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Rasputin's Shadow

Written by Raymond Khoury

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RASPUTIN'S SHADOW

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PROLOGUE

Ural Mountains, Russian Empire

1916

As the high-pitched shriek reverberated against the walls of the copper mine, Maxim Nikolaev felt an unusual pinch deep in his skull.

The big man set down his pickax and wiped his brow just as the painful sensation subsided. He took in a deep breath, flooding his already-infested lungs with more toxic dust. He didn't even notice or care anymore. Right then, the mid-morning break was all he was thinking of, given that his working day had started at five.

As the last echoes of the whistle died out around him and with the army of pickaxes now at rest, Maxim heard the distant sound of the Miass River, out by the mouth of the open mine. It reminded him of when he was a boy, when his uncle often took him swimming at a secluded spot on the outskirts of Ozyorsk, away from the thick, putrid smoke that belched out of the smelting plant twenty-four hours a day.

He remembered the smell of the pine trees, so tall they seemed to touch the sky. He missed the tranquility of the place.

He missed the open sky and the clean air even more.

A voice rang out from farther down the tunnel. 'Hey, Mamo, get your ass over here. We're playing for a go on Pyotr's daughter.'

Maxim wanted to roll his eyes at Vasily, partly for the diminutive, which he hated, and partly for the man's general stupidity, but the wiry bastard took offense at the slightest provocation, so Maxim smiled at the group

of men instead, hefted his pickax onto a broad, muscle-bound shoulder, and sauntered over to where the three other *mudaks* were already at their regular seats.

He sat down next to the unfortunate Pyotr and set his tool against the wall beside him. Maxim had laid eyes on the man's daughter only once, and though she was indeed strikingly beautiful, he had no doubt that she could certainly do a lot better than any of the pathetic losers around him toiling deep in the bowels of the earth for a less-than-meager wage.

Maxim fished out a small flask – a punishable offense – and took a long swig, then wiped his mouth with a grimy sleeve. ‘Let’s play, then,’ he told Vasily. He might as well try to win some money from the leering idiot if he could.

Stanislav, the most pathetic of the foursome, went first, followed by Pyotr, then Maxim. Then Vasily’s turn came around. He slammed his fist down onto a just-turned Queen of Hearts, rattling the half-broken wooden table around which the four men sat, then leaned back with a smug smile on his face.

Maxim didn’t flinch. His mind was already drifting away. He felt another odd tingling in his head, like a little tickle really, deep in his brain. For some reason, he thought of how much he hated Ochko. Everyone pretended it was about skill when really luck was all you needed. He much preferred Durak, a game that seemed to be about luck, but was really about skill. He had never once been the last to hold cards in twenty-seven years of playing that game. It was probably why that leech Vasily refused to play the game with him.

Vasily’s croaky voice broke through his curdled thoughts. ‘Come on, Mamo, deal yourself a card before we all turn to stone.’

Maxim looked down and realized he had turned over his first two cards without even looking at them.

Stanislav turned a Seven of Clubs, unsurprisingly cutting him out of the game after three cards. Pyotr turned a Two of Spades, giving himself nineteen. He looked nervously at Vasily, whose expression didn’t change. The bastard was leading with eighteen. That, and he was a very bad loser. Vasily gestured at Maxim to hurry up and take his turn, presumably so he could turn a Three and win the small pile of coins sitting in the middle of the table.

Maxim really didn’t want to let him win. Not that day. Not there, not then. And as he was about to turn his card, he felt a piercing sensation

worm its way through the back of his skull. It didn't last for more than a breath. He shook his head, shut his eyes, then opened them again. Whatever it was, it had gone.

He peeked at his card, then looked up at Vasily. The wiry creep was leering at him and right then, Maxim knew that the man was cheating. He didn't know why, but he was dead sure of it.

Not only cheating, but looking at him like – like he hated him. More than hated. Loathed. Despised.

Like he wanted to kill him.

And right then, Maxim realized that he loathed Vasily even more. His veins throbbing angrily against his skull, he managed to turn over his card. He watched as Vasily dropped his eyes to take it in. It was a Five of Diamonds. Maxim was also out. Vasily smirked at him and turned his own card. A Four of Hearts. Too many. He had won.

'That's us, *moi lyubimye*,' Vasily said, all smug and reaching out to gather his winnings. 'Four hearts, beating as one.'

Maxim's hand shot out to block Vasily, but just as he did, Stanislav turned away from the table and convulsed before throwing up, spewing the contents of his belly onto the cheat's boots.

'Fuu! Stanislav, you son of a whore—' Vasily lurched back from the retching man, then a pained look spread across his face and he fell off the wooden crate on which he had been sitting and hit the ground, clutching his head, knocking over the table and sending the cards flying off.

Pyostr shot to his feet too, flaring with indignation. 'Four? What four? I didn't see a four. You filthy cheat.'

Maxim swung his gaze back at Stanislav, whose eyes were bloodshot, as if the force of his retching had blown all the blood vessels in his face, and Maxim knew, knew for sure, that Stanislav had also been cheating. They all had, the swine. They were going to fleece him – then they were going to hurt him.

As if to confirm it, Vasily started to laugh. Not just a laugh, a demonic, deep-rooted laugh that gushed with contempt and mockery and – Maxim was sure of it – hatred.

Maxim stared at him, rooted to the mine's soil, feeling the sweat seep out of him, unsure of what to do—

He saw Vasily take a step in his direction – he really didn't look at all well – then the cheat's eyes went wild and the man stopped in his tracks.

Pyostr had just embedded Maxim's hack into the side of Vasily's head.

Maxim lurched back as Vasily hit the ground at his feet, a fountain of blood gushing out of the man's skull. Then he was aware that the pain in the back of his head was back, sharper than before. An intense fear washed over him. He would be next. He was sure of it.

They were going to kill him unless he killed them first.

He'd never been as sure of anything in his entire life.

Angry yells erupted from other recesses of the mine as he launched himself at Pyotr, blocking his arm while grabbing the hack and fighting the murderous cheat for it. In the dim light of the lone grimy lantern, he glimpsed Stanislav, back on his feet, going for his pickax too. Everything turned into a blur of claws and swings and shouts and punches until Maxim felt something warm in his hands, something he was absolutely compelled to squeeze until his hands met each other in the middle, and when clarity returned to his eyes, he saw poor Pyotr's eyeless, bloodied face turn a livid purple as he snapped the man's neck.

All around him, the air was suddenly full of screaming and the sound of steel cleaving through flesh and bone.

Maxim smiled and sucked in a big lungful of air. He had never heard anything so beautiful – then something flashed in the corner of his vision.

He leaned backward as the ax came swinging toward his neck and felt the displaced air blow across his face. He jabbed a fist into his attacker's ribs, then another. Something crunched. He stepped behind the groaning man, swung an arm around his throat – it was Popov, the shift manager, who had never even raised his voice the whole time that Maxim had worked there – and began to choke him.

Popov dropped to the ground like a sack of beetroot.

Maxim grabbed the ax from the dead man's hand and immediately buried it in the face of Stanislav, who already had the hack he was holding halfway through an arc toward Maxim's chest. Maxim tried to duck out of its path, but the hack still connected and gouged a large chunk out of his side.

Stanislav toppled backward and fell to the ground, the ax embedded in his face.

Maxim dropped to his knees then keeled over, grabbing his torn flesh with both hands, trying to push the two sides of the wound back together.

He lay there, writhing on the ground, pain shooting through him, his hands bathed in his own blood, and glanced down the mineshaft. He

could barely make out the dimly lit silhouettes of other *mudaks* up and down the tunnels, hacking away at one another furiously.

He looked down to the wound in his side. His blood was rippling through his fingers and cascading onto the thick grime of the mine floor. He kept staring at it as the death cries echoed around him and the minutes slipped by, his mind numb, his thoughts adrift in a maelstrom of confusion – then a powerful explosion ripped through the air behind him.

The walls shook, and dust and rock shards rained down on him.

Three other explosions followed, knocking the lanterns off their mounts and plunging the already-dark tunnels of the mine into total darkness.

Everything went deathly silent for a brief moment – then came a cool breeze and an urgent, rushing sound.

A rush that turned into a roar.

Maxim stared into the darkness. He never saw the solid wall of water that plowed into him with the force of an anvil and whisked him away. But in those seconds of consciousness, in those last moments before the water overpowered his lungs and the force of the torrent slammed him against the tunnel wall, Maxim Nikolaev's final thoughts were of his boyhood and of how peaceful it would be to return to the river of his youth.

Standing by the detonator at the mouth of the tunnel, the man of science listened until all silence returned to the mountain. He was shaking visibly, though not from the cold. His companion, on the other hand, was unnaturally calm and serene. Which made the scientist shake even more.

They had made the long journey together, from the distant isolation of the Siberian monastery to this equally forsaken place. A journey that had started many years ago with the promise of great things, but that had since veered into savage, criminal territory. The man of science couldn't quite put his finger on how they'd reached this point of no return, how it had all degenerated into mass murder. And as he stared at his companion, he feared there would be more to come.

'What have we done?' he muttered, fearful even as the words snuck past his lips.

His companion turned to face him. For a man of such power and influence, a man who had become an intimate friend and confidant of the tsar and tsarina, he was unusually dressed. An old, greasy jacket, tattered around the cuffs. Baggy trousers that hung low at the back, like the

serouals worn by the Turks. A farmer's oiled boots. Then there was the wild, tangled beard, and the greasy hair, parted down the middle like that of a tavern waiter. The scientist knew it was all artifice, of course, all part of a calculated look. A craftily honed image for a grand master plan, one in which the man of science had become an enabler and an accomplice. A costume designed to convey the humbleness and humility of a true man of God. An outfit so basic it also couldn't possibly detract from its wearer's hypnotic, gray-blue gaze.

The gaze of a demon.

'What have we done?' his companion replied in his odd, simple, almost primordial manner of speech. 'I'll tell you what we've done, my friend. You and me . . . we've just ensured the salvation of our people.'

As always happened in the other's company, the man of science felt a numbing weakness overcome him. All he could do was stand there and nod. But as he began to digest what they had just done, a stifling darkness descended upon him and he wondered about what horrors lay ahead, horrors he would have never imagined possible back in that secluded monastery, where he'd first met the mysterious peasant. Where the man had brought him back from the edge, shown him the wonder of his gift, and talked to him about his wanderings among the hidden cloisters deep in the forests and the beliefs he had learned there. Where the mystic with the piercing eyes had first told him about the advent of 'true tsar,' a fair ruler, a redeemer of the people born of the common folk. A savior of Holy Rus.

For the briefest moment, the man of science wondered if he'd ever be able to extricate himself from his mentor's hold and avoid the madness that surely lay ahead. But as quickly as the thought had surfaced, it was gone, snuffed out before it could even begin to take shape.

He'd never seen anyone refuse anything of Grigory Efimovich Rasputin.

And he knew, with crippling certainty, that his will was far from strong enough for him to be the first.

1

Queens, New York City

PRESENT DAY

The vodka didn't taste like much, not anymore, and that last swig had scorched his throat like acid, but that didn't stop him from wanting more.

This was a bad day for Leo Sokolov.

A bad day coming close on the heels of many bad days.

He tore his eyes off the wall-mounted TV screen and gestured to the barman for a top-up, then returned his gaze to the live feed coming back from Moscow. Bitterness roiled inside him as the camera zoomed in on the coffin being lowered into the ground.

The last of us, he lamented in angry silence. *The last ... and the best.*

The last of the family I wiped out.

The screen split to show another feed, this one coming from the city's Manezh Square, where thousands of protesters were angrily demonstrating under the walls and spires of the Kremlin. Under the very noses of those who had murdered that brave, noble – that magnificent man.

You can scream and shout all you like, he fumed inwardly. *What do they care? What they did to him they'll do again, and they'll keep doing it every time someone dares to speak out against them. They don't care how many they kill. To them, we're all just ...* he remembered the man's rousing words.

We're all just cattle.

A profound sadness seeped through him as the screen shifted to a

close-up of the grieving widow, all in black, doing her best to appear dignified and defiant despite knowing, Sokolov was sure, that any lingering aspirations of protest would be relentlessly snuffed out of her.

Sokolov's fingers tightened against the glass.

Unlike other opposition leaders, the man they were burying hadn't been an egomaniac lusting for power, or a bored oligarch looking to add another trophy to his gilded life. Ilya Shislenko hadn't been a wistful Communist, a messianic environmentalist, or a raving leftist radical. He was just a concerned, ordinary citizen, a lawyer who was determined to try to make things right. If not right, then at least better. Driven to fight those in power, the ones he'd publicly branded as the party of liars and thieves – a label that was now firmly embedded in the psyches of those campaigning against the government. Committed to fight the rampant corruption and embezzlement, to get rid of those who'd stolen the country from the ones who'd enslaved it for decades, those who now ruled it with a gold-plated blade instead of an iron fist, those who'd pillaged its formidable wealth and stashed their billions in London and Zurich. Putting his life on the line to give his fellow countrymen some of the dignity and the freedom that many of their neighbors in Europe and elsewhere around the world enjoyed.

How proud Sokolov had felt when he first read about him. It had breathed new life into his weary, sixty-three-year-old lungs, seeing this charismatic young man fêted on the news channels, reading glowing profiles about him in the *New York Times*, listening to his rousing speeches on YouTube, watching as the protest marches he'd led grew and grew until the unheard-of started to happen, until tens of thousands of angry, fed-up Russians of all ages and means braved freezing temperatures and menacing riot police and started congregating in Bolotnaya Square and elsewhere in the capital to hear his words and shout out their agreement and express their having had enough of being treated like mindless serfs.

And if listening to his words wasn't exhilarating enough, if seeing those crowds back in the home country didn't make his heart thunder, what made it all the more rapturous was that this inspirational leader, this exceptional and courageous man, this savior of saviors, was none other than the son of Leo's own brother. His nephew, and apart from him, the last surviving member of his family.

The family that he had all but obliterated himself.

The screen cut back to footage of his nephew's last speech, footage

that Sokolov suddenly found almost unbearable to watch. Looking at the young man's poised features and the irresistible energy he radiated, Sokolov couldn't help but imagine how that would have changed after he'd been arrested, couldn't block out the horrors that he knew had befallen the man. As he had so many times since the news of his death had broken, he couldn't avoid picturing his nephew – that beautiful, shining beacon of a man – thrown in some dark hole at Lefortovo Prison, the bland, mustard-colored detention center close to the center of Moscow where enemies of the state had been incarcerated since the days of the tsars. He knew all about its sordid past, about how dissidents held there were force-fed through their nostrils to get them to be more compliant. He knew about its dungeons and its 'psychological cells,' the ones with the black walls, the solitary twenty-five-watt bulb switched on 24/7 and the constant, maddening vibration that roared in from the neighboring hydrodynamics institute with such vigor that you couldn't even set a cup on a table without it skittering off. He also knew about its monstrous meat grinder, the one they used to pulp the bodies of its victims before they were sluiced into the city's sewers. Alexander Solzhenitsyn had been imprisoned there, as had another Alexander, the ex-KGB agent Litvinenko, who'd been given a chain-smoking informer for a cell-mate during his incarceration there – a thoughtful little gift from his former employers, given how much he couldn't stand cigarettes – before being murdered by way of polonium-laced tea after running off to London following his release.

The death of Sokolov's nephew hadn't been anywhere near as sophisticated. But, Sokolov knew, it was undoubtedly far more painful.

Undoubtedly.

He shut his eyes in a futile attempt to block out the wrenching images of what he knew they would have done to him in there, but the images kept coming. He knew what these men were capable of; he knew it well and fully and in all of its gory, inhuman detail, and he knew they wouldn't have spared his nephew any of it, not when a decision had been taken high up, not when they needed to get rid of a major thorn in their side, not when they wanted to set an example.

The screen shifted to another point of view, this one coming from somewhere much closer to the rundown Astoria bar Sokolov was slouched in. It showed a protest demonstration that was currently under way in Manhattan, outside the Russian consulate. Hundreds of demonstrators,

waving signs, shaking fists, attaching bouquets of flowers and tributes to the gates of adjacent buildings – the whole scene watched over by New York’s finest and a small army of news crews.

The screen then cut away to show other, similar, demonstrations taking place outside Russian embassies and consulates around the world before returning to the one in Manhattan.

Sokolov stared at the screen with deadened eyes. Within moments, he’d paid his tab and staggered out of the bar, vaguely aware of where he was, but dead certain about where he needed to be.

Somehow, he managed to make it from Queens to Manhattan and all the way to East Ninety-First Street and the big, noisy throng that pressed against the police barricades. His chest heaved with anger, fueled by the intense passion on display all around him, and he joined in, making his way deeper into the crowd, pumping his fist in the air as he took up the familiar resounding choruses of ‘*Izhetsy, ubiišy*’ (Liars, murderers) and ‘*Pozor*’ (Shame on you).

Before long, he was at the front of the crowd, right up against the barricade that protected the consulate’s gates. The chants had grown louder, the fists pumping the air more vigorously. The whole effect, combined with the alcohol swirling through his veins, turned almost hallucinogenic. His mind wandered in all kinds of directions before quickly settling onto a very satisfying image, a revenge fantasy that spread across him like wild-fire. It warmed him up from within and he found himself nursing it and allowing it to grow until it consumed him like a raging inferno.

Through tired, foggy eyes he noticed a couple of men by the consulate’s entrance. They were eyeing the crowd and conferred briefly before retreating behind closed doors.

Sokolov couldn’t help himself.

‘That’s right! You run and you hide, you godless swine,’ he hollered after them. ‘Your time’s running out, you hear me? Your time’s running out, all of you, and you’re going to pay. You’re going to pay dearly.’ Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he slammed his fist repeatedly against the barricade. ‘You think you’ve heard the last of us? You think you’ve heard the last of the Shislenkos? Well, think again, you bastards. We’re going to bring you down. We’re going to wipe you out, every single last one of you.’

He spent the next hour or so there, screaming his tired lungs out and shaking his weak, tired fists. Eventually, his energy drained and he slunk

away, his head bowed. He managed to make it back to the subway and then to his apartment in Astoria, where his dotting wife, Daphne, was waiting for him.

What he didn't realize, of course, what he wasn't conscious of even though he should have known better and would have known better had it not been for those four last shots of vodka, was that they were watching. They were watching and they were listening, as they always were, especially at times like these, at gatherings like these where crowds of undesirables could be taped and analyzed and catalogued and added to all kinds of sinister lists. CCTV cameras mounted on the walls and roof of the consulate had been rolling and powerful directional mikes had been recording and, even worse, undercover agents of the Federation had been roaming the crowd, mimicking the protesters and their angry shouts and fists all while studying the faces around them and picking out those who merited a closer look.

Sokolov didn't know any of that, but he should have.

Three days later, they came for him.