



Learn English Through Stories.

J Series

J7

**Adapted and modified by
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Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 7

Twenty-eight

‘Another one bites the dust,’ said Petrov. ‘They’re falling like ninepins. Now the count stands at four. The British Foreign Secretary, the German Chancellor, the American Attorney-General . . . and now the Japanese Prime Minister.’

‘And lord only knows how many more will fall,’ said Judith.

The four members of IG4 were in a suite of the Hyatt in Kathmandu. The hotel room’s large picture window provided a view of thirty-seven acres of landscaped grounds that secluded the guests from the hustle and bustle of the Nepalese capital. In the distance, they could see the Boudhanath Stupa, the holiest of all Tibetan Buddhist shrines outside of Tibet. Inside, the suite was toasty and inviting, having been furnished in the traditional Newari style of Nepal.

‘The Japanese Prime Minister collapsed in full view of the members of his Cabinet,’ said Zhang. ‘Our MSS operative in Tokyo obtained identical reports from several sources.’

The team had mustered all the resources at their command to carry out extensive background checks on each of the last three dead leaders. They would now need to add the Japanese Prime Minister to that list. The problem was that, even after extensive matching of data sets using secret algorithms provided by the National Security Agency, they had been unable to come up with a common link.

‘We are ignoring an obvious detail that needs no algorithms,’ said Petrov. ‘Sometimes, what one is searching for is actually hiding in plain sight.’

‘What do you think we are missing?’ asked Zhang.

‘Apparently, the Japanese Cabinet members were discussing financial aid to the Middle East,’ said Petrov. ‘I guess there are enough people who would be angered by such a proposal.’ He lit a Belomorkanal, ignoring the fact that they were seated in a non-smoking room.

‘All four leaders who died were staunch liberals,’ continued Petrov. ‘The British Foreign Secretary opposed the UK’s exit from the European Union. He did not see the referendum results as a vote against immigration.’ Petrov took a long puff of his cigarette and allowed the nicotine to hit his lungs. ‘The German Chancellor spearheaded a plan to absorb thousands of Muslim immigrants into Europe,’ continued Petrov. ‘This was much against the wishes of common German citizens.’ He exhaled generously. It was accompanied by deliberate coughing on the part of Judith. He ignored her. Let the bitch suffocate, thought Petrov smugly.

‘The American Attorney-General opposed a plan to ban Muslim immigration into America,’ said Petrov. ‘The result? Impeachment proceedings commenced against him. And finally, the Japanese Prime Minister wanted his country to extend additional lines of credit to Islamic countries. Not a very popular move, and one that was bitterly opposed by his Cabinet.’

Petrov’s colleagues were silent as they absorbed his hypothesis.

‘Effectively, what is common across all of these high-powered victims is the fact that they were liberal voices who were urging the world not to fall prey to Islamophobia,’ said Petrov. ‘That’s your common link right there.’

‘You really think this is a conspiracy to eliminate liberals around the world?’ asked Zhang. The Chinese man spoke very little but absorbed everything that was said. The MSS was the most powerful intelligence agency among the four represented at that table. Headquartered in Beijing, it was responsible for counter-intelligence, foreign intelligence and political security. Unlike the other three agencies, the MSS had the power to arrest or detain people at will within China.

‘It seems obvious,’ replied Petrov. ‘The world is changing rapidly. Just look around you. Political parties on the right and right-of-centre are becoming stronger around the world. The liberals and the left are in decline. Eliminating their remaining leaders could finish them off entirely.’

Zhang spoke. ‘Even if one assumes that your hypothesis is correct, one must then answer the two most important questions.’

‘And those are?’ asked Judith.

‘First, who is behind these killings?’ said Zhang. ‘And second, how does one bring on the death of a man without leaving any clue as to how he died?’

Twenty-nine

Zhang made his way back to his own room at the hotel. Being part of IG4 was a tightrope walk. On the one hand, his bosses in Beijing expected him to report to them almost everything that emerged in IG4 meetings. On the other hand, the mandate at IG4 was to maintain absolute secrecy. At times he found it difficult to understand where his true loyalties lay.

Zhang sat down at the desk tiredly and powered on his laptop. An encrypted memo from the MSS team that handled Xinjiang province awaited. China had been facing problems with a home-grown separatist movement of Muslim Uighurs in that region. The memo indicated that some Uighur rebels had made their way into Syria for training.

His thoughts wandered back to the IG4 meeting. The threat of Islamist radicalization was real, even for China.

Zhang had been born in Tianjin, located on northern coastal China, his birth coinciding with the Cultural Revolution kicked off by Mao Zedong. Tianjin was one of the five national central cities of the country and the influence of the Communist Party was all- pervasive there. Zhang's father was a member of the People's Liberation Army that violently and brutally suppressed the Red Guard groups that had been at the centre of the revolution.

Zhang's father had called in several favours to ensure that his son received the best possible education, and Zhang was eventually accepted into the Institute of International Relations in Beijing. The institute was actually the starting point for a career in espionage. Students from the IIR would eventually be sent to the Institute of Cadre Management in Suzhou for tactical studies and training, before being absorbed into the MSS.

Headquartered in Beijing, the MSS had begun as a central-level ministry with a few departments that resembled the KGB's political police, but had morphed into an organization that was responsible for overseas intelligence, counter-intelligence and political security. Known locally as Guojia Anquan Bu, or GAB, the MSS was made up of multiple bureaux, and Zhang had spent many years in each of them.

Some of the functions that Zhang had handled included wiretapping, stealth photography, internet monitoring and propaganda. In addition, he had been involved in the recruitment of businessmen, researchers and journalists for an extended intelligence web.

For over two years he had handled the Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau desks. Then he had run counter-insurgency operations against the Falun Gong, the Uighurs and Tibetan activists. He had also helped establish a group of young ladies to honey-trap agents of MI6 and the CIA, besides cultivating think-tanks, such as the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, that provided the perfect cover for espionage activities. Zhang was nothing if not experienced.

Zhang understood that Chinese foreign policy would always be based on the philosophy of Sun Tzu. There could only be one hegemon in the world at any given time.

And that would have to be China.

Thirty

The interview took place in the business centre of The Imperial Hotel in Delhi. Vijay looked around to identify other potential candidates, but he seemed to be the only one waiting in the lounge. He had tried to improve his appearance by putting on a fresh shirt, but it hadn't made much of a difference.

A few minutes later an exceptionally tall, white-haired German emerged from a private office. 'Mr Vijay Sundaram, I presume?' he asked in thick German-accented English, as he held out his right hand. 'My name is Dr Klaus Schmidt.'

There was no smile, just a fixed sombre expression on the German's face. He has all the warmth of a prison warden, thought Vijay to himself as he followed Schmidt into the office.

'What do you know about Milesian Labs?' Schmidt asked abruptly, staring at Vijay through thick glasses. His eyes were cold, hard and expressionless. Not the slightest facial hair could be discerned on his pale, unblemished skin. His nails were perfectly manicured. This was a terrifyingly neat man. The exact opposite of Vijay.

'Very little, I'll admit,' replied Vijay truthfully. 'I dug up a little information after receiving your interview letter and here's what I do know. You are a leading pure science outfit. Yours is an unlisted company and your main research facility is located in Uttarakhand, a state that is a few hours away from Delhi. You seem to be building a bank of patents that could be immensely valuable one day, but you are probably the most secretive company on earth. It's next to impossible to find out anything about you.'

'We like to keep it that way,' said Schmidt, without any change in his expression. 'It enables us to get on with our path-breaking work without distractions.'

'I understand,' said Vijay, although he didn't.

'Good,' remarked Schmidt. Vijay had no idea if the German was referring to his answer or to his own company. 'Do you know why we are interested in you?'

'I imagine that it would be related to the thesis that I wrote at IIT,' answered Vijay.

‘Yes,’ replied Schmidt. ‘Quantum Behaviour Beyond the Quantum. Interesting premise. Please quickly summarize the key points for me.’

Vijay took a deep breath. ‘For years, we have believed that when we are dealing with large objects we can simply follow Classical Mechanics because the whole system will be governed by classical laws. It has also been assumed that when we are dealing with infinitesimally small objects, the only way to understand the system is through Quantum Mechanics, because Newtonian laws fail at the quantum level. But what if some parts of quantum theory can be applied to larger objects such as planets? That was the thrust of my thesis.’

‘And that’s precisely why we want you,’ said Schmidt. ‘Milesian Labs wants to help you convert your hypothesis into reality.’

Vijay hesitated before asking what was on his mind. ‘What is your offer?’ he asked, almost embarrassed by his question.

‘You have been interviewed at SpaceX, Google and the Indian Space Research Organization,’ said Schmidt matter-of-factly.

How does he know which companies I have had discussions with? wondered Vijay.

‘Take the highest figure that any company has offered you so far, and double it. That’s my offer,’ said Schmidt, taking off his glasses and putting them on the desk. He looked far more human without them.

Vijay was stunned into silence. It was an incredible offer.

‘It’s not an easy assignment,’ continued Schmidt. ‘If you accept our offer, you would be required to relocate to our research facilities in Uttarakhand. You would have to live in residential quarters, albeit luxurious ones, on our picturesque campus. Your needs would be entirely provided for.’

‘That doesn’t sound too bad,’ said Vijay, politely.

‘You would have to cut off all physical contact with the outside world for the first three months of the assignment,’ continued Schmidt.

‘Why?’ asked a shocked Vijay.

‘It’s a company rule that all new staff are subjected to. It’s to protect our research, the very purpose of our existence,’ replied Schmidt. ‘Will that be a problem?’

'My friend, er . . . girlfriend, Sujatha.'

'I understand,' said Schmidt, his expression not in the least conveying that he did. 'Unfortunately it is necessary. You could, however, continue to be in touch with her by phone, video chat or email.'

Oblivious of Vijay's expression, Schmidt continued. 'Please read through this document,' he said, pushing a thick set of papers across the desk.

'What's this?' asked Vijay, picking up the sheaf.

'It's a detailed non-disclosure agreement and code of behaviour,' said Schmidt. 'We would require you to sign it before we can confirm your appointment.'

Vijay cursorily leafed through the papers. 'What's this bit about computers, tablets and phones?' he asked.

'Milesian Labs requires that all employees only use computers, phones and equipment that are supplied by the company,' replied Schmidt. 'This is our company's protocol in order to ensure that no classified information can ever be leaked.'

'And the stuff about my previous research?'

'You provide us access to all your previous research,' replied Schmidt. 'You continue to own it and we have no proprietary claim on it.'

Ten minutes later, Vijay's interview was over. He shook hands with Schmidt and left, relieved to be away from the man.

You can pay me a king's ransom, he thought to himself, but you guys are spooky. No way that I'm joining you!