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J Series

J1

**Adapted and modified by  
Kulwant Singh Sandhu.**

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# Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

## Part 1

### One

The room was ordinary and windowless, and its walls had been painted bluish-green. The air-conditioning hummed softly to keep out the heat of the Jordanian desert. In the centre of the room was a round conference table surrounded by four hardback chairs. On the table were cups, the coffee half-consumed, water bottles and sandwich wrappers. By way of routine, the first ten minutes had been devoted to sweeping the room for listening devices.

The four people seated around the table seemed a strange assortment. In ordinary course, they would probably never have socialized with one another. Judith Frost was a CIA operative, Yuri Petrov was on deputation from Russia's SVR — the Sluzhba Vneshney Razvedki, Rakesh Sharma was from India's Research and Analysis Wing, or RAW, and Jin Zhang represented China's Ministry of State Security, the MSS.

But the combination wasn't that odd, when one considered the reasons for the existence of the group, informally christened IG4.

Meeting locations of IG4 were never constant. The four members travelled around the world to secret rendezvous points that were usually fixed just a day or two in advance. This time, it was the capital city of Jordan, Amman.

In her early fifties, Judith was considered one of the best counter-terrorism experts in the world. She was dressed simply in beige slacks and a linen top. Thin rimless glasses sat unobtrusively on her pert nose. Her tightly tied-back hair gave her a somewhat schoolmarmish look.

A large, flat-screen monitor had been mounted on a wall and hooked up to a high-encryption notebook computer. Judith tapped a key on the computer to bring up a slide that showed photographs of three people.

'So here's our list,' she began. 'The British Foreign Secretary, the German Chancellor and the American Attorney-General. All three have died within a period of two months.'

She paused to get her thoughts in order. 'Now, let's quickly review what we know. In all three instances there were no security breaches. Symptoms did appear but they disappeared just as quickly. By the time these people died,

there was nothing to suggest anything other than death by natural causes. What was particularly strange was that all three individuals were young and healthy, and did not have any serious medical ailments to speak of.'

She took a sip of water from the bottle in front of her and continued. 'The truly odd angle in this story is that the symptoms prior to death of each of these three people were almost identical. Swelling of one or more of the limbs or face, severe rash, vomiting, reduced heart rate, shutting down of the kidneys, intravascular coagulation, and finally, coma. Almost all the symptoms one would see in cases of poisoning. Except for one thing. None of them had been poisoned.'

Rakesh Sharma from RAW spoke. Sharma had originally been an army man who was subsequently absorbed by military intelligence and then RAW. His bearing and demeanour were those of a man brought up in the armed forces. His bushy moustache and impeccably knotted regiment tie were dead giveaways. Tall, fair and with an imposing hooked nose, Sharma automatically commanded the attention of those around him. The only part about Sharma that could not be discerned, unless one looked very closely, was a prosthetic leg, a legacy of the Kargil War.

'Having one or two symptoms that match could be passed off as coincidence,' said Sharma. 'But so many commonalities and that too across powerful political leaders? All within a few months? These cannot be swept aside as coincidence.'

Judith nodded in agreement. 'Let's keep one more detail in mind. Each of the three individuals was surrounded by several layers of security. It would have been exceptionally difficult for anyone to breach the protective ring around these leaders. Assassination was almost impossible. Their autopsies did not show needle marks or ingestion of toxic substances. In fact, pathology reports showed no toxicity at all.'

'We need to think beyond such commonalities,' interjected Yuri Petrov as he drained his coffee cup. 'What we need to find out is what links these people together other than the symptoms of a disease. If we find the link between these three leaders, we will be closer to figuring out what actually happened.'

Petrov was a beefy man who looked like he worked out at the gym for several hours each day. On his head was a mop of reddish hair that seemed to be

thinning in places. His red hair contrasted with his eyes, which were bright blue, an extremely rare combination.

Petrov was the youngest in the room but possibly the most powerful among the four. The Russian SVR was dominated by men whose fathers and grandfathers had been operatives in the erstwhile KGB. Petrov was an exception. He had proved himself to be incredibly adept in negotiating anti-terror alliances. He had also managed to make himself indispensable during Russia's annexation of the Crimea. It was whispered in the corridors of power that he had access to the President of the Russian Federation through his immediate boss at the SVR.

Petrov lit up his Belomorkanal, ignoring the dirty look that Judith threw his way. 'Let's examine their finances, marriages, political connections, friendships, business dealings, enemies, sexual liaisons, travel schedules, legal disputes and everything else that bears scrutiny,' said Petrov. 'That's the only way we will find the elusive link.'

'It's like searching for a needle in a haystack,' said Zhang, adjusting his thin, metal-framed glasses. He was a petite man, always perfectly groomed and attired, his black hair neatly gelled back to reveal a wide forehead.

'Correction,' said Judith. 'It's one needle hidden among millions of haystacks.' Petrov was quiet. He knew that a meeting with the Director of the SVR was in order.

## Two

Vijay Sundaram walked towards his lecture hall on the sprawling 325-acre campus.

Located in Hauz Khas, a prime South Delhi locality, the IIT Delhi campus boasted abundant lawns, generous residential facilities and wide roads. The Indian Institutes of Technology, or IITs, were the most sought-after universities in India. Among the twenty- three IITs scattered around India, IIT Delhi was one of the best. The leading global technology giants recruited engineers from here for jobs around the world.

Vijay sighed as he made his way in the blazing hot sun across the campus. He was deep in thought. Twenty-eight years old, he had never acquired a taste for appearances. He was habitually unkempt, his shirt hung sack-like on his thin frame while even his glasses looked like they hadn't been cleaned in days. His hair was speckled with dandruff and his shoes seemed like they would give up on him at any moment. Luckily for Vijay, his endearing smile, deep, penetrating eyes and caring nature compensated for everything else about him.

In short, his awkward looks were irrelevant. Vijay had just been awarded his PhD by IIT Delhi. It had been a slow and painful seven years to earn his doctorate, significantly longer than the average five. For a boy who had been brought up in an orphanage in Sringeri, a sleepy town in the south Indian state of Karnataka, the mere fact that he had presented a thesis was an achievement, let alone that it had been hailed as path-breaking within academic circles. It was testament to his brilliance and perseverance.

But the appearance of the end of the long road to his PhD was troubling Vijay. It implied the end of IIT life and the beginning of what Indian parents liked to call 'settling down'.

And then there was Sujatha.

In recent weeks, she had been dropping hints about their getting married. There was a part of Vijay that wanted to be with Sujatha for the rest of his life. And another part that wanted to run away. Hence Vijay's incessant sighs these days.

He felt his phone vibrate. He fished it out of his pocket and looked at the screen with a quiet smile of satisfaction. Milesian Labs. Probably calling about

his job interview the next day. He took the call as he walked towards his final lecture.

Maybe the call would decide things for him.

## Three

Vijay Sundaram surveyed the classroom. It was packed to capacity. Vijay was one of the most popular teachers at IIT Delhi and among the youngest. The minimum requirement for teaching was a PhD, but the university had made an incredible exception for Vijay. He had been allowed to teach while working towards his doctorate. Teaching enabled him to meet his expenses while he continued with his research, but all that would soon be coming to an end.

‘During this academic year,’ began Vijay, ‘I have taken you through the fundamentals of quantum theory. Given that today is my final lecture here, I thought that I should find a way to give you a different perspective on what we have learned.’

Vijay took off his glasses and used his handkerchief to wipe them, something he hadn’t done in days. His students grinned.

Vijay put on his glasses again and continued. ‘How many of you are familiar with Vedanta?’ Only a few hands went up. Less than 10 per cent of the class.

‘The word “Vedanta” literally means “the end of the Vedas”, the oldest scriptures of Hindus,’ explained Vijay. ‘Originally, Vedanta meant the Upanishads, but eventually the definition was expanded to include the Brahmasutras and the Srimad Bhagvatam.’

There was silence in the class as his students attempted to understand where he was going with this. ‘While quantum physics and Vedanta may seem poles apart, the truth is, both are attempts to understand the underlying reality of the universe,’ continued Vijay. ‘We refer to quantum physics as science and Vedanta as philosophy, but they are one and the same. From Aristotle all the way to the nineteenth century, the term “natural philosophy” was used instead of science. There was a reason for it. A good scientist has to be a philosopher and a good philosopher must also be a scientist.’

His students were all ears. This was not part of the curriculum, but they knew that the knowledge Vijay was imparting to them that day was priceless.

‘Physics, as we know, can be studied in two phases: classical and quantum,’ said Vijay. ‘Sandwiched between the two is Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. Isaac Newton is the starting point of classical physics, which focuses on macro objects and the rules that govern them. An example: for every action in nature



there is an equal and opposite reaction. But Newton's classical laws were never concerned with atomic and sub-atomic. Classical physics believed that the world was little more than a machine and that all motions of various objects within this machine could be predicted by classical laws already in place.'

He paused to take a deep breath.

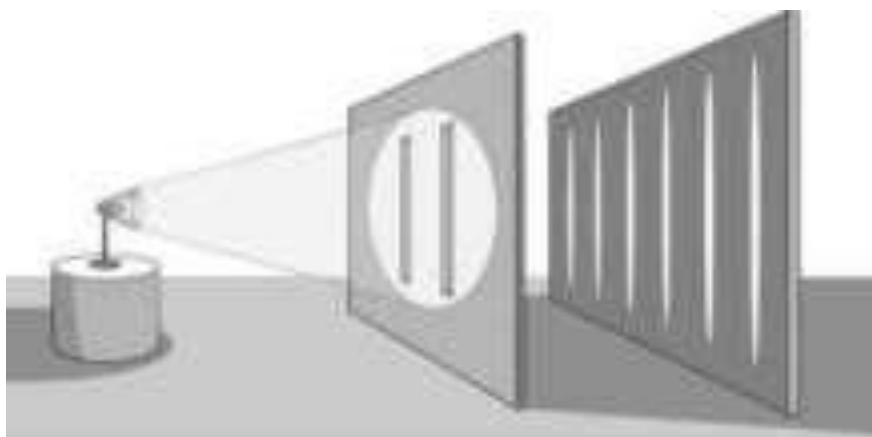
'The world of classical physics was turned upside down with discoveries in the twentieth century,' said Vijay. 'At a sub-atomic level, classical laws did not seem to work. One needed an entirely new set of laws. This led to the development of quantum physics.'

'The double-slit experiment,' said one of his students excitedly.

Vijay smiled. It was always nice to see enthusiasm. 'Precisely. In 1801, Thomas Young showed that light was a wave. In his experiment, he placed a light source at one end and a photographic plate at the other. Between the two was a barrier with two slits. Can someone please tell us what happened?'

A young man in the front row got up and spoke. 'Our natural instinct tells us that we should see two bands on the receiving photographic plate. Instead multiple bands are observed—an interference pattern. This shows that light is a wave, not particle.'

'Thank you,' said Vijay, bringing up a slide that showed the experiment on a roll-down screen next to the blackboard.



'Now can someone tell us how Einstein's discovery in 1905 ran contrary to this notion?' asked Vijay.

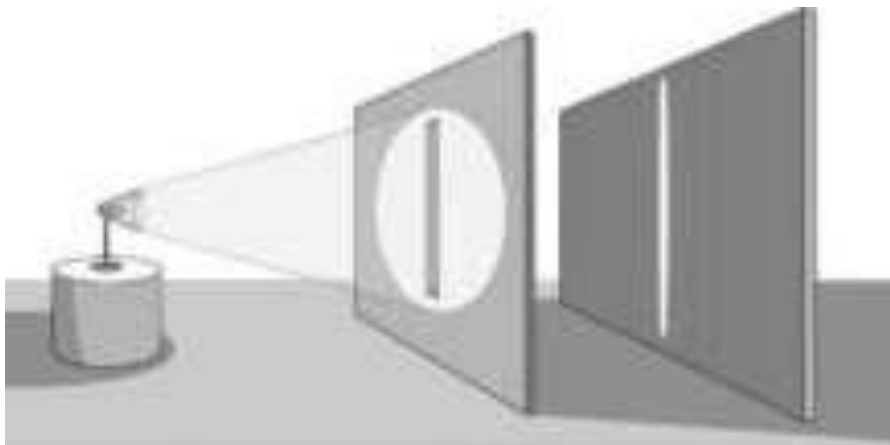
Several students put up their hands. Vijay chose a young lady in the third row.

‘Einstein shone a light on photoconductive metal and found that it emerged on the other side of the metal as packets of fixed energy—photons,’ she said. ‘He concluded that light is a particle, not a wave.’

‘What is light then?’ asked Vijay. ‘Wave or particle?’

‘Both,’ said the young lady. ‘If we carry out the slit experiment with one slit instead of two, we find that light is received on the photographic plate as a single band. In this case, light behaves like particles. But with two slits, it behaves like waves.’

‘Thanks,’ said Vijay, clicking to the next slide that showed the single-slit experiment.



‘So there is something that controls the way that light behaves. It sometimes behaves like waves and sometimes as particles. What determines its behaviour? That is the starting point of quantum physics. Now let us fast-forward to 1923. That was when the physicist Louis de Broglie theorized that not only light but all matter must have both wave and particle properties. The tree in your backyard may seem more particle-ish but it would necessarily have a wavelength. Six years later, Louis de Broglie won the Nobel Prize for this insight.’

Vijay quickly did a scan of the faces in the classroom. Not a single bored expression.

‘Now what does Vedanta say?’ asked Vijay. ‘Vedanta tells us about vrittis. Anyone here who knows what those are?’

There was silence.

‘Vritti literally translates to a mind wave,’ said Vijay. ‘I will not get into the details of the types of vrittis, but it is sufficient to know that these mind waves create the objects that we observe in our world.’

‘Surely you mean observe the objects, not create?’

‘It is our very act of observation that makes waves into objects,’ said Vijay. ‘And that is at the core of Vedanta.’

Vijay glanced at the clock. It was time to conclude.

‘I can see each one of you as particles or solid matter before me, but how can I be sure that you are not waves when I turn my back on you? What we call reality is the combination of observer and observed. We seem to create our reality and that is precisely what Vedanta wants us to understand.’

## Four

Vijay left the classroom and headed to the main gate. There were hundreds of little errands that he needed to complete as part of his exit from IIT. He remained lost in his thoughts as he mentally ticked off points on a checklist. He watched a student sharing lunch with his parents under a tree. He tore away his gaze and moved on.

Vijay had no clue of who his parents were. He had been found abandoned on the steps of the Sringeri Sharada temple in Karnataka. The local police had placed him in an orphanage affiliated to the trust that managed the temple. The administrator of the trust was Mrs Srinivasulu Laxminarayana Venkata Rao. Because no one could really remember her name—leave alone roll it off their tongues—people simply called her Amma. She was a gentle lady who had overseen the passage of hundreds of children to and from the doors of her establishment.

The trust not only ran the temple and the orphanage next door but also a school and a charitable hospital. Amma herself had remained childless and came to view each child in the orphanage as her own. Each new entrant was randomly assigned a name and surname upon school admission. So each child knew he had an identity, just like everyone else in the world. His had been Vijay Sundaram. Amma had a secret place in her heart for the bright-eyed Vijay, but none of the children would know the difference. They all knew they were not destitute cast on the dust-heaps of the world, but beloved children who received the best attention to their health and education.

Vijay shared a dormitory with sixty other boys. A separate dorm accommodated the girls. The children led a busy and disciplined life and they were well looked after, with three square meals a day, clean clothes and a solid roof over their heads. The charitable hospital next door saw to their mildest discomforts, and a propitious outbreak of measles or chicken pox was cause for celebration because it meant a break from classes, fistfuls of grapes and rowdy games of carom (board game) — all within wistful distance from their not-so-stricken friends. Their routine was hectic: early morning prayers, exercise, school, sports, homework and chores—with some laughter in between. Vijay was a loner, preferring to keep to himself, but distinguished himself through his academic performance, which was always stellar. It became evident early enough that he was destined for a career in science.

During his seventh standard exams, his mathematics paper included the question: 'Indicate which of the following statements are either true or false'. Vijay's answer was a single line that indicated his almost intuitive grasp of grammar as well: 'All of the statements are either true or false.' He then proceeded to provide the usually expected answers overleaf.

Amma had a set of bookshelves in her office. Books donated by patrons of the temple were kept there and made available to the children. Amma was particular that the books be treated well and returned to her bookshelf within a reasonable period. Among the children, Vijay was the most frequent visitor to her office. He would often devour a book within a day and return the next day for replenishment. In the beginning, Amma often wondered whether he actually read the books that he borrowed.

A day after he had returned a book about the Big Bang, she asked him, 'Do you recall when the Big Bang started?'

Vijay knew the answer. '132, Amma,' he replied confidently.

132? That answer makes no sense, thought Amma.

After Vijay left, Mrs Rao leafed through the book to look for a clue to his strange reply to a question about what happened 13.8 billion years ago. Mrs Rao was confused. Why had Vijay said '132'?

Then her gaze travelled to the bottom of the page. It was page 132. The boy's memory took snapshots without cease, continuously camera-ready.