

[24] Psychic War!

Chernov and his men moved swiftly to get the surveillance camera back into place. Both corpses were dragged up next to the inside door, out of the camera's normal viewing angle. One of the men put on a flak jacket that had been quickly stripped from a body. His hair and weight were similar to those of one of the dead men, and from the rear he could pass the periodic cursory look from the security control center inside. Quickly the camera was moved back. Then they waited. Two minutes seemed an eternity, but it was absolutely essential to protect the identity of their agent on the inside. When the last second had been counted—leaving the new “guard” peering out the small window toward the road—Chernov led his other two men into the complex, closing the door securely behind them.

A short, fast run of about 90 feet brought all three to a clump of small fir trees near to the end building on the left side of the entry drive. There they stopped out of sight to survey the situation and orient themselves with the map of the property they had memorized. They knew there were four trained and extremely vicious Rottweiler attack dogs that roamed the grounds after dark. It would be only a matter of a few moments until they would pick up the intruders' strange scents and be upon them.

The number of guards patrolling and the routes they took varied, so the three Russians were running the risk of being discovered at any time. They crouched and waited for the dogs. It would be best to dispose of them first. Chernov smiled to himself. Dogs and guards were no great challenge for him and his men. It was the hooded one that concerned him.

The sound of barking coming at them from two directions caused Chernov and his men to crouch lower. Two of the converging canines were dispatched with single shots from silenced guns as soon as they came within range. Then the invaders jumped out of the shelter of the trees to face the other two. Snarling ferociously, the dogs charged with fangs bared. The colonel stepped back to watch these two men that he had carefully trained perform. The guard dogs

didn't stand a chance. Lightning kicks to the throat broke two necks in midair lunge.

Chernov grunted his approval. "Now!" he whispered, and they raced for the row of low buildings on their left. Once there, they crept cautiously along, keeping close to the walls and traversing quickly the short open spaces between. Reaching the far end of the last structure, they paused for breath again and surveyed the area leading to the side door that they knew would be unlocked.

"Freeze!" The stern command was barked from behind the furtive figures. A guard had just come around the other end of the building and spotted them. He approached rapidly, automatic weapon out in front, ready to fire.

"Hands up! Get up against the wall! Now!" Chernov and his men obeyed grudgingly. "Spread your legs—no sudden movements." He approached them cautiously to get a better view in the dim light. *How did these guys get in here?* He looked around warily in case there were more.

He had to notify central control immediately, and he was also going to need some help. Keeping a careful eye on the intruders and his gun trained, he pulled his walkie-talkie from his belt. Out of the corner of his eye, Chernov saw what was happening and knew he had to act instantly.

Whirling around faster than the guard's eye could follow, the colonel made a sweeping motion through the air with one hand. He touched nothing, yet the walkie-talkie splintered into dozens of pieces. The automatic weapon was torn from the hands that gripped it and thrown against the concrete wall of the building with such force that the barrel bent and the stock shattered. In another blur of graceful motion, Chernov broke the helpless man's neck with a flying foot. They dragged his body quickly under a large bush, then hurried to the main structure.

Keeping as much as they could in the shadows, they quickly reached the side door they knew would be unlocked without encountering any other guards and made their way noiselessly inside. Following the blueprints of the building they had memorized, they headed swiftly and silently for Leighton's office.

"Remember!" whispered Chernov, repeating an order he had already drilled into his men. The tall hooded one is dangerous. Shoot him on sight! And the woman is mine."

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After another exhausting day of watching experiments, recording explanations, and analyzing the daily "transmission" from the Archons, Carla had been in an intense strategy session all evening with Viktor, Del Sasso,

Morris, and Leighton in the latter's spacious office. The Archons' "transmission" that day had given the first details of how the Plan would be presented to the world and the necessary steps to be taken thereafter for its implementation. Following the exact procedure was absolutely essential. The process would require a number of news "leaks" by Carla to her editor friend in New York in addition to her own syndicated articles, all of which had to be written and handled with extreme care.

Carla and Leighton had been left alone for the past ten minutes. Kay had excused herself to do some preparation in the labs for the next day's work. Viktor had stepped outside to clear his head with a short walk. And Del Sasso had gone to his apartment to change clothes. "I have an intuition," he'd explained, "that I'm not supposed to wear my usual robe the rest of the evening." He hadn't yet returned.

"His headache may have gotten worse and he went to bed," suggested Leighton.

Viktor had just rejoined them when Carla made a decision. "Is that offer of a room for the night still open?" she asked Leighton.

"It sure is!" came the quick reply.

"Well, maybe I'll take you up on it—for tonight, anyway."

"It's a long drive back, I suppose," suggested Viktor.

Carla hesitated. She'd been debating with herself all evening whether to tell them what had happened, and had finally concluded that she should. "I didn't want to upset you, Viktor. Of course, everyone knows that the access road is now guarded with a company of special commandos."

"That's ridiculous!" retorted Frank impatiently. "Who needs those guys?" He turned to Viktor. "Someone thinks they spotted a special Russian team apparently here to assassinate you." Viktor suddenly looked frightened. "Don't give it another thought," Frank continued. "Look, Viktor, what happens out there is no concern of ours. Inside this fortress is another world, and nobody's going to break in here, believe me! That's why you're in here."

"There's something you don't know, Frank," interrupted Carla. "When Viktor dove into my convertible in Paris and we made our escape, a Russian delegate to the Congress that I only knew as Dr. Alexandr Pavlov, a real brute of a man who was chasing Viktor, leaped onto my car. He was climbing in, and would have had us, when I made a fast turn that broke his grip and threw him through a plate-glass window...."

It wasn't "Pavlov" she was seeing now in the rearview mirror, clinging to

her car in Paris, but Chernov in the elevator in Palo Alto—with revenge in his eyes. She had to stop to get control of her voice. *Why do I feel like this? There's nothing to be frightened of anymore. For Viktor's sake, get hold of yourself. Don't make it worse for him!*

Viktor picked up the story. “As you knew, Frank—although I had no idea at the time *how* you knew—’Pavlov’ was really Colonel Alexei Chernov, the commandant of the secret installation where my lab was located. It was also a military base for training special troops in psychic warfare.”

Leighton smiled and nodded. “I knew who he was the minute I saw him that first night. As you both now know, we’ve got him on lots of film.” Then he added with a chuckle, “I blew his cover at the Congress. Privately, of course. You remember that, Viktor?” Viktor nodded soberly.

“Chernov is here!” continued Carla, looking at Viktor sympathetically. “He almost got me at my hotel last night!” She paused again to control her voice. “I’m sure he’s after both of us!”

“Then you have to stay here!” exclaimed Leighton. “Not just tonight, but until the Plan has been implemented and all nations, including the Russians, are part of it. Only then will the threat from Chernov and his men be ended!”

All the color had drained from Viktor’s face. Leighton noticed and tried to reassure him. “There’s nothing to be afraid of, Viktor nothing at all. Chernov can’t even get close to us out here with a whole company of commandos deployed along the access road. It would take an army with tanks to get past them. And it’s at least a three-mile hike through thick woods with no trails, so you can forget about that. And even if, by some miracle, they got here, I guarantee you they could never get inside. It’s impossible! So just relax.”

“You don’t know the capabilities of these men,” said Viktor in a weak voice. He sounded resigned and defeated.

“Forget it!” insisted Leighton. “Now Carla, let me show you to your apartment. It’s right next to Viktor’s—all made up and ready. Do you have some things in your car?”

She nodded. “Just a few.”

“We can pick them up on our way over there. Are you coming, too, Viktor?” Viktor nodded listlessly. He looked like a condemned man whose day of execution had arrived.

Leighton stood to his feet “Viktor! I tell you—there’s nothing to be afraid of. I wish you could see yourself in a mirror. It’s comical. Come on, man, cheer up!” Then he remembered something. “Wait a minute. I almost forgot. Let me

call the FBI so they know you're staying here tonight.”

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Out in the hall and just around the corner from Leighton's office, Del Sasso was being kidded about his attire by one of the CIA guards, a devout Catholic. “I almost didn't recognize you! I said to myself, ‘Who let that strange dude in here?’ You don't look like yourself without that robe, Father. I thought you never took it off.”

“Oh, I do have it laundered once a year, when I take my annual bath. I'm quite civilized.”

At that moment, Chernov and his two men, moving quickly down the main hall from the side door, stepped into view. The agent saw them at the same time they saw him. He went into an immediate crouch, swinging his automatic weapon quickly from where it was slung over his shoulder. There was no time for him even to aim. A volley of muffled shots from Chernov, and his men left the guard dead in a pool of blood. Del Sasso slowly raised his hands over his head.

“He's a tall one,” said Chernov. “Use him for a shield!” One of his men grabbed the psychic, put a gun to his head, and marched him along in front of them. They arrived at the office door just as Leighton opened it.

“My God!” cried Leighton and jumped back into the room, trying to close the door. Chernov's shoulder smashed it open and knocked Leighton to the floor unconscious. With one of the Russians standing guard at the door, the colonel and his other man charged into the office, pushing Del Sasso ahead of them.

Carla screamed and Chernov smashed her across the mouth with the back of his hand, knocking her down. From the floor she watched in semiconscious terror.

“Pavlov” stood over her, enjoying this moment immensely. “So, we do meet again, Miss Bertelli. You were quite brave in Paris, and that was a brilliant piece of acting on the elevator. This time there's no escape!”

“Don't harm her!” pleaded Viktor.

Eyes blazing with hatred, Chernov slammed him across the mouth, knocking him to the floor also. “I'm taking you with me, Khorev—back to Moscow. I'd rather kill you right now, but you have some debts to pay to the country you betrayed!”

The colonel glanced quickly around the large office without finding someone he had expected to be there. Leaning over Viktor, he demanded, “Where's the hooded one?”

“The ‘hooded one’?” stammered Viktor, pretending not to understand.

With one powerful hand Chernov grabbed Viktor by the back of his neck and pulled him to his feet, shoving the barrel of his pistol under Viktor’s chin. “You know who I mean! Where is he?”

“I’m the one you call the ‘hooded one,’” said Del Sasso, “and you are all dead men.” He pulled away from the Soviet who had been holding the gun to his head and faced them with a twisted smile on his face that stunned Viktor and Carla. It was derisive, contemptuous, and mocking—like the smile of a bully gloating over a cowering victim. Here was a frightening side of Del Sasso that Viktor and Carla had tried to forget.

“You were going to shoot the ‘hooded one’ on sight Then shoot him.” Del Sasso was laughing now, taunting them.

To Carla, the very atmosphere in the room seemed to have been charged with some mysterious force. Yet it wasn’t so much a power as a *presence*—primordial and horrifying—like nothing she could fathom or label. *The Archons?*

The barrel of the gun that had been pressed against Del Sasso’s head bent and twisted and the useless weapon was wrenched from the hand that held it and fell to the floor. The tough and seemingly invincible warrior, “ten times more dangerous” than the *Spetznas*, who had been holding Del Sasso, was now quaking like an aspen leaf in the wind. He levitated slowly, began to twirl at increasing speed, then suddenly shot through the air and crashed into his companion who was guarding the door, sending them both into the corridor. The door slammed shut. There was a volley of shots from the direction of the lobby, then footsteps running toward them and a babble of voices.

Now Del Sasso turned his attention to Chernov. The old Master was desperately attempting to aim a gun that seemed alive and refused to point at the ‘hooded one,’ whom he now recognized at last. A slight quick gesture from Del Sasso and the gun was torn from Chernov’s grip and skidded across the floor toward Viktor. Viktor grabbed for it.

Chernov made a feint as though he were going after Viktor and the gun, then spun suddenly and with blinding speed arched his lethal foot toward Del Sasso’s throat. Instantly he was thrown against the far wall of the office, just as Yakov had been in the laboratory. Battered and bloody, he pulled himself up from the floor, shook himself, and began a wary advance toward his incredible antagonist.

“I detest violence,” said Del Sasso. Carla noticed that his voice had taken on a very controlled and almost conciliatory tone. “Surrender now and no more

harm will come to you.”

With a cry of rage, Chernov charged. He had not taken two steps when, to her utter terror, Carla saw the heavy glass that protected the top of Leighton’s huge desk abruptly lift into the air. Spinning like a high-speed circular saw, it sailed swiftly through Chernov’s midsection, bisecting his body at the belt line. Smashing into the wall behind him, the glass exploded into a thousand bloody shards. Carla gasped in wordless horror and lost consciousness.

When she came to her senses, Carla found herself lying on a sofa in the lobby. Ghastly pale and in shock himself, Viktor was leaning over her, dabbing gently at her bleeding mouth with damp paper towels held in trembling hands.

“Are you okay?” asked Viktor.

She nodded weakly. “I can’t believe it. I just can’t.”

Badly shaken, but with a wild look of triumph in his eyes, Leighton was nearby, alternately talking on a phone, and barking orders to those present. He was very much in charge once again. Kay Morris hovered at his elbow, consulting with him between phone calls.

Carla watched the frantic activity out of a fog, trying to regain her senses. At first, the room was swarming with guards—more than Carla had imagined were on the base. They conferred together in low tones with Mike Bradford, the director of security, shook their heads in disbelief at what had happened, then hurried back to their assigned duties. Unruffled and composed, as though he were in another world, Del Sasso stood near Leighton, watching and listening. There was an unearthly peace about him that seemed supernatural.

Viktor held both of her hands tightly in his. “It was awful!”

“Is it all over?” Carla asked. “The other two men?”

“When Del Sasso knocked them through the door they were shot by some guards who were coming down the hall searching for them.”

Carla struggled and managed to sit up. Her ear was still ringing from the blow Chernov had given her, and one side of her face was swollen. She saw Leighton hang up the phone. He came over and sat down beside her and put an arm around her tenderly.

“Are you okay?” he asked. She nodded. “Should I call a doctor?” He looked at her swollen face and cut lip with concern.

She shook her head. “I’m okay, Frank—really.”

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am that this happened,” he told her.

“Please, it’s not your fault.”

Turning to Viktor apologetically, Frank said, “I still say it’s impossible.

There's no way they could get in here. They must have come up through the woods. Somehow they got into the guard station at the gate and killed the guards. They must have tricked them, but how? I just can't believe it!"

"Antonio saved our lives," murmured Carla. He turned and smiled at her across the lobby. "You were magnificent, Antonio!" she called out to him.

He walked over, pulled up a chair, and sat down heavily. "I'm sorry that he hurt you, Carla. And about your office, Frank—things really got out of hand. I didn't want it that way, but sometimes the only way to stop violence is with greater violence." He seemed almost like a repentant child apologizing for some misdeed.

"Please, Antonio!" said Leighton gratefully. "If it weren't for you, we'd all be dead!"

Del Sasso turned to Viktor and Carla. "I offered him his life. You heard that didn't you? I asked him to surrender. You're my witnesses."

"We're your witnesses," said Viktor solemnly. He still seemed to be in a state of shock.

"I heard it and I saw it," Carla assured him.

"So much blood!" murmured Del Sasso. "I don't like it. Basically, I'm a gentle person." He seemed obsessed to prove that he hadn't intended such bloody violence. Carla wondered at that.

She put a hand gingerly to her swollen face. She hadn't known that she would be getting into something like this, could never have anticipated it. Well, there was always a price to be paid for anything that was worthwhile, and there could no longer be any doubt that she was sitting on a story far bigger than she had even imagined. Whatever the cost in the future, there was no turning back now.

Carla was extremely grateful to Del Sasso for saving her life, but at the same time there was something terrifying about the power he controlled. Or did it control him in some mysterious way? Was that what he was trying to tell them, and why he was so apologetic? Was Del Sasso, after all, just a pawn of the Archons? It was a frightening question.