

Taking the Dark

“Where there is light, there must be shadow, where there is shadow, there must be light. There is no shadow without light and no light without shadow...” Haruki Murakami, 1Q84.

Rasputin raised his arms, two daggers in his fists. He was mumbling an incantation. On the slab before him, a heavily pregnant woman cried out in labor. Her midwife and husband pleaded with him to save her. Hooded wraiths surrounded the woman, including Czarina Alexandra. Outside the vault, noblemen fought the Czarina's guards.

Rasputin knew that this was the time Baba Yaga foretold he would die. He only had minutes left to live. He must make them count. The daggers fell with precision, a Cesarean section he had never performed before. The woman would die, but her infant would live.

Grigori passed the squalling child to the midwife, a wet nurse. She quickly secreted the child beneath her robes, forcing her nipple into his mouth. The boy went silent, suckling, as the armed assassins broke down the door.

The hooded wraiths scattered, but the Czarina and Rasputin were not so lucky. The infant would become Petrov's great grandfather. Having killed their intended, the noblemen left the room sheathing swords and holstering pistols.

The spaceport outside of St. Petersburg was one of the newest. Still, it had the same feel as Baikonur Cosmodrome, providing a sense of dismal vastness. Access to the ships via subterranean Maglev denied the traveler that sense of grandiosity, which is why another Grigori tugged on his father's suit as the train slipped smoothly through the underground. The ten-year-

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old demanded to see the Lunar bound ship from the outside--to stand beside it and admire its immensity.

Petrov reassured the boy he could experience it in 16K once the ship encysted them, but to Grigori that wouldn't fly. The train came to a smooth stop before an elevator. As the elevator opened on the surface, instead of a sleek rocket, Grigori saw a farm of capsules. All that was above him was an overcast sky.

The boy pouted as Petrov checked the roster for their capsule assignment. He read the Cyrillic, and followed the directions out to the designated aisle, then down the aisle to their assigned vessel. The double bubble ship was hardly aerodynamic. Other families were also looking for their transport. They, like Petrov and Grigori, were on a father and son school trip.

Keying the entry, he shifted their luggage into the airlock. A family pod, much like the old recreation vehicles, self-contained.

Petrov punched in the self-diagnostic test, and green lights flashed across the panel. "Okay, Grigori, buckle up, we're transferring to the mother ship."

Petrov activated the autopilot. Twin turbofans deployed on either side of the pod. As the turbofans spun up, the vessel lifted smoothly and flew toward the waiting rocket.

Petrov activated external cameras, and the walls of the double bubble went transparent, showing the spaceport and the growing mother ship. Other capsules docked ahead of them, looking like insect eggs collecting along the length of the rocket. They clung amidships. Petrov looked at his son. The boy's mouth dropped, seeing the view.

"Wow, Otet! We really are going to the Moon!"

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Grigori rotated his couch to view it from all angles. It made him dizzy as the capsule docked. He fell into his belts looking straight down at the launchpad, much farther than expected. He swallowed, "Otet!"

"Reorient, Grigori. Skyward. Let me help you." Petrov pressed the button for his son's seat, and it swiveled 180 degrees and locked. Then he set the external cameras to fade, allowing the pod's interior to replace the view.

"One minute to lift off. All passengers prepare," came in over the ship-wide speakers. To punctuate the words, their acceleration couches shifted. The ginger-haired family felt the rumble as the engines fired.

"Seal your helmet, son," Petrov instructed.

Grigori squealed as he heard the final countdown through his helmet, yelling out, "Ready, Steady, Go!"

The blast off was intense; loud despite the sound baffling. Through his heads-up-display, Grigori saw sky, ground, and engine views. His brown eyes darted screen to screen, then to his father, whose helmet was bucking against the headrest. Breathing became difficult. His neck popped as the mother ship's propulsion pressed him into the couch.

It seemed to go on forever, and then the main engines cut, causing a sudden silence. Grigori felt his body float, as did his stomach contents. He wasn't ready for the nausea. His cheeks bulged against pursed lips.

"Don't throw up, son! You'll be floating in it for the rest of the trip."

The mother ship seemed to sense Grigori's distress. The main engines started again, providing a modicum of gravity as it left Earth's orbit. Both Petrov and Grigori sighed as their stomachs, and everything else, settled. Their couches rotated, accommodating the thrust.

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Both father's and son's hair settled. They watched the earth shrink, glad to leave the St. Petersburg winter and their troubles behind. Where they were going would be both colder and drier. They exchanged snow for gray regolith. Grigori activated his tunes, listening to the latest pop song, while Petrov read.

Later, they slept.

What woke them was the mother ship rotating to decelerate as they approached the cratered world. Nausea struck again--less than before, not only because they expected it, but also because they were getting their space legs.

They wouldn't be staying at a Moon Base or the domes that dotted the surface. These were typical destinations for visitors, tourists, and researchers. Instead, they'd land near one of the remote mining camps. It was a teaching experience designed for both father and son.

Petrov worked in a consulting firm for investors interested in extraterrestrial business. The returns were fabulous and taxation negligible, compared to terrestrial corporate investment. That was changing, but for now, Petrov joined his company just as things were taking off, and he did well.

Grigori wanted to be a space engineer. He was interested in orbital construction, but Petrov believed that road led to designing asteroid bunkers and planetary outposts. Not as glamorous, but the pay was better. He hoped this trip would force Grigori to buckle down in his studies.

“Capsules will detach in sequence. The *Pride of the Republic* will remain in orbit. We assigned your berths on the mother ship to put you on the correct glide path to your ultimate destination. Follow the virtual beacons down. We shall begin in five minutes. Message will repeat.”

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“This is it, Otet! We’re going to the Moon!”

“Quiet, son. Let me concentrate.”

The double bubble detached with a soft whoosh of steam, propelling it away. Petrov activated thrusters, and the capsule reoriented. A series of flashing boxes guided him down. He positioned the vessel in the center of the grid, making fine adjustments as needed. A warning light informed him to deploy the twin turbofans to slow their descent.

Petrov ignored the external view, but it enthralled Grigori. He watched crawlers and domes pass by on crater rims and in valleys. They flitted over immense piles fed by large machines scraping away the regolith--all to extract titanium ore. The ore moved on conveyor belts from the mining site into freight cars destined for the refineries.

Flashing by, Grigori drank it all in. The double bubble entered a landing spiral, coming in at a camp beside a large strip mine, close to the terminator. The horizon shortened as the craters, outbuildings, and the surface structures rose and the regolith approached.

Petrov white knuckled two joysticks guiding their capsule down. A red light exploded on the panel, warning him to deploy landing skids. He stabbed the button in panic, and the vessel side slipped. He corrected, or rather over-corrected, and then got it back onto the landing grid. The ship came down hard and bounced on its hydraulics.

Cutting thrusters and turbofans, he exhaled as the capsule came to rest, stirring up dust. “Well, Grigori, we’re down.”

Grigori looked at his father, pale and sweaty. Around the cabin, as the external view faded, squares replaced them on the walls of their home. The squares became windows on their surroundings.

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Petrov saw someone heading their way. A metal wrench banged on the skin of the capsule. He unsealed the external hatch. The ship took the weight, then sealed, and the airlock cycled. The inner door opened and both father and son stared at a woman with a crewcut, her space helmet under her arm.

“Greetings Earthlings! I am Olga Uvarov. Welcome to Titan Spassky Mining Site Twenty-seven. Rumor has it we have engineer cadet on board. Who might you be?” Olga asked in Russian with a Kazak accent.

Grigori blushed and took a step back. Olga was pretty, blond with stubbly hair, dark eyes, intelligent. His dad helped, “This is my son, Grigori. We are from St. Petersburg. I am Petrov, his father.”

Olga shoved out a gloved hand to Grigori. He shook it.

“Let’s get your spacesuits fitted and checked so we can take you on a tour.”

“Spasiba (Thanks), Ms. Uvarov.”

“You may both call me Olga. You are part of Mining crew now. We are informal. Much to learn before you work.”

“Work?” Grigori swallowed.

“Learn by doing. You look healthy. You will make your father proud. Here, let me help.”

“Uh, okay,” Grigori said, as he looked at the parts of his suit.

After suiting up, Grigori struck his helmet, deaf. Olga pointed at his forearm, then her ear. He looked at the display. She pointed at audio. Pressing it, he heard her talk inside his helmet.

“Ready?”

He nodded.

“No, Grigori, you must speak. If you turn away and nod, no one will notice.”

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“Yes, Ms. Olga.”

“Just Olga. Now come along Cadet. Petrov, you go first.”

The airlock could only hold two at a time, so Petrov went on his own. Stepping out on the lunar surface, he mumbled in bad English, “One small step for man...”

Grigori and Olga followed, and she picked up the wrench she used to knock. To Petrov's surprise, Grigori gripped her gloved hand.

“Moving around on Moon differs from Earth. Walking gets too bouncy, use long leaping hops, tovarich (comrades).” She watched them try, grinning at their attempts. It didn't take long until they got it. “Okay, little bunnies, follow me.” Olga led them on a tour that took several hours.

“Inside that dome is the dining facility. Anyone hungry?”

Grigori nodded, then remembered to talk and said, “Da.”

“Before we go, do you see that ridge there? That's the outer edge of Russell crater. Now you can tell friends where you stayed.”

Inside, they moved through the cafeteria line, taking full trays to their seats. Grigori stared in wonder at the men and women. Roughnecks and miners were all the same. Sturdy people in dusty suits.

He began eating when two four-meter robots entered, heavy and metallic, stomping animatedly, hydraulics whooshing as they moved.

“Wow! Look at that, Otet!”

Olga smiled as the machines backed into charging ports. They opened, discharging their operators.

“What are those?” Grigori asked, amazed.

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Olga said, "Heavy Equipment Mechanicals (HEMs), they inspect and shift large items and boulders."

"Can I try one?"

"Unfortunately, you're too small to work controls. Maybe you can ride along with an operator."

"Can I, Otet?"

"If it's okay with them."

Grigori ate fast while watching the operators. What they ate, where they sat. When one stood up, Grigori raced over and begged him for a ride. He refused. Not put off, Grigori asked a woman. She agreed, after a nod from both Petrov and Olga. Grigori glommed onto her and she directed him where to sit in her HEM.

Petrov walked over and thanked the operator. She promised to drop him off at their capsule later. They left Olga and Petrov to finish their supper.

The sun was low in the lunar sky when Petrov left. Lost in his thoughts, he halted, noticing something odd. He had no shadow. The sun behind him should have cast one, but there was none. He wondered if lack of atmosphere caused it, but that made little sense.

Looking at other objects, they also failed to cast shadows. It was a conundrum. Fatigue slowed his mind. He'd leave the puzzle for later. In the distance, he saw a HEM approaching. He waited for his son, standing at the external hatch of their capsule.

Grigori lay in his bunk, unable to sleep after all the excitement. He read Peter Pan, distractedly. He loved Peter and Wendy, but felt a special connection to the Lost Boys. Staying a kid forever intrigued him.

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Something about the Lost Boys struck him. They did not have shadows. He pondered whether the secret to their eternal youth was that they were ghosts. Nothing suggested it, and they left the question unanswered.

He remembered sitting with the woman in the HEM. It hadn't occurred to him that when they should have cast a shadow; they didn't. Maybe he was a Lost Boy? The notion gave him reason to sleep, to dream.

Pixie dust fell on him, but instead of flying, he felt heavy. Partially paralyzed, he heard his father snore. Try as he might, he could not move. He didn't panic. He let the fear pass through him as the paralysis increased.

His mind returned to his missing shadow. Pressure waves rolled over his body. He thought of his last visit to the Black Sea with his parents. Lying in the shallow water, the wavelets moved over him, pinning him to the sand.

Grigori could hear other kids playing, parents calling out. Then the sensation of the sand slipping away beneath him with the tide. He sank. The heat from the sun on his face. The coolness of the water beneath him. That's how he felt now.

Grigori woke hours later, covers thrown off. Petrov moved around making breakfast. The odor of strong tea drifted into the boy's nostrils, helping him to rise from the depths of sleep.

"Ah! There you are! Hungry?"

The boy nodded. He was always hungry.

"You better get cleaned up and dressed. Olga will be here soon."

"What are we doing today, Otet?"

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“You haven't been paying attention. Today, we go out on the Rover.” Petrov activated the external cameras. The walls shimmered, revealing a nightscape.

“Why are we awake? It's still dark outside!”

“Near the terminator day and night are close together. It will be dark all day long.”

“How will we see?”

“Wait and see. Now get ready.”

Olga arrived in the Moon Rover and waved at the skin of the capsule. Petrov flashed the landing lights in acknowledgment. A short time later, father and son exited the hatch and mounted the vehicle.

The Rover had six balloon tires, three to a side, and communication equipment including a satellite link, a telescope, and a backhoe in case they got stuck. It also had a winch and tackle. Olga looked very much at home in the driver's seat, but as the family approached, she tapped the side of her helmet.

Grigori forgot to activate his comms system.

“Good morning, tovarich!” blared through Grigori's helmet speaker.

He adjusted the volume down, and answered, “Good morning, Ms. Olga.”

“Do you want to drive?” Olga asked, as she shifted out of the driver's seat.

“Can I, Otet?”

“May I, and yes, you may,” then to Olga, “Is it safe?”

“I know where we go, no problem. If problem, I make stop.”

“Oh boyo!” Grigori yelled, rubbing his gloves together, and ran toward the driver's side, and tripped.

“You okay, son? Check your suit pressure, check for leaks.”

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Grigori climbed to his feet, dusted himself off, then checked his gauntlet for pressure changes. "Good to go!"

The Rover leaped as Grigori hit the accelerator for the first time.

"Nice and steady pressure. Same with steering. Adjust slowly. Get a feel for her. Anya is very cooperative if you treat her right," Olga advised.

"Anya, whose Anya?" Grigori asked, over-steering as he got a feel for the Rover.

"Anya is pet name, I call Rover."

Despite the bright headlights, they were still in the dark, and hit several bumps and small craters. Petrov gripped Anya tightly, nervous.

"Relax," Olga said to him. "No traffic here, not much to hit."

"He seems to hit everything!"

"Grigori is good driver. Better than me when I started."

To Grigori, she said, "Turn right toward terminator."

"Terminator? Like the movie?!"

"No, Grigori. Toward the light. We go to where the light and dark meet."

Grigori heeled the Rover over to the terminator's edge. Racing there, Anya flew at 25 kilometers per hour (kph). The Rover hit some hard bumps, rattling teeth.

"Prepare to drop sun visor. It gets bright. Save eyes," Olga warned.

They followed her instructions. It was bright as they crossed the terminator. They squinted as the sun turned the valley from black to gray. Grigori slowed, dazzled.

"Now, boychik. Try experiment. I want you to go back into dark, then catch up to terminator, and drive along with it. Tell me how fast it goes."

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Grigori followed Olga's instructions. It was tricky, but he finally synchronized Anya's speed with the terminator. He looked at the speedometer.

"10 kph!"

"Very good!"

Grigori swelled with pride--not only at answering correctly, but mastering the Rover.

"How come it's so clear here, but not on Earth?" Grigori asked.

"On Earth, the terminator moves at 1100 kph. And then there's..."

"Olga, let Grigori figure it out. Good practice for his school report."

They drove a while with the terminator. The trio noticed long shadows moving independently. The shadows appeared animated, full of life on their own. They moved like squiggles in the dust. Their shapes changed randomly. Living things, playful.

Petrov described the shadows' behavior akin to young sea lions at play. Diving and twisting, moving happily along the regolith. At one point it mimicked Anya, then contorted and shot away.

"Did you see that?!" gushed Grigori.

"What's going on, Olga?"

"No one knows. It's epiphenomena. Here at Mining site we pay no attention. This is not science mission. Finding answer is not important to business."

"Is it dangerous?" Petrov asked.

She laughed. "No more dangerous than Earth clouds."

"Clouds can get plenty dangerous!" Grigori said, slowing down, letting the terminator move ahead.

"Not without water. Hey, watch out!"

Grigori twisted the wheel and narrowly missed a steep drop-off.

“Well, that’s enough excitement for today. Now we go to work.”

“Which way is back, Olga?”

“You not pay attention?” she asked Grigori. “Then we lost!”

“Otet! Otet!” Grigori began crying.

“You learned an important lesson, Da? Okay, boychik. Use gyro, look for beacon. No compass good here, but give general direction.”

“What about GPS?” Grigori asked, concentrating on the gyro as it swung, adjusting the Rover’s heading as he steered.

“Not enough satellites. Not worth investment, yet...”

“I still can’t get over those shadows,” said Petrov.

“Another project for Grigori. If he find answer, make famous, Da?”

“Da!” both father and son said at the same time.

They spent the rest of the day mining, using night-vision in the dark. Grigori and Petrov used picks and shovels, looking for a new ore vein. They would return to Earth after supper, joining with the *Pride of the Republic* still in orbit.

Olga stood in the dining facility and hugged them both before she left. Petrov shook her hand, planting a fistful of rubles into it as a tip for the time she spent.

She smiled at him, a little flirtatiously, and said, “No need. It’s my job, but thanks.”

“You are always welcome in our home in St. Petersburg, Olga.”

“Da! And bring Anya!” Grigori shouted.

Olga laughed and waved as she left.

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Their return trip to St. Petersburg spaceport was uneventful. Even Grigori didn't mind micro-gravity, now that he knew what to expect. He enjoyed it, although he made Petrov angry when he floated around the cabin.

One hundred years before, two Japanese photographers, Tanaka and Watanabe, walked among the ruins of a scorched city, Hiroshima. It was September, less than a month after they dropped the atomic bomb. The sky was overcast and a black rain fell. Radioactive fallout turned the puddles black, yet still people drank from them. There was no other water. Having no choice, they suffered poisoning.

Tanaka stopped to cry. Watanabe gripped his shoulder hard, saying, "We have a job to do, Tanaka-san."

They documented the horror, taking photos in hospitals, streets, and the remnants of buildings. They were at it for days. The radiation would kill them, but at the time no one knew that. Lifting and shifting things to document the carnage, they inhaled radioactive particles. Nobody would see those pictures until after their deaths. Some would later appear in the Hiroshima memorial museum.

The two men often began at ground zero, then spiraled out to document the destruction. Watanabe was the first to spot the shadows of humans. Humans, once whole, vaporized and imprinted on walls. He marked their locations in his mind. Further out, Tanaka photographed children's bones desiccated and collected in piles like wind-blown leaves in schoolyards.

"Look, Tanaka," Watanabe said.

"What? I'm not sure what you are pointing at. A blank wall?"

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“The shadows are missing. Those I saw before. Over there, yesterday, or maybe the day before.”

“Hmm. Not sure I remember.”

“I placed some chalk. The mark is there, but the shadow is not.”

“You must be mistaken...”

“No, I’m sure of it.”

“What could it possibly mean? Perhaps the rain washed them away.”

“Not likely.”

“Another mystery we can’t answer. Far too many, I’m afraid.”

“Hopefully, this won’t ruin the film like the one yesterday.”

In the dark room hours later, Watanabe showed Tanaka the anomaly. The shadows were indeed missing.

After the photographers died, of all the photos they took, no one ever recovered the Watanabe images showing missing human shadows. It was just one of many moments lost in history. To this day, in the museum, one can still see the impression of a human turned to shadow on a wall fragment.

A night guard at the Hiroshima memorial, Tamaru, swore to anyone that would listen that the shadow on that exhibit came and went. None of his friends believed him. They figured he drank too much Sake.

“... and that’s why the terminator on the Moon is so sharp.”

“Thank you, Grigori, for that interesting presentation on your school field trip. Does anyone have questions?” the teacher asked.

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Masha raised her hand near the back of the classroom, and then asked, "Why is it so sharp again?"

"Masha, if you were paying attention..."

"It's all right, Ms. Lermontov. It's because there is no atmosphere on the Moon to diffuse the light. Diffuse means scatter."

"Oh, okay, thanks," said Masha, and grinned at Grigori. She *liked* him.

Grigori made a face. He didn't like girls, especially ones with blond hair. As he walked to his seat, he puzzled over the question that still bothered him. Masha kept trying to capture his attention, smiling, but his mind was elsewhere.

'What's going on with the shadows on the Moon?' he thought.

Returning to Earth, it was comforting to see his shadow. He kept checking it the first few days, but it was always there, reliable. When the school bell rang, the teacher dismissed the kids.

Masha was at his side almost immediately, pawing at him. She flattered, "You are so smart, Grigori. I wish I could be more like you. Will you walk me home?"

"No, Masha. I'm not going that way; I'm going to the State library."

"Always studying. Can I join you?"

"No," he said. "It wouldn't interest you, anyway."

She frowned. "Well, I'll see you in school tomorrow, okay? Maybe we can have lunch together?"

"Maybe... see ya."

The wind made him tighten his collar. It was cold for September. He climbed the steps to the library. It was always overheated inside, and he removed his coat. Old men dozed, or frankly

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snored at the reading tables, books opened and ignored. He headed toward the stacks containing the Russian history of the nineteenth century.

Grigori could stay home and use his computer, but he preferred looking through books. Sometimes, he found messages stuck inside them. Those were definitely interesting and not available on a computer screen. One time he found an ancient letter secreted in a book, and ever since looked for more. His subject for the day was the mysterious Grigori Rasputin.

The smell of old books was a balm to his soul, a feeling from beyond his years. First, he pulled a book at random, but it was merely a convoluted history of the Russian revolution. To his surprise, he found a book translated from English. Written by an American academic, Douglas Smith, it was called *Rasputin: Faith, Power, and the Twilight of the Romanovs*. It was unwieldy with over a thousand pages. He had trouble holding it, so he propped it on a shelf.

Scanning it, the first couple of hundred pages were about Rasputin's roots. This interested Grigori the most. He didn't think of him as a 'mad monk', but as a mystic. He paid for the cost of his arcane knowledge with alcoholism and womanizing. Yuck! Rasputin's womanizing led him to the bed of the Czarina, which only made his story more interesting.

Grigori read about Rasputin's childhood in Pokrovskoye in Siberia. His father, Efim, a coach driver and likely an alcoholic, beat him. Rasputin wandered the village, making prophecies, and earned the title of a clairvoyant. The descriptions were so vivid he could smell the cheap vodka and partially digested sausage in the air. Then he realized he wasn't imagining it.

A gnarled, arthritic hand appeared on Grigori's shoulder. The swollen knuckles andropy veins might have been from the mystic himself. It wasn't. Grigori looked up into the face of a kindly old man. He had rotten teeth, but his smile was genuine.

"Would you like to meet him?"

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“Who? Rasputin? Not possible!”

“What if it was, and you could talk to him when he was your age?”

“Ah sure, da, right...”

The man reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a gold pocket watch. It had an ornate cover, which he opened. Inside, the face was like nothing he had ever seen (not that Grigori had seen many pocket watches). It had four bezels.

“Each of these bezels specifies coordinates. The outer most adjusts for the time. The three inner bezels adjust for coordinates along the x, y, and z axis. All four used together can move the user from here to anywhere and any when they'd like to be.”

“Is it magic?” Grigori asked, his eyes going wide.

“No son, it is science.”

“How come everyone doesn't have them?”

“Sadly, it cost me my career to invent it. The University stopped my research and fired me.”

“But why? Is it fake?”

“No. Real enough. It didn't pass their ethics committee standards, and they recommended my removal.”

“Ethics committee? But why fire you?” Grigori asked again.

“Something about paradoxes, branching timelines, alternate universes... So, anyway, do you want to go meet Rasputin?”

“So long as I'm back before dinner!”

The man laughed, “You'll be back less than a minute after you go! Now hold on to the watch, and I'll show you how to use it.”

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The gold fob extended from the man's vest buttonhole to the watch, keeping him attached to the mechanism. The man showed Grigori how to set it, 'just in case' something should happen to him while they were there. "To start the transit, just click the winding stem thrice, like so..."

Grigori felt his face and body expand, then contract to a pinpoint. Then expand again and settle back into his normal dimensions. It was something no one should experience. He smelled, tasted, and saw everything at once. It was disturbing, disgusting, and dizzying. Beyond that, it was indescribable.

They both threw up on the muddy street as they popped into Pokrovskoye in 1879. People turned away from the offal and smell, and one did a double take after looking at his vodka bottle. Other old men sat under awnings and children played in the street. The man and boy stepped back, avoiding a horse-drawn carriage as it bounced along the rutted road.

The man pointed out another ten-year-old boy strutting alone down the street, ignoring the other kids. "That's Rasputin. The rest is up to you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must share a drink with old friends."

Grigori looked around, startled. He felt like he was in a movie, though he wasn't. Rasputin was receding rapidly, so Grigori chased after him yelling, "Hey, wait!" Rasputin continued down an alley between wood buildings, entering the Siberian forest. Grigori followed. He stopped to turn back. The sun entered the alley on an angle, and several kids were talking to their shadows. It was spooky. The shadows themselves responded independently of their owners.

"Imaginary friends?" He wondered.

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Looking onward into the forest, he could no longer see Rasputin, but heard him moving through the underbrush. He plunged on, undaunted. The forest canopy covered him as he ran. In no time, Grigori lost Rasputin.

He couldn't see the village. He heard nothing but the swaying of trees, the pawing of squirrels, and the foraging of birds. A sudden chill gripped him. A city boy out of time, out of his element, Grigori stopped himself before he burst out crying for fear of wolves.

Something hit him hard in the back, throwing him to the ground. Terrified, he rolled over expecting dripping teeth. Instead, Rasputin stood over him, glaring down.

"Who are you?"

"I am Grigori."

"That's my name!"

"I'm named after you."

This struck Rasputin oddly, but then he noticed the boy's strange clothing. He'd seen nothing like them before. Synthetic material, unknown in Siberia. "Your clothes, where did you..."

Grigori watched Rasputin's eye. They took on an iridescent golden glow, replacing his depth-less black iris. Both boys inhaled.

"You are from the future. The distant future."

Grigori, speechless, nodded.

"How did you get here?"

"Difficult to explain. Can you help me up?"

"Oh, da! Come with me." Rasputin struck off into the forest, no trail in evidence.

"Where are we going?"

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“I want you to meet my teacher.”

Rasputin's clairvoyance was no longer a historical flight of fancy. Grigori witnessed it! 'But who would believe I traveled back in time? No one. Books never mentioned Rasputin going to school. So who was this teacher he spoke of?'

The forest grew darker as he followed the boy. Without him, he would never make it back to the village on his own. Grigori believed this forest must hide fire-birds and enchanted swans.

Rasputin led him to a hovel. It seemed impossible that anyone could live inside, yet smoke came from its pile of logs. Grigori helped the boy shift timber and create an opening. What Grigori saw shook him to his core.

The two boys stood in a vast entrance hall, a veritable gilded palace that would be the envy of the Romanov's. All in sparkling white except for the gilding, the gold banisters, and flourishes.

Rasputin stomped his foot twice and shouted, “Baba Yaga!”

A narcotic odor enchanted the air, making Grigori dizzy. The closest place he could imagine to it was a witch's gingerbread house. On the riser above, a purple mist formed, and then consolidated into the silhouette of a crone. As the vision took substance, the form shifted through a hundred permutations: animal, monster, beautiful maid, and finally old woman.

“You brought me food?” Baba Yaga opined.

“No!” Rasputin shouted. “A story for a story.”

“A far trade,” she answered. Her jaw cracked when she first spoke.

Grigori told of his trip to the Moon and the strange behavior of the shadows. When he finished, Baba Yaga inhaled and exhaled an orange smoke. She gave him a crooked smile.

“Rasputin is my apprentice, future boy. You have shown him the limits of my power. This I cannot abide. Yet, I will pay my debt, and tell you the story of shadows.

“A hundred years before I met young Rasputin, spirits riddled Siberia. Spirits malignant and fair, seductive and dangerous. Now those shadows attach to everyone. Before that time, they lived free. Roamed the forests and haunted the people, disrupting their dreams. An unruly lot. They struck fear in all. I had no choice but to enslave them. Tie them to all things and people. Yet the greatest of my magic manifested when I dropped a veil of unknowing over the eyes of all. From that time forward, life believed that their shadow could not exist without them. I regret you found this out, Rasputin. Now you know my sorcery goes no further than the sky.”

“Baba Yaga, I respect you, regardless,” Rasputin swore, somewhat fearfully, bowed to his teacher.

Grigori stared at the walls of Baba Yaga's palace as shadows raced, free. Now he understood. In the knowing, the floor opened before him. Below, a deep waterfall cascaded and crashed, casting rainbows on sharp boulders.

Hypnotized by the vision, a shadow slid up beside him, tricking him, and he stepped forward and fell. Rasputin leaped after his new friend, the mist rising as their speed increased. In terror, Grigori screamed, watching death approach on the jagged rocks below. Striking them, he felt his life drain into blackness.

Keith 'Doc' Raymond

The boys tumbled out the door of the bar, gasping. The man with the gold pocket watch laughed. The others, on their stools, drank abirtka with glowing eyes and numb mouths. The man lifted his pocket watch from his vest and checked the time.

“Come along, Grigori. Time to say goodbye to your friend.”

“Can I go to the future with you?” Rasputin asked.

The old men laughed. “Rasputin, you may be clairvoyant, but you are also a fool,” one said.

Time travel, a fantasy fit only for dreamers.

“No, young man,” answered Grigori’s friend. “Besides, we do not travel to the future. We only return home. As best you should.”

“Da, Rasputin! I hear your mother calling,” jeered one of the other old men.

Grigori and Rasputin's eyes met, both sad to lose a friend. One they only just met. Their time with Baba Yaga. The story of shadows. His adventures on the Moon. All things they could only share in secret.

The man with the pocket watch grasped Grigori’s hand, and together they walked to the edge of Pokrovskoye, and disappeared in the fog.

Back in the State library, Grigori closed the book. He must have fallen asleep leaning on the bookshelf, he thought. Standing upright, he was alone except for the other men still snoring. He checked his watch and realized he was late for dinner.

The next day, his friends gathered, and he related his adventure in Siberia with Rasputin. No one believed him, but they enjoyed the story. Grigori, frustrated, had to prove it to them, but how? Then he remembered the kids in the alley.

Keith 'Doc' Raymond

“Alexei, pozhaluysta (please), stand there facing your shadow. The rest of you watch.”

“Why?” he whined.

“Just watch.” Everyone did.

The other kids shook their heads. Grigori spoke to it, and then everything changed. The shadow raised its arm, gesturing. The kids watched Alexei, but he had not moved. Yet his shadow did!

Grigori listened, and then seemed to answer the shadow. Two of the kids ran away, terrified. Magic, no doubt. First, Grigori frightened them with a story, and then he brought shadows to life.

Taking a moment to see their fear, Grigori said, “Pozhaluysta, don't be afraid! This shadow is more afraid of you than you of it. This being lived in secret for a very long time. It amazes him, I know. He has much to say.”

“Why can't we hear him?” asked Masha.

“He only answers those that speak to him.”

“But we hear nothing,” another boy protested.

“Can I speak to my shadow?” Masha asked.

“I don't see why not?” Grigori answered.

Most of them felt foolish, but tried anyway. When the shadows answered, goose bumps appeared on their arms. The idea you were never alone shocked them. One kid ran, trying to wipe away the entity clinging to him relentlessly.

Tamaru patrolled the museum with his flashlight. Pointing it at the wall fragment, once more he noted the shadow missing. He shook his head.

Keith 'Doc' Raymond

“I should probably stop drinking,” Tamaru said to himself.

He continued on, ignoring the images of the dead on the walls.

At supper that evening, Grigori kept trying to get his father's attention, to share what happened that afternoon. Petrov was busy entertaining Japanese business executives and had no time for his son's antics.

When the shadow appeared and circled the table, it moved incredibly fast. Slowing, Grigori noticed and spoke to it like an imaginary friend. The female translator, watching Grigori, asked the shadow a question. No one paid attention until they heard her speak.

Petrov's Japanese guests stopped, surprised by the translator's expression. Grigori's father, embarrassed by his son's babbling, stared disbelieving until he heard the shadow's words coming from the translator.

“She is telling us about her family. How they died in an explosion. How she grieves. She goes on and on to your boy.” The woman translated into Russian.

“What explosion? What family?”

“She lived in Hiroshima. Ah, so sorry! Not *her* family, more like their servant.”

“That's what I was trying to tell you, Otet! These shadows are not ghosts, they are unique beings. She tied them to people and things!”

“Who?”

“Baba Yaga!”

“What are you...” Petrov began. The Japanese business manager shushed him.

They listened intently, reverent of spirits.

Keith 'Doc' Raymond

Then the Japanese translator bowed deeply to Grigori, and said, her face pale, "She told us the crone enslaved her for generations, making her pass from one family to the next. Grigori freed her. She is glad your son understands. He is the first to know since ah, a 'Rasputin.'"

Everyone stared at the shadow cast by no object and listened. A queer sensation moved through them. Petrov saw his son in a new light. He was no longer a boy.

END