

Defenders: Russia – chapter 9

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth is still recovering from the shock of witnessing the execution of the Romanov family. He is also very worried. He brought a Fabergé egg home with him from Yekaterinburg, against Alexei's instructions, meaning two strange women all in black appear to be watching his every move. But they have yet to act. Seth would like Alexei's help, for a change, but Alexei hasn't appeared to him since that brutal day last week.

ДЕВЯТЬ

Monday morning.

Seth spent all break and lunch time with Nadiya. He told her everything he had seen in Russia and said his head was hurting, that he couldn't sleep and he knew it was because of what he had witnessed.

'You're traumatised,' she told him.

'I know,' Seth smiled weakly.

'Do you think you'll see him today?' Nadiya asked gently. 'On the TV?'

Seth nodded. 'It's Russia's last game. He'll show. And if he doesn't I'll simply go out and hand over his egg to those two women.'

Nadiya looked at Seth closely. Too closely.

'What?' Seth recoiled.

'You,' his friend said. 'You seem weird. Angry. Not like you at all.'

Seth shrugged. He didn't know what to say to that.

'So, you'll try to talk to him tonight?' Nadiya urged.

'This afternoon. Russia-Uruguay kicks off at 3pm. He'll be there. School finishes at 2.50 today. I can be home for 3 if I sprint.'

'What will you say?'

‘I’m not sure,’ Seth said, thinking about his mum and what she had said about bullies. ‘That he needs to make it stop. That I am sick of this.’

‘Do you think he will?’ Nadiya asked. ‘I mean he’s been telling you what to do, not the other way round.’

‘It ends now,’ Seth said firmly.

‘And if...’ Nadiya faltered.

‘What?’

‘Well... if he doesn’t do what you want and you need to make a big decision?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Well, if I can help. Please, will you talk to me first? I’m worried about you, Seth.’

Seth smiled.

‘I will,’ he said. ‘I promise.’

Seth was sweating profusely by the time he got home. 3pm. Time for Russia v Uruguay.

As he burst through the front door, Rosa raced into the garden and stood barking loudly, as if she was worried he had been chased home. But he hadn’t.

Seth had seen the two women loitering near the library, but just raced past them. All they had done was turn and watch him go past. He’d wondered if they really were a threat to him.

Two matches were on when he put the TV on. Saudi Arabia versus Egypt. Russia against Uruguay. Seth flicked from one channel to the other as the national anthems were played. He studied every mascot. No sign of Alexei.

Seth decided to watch the Russia game. Surely if Alexei was going to haunt another game it’d be one involving his home nation. Wouldn’t it?

He watched Uruguay destroy the host nation. Two goals after 25 minutes. Then a Russian sending off. The match was over as a contest. It was only then that Seth saw him. Alexei Romanov, sitting among hundreds of flag-waving Russians in the crowd who were cheering and chanting even though they were 2-0 down.

Seth closed his eyes. This was it. The dizziness came. The feeling sick. The noise of the Russian fans was louder now, and Seth knew that he was sat amongst them. He looked

out across the pitch. A rectangle of beautiful green grass. Luis Suarez running just 50 metres in front of him.

On the seat next to Seth, Alexei Romanov looked diminished. But he ignored that. He wanted to talk to Alexei immediately.

‘I don’t have long,’ Alexei said. ‘I...

‘Neither do I,’ Seth interrupted. ‘I am sorry you died like that. I watched and it was horrible. I will never be able to forget it. But that’s history. You’re... you’re dead. And I don’t want to do this anymore.’

Seth watched Alexei shudder and fall back into his seat. Around them was chanting and Russian flags waving, but it was quiet between the two boys.

‘There’s no point in me saving the egg for you. You’re dead. You... you don’t have power over me. I don’t have to do what you ask.’ Seth knew he sounded heartless, but he had to be honest, face the truth.

Alexei nodded. ‘All that is true. Except...’

‘Except what?’ Seth narrowed his eyes.

‘Except that if you don’t take my Fabergé egg to my family’s crypt in St Petersburg before the centenary of our deaths in three weeks, then I can never be with my father and mother again. I will be a lost soul.’

‘But I don’t have to,’ Seth snapped back.

‘No, you do not have to. I have less power now. You can see I am getting weaker.’

Seth gave Rosa a long walk after the Group A games. They walked out of town and up onto the moor. It was wild up there, the sun searing down on him, but he liked being high up and able to see so much sky and hills in the distance.

The two women followed him at a distance. As soon as Rosa noticed them she barked vociferously and they backed off. Seth was disappointed they had not just gone to his house and taken the Fabergé egg. That would solve everything, he thought. His mum was out. No-one would be harmed. Then this would all be over.

Seth yearned for that. To be a normal boy walking his dog, thinking about England’s game against Belgium in two days, not Russian royals. Not strangers tracking him.

After his conversation with Alexei, Seth now realised he had the power to take control. Give the women in black the egg.

Could he do that?

The only downside was that it might have consequences for Alexei, but hadn't Seth done enough for him already? He wanted his own life back.

'Should I do that?' he said out loud. And realised that he had a choice to make. He was determined to make it before the England game on Thursday, so that finally he could enjoy the football.

Seth is coming to the realisation that he can get himself out of this situation – that he can make the women in black go away. He has talked to his mum and to Nadiya about it. But now it is down to him. He has given himself until Thursday to make a decision about what to do next. Tomorrow, you can help him decide.

Chapter 10 will be published at <https://literacytrust.org.uk/resources/defenders-russia-world-cup-2018-football-story/> before 7.30am on Wednesday 27 June.

Note to teachers and parents

On Wednesday 27 June – in Chapter 10 of *Defenders: Russia* – I will offer children two clear options for what happens next. You will be able to cast your vote by using the contact form here: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/world-cup-2018-literacy-resources/> or by emailing vote@tompalmer.co.uk with your preferred option in the subject line. Voting will be open from 7am to 7pm British Summer Time on Wednesday 27 June only. Any votes submitted before or after the voting is open will not be counted.

Any additional email addresses submitted for voting purposes will not be used for future marketing purposes or shared with any third party, without consent. (With new GDPR rules coming in, we ask you to check our privacy policy: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/privacy-policy/> and terms and conditions: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/terms-and-conditions/>.)

World Cup word of the day

Recoiled

