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

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Keepers of the Kalachakra

By Ashwin Sanghi

Part 15

72

Across the world, in a different time zone, Bruce Williams leaned back in his swivel chair awaiting the arrival of his morning visitor. The Chairman of RBA, or the Reconstruction Bank of America, knew that the meeting was overdue. Williams adjusted the cuffs of his shirt so that they showed from below the sleeves of his top-end Brioni suit exactly an inch. He then surveyed his office to check that nothing was out of place.

It was a massive room that occupied two thousand square feet of the prime corner on the top floor of a Manhattan skyscraper. No expense had been spared in furnishing it. Deep-pile carpeting, mahogany period furniture, soft leather upholstery and rare antiques sent out one very important message—that of immense power. The sleek platinum-plated intercom unit on his desk flashed silently. His visitor had arrived.

Williams stood up and walked around the desk to greet his visitor as his secretary, a perfectly attired middle-aged lady with tightly tied silver hair, held open the door and announced, 'Mr Mason Henderson'. She discreetly left the two men alone to shake hands. To the uninitiated it looked like a regular handshake, but it wasn't. Each man pressed his forefinger a little more than what was usual against the region that was usually known to palmists as the Mount of Venus.

The two men settled into generous Napa leather armchairs and engaged in customary small talk until Miss Jenkins brought in a silver tray containing coffee and cookies. Once she had left, the men got down to business.

'The Brotherhood is pleased with the progress we've made so far,' said Williams. 'But the next few months will be crucial. We will need to rally every brother and sister to ensure that Minerva's aims are fulfilled.'

Henderson nodded. He was a good-looking man whose complexion always had a bronzed look that matched perfectly with his ash brown hair.

Williams had been responsible for bringing Henderson into the secret society. Together they now occupied the two most senior positions within the organization.

It had been many years since Henderson's initiation, a long and tedious process that every new entrant had to go through. Existing members first ran background checks on the candidate: finances, political affiliations, religious beliefs and personal relationships. This was followed by a vote. Each member could cast a single vote by placing a white cube or black ball into a box. Even one negative vote expressed via a black ball meant non-admission. Henderson had kept his fingers crossed that his single weak spot had not been discovered. He had passed with flying colours.

Then Henderson had undergone the elaborate initiation process. He had been blindfolded with black satin and a blue rayon cord placed like a hangman's noose around his neck. Duly prepared, he had been led to an inner sanctum where three large candles were burning. He was asked to bare his right shoulder and the Worshipful Master had used a compass to prick his exposed skin. He was then asked what he desired. As per agreed custom, he answered, 'Light!' His blindfold was then removed so that he could see the three candles. He was informed that the three candles symbolized the sun, moon and the Worshipful Master. Finally, he was made to take the oath that swore him to secrecy and loyalty to Minerva.

Both Williams and Henderson were wealthy beyond belief. Williams had single-handedly created RBA, a bank devoted to financing massive infrastructure projects around the world. Henderson had transformed a small chemicals company, Genchem, into one of the largest conglomerates in the field. Both men were seen travelling the world in their private jets and hobnobbing with heads of state, other billionaires, dictators, Hollywood stars and royalty. What bound them was Minerva and its espoused cause.

Over the years, they had ensured that the richest and most powerful men and women of America, Western Europe and Asia joined their ranks, each admission only adding to the overall influence and wealth of the group. Some of them had earned their money in dubious ways but that didn't matter to Minerva. Williams often joked that money was like holy water. It purified everything, including one's sins.

Two years ago, Williams had taken over as Worshipful Master. He had appointed Henderson as his Senior Warden, the second in the hierarchy of principal officers. Though yet to prove himself, Henderson was a capable man. And Williams knew that he would have to take the plunge.

‘Let me make this easier for you. Do you know why I am here at Milesian?’ Mikhailov asked Vijay eventually.

Vijay was expecting a conspiratorial secret revelation. He was sorely disappointed.

‘It’s because of my previous research into quantum duality,’ said Mikhailov. ‘As you know, wave–particle duality is the concept that every elementary particle can behave not only as a particle but also as a wave.’

‘Sure,’ said Vijay. ‘Thomas Young’s famous double-slit experiment.’ He had lectured on it several times, including his last session at IIT. Light could behave as a wave or as a particle. In fact, anything and everything could behave as a wave or particle.

‘And that is precisely the reason why Vedanta and the Kalachakra should be of interest to us,’ said Mikhailov. ‘Did you read about the Kalachakra?’

‘Sure,’ said Vijay again, hoping this would lead somewhere. ‘And what did you discover?’ asked Mikhailov.

‘As it is outside, so it is within the body,’ said Vijay, echoing the line that had firmly planted itself into his head.

‘Good,’ said Mikhailov. ‘You’ve picked up the central theme, indicating that we are part of an inextricably linked whole. But did you give some thought to the word Kalachakra?’

‘It’s the wheel of time, isn’t it, as you’d mentioned? Kala—or time. Chakra—or wheel.’

‘Yes,’ answered Mikhailov. ‘But why is time a wheel? Modern man thinks of time as linear, a straight line. But the ancients of the East realized that time is circular. Hindus believe that time moves in cycles and that each cycle has four great epochs or yugas

—Satya, Treta, Dwapar and Kali. Once over, the epochs start all over again.’

He paused. ‘Do you remember what the great astronomer and astrophysicist Carl Sagan said about the Hindu notion of time?’

‘I don’t think I do,’ said Vijay.

‘He said that Hinduism is the only faith that is dedicated to the idea that the cosmos itself undergoes an infinite number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only dharma in which time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night, to a day and night of Brahma, 8.64 billion years long, longer than the age of Earth or the sun and about half the time since the Big Bang.’

‘And the Buddhists?’ asked Vijay.

‘The Buddhists see time as measurement of change,’ replied Mikhailov. ‘A month is simply the change in the moon while it revolves around Earth. Or a woman going from one menstrual cycle to the next. That’s why it is the “wheel of time”. Everything that has happened will happen again. Everything that will happen has already happened. Time is relative. The sages of the East were giving us something akin to Einstein’s prediction, but without its mathematics. Now, what is Schmidt making you study?’

‘Quantum behaviour beyond the quantum,’ replied Vijay. ‘The possibility that quantum laws may apply even at planetary level.’

‘And what do you think?’ asked Mikhailov.

‘If sub-atomic particles are energy and planets are also energy, then why shouldn’t they behave similarly?’ replied Vijay.

If A is C and B is C, then A is B.

‘I agree,’ said Mikhailov. ‘But if my dog has four legs and my cat has four legs, does that make my dog a cat?’

Vijay laughed.

Mikhailov continued. ‘The problem is that our present scientific framework shows that sub-atomic particles and planets don’t behave similarly. Which means that either the premise is wrong, or. . .’

‘Or?’

‘Or the framework is wrong,’ said Mikhailov. ‘It is possible that on some other planet they have figured it out already. We still need to get there.’

‘You believe that there is life elsewhere in space?’ asked Vijay.

‘It is arrogant of humans to assume as a given that we are the only life form in the universe,’ said Mikhailov. ‘Our sun is just one star among the two hundred

to four hundred billion stars in our galaxy—the Milky Way. And remember that the universe consists of two trillion galaxies like the Milky Way. If we were to represent the entire universe as Earth, then Earth itself would proportionally be the size of a billionth of a pinhead. So it does seem strange that we can even entertain the notion that we are unique.’

‘I agree,’ said Vijay. ‘The probability that there is no life outside Earth is infinitesimal.’

‘Given that Schmidt is asking you to study planets, have you considered the implications of quantum entanglement?’ asked Mikhailov. ‘Some more tea?’

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Mikhailov rose from the tatami mat as though he were a young man of twenty. He poured more tea for both of them and returned.

‘Well, the concept of quantum entanglement is not new,’ said Vijay. ‘Physicists have held that, in a so-called entangled system, two seemingly separate particles can behave as an inseparable whole. One constituent cannot be fully described without considering the other.’

Mikhailov sipped his tea quietly, watching him, and waiting for more.

‘This special property of quantum entanglement can be better understood if one separated the two entangled particles and placed them miles apart. If one were to measure the characteristics of these particles using the same criteria, one would find that the measurements would be identical but in opposite directions.’

‘Correct,’ said Mikhailov. ‘So if quantum laws can be repeated at planetary level, then our Earth should have another entangled planet spinning somewhere else in the universe?’

‘Precisely,’ said Vijay. ‘Indeed, in my thesis I have argued exactly that.’

‘But seers of the East instinctively understood this when deep in meditation,’ said Mikhailov. ‘They were ahead of science. And that is something you must never forget. Do you remember what Robert Oppenheimer said about it?’

‘What?’ asked Vijay, entirely bewildered.

‘He said that the discoveries in atomic physics are not wholly unfamiliar, wholly unheard of or new. They have a history and central place in Buddhist and Hindu thought.’

‘But modern science is about verifiable data and experimentation,’ said Vijay.

‘The sages were concerned with perception, not experimentation,’ replied Mikhailov. ‘Do you know that the Rig Veda, the most ancient book of the Hindus, composed before 3000 BCE, contains a hymn in which the speed of light was calculated at 2,202 yojanas in half a nimesha?’

Vijay nodded. He recalled the hymn. Yojananam sahastra dwe dwe shate dwe cha yojane aken nimishardhena krammana namostute. With deep respect, I bow to the sun that travels 2,202 yojanas in half a nimesha.

It was quite remarkable. Converting the ancient units to modern ones, the result was 302,301 kilometres per second, just a 0.1 per cent variation from the modern calculation of 299,792 kilometres per second.

‘There are those who think that the ancient units were reverse-engineered in order to sync them with modern calculations,’ said Vijay. ‘It is rather convenient that one nimisha is 16/75th of a second. Maybe someone did a reverse calculation to determine the unit values that would yield the correct modern-day speed of light.’

‘Do you even know what a nimisha is?’ asked Mikhailov crossly. ‘The Puranic units are clearly recorded.’ Mikhailov quickly jotted down some figures for Vijay’s benefit.

‘There was no reverse engineering of the units, as you can see,’ said Mikhailov. ‘Simply two different ways of breaking down the day-night cycle—the only constant between the two systems.’

‘But how did ancient seers determine the speed of light in the absence of technology and equipment?’ asked Vijay.

‘You will see numerous parallels to modern physics in the Upanishads of Hinduism, in the Sutras of Buddhism and the Sufism of Ibn Arabi,’ said Mikhailov. ‘Never discount the value of perception!’

‘Everything is going as per your plan,’ said Henderson to Williams. ‘You have only to switch on the television and you will be bombarded by extremist views. Polarization has succeeded.’

‘But polarization is insufficient,’ said Williams. ‘Polarization can only be deemed successful if it results in a final solution. I have already contributed over a hundred million dollars to the corpus of Minerva. So have you. There are many like us who have donated generously.’

‘So where is the money going?’ asked Henderson.

‘Milesian Labs, mostly,’ explained Williams. ‘We must ensure that it grows stronger so that we may eventually neutralize the threat of Islam.’

‘Radical Islamism,’ corrected Henderson gently. ‘There is a difference.’

‘Those distinctions are for politically correct statements by the liberals,’ said Williams. ‘The truth is, we have a problem with Islam, not just “Islamism” or “radical Islamism” or “radical Islamist terror”. Minerva must act if we wish to prevent the entire world from becoming a caliphate!’

‘How, if not through easy polarization?’ asked Henderson.

‘I chanced upon something very old and extremely valuable,’ said Williams conspiratorially. ‘It cost me a substantial sum but it was worth every penny.’

‘What is it?’ asked Henderson.

‘I’ll tell you about it soon,’ replied Williams. ‘It gives us an added advantage in fighting the scourge.’

Henderson nodded. ‘I also have an idea,’ he said. ‘But I need your support to make it happen.’

‘What is it?’ asked Williams.

‘It’s called Molecular and Universal Audio,’ replied Henderson. ‘It could revolutionize the way we operate.’ The men spent the next few minutes discussing Henderson’s idea.

'I will ask Buchman, the Brotherhood's banker at Vonlanthen & Cie, to assist you with capital requirements,' said Williams. 'Now, I need to ask you something.'

'What?' asked Henderson.

'When I took over as Worshipful Master two years ago, I knew that the day would not be far off when I would hand over the reins to you. I think that time has come. What do you think?'

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Mikhailov stared at Vijay, looking for signs that his words had sunk in.

'Have you read the Srimad Bhagvatam?' he asked. 'Chapter sixteen of the fifth canto contains the Sanskrit word for geography—bhugol. The sages who wrote the Srimad Bhagvatam were telling us that bhu, or Earth, is gol, or spherical. How would they have known this?'

Then Mikhailov went in for the kill. 'Just Google "Milky Way" and pull up an image on your phone,' he instructed. Vijay did as he was asked. 'Look at it closely,' said Mikhailov. 'Do you see the Golden Spiral of Fibonacci?'

Vijay was aware of that famous concept. The Fibonacci sequence was obtained by starting with 0 and 1 and then adding the previous two numbers to obtain each successive number.

If one took any two adjacent numbers in the sequence, after skipping the first few, the ratio of the higher to lower number always tended towards 1.618. This was called the Golden Ratio. And a logarithmic curve with a growth factor of 1.618 yielded the Golden Spiral that could be seen everywhere in nature. In flowers, petals, hurricanes and even galaxies.

What was Mikhailov trying to tell him?

'Now Google for "Swastika" please,' said Mikhailov. Once Vijay had the image, it struck him. Mikhailov was right!



‘The Milky Way consists of a core surrounded by a circle of gas, dust and stars that contains four radii—Norma, Scutum-Centaurus, Sagittarius and Perseus. These arms branch outward in a logarithmic spiral shape,’ said Mikhailov. ‘Look at the Swastika closely and you will find the same shape. Maybe ancient astronomers knew more than we care to imagine.’

There was a lull in the conversation as both men mentally ruminated on each other’s ideas. Then Mikhailov spoke. ‘Remember that the only way to arrive at a unified theory, one that explains atoms and planets, one that can explain waves and particles, one that can explain animate and inanimate, is by combining science and spirituality. Come back tomorrow night and I’ll explain what I mean.’

Vijay left, using the protocol that had been agreed upon, no doors being closed. Once Mikhailov was alone, he went back into thought.

He was wondering what his next steps regarding Vijay ought to be.

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Bruce Williams had been born to a wealthy banking family in Boston. His parents were members of Boston’s elite, the Boston Brahmins. In fact, his mother traced her ancestry back to the Mayflower. As was customary, he attended the Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, a school that prepared him adequately for admission into Harvard.

He just about scraped through Harvard because he was entirely focused on finding ways to make money. Although his father was exceedingly wealthy, the old man always kept his son on a tight leash and the latter was forced to search for innovative avenues to support his lifestyle. One of the solutions was high-stake poker games in which he would mop up a small fortune on almost every occasion.

Playing poker gave him an education in the laws of probabilities and odds. It also made him good at reading other people's gestures and expressions. Once he graduated, he joined his father's bank, but in less than a year he quit. Father and son could not agree on anything.

Realizing that his son's energies could still be put to good use, his father advanced him a sizeable chunk of capital with which Williams set up an infrastructure company. He would bid for construction projects such as roads, bridges, dams and ports, using his substantial connections, only to do a quick resale mid-project. That's when he realized that there was an opportunity available to finance such deals and the Reconstruction Bank of America was born.

RBA went on to acquire several other banks; within a relatively short span of three decades, it became a multinational banking and financial services holding company headquartered in New York City. It was the sixth largest bank in the United States and one of the country's largest providers of financial services, including a hedge fund. Williams was one of the largest contributors to the Republican Party and it was at a fundraising event that he had met the Mayor of New York City.

It would be another couple of years before the Mayor put forward the name of Williams as a potential candidate for membership in Minerva. Unbeknownst to Williams, the Mayor was the Worshipful Master and was on a mission to induct young blood into the Brotherhood. Williams took to Minerva like a fish to water.

Some years later, Williams met Mason Henderson at another fundraiser. They became friends instantly, regularly having lunch together at their respective clubs. It was just a matter of time before Williams got Henderson to join Minerva.

At that time, Williams did not know that he would occupy the position of Worshipful Master one day. Nor did he foresee that he would one day give it up willingly to Henderson.

‘How is he doing?’ asked Zhang, taking a sip of jasmine tea.

The four members of IG4 were inside a safe house that belonged to the Bundesnachrichtendienst—the Federal Intelligence Service of Germany. Located in Kreuzberg, the cultural hub of Berlin, the apartment provided a partial view of Gorkitz Park through the half-open drapes.

‘He’s alive and well,’ began Judith. ‘His microchip indicates as much. He has also had an online chat with me via Tor. At the moment he still seems to be finding his bearings.’

Zhang nodded, staring at the photograph of Habib, Mafraqi’s deputy, in his folder. Judith seemed to believe that he was amenable to negotiations.

‘Anyone that he has had conversations with?’ asked Petrov.

‘He mentioned several names including your Russian scientist,’ said Judith. ‘Mikhailov?’ asked Petrov.

Sharma’s ears perked up. Mikhailov? That name sounds familiar.

‘Yes,’ said Judith. ‘Mikhailov.’

‘Anything specific that was discussed?’ asked Petrov, stubbing out his cigarette. Judith detected a slight quaver in his voice.

‘No,’ she replied. ‘Our chat was before his scheduled meeting with Mikhailov. But he did tell me that Mikhailov had asked him to research something called the Kalachakra.’

‘The Buddhist wheel of time,’ said Sharma. Eastern mysticism had always been a source of fascination for him.

‘What is it about?’ asked Judith.

‘It’s considered to be one of the most powerful teachings in Vajrayana Buddhism,’ said Sharma. ‘A potent mix of Buddhist philosophy, Hindu tantra, science and astrology.’

Sharma looked at the faces of his colleagues. ‘I personally know the leading scholar in the field, Professor Vignesh Thakur,’ he added as explanation.

‘Astrology? Why would Mikhailov be interested in that?’ asked Judith.

‘The Kalachakra system believes in the correlation between body, mind, consciousness and the universe,’ replied Sharma. ‘As outside, so inside.’

‘But seriously, astrology?’ asked Judith.

‘That’s only part of it,’ said Sharma. He looked at Judith’s expression. ‘One may scoff at astrology as the hobby of quacks, but the truth is, if you believe in mathematical regression models, you should believe in astrology too.’

‘Why?’ asked Judith.

‘Because Maharishi Bhrigu, the creator of predictive astrology as we know it, collected half a million birth charts and then studied the lives of those people,’ explained Sharma.

‘He then developed a predictive model, one that could point to potential events based upon planetary positions.’

‘But surely that’s nonsense,’ said Petrov. ‘Mikhailov has lost his marbles. Tell our boy to stop wasting his time with him, and focus instead on finding out how Milesian is helping Minerva bump off the world’s leaders.’

‘We are living in a world where we are willing to believe that the mere act of observation can alter our reality,’ said Sharma. ‘And yet we stick to the notion that the universe has no bearing on our lives. That the movement of the sun, moon and planets have no influence over us. We wish to believe that in a quantum world, one in which everything is connected, the planets are not connected to us.’

‘Mikhailov is crazy if he believes in this stuff,’ said Petrov. ‘And it looks like you’re on your way there, Sharma.’

‘I’m simply saying that the movement of the sun, moon and planets tend to interfere with the earth’s magnetic field. This magnetic field has a bearing on newly born infants and adults alike,’ said Sharma. ‘Why do women’s menstrual cycles closely mimic lunar cycles? Why are schizophrenics more likely to be born in February? Why are dyslexics more likely to be summer babies?’

‘Why?’ asked Judith.

‘Because of planetary positions at the time of birth,’ replied Sharma.

‘Astrology is among the worst manifestations of pseudoscience,’ said Petrov. ‘Stop wasting your time.’

And that was when Sharma remembered who Mikhailov was.

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‘Makes no sense,’ said Cracker, taking a bite of his doughnut and leaving a trail of crumbs on his crumpled shirt. ‘Did you attempt to run it against EdgeRun?’

‘Sure did,’ said his deputy. ‘No joy. Incredible. EdgeRun is usually awesome.’

Some years ago, Edward Snowden, a former CIA employee, had leaked classified information from the NSA. One of the most important elements of the leaked information was a decryption programme called Bullrun. Bullrun used advanced mathematical routines to enable the NSA to routinely decrypt vast amounts of data. It then turned out that the British government had also been using a similar programme called Edgehill.

Many technical details around the programme were mentioned in Snowden’s documents and were censored by the mainstream press at the urging of US intelligence officers. And those were the very details that Cracker had pieced together in order to create his own decryption algorithm that took elements of Bullrun and Edgehill to build an entirely new piece of software. He had christened it EdgeRun, after its twin origins.

‘The fact that he is communicating gibberish makes me very worried,’ said Cracker. ‘Give me the raw data dump of whatever he typed. Let me see if one of my contacts at the NSA can help. What about other communication?’

‘Regular calls to his girlfriend,’ replied the deputy. ‘Nothing significant discussed. Some of the conversation tends to be in Kannada, so I’ve sent you transcripts that are translated. He seems to be missing her a lot.’

‘Touching,’ said Cracker. ‘What about his movements within the campus?’

‘Works extra-long hours, just as Schmidt would want him to,’ replied the deputy. ‘Nothing noteworthy on the CCTV system. And, ah, yes. He saved Mikhailov’s life through a timely Heimlich manoeuvre in the restaurant.’

‘Really?’ asked Cracker, brushing the doughnut crumbs off his shirt and taking a gulp of his coffee. ‘Anything else?’

‘He tends to leave his apartment door open most of the time once he’s home.’

‘Hmm,’ said Cracker. That last piece of information was mystifying.

And then something struck Cracker. 'When he checked in, didn't you say that there was a roll of clingwrap in his luggage?' he asked.

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Vijay made his way from his lab to Food for Thought, his mind dwelling on Mikhailov. He wasn't sure what to make of the man. Judith had asked him to be careful and warned him that Mikhailov could be connected to Russian intelligence. But wasn't the Russian SVR also a constituent of IG4?

Then there was Mikhailov himself—a weird man. Vijay couldn't tell whether he was a genius, or mentally disturbed, or a bit of both. Vijay decided to play along for a while before he made up his mind. He suddenly felt a hand on his shoulder. He swung around, almost prepared to land a punch before he realized that it was Schmidt.

'I'm so sorry to have startled you,' said Schmidt to an embarrassed Vijay. 'No, no. . .' stammered Vijay. 'I have no clue why I'm so on edge.'

'Maybe it's the newness of the place,' said Schmidt. 'Made any friends as yet?' Vijay knew it was a trick question.

'Not really,' answered Vijay. 'Everyone here is kind and cooperative. It's just that no one has any time to socialize.'

'Luckily, you were there to save Mikhailov when he was choking,' said Schmidt, his face not giving away anything. Ah, so that's where this is coming from, thought Vijay. Word has reached him of the incident at the restaurant.

'It's what anyone else would have done,' said Vijay, shrugging it off and hoping that the conversation would end soon.

'I enjoyed reading your research proposal,' Schmidt went on. 'I thought we could have lunch together to briefly discuss it?'

Having lunch with you is on my list of favourite things, right after coming down with bird flu, measles and chicken pox, thought Vijay.

'Sure,' said Vijay. 'Shall we go?'

The two men walked over to Food for Thought, where Daulat Singh took extra-special care of them on account of Schmidt's presence. Schmidt asked for a chicken-mayo sandwich and mint-flavoured water. Vijay ordered vegetable burritos and fresh apple juice.

'Do you like it here?' asked Schmidt after Daulat Singh had left.

'Sure,' replied Vijay. 'It's a fantastic facility and I'm getting to do research work on a subject that excites me. What more could I want?'

'Not missing Sujatha too much?' asked Schmidt.

Vijay momentarily froze. Was it a subtle warning of sorts? Or had they been listening in on his conversations? Probably the latter.

'I think that's the name that you mentioned during our interview,' said Schmidt. 'Or am I mistaken?'

'You have a good memory,' acknowledged Vijay. 'Luckily for me, she is very busy with her life as well.' He then changed the subject. It made him uncomfortable to be discussing Sujatha with Schmidt.

'What do you think of the direction that I wish to take?' he asked.

'I think it fits in exceptionally well with what others are doing at Milesian,' said Schmidt, taking a bite of the generous sandwich that Daulat Singh had placed before him. 'Although you should be very careful of what you discuss with the others.'

What was that? Another hint to stay away from discussions with Mikhailov?

'Why?' asked Vijay, playing innocent.

'Because we have found that the only way to maintain integrity of research is by preventing cross-contamination of ideas,' explained Schmidt. 'We want your research to remain pure and uninfluenced by others. The same applies to everyone else too. I am the sole funnel through whom everything gets filtered.'

That's a load of fertilizer, thought Vijay.

'I have sent you a formal request for copies of your thesis as well as the informal research notes that went into formulating it,' said Schmidt. 'I do hope you remember the clause in your agreement that requires you to share with us all your previous research?'

‘Yes,’ replied Vijay, slightly uncomfortable about handing over years of work to Schmidt.

‘Don’t worry,’ said Schmidt. ‘It continues to remain your work. But if we do not know the ground that you have covered, we would be unable to integrate your present efforts with what you already know.’

Vijay nodded.

‘The land that Milesian occupies at this site is incredibly vast,’ said Vijay, changing the subject. ‘What lies beyond our working and living areas? It’s impossible to get a feel, because the cable car doesn’t have windows.’

The shift in Schmidt’s expression was instant. It was a flash of intense anger. He recovered from the momentary lapse quickly and re-established a cordial veneer.

‘At Milesian, we aim not only to carry out path-breaking research but also to improve the world,’ he said. ‘One of the biggest challenges we are facing is the gradual extinction of biodiversity. Beyond us lie hundreds of acres of pristine forests, home to some of the rarest plants and herbs in the world.’

‘Can one visit?’ asked Vijay, pushing his luck.

‘We have seen that the only way to allow such flora and fauna to flourish is by leaving them entirely untouched over extended periods of time,’ replied Schmidt. ‘Now, I suggest that we both get back to work. Nice to have had this little chat with you.’

I’m being dismissed, thought Vijay.

Schmidt stood up and walked out. Vijay was a little slower. He looked at Schmidt’s food tray. Then he did something that he could not explain.

He turned away from the CCTV angle of vision, picked up the partially-consumed bottle of Schmidt’s mint-flavoured water and slipped it into his inner jacket pocket before heading over to his lab.