

Seth and Nadiya face a challenge. A strange Russian boy is haunting Seth through his TV and has made a threat that, if Seth doesn't help him, he will cause England to lose their opening World Cup group game against Tunisia tonight. All the duo have to go on is a photograph of the boy holding a large ornamental egg. Will our two heroes be able to discover what the boy needs to know? And, if they don't, will England lose in Volgograd tonight and be on the edge of elimination from the tournament?

Три

Nadiya was worried about Seth. She had been involved the last time he was troubled by shadows of the past.

'I'll help you,' she said. 'On one condition.'

'What's that?' Seth asked.

'That you leave it to me. I'll do all the research online. But you have to avoid screens *all* weekend. Or you might see the boy again. Okay?'

'But Brazil?' Seth complained. 'And Germany on Sunday? And there's Messi and Ronaldo on Saturday, working out who's the best player. The Goat. What if one of them scores a hatrick? Or misses a penalty? I need to see it.'

'Goat?' Nadiya asked. 'What are you on about?'

'Greatest of all time,' Seth told her. 'G.O.A.T. It's an acronym.'

Nadiya shook her head. 'No screens. Not even your phone. No goats. Or no deal.'

Nadiya worked all weekend on her laptop, deep sea trawling the internet. She had the World Cup on in the background. It was just after Ronaldo scored his first goal and stood facing his teammates, stroking his chin, that she saw an image that horrified her.

Staring out of her computer screen was a boy wearing a military uniform. There was a medal on his chest. His pale face and unflinching gaze were unmistakable.

The boy from the photograph.

Nadiya had never doubted that Seth was seeing something real to him. Now she knew how real – and how dangerous – the situation might be. Because now she knew exactly *who* the boy was.

They met on the edge of the Moor, the expanse of grass and trees that separated their school from where both Nadiya and Seth's houses were. It was after nine p.m. Daylight fading.

Seth had been listening to the Germany and Brazil games on the radio all afternoon. He was intensely frustrated. He'd missed enjoying Germany losing and Brazil drawing. Huge games. After Brazil's match ended he took Rosa out for a walk. She was running free, playing with a young cocker spaniel.

That was when Nadiya had called him.

Nadiya could see her friend looked tired and anxious for news of her research. She hoped what she had to tell him would help. But, really, she knew she needed more time. Much more time.

'I know who he is,' she announced.

'Who?'

'His name was Alexei Romanov. He was the heir to the Russian throne in 1918. His mum was our Queen Victoria's granddaughter. But they were killed.'

'Killed?'

'Murdered alongside his mum and dad and siblings. He was the youngest. Just 14, like us.'

Seth felt a shudder go through him.

'So that's why he said he was a king?'

‘Yes,’ Nadiya went on. ‘And he was a saint too. The Russian church canonised him.’

‘Well... thank you... that’s brilliant...’ Seth said. ‘And what about the egg?’

‘I don’t know’ Nadiya admitted. ‘Not exactly.’

Seth said nothing. He was waiting, because he knew Nadiya had more to tell him.

‘Eggs like that were called Fabergé eggs,’ his friend explained. They were made by a man called Gustav Fabergé from precious jewels and gold and – now – they’re worth millions. Seriously. Some go for 20 million.’

‘But why would he want it if he’s dead?’ Seth muttered to himself.

The light was fading to the west now. No glorious sunset. Just a pale pre-darkness. A cold wind now blowing across the moor. Seth checked where Rosa was and waited for Nadiya to speak.

‘But I’ve not found out which egg Alexei Romanov is holding in your picture. Not yet.’

Seth coughed to hide his disappointment. ‘You’ve done well,’ he said, trying to sound positive. His legs felt weak.

‘But I will,’ Nadiya added.

Seth looked at the church clock. ‘It’s night-time now,’ he said. ‘And school tomorrow. Then there are only three hours before England and Tunisia kick off. We’re running out of time. Let me help too. Let me...’

‘No,’ Nadiya stopped him. ‘No screens. It’s not safe for you. I’ll do what I can tonight. We’ll talk in the morning at school. It might not be too late.’

It was dark as Seth made his way down the hill, Rosa tugging as eagerly as she always did when they were on their way home.

Monday morning. Seth walked his normal route to school. Past the old hospital, now converted into fancy flats. He counted four cars with England flags flapping and two women jogging past him, both wearing England football tops. There was something in the air today. That buzz in the country when England are playing in the World Cup and nothing has gone wrong, yet.

Seth also saw a horse pulling a large wooden caravan with AMBULANCE written on the side. And a pair of nurses standing at the door to the old hospital. Figures from the past. He was seeing shadows again. Seth shuddered.

He called at Nadiya's house. No reply. He hung around for her until the last minute, when he had to run to school. Where was she? Why wasn't she answering? Had she gone to school already?

But Nadiya was not in registration.

Nor was she in maths later.

Seth didn't have his phone with him, so he had no way of texting her.

At morning break he sat outside staring through the trees and across the moor. He watched, as three boys in suits and ties walked by, pushing each other. They were wearing the school's uniform. From 1927. More shadows. More omens that Seth was heading into a troubled time.

Seth realised he was scared now, that he needed Nadiya. He didn't think he could face this without her. The visions from the past: they were overwhelming him again.

Then a sudden heavy hand on his shoulder. He jumped, looked round, expecting the worst.

'It's me,' Nadiya said.

She looked tired. Her eyes were dark underneath and puffy.

'Where've you been?'

'The library in town. I've been marked as late. The first time. Ever. Can you believe it?'

Seth winced. 'I'm sorry,' he said.

'Don't be,' Nadiya grinned. 'I think I've worked out where the egg is. I found an old travel book in the library. Written in 1920 by a man who knew what happened to the Romanov family. They were all murdered in a place called Yekaterinburg.'

'Yekaterinburg? That's where some of the games are. France play there on Thursday.'

'It's there,' Nadiya said. 'I'm pretty sure the missing egg is there.'

After school. 6.15 pm. Seth and Nadiya decided to watch the BBC coverage as soon as it started. Nadiya's mum and dad were in the front garden with Seth's mum and Rosa, drinking tea.

The BBC TV World Cup intro began.

The boy on the train with the book of stickers.

The girl with a football balloon.

The Russian dolls with pictures of players on them.

And then Gary Lineker's smiling face filled the screen.

It was time.

A strange time for Seth. He hadn't looked at a screen for three days. Not a TV, not a computer, not a smart phone. The light and colour made him feel dizzy. He looked away from the screen to see Nadiya studying him.

'Are you ready?' she asked.

Seth nodded.

Nadiya glanced at the screen to see footage of the England team climbing off their bus and entering the stadium.

'Are you sure you want to do this?' she asked.

Seth nodded again. 'It's not just about me,' he said. 'This is about England. We need to beat Tunisia, so I need to do this.'

Has Nadiya correctly identified the strange Russian boy? Is he really the ghost of the heir to the throne of Russia and can he do what he threatened? Stop England winning their opening World Cup game? Have the children done enough to satisfy him by finding out where the missing egg might be? And how will Seth meet him and tell him?

Find out in the next chapter of *Defenders: Russia*. Chapter 4 will be published at

<https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/defenders-russia-world-cup-2018-football-story/>

before 7.30 am on Tuesday 19th June.

If you would like to know more about the adventures of Nadiya and Seth and find videos and resources about how Tom wrote his history ghost series, *Defenders*, then please visit:

<http://tompalmer.co.uk/defenders/>.

World Cup word of the day

Heroes

