

Alexei Romanov has demanded another favour of Seth. A favour that is not going to be easy to fulfil.

We had more than 2,000 votes from schools and families to decide what happens next in *Defenders: Russia*. Thanks to everyone for thinking about it, talking about it and voting.

Now, on with the story...

ШЕСТЬ

‘So what is it?’ Nadiya asked. ‘What does Alexei want you to do?’

To Nadiya, Seth looked anxious, his hands shaking visibly. Suddenly, and without a word, he left the room. Nadiya heard him running round the house, calling out in a loud voice.

For Rosa.

For his dog.

That’s weird, Nadiya thought to herself. *Rosa was just here. Now she’s vanished.*

When Seth came back into the front room, his face was ashen.

‘What is it?’ Nadiya pressed. She had an inkling, a terrible inkling of what had made Seth so distraught.

‘Alexei insists I follow him and his family to see their...’ Seth stopped.

‘Their what?’ Nadiya asked, confused. ‘Their palace? Their gardens? Their Fabergé eggs?’

Seth shook his head. ‘Their deaths,’ he croaked.

Nadiya gasped, putting her hands to her mouth. ‘No,’ she said. ‘No, you can’t. You mustn’t.’

‘I don’t have any choice,’ Seth said calmly.

‘You do. Just don’t watch the TV. Don’t look at screens. You managed a whole weekend before.’

Nadiya flicked the remote to turn the TV off.

‘You don’t understand,’ Seth said, pausing. ‘Alexei has Rosa.’

Nadiya’s heart stopped. Just for a moment. Her gut feeling had been right. She couldn’t breathe. Not Rosa! Not Seth’s lovely dog! As she took it all in, she felt her bottom lip trembling. She had no words.

Seth filled the silence.

‘He wants me to witness their execution. In Yekaterinburg, where it happened. Then – when it’s over – he wants me to find his Fabergé egg that his father gave him. When they were taken that night, his family took their most-valued possessions with them. They’d been told they were going to be taken to an underground room for their safety from marauding enemy soldiers. But it was a lie. They were put in a basement room and shot by the Bolshevik troops, who wanted to finish off the royal family and let the people rule themselves. Sort of. Most of their possessions were stolen, but...’

Nadiya groaned. ‘I know...’

‘What?’ Seth asked.

‘I know what you’re going to say. In that book I read at the library in town, the writer said the soldiers who killed the Romanovs later admitted seeing a strange boy and... a dog. That they appeared out of nowhere. Like ghosts, they said. And that he stole the Fabergé egg.’

Seth nodded. ‘Alexei says I’m that boy,’ he said gravely. ‘And Rosa’s the dog. That’s why Alexei took her. He needs a boy *and* a dog.’

The two children sat in silence again.

‘He wants me to take the egg and bury it so that I can go back for it in 2018... well, I mean... this year.’

Nadiya breathed out. ‘When? I mean... when do you have to go?’

‘On Thursday,’ Seth replied. ‘Thank goodness my mum is away until Sunday. France are playing a World Cup match in Yekaterinburg on Thursday. If I watch that match on TV, then he’ll reunite me with Rosa. He says, if I agree to it, he’ll promise to return us safely home before England play Panama.’

Thursday after school. Seth and Nadiya sat on the sofa. Seth felt nauseous. Nadiya deeply troubled. The TV was showing the build-up to the latest World Cup match, France versus Peru.

‘Are you nervous?’ Nadiya asked.

Seth nodded. ‘But determined too,’ he said. ‘I need to be with Rosa. I’m frightened for her.’

On the screen the TV was showing images of a full stadium in Yekaterinburg. Flags waving. Lights shining. Fans singing. Seth wondered if any of them knew what had happened in the city where they were enjoying the football.

‘Look,’ Nadiya said. ‘You know what happened in that basement. To the Russian royal family?’

‘I know they were murdered,’ Seth said.

‘Do you know,’ Nadiya hesitated, ‘the details...?’

Seth shook his head. He didn’t want to know. Not really.

‘I think I should tell you,’ Nadiya said. ‘Just so you’re prepared.’

Seth didn’t reply. Nadiya took his silence as consent. She spoke slowly and clearly. She tried to be matter-of-fact about it, but she could see her description was troubling Seth. And why wouldn’t it? It was a horrible story.

After she had finished, Seth looked at the clock above the fireplace. Nearly 5pm. Time for France and Peru to kick off.

The pair looked at the screen. Behind the large word ‘Yekaterinburg’ pitch side, Seth saw Alexei. The Russian boy was holding a rope. And there was Rosa on the end of it. Seth felt overjoyed at seeing his dog.

‘It’s time,’ he said to Nadiya, feeling faint again, his words echoing around him.

Seth found himself outside a grand two-storey house on a wooded hill, looking down over a small old town. There was woodsmoke in the air. The sound of birds singing, but also boots marching. The house had lovely gardens, but the gardens were circled by a tall forbidding wooden fence that he could not see through. And Seth knew that this was the house in Yekaterinburg. He knew it was 1918 too, not 2018.

Then, suddenly, Rosa came bounding across the lawn towards him. Seth grabbed her and hugged her as she mouthed his hair and his ears. She was whimpering. But Seth felt better. They were together. She was safe, for now.

Then Seth felt Rosa stiffen: she had spotted something behind him. Seth turned and had his first glimpse of the Romanovs through the large open front door. The Russian royal family being ushered down a grand staircase. And there was Alexei being carried stiffly by a man aged about 50 wearing a suit, with no sense of what a terrible gruesome end they were about to come to.

Seth knew he was Alexei's father, Tsar Nicholas II. And he knew exactly where they were being taken.

This was it.

Seth is about to follow Alexei and the Russian royal family to their executions. His bleak challenge is to watch and let it happen, then to play the role of the ghostly figure who takes Alexei's egg. But will he hold his nerve while witnessing such terrible events? Will he be able to get his hands on the Fabergé egg? And who will be in the room intent on stopping him?

Thank you to everyone for their votes, ideas and comments yesterday. There were some fantastic ideas and I will certainly use some of them.

The final results were: Option one 64%; Option two 7%; Option three 29%. Although there was a clear favourite, there was a great demand for Rosa to be increasingly involved, so I've added more Rosa!

Chapter 7 will be published at <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/defenders-russia-world-cup-2018-football-story/> before 7.30am on Friday 22 June.

World Cup word of the day

forbidding

