



Learn English Through
Stories.

J Series

J10

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Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 10

Forty

The atmosphere inside the warehouse was tense. ‘I don’t understand,’ said Vijay. ‘Why are you concerned whether I take up the job offer at Milesian or not?’

Judith looked at Sharma. There was an imperceptible nod.

‘Are you familiar with the name Samuel P. Huntington?’ asked Sharma. ‘Who is he?’ asked Vijay. His entire life had been spent studying physics.

‘Was,’ clarified Sharma. ‘He died in 2008. He was a political scientist who put forward a theory called “The Clash of Civilizations”. According to this theory, cultural and religious identities would be the main reason for global conflict in the post-Cold War world.’

‘What does this have to do with me?’ asked Vijay.

‘First, let me explain to you why our group, the IG4, even exists,’ replied Sharma. ‘The two global superpowers and the two emerging superpowers of the world have the most to lose in the event of an uncontrolled global conflict, one brought on by the sort of polarization that Huntington spoke of. The intelligence agencies of our four countries have temporarily put aside their differences to collaborate and create IG4—Intelligence Group of Four. The biggest challenge we face is the prospect of the clash of civilizations becoming an all-out war between Muslims and the rest of the world.’

Vijay was bewildered. What does my job offer have to do with all this? he wondered.

These guys are nuts.

‘Over the past few months, several world leaders have died,’ said Judith. ‘These were staunch liberals who were attempting to moderate the dialogue between the Islamic world and the West. We believe that they died precisely for that reason.’

Vijay shrugged. He still had no idea of what these chaps were going on about.

‘Milesian Labs is owned by an ultra-conservative group called Minerva,’ replied Judith. ‘Minerva seems to be killing off the world’s liberal leaders so that conservative voices get heard over the international cacophony. This would result in an escalation of conflict, not just with Islamism but also with Islam.’

‘What’s the difference?’ asked Vijay.

‘Lots,’ replied Judith. ‘Islam is a faith, a means to worship. Islamism is political Islam espoused by groups that aim to establish a Sharia-based Islamic state.’

‘Each of the people eliminated died mysteriously,’ added Sharma.

‘Unfortunately, we do not know how Minerva succeeds in breaching the security around these people and then kills them without poisoning, shooting, strangling, stabbing, drowning or any of the other usual methods. That’s why we need you to go inside.’

‘You’ve got to be kidding me,’ said Vijay. ‘You want me to put my own life on the line on account of this ridiculous theory of yours? Forget it, Samuel Hunter be damned.’

‘Samuel Huntington,’ corrected Judith as she continued staring into Vijay’s eyes.

Forty -one

Alexei Mikhailov sat motionless inside his apartment suite within the Milesian Labs facility in Uttarakhand. He was seated on a yoga mat in the lotus position, his legs locked together, his spine ramrod straight and his shoulders relaxed. His eyes were closed and he was breathing slowly and deeply. His stance was no different from that of the ancient statues depicting Shiva or Buddha. Years of practice ensured that Mikhailov's body was almost entirely inert and his mind free from distractions.

At sixty, Mikhailov was one of the oldest residents of the complex. He was odd in appearance, primarily because he maintained his hair in a fuzzy Einstein-like fashion. He was a thin man with a hooked nose, the prototype of a mad scientist in a horror film.

But in the world of Russian science, Mikhailov was aristocracy. Mikhailov's grandfather, Viktor, had been one of the researchers sent by the Russians to search for the elusive Shangri-La, the supposed hidden paradise on earth. In order to garner clues about the exact geographical location of Shangri-La, Viktor's group had also carried out excavations among the remains of the ancient monastery at Nalanda.

Mikhailov's father, Vladimir, had been one of the leading researchers at City-40, more commonly known as Chelyabinsk-40, the birthplace of the Soviet nuclear weapons programme after the Second World War. The plant that the Soviets built there, one of the largest production facilities of weapons-grade plutonium during the Cold War, had leaked huge amounts of radioactive material into the area that immediately surrounded the plant. Vladimir had died young from leukaemia and the responsibility of bringing up Mikhailov had fallen on his grandfather.

Mikhailov felt himself dissolving into the cosmos. He had always been spiritually inclined, probably on account of the stories that his grandfather had narrated to him about his quest for Shangri-La. More importantly, Mikhailov was also a keen practitioner of meditation and had learnt under one of the great spiritual masters in Kashmir. This often enabled him to 'perceive' information that was not so obvious to others.

And then he felt it.

Mikhailov forced himself to keep his eyes shut and to remain focused, but this was happening far too frequently for comfort these days. It was a disruption in his energy flow, almost the equivalent of a static charge. And it was never uniform. But what was causing it? Am I imagining things? he wondered.

Mikhailov opened his eyes, frustrated. He would need to start recording the exact times at which the energy spikes occurred.

Forty-two

‘I have made up my mind,’ said Vijay. ‘There is no reason why I should work at Milesian and put my own life in danger. I am a simple scientist. I want to get on with my research and my life.’

The members of IG4 stayed absolutely silent. The warehouse felt even more ghostly in the stillness.

Then Judith got up from her chair and placed her notebook computer in front of Vijay on the table. She clicked on a file that opened up a media player window. Video footage began playing.

Vijay looked at it reluctantly. He snapped out of his hesitation when he realized what was contained in the video recording.

Sujatha.

‘These clips have been compiled over the past week by Petrov,’ said Judith. They showed Sujatha in the mall; at the metro station; entering the cinema; and leaving her BSI office. In each frame, a lean stranger with a gaunt face could be seen lurking a few steps away.

The video compilation ran for less than five minutes. ‘Now look at this,’ said Judith, clicking open another file. Again, it was a video that had been strung together from various source files. It showed Vijay walking out from the IIT gate; entering a coffee shop; exiting the supermarket; waiting for a train at the station. A dark man with a pockmarked face could be seen trailing him in all the clips.

Judith observed Vijay’s expression. He was shaken. She moved in for the kill. ‘The people stalking you and your girlfriend are Minerva associates. The only

reason we have this evidence is because we have been keeping tabs on Minerva.'

Vijay was stunned into silence. After what seemed like an interminable lull, he asked, 'Were you the ones who searched my flat?'

'No,' said Judith. 'But we have video recordings of the Minerva agents who did. How safe will either you or Sujatha be if you are not under IG4's protective umbrella? Isn't it possible that Minerva will use Sujatha as leverage to get you to fall in line? She travels alone all over the country as part of her job. How difficult would it be for them to get her? Or you?'

'That's a low blow,' muttered Vijay. But something else was nagging him. Those operatives who were following Sujatha and me—how can I be certain that they were Minerva people and not IG4 agents?

'You're wondering whether the people following you were our agents,' said Judith. The woman had more than a sixth sense. Vijay nodded mutely.

'Let me show you the clips yet again,' said Judith, clicking the play button yet again.

'See? You are indeed being followed by us. But our agent is behind the Minerva man. Please observe carefully.' Vijay saw the Mumbai Indians t-shirt man, one of the group who had abducted him. It seemed obvious Judith was telling him the truth.

Else she was a very good liar.

Forty-three

‘Vee!’ exclaimed Sujatha. ‘What happened to you?’

Vijay’s face and eyes were swollen. His upper lip had a gash and his clothes were badly torn. He had arrived at Sujatha’s tiny flat in a taxi he kept waiting downstairs so that she could pay his fare for him. His wallet, chain, watch and phone were missing.

She supported Vijay as he hobbled towards the sofa. After paying his taxi fare, she made him as comfortable as she could, propped up against a soft pillow.

Vijay stared blankly at the statue on the side table by Sujatha’s sofa. It was a figure of Ardhanarishvara, a figure that depicted Shiva and Shakti combined as one. He gazed at it for an extended spell in a stupor. Sujatha interrupted his reverie. ‘Swallow two of these,’ she said, offering him paracetamol pills along with a glass of water. ‘Should I make some tea?’

‘Do you have anything stronger?’ asked Vijay, wincing in pain.

Sujatha remembered that she had received a bottle of flavoured vodka from a friend for her birthday a month ago. She quickly brought it out from the kitchen and opened it. Vijay poured himself two fingers of the clear liquid and took a gulp. He winced as the alcohol made contact with the cut on his lip.

‘Will you please tell me what happened?’ asked Sujatha, on the verge of tears. ‘I was on my way to meet an immi—’

He bit his tongue to prevent himself from completing the word ‘immigration’.

‘Someone at Lajpat Nagar,’ said Vijay slowly. ‘Along the way I took a shortcut through an alleyway that was deserted.’

‘And?’ asked Sujatha.

‘I was mugged,’ said Vijay. ‘I can’t remember exactly how many thugs there were, but it felt like three or four. They bashed me around and then fled with my valuables.’

‘Hell,’ muttered Sujatha. ‘I should take you to the hospital.’

‘Nothing is broken,’ replied Vijay. ‘If we go to the hospital, they will ask us to file an FIR with the police. I don’t want to do that.’ Filing a First Information Report will leave too many glaring gaps in my story.

‘Why not?’ asked Sujatha. ‘It would be better that those brutes are caught.’

‘Because I do not want to answer the hundreds of questions that will inevitably follow, and lead nowhere,’ answered Vijay. ‘I need to leave Delhi in a few days and if there were to be a police case, they would need me to appear at the magistrate’s court.’

‘Where are you going?’ asked Sujatha.

‘I’ve decided to take your advice,’ said Vijay. ‘I’m accepting the financial security that a job with Milesian Labs offers.’

Forty-four

Vijay had not wanted to lie to Sujatha about what had happened to him, but the necessity of doing so had been made evident to him by IG4. If Sujatha were ever abducted, the less she knew, the safer she would be.

At the warehouse meeting with his abductors, Vijay realized that, whether he liked it or not, he was already stuck neck-deep. He looked at the four members of IG4 for reactions but there were none.

‘I’ll accept Schmidt’s offer,’ he said eventually. ‘But how will you ensure that Sujatha and I are protected?’

Sharma got up from his chair and walked to where Vijay sat. In his hand was something that looked like a gun. Vijay looked warily at it as Sharma inched closer.

‘Stop worrying,’ said Sharma. ‘What I’m holding is a jet-injector. It’s a syringe that uses a high-pressure jet of liquid to penetrate the epidermis. It is powered by compressed air. I’m going to use it to embed a really tiny microchip under your skin.’

Observing the consternation on Vijay’s face, Judith interrupted. ‘The microchip is cutting-edge, not yet commercially available. It draws power from electrolytes within the human body. The chip will keep us aware of your location as well as your physical condition. Once the assignment is over, the chip can be removed.’

'Physical condition?' asked Vijay. 'Is that a euphemism for whether I'm dead or alive?'

He yelped as the injector transferred the wheat-grain sized chip into his upper arm with a whoosh.

Sharma applied an adhesive strip to the spot where the chip had been embedded. 'You can take off the strip in ten minutes.'

'What if I need to pass through scanning devices?' asked Vijay. 'Will the microchip show up?'

'No,' replied Sharma. 'The chip is engineered from flexible polymer lined by animal tissue. If it does get detected, it will simply show up as a cyst or hardened tissue.'

Vijay digested the information. These IG4 guys think about everything. Terrifying foursome.

'Anything else?' asked Vijay, already regretting the fact that he had agreed to go along with IG4.

'We need to rough you up,' replied Judith. 'Wh-why?' spluttered Vijay.

'Relax,' said Judith. 'We simply need you to accept a few blows to your face so that your bruises allow you the luxury of a cover. You are obviously under surveillance by Minerva. You will need a cover story to explain your current absence from their radar. We would like you to maintain that you were mugged and left unconscious at a deserted warehouse. This narrative is necessary to make sure that Minerva does not get suspicious.'

'Is this really necessary?' asked Vijay, not relishing the prospect of being bashed about.

'You will need to maintain the same story with Sujatha,' said Judith, ignoring his question. 'You must not reveal anything about IG4 or the true purpose of your job at Milesian Labs. This is to ensure Sujatha's safety, in the event that she is ever captured by Minerva.'

Why don't you say you don't want to take the risk of Sujatha revealing anything to her captors if she is ever abducted? thought Vijay.

Before Vijay could argue further, Petrov administered a blow to the right side of his face. Vijay howled in agony, but before he could recover, Petrov landed yet another punch. And then another.

Petrov seemed to be enjoying himself. *The bastard.*