

[16] Project Archon

“I can’t say that I’m exactly shattered. I’m too cynical for that. But it’s still disillusioning when your own government—or at least those who represent it—*lie* to you! That’s the sort of thing we expect from the Russians, but not from our own people!”

Angry and frustrated, Carla was speaking by phone to a close friend in New York, one of the senior editors of *Time* magazine. As she talked, she paced impatiently back and forth within the limits of the phone’s short cord in her fourteenth floor room at the Palais des Congres. Perfectly framed in her window, there before her gaze at the far end of Avenue Raymond Poincare lay the majestic monument of Place Victor Hugo and the sprawling Palais de Chaillot, while just beyond arose the black filigree of the Eiffel Tower. She fixed her eyes on its familiar and stolid beauty as a frame of reference for a world gone badly awry.

“Why should you be shocked?” came the unruffled voice from the other end. “Eisenhower lied to the whole world about Gary Powers and the U-2 spy plane the Soviets shot down in 1960; John Kennedy lied about the Bay of Pigs in 1961; Nixon lied about CIA attempts to fix the Chilean elections in 1970, as well as about his tapes and—I could go on and on. Denial isn’t just the name of the game; it’s an honorable tradition and it’s still in vogue. You don’t expect the embassy boys to say, ‘Yes, Miss Bertelli, we have taken Dr. Khorev to a secret location for our own nefarious purposes and aren’t going to let anyone know about it until we’re good and ready, so please don’t breathe a word.’”

“I know, George, I know. But it’s terribly insulting and demeaning when you get lied to right to your face! I can’t let my personal feelings get involved, but it still makes me screaming mad!”

“Look, Carla. I know you think you’re onto something bigger than Watergate, but you’re also aware of the general feeling among editors about *psychic research*. That’s tabloid stuff. You couldn’t get a legitimate paper or magazine to touch it with a robot. If Khorev were a physicist or a novelist or in

the military or an athlete or almost anything else—but a *parapsychologist*! That’s the kiss of death on your story. Most editors would say, ‘Oh, another Uri Geller, huh? Well, that fad has died off, thankfully. Sorry, we’re not interested.’”

“He’s not a psychic, for heaven’s sake. He’s a scientist who checks up on psychics—and he’s one of the most brilliant in the world!”

“Most if not all psychics are phonies, so why does he have to be so brilliant to check up on them?”

“George, the CIA is involved in this up to its ears.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m not at liberty to reveal that yet, but I’ve known it for a couple of years. Anyway, it’s fairly common knowledge that the CIA is involved to some extent in psychic research. If *they* take it seriously, that ought to give it some credibility.”

“Oh, now you’ve really convinced me. Shall I remind you of some of the absolutely kooky things the CIA has been involved in, the blunders it’s made, the bungled, harebrained assassination plots against Castro, Lumumba, and others—working with people like Noriega, the endless list of lies and misinformation?”

“Forget it I’ve read Woodward, Agee, Marchetti, Stockwell, Snepp—all the exposes by exagents.” She paused and frowned at the Eiffel Tower. “Okay, so if I can’t get an old friend like you interested—”

“I’m interested. You know that I’m just reminding you of what you’re up against.”

“Please don’t I’ve heard it for years. But I’m telling you, *something* is going on that’s way out of the ordinary.”

“Convince me.”

“Well, you know why I’m over here. This is the world’s very first International Congress on Parapsychology. And it’s not a bunch of out-of-touch professors sitting in their ivory towers talking theory, either. These are official government representatives discussing actual applications of psychic power, and very concerned about it.”

“Like what?”

“Look, I don’t have time to go into that.”

“That’s the problem, Carla. It’s always so vague.”

“George, ifs not vague—believe me. But please have pity on me—I’m paying for this phone call. The Russians are so concerned that in Khorev’s speech this morning, addressing the entire Congress, he called for international

controls, free exchange of information—and he was dead-serious when he warned about the dangers of psychic power!”

“But you think he was being hustled off to the airport to be taken back to Moscow?”

There isn’t any other explanation for what I personally witnessed and got involved in. We could have both been killed!”

“Then apparently the Russians weren’t happy with his speech.”

“I’m not talking about his speech. This was a prepared statement that his government instructed him to read.”

“You think he changed it?”

“No, there’s something else behind this. Listen. I get nothing from my friend at police headquarters here in Paris. A top Russian scientist defects, and one of their delegation has to be in a hospital here somewhere with dozens of fresh stitches in him, and there’s not a peep.”

“You’ve checked the hospitals?”

“Every last one. They really have the lid on this! The American Embassy goes so far as to tell me—*me, the person who brought him in*—that Khorev doesn’t even exist. Hide a defector—that’s standard procedure. But you tell the world you’ve got him, and the other side screams for his release. Why is nobody saying anything? There’s something I don’t understand, and whatever it is, it’s got to be big—really big!”

“Well, I’ll admit it stinks a little worse than usual. I’ll give you that much.”

“And to top it off, Dr. Frank Leighton, head of the American delegation, has vanished as well. I would bet you anything that he’s on the same plane with Khorev heading for the U.S. right now. And let me tell you something else—Leighton’s been working for the CIA for years!”

“So have a lot of other people.”

“He’s not just a paid informer—he’s involved in secret research that’s incredible. But I can’t even write about that yet. I’ve been sitting on it because it was passed on to me in confidence.”

“Okay, what do you want me to do?”

“Just remember what I’ve told you and let me know anything that comes over the wires that seems to be even remotely related to this story.”

“Okay. I can reach you at this number in Paris, right? Then you’re back in Washington?”

“No, when this Congress ends Saturday, I’m only stopping in Washington long enough to pick up some things. Then I’m heading for California. I’ll call

you when I get out there.”

“California?”

“I’m reluctant It’s going to be painful.”

“Ken?”

“I don’t think there’s any other way. He’s still got a connection with Leighton, and that’s how I’m going to find Khorev.” Her eye had wandered over to look down on Rue Debarcadere and Place Ferdinand. For a moment she had a horrifying vision through a rearview mirror of “Pavlov” bouncing off the table and flying through that plate-glass window. She shuddered—and then a smile began to spread across her face. *It serves you right, you contemptible gorilla! I’d love to know your thoughts right now.*

“Are you there, Carla? Hello?”

“Sorry—I was just thinking. One of these days, George, I’m going to hand you one incredible story! That’s a promise. Talk to you later.”

She hung up the phone and stood looking down upon Place Ferdinand for a few more moments, relishing the memory. Then it hit her. *Why didn’t I think of this before? They’re going to be looking for me! They don’t know me—but they know my car!*

She dug around in her purse, found her rental papers, and hurriedly dialed a number. When someone answered, she began talking rapidly in French. “This is Carla Bertelli. I picked up a blue Volvo C-70 convertible from you this morning at Orly. Yes, I know it was for a week, but I can’t drive it anymore. No, there’s nothing wrong with the car, just with me. I’m incapacitated. Someone will have to come and get it. I’m at the Palais des Congres. Never mind the cancellation fee, penalties, pickup—or anything else. I don’t care what it costs. And there’s a 100 Franc *pour boire* if someone can get here within the hour. I’ll be waiting in the main lobby near the checkout desk.”

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Viktor had protested vehemently at being taken suddenly out a back exit from the embassy and into a waiting limousine without being able to thank Carla Bertelli once again for saving his life. “It’s extremely urgent to get you out of France,” Jorgensen had insisted, “and safely to the United States before the Russians raise an international furor.”

“But what about Miss Bertelli?” he had asked. “She’s waiting, you know.”

“One of my assistants will explain everything to her. She’ll understand.”

Now the sense of euphoria began to build until he thought he would burst with the joy and relief. On the way to the airport, Viktor kept running his hand

over the briefcase clutched on his lap to make sure it was still there. It all seemed unreal, especially when, without going through customs or passport control, he was escorted aboard a large, sleek jet that apparently belonged to some agency of the United States government. He was treated with great courtesy and care, as though the flight and everyone on it existed for his benefit alone. It was not long before he realized that was indeed the case.

As soon as the plane had attained its cruising altitude, Viktor became the center of attention—attention that began with questions that seemed at first to reflect genuine interest in him as an individual, but which soon turned into intensive and eventually grueling interrogation. For the first hour or so, it hardly seemed to matter. He was almost too intoxicated with the wonder of it all to answer the questions that were being fired at him in rapid succession. However, the truth finally moved from surrealism to cold reality. He was indeed high above the Atlantic Ocean, speeding toward Washington, D.C., and it had at last become clear to him that his fellow passengers were all either embassy personnel or CIA agents. He was now certain that his interrogators had to be with the CIA.

“Doctor, we’re sorry to be asking so many questions, but you understand why we have to be as thorough as possible. It’s for your protection as well as for ours.” Jorgensen had said that at least five times, but he sounded sincere and Viktor appreciated his solicitude, even if it seemed overdone. At last Viktor leaned back in his seat, completely exhausted with the effort.

The seats were arranged facing one another on both sides of the plane. Viktor was in the middle on the right aisle facing toward the rear, with five other men sitting around him. Three were obviously professional interrogators. Then there was Jorgensen and an aide. There were at least a dozen others on the plane, but he’d had no contact with them as yet although they were apparently part of his escort. Looking around, he’d seen several men engaged in phone conversations. It was an impressive operation.

“Take us through your reasons for wanting to defect just once more, Doctor, if you don’t mind.” Why did they keep saying that? If he did mind—and he did—he couldn’t say so. This politeness seemed so unnecessary, and certainly strange in comparison with the way the Committee back at the base, for example, operated.

“Well, as I’ve said,” began Viktor once again wearily, “the evidence I accumulated over the past five years—and I have as much of it as I could carry in my briefcase—led me in directions that I couldn’t pursue in a Marxist society where materialism has so long been the sacred cow. I don’t have to tell you—

that even now—there’s little freedom to think for yourself—especially at certain levels in the military and classified work—and I’m starved for freedom. I need freedom for my research, which is my whole life— and personal freedom just to be a human being.” He paused and shrugged. “And that’s basically it”

“And the Paris Congress gave you the first chance you’d had?”

“I’m not a Communist Party member, never have been, and without that you couldn’t get out of the country—and even very few Party members ever got to the West There’s just no way you can escape across the border to Finland or Turkey—at least not any way that I would dare to try. There’s supposedly a new freedom—but not for people in my position. They wouldn’t have sent me to the Congress if it hadn’t been necessary to give the delegation some legitimacy. Every so-called ‘delegate’ except me was working for the FSB.”

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In a curtained-off section in the front of the plane, Frank Leighton, tie loosened, looking tired but clearly very excited, was seated with two other men—the embassy’s top Russian expert and the CIA’s Western Europe division chief. They were closely watching Khorev’s interrogation on closed-circuit television.

“I don’t think he’s a plant,” said the embassy official, for about the sixth time. He himself had defected from Russia 20 years before. Everything about Khorev rang true, not only to this expert’s intimate knowledge of the Russian system, but to his intuition as well.

“I *know* he’s not a plant,” insisted Leighton. “He’s too important to them to risk—and I need him immediately out in California!”

“There’s no way you can put him to work yet,” protested the CIA division chief. “So forget that.” And then he added cautiously, “He wouldn’t be the first big fish they’ve thrown our way.”

“He’s not a ‘big fish,’” retorted Leighton. “He’s their top man in psychic research! They couldn’t possibly afford to use him that way. Can you imagine how much it’s going to set them back to lose him?”

“I still think he could be a plant,” cautioned the CIA watchdog. “He’s got to be kept on ice until we can check him out thoroughly.”

“What do you want to do?” demanded the Russian expert. “Treat him like you guys did Yuri Nossenko, locked up for three years in a tiny room with the screws turned ever tighter, trying to break him because somebody was afraid he was a double agent?”

“Don’t keep bringing that up,” countered the CIA man. “I know Yuri was

your friend, but that's an isolated case, a bad mistake—and plenty of mistakes have been made in the other direction, too. Don't forget Fedora and Tophat. Their misinformation about Soviet ICBMs led us astray for years. And how about Colonel Penkovsky? Now there was the darling of British Intelligence, and our own also—supposedly the greatest Western intelligence coup of the century. And you know the doubts about him today. I just want to be sure.”

“There's no way to be *sure*. Lies become truth, defectors turnout to be plants, some of our own agents are working for the other side. Moles are everywhere, and pretty soon you don't believe your own judgment and black-and-white evidence when it's under your nose.” He threw up his hands. “Everything's a calculated risk.”

Leighton had deliberately withdrawn from the argument. It was irrelevant as far as he was concerned. He had already placed a call to the Director of Central Intelligence (DCI) and would make his appeal directly to him. Noticing Leighton's lack of interest in their discussion, the other two joined him in leaning back and watching the television monitor in silence. Khorev was going into more details than he had before, telling about the last experiment.

“This was the third psychic we lost. He was out of his body—at least that's my present understanding—probing a target that the FSB had given us several pictures of... quite a large complex supposedly located outside Palo Alto. We were told it was a CIA psychic research lab.”

The questioners seated around Khorev exchanged skeptical glances. In the front of the plane, Leighton suddenly sat up straight and leaned forward on the edge of his seat.

“Did he describe what he saw—any details of interest?”

Viktor nodded. “Yes, but better than a mere description, I developed a means of transferring the image in a human brain onto video film. My briefcase—someone took it from me when I came aboard—” Viktor looked around questioningly, just a trace of worry in his expression.

“We can get it for you when you need it.”

“There are things in there I really need to explain,” put in Viktor hurriedly.

“You'll have plenty of time for that later. Now you were saying—?”

“I've got a cassette in there of what our psychic saw. I suppose you've heard of Dr. Frank Leighton—one of your top parapsychologists. You'll see a glimpse of him on the video.”

Behind the curtain, the Russian expert and the CIA chief looked at Leighton questioningly. He stood abruptly to his feet. “This has gone too far! I want the

questioning stopped—*now*. I'll take full responsibility." He pulled the curtain aside, and the three of them hurried down the aisle.

"He was dead beyond a doubt," Khorev was saying as they came up behind him. "And that mangled, lifeless arm—holding a felt pen that none of us had ever seen before—printed out in Greek letters the message: 'Death to Prometheus. Archon.'"

Following the gaze of the men seated opposite him, Viktor turned around and was astonished to see who was standing there listening. Leighton leaned over and patted Viktor on the shoulder. Surprised and overjoyed, Viktor reached up and the two shook hands warmly.

"I missed you at lunch today," quipped Leighton, "but dinner will do. And I think we'll both be just as happy that your 'assistant' won't be listening in."

Viktor managed a weak smile. "You must tell me how you knew who he was."

"Oh, I'll explain that and a whole lot more in due time. Chernov's a nasty one—fills up one of our thickest red-flagged files. But you won't have to worry about him anymore."

"That's right!" exclaimed Viktor, and then repeated the words as though he were just beginning to understand his new freedom. "You're right—no more Chernov! You can't imagine what that means!" The tension drained from his face, and he joined Leighton in an exhilarating laugh.

"I was looking forward to showing you the sights of Paris," added Leighton a bit wistfully. "But how about Washington, D.C. instead? And after that San Francisco!"

"It's just too much to believe." Viktor's voice was choked. "Am I really here? Is this really happening to *me*?"

"It sure is. We're happy for you. And you can count on us for any help you may need. Now I think it's time we all had something to drink and relaxed a bit before they serve us some dinner."

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In the middle of dinner Leighton was called away to a phone. It was the DCI returning his call.

"I understand you've got Khorev," said the director.

"Right. That's what I was calling about."

"Congratulations! I'll hear how it happened later. How does he look?"

"Clean as a hound's tooth! I mean, this is *Viktor Khorev*—the one and only. He's not playing any games."

“I’d tend to agree with that just because of who he is.”

“We’ve been through his entire briefcase. You’ve never seen anything like the treasure of documents he’s brought us. I guarantee he hasn’t held anything back.”

“That’s a good sign. So?”

“I’ve got to have him immediately out in California.”

“That’s not the way we do things.”

“I know it isn’t but this is a unique situation.”

“You know I’ll take some heat from some of the Old Guard.”

“I know, but can’t you see where Khorev could play a key role in getting the Plan accepted by the world? Think about it!”

There was a long silence on the other end. When finally the director spoke, there was suppressed excitement in his voice—excitement that he never allowed to intrude into his professional life, but which he could scarcely suppress now as the truth of what Leighton had said gripped him. “You’ve got him. On one condition: He doesn’t leave the base. He’s got to be kept there under 24-hour guard—for his protection and ours.”

“I’ll see to that!” responded Leighton.

“And listen: This project is so sensitive that if Khorev ever steps one centimeter out of line, he’s history!”

“Do you want me to bring him to Langley to see you on my way through?”

“I’m leaving for the Middle East tomorrow. I’ll stop by when I’m next out on the West Coast. This is a big break—congratulations again!”

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When dinner was over, Leighton motioned for Viktor to follow him. Together they went toward the back of the plane, away from the others.

“What I’m going to talk about now is so secret” Leighton said in a confidential tone, putting his hand on Viktor’s shoulder and leaning close, “that no one on this plane knows about it except me—and soon you. So don’t mention this to anyone—and don’t discuss your video or your work, no matter who asks. I’ve given the order for no one to question you any further. So if someone tries to do that, just call for me.” He paused for a moment smiling warmly at Viktor.

“I’ve really been treated very kindly.”

“And you always will be,” said Leighton solemnly. “Now I don’t know what your hopes were—I mean what you expected to do in America?”

“Of course, I want to continue my research here—if there’s some place I can

fit in.” He looked at Leighton questioningly, knowing that what he had in mind was really too much to ask—at least at this early stage. “I had hoped to be able to learn about your research, but I know it may be very secret.”

“That’s no problem. I’ll be happy to show you everything.”

“Would you? That would be wonderful!” Viktor began to feel that he and Leighton would be good friends. “I hope I can see you sometimes—I mean, I don’t know where I might be taken.”

“That’s up to you, really.”

“It is?” Viktor couldn’t believe his ears, but then this was the West and he was going to America, the land of freedom. That gave him courage to ask something else. There’s someone I’ve wanted for years to meet.”

“Who’s that?”

“Dr. Ken Inman. I’ve read some of his papers and find his theories particularly challenging, but he seems to have dropped out of sight. I haven’t seen anything recent from him.” Something changed slightly in Leighton’s eyes that Viktor couldn’t interpret. Now he was fearful that he had overstepped his bounds. “I’m sorry—I shouldn’t be expressing myself so freely when we hardly know each other.”

“No, that’s quite alright. So you want to see Inman. You know, he hasn’t been involved in this field for about two years.”

“Did he retire? I thought he was quite young.”

Leighton was thinking of a possibility that might have some real promise. “I’m sure I can arrange for you to meet him. That wouldn’t be difficult. Whether he’d be willing to talk about his psychic research—that’s another question. But to you—yes, I think you might be able to do what some of the rest of us have tried to do without success: stir his interest again.”

Viktor didn’t understand what Leighton meant and didn’t know how to respond. They stood facing each other in silence. At last Leighton put his hand back on Viktor’s shoulder and his tone became confidential once again.

“You may have been hoping for a little vacation, and I can probably arrange that later. There’s a matter of some urgency, however, and I was wondering whether you’d be willing to join my staff at that special research installation in California?”

Viktor’s eyes lit up and a grin began spreading across his face. “You really mean that? Is it possible?”

“I’ll have to get security clearance for you, which isn’t usually granted at this stage, but I’ve got a lot of confidence in you.” He was searching Viktor’s

eyes. “You won’t let me down, will you?”

“Never!” said Viktor earnestly. “This is such an honor. I never dreamed of such a thing!”

Leighton gripped his arm. “You’re going to find what we’re doing fascinating. Remember: No one else on this plane knows about this project so don’t mention a word.”

Leighton motioned Viktor over to a seat. They sat down and Leighton leaned in close. “What we’re involved in out there is the most exciting challenge I’ve ever faced. Let me tell you a little bit about it. The code name is Project Archon.”