



# CHERUB: THE FALL

## PREVIEW CHAPTER

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# 1. RUSSIA

*Aero City is located in a rural area three hundred kilometres north west of Moscow. Built in the Soviet era, the town was a major centre for aviation research and many of Russia's civil airliners, military transport aircraft and guided missiles were built within its giant factories.*

*In 1994 the government announced plans to sell the whole of Russian industry under a scheme known as 'mass privatisation'. The process was riddled with corruption and many of its most valuable assets fell into the hands of a small group of men and women who became known as 'the oligarchs.'*

*One such man was Denis Obidin, who used his position as a junior bank official to fraudulently lend large sums of money to his own wife and parents. Obidin then used the cash to buy up shares that the government had given to factory workers who had no idea of their true worth. By 1996, he owned a slice of the Russian aerospace industry that was thought to be worth more than \$800 million.*

*Today, Obidin not only controls all of the factories and most of the land and property in Aero City, but has had himself appointed mayor in a rigged election. When a local police chief announced plans to investigate corruption within Obidin's administration, the officer was found dead in his apartment and Obidin put his brother Vladimir in charge of law enforcement.*

*Obidin initially laid out grand plans to design and build a modern Russian airliner that can compete with Boeing and Airbus, but his reputation for corruption has scared off foreign investors and no airline will purchase aircraft from a company with a shady past and an uncertain future.*

*After a series of layoffs, the unemployment rate in Aero City exceeds eighty percent. Obidin's one remaining factory produces a small number of missiles for the Russian military and upgrades elderly Russian airliners by fitting efficient British jet engines. But with the Russian military slashing its budgets and airlines steadily replacing their fleets with western aircraft, this work is drying up.*

*Obidin has given up hope of raising the billions needed for his airliner project and put out word to international weapons dealers that everything is for sale. For the right price, a visitor to Aero City can purchase anything from a batch of rocket fuel or blueprints for a missile guidance system, all the way up to a truckload of anti-ship missiles capable of sinking an American aircraft carrier.*

*(Excerpt from a classified mission briefing for James Adams, August 2006)*

Denis Obidin's luxury home had featured in glossy magazines both in Russia and across northern Europe. The rambling wooden structure was three storeys high, with eight bedrooms, a ballroom where Obidin's wife hosted parties and an eighty metre spire at one end. The spire was topped off with a rotating platform and a retractable dome that would occasionally be opened to reveal a large telescope.

Denis claimed to love astronomy, but everyone knew that the tower was really a sniper post. Wealthy Russians were often targeted by kidnapers and the sniper was a last line of defence against anyone who managed to breach the electrified perimeter, avoid the guard dogs and make it past the machine gun toting guards who patrolled the compound.

The huge double glazed windows in Denis Obidin's library looked out over an expanse of forest. The leaves were autumnal and the ground was dusted with snow. A romantic might have found it beautiful, but James Adams could only see cold.

It was warm inside chez-Obidin, with its under floor heating and a gas generator buried beneath the garage, but the rest of Aero City got its electricity from a decrepit nuclear power station five hundred kilometres away and suffered regular outages.

After a month living in Aero City, James had concluded that the only thing in the world worse than school was a school where you spent the entire day wearing fingerless gloves and watching your classmates breath curling up towards the ceiling.

‘It’s snowing,’ James said, in Russian, as he looked across a long desk at Denis Obidin’s six-year-old son, Mark.

James had been learning Russian intensively for three years and was fluent, though his accent was nowhere near good enough for him to pass as a native. James asked Mark to repeat the phrase in English.

‘Ziss nowing,’ Mark said.

‘Not bad,’ James said cheerfully. ‘Now let’s try English numbers again.’

The little boy shook his head and screwed up his face before breaking into a giant yawn. ‘I’m too tired.’

‘Come *on* Mark,’ James said sternly. ‘I’m your tutor and if you don’t concentrate you’re not going to pass your entrance exam.’

Mark broke into an evil smile. ‘I’ll tell my daddy it was your fault and he’ll punish *you*.’

‘Oh you reckon, do you?’ James grinned.

Mark folded his arms. ‘My uncle Vladimir is the chief of police. He’s got his own police station and his own cells. He can do whatever he likes.’

‘Maybe he’ll put you in a cell if you don’t pass your exam.’

‘Nah, he loves me,’ Mark grinned. ‘He buys me all the biggest Lego sets. I don’t ever want to go to a stupid English boarding school. I like it here.’

‘At least the classrooms are nice and warm in England,’ James shrugged. ‘And the lights never go out in the middle of the day. Besides, we all have to do things we don’t like, kiddo. My aunt and uncle

make me come here after school every day and teach English to a horrible *smelly* little boy. And all because they're trying to be nice to your daddy.'

Mark got out of his chair, ran around the desk and tried looking mean as he bunched his fist under James' nose. 'I'm not smelly. You're smelly.'

'You wouldn't dare,' James grinned.

Mark smiled as he gently nudged his fist against James' nose.

'GRRRRR,' James bellowed. 'You're dead, you chicken nugget.'

The little boy cracked up laughing as James scooped him off the floor and flipped him upside down so that his hair hung down in strands.

'Now I'll use you as a broom,' James said, as he lowered Mark's head towards the floor and swung him gently from side to side, before setting the youngster down on the edge of the desk.

'Do that again,' Mark squealed, giggling so much that he had spit bubbling out the corner of his mouth.

'I'll do it again, but only if you say *I want to be a broom* in English.'

'Never in *stupid* English,' Mark said indignantly, as he jumped off the table and crashed face first on to a beanbag by the window.

Both boys turned towards the door as it clicked open. Vladimir Obidin stood in the doorway. The powerfully built man wore the crisply tailored uniform of a senior police officer.

'James, you're leaving now,' he said fiercely.

James looked at his watch, as Mark sighed with disappointment.

'It's only twenty past,' James said.

'There's a meeting here tonight,' Vladimir said, then he abruptly changed his tone to one of anger. 'I don't justify myself to children. When I say *go*, you go.'

Vladimir sent a shiver down James' back. He'd worked for Russian military intelligence and had a reputation for extracting confessions from Aero City's criminals with a set of dentist's tools and a blow lamp.

James tried not to feel intimidated as he said goodbye to Mark, grabbed his backpack and stepped out of the library.

‘I’ve got a long trek home,’ James said nervously. ‘Can I use the bathroom?’

Vladimir huffed as though James had just imposed some great burden upon him. ‘Quickly then,’ he barked.

James stepped into a plush washroom, with a huge spa bath and beech panelled walls. He slid off his backpack and – all too aware that Vladimir was on the other side of the door – quietly pulled a Nokia communicator out of the side pocket.

As James flipped it open, he noticed that the communicator had picked up some e-mails. Cellphone coverage in Aero City was flaky and his phone tended to receive a whole bunch of messages and missed calls whenever he passed through an area with good reception. But this wasn’t a good moment to read them. He switched to a wireless messaging application and tapped in a four digit number to access a hidden menu.

James had dropped a dozen pinhead sized listening devices around the Obidin’s house over the three weeks in which he’d been tutoring Mark after school. Rows of bright green signal bars on the communicator screen showed that they were all powered up and transmitting perfectly.

‘Shift it,’ Vladimir shouted, pounding his fist on the door. ‘I’m a busy man.’

‘Just shaking off,’ James said, as he shoved the communicator inside his pack and raced for the door. At the last minute he remembered to flush the toilet.

Mark gave James a friendly wave from one of the first floor windows as Vladimir escorted him down the woodchip driveway towards the solid steel gate at the front of the Obidin compound.

‘Alright, Slava,’ James nodded, as he passed a machine gun toting guard and stepped through a reinforced steel door cut into a half metre thick wall.

The bored and half frozen guard usually exchanged a few sentences with him, but he clammed up under Vladimir’s gaze and didn’t even acknowledge James’ nod.

Once James was out of the compound, he zipped his jacket and pulled up the collar to ward off the cold. For the purposes of this mission, James lived in an apartment block six kilometres away with a fake aunt and uncle. They were posing as weapons dealers who wanted to buy missiles from Denis Obidin. In reality they both worked for MI5.

A bus ran into town from a stop half a kilometre from Obidin's house, but Aero City's transportation was erratic. The wait for a bus in sub-zero temperatures was unbearable and on the odd occasion when a bus actually turned up, it was filled with cigarette smoke and mean tempered pensioners with vile coughs. Running home was the healthier option and it meant James would still be in decent physical shape when he returned to CHERUB campus.

The first part of James' run took him along a gloomy road, with little traffic and trees packed along each side. He loved this section of his daily run home, with the crisp air and the smell of pine needles. The trees ended when he reached factory seven. A kilometre and a half long, the massive hangar had once employed thirty-five thousand workers who turned out a three hundred seat airliner every ten days.

It had been graffitied and vandalised in the years after closing, but most young families had left Aero City in search of work and taken the city's delinquent teens with them. The only life James had ever seen around the plant were a few homeless boys who lived rough in an abandoned apartment block. They sniffed glue inside the dilapidated remains of a cargo plane and occasionally kicked a half inflated football around inside the hangar.

Once he was sure nobody was about, James stopped running and sat on a concrete step with his back against a fire door that had been taken off its hinges, probably to be burned as firewood. He slid the communicator out of his pocket and checked his messages.

The first was from his girlfriend back at CHERUB campus:

HAPPY 15<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY.

MISS U

LOVE U  
COME BACK SOON!  
HOPE IT'S NOT 2 COLD.  
KERRY.

James had heaps of other birthday messages from friends on campus and even a message from his handler, Meryl Spencer. The oldest unread message was from his sister, Lauren. It had been sent the evening before:

HAPPY BDAY 4 2MORO SCUMBAG!  
SORRY THIS IS EARLY. MR LARGE IS  
DRAGGING US OFF ON SOME BLOODY  
HIKING EXPEDITION.  
UR PREZZIE WILL BE WAITING  
WHEN U GET HOME!  
P.S. KEEP UR HANDS OFF THE  
RUSSIAN GIRLS U PERV!

