

how to be a tactical asshole when the situation demands it.

I just wish she'd let me recon the data-center before she handed down the work estimate. The thing is, the communications infrastructure of Slovtakia was built long before the Berlin Wall fell, and it consisted of copper wires wrapped in newspaper and dipped in gutta-percha. After the Wall came down, responsibility for the telcoms had been transferred to the loving hands of Anton Tkachi, who had once been a top spook in Soviet Slovtakia. There are a lot of decades in which it would suck to have your telcoms run by an incompetent, greedy kleptocrat, but the 1990s represented a particularly poorly chosen decade to have sat out the normal cycle of telcoms upgrades. Because internet.

After Tkachi was purged—imprisoned 2005, hospitalized with “mental illness” in 2006, dead in 2007—the Slovtakian Ministry of

Communications cycled through a succession of contract operators—Swisscom, T-Mob, Vodaphone, Orange (God help us all)—each of which billed the country for some of the jankiest telcoms gear you've ever seen, the thrice-brewed teabags of the telecommunications world, stuff that had been in *war zones*, leaving each layer of gear half-configured, half-secured, and half-documented.

The internet in Slovstakia sucked monkey shit.

Anyway, my boss, Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS, promised the Interior Ministry that I would only need three hours, and the Interior Ministry had called up the telcoms ministry and given them orders to be nice to the Americanski lady who was coming over to do top-secret work for them, and give her everything she needed. I can tell that they laid it on thick, because when I first arrived at the country's main data-center, a big old brutalist pile that I had to stop and take

a picture of for my collection of Soviet Brutalist Buildings That They Used to Shoot You for Taking Pictures Of—hashtags are for losers who voluntarily submit to 280-character straitjackets (and sentences can too a preposition end with)—the guy on the desk sent me straight to the director of telcoms security.

His name was Litvinchuk and he was *tightly wound*. You could tell because he had his own force of telcoms cops dressed like RoboCop standing guard outside his door with guns longer than their legs, reeking of garlic sausage and the sweat of a thousand layers of Kevlar. Litvinchuk welcomed me cordially, gave me a long-ass speech about how excited he was to have some fresh foreign contractors in his data-center (again) and especially ones from a company as expensive as Xoth Intelligence.

“Wait, that’s not right word,” he said, in a broad Yakov Smirnoff accent (he had a master’s

from the London School of Economics and I'd watched him do a TEDx talk where he sounded like a BBC World Service newsreader). "Exclusive? Illustrious?" He looked to me—specifically, to my tits, which was where every Slovstakian official I'd met addressed his remarks. I didn't cross my arms.

"Infamous," I said.

He smirked. "I'm sure. Miss Maximow"—he pronounced the *w* as a *v*, as they always did as soon as I got east of France—"we are all very excited to have you at our premises. However, I'm sure you understand that we must be careful to keep records of which contractors work on our sensitive systems." He slid a paperclipped form across his desk to me. I counted to seven—more efficient and just as effective as ten—and picked it up. Nine pages, smudgily photocopied, full of questions like "List all NGOs and charitable organizations to

which you have contributed, directly or indirectly.”

“No,” I said.

He gave me his best fish-face, which I’m sure was super-effective against the farm boys cosplaying Judge Dredd in the hallway. But I’d been glared at by Ilsa, She-Wolf of the etc., etc., and had been inured to even the hairiest of eyeballs.

“I must insist,” he said.

“I don’t fill in this kind of form,” I said. “Company policy. Xoth has negotiated blanket permission to access your premises from the Interior Ministry for all its personnel.” This was true. I hated paperwork, and this kind of paperwork the most—the kind that asked you questions you could never fully or honestly answer, so that there’d always be an official crime to pin on you if you stepped on the wrong toes. Lucky for me, Xoth had a no-exceptions policy that techs were not allowed