

Defenders: Russia – chapter 16

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth is trapped in St Petersburg’s Cathedral. What he doesn’t know is that Nadiya is there too, encased in a stone tomb with time running out. The women in black have possession of Alexei’s Fabergé egg, but now something unfathomable has started happening in the cathedral, meaning they too are trapped, petrified by what is happening before their eyes.

Шестнадцать

Seth managed to lift himself off the cold marble floor of the cathedral to turn around and see why the women in black looked so frightened.

At the other end of the cathedral, the stone tombs of the Romanov family appeared to be cracking open, as if they were being splintered by giant chisels. Brilliant coloured shards of light were diffusing from the cracks up and around the crypt, onto the walls and pillars of the cathedral, reflecting off gold and glass and marble.

And, amid all that, strange figures loomed in the spaces between shadow and light. Figures dressed in suits, fine gowns and dripping in jewellery, like kings and queens. A bleak sound of howling, chanting, screaming and wailing forced Seth to cover his ears.

‘Con- concussed,’ he muttered to himself, remembering how he had been struck by one of the women in black. He heard his words slur and felt like he might pass out again.

Seth knew what he was witnessing. That it wasn’t just the results of his concussion. He was seeing the Romanov family rise a century after their execution. The Tsar. The Tsarina. Alexei’s mum and dad. His sisters, Olga, Tatiana, Maria and Anastasia. He also noticed two dogs. Seth knew them by name: Jimmy and Joy.

And then, he saw the main tomb was shuddering, a quaking movement along the floor of the cathedral. A large torch that had been sitting on a table beside him fell to the floor, switching on, adding to the lightshow.

Seth studied the humanlike figures who were appearing in the lights. Among them: a boy. The boy was wearing a military uniform.

Alexei Romanov.

The Russian prince looked taller than usual, stronger.

‘Alexei?’ Seth called out.

The boy looked gravely at Seth, then saluted him.

Seth watched what happened next in total awe. Alexei and four young women from the group of spectres approached the larger tomb and lifted the great stone lid off it without the slightest effort.

No light shone from *this* tomb. Seth assumed it was empty and wondered if it was for Alexei.

Then he saw her. Climbing out of the tomb. Nadiya.

Still unsteady on his feet, Seth ran to his friend and they threw their arms round each other.

‘I thought you were...’ Seth felt his voice choke and falter.

‘Dead?’ Nadiya asked, then she looked at the tomb she’d been trapped in, puzzled.

‘How did you get lift the lid off? Are you Superman now as well?’

Seth smiled. ‘Alexei did it,’ he explained. ‘And his sisters.’

Nadiya looked around the cold dark empty cathedral. She saw nothing out of the ordinary. No Romanov children.

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

But Seth’s attention had gone, now he watched as the Romanov family stood together in one group, observing Alexei walking away from them, staggering, fading as the supernatural lightshow faded itself. The Tsarina put her hand to her mouth displaying her grief: she was losing her only son again. His sisters called out for him to stay. But Seth knew Alexei could not stay. The women in black had the Fabergé egg: Alexei’s spirit could not remain with his family’s. It would be lost and alone forever.

‘Alexei,’ Seth said. ‘He’s going.’

Seth looked at Nadiya in disbelief.

‘What?’

‘He’s going. He’s lost. Forever.’

Then a sudden noise. Rapid footsteps. Louder. As the two women in black ran at Seth and Nadiya, released from their fear, the walking stick coming at Seth for a second time, hitting him on the head again.

‘Owwwww!’ Seth shouted. Then he watched through blurry-eyed double-vision as the women in black headed towards a spiral stone staircase at the far end of the cathedral.

‘Alexei’s egg!’ Nadiya said.

‘It’s gone. They’ve gone. Forget it. Alexei is lost.’ Seth could hardly speak. He felt so faint. And so sad for the Russian boy.

‘But Alexei,’ Nadiya said. ‘You told me that he saved me.’

Seth nodded. ‘He did.’

‘And we need the egg to save *him*?’ Nadiya shouted.

Seth nodded again.

Nadiya stood up and grabbed the torch from beside Seth. ‘Then we need the egg,’ she said. ‘We need to return it to his family crypt. Wait here. I am going to try and get it back, even if it is the last thing I ever do.’

‘Noooooooooooo!’ Seth’s voice echoed around the cathedral.

He watched his friend sprint off towards the foot of the spiral stone staircase, carrying the still-lit torch that had fallen near him, as the spectres of the Romanovs and the lights and noises of their coming faded back to a silence that was broken only by the hammering of footsteps.

What happened next happened quickly.

At the top of the spiral staircase there was a door out onto the roof of the cathedral, where there was a huge stained-glass window. Seth watched helplessly as the two women in black escaped through the door and go outside. Now he could see their silhouettes through the window as they stood on the roof, no doubt looking down to the square below, plotting their escape.

Seth wished he could do something to stop them. But every time he moved his head he felt like the world was slipping to one side. Only Nadiya could rescue the situation now.

And there she was. She had made it to the top of the stairway. Seth saw her lunge towards the outside door. He was tempted to cry out to warn her, but was worried that all he would achieve was warning the two women in black she was coming. So he stayed silent.

Now – behind the stained glass window – he could see three figures. He was inside. They were outside. The light of the big screen showing England v Columbia meant that the

three shadows were clearly visible. Seth had no idea who was who. But he could see the light of the torch Nadiya had taken as the three shapes intermingled roughly.

Were they fighting?

Just talking?

It was impossible to tell.

Then... suddenly... horribly... one of the silhouettes fell. The torch in that person's hand fell too, spinning its light before it smashed on the floor.

Seth heard another thud. And a scream. And before he knew he was doing it, he was shouting at the top of his voice.

'Naaaaadiyyyaaaaa!!!!!!'

In response he heard only silence.

Seth has seen someone fall to their death from the roof of the St Peter & Paul Cathedral in St Petersburg. Was it Nadiya? Her final words were that she was going to help Alexei even if it was the last thing she ever did. Seth is convinced his friend has made that terrible sacrifice. Find out what happened to Nadiya in tomorrow's episode. Then vote to decide what happens next in the story.

Chapter 17 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am on Friday 6 July and will give children the chance to vote on where the story goes in its final week. Details about how to vote will be published in tomorrow's chapter.

If you are breaking up this week, please tell the children they can follow the story from home with their families, if they would like to. And thank you for reading the story with them.

World Cup word of the day

Possession

