



Learn English Through
Stories.

J Series

J12

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Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 12

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Spread over a thousand acres, the facility of Milesian Labs was like the setting of a science fiction movie. A massive concrete-framed building provided a modern state-of-the-art laboratory where nine researchers worked in a fifty thousand-square-foot lab. 'Each researcher operates from a designated mini-lab of around five thousand square feet,' said Schmidt. 'There are nine who joined before you. You are the tenth. Our team is now complete.'

Scattered around the lab were residential studio apartments for the researchers, a multi-cuisine coffee shop and bar, a convenience store, a massive library, plush movie theatre, sophisticated gym, temperature-controlled pool and well-equipped health centre.

'Let me walk you through the library,' said Schmidt. It was an independent building that occupied four floors. 'We have well over a hundred thousand books here in addition to audio-visual content and material that is available electronically. Four fulltime librarians manage this place so that you should never feel that your research is not being adequately supported by us.'

Vijay was in awe. Schmidt noticed.

'Of the thousand acres that we own,' he continued as they exited the library and walked towards the residential block, 'only fifty have been utilized for the infrastructure that you see. The remaining nine hundred and fifty acres are dense woods that envelop the facility — our contribution to preserving the environment.'

The fifty-acre work-and-stay facility was almost the equivalent of a cherry sitting on an oversized black forest cake. Heightening the sense of seclusion was the fact that the grounds were guarded by armed security personnel and guard dogs along the perimeter gates and electrified access points, biometric scanners and CCTV cameras every few metres. All this, for ten researchers, thought Vijay. Am I an employee or a prisoner? A bird in a golden cage?

‘I loved that Nataraja statue outside the main gate,’ said Vijay to Schmidt.

‘Glad you liked it,’ replied Schmidt. ‘It’s a replica of the one at CERN—the European Organization for Nuclear Research—except for the fact that this one is enclosed.’

‘Why Nataraja?’ asked Vijay.

Schmidt pulled out his phone from his pocket and showed Vijay his wallpaper.

‘CERN is concerned with the God particle, the Higgs boson, that had been predicted by another illustrious Indian, Satyendranath Bose. The dance of Shiva is nothing but the dance of subatomic particles. Moving, morphing and transforming.’

‘Creation to destruction and back,’ murmured Vijay.

‘No,’ said Schmidt. ‘There is neither creation nor destruction. Only appearance and disappearance.’

Outside one of the Milesian perimeter gates, a man in a heavy woollen jacket dialled a number on his mobile phone. ‘He’s inside,’ said the man into his phone, his breath fogging in the cold air.

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Vijay’s first day at work commenced with a meeting in which he was introduced by Schmidt to the other nine scientists. The research that Milesian undertook was quite incredible, both in terms of breadth and depth.

One of the scientists was studying weather systems to determine the correlation between independent weather events. Another was mapping human thoughts and examining the scientific basis for telepathy and telekinesis. A third was studying animal communication across distances. Yet another was involved in studying space-time warping, wormholes and black holes.

Milesian researchers were drawn from across the world—from India, China, England, America, Russia, Singapore, Japan, Germany and France. Each of them operated independently, with no collaboration between any of them. There were only two women among them. Their ages ranged from twenty-eight, with Vijay being the youngest, and upwards to sixty with the Russian, Mikhailov, topping the age chart.

They were not permitted to share findings with one another. Everything was funnelled through to Schmidt, but the exciting bit about working at Milesian was that the company did not specify a research agenda. Each scientist was free to outline and develop a study plan independently. A job at Milesian implied immense freedom, coupled with constant monitoring. Working at Milesian was like being a fish in a glass tank—one was always under observation. CCTV cameras and biometric access sensors that were dispersed throughout the facility monitored all ten researchers' movements in high-resolution.

Each of the researchers stepped forward to shake Vijay's hand and welcome him to Milesian. A couple of them kindly invited him to join them for lunch later in the day, almost like designated buddies attempting to make the new kid in class feel more comfortable. But there was one person who entirely ignored Vijay.

Mikhailov.

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It was bearable cold weather in Moscow that day. Bearable meant that the height of the snow on the ground was no more than a foot and the minimum temperature was no lower than minus ten Celsius.

Petrov parked his car in the enormous parking lot that lay adjacent to the famous Y-shaped building in Yasanevo, a southern suburb of Moscow. The massive structure housed the entire machinery of the SVR, including its oversized espionage wing. The complex was simply referred to as kontora, or 'the office'.

He entered the building and strode through the imposing lobby, crossing several security checkpoints effortlessly as he headed towards his boss's office, walking through unending hallways of the state-of-the-art complex.

During the Soviet era, the SVR used to be known as the First Chief Directorate of the KGB. The change in name was, however, irrelevant. The primary task of the SVR continued to remain that of collecting secrets from targets outside the Russian Federation.

A year earlier, the SVR had been taken over by a new director, a Soviet-era diplomat who had long been suspected by the West of operating secretly as an officer of the KGB. His friendship with the President of the Russian Federation was legendary, and whispers in the corridors of power indicated that the Director could even be the President's chosen successor one day. Petrov reported to him alone. What was not lost on most insiders was the fact that Petrov's closeness to the Director, by default, also gave him indirect access to the President.

Petrov walked through the secretary's office and gently knocked on the massive door. 'Voydite,' came the voice from within. Petrov opened the door and entered.

'How is your Gang of Four these days?' asked the Director, smiling as Petrov walked in. He waved his hand towards a chair.

'Hopefully, we'll extract more out of it than we put into it,' replied Petrov, sitting down on one of the visitors' chairs opposite the Director. 'I much prefer the idea of shooting terrorists rather than this cloak-and-dagger stuff to prevent a supposed world conflict.'

'Remember one thing, Petrov,' said the Director. 'If you have a computer network that is infected with a virus, shutting down a few machines will not help. You can kill terrorists but not their ideology. The Americans killed Osama bin Laden. Did Al-Qaeda's ideology die? They killed Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Did the ideology of an Islamic caliphate die? The real challenge lies in snuffing out the ideology.'

Petrov nodded.

'I do hope you remember the commitment that we made to the President when this group was being created?' asked the Director. 'The specific reason for us getting involved?'

'Absolutely,' said Petrov. 'But first I need your help.' 'How?' asked the Director.

'Mikhailov,' replied Petrov.

The Director made a note on the pad in front of him. 'I'll get someone on it,' he said. 'Now, there is something else that I need to discuss with you.'

The Director handed a dossier to Petrov. It was marked Sovershenno Sekretno. Top Secret. Petrov opened the folder and quickly glanced at the single page within. The first paragraph caught his attention.

A massive sinkhole materialized near the mining town of Solikamsk in the Perm region of Russia. It has since tripled in diameter over the past ten months. The enormous hole is now four hundred feet across and around two hundred and fifty feet deep.

‘Why are you asking me to read this?’ asked Petrov. ‘Maybe the earth’s crust has become unstable. Maybe it’s to do with the water table. Maybe it’s drilling-induced. Possibly even something simple like excessive human activity. Why should this warrant SVR’s attention?’

‘Why are such incidents happening so frequently these days?’ asked the Director. ‘Some of these sinkholes have appeared in isolated areas with virtually no human activity. Some of them are in areas where there is no drilling.’

‘Is there an agency that maintains data on these sinkholes?’ asked Petrov. ‘Like the ones that monitor hurricanes or earthquakes?’

‘No,’ said the Director. ‘But across the world, insurance companies have reported a doubling of claims associated with sinkholes. Something very peculiar is happening. We need to know if someone is causing them.’

‘Someone?’ asked Petrov. ‘Surely you mean something?’

‘I said it correctly the first time,’ said the Director. ‘I will help you with Mikhailov. But I need your help with these fucking holes.’

Fucking holes, thought Petrov to himself. He thought of the platinum blonde who had shared his bed the previous night. Thirty minutes later, Petrov walked out, dossier in hand. He was shaking his head.

What am I? A frigging seismologist?

Petrov had been born to ordinary folk in Saint Petersburg, then known as Leningrad. His father was a security guard and his mother, a simple housewife. Life was hard and the family made do with cabbage soup and cutlets most days, but they never went hungry.

Petrov was a hardworking boy and his excellent grades propelled him into studying law at the St Petersburg State University. He was just twenty-five years old when Mikhail Gorbachev brought about the end of the Soviet Union. He saw people celebrating in the streets when the August coup fuelled Boris Yeltsin's rise to power. It was a momentous time in their history and a chance to get away from the stranglehold of the Communist Party.

During Gorbachev's last days as President of the Soviet Union, the Chairman of the KGB, Vladimir Kryuchkov, together with seven other Soviet leaders, created a State Committee on the State of Emergency. They attempted to overthrow the government in order to maintain the 'integrity' of the Soviet Union. The attempted coup crumpled within three days. During that time, Petrov remained firmly in Boris Yeltsin's camp. It turned out to be a wise personal choice because Yeltsin eventually emerged victorious. In that year, the KGB was disbanded and split into two new services, the FSB and SVR. Petrov was absorbed into the SVR.

Yeltsin, the first President of the newly minted Russian Federation, was convinced that he could convert the erstwhile USSR's socialist economy into a vibrant capitalist market economy. He ruthlessly carried out economic shock therapy, price decontrol and privatization. In the process, he created terrible times for ordinary citizens. The sudden and unplanned nature of the shift resulted in the lion's share of wealth migrating to the hands of a few oligarchs.

Russia soon became famous for all the wrong reasons—massive corruption, thriving mafia, social unrest, galloping inflation and economic breakdown. It was during those years that Petrov began to appreciate the value of a strong state and even stronger leadership. The man who seemed to symbolize such strength was Vladimir Putin.

Petrov shared many commonalities with Putin even though fifteen years separated them. Both had studied at the St Petersburg State University, both had worked for the KGB and both valued order over chaos. When Putin became the First Deputy Prime Minister in Boris Yeltsin's Cabinet, Petrov quietly built his bridges with Putin supporters. This brought him to the notice of the future SVR director, who took personal interest in Petrov's career and ensured that he moved up the ranks.

After Russia's disastrous handling of the Ukrainian Revolution, the Director needed to build a team of tough men who would not crack under pressure. Petrov was included in a squad given the responsibility of coordinating efforts to take over the Crimea from the Ukraine.

At lightning speed, unmarked Russian forces, aided by local guerrillas, took over the region. This was followed by a contentious referendum that conveniently showed majority public opinion favouring joining Russia. Russian President Vladimir Putin immediately signed a treaty of accession with the self-styled Republic of Crimea, incorporating it into the Russian Federation. It was game, set and match to Putin's camp.

Petrov's rise through the ranks of the SVR had been guaranteed after that.