

Defenders: Russia – chapter 20

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

TEACHERS PLEASE SEE THE NOTE AT FOOT OF STORY BEFORE SHARING WITH YOUR PUPILS. THANK YOU.

Nadiya and Seth have been summoned to a public park in Moscow to meet a group of animal rights activists. The activists have asked for help to stop the killing of stray dogs ahead of the World Cup final on Sunday. Will our heroes help the activists before heading off to watch England play Croatia at the Luzhniki Stadium in Moscow tonight? Can the dogs even be saved? And what will happen on the pitch? Is the England World Cup dream about to come to an end? Or is football coming home?

It's coming... football's coming home...

Двадцать

Nadiya turned the World Cup semi-final tickets over in her hands as she sat at breakfast with Seth and his mum. She couldn't believe she was actually going to watch the game in person. Tonight. She felt her heart begin to beat faster just at the thought of it.

'Big day,' Seth's mum said, watching her.

Nadiya nodded.

'And France in the final,' Mum went on.

'If...' Seth interrupted their conversation.

'If what?' Mum asked.

'If we win tonight...'

Nadiya glanced across the table to see that Seth also appeared to be nervous. He held her stare and she could tell that he was thinking about their meeting with the animal rights activists just as much as about England playing Croatia.

What a day they had ahead!

Nadiya had no idea how any of it was going to play out.

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Sometime later, Nadiya and Seth walked across Red Square, passing a building called Lenin's mausoleum. Nadiya told Seth that this was where Muscovites kept the preserved body of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Russian revolution a century ago.

Seth was shocked. He didn't know much about the Russian revolution, but he couldn't help but feel angry about Lenin having his own mausoleum, seeing as he was one of the people responsible for the murder of Alexei and the rest of the Romanovs. He knew that some people thought the Romanovs had been bad leaders themselves, but, for Seth, that was no excuse for murdering a 14 year-old boy.

The two friends crossed the River Moskva as it ran fast and deep. Then down some steps to the Bolotnaya Park, which was small and rectangular with sculptures and stunted bushes on raised beds.

Nadiya pointed out a pack of dogs hiding among some of the bushes.

'Do you think they know they're being hunted?' she asked Seth.

'It looks like they do to me,' Seth grumbled.

There were several other people in the park. The two children walked to its centre, as instructed. And then – as if from nowhere – two young women appeared from amongst the dog walkers and football fans idling the day away before the match. Seth and Nadiya felt safe because there were so many other people about. They had agreed beforehand not to go anywhere alone with the activists.

The two young Russian women spoke good English. Both were tall, wearing jeans and leather jackets. One was carrying a green rucksack.

'Password?' one of them said.

Nadiya and Seth looked puzzled.

'Who told you about us?'

'Laika,' Seth replied.

‘Good. That is password. Thank you for meeting us. We are animal rights activists,’ they told Seth and Nadiya. ‘Let us show you quickly what problem is. Walk to edge of park. Look across water to the opposite bank. At edge there is a green van. Look closely.’

Nadiya led Seth to the edge of the park to look out over the Moskva. What they saw horrified them. By the green van, four people in overalls were beneath the bridge the children had just walked over. There were at least a dozen dogs. The four people were throwing food to them, which the dogs pounced on. Then they ate. Voraciously.

But, within minutes, it was clear the dogs were not well. They began staggering and vomiting, dropping to the floor soon after.

‘Poison,’ one of the activists explained. ‘It is slow. But painful. And you can see how the animals are suffering?’

Nadiya frowned. She could see that clearly. She looked into Seth’s eyes. Seth nodded. They had both seen quite enough.

‘How can we help?’ Nadiya asked.

‘There is only one man in Russia who can stop this,’ the activist with the blue rucksack explained. ‘He works in there.’ She pointed to the high walls of the Kremlin. ‘We have way that you can enter the Kremlin. A secret passage. Under river here.’

‘Why us?’

‘Because this man’s dogs know our scent – and they like children. They are famous for it.’

‘But what would we do?’ Seth asked. ‘When we got inside?’

‘There are three rare pedigree dogs that are kept at night locked in a room at the end of the tunnel. They are left alone all night. It would be easy to take them.’

‘Take them?’ Nadiya gasped.

‘Yes. Take them. Kidnap them. Using tunnel. They are treasured by the very important man. If you take them, bring them back to this side of the river, he has power to stop the killing of the mongrel dogs before cup final on Sunday to be sure we do not harm his pets. And once final on Sunday has passed he will have no need to harm the stray dogs. They will be saved.’

‘Who is the important man?’ Nadiya asked.

The activists told Nadiya exactly who he was. She and Seth shuddered. They knew who he was, and knew too, that he was a dangerous man.

It was challenging for Nadiya and Seth to put everything to do with Laika, the stray dogs and the activists out of their minds as they walked around the bend in the river towards the towering Luzhniki Stadium. But, once they had passed their tickets under an electronic reader to access the stadium, then climbed up the concrete staircase to be met by a wall of loud music and gigantic flags of Croatia and England laid out flat on the vast green illuminated pitch, they were in the zone. The England-versus-Croatia-World-Cup-semi-final zone.

The two children took their seats three rows behind the England bench just as the players came out of the tunnel. As Nadiya watched the England players belting out the national anthem, she felt a shiver running up her spine. She had never really thought about *God Save the Queen* before.

But now?

Now it was the best song in the world to her, as she bellowed it out with thousands of other England fans. Nadiya decided that, for 90 minutes or so, she was going to think about nothing but the football. Then she and Seth would be able to give their full attention and energy to helping save the stray dogs from tomorrow.

But now: football.

It was time.

Time to see if football was coming home...

Nadiya and Seth are tense twice over. England's World Cup semi-final against Croatia is about to kick off. If England win, the two children will have tickets to the final on Sunday. But they have something else on their minds, too; because, whatever happens on the pitch tonight, tomorrow they must tunnel into one of the most secretive buildings in the world to help save the lives of dozens of innocent dogs.

Thanks for reading. Enjoy the game tonight.

Chapter 21 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published at

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

before 7.30am on Thursday 12 July, by which time we will know if England are in the World Cup Final – or not!!!

Watch a video of Tom when he visited the park and Red Square in Moscow that he describes in this story: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/foul-play/dead-ball/>.

Note for teachers to pass on to the children

In this story Seth and Nadiya are not at school, though it is still term time. They have also gone off and faced dangerous situations without a trustworthy adult. And, in this episode, they are about to meet two strangers in a park. Obviously none of these actions are good or safe for children and Tom would like to stress, on behalf of the National Literacy Trust, that this is a story. Children should always ask for help from a trustworthy adult rather than face these situations and should not do the things Seth and Nadiya are doing because this is fiction. In the same way they would not do what Harry Potter does in some of J K Rowling's books. (Tom knows that children knows this, but he still has to say it, just in case.) One of the problems of writing adventure stories for children is getting rid of adults and putting children in adventurous situations where grown-ups aren't checking up on them to keep them safe. The National Literacy Trust has asked Tom to clarify this. Please can you pass it on to the children? Thank you.

World Cup word of the day

Activist

