just need to have someone to let me start again? What if I one day find out that I actually am a cold-blooded killer and go back to my old job?’

‘Those are questions you got to solve by yourself. I only promised to listen and keep your secrets.’

‘And I’m thankful for that.’ Marie took the last sip of her beer and put the glass on the table.

‘You know, I admire your guts. It’s not every day I hear such a grueling story. I wish you all the best in whatever you do Marie. If you choose to be in touch with me later, here’s my card. I’ll be there for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Uncontrollably Marie leaned forward and hugged Hardwick over the table. She wouldn’t let go for a while. A tear drop fell on his shoulder.

34 - Interrogation

Jay was making his way back to the hotel on Sangaraja Mawatha to collect his camera. He was exhausted physically and mentally. The sun wouldn’t give any mercy and he had had to walk all the way from the other side of the town. He thought he’s delirious when he saw a black car pull over right in front of him. The same three Just a Sec officers that had given him a hard time before grabbed him, took him to the car and sped off.

As Jay came to his senses and understood what’s happening he demanded to get his camera before going anywhere. Surprisingly, the officers agreed to his wishes and went to collect the camera. Jay had to wait in the car as one of them went inside Hotel Suisse lobby.

‘So, what’s this fuzz all about?’ Jay asked from the American who was again chewing on the toothpick. Jay wondered if it was still the same one. ‘I believe we both know what it is about.’ Jay realized there would be no fruitful conversation with this fellow, so as soon as he got his camera back he leaned on to the window and dozed off. ‘If you don’t mind I’m going to take a nap.’ He muttered his eyes closed.

They didn’t mind.

Jay woke up in Jaffna, in front of Just a Sec headquarters. It was late at night already but the building was fully lit. The silent security officers grabbed him by arms and delivered

him inside. They would only let go when they reached the interrogation room door. Jay had seen these places in movies and knew he will be watched behind a glass as he's sitting alone in the dark gloomy room. For his surprise it was completely the opposite. There were a few room plants, a cappuccino machine and a couple of red sofas.

Jay took a seat and he was followed by an elderly gentleman who offered him to have a cup of coffee. Jay couldn't resist the offer. 'My name is Daniel Otz. You can call me Danny. I'm the director of Just a Sec Jaffna district. I'm sorry if those young guns were rude to you, they are just learning the ropes. If you want you can fill in this brief customer feedback questionnaire before we start.'

'No I'm ok with the coffee.'

'It will only take a minute and we would really appreciate it.'

'No, really... Let's just get on with this. Why am I here?'

'Fine... Mr. Fleury, or can I call you Jay?' Jay nodded. 'Jay, it seems that many of the events lately are boiling down to you. Our surveillance has seen you in places where many unfortunate events have taken place. Such as the murder in your hotel room yesterday...'

'Oh come on, that was self-defense. I don't know what that guy was doing in my room or who he was, but he was the one who tried to whack me.'

'Right, right... and the murder of Mercedes Bauer... does it ring a bell?' The cunning voice of officer Otz gave him the creeps.

'Ok, you got me. What do you have so far? I can fill in the blanks.' Jay was trying to play it cool.

'By coincidence our surveillance satellite recorded too suspicious males on the beach in Mirissa the other day. In between them was a body that surprisingly resembled Mercedes Bauer. Would you mind elaborating on that?'

'Ok, fine. We wanted to have a relaxed time together in a hide-away without other tourists.'

'Excuse me, "we"?''

Shit, why I dragged Marie into this. 'Me and my girlfriend Marie Thibault... Nonetheless, we tried to figure out different options and then we bumped into this character who introduced himself as Dinesh. He said he would take us down south to a lovely beach. He did but then it wasn't that lonely beach after all. There were the presidential candidates, High Tide Soldiers and whatnot. So, our vacation turned into a nightmare. Eventually I found myself trying to give CPR for Mercedes Bauer, a lovely girl who he had just drowned.'

'Well, that is a mouthful.'

'You can check everything. This guy rented a car from Jaffna Car Hub, and never returned it.' As Jay was taking a sip of his coffee he saw a green light blink on the arm rest of the opposite sofa. 'What was that?'

'It's checked: What you said is correct.'

Woah! That was quick. 'So you have guys listening to our conversation and checking everything I say?'

'Indeed. Don't let it bother you. Can you tell me more about this Dinesh fellow?'

'His real name was something like Supermaniac Pill-eye Suresh...'

Daniel Otz heard something in his ear transmitter and smiled. 'Would it be Subramaniyam Pillai Suresh?'

‘Yes, that’s the guy.’

‘And how do you know that? You said he used name Dinesh, didn’t you?’

‘Yes. In the border we had to fill in all kinds of forms. I volunteered to take them for stamping. That’s when I realized it’s not his real name. Terrible process that stamping by the way.’

‘Okay, one last thing before I let you go...’ That sounded very good to Jay. ‘...In your landing card you said you’re on a business trip, and there is no mention of your girlfriend anywhere.’

‘Am I the only one guilty of combining business with leisure? As for her, everyone fills an individual landing card. See the Ashok-Hilton Hotel’s registry. We stayed there together.’ In about eight seconds the green light blinked again.

‘Wonderful. I’m sorry we took your time Jay. Have a safe trip back home.’

Jay stood up and thanked for the coffee. He also said it was actually quite nice experience, if they wanted feedback. As he was almost at the door, Otz asked him to tell greetings to his girlfriend.

‘I will, I will...’

‘So, you’re both going back to Canada tomorrow?’

‘Nah, we thought of trying out Eelam Star now that we’re here.’ The green light blinked again and they both smiled. *Shrewd old man, tried to trick me at the door...*

Jay never stayed for filming the Eelam Star, not to mention stepping in it with Marie. He went directly to the airport and claimed his anonymous World return ticket. When he finally reached the right gate there was still eight hours to his flight. Luckily this was not an ordinary airport but there was a long line of comfortable easy chairs where he could sleep before boarding.

But he couldn’t sleep. He was just contemplating Marie’s words of how she would change and never to do anything like that anymore. He smiled when he thought of her suggestion of settling in Europe and starting over.

He started thinking what was there actually waiting for him in the so called home. There was a shitty job, with a crooked boss. There was his cramped flat and a series of drunks who called themselves his friends. Still, he didn’t know if he can ever trust Marie again. He started thinking what her motives were to take on that kind of a job. He thought how much of her speech was complete BS or did she actually love him. He thought about the nights spent together, the time sitting next to each other at the bonfire, the three-wheeler ride down south... Those were best moments in his life. *Would it make any sense to take a chance with her? Was it worth a risk?* Finally he dozed off.

Jay woke up and glanced at the screen showing the departures. His flight was already boarding. There was another flight, though, that caught his attention: Final call to flight Jaffna-Prague at gate A9.

35 - Eelam Star

Semi-volunteer lobbyists with Derlingo signs had filled the street in front of Jaffna railroad station. They were now fighting of space with the reporters who had gathered to witness the launch of world’s fastest train, Eelam Star. The lobbyists were demonstrating

against it, holding banners that touted “Ban AM!” or “Be safe, use planes!” or “Better under water than blown to pieces in the air”. Some of the reporters had taken the opportunity to interview some of the demonstrators. All of them shared the same view: Antimatter is not a safe energy source.

Just as Sec troops were guarding the over-street pipe that took passengers into the shiny new Eelam Star that looked like a space shuttle without wings. Marie was patiently making her way towards the platform lost in her thoughts. *What if Jay's waiting me there? What if he changed his mind? Why can't I just be the girl next door? Why did I ever make the choices I made?*

Suddenly someone poked her side. It was a young boy who was hurrying to hitch a ride in Eelam Star, most likely without a ticket. Marie lost her temper and grabbed firmly of the boy's arm. *You don't push me around rascal!* She punched him right between the eyes and made his nose bleed badly. Before he could scream and catch everyone's attention Marie shut his mouth with her hand and continued walking towards the platform, with the bleeding victim in her firm grip. She could see the boy shedding tears in his pain but decided to release him only next to the train. She motioned him to be silent and removed her hand hesitatingly. Before the boy could say anything she produced a one hundred bill and gave it to him. He ran away bewildered.

The whole left side of Eelam Star opened and the red and black dressed staff burst in wild cheering to welcome the first travelers. Marie was a bit taken aback of the surprise but decided to follow the example of thousands of fellow travelers who embarked on the train.

All this was shown on several giant screens around the station. Marie followed the live transmission inside the train that was now filled with passengers, all embarked within just a few minutes. Voice in the PA announced: ‘Dear citizens of Eelam. Dear guests. Welcome to the next generation of pollution-free traveling. Welcome to be part of the launch of Eelam Star, the fastest means of transport known to humankind. Without further a due let us give a big hand for Henry Yorke, the President of RoE Ltd.’

The camera took several close ups of the train from all sides before cutting to Henry Yorke. Only parts of the audience were cheering, most of them were booing. For Marie's surprise he was accompanied by a familiar person. *Fox... Miriam... What are you doing there?* Henry Yorke was standing on the podium but was not holding a microphone. He had passed it on to the woman next to him. The audience had turned silent to observe the peculiar events.

‘Good day everyone, my name is Miriam Fleury. I am here with Henry to prove wrong all the speculations of RoE Ltd's crooked intentions. Instead I'd like you to turn your attention to what honorable Henry Yorke already tried to say in the Derlingo press conference: Marc Lecavalier is responsible of thousands of deaths of innocent people. His years of testing with Underwater Current Trap, or UWCT, caused the unfortunate events that we call the Tsunami. He also masterminded the assassination of the president of Sri Lanka and the leader of LTTE back in 2008.’ Frantic murmur spread in the audience.

‘Show us the evidence!’ someone from the front row shouted doubtfully. ‘As you wish’ Henry Yorke answered and a video started running on the screens. It went on for several minutes and a sudden silence took over the area. Everyone could recognize Henry Yorke and Marc Lecavalier discussing about the events that led to the formation of RoE

Ltd. When the video finally stopped in cheesy “Pablo’s Archives” logo the debate in the audience continued.

‘That doesn’t tell anything about Tsunamis! It doesn’t even prove him guilty really. Someone else did it.’ The Derlingo lobbyists were raging.

‘Oh, come on! You heard it with your very own ears! I was employed by Marc Lecavalier in Derlingo NRG to carry out the assassination. I’m willing to face all the consequences, even if it means serving the rest of my life in prison. Still, if anyone, Marc Lecavalier should pay for his deeds. I beg you to understand that I’m a changed woman now. You might have heard rumors of an organization called High Tide Soldiers. I’m their leader and I wish to take this opportunity to explain our cause.’

Jay felt weak and his head was spinning. He had tuned into the news channel in the airplane, hoping to catch a glimpse of Marie somewhere near Eelam Star. Now he was again face to screen with his long-lost mother. He only heard one sentence here and there as Miriam was speaking for the noble cause of High Tide Soldiers: re-uniting the island to one nation again.

Alyssa was lying on her sofa, watching the eventful day in the commercial capital of Eelam live from the BBC news. She couldn’t believe her ears when she heard of Lecavalier’s past. She couldn’t believe how naïve she had been in joining him. She couldn’t believe why her uncle had spoken for him. All she could do was to spoon ice cream directly from a large container and stare at the news transmission with watering eyes. She had been betrayed.

She picked up her walkie and dialed Lecavalier’s number. ‘Yes? Who is it and what do you want?’ an angry voice responded. ‘This is Alyssa. Are you home watching the news?’ Lecavalier was furious. ‘Damn yes I am. It is nonsense; all nonsense! I’ve never seen this woman before! Hello? Hello?’ The call was disconnected.

Alyssa dialed another number. Her British friend in the Montreal police forces picked up. ‘Hi Tawny! Alyssa here. Did you hear the news of Lecavalier?’ *I hope she still remembers me.* ‘Oh, hi girl... Yes, we are all watching it right now. Patrol is getting ready to make a move to his apartment.’ *Great...* ‘Good, do that. I know he’s guilty. He’s at home. Go get him.’

Though Alyssa didn’t know what to do with her future right now, she was happy that Lecavalier would have to pay for his deeds. She didn’t have much time to worry about her future, because interesting new twists took place in the news. An ever-increasing assembly of people filled the streets of Jaffna. Thousands marched towards the podium, holding up banderols. More and more of them kept coming as if they were emerging from a whole in the ground. They were all dressed in white t-shirts and chanting in concert slogans like “Unify the island!” and “We’ll do it together!” They had drums, empty plastic bottles, canes and whatever that just made noise, giving rhythm for the chants.

Alyssa was about to choke in her ice cream when she saw two presidential candidates leading the pack with some Sri Lankan fellow and another unknown white guy with a pony tail. The reporters were making assumptions of where did these people come from and why, yet remaining clueless of their purpose. It took about half an hour for the

marching to stop. Now the Jaffna Railway Station was practically surrounded by the marching people who suddenly went silent.

The Sri Lankan guy took a microphone. ‘Thank you Miriam for your speech. My name is Rohan and I’ve been leading High Tide Soldiers together with Miriam. I have here with me the two presidential candidates and a professor called Tom Hardwick. They possess all the evidence that it was indeed Derlingo NRG led by Marc Lecavalier who has caused all the five Tsunamis; making hundreds of thousands families suffer. I also have with me 3000 RoE employees who have gathered here to demonstrate in order to unify the island as one country again. Sri Lanka has suffered enough. Now it’s time for the Buddhist, the Hindus, the Muslims, the Christians and all the other religions and races to join hands to build a better tomorrow. It’s time to stop the hatred, blame and bitterness. It’s time to start cooperation, sharing prosperity and our love for the home country.’

By now Just a Sec helicopters had surrounded the sky, the heavily armed soldiers occupied the rooftops and everything seemed to be ready to break the unannounced demonstration.

Rohan looked up to the sky. ‘If you intend to shoot us with your bullets, smokes and nets or if you intend to unleash the dogs to create just another mass hysteria, I say you are foolish. We will not budge and we will not use violence. We all were given two ears and only one mouth so we would listen more than we speak. Now it’s your time to listen.’ Rohan handed over the microphone to Siva.

‘We have good news and bad news. We have heard that Mercedes Bauer, our beloved friend and colleague has perished. I know what some of you are thinking. No, we didn’t take her out to improve our chances to be selected for presidency. First we thought it’s an accident but as new evidence came about it was confirmed to be a murder. We’ve been in touch with Just a Sec and they are already tracking the killer.’

Nita took the mike and continued. ‘Now the good news: Siva and I have decided to share the power in the leadership of RoE next year, if the honorable selection committee grants us the possibility. Even if you would go by the book and select only one of us, we still share the salary and work together. What Rohan and Miriam have told you is a very important message. Together, by joining hands, we can have greater impact than working alone. If you remember nothing else from today’s events, remember this: we call for unity!’

Presence of the presidential candidates gave credibility and undivided attention to anyone on the same stage. Rohan got the microphone back. ‘Thank you Siva and Nita. Before the news channel you are watching decides to go for commercials, and before you go to your refrigerators, hear this. We have got hold of an age-old letter that hopefully is what I’ve been told it is. We haven’t opened it, because we want you to understand its genuine origin. Can we have a camera zoom here, please?’

In an instant all the cameras were transmitting picture of an envelope that was sealed with letters “RC”. Rohan continued. ‘This hopefully reinforces our message with the sheer fact that it comes from so far back in time. We hope it’s still relevant. Without taking any more of your precious time, I’m now going to open it.’

For a while the whole crowd was all silent. The helicopters were long gone. The soldiers had lowered their weapons. Even the nature held its breath.

Rohan read with pride in his voice:

4 February, 1948. Nuwara Eliya. Sri Lanka. Partly due to our misinformed decisions, I'm writing this letter of regret. We might have done a terrible mistake. If our predictions are right, this day of rejoice for many shall be noted in history as the day when gods conspired to doom this country into oblivion. A day will dawn, when the country will be torn apart, leaving only death and misery behind. A day will dawn, when there will be no more brotherhood, no more love, no more caring for each other, no more smiles, and no respect for the family. A day will dawn, when the day won't dawn anymore if this humble letter is not taken seriously. As we give the reign for the hands of the ones that were our servants, we hope and pray that they remember what we have done to help this beautiful country. We hope that they will cherish the blessings of our work and bury their hatchets for common good. We hope all men can be born equal on this exceptional island. We hope that whatever is drawn on the map by man, will never compromise the deeply embedded goodness of Ceylon inhabitants. We hope. We hope. We hope.

- Lord Soulbury, Royal Commission

Some hours later Jay read the latest headlines: Eelam Star had exploded into the thin air.

Epilogue

June 20, 2026.

The lights go off in the Toronto Female Penitentiary. The moaning, groaning and chatter of the convicts slowly calms down and turns into silence of the night.

Miriam Fleury switches on her mini Maglite to commence on the nearly ritualistic event she has repeated since the day she got locked in. She opens a small casket and takes out an old news receiver that time has tarnished but that still functions enough to read whatever was downloaded in it before the verdict got out.

She climbs on her bunk and switches on the receiver. There is only one bookmark pointing to The World issue dated on 8 April, 2023. She first glances at the front page – as she always does – where there's a picture of massive explosion and a heading "Eelam Star explodes in Turkey on its way back to Eelam". She sighs and feels sad for the lost souls. This image of an explosion reminds her every day of the just reason of her being inside the bars, of all the torn apart families caused by her actions, not least her own.

Browsing the pages to find Jay's article, she feels pride of her son's pictures, artwork and multimedia that are included the support the story, but she especially enjoys reading the text, over and over again. Today she's going to do it one last time, before breathing the air of freedom tomorrow:

On the Origins of Serendipity

"You're out of line", "That can't be published", "You're making it up", "Forget about it", "Better start looking for another job"... Those were the comments of my colleagues in the editorial of The World when they saw the raw version of this article the first time.

Was I out of the line? Most likely. Did I start looking for another job? Definitely. Did I forget about it? Nope. Did I make it up? Certainly not. Could it be published? Oh yes, you're reading it.

This ain't a normal politically correct article, not the kind of junk The World - including me – have been putting out for years and years. It was never proofread; not a single word or comma was changed. This might not be the new era of the world press. But it's my last article. Skip it, delete it, I don't care. I had to write it.

Sri Lanka, Ceylon, Tambapanni, Seylan, Tabrobane, Seylavo, Heladiva, Ilankai, Serendib... call it what you will. This island changed my life.

Upon arrival I didn't dare to expect much. A job is a job is a job, I thought. No matter how exotic the place was. I was set out to do what so many others are doing already. I was to portray another fine invention of Eelam, the formerly mischievous little brother of Sri Lanka; A brother that had quickly grown up and taken over the throne like Ravana from Kubera. I thought I was prepared to see its glory but I could have never imagined how magnificent it actually was.

Everything worked without a real government. People enjoyed luxurious life and they didn't ruin themselves with intoxicating substances. The air was pure, the streets were clean and human settlements merged with the nature beautifully. Even the sectors of society had blended: everyone seemed to be making money by contributing to common good. And everything was managed with strict professional efficiency. It was a perfect society. And I hated it.

No matter what the motives of RoE Ltd in their business were or what they might have done wrong, all that you can read from every other paper. Being a Canadian reporter it should be my duty to dig out the skeletons of M. Lecavalier and be disgusted how terrible crimes on humanity he has made. I'm tired of doing what everyone else does, so I don't want to blame them. After all, this is my life. And this is my story.

Off I went to see the big brother. His streets were bumpy and narrow. His air was thick with black particles of dust. His government was crooked and corrupt to the bone. His police was more interested in cricket than order. His food was too spicy. His women had hairy legs. His citizens were poor and greedy. His water was undrinkable. His houses were filled with bugs and dirt. Even his climate was too hot and humid. I loved it.

But more than the country; I've come to understand that it's about people. Where ever you go you have a chance of running into right people with wrong intentions or wrong people with some intentions. In Sri Lanka though, I met a few people that will always rock my world.

I learned how life is not really a continuum. I learned that people are not the same at different ages. I learned that you can't close the doors of future based on the choices of the past. I learned forgiveness is more powerful than bitterness; love more powerful than hate; a hammock sometimes better than a hover bed.

Now I understand that serendipity has its place in the English dictionary. It's not sheer luck; it's not just a coincidence. You don't need to go to Serendib to experience it. Serendipity comes for those who are prepared, who are ready for the challenge and who are in need. It doesn't come on a silver platter, but it gets you when you least expect it. It

tests you in mean ways that defy you and push you on the verge of frustration, hatred, and disgust. You can decide to give in to it, but then you will never meet serendipity.

See it through, no matter how long it takes, no matter how painful it is, no matter how much you feel like out-of-place. See it through, and you get the reward. The reward is more than addition to your vocabulary: serendipity stays with you for life.

Consider this as my official resignation. I got to go after my dreams, and get married to my Sita.

*Jay Fleury
A changed man*

PS. I love you mom!

Author's Notes

I hereby deny any responsibility over possible repercussions this novel might have. Apart from the historical insights and names of places it's purely fictional. No harm intended to anyone. No one should lose their temper. I wrote it with good intentions.

I started the writing process in March 2007 in Kirulapone, Colombo, Sri Lanka. The original intention was just to portray the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feelings of this unique country as I've experienced them during my time here. Soon, however, I thought it wouldn't harm to include some social criticism in between the lines. The story line suddenly portrayed two countries: one of which was highly advanced yet harmonious with nature and the other one a fair bit more chaotic and disorganized. Though in fictional writing many of the reality-based notions are exaggerated still some of those things do exist in Sri Lanka already today: chaotic traffic, trashes, pollution, excessive military and police forces on the streets. But the other side of the country is its warm-hearted people, diverse nature, rich history and the easy-going lifestyle it offers. Sri Lanka for me is like second home now. I hope the people of Sri Lanka can rise above the ridiculous politics to stop the insane expenditure in the so-called "war against terrorism" that is holding it back from development and prosperity. But to be honest with you, I doubt it will ever happen. This country is digging its own grave while the people are just blaming everything on the corrupt politicians. "What to do..." they say when they think there's nothing to be done, or are too complacent of making things move. It for sure makes life easier but it's not a solution in the long run. Sad to say, but I don't believe in Sri Lanka being able to reverse the development any more. I sure hope someone proves me wrong.

People whose feedback immensely helped during the writing process include my good friends Pirjo Rinnepelto and Petteri Hietavirta. Special gratitude goes also to Toby, Dommy, Teresa and Sutharshini who provided their valuable insights. Without you all I would have failed; not just in writing, but in life. Having friends like you is the most valuable gift one can get.

This book is partly a salute to freedom of speech and partly for wild imagination. Though this book is written essentially for me I'd appreciate if at least one person could get good vibes or a big idea out of it.

Every book deserves to be read!

In Borella, Colombo, 15 February 2008

Tomi Astikainen

State of the world

Started by three concerned university students in UK 1998, 5dollars was nothing more than an NGO without personnel, office or even basic infrastructure. All they had was a P.O. Box, a savings account, a web address www.5dollars.org with an open discussion forum. Most importantly, they had a grand cause. It stated in the website: ‘We live in a turbulent world, full of anger, catastrophes and misery. Still, we believe in an unmatched good will of human kind to help each other at the times of agony. When the opportunity arises it’s not in the hands of governments or nation states to change the course of our future history. We believe it’s the responsibility of individuals populating the planet called earth. Thus, we ask for your help. If you are reading this now, it means that you have an access to the internet. It means you are among us, the fortunate people who are richer than the rest of the six billion. It means that you are able to put aside 5 dollars and donate it to a yet unspecified cause that will be the turning point on our journey towards a better world to live in.’

No matter how utopist or naïve the message was, it quickly reached millions and millions of people. Most of them didn’t react, thinking it’s just another email scam, but a few of them did. Five-dollar donations started pouring in until the world was shocked by what we now know as 9/11. Most of the donators had already forgotten their act of good will, but those who remembered were pleading for the youngsters to give all of the money for the families of 9/11 victims.

This demand reached the world press and the steady flow of donations was suffocated for some time because of the scandalous articles they wrote, until the mastermind of 5dollars came forward in public, yet remaining anonymous: ‘Though we are genuinely sorry for the families who lost their fathers, mothers, siblings and children, we are not convinced that this is exactly what we meant by a turning point in human history. We don’t see this donation having the desired effect. Still, we remain persistent in our mission; the day will come that we make the donation. I’m personally donating five dollars every month. You can check that at any time.’ And the press did: they dug up all the transactions of the account. They were genuine. The previously scandal-seeking magazines made a common public apology and each donated five dollars as an act of belief. They were back on track.

In 26 December 2004 the whole world became aware of what Tsunami means. This was again a momentarily set back for 5dollars. Less and less people believed that the money would ever find the grand purpose that they were promising. If flushing away more than 160 000 souls were not a grand enough purpose, then what would be? Though the rumor was that the founders of 5dollars had all become successful business people, not a single penny on the account was touched. When this information reached the masses, five-dollar donations continued... And still no one knew who the founders were.

Remarkable is that 5dollars never advertised their website. Word-of-mouth marketing and failed attempts by the world press to put them down were enough publicity. By February 2008 individuals around the world had donated altogether 600 million dollars. That February something shocking happened on a tear-drop shaped small island of Sri Lanka. It was time.

5dollars took action: ‘Ten years we have collected money for a grand cause that would change the course of human kind. No matter how unfortunate events there have been along the way, we have waited for something more suitable to invest in. Now we are 100% certain that this is it. The rebuilding of the upcoming Republic of Eelam as such is already a good cause to invest in. Finally they got their independence but at what cost? They have nothing left. We don’t want the people of Eelam continue in suffering. We don’t want their new leaders to repeat the same mistakes as Mother Lanka did. Market economy was not an answer to Sri Lankan dead-end. It just worsened the situation. In early 1990s the country was unaware of a material called plastic. Ten years later they were already full of it, without any possibilities for proper recycling. The rich became richer, and the poor continued suffering. However, we believe that appropriately utilized market economy can work for the benefit of Eelam. This newly founded country will be an example for the whole world. We are ready to donate.’

Now the press was awake. 600 million USD was pocket money in a global scale, but it was definitely enough for positive leverage through press attention.

The recent developments in the global economy were not surprising. Despite ample critique, European Union had proven to be effective solution in the changing world. The premise of cherishing the cultural heritage and identity of individual member states in combination with overarching mutual cooperation was not only good for the European citizens. The corporate sector saw an arising opportunity.

It all started from a tipsy pub conversation in East London where some Unilever employees were “brainstorming” on Friday night. Someone had said how good company Unilever was due to its British/Dutch shared origin. This conversation was buried for a moment as the Friday Night Pub Trivia took place. One of the questions was: ‘Name the top five companies in Fortune 500 in 2006’. The regulars were so much up to date in pretty much all categories, especially brands & business, that the answer was easy for them: 1) Exxon-Mobil, 2) Wal-Mart, 3) Royal Dutch Shell, 4) BP and 5) General Motors. Then someone less intoxicated noted that if numbers three and four would merge, it would be the biggest company in the world according to the revenues, and that it would be another successful British/Dutch cooperative. This idea somehow ended in the board-rooms of respective companies and they both liked the idea of taking the crown from Americans. So they joined hands and started supporting other European enterprises to do the same.

After several mergers, acquisitions and strategic alliances the Top 10 list of most successful companies in the world was quickly dominated by European conglomerates leaving only three American companies on the top 10 list of Fortune 500.

Moreover, the new strong European multinationals were ready for cooperation. They understood the synergistic effect of pulling towards same direction. The EU 10 was formed; a loosely connected think tank finding ways for better future Europe, and ultimately a better world.

As the news of “Biggest five dollar investment in the history” reached the EU 10, they instantly gathered for a week-long “Future Waves Seminar” to formulate a strategy for the next 10 years. Facilitated by a small independent strategy consultancy, the seminar produced the most ambitious and most optimistic outcome. In the press it was known

as “the strategy for bright common future”, but internally it was called Republic of Eelam Ltd, or RoE.

The EU 10 suggestion was that they would follow the example set by 5dollars, and each of them would donate 600 million for the rebuilding of RoE. “Eelam 2018 – The Innovation Centre of the World”, “The New World Order”, “EU Strikes Back!” the world press shrieked.

Mostly the feedback was positive. The initiative was groundbreaking. But as always, there were critics. Mostly they came from the international lawyers’ community. For a while it seemed that the whole initiative would be watered by their ability to come up with claims why this couldn’t or at least shouldn’t be carried out: ‘If RoE Ltd is formed, it will soon reach a monopoly status that is against all good practices of free competition.’, ‘A country without government or armed forces is unheard of!’, ‘The EU law, international legal agreements, the law of Sri Lanka, or the law of any other country for that matter, does not know the concept of a country being privately owned.’, ‘Would this so called country even have a law? No? It would lead to total anarchy.’

Strikingly, the EU 10 was not concerned about lawyers. They were concerned about Americans. Thus, they quickly reacted.

Eelam was the first country in the world to become a private corporation. Republic of Eelam Ltd is commonly called RoE Ltd. Their businesses include Just a Sec – the surveillance and security division, Night Train – which manages the training and education in Eelam, Soft Goods –handling cultural heritage, sports and religion, E-money – responsible of taking care of finances, investments and macroeconomics, Eye Dee Ventures – running foreign and domestic manufacturing and trade of consumer goods and electronics, Eatlam – managing the production and purchasing of groceries, Trans Eelam – accountable for transportation and infrastructure, Eelam Crane – employing the construction and housing experts, and finally Eenergy – the world-renowned energy and power specialist.

After the surprising events taking place in February 2008 the country was peacefully separated from Sri Lanka and as if from God’s will, the new Republic of Eelam was no ordinary newly independent state ran by aggressive separatists, though that’s how it was likely to become.

The paradise island of Sri Lanka had been in possession of independent kingdoms for thousands of years. Later the Portuguese, Dutch and the British took turns governing the country, leaving their mark in history though Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim populations remained largest. The north was populated mainly by Tamils while Sinhalese majority was in Southwest of the island. The British gave Ceylon independence in 1948, handing over control of the entire island to a Sinhalese government, based in Colombo, which renamed the island Sri Lanka.

Though argued so in some instances, state never reduced the attendance of Tamils to universities by statute or other discriminatory method. What government did was to bring in a quota system based on district representation as the education facilities were very badly distributed during British period and people from rural areas – both Sinhala and Tamil – had very little chance of going to university. The British never built a school outside Colombo, Jaffna, Batticaloa and Kandy. The new quota system reduced the num-

ber of affluent Tamils – and Sinhalese – entering the university but it was interpreted wrongly as ethnic discrimination.

There was, however, oppression towards Tamil people but mainly due to the decisions made on language issues. English had been the official language that unified the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim people as well as people later referred to as Burghers – the progeny of people habituating the country during the colonial eras. Now the independent Sri Lanka wanted to emphasize its cultural heritage and in 1956 government ruled that Sinhala – instead of English – would be the official language, as per the majority of population. This hampered the equality of Tamils and Sinhalese badly. The new constitution that took place in 1972 further alienated Tamil's right to exist as a distinct nation with their cultural heritage, religion and language.

For decades Tamil politicians were lobbying for a self-determined Tamil state. With all democratic ways to achieve equality having failed repeatedly, an armed struggle for independence began, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) founded in 1972. From the mid-1970s onwards small scale armed disputes occurred between LTTE and the armed forces. Tamils were detained without trial and tortured under emergency regulations and later under the Prevention of Terrorism Act. There were random killings of Tamils by the state security forces and Tamil hostages were taken by the state when 'suspects' were not found. LTTE played their part in retaliation and the heat was rising.

Finally in July 1983, all the hell broke loose as an army patrol was ambushed and slain brutally by LTTE. For several days the angry Sinhalese mobs went berserk killing Tamils across the island resulting on a death toll of 400-2000 depending on the source. While many Sinhalese were involved in the mob, many others kept Tamil neighbours in their homes to protect them from the rioters. During these riots the government did nothing to control the mob. This day, nominated as Black Friday, resulted to 150 000 leaving the country resulting in a Tamil Diaspora in Canada, UK, Australia and other western countries. Black Friday was the start for 25 years of reciprocal violence that took more than 70 000 lives.

In 2008 though, the powerful Canadian Tamil Diaspora – with the help from international Tamil community – had convinced the Canadian Government to take action. The Prime Minister Rene Chevrez himself was trying to turn world's eyes towards the cul-de-sac of Sri Lankan situation, with any means necessary...

The greatest invention of RoE Ltd was the commercialization of antimatter – or AM as they'd call it. The correct scientific term was anti-hydrogen, but AM was a commonly accepted term now. First particle of antimatter was found already in 1955, but only the investments by CERN and Fermilab enabled further research and two collaborative research projects ATHENA and ATRAP. The power of antimatter was quickly deemed to be both too costly and too deadly in the wrong hands and thus all the research and testing was frozen for years... at least officially. The reality was that CERN couldn't figure out two things: how to store antimatter safely without blowing it away immediately and how to create enough antiprotons without using energy excessively.

In 2013 RoE Ltd was surprisingly granted a patent in what they called the AM Vacuum, an airless space where antimatter could be utilized without the risk of an explosion. Where or how they produced AM was a highly held secret. Some even speculated that it was brought from space, though RoE had never expressed interest in space pro-

grams. Only thing they revealed was that they had somehow managed to harness the AM as the energy source of creating more antimatter. RoE scientists in Eenergy – the RoE scientific community specialized in energy and power research – called it “The Loop”. When asked how they had had enough motivation to study something that was deemed impossible, the CEO of Eenergy had just noted: “Isn’t it enough reason that this planet is going straight to hell and all the contemporary alternative energy sources are forgotten as economically unviable. I personally wake up every morning at four o’clock to study the subject because on my bed side table is a note: Remember that 1 kg of AM equals 5.6 billion liters of gasoline. Call me an idealist, but it works.”

In retrospect it was amusing to realize what people had thought of antimatter in early 2000s. Respected scientists told that anti-hydrogen can be made in minuscule amounts, but not in enough quantity to do more than test a few of its theoretical properties. In CERN website it said that “If we could assemble all the antimatter we've ever made at CERN and annihilate it with matter, we would have enough energy to light a single electric light bulb for a few minutes.” In mid-2000s the antimatter production rate was between 1 and 10 nanograms per year, and even the most optimistic forecasts didn’t see more than 30 nanograms annual increase in sight. This resembled now the development of first microchip that could store only 64 bytes of data, and skeptics thought there would be demand for maximum of five computers in the whole world. People had lost their ability to dream big.

RoE Ltd’s big dreams were portrayed in small antimatter pills. AM Pills looked literally like pills the size of a breath mint. One pill could not activate without three others and thus they were safe to use, unless expired. That expiry date was something RoE had to trust in the hands of the human kind. Every individual on this planet were held accountable to deliver pills that were about to expire to the police. In public it was said that one pill lasts for three years and the expiry date is set one month before detonation. In reality they lasted four years. This was a necessary precaution to prevent misuse.

In 2021 the first pilot countries of Eelam, Belgium, Egypt and New Zealand had completely replaced their gas and hydrogen stations with AM stations. All their vehicles were transformed to use AM power and massive public awareness campaigns were launched. Though RoE Ltd charged only about 1000 USD for transforming a normal car to AM power they didn’t make huge losses. That was their investment for future: RoE Ltd was just waiting for the good old economies of scale to kick in.

After six months no accidents had happened and the rest of the world took action: 128 countries expressed their interest to do the same as the pilot countries. And RoE Ltd was pleased to serve them, not least to satisfy the expectations of stock analysts around the world. RoE stock value was hitting the roof and skyrocketing through it. Though still providing pill stations, pill dispensers and pills for free, and even assisting in their use and educating the general public without a cost, they made considerable amounts of money with the AM-powered vehicles.