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I
THE SEARCH
[excerpt]

Everything's gone: both the shield and the sword.* Instead, there was a plain black and white photo stuck to the faded stripes of the Russian flag. Nothing more. Though the rank didn't change. It remained as before.

"Senior Lieutenant Tagirov," read Pavel. No computer printing: handwritten with flourish. This custom was definitely not going to die out. And the reserves of ink will last them a century.

"I am listening, Comrade Senior Lieutenant."

"Pavel Petrovich, do you know that our directorate is conducting a criminal investigation into the illegal commercial activities of StarNet, Ltd.?"

"And what do we, that is, ComServ, have to do with it?"

"We have received field intelligence that at your office, at 12 Avenue of Heroes...this is number 12, isn't this?"

"Yes," confirmed Pavel, "that's right, this is 12 Avenue of Heroes."

"...there are kept documents and computer equipment belonging to StarNet, Ltd. Do you know anything about it?"

The Lieutenant was phrasing every one of his statements as a question. Statements in the shape of question marks. One would think he was full of doubt and was thinking out loud. In fact, in the physical world, the Senior Lieutenant was staring directly into Pavel's eyes, unblinking. And there was no shade of doubt in his black intelligence-gathering pupils, except perhaps for some doubt in some aspects of Pavel's moral character.

"No, I know nothing about it," responded Pavel firmly. The temperature of the two black icicles remained unchanged, below zero, which meant that everything was fine: Pavel's own eyes were betraying nothing but a slight fatigue. A lack of focus typical for the afternoon. The leadenness of just after 3 o'clock. A low hum.

"OK", said the Senior Lieutenant, "then let's find some empty office where we can talk. Do you have one?"

"Yes, we have – the conference room on the second floor."

"The detective will present you with the search warrant and we will start searching the premises."

"A search," thought Pavel. "This is news. An unexpected turn of events. Up to now they were after my soul and nothing else, purely, from a distance, only hints and evasions. And straight away they go all materialistic on me. Give up the goods, show us the stuff, and that sort of thing. Looks like they've changed more than just the colors of the flag..." Senior Lieutenant Tagirov was resplendent in a John Lennon jacket with band-collar made for some reason of a shiny fabric and adorned with large shiny Gypsy buttons. In contrast, the detective, a bearer of a remarkable surname, Mokrov, was dressed casually, without pretence, as for a meeting with friends. He sported an everyday Wrangler

corduroy shirt and jeans bearing the same label. Shoes were the only part of their attire that spoke of affinity between the members of the same organizations: they were polished to perfection and shined like mirrors. Two Cinderellas.

"Pavel Petrovich, do you know that our directorate is conducting a criminal investigation into the unlawful commercial activities of StarNet, Ltd.?"

"Your comrade informed me just five minutes ago."

"Very good. Then please read this warrant," said Mokrov and placed on the table a greenish piece of paper. "Take a seat, take a seat," he added as if he, the detective Andrei Vitalievich Mokrov -- not Pavel, and not even Nikitin -- were the owner of the place. Perhaps that's how it really is, in deed. They come in without knocking, with keys of their own, so to speak. "From Moscow to the furthest reaches," as in the old patriotic song.

"Thank you," said Pavel and pulled the paper toward him.

Still, one should admit some progress has been made in the automation and efficiency of the bureau, their paperwork: the warrant had been printed on a laser printer. The descriptive part of the warrant listed all the sins committed by Alexey's outfit:

"...illegal use of a trunk radio relay line... twenty four unregistered base stations... illegal profits... especially large amounts ... fifty four million rubles..."

"Twenty four unregistered base stations," thought Pavel, "not too many for a regular cellular network operator. Should be about a quarter of the total. My percentage is the same, though I am not in the cellular business. I have about four unregistered stations. Yes, exactly four. The papers are lost somewhere in the pipeline for the second year running. Reorganization of the ministry. The state minded thinking. Well, some set the traps and the others hide in the bushes, sticks in hand, waiting for the quarry. Counting their losses. Mousetraps for their own kind."

"Pavel Petrovich," said a voice over Pavel's head, "do you know anything about the documents and computing equipment belonging to StarNet, Ltd. kept on your company's premises, in this building, at 12 Avenue of Heroes? If you show us where it is kept, it would save some time, both ours and yours."

"Considering this is Friday, the end of the workday," added the unpretentious and amicable Detective Mokrov who glanced kindly at Pavel.

Pavel got the point. He elaborated the detective's complaint in his imagination: "Have to start up the heat in the sauna at the country house, the pork kebab is already soaking in the marinade..." Pavel's imaginary rebuke: "Can't be helped, Comrade Detective, but at least the beer at the city bar will have chilled quite well by then."

But what he said out loud was, "I know nothing about the documents and computing equipment belonging to StarNet, Ltd."

The detective's eyes betrayed momentarily his slight disappointment, a change in shades of blue. Which was good. It meant that Pavel's own green eyes had retained the dull opacity of the eyes of a man working hard day in and day out.

"Tell me," he asked Detective Mokrov, "why the warrant has been signed by you and not by the prosecutor."

"In this case it is not required," answered the bearer of the gloomy surname with unexpected merriment in his voice. "Here is the Code, Article one-hundred eighty-two. You're welcome to familiarize yourself."

The book had been opened at the required page, but Pavel did not read the article. He already knew that in such a case it did not have to be signed by the prosecutor. He had

asked automatically, out of habit, without any real purpose. Just a silly question, really.

"Where do I sign?"

"Here."

Yet another man in perfectly polished shoes came into the room. Pavel noticed him on the way here. He had been pacing in the center of the corridor. Could have been taken for an untimely visitor looking for somebody -- either for a cleaning lady on the stairs or for the pert manager at the far sunny corner of the corridor. Nothing of the sort -- he was on the lookout.

"There's no commotion," he reported to Tagirov quietly but distinctively. "Everything is quiet."

"The witnesses are waiting at the reception desk," he added after a pause.

"Bring them in."

It turned out the lookout man had been indeed looking for the cleaning lady, a fat girl with pock-marked face in a blue uniform. She was brought in together with a guy from the third floor who appeared to be a ski instructor from the travel agency up there. Both smiled awkwardly. As though they were on camera.

Mokrov speedily put in the form names and occupation of all those present. Once again they were asked to sign. While signing, Pavel managed to read: "Before the search (seizure) has begun, the participants had been explained their rights, responsibilities, and the procedures for conducting a search (seizure)."

"Let's begin with the right side and go through the rooms clockwise, one by one," suggested Tagirov.

Nobody objected. The first room proved to be the only one with a locked door.

"What do you keep in here?" asked the second operative, the omnipresent one. His name Pavel had also seen in the protocol. Vashchilov. A regular name for a regular will-do type of guy.

"It's the server room."

"Open up."

"I don't have the keys. I have to call the guy."

"Call him in our presence, please," said nice-guy Mokrov. Total opposite of that false Beatles fan, Tagirov.

"Yes, of course," said Pavel as he fetched his cell. "Artem, come up here please with the keys to the server room."

"Who is Artem?" asked Tagirov.

"Our systems administrator."

Artem Kutepov took his time getting upstairs. Maybe he stopped for a smoke break along the way. As usual.

While waiting, Mokrov hummed something under his breath, Tagirov studied Pavel, and Vashchilov stretched his legs. He walked to the end of the corridor and back, twice. On his way, he looked into wide open doors, while all the others stood at the locked one. Just getting his bearings in the locale.

Finally, Artem arrived. He walked unhurriedly from the far stair landing and his face was expressing nothing, as if having people from the street come to look at the company hardware was an everyday occurrence. Like it was the Tretyakov Gallery or the Hermitage.

"Who has access to the server room?" asked Tagirov.

"All systems administrators and engineers on duty."

"Who has access to the server room?" repeated Tagirov, this time addressing Artem, who by then had shuffled over and stood squinting his eyes.

Artem gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Well, just the usual... the people on duty, the systems administrators."

"Concurrence," thought Pavel, "that's nice. Wish it would happen more often."

Artem clicked open the lock. The air-conditioned twilight of the server room stood open to them. The blinking of green lights and the cooling fans' monotone hum.

"This is it," said Vashchilov confidently and took the first step into the inner sanctum.

[...]

** The emblem of the KGB and its successor the FSB. (E.Y.)*

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