

Defenders: Russia – chapter 8

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth finds himself back in the UK, having returned from 1918 Russia, where he witnessed the murder of the Romanov family. While there, he did what he was instructed to do by Alexei Romanov and retrieved the Fabergé egg. Unfortunately, Seth also did something he was told not to do: he brought the egg back to 2018 England. Now the two women in black, who also witnessed Alexei's family execution, have followed Seth home. He has no idea how much danger he could be in.

БОСЕМЬ

Sunday afternoon.

Seth and his mum were sat in his front room, after they'd made an early lunch together, enjoying it in the garden. Seth had eaten his too quickly; it was hot outside and he wanted to get in to see the build up to the match.

England v Panama. Game two.

The national anthems. The banners on the pitch. The close ups of players and fans. And no Alexei, Seth was relieved to see. Maybe he would even get to enjoy this game.

The referee's whistle blew.

Seth sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning right forward, as he usually did when England played. Rosa was next to him, her weight against his leg. But very quickly Seth was slumping down, staring at the screen, not really taking in what was going on. He felt so exhausted, unable to take anything in.

He heard his mum shout when Stones headed the first goal in.

Then again when Kane got his first penalty. Two-nil.

But Seth was deep down inside himself, trying to make sense of what he had witnessed in Russia. A dozen people shot to death. That was what he'd seen. But it just didn't make any sense to him at all. His mind was going over and over little details, like the Tsar shouting 'What...' and the first crack of a bullet.

When the third goal went in his mum paused the game, eyeing Seth.

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‘What?’ Seth said. ‘What are you doing?’

‘You’re not watching it. You don’t care. What on earth is wrong with you, Seth?’

Seth shrugged.

After a long loaded silence, Mum moved closer to Seth on the sofa.

‘It’s happening again,’ she murmured. ‘Isn’t it?’

‘What?’ Seth parried, sitting up. ‘England winning?’

Mum shook her head. ‘No, not England,’ she said. ‘The thing. With ghosts. With you seeing things.’*

Seth admitted it all to his mum.

About Alexei. His threat that England would lose to Tunisia. Kidnapping Rosa. Going to Russia and seeing the executions. And the egg. That he had hidden it under his bed in a shoebox.

Mum stood with her back to the closed front room door as Seth spoke, her hands folded, as if she was barring his way.

‘Why do you do what he says?’ she asked.

Seth pulled a face. ‘Didn’t you hear what I told you? About Rosa. About England.’

‘And have you refused? Have you said no?’

‘No,’ Seth answered in a quiet voice.

Mum paced across the room, Rosa shifting herself round to watch.

‘He’s a bully,’ Mum declared. ‘He might be the son of a Tsar who seems to be able to make you travel through time and space like some junior Dr Who, but he is still a bully.’

Seth thought about what his mum had said.

‘I know there is not a lot I can do to help you with these things. But I can give you my advice, as a mother. And my advice is that you have to stand up to this bully, whoever he is.’

Seth walked up the hill to the moor, Rosa alongside him, glancing behind her every few steps.

Seth felt sad and happy at the same time. Happy because England won 6-1 and had qualified for the group stages in style. Sad because of what had happened to him in Russia – and to Alexei. It was 100 years ago; but, for Seth, it had been only a couple of days.

Seth had no idea anyone was there, a hundred metres behind him, hidden in the shadows, concealed by the trees that lined the road.

But Rosa knew.

They walked past the church and over the road to the moor. Several steps onto the grass – a huge field ahead of them – Seth released the clip on Rosa’s lead. He had seen her best friend, a cocker spaniel called Finn, and knew Rosa would want to race off and play with him.

But Rosa turned and faced the way they had come.

‘Come up,’ Seth said, walking on, waving to Finn’s owner, a man with dark hair and black tee-shirt.

But Rosa stayed put. She let out a single bark. Loud. Seth knew the bark well. It was a warning bark, so he turned and looked in the direction his dog was staring.

He felt like he had been punched in the chest.

He saw the two figures moving towards him, watching from the other side of the road, dressed in black jeans and black tee-shirts. With black hair.

‘The egg,’ Seth said to Rosa. ‘They want the egg. They were looking for it in Yekaterinburg at the execution and they’re looking for it now. I bet that’s what it is.’

Then the two women in black began to cross the road.

Seth squatted and linked Rosa’s lead to her collar. Then they were running. Across the moor. Down the far side of the park. They ran without looking back for over half a mile, Rosa ahead, pulling Seth so that he was running faster than he felt he ever had. Until they were close to home and Seth stopped to look up and down the street. No sign of the two women.

Opening his gate, up the garden path, through the door, slamming it behind him. Now he breathed deeply, as Rosa observed him.

‘We’ll be safe at home,’ Seth said.

Late that night, Seth watched the Poland v Colombia match. As the final whistle blew, he felt disappointed for his two Polish friends at school. Sadly, they had been outclassed by Colombia.

Seth's motivation to watch the match was to see if Alexei was there. He needed to speak to the Russian boy, it was Seth's turn to ask for help.

But Alexei did not appear. And Seth felt panic rising through his body. He had no idea what to do about the women in black, about Alexei, about anything.

But he knew he would have to do something. And soon.

The two women in black are following Seth, possibly waiting for a chance to get at him and Alexei's Fabergé egg. Seth needs to talk to Alexei, but the Russian boy has not made contact since Seth witnessed his execution. Seth has no idea what to do next. How bad a mistake was it for Seth to bring the egg back to 2018? And will he ever see Alexei Romanov again?

Chapter 9 will be published at literacytrust.org.uk/defenders-russia before 7.30am on Tuesday 26 June.

The next vote will take place on Wednesday 27 June. It will be a straightforward Yes/No.

***Seth's mum knows about the visions he has had in the past. Normally a parent would do everything they could to protect their child from this sort of danger. How she tolerates it is explained in the three *Defenders* books. I decided not to go into detail about this as it would affect the momentum of the story. If you'd like to know more about Seth and his mum (as well as Rosa and Nadiya) you can find out more in the *Defenders* trilogy here: <http://tompalmer.co.uk/defenders/> where Seth and Nadiya take on Viking, Saxon, Roman and Iron Age hauntings.**

World Cup word of the day

Concentrate

