

'The Czech Adventure'. Chapter Four.

I am standing in my luke-warm shower the following morning when the telephone rings.

"I am spikking for the General Kakonin," says a hoarse voice.

"Ah yes," I say.

"The General wishes see you and your colleagues quickly."

"What about?"

"Industrial diamond sale. General say no time for losing."

"Did he? Where and when does the General want to meet?"

"Forum International Hotel. First floor seating. One hour from now, pliss."

"Does the General have samples?"

"Yess."

"Does he have certificates of origin?"

"The General has everything required." And the phone goes dead.

One hour from now gives us reasonable time for a discussion before we are due at the Police Headquarters. I call the others and in due course we assemble in Reception. Ed is complaining about having to wear the same shirt he wore yesterday. Suddenly his face lights up.

"Hey. Take a look at that chick."

It's Temple, dressed to kill and with that 'approach me not, you vile scum' look on her face.

"Is she something or is she?" exclaims Ed, clearly overcome. He is even more overcome when Temple comes up to me and says,

"Hello Johnny. Did you have a good day, yesterday?"

"Hard work, overall. And you?"

Ed is jigging about by my side obviously wanting an introduction.

"Temple, this is a colleague from Tel Aviv. Ed Greenbaum. Temple Cloud. From Kensington. England."

"Oh hello," says Temple with a slight turn of her head.

"You know," she continues to me, "Alastair is such a bore."

"You surprise me."

"Yes. He won't go to any galleries or museums. He won't eat out of the hotel. He leaves his car in the lot at the back and we have to take those crazy taxis. And he spends most of the time arguing with the hotel about the laundry, the hot water, the fax machine and anything else he can complain about." Ed interrupts.

"Say. We're having lunch at the Atlantic. Great restaurant. Why don't you join us? Twelve thirty suit you?" This is news to me but I say nothing.

"What a lovely idea," says Temple, still not looking at him.

"Great. It'll be a real pleasure, Miss Cloud," says Ed, still jigging about.

Dobri has been sending a fax and now rejoins us. Temple gives us all a dazzling smile, says 'Bye' and sways off.

"Oh, wow," says Ed.

“Let’s go,” says Dobri.

The Forum International Hotel is obviously more in Ed’s line. It’s a modern concrete and darkened-windows construction with a variety of flags hanging limply over the main doors.

“Maybe we can get a martini here,” he suggests.

“At ten o’clock in the morning?” I say.

“Hey. With you guys, you don’t know if you’re ever gonna see a martini again. My Uncle Mordecai always said ‘take it when you can get it; you just never know what the future is gonna zap you with’. A real philosopher.”

“It’s good to have an Uncle,” I say approvingly. “Dobri has one, also. His Uncle Vladi should meet your Uncle Mordecai. They sound as though they have the same approach to life.”

Dobri snorts. Ed looks doubtful.

“My Uncle Mordecai died.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say. “Do you have any other Uncles?”

“This is the way to the first floor,” says Dobri.

The first floor of the prestigious Forum International Hotel is furnished with black leather sofas and chairs with low, black glass and chrome tables. The lighting is very subdued so that you have to squint to see your way.

“Why is everywhere we go so goddam creepy?” asks Ed.

“Can you see the General anywhere?” asks Dobri.

“Over there,” I indicate. “With some colleagues.”

The General reclines in the longest of the black sofas. On either side of him stands a heavy. These two fellows are very large and broad and not wearing customer-care smiles. There is a third man, small and thin, who carries a brown document case which looks to me just like the one Mr. Slama had.

“Do we have to do this?” mutters Ed.

“There’s no problem,” says Dobri. “Those big types are only go-fers.”

I look quickly at Dobri.

“How can you be so sure?” I ask.

“Trust me.”

He seems relaxed so I assume he knows something about the different categories of heavies. Maybe they teach you that at Kung Dwong Fah classes.

“They do martinis, here?” asks Ed.

I go up to the General and shake his hand.

“How are you, General Kakonin?”

He growls something and the little thin guy says,

“General iss happy to see you and colleagues.”

I introduce Ed as our diamond expert. The General stands up, embraces him with a bear hug and shouts “Good!” Ed staggers back.

“Where’s the waiter?” he says.

The General barks at the little thin man who translates,

“General say order vodka and then.” He stops, looks furtively round the room and lowers his voice, “Inspect the merchandise.”

“Great. Great. I’ll have a martini. Very dry.” says Ed.

The small thin man looks perplexed. I look around for a waiter. The room is empty apart from our group. The General says something to one of his aides who walks purposefully off and returns almost immediately with a worried-looking waiter carrying vodka, ice and glasses.

“That’s not gonna make a true martini but what the heck?” complains Ed.

The waiter sets out our drinks with a shaking hand while we all remain silent and then he leaves us. The small thin man opens his case on the table and the two heavies take up station between us and the rest of the room.

“O.K. Ed,” says Dobri. “Over to you.”

Ed puts on a pair of granny glasses with thick lenses and starts to check through the samples. They are sorted in some way in small plastic bags which he carefully empties on to the table and sifts through, peering through his glasses, before equally carefully replacing them in the bags. He mutters to himself and makes notes on a small jotter pad. The rest of us say nothing and sip our vodkas. The General lights a large cigar. The small thin man watches Ed like a hawk. Ed eventually finishes the last of the samples, scribbles a final note and sits back.

“Uh huh,” he says and swigs back his vodka in one gulp. He looks quizzically at Dobri who says quietly,

“Speak freely. It’ll be O.K.”

“Right,” says Ed. He looks nervously at the General.

“O.K. These are all cabochon and that means they are not of the first quality”

He is interrupted by the small thin man who is translating. The General glowers.

“But that doesn’t mean they’re unsaleable,” adds Ed quickly. “No sir. Not at all. There are buyers for these in Rio, in Bangkok and in the U.S. No problem. I know who to go to.”

The small thin man translates and the General relaxes. He says something to one of the heavies who refills our glasses. Ed continues.

“Normally speaking, the buyers go to the source. South Africa, Colombia and Russia, right? But if the price is good, then they’ll buy wherever. The only problem we have is that the quantities are big. Could take all of a year to move them. So we need to know if the General is, uh, prepared to be patient.”