

“THE CZECH ADVENTURE”

Chapter One

We fly to Prague and take a taxi to the city. The taxi driver says nothing the whole journey and concentrates on chicaning through the other traffic. Spread out on the shelf above the dash are soap, a few small toys, a mobile phone and a deodorant stick. Hanging from above the windscreen are good luck charms and his I.D. card which gives his blood group and says his name is Vaclav Pechar. He swerves into the parking space in front of the Europa Hotel on Wencesplatz and hits the brakes hard.

“Good!” he says. Our bags, computers and document cases are picked up by a youth with dyed red hair who disconcertingly vanishes as I pay Vaclav.

“Good!” he says again, shakes my hand enthusiastically and gives me his card. It’s in Czech of course, which I can’t read, so I hand it to Dobri. We push our way through a noisy group of German teenagers and go in what appears to be the collonaded main entrance of the hotel. But it’s not, it’s the entrance to a large and busy coffee-room, in which two ancient gentlemen are playing violin and piano, in full evening dress.

“Table for two, sir?” asks a waiter.

“No thanks,” I say, “Hotel?”

“Next door.” So we try again. At reception, a letter is waiting for us. It’s from Mr. Slama and reads:

‘Welcome to Praha, Mr. John Problem and Mr. Dobri Denn. Please to meet at Casino Red Dog at 13.30 hours. Thank you. Yours faithfully. K. Slama.’

The youth with the red hair and our bags appears and shows us to our rooms. On the way up he grins and says:

“Manchester United, very good.” I give him a big tip even though I support Hull City.

“See you in the bar in five minutes,” says Dobri.

My bedroom is large, has creaking floors and a brand new bathroom, in which hangs a sign saying:

‘Please regret water shutdown. Water return 19.30 hours. Thank your understanding.’

In the bar, which is a circular balcony overlooking the ancient gentlemen playing the violin and piano, we have time for only one quick drink. We agree that Dobri will take a background role and, cunningly, not mention his Czech origins in our meeting with Mr. Slama.

At the Casino Red Dog, the doorman looks at us with a welcoming leer. I say “Mr. Slama, please.” He sniffs and gets a boy to show us upstairs. We pass through a huge and noisy, smoke-filled room where the gaming tables are crowded with Czechs and tourists, mostly Germans, it seems. Mr. Slama is sitting in a red plush booth peering into his brief case. He jumps up and pumps our hands.

“Welcome. Welcome to Praha. Good trip?”

“Yes, thank you,” we say.

“Three becherovkas,” he says to the boy. “So, here you are. Praha very beautiful city. Many beautiful girls. Ha, ha. But we do business.

“Absolutely,” I say.

K. Slama is stocky, has a sallow complexion, bad teeth, wears black clothes and a large Rolex. He has an ancient mobile phone I don't recognise and a carton of two hundred cigarettes, half empty. He smokes continuously.

“You very young to represent big consortium.”

“Don't worry,” I say, “ we are fully empowered to conduct initial discussions concerning the precious metals.”

“H'm,” he responds, looking disappointed and a little suspicious. After a short pause, he thrusts a menu at us and says:

“Something to eat? A light little lunch?”

Nothing on the menu looks light, so I decide to eat hearty and choose a ‘Mydlar Axman's Chop’, which turns out to be leg of pork, while Dobri orders “Garlic Soup, Timber Men's Style.” Mr. Slama orders an omelette.

“Stomach fragile,” he says, lighting another cigarette. “So. Your consortium interested in very special precious metals, yes?”

I nod my head.

“I have many,” Slama continues.

“Good. Who is actually the owner of these metals?”

“Russia.”

“The Russian government?”

“Military people.”

“Military people of the government?”

“More and less,” says Mr. Slama.

“Perhaps you could explain that to us,”

“Don't worry. We meet principal. Tonight. 5 star General.” he adds proudly.

“Tonight?”

“Yes. We drive to Hotel Jested. Is not far. You have car?”

“No.”

“O.K. We hire.” He opens his mobile, which has two scuffed red stars printed on it, and mutters into it.

“Is done. You pay later with dollars, please.”

We eat for a while and then he starts scrabbling around in his briefcase.

“We must go to my apartment to get list of metals.”

We leave the Casino Red Dog and push our way through the crowds on Wenceslasplatz. Mr. Slama’s apartment is in the Hotel Slunce a short walk away. We wait in reception while he goes to get his list.

“The Czech Republic’s economy is booming,” says Dobri. “Thousands of tourists and a huge in-flow of German investment.”

We look around the reception area which seems to be all Germans.

“I wonder where the British and the Americans are? Well, at least we’re here.” he adds.

Mr. Slama returns with a folded list which he hands to me.

“Please to read later,” he whispers.

For our journey to the Hotel Jested, Mr. Slama suggests that one of us should drive. Dobri obligingly says I will enjoy the experience. The car is a large old Tatra and is comfortable in an American way with wide seats and a fierce heater. Mr. Slama takes \$200 from me, hands \$180 to the car-boy and then pockets the other twenty. After two hours of driving, he says,

“Not far, now. Left here, please.”

We turn onto a single track road and start climbing interminably up a hillside into wreaths of evening mist. At the top of the hill is the Hotel Jested. It looks like an elongated rocket, round at the base, with its nose lost in the mist. Mr. Slama leads us into the restaurant which is empty except for one table at the back, at which sits a large man in a military uniform with no markings. He heaves himself up and greets us. Mr. Slama says,

“General Kakonin. Mr. Problem and Mr. Denn from London.”

To be continued...