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Stories.

J Series

J5

**Adapted and modified by
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Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 5

Twenty-one

Vijay walked back to the flat that he would be required to vacate within a couple of days. He opened the front door and entered, throwing his satchel on the sofa. He looked around at his sparsely furnished apartment. Something did not seem quite right. He couldn't place his finger on it.

He forced himself to quit over-analysing things and carried his bag of groceries into the micro-kitchen, which was smaller than a closet. He placed the bag on the counter and poured himself a glass of water. He opened the cabinet to pull out a packet of rice puffs when he noticed that the arrangement of items inside the cabinet seemed different. Vijay was methodical about most things other than his appearance. He liked his stuff arranged in a way that he could remember and access easily. It was the same methodical approach that he followed with his notes and research.

The rice puffs came in a tall bag that was usually kept towards the rear of the cabinet so that other items that were shorter could be easily seen. But now the placement was different. He went back to the living room, sat down, and placed his water and rice puffs on a pile of books that doubled as his coffee table. His eyes were drawn to the way the books were arranged. Vijay's razor-sharp memory recalled the exact order in which he had left the books earlier that day. The stacking order had changed. The hair on the back of his neck stirred. Someone had been here.

He cautiously got up from the sofa and tip-toed over to the bed. Could that someone still be inside his flat? He lay down on the floor to look underneath. Nothing. Then he patted the drapes. Nothing. He walked into the bathroom and pulled away the shower curtain. Nothing.

He had been feeling watched for a while now. It had started almost around the same time as his job interviews. But never before had his flat been broken into and searched. Vijay shuddered.

He retraced his footsteps to the closet. He didn't open it. Instead he placed his ears to the sliding doors, attempting to discern any noise from within. Nothing. He pulled open the doors quickly, almost attempting to pre-empt anyone inside.

'When will you be leaving?' boomed a voice from behind him. Vijay jumped, his heart thumping wildly.

It was his landlord, who had his own master key to the main door. Vijay muttered a few cuss words under his breath and took another look inside the closet. Seeing nothing strange in it, he turned around to look at his landlord, a seventy-year-old Sindhi gentleman. 'You could have knocked,' said Vijay to him, irritated by the intrusion but also relieved by the presence of a familiar face in his flat.

The landlord shrugged. 'Your moving company needed to survey the place and your stuff,' he said. 'I gave them access to the flat earlier today.'

'What moving company?' asked Vijay. 'I hardly have anything that needs moving.'

'They said that you had engaged them to pack and move your things,' said the landlord.

'They were here for less than ten minutes. Here's the visiting card that the man gave me.'

Twenty-two

Rakesh Sharma sat inside the meditation hall alongside hundreds of other participants, each person sitting cross-legged on a square two-by-two cushion. The sun was yet to rise. There was pin-drop silence in the hall.

Twice each year, Sharma travelled to Dhamma Salila, a meditation centre located at Dehradun. During those visits he forgot about his work with RAW and IG4 and erased from his mind the terrible things that he regularly saw as an operative. It was almost like powering off a smartphone and booting it up again so that all the memory being hogged by RAM-guzzling applications could be freed.

The meditation technique that was taught at Dhamma Salila was called Vipassana, a method of self-purification through self-observation. Vipassana meant 'seeing things as they are'. Sharma had tried it for the first time after being injured during the Kargil war. He became a regular during the years that followed. It turned out to be his salvation.

Sharma focused on his natural breath to concentrate his mind. Then, with a heightened sense of consciousness, he proceeded to observe the shifting nature of his body, mind and experiences. His intensified awareness was aimed at leading him to an understanding of the core truths of impermanence and connectedness.

But Dhamma Salila, with its severe routine, was not for everyone. All students were woken up in the wee hours of the morning—4 a.m.—and ended their day at 10 p.m. During the intervening eighteen hours, they meditated for eleven hours and were required to maintain 'noble silence' throughout their stay. All forms of communication with fellow participants were prohibited. The last meal of the day, purely vegetarian and sattvic, was consumed before noon. Men and women lived and meditated separately. Letters, phones, cameras, computers, writing material, magazines and tablets had to be deposited at the reception before starting the programme.

Learn to live with yourself. It can be terrifying.

This was the last day of his latest three-day programme. Sharma got up from the cushion effortlessly, almost as though he had no prosthetic leg to slow him down. He walked out of the meditation hall and followed the gravel path to the small and bare living quarter that had been allotted to him, a ten-by-eight room with a stone platform for a bed. The only concession to comfort was a thin mattress on the platform and a functioning bathroom. All Vipassana students were required to live the lives of monks, with a view to dispelling their egos.

Sharma calmly gathered up his belongings and placed them in his duffel bag. He then walked along a pathway that allowed him to take in the wonder of the Myanmar-style pagoda that was equipped with meditation cells within. The wind chimes atop the golden pagoda seemed to be talking to him, tinkling as he crossed the tranquil park.

From a distance, a monk in saffron and vermilion robes watched as Sharma made his way to the admin block.

Twenty-three

Prime Minister Komura looked at the men seated around the table. All of them were old. And that was the problem. Old men; tired ideas; obsolete plans; tightasses all. Komura was among the youngest prime ministers that Japan had ever had, having celebrated his fiftieth birthday just a few weeks earlier. But the rest of his Cabinet was pure vintage.

The house in Chiyoda-ku was Komura's official residence and workplace—the Number 10 of Japan. Located diagonally adjacent to the National Diet Building, it also housed the offices of the Chief Cabinet Secretary and the Deputy Cabinet Secretaries.

'Next item on the agenda is financial aid to the Middle East,' said Komura.

'Shusho,' began the Minister of Justice, using the usual honorific for Japanese prime ministers. 'Why are we providing money to countries that only use it to promote religious fundamentalism? God knows we would be better off spending it domestically.'

Komura looked directly across the table at the dissenter. Yet another relic hanging on for relevance, he thought. He banished the thought and took the question head-on.

'Japan's wellbeing depends on global stability,' said Komura. 'Unlike several other countries, we have confined our military intervention to sending a mere one thousand troops for peacekeeping into Iraq. If we want stability in this region, it is absolutely vital that we play a positive role, at least financially, if nothing else. We cannot simply sit back and do nothing.'

'Sometimes doing nothing requires great courage,' shot back the Minister of Justice. 'Why not let them fight one another to the finish?'

He was merely reflecting the opinion of a vast number of Japanese citizens who believed that Japan's money was better spent on reviving their own economy rather than supporting burgeoning deficits elsewhere, particularly the Middle East.

'First, we do not wish to open immigration to refugees from other countries. Second, we do not want to have military involvement. So should we avoid the

third option of financial assistance too?’ asked Komura, his voice rising a notch. He looked at the twenty faces at the round table, attempting to gauge the level of support that he had in the room. The silent ones were infinitely more dangerous than the ones who were vocal. He felt a tingling in his right arm. He attempted to ignore it.

The Minister of Foreign Affairs cleared his throat. ‘Shusho, your view is correct. It is in our interest to promote stability in the region. The question that we must ask ourselves is whether your proposal would achieve that objective.’

He’s couching his opposition in supportive words, thought Komura. It seemed evident that most of his colleagues were thinking along similar lines.

Komura reached for the bottle of water in front of him but was unable to unscrew the cap due to the trembling of his hands. Suddenly, the bottle fell from his grasp.

In the rigid formality of a Japanese Cabinet meeting, there occurred what could be straight out of burlesque. The Prime Minister stood up and desperately began tearing at his jacket, attempting to unbutton the cuffs of his dress shirt—a grotesque striptease. The gnawing itch in his right arm was unbearable.

The aged members of the Cabinet looked on dumbfounded at the spectacle. They knew the younger man had been under considerable pressure lately. Could the Prime Minister be losing it?

Before they could do anything, Komura fell face forward on the table.