

Defenders: Russia - Chapter 11

A live World Cup story by Tom Palmer

Seth has had a big decision to make.

Should he help Alexei Romanov or not?

Over 1,000 schools have voted.

This is the storyline that more than 75% of you voted for.

Одиннадцать

Wednesday afternoon and Mr Schadenfreude, Seth and Nadiya's German teacher, was offering his German GCSE class the chance to stay on for an extra lesson after school. To watch Germany versus South Korea in the World Cup.

With a German commentary.

'It will be educational,' Mr Schadenfreude told them. 'It'll sharpen up your German.'

Seth and Nadiya sat in the German classroom, blinds down to keep the raging sun out, both of them trying to work out what the commentator was saying.

Seth was feeling good. He had made his mind up what to do about Alexei Romanov. He knew it was only a matter of time before Alexei appeared to him and then he could tell him about his decision. And – to make matters better – he had not seen the women in black for over 24 hours. Maybe they had gone away for good. Maybe life was about to get better.

Mr Schadenfreude had suggested that the pupils work in pairs and listen out for key words in German. He had made them bingo cards with nine words that they had to identify in the German commentary.

As half time approached, Seth and Nadiya had eight of the nine words they needed. One more and they would win a £10 book voucher prize each.

Seth stood up once the half time whistle had gone.

'I want to win the book tokens,' Nadiya said, looking up at him.

'Me too,' Seth replied.

‘So make sure you get back from wherever you’re going. And fast. Don’t be going off to Russia or something. Okay?’

Seth rushed out of the classroom.

Toilet break.

After he’d washed his hands, he checked his phone to see if his mum had texted him. Turning his phone on he didn’t see his usual home screen, a picture of Rosa on the top of the moors, wild and wolf-like. He saw Alexei Romanov, looking very pale and very tense.

‘So?’ the Russian boy asked. ‘What have you decided?’

Seth coughed. He had something very serious to tell Alexei. He wanted to make a joke about them Facetiming, but he resisted.

‘Well?’ Alexei pressed.

‘I’ve decided to help you, Alexei,’ Seth said calmly.

He watched as the boy’s face began to crumple. Tears ran down his cheeks. Alexei was trying to smile, but he seemed so emotional it was hard to tell what his expression was.

‘Thank you,’ Alexei said at last. ‘You will go to St Petersburg for me next week? With my egg?’

‘I will.’

Alexei was laughing now. He was less pale. Seth had never seen him smile. He looked like he was a nice person now, not a bully. Seth felt a strange warmth towards him. Something like friendship.

‘Now...’ Alexei gushed, ‘please... tell me... what can I do for you? I will do anything I can.’

Seth grinned. ‘How about finding a way of me and Nadiya going to watch England play Belgium tomorrow?’

‘Granted,’ Alexei said.

‘Cool,’ Seth said. ‘And – er – how about helping South Korea beat Germany?’ Seth asked, but his screen had gone blank. He wasn’t sure if Alexei had heard that.

Back in the German room, Seth sat next to Nadiya. He told her about seeing Alexei, about what the Russian boy had promised.

‘Great,’ Nadia said. ‘I can’t wait. Well... actually... I can. I am more interested in winning this bingo game.’

‘What’s our last word again?’ Seth asked.

‘Katastrophe,’ Nadiya said.

When Mats Hummels headed over the crossbar, unmarked, with Germany’s 28th goal attempt of the game, Seth wondered if a katastrophe was about to happen. A German katastrophe.

What if Germany only drew with Korea?

They’d be out of the World Cup!

Soon the 90 minutes were up. And injury time began. Would it happen? Or would it be like the Germany-Sweden game? A last minute winner for Germany?

No.

Because then it happened. The unthinkable.

South Korea scored.

The room went crazy. The German commentators’ voices sounded like cries of pain. It was mayhem. But, still, the commentator had not said the word Nadiya wanted.

Everyone was on the edge of their seat as Germany pushed for a goal.

Manuel Neuer came out of his goal and moved up field.

Then, over-reaching himself, he lost the ball.

That was when the commentator said it. Three times.

‘Katastrophe! Katastrophe! Katastrophe!’

Nadiya was on her feet.

‘BINGO!’ she shouted.

And Seth saw – in the corner of the screen – underneath where it had just changed to South Korea 2 Germany 0 – a small image of Alexei, smiling again.

And Seth had to wonder.

Had Alexei really made Germany lose? Just for Seth?

Seth walked home in the heat. He took his blazer off and loosened his tie. He felt good. He was going to help Alexei but, on his own terms, without any threat hanging over him. And Alexei was going to reward him by getting Seth and Nadiya pitch side seats at the England v Belgium match tomorrow.

Next week Seth would go to St Petersburg and find a way of putting the egg in the crypt of the Russian royal family. Not an easy task, but that was something to worry about next week. Not now.

Because Seth was thinking about tomorrow.

Tomorrow was going to be a good day.

Or was it?

Seth has a mission. He is determined. He is relaxed. He is doing what he thinks is the right thing. But is Seth right to feel relaxed? Is it really good that the women in black are no longer hanging around his house and school? If they're not in England, where are they? And how easy is it going to be for him to enter a national Russian monument and hide a valuable Fabergé egg. Is it a good idea for Seth – and Nadiya – to go to Russia tomorrow? Or could it be a catastrophe?

Chapter 12 of *Defenders: Russia* will be published before 7.30am on Friday 29 June.

Thank you to everyone for thinking about Seth's choice and voting. Thanks especially to teachers and others who helped to make it happen.

World Cup word of the day

Raging

