

RUSSELL
BROOKS

A RIDLEY FOX / NITA PARRIS THRILLER

PANDORA'S
SUCCESSION

THE DEADLIEST WEAPON AGAINST MANKIND
HAS BEEN UNLEASHED.

PANDORA'S SUCCESSION

By Russell Brooks

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Chapter 1

Somewhere near Groznyy, Chechnya

The blow to the side of his head dropped Ridley Fox to the floor. The cold surface against the side of his face, the jarring pain and the spinning were the last things he remembered before he blacked out. When he awoke, the throbbing pain remained, as he was dragged by his legs across the floor, the concrete scraping the back of his scalp. He opened his eyes, to stare into the barrel of a Russian AK-108 assault rifle less than a foot above him.

His fiancée, Jessica, had died at the hands of his captors, two years before, just hours after he had proposed. Unlike her, he knew they'd torture him first. He had promised to give up his career in the Joint Task Force Two (JTF2)—Canada's equivalent to America's SEALs—to settle down with her. The heavy drinking and bar fights began, and then ended shortly after, with Fox in a prison holding cell. That's where he met his current CIA superior, General Paul Downing, and learned everything about the weapons consortium known as the Arms of Ares—his captors.

Fox mentally shook away that memory, as he watched a tangled web of exposed pipes and cheap wire mesh-covered light bulbs that ran along the ceiling while he was dragged along. One of the guards yelled at him in Russian. Although Fox was fluent in the language, as well as a few others from each continent, he was too disoriented to listen. All he did was concentrate on getting his strength back. But even if he got most of it back, he still would've been mentally unable to focus on overpowering his captors.

Moments went by, and Fox felt his legs being dropped just as he succumbed to the blow of a boot tip to his side. The kick forced a loud grunt out of him as the guard yelled profanities at him. Fox blinked rapidly as the pain subsided, taking slow deep breaths and waiting for the guard to kick him again. It didn't come. Above him he couldn't see much but a yellowish flickering reflection of light. Then he heard footsteps walking away from him. The thundering boom of the slamming metal door was accentuated by its echo in the cold, dry room.

"Is that it? Why don't you come back and finish me off?" At least that's what Fox wanted them to understand, even though it came out sounding different. Except for the occasional knocking within the pipes that snaked throughout the structure, there was silence.

The ceiling spun above him. Fox closed his eyes, but the throbbing in his temple and his side continued. He thought back to three days before, when he was contacted by a man named Gregor Sokolov—a scientist working for Ares—who offered him the opportunity to put Ares out of business. In return Fox would help him and his wife defect. It was an offer Fox couldn't refuse. Presently, he was in the underground facility where Ares was developing something so deadly that Sokolov didn't even want to discuss it in their correspondence.

He heard a metallic creaking sound as the door was reopened. Fox noticed that the person who entered the room was a bit more discreet, right down to the sound of the latch to lock it. When he opened his eyes he saw the silhouette of someone kneeling beside him, seconds before he tasted a dry cloth being tied around his head, covering his mouth. Although he was trained not to panic in such a high-stress situation, his breathing intensified when the individual pulled Fox's shirt up high enough to expose his chest and held a needle inches above it.

He struggled to move his arms and legs, as the person lowered the needle, the sharp edge touching his skin—but his damn limbs weighed a ton. He made one last attempt to move, and the needle thrust into him, puncturing deep into his heart. The simultaneous mixture of pain and rush of energy he felt brought instant flashes. It was though the goddamn room was in flames around

him. He felt the burning inside of him, coursing through his veins to his arms and legs, at such speed that he was literally thrown up off the ground.

“Fuck!” The gag muffled his curse along with the screams. Seconds went by before he stopped.

“Mr. Fox, thank God.” It was a woman’s voice. Her thick Russian accent added to her broken English. “I just shot you with adrenaline. Oh my God, I thought they would kill you.”

Fox clutched the syringe that protruded from the left side of his chest and pulled it out gently, waiting a bit longer until the sharp pain subsided. His hands quivered as he undid the cloth that was tied around his mouth and looked around him—it was all concrete from floor to ceiling. It all came back to him—even his strength. He touched the bruise on his temple, his hand jolting away as he felt the sting. Fortunately the guard did not strike him too hard with the butt of his gun, or else he could’ve been left with a concussion. A well-informed guard would’ve known to have done so, considering how much of a threat Fox posed to these people.

“Listen to me. Do you remember where you are?”

Of course he remembered. He didn’t even look at her as he breathed hard. He couldn’t fathom how he could’ve been so sloppy. There was no room for mistakes in his line of work. He didn’t have a wife and kids to go home to. There were definitely no colleagues an outsider could call and expect to get an honest answer as to his current whereabouts.

“Fox,” the woman said again as she grabbed his shoulders tightly.

Fox looked into her pale, white face. The coffee stench in her breath caught him head on.

“Yes, I know where we are,” Fox said, referring to the underground facility they were in.

“Yes, but we don’t have much time. Somehow they knew you were coming, but I couldn’t warn you. So I come back. Oh my God. I had to be sure you were okay.”

Fox’s left hand lashed out and clutched her throat.

“Fox...please...I cannot breathe.”

“That’s the whole idea. Now tell me who you really are.”

“I’m Sveta,” she struggled, “Doctor Gregor Sokolov’s wife. The late Dr. Sokolov. I’ve been using his name to contact you. I didn’t know what else to do. It’s the truth.”

Fox unclenched her neck slowly, just enough so that she could breathe easier. “The code.”

“The...code?”

“I won’t repeat myself.”

“One tulip in May for every hundred raindrops of April past.”

That’s good enough. He released her. She gasped for air and cupped both hands over her mouth. Her eyes watered as she coughed.

Fox looked at his watch. It was 12:52 AM. “Wipe your face. It’ll draw attention to you.”

She sniffed as she took a tissue out of her lab coat pocket and dabbed her eyes. “Do you have backup?”

There was no sense patting himself down. He knew his weapons were gone. “I’m here alone.”

“You can fight six armed guards by yourself?”

“You have a better idea?” She didn’t answer. “Yeah, I didn’t think so. I’m going to need my weapons. Where are they?”

“They’re in storage. Make a left outside and they’re in the third door on the right-hand side.”

Fox heard the clacking sound of the lock on the door. *Shit, someone's coming in.* Without a moment's hesitation he dropped to the floor, tucking the syringe under him and he assumed the same position he was in before Sveta revived him. He closed his eyes while he listened to the sounds of footsteps. There was the clapping of heels as they hit the floor. The sound was familiar—it was the boots the guards wore. One set was heavier than the next—there were two of them.

“What’s going on? What are you doing here?” said one of them in Russian. The proximity of his voice alerted Fox that the guard stopped within two feet in front of him. His cue would come at any moment now.

Sokolova placed a hand on her hip while she pointed at herself with the other. “I should be the one to ask you what this man’s doing in here.” She then pointed to Fox. “How could you allow him to get in here undetected?”

The guard seemed to be at a loss for words for a moment. “We’re not sure as of yet.”

“Not sure? You mean you don’t know. Do you happen to know who he is or who sent him? No, I guess you wouldn’t know that either. Not after you nearly killed him.”

“He...uh...we were given last-minute warning. We took necessary action.”

A raging fire burned within Fox as he kicked out his left leg in a semi-clockwise rotation, hooked the guard’s ankles and swept him off the ground. Using the momentum from the kick, Fox sprang up just as the guard hit the ground. He quickly lunged towards the other guard, whose first instinct was to reach for his AK-108 Assault Rifle. Fox struck him in the forearm, making him lose his grip on the rifle. He followed with a palm-heel strike to his nose—breaking the cartilage. The blow snapped the guard’s head backwards and left his neck exposed. Fox followed through with an edge hand blow and shattered his trachea. As though his skeleton had lost its density, the guard folded over like a wet towel and dropped to the floor.

Fox didn’t have to hear the other guard’s movements to know that he should re-engage him. The guard didn’t have a moment to get up before Fox slammed the heel of his boot onto his solar plexus. He then turned to Sokolova who stared at him wide eyed while she took two steps back. A few weeks ago he would’ve killed her too, and the bitch would’ve deserved it. He saw the fear in her eyes and the paleness of her face. *Woman, you better not slow me down.*

Fox brushed a lock of his auburn-colored hair that has fallen over his left eyebrow. “That’s two down. Four more to go.”

Sveta was still at a loss for words as she looked down at what Fox had done. *Goddamn you, woman.* He snapped his fingers in front of her face to redirect her attention. “Listen, we’re going to get through this together. But I’m going to need you to stay focused, or else you’re going to get us both killed. You understand me?”

She gave a set of short, quick nods.

“Good. I’m going to change into his clothes. I just hope they fit.”

Fox looked at both guards and visually measured each of their heights. The one with the shattered nose appeared to be close to his height of six foot two. His clothes should fit. Fox knelt down in front of him and pulled off his boots. “I need to know something.”

“What?”

“Why are you doing this? Why now?”

Sveta cupped her hands over her mouth and her nose before she let out a huge breath. It was as though she was trying to hold back more tears. “My husband, Gregor, was killed two days ago in an accident with the bio-weapon that we’re working on. I never wanted any part of this, but he was greedy and easy to corrupt. The organization we belong to—the Arms of Ares—paid

us a lot of money for our skills as microbiologists. I never imagined so many deaths would result from the weapons we've built and sold to terrorist groups and rogue nations. But I want no part of it anymore."

"Let me get this straight. You're helping a criminal organization develop weapons strictly to market them illicitly, and it never occurred to you that innocent people would be killed? You're something else, lady, and you took a huge risk contacting me. Why me, anyway? Why not MI-5 or the FSB?"

"The Arms of Ares has infiltrated many top-level organizations and agencies, including the British and Russian intelligence agencies you just named."

Fox was unbuttoning the guard's shirt when she suddenly grabbed onto his hands. *What the hell are you doing?*

"I lost my husband to Ares, and you lost your fiancée. I wanted to have ordinary life too, with children and even grandchildren. Ares stole that life from you—that's why you joined CIA. Am I right?"

Fox stared at her, incapable of ignoring the comment. *Jessica, not again. She knew one hell of a way of tapping into my soft side. No. Remember what I'm here for. Just focus.*

"That's why I trust you," Sveta continued. "I know you cannot be led astray by these people like me and my husband were."

She let go of his hands and allowed him to finish unbuttoning the guard's shirt, remove it and put it on. It was a tight fit, but it would pass. Fox soon had on the guard's pants. "When you first contacted me, you said there were other labs. Why didn't you want the CIA to focus on those?"

"Those are sleeper laboratories. If there's a problem in one, they can easily drop everything here and set up shop in another lab where the facilities are already established."

Fox tucked his hair under the guard's cap. "Then it ends here. This is where we'll bury everything."

"It won't stop them. They'll go elsewhere. Continue their research and development without problem."

"Yeah, but it'll take a while for them to recruit more scientists. Taking out everyone in this lab could cripple their production."

"True, but not for long. Ares has many resources."

"Yeah, no doubt," said Fox. "So what kind of R and D are we talking about? Weaponized Ebola? Anthrax?"

"Something far worse. It's a microbe called Pandora. All I can say is that small amounts of it introduced into a populated area can produce a death toll similar to that of a nuclear bomb. Ares has set new standard in biological warfare."

"If there's more of it out there then we'll have to find it, starting with you telling me where to locate those sleeper labs, the biology behind Pandora, and any means of immunizing ourselves against this thing."

"I've forwarded some of that information to the secure email you gave me. If you get me out of here alive, I'll forward you the list of all the active members of Ares and their clients. As for a defense against Pandora—there is none."

"None? Or none that Ares wants to find?"

Sveta shook her head. "There's no known protection against Pandora unless you want to outfit six billion of the world's inhabitants with anti-contamination suits."

"You're funny."

“I’m not trying to be.” Sveta paused as though she was in thought. “One more thing, Ares is ready to sell Pandora on the black market. A demonstration is supposed to take place in Darfur sometime tomorrow afternoon. That’s about twelve hours from now.”

“One done against innocent villagers, no doubt. They’re going to try to sell it to those who are against the peace process.”

“With this weapon, they could strengthen terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda in their attacks against the US. They’ll be unstoppable.”

Fox removed the ammunition clip from one of the rifles and picked up the other. “Everyone’s stoppable. We strike them fast and we’ll strike them hard.”

“What you need to know is included in the email I sent you, as well as the location of the demonstration.”

“Good. I’m going for my ammo. Now get the hell out of here.”

“Oh yes, before I forget. You should also know that this laboratory doubles as a containment unit to prevent any contagions from getting out. In other words, if there’s any type of disruption in the confines in which Pandora is stored, the place will go on lockdown. There are sensors throughout the facility that are sensitive to the slightest change in the atmosphere. Setting off an explosive close to Pandora can cause the lockdown very quickly.”

“Then that’s where I’ll place the explosives. Are you sure there isn’t anything else you need to tell me before we leave this room?”

She stood silent for a moment, as if deep in thought, and then nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Go wait for me outside.” Fox opened the door and let her pass first. The hallway was clear when she walked out. He closed the door behind him and walked in the opposite direction.

Fox found the storage room easily and collected the two C-4 flat explosives, the cigarette-box-shaped detonator, and his Heckler and Koch USP Compact Tactical handgun. He unscrewed the noise suppressor and dropped it on the shelf, knowing that using it now was pointless. He tucked the handgun behind him, in the waist of his pants, where he could easily reach it. He then immediately stuck an explosive to the back of the storage rack and activated it. He would later detonate this with the remote. Maximum damage could only be achieved if the explosives were placed in the same room as Pandora. He walked back to the hallway, not making eye contact with those who passed him.

Fox came to a window where he could see into the main research room. There was a huge contrast between the cleanliness and brightness of the laboratory versus the hallway where he was. There were several men and women in white coats who seemed to be assembling several objects he couldn’t describe, but he knew they had something to do with the large set of metal canisters along the back wall with the N2(l) label affixed to each of them. He counted four of them and they were all about two feet wide and over eight feet tall. From his limited scientific knowledge, he was sure the liquid nitrogen in those canisters had something to do with the storage of Pandora. Within that room was another room, also separated by a large glass partition where a green glow emanated.

Pandora.

Fox realized the glass partition most likely acted as a seal to protect the white-coats from exposure. That theory was soon confirmed when he saw an airlock chamber that led into the inner room with the green glow. That’s where he had to plant the other explosive, which was close enough to breach the inner chamber. The C-4 in the storage room would take care of the rest of the facility.

Fox opened the metallic door and walked in. Everyone inside seemed too preoccupied to notice him. He stayed out of the way, making no eye contact, staying close to the walls until he came to the first set of liquid nitrogen canisters. He planted one of his bombs behind it.

“Are you mad?” Behind him someone cried out in Russian. “Get out! You can’t bring weapons in here.”

Fox turned to the man and replied to him in Russian. “We caught an intruder earlier. So we’re making a precautionary sweep to make sure everything’s the way it should be.”

“No one else has come in here. Leave now,” the man ordered.

He must to be the head scientist.

“My apologies. I’ll leave,” said Fox as he nodded and exited the room, closing the door behind him.

There was a commotion ahead, a lot of yelling followed by shuffling feet. Fox recognized it as his cue to hurry. They obviously found the two guards he had taken out earlier—and that he was missing. He picked up the pace as he saw two guards running towards him down the hall, searching the rooms. Five white-coats kept clear by sticking to the walls as the guards swept by. Fox imitated the other guards by running and checking one room after the next, but he couldn’t afford to do it for long—someone was bound to see through his disguise.

That came soon enough when he heard someone yell, “There he is. Stop him!”

He turned around and ducked to the opposite wall, grabbed his AK-108 and fired off a few rounds at the two guards behind him. They ducked around the corner as bullet pockmarks spread across the walls in a straight line, sending a mixture of dust and cement chunks ricocheting off the walls. The others would soon be drawn to his location like bees regrouping to form an assault.

He spotted the entrance close by and he palmed the detonator. Once the structure started to cave in on itself, he’d still have time to make his escape. The euphoria of the thought overwhelmed him, until he heard screams.

“Zacrute,” Fox heard someone yell in Russian—this meant shut up.

“We have your partner. Come back now and throw down your weapon!” yelled the same man, again in Russian. Fox assumed him to be their leader.

Shit, why’d she have to get caught? What the hell didn’t she understand about waiting for me outside?

She had already risked her life to rescue him—it would be inhumane to leave her. Along with knowing everyone in Ares, she might also know who set him up. Fox sighed and tossed the rifle across the floor so that it slid to a stop in the middle of the two intersecting hallways. He slowly walked to where he’d thrown the gun, keeping the detonator closely hidden inside his shirtsleeve and his hands held high enough, but not too straight, to avoid letting the detonator to slip too far inside his shirt. He walked out in full view of the enemy, who were all strategically positioned. Two guards were down on one knee while the other two stood behind them, one beside Sveta, with the tip of his AK-108 inches from her. Further behind them, a few white-coats peeked from around the corners.

“We’ve been given orders not to execute you. But it doesn’t mean that we won’t shoot off your kneecaps if you give us reason to,” yelled Sveta’s captor. “Put your hands behind your head and get down on your knees!”

Fox did as he was told. He went down on his knees and slowly put his hands behind his head and discretely let the detonator slide out from the inner sleeve into his hand. The moment that he would push the button, he knew he wouldn’t have long before the blast caused a

lockdown. But he couldn't do it as long as Sveta's captor pointed his rifle at her. An explosion would startle him and might cause him to unintentionally pull the trigger. Fox only needed for him to point the rifle away from her for a few seconds.

Although he was a quick draw with a sidearm, his HK versus their AK-108s wouldn't give him much of a chance surviving. However, their weapons were bigger and heavier than his, making it more difficult for them to aim both quickly and efficiently. The sound of an explosion could distract them even more—buying him more time to react.

Fox played a scenario in his head. The three guards would most likely approach him while the other stayed with Sveta. He'd detonate the explosives when one of them was close enough—using the extra one to two seconds of bought time to grab him in a chokehold with one arm while simultaneously using him as a human shield—then draw his HK with his free hand to dispose of the other guards. Sveta's captor would most likely use her as a shield, so he would have to be taken out first. Speaking to him in Russian would be a start. "I'm unarmed, and so is the woman. What threat is she to you right now?"

The guard appeared to think about it for a few moments, and then lowered his gun. Fox knew, at least right now, that any misfire would go into the floor a few inches from Sveta's feet. She'd be fine as long as she didn't move.

But rather than three, Sveta's captor only sent the two front guards after Fox, while the other remained behind with him. It wasn't the scenario Fox had expected, but he'd still have to detonate the explosive to distract them. He only hoped that they would momentarily point their guns away from him, making it harder for them to aim at him properly if he were to rush them.

The two guards were over thirty meters away from him. Fox only needed twelve meters from a dead start—a distance that he could clear in two seconds—in order to gain the necessary momentum to attack the first guard. Sure, using his sidearm might appear to be more efficient, but the chance of hitting his mark was lessened while they were moving. If Fox were off by a fraction of a second, one of the guards might be able to take a decent enough aim to at least put a few rounds in him.

The guards closed the distance to about fifteen meters from him and Fox's thumb slid over the button of the detonator. The guard to the left was a half step in front of the other. Fox would base his timing on that one. Right before the guard on the left reached twelve meters away, Fox pressed the button on the detonator and an explosion occurred further back in the lab. Fox dropped the detonator and simultaneously launched from his position. He kept low as he drove forward, swinging his arms rapidly as his knees pumped into his stomach. He straightened up prematurely—slightly reducing his forward momentum—as he swung his arms outward a split second before he was between both guards. In a double clothesline move Fox struck them both in their heads—flipping them onto the floor.

Fox used the impact from the second guard to pivot around while he drew his gun from his waistband. As he rotated, he fully extended his arm while the third guard was still in the process of aiming his rifle. Fox squeezed the trigger and watched as the guard's head snapped back before he lifted off the ground. The guard had not yet hit the ground before he had Sveta's captor in his sights. Fox pulled the trigger just as he saw a flash of light come from the guard's rifle, quickly followed by a staccato noise and objects whistling by him. However, Fox's shot was on target. He saw the guard go down, holding onto the trigger as he did, and shots pockmarked the ceiling and burst one of the pipes.

Sveta was crouched over with both hands covering her ears, as steam from the damaged pipe blew clouds of vapor around her. Fox saw that she was in shock and felt it pointless to yell

for her to join him. He yanked her away—nearly dislocating her shoulder in the process. The floor shook as they ran—the chain reaction would catch up to them very soon. Fox heard staccato shots and Sveta cried out. It wasn't long after that Fox realized he was pulling dead weight. *Damn it, she's been hit.*

When he looked down at her, blood stained the back of her lab coat. Fox saw the perpetrator, lying sideways on the floor in the middle of the intersecting hallways. It was one of the two guards he had clotheslined. *Why didn't I kill that son-of-a-bitch?*

A rumbling caused Fox to nearly lose his footing. Then bits of the ceiling collapsed around him, and a huge futon-sized block crashed down and crushed the guard before he was able to fire another shot.

"Sveta...Sveta." Fox knelt down beside her. Still no answer. *Shit, don't die on me now.*

"Who set me up?"

She was gone.

When he looked over his shoulder, he saw a metal door sliding down from the ceiling. He broke out in a sprint and threw himself under it, seconds before it touched the ground. He was now outside, but still underground. A metal ladder was a few feet away. He ran for it and climbed to the top. He struck the wooden trapdoor hard, and it bounced once before settling open.

The scent of hay and fresh manure struck his nostrils as a small number of horses stomped and whinnied in their stalls. The ground shook, rattling the wooden walls of the stable they were in. *A stable and a farmhouse fronting for an underground bio-weapons facility. Who would've guessed?*

He climbed out onto the hay in the middle of the stall and ran for the door. The five horses in their stalls stomped and whinnied wildly at the tremors.

Fox ran out of the stable into the crisp, cool air, and stopped at the splintered wooden fence that bordered the driveway. He hopped over, turned left, walked six steps, turned right and walked another three. He knelt down on both knees and dug up a wallet-sized tracking device. Then he bolted across the moonlit field, to the woods where he'd hidden his motorcycle. He pressed a button on the tracker and followed the sounds of a huge flock of grasshoppers that died down a few seconds later. He then came to the camouflage net that covered his motorcycle. He yanked it off and lifted the seat. Underneath it was a lit dial pad. He punched in the numbers 062176, which was followed by a beeping sound and a click. He lifted the cover to remove a satellite phone and dialed a number. The phone on the other end rang once and then he heard the recorded greeting.

"Welcome to Spade Insurance. Please listen carefully for our menu options have changed." Fox dialed in his code, 062176. The voice recording ended and there was a short pause. A pleasant voice with a slight Jamaican accent replied.

"How can I help you, Mr. Fox?" It was Marie Vasell, General Downing's secretary.

"The lab's destroyed. I need to speak to General Downing immediately. We're going to have to scramble a team to Darfur ASAP. This so-called simple assignment I was given—it just got a whole lot more complicated."