

**RUSSELL BROOKS**



The Deadliest Weapon Against Mankind has been Unleashed

**PANDORA'S  
SUCCESSION**

PANDORA'S SUCCESSION

By Russell Brooks

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge these individuals for which this novel would not have been possible: My editors: Victory Crayne and Lisa Martinez.

My publishing and marketing associates: Jeff Rivera, Jerry D. Simmons

My eBook Converters: Signe Nichols and Carol Webb of FirebirdEBooks.com

My parents: Stanley and Cynthia Brooks and other immediate family members (too many to list here). My friends in The Artist Lounge, without you guys The Russell Show would not exist.

Randy Brooks, Ron Muka, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Eric Black, Ben Kockerman, Gumbowriters.com, Joseph Finder, Barry Eisler, JA Konrath, Wim Demeer, Jim Gessner, The Rainiacs, Jill Delbridge, Gary Smailes, Nelson Christensen, Cheryl Tardif, Steve Bick, and especially the bloggers that helped spread the word.

## 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.”

## Chapter 2

*Odessa, Ukraine, 8:57AM, the day after*

The gentleman stubbed out his second cigarette in the ashtray. The outdoor terrace to the café he was at was one of many in this tourist area of the city, within walking distance of the Black Sea.

He wasn't in town to enjoy the eighteenth and nineteenth century architecture, or the popular beaches. Even back in the days as a KGB operative he rarely took the time to enjoy himself in many of the places his work took him. But those days were long gone. Although he had several aliases, he was best known as Valerik. This was the ideal place for him to meet his Ares colleagues, the first time since getting back from the bombed out facility near Groznyy, Chechnya.

Valerik recognized his ride, as the black, fleet-sedan stopped several feet away. As he got up, his protruding gut bumped the table, a constant reminder of how much weight he had gained since his deactivated status as KGB. It was then that he noticed a black espresso stain on his white shirt. Had the spill been on his brown jacket it would be better concealed. But he left it unbuttoned since it fit him more comfortably. He grabbed his handkerchief and dipped it into a glass of water belonging to another patron as he walked by. He worked on the stain, ignoring the angry protest behind him.

A man dressed in an overcoat stepped out of the front passenger seat to open the back door for him. An overcoat in this weather? He might as well have placed a sign on his forehead that read *I'm hiding a gun*. Valerik got in and sat down beside his white-haired superior, who was also a former KGB operative. The doors shut and the car drove off.

"What's your assessment of the Groznyy lab?" asked the white-haired man in Russian.

"The laboratory was on lockdown, indicating Pandora was unleashed inside. I didn't dare use the override codes to open the blast door to inspect the damage," Valerik replied in the same language.

"You should've gotten there quicker. We'd be rid of Fox once and for all. Now he's gotten away, along with how much intelligence on us? Only God knows."

"The guards reported they had captured him. Apparently Sokolova helped him escape."

"Of course she did, just as she led Fox to our lab."

"We still have our satellite laboratories—"

"Which we'll have to abandon immediately," the white-haired man took out a larger than normal pen-like object and twirled it.

Valerik looked away from him, out the window to hide his frown. *That damn toy of his*. He couldn't stand seeing him play with that pen.

"With Fox's escape, those locations may be compromised. See to it that Pandora's taken to another location until we can set up some new satellite laboratories."

Valerik looked back to his superior. "I can do that. In the meantime, we should delay the demonstration."

"If we do that, we risk losing the confidence of our clients—and the billions that Pandora could bring in for Ares."

"What if Fox knows the location of the demo? If he disrupts it, we'll lose our clients for sure. We should send a few of our men to accompany our clients while they set up Pandora to be tested."

“The only Ares members involved will be those that deliver Pandora. Beyond that, if we start chaperoning our clients they’ll ask too many questions about the security of our organization. So far, I haven’t heard from our source that Fox knows anything about the demo or its location. Just concentrate on getting Pandora moved.”

The white-haired man signaled the driver to pull over beside a small marketplace comprised mostly of small tourist shops. When the car stopped, Valerik got out and held the door open as he peered inside. “I’ll contact you once everything’s done.”

“See to it that you do. With positive results, of course.”

Valerik shut the door and walked in the opposite direction. The sedan drove off. When the car was out of sight, he walked into the marketplace and went to a mobile phone vendor. He walked up to the counter that doubled as a display case, pointed inside to the mobile phone, then slapped the cash down on the surface. Once the clerk handed him the phone with prepaid minutes, Valerik left the store. He removed the uncharged battery from the phone and replaced it with a charged one—same brand—that he kept in his jacket pocket. Once outside, he activated it and dialed a number. After the first two rings, the call was answered.

“What do you have to report?” asked an electronically disguised voice.

“It’s me. Are your men on standby?”

“They are. Did anything else go wrong?”

“Not at all. It’s only a minor setback, that’s all. We’ll just have to begin the operation earlier than expected.”

“Do not disappoint me. The success of our operation depends on you getting the package.”

“Yes, sir.” Valerik’s phone went silent as his real superior switched off.

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*Heathrow Airport, London, England.*

Dr. Tabitha Marx sat alone in the VIP lounge as she waited to board her flight to Entebbe Airport in southern Uganda. She downed the last of her Black Russian, rested the glass on the table beside her, got up, and walked to the floor to ceiling window that overlooked the runway and the dozens of stationary planes.

She had cut down significantly on her drinking since she had arrived from Ayles Ice Island in the Canadian arctic two years ago. Before she had arrived, two cryospheric researchers had accidentally exhumed a prehistoric man that was infected with a dormant microbe. Their exposure to the microbe and their eventual death—as well as the deaths of some that came to their rescue—would have made international headlines had she, her colleagues at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and both Canadian and American governments not intervened. Fortunately, the outbreak was contained without any repercussions of a mass panic.

Marx’s six-foot stature mostly attracted wealthy and powerful men to her, the rest were intimidated. As she watched the planes take off, her flowing, dirty-blond hair draped down the shoulders of her pantsuit.

So much had changed over the years. Born to American parents forty-four years before, she was used to travelling, since her father worked at the American Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. He was later killed by the Soviets in an air-raid in neighboring Afghanistan, near the end of the Soviet-Afghan war.

Her hatred towards the USSR and Communism increased tenfold that day—so did her bonding with her mother, but it wasn’t meant to last. Her mother was hospitalized, a few years later, with severe heart complications.

It was then that her mother disclosed the horrifying truth. Marx's father was a CIA agent that had aided the mujahedeen to run their training camps in Afghanistan in their fight against the Soviets. What was more devastating was when her mother also told her that she had been recruited by the KGB to spy on her father, and that furthermore, the intelligence that she had provided the Soviets ultimately got her father killed.

It was the most emotional day of Marx's life. She had screamed at her sobbing mother, telling her that her sickness was well deserved. It was last time that she saw her mother alive. She was bawling as she ran from the hospital room, pushing hospital staff out of her way. She made it outside of the hospital where she collapsed, only to be aided by a few motorists and pedestrians. It was the last time she remembered crying.

The lounge doors opened and a group of men in business suits walked in and headed straight for the bar. Marx glanced briefly at them and sighed, assuming them to either be businessmen or diplomats—the latter she detested—as it was a constant reminder that all the world's problems could be linked to politics and religion. It was what eventually destroyed her family.

It wasn't long before one of them approached her. "Good morning. Would you care—" "No, I wouldn't." The man withdrew from her immediately, muttering something under his breath. Just then she heard her boarding call over the PA system. Marx walked back to her seat and grabbed her single travel bag. In a few days, she would make history, and the face of the world would be forever changed.

## Chapter 3

*West Darfur, 10 AM, local time*

The townspeople crowded the town square on market day. Most of the residents of this small dusty town—one of the few on the United Nation’s endangered list that has avoided attacks from both government and militia forces—had left and were making their way in droves to the refugee camps that bordered Chad to the west. For many, this was the last opportunity to stock up on rations before they migrated.

Over where the adults bargained for everyday items, three young boys kicked around a soccer ball between the stalls. The shortest of the three was the last to kick the ball. He sent it flying out of the market and into a clearing. They ran after the ball which had rolled under the feet of a man dressed in a traditional pastel-colored robe, and a skullcap, with most of his head and face covered by a length of cloth.

They stopped a few feet away, gawked at the giant, but did not run. He was leaning against a stack of empty boxes in the shade, and his eyes were visible as he peered down at them. He was not dark-skinned like them, but had more of an olive-colored complexion. They had never seen anyone of that complexion before, but knew he must be from a land beyond the desert, possibly even further than where the devils on horseback came from.

The giant kicked the ball back towards them and looked away. The shortest of the three picked it up and walked closer to the man. “Where are you from?” he asked in Arabic—the most common language that was spoken in the region.

Fox looked at the kid and saw in his eyes that he ached to know who he was. The boys must have known right away that he wasn’t from here.

“Did you come to save us from the devils on horseback?”

Fox glanced at the other two boys and then back at the one that spoke to him. They were all familiar with *the devils* or The Janjaweed—their official name. The Sudanese government had continuously denied being linked to the militia group, for carrying out the most atrocious attacks that had left scores of innocent people dead.

“What do you know about the devils on horseback?” Fox replied in Arabic.

“They’re very bad men,” the child replied as the other two approached.

“Really?” asked Fox. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Musa.”

“I’m Adam,” the boy to Musa’s left quickly said.

“I’m Ibrahim,” said the other.

“Where are you from?” asked Musa.

“Did you come from the other side of the desert?” asked Adam.

“Where’s your camel? How did you get here?” said Ibrahim, as the others joined in, flooding Fox with questions.

Fox held out his palm. It appeared that the size of it, in the children’s eyes, was enough to silence them. “Are they the same ones that come every time?”

They nodded.

“How many usually come?”

“Ten,” Ibrahim said first.

“I saw eight last time,” said Adam.

“That’s good enough,” said Fox.

“We haven’t seen them in a long time,” said Musa.

“Did you come to save us from the Janjaweed?” asked Ibrahim.

“My mother told me that help would come. And that they would be men from far away, just like you,” said Musa.

And their bombardment continued. These kids and their families had next to nothing and they depended on outside help. His fight wasn't with the Janjaweed. He wouldn't even be here if it weren't for Ares.

“Are you here to help us?” asked Adam.

Fox couldn't avoid looking into their pleading eyes. “You shouldn't need any help. After all, you just said that they haven't been seen in a long time. You should all be safe. Now run along and play with your ball.”

The boys didn't appear to be convinced.

“The last time they were here they scared everyone with their guns,” said Ibrahim.

Musa's ball slipped from his hands, but he was quick to pick it up. “They took clothes that my mother was selling at the market and didn't even pay for them.”

Adam nodded. “I heard they set fire to villages.”

Fox looked past them, in the distance, where he thought that he heard something. He waved the boys away with his arm. “Run along.” Fox walked off and left them. *This is their civil war, not mine, who am I to get involved? I'm just here to fuck Ares over. I would've done the same had they gone to Somalia or Zimbabwe.* He didn't dare look back at the boys. They would only make him go soft, and he couldn't afford another blunder such as the one in Groznyy.

He rubbed his forehead with his sleeve, wiping off some sweat. He then took a swig of cold water from his canteen that he had well hidden under his robe.

Fox turned to the sounds of a diesel engine gunning, and saw thick, black smoke belch into the air. A truck with a small open-end payload drove around the stalls, into the town square. Following it, on horseback, were five more men in army fatigues. The Janjaweed—the devils on horseback themselves—were here.

The bustling market came to a complete standstill as the men passed through. But Fox's focus was on the truck and its cargo. His facial scarf began to drop and he fixed it to cover above his nose, as he dashed through the crowd, keeping his eyes on the truck.

During his pursuit, he saw a stall with women's clothing. He reached inside his robe and took out a few bills without counting them. He tossed them on the table in front of the merchant saying the standard Arabic greeting, “Izeyik.” Simultaneously he grabbed three garments off the rack. He didn't hear any protest from the merchant.

The Janjaweed drove about a hundred meters past the marketplace and stopped in front of an old, school building that had seen its share of assaults—from the dilapidated rooftop to the pockmarked outer walls.

Two men hopped out from the back of the truck. They waited as two more inside handed them an object on a tripod, and then a metallic briefcase. The driver came around back to help them and they all carried everything into the single-storey structure. Three of the horsemen doubled back towards the marketplace. The other two dismounted their horses, walked them to the side of entrance, and stood guard with their assault rifles.

Fox hid from sight as the horsemen rode by. He kept his face covered as the sand and dust that the horses kicked up blew about him. Before the dust settled, he was meters away from the men that guarded the school entrance. He had the green, red, and blue garments in each hand, holding them high for them to see.

“Izeyik, Izeyik. Quay-Seen?” *Hello, hello. Are you well?*

The two men didn't answer, but approached Fox, their rifles pointing downward.

"I'll offer you an excellent bargain on these beautiful robes for your wives or mistresses. Name your price," Fox said in Arabic.

"Get lost. We're not buying anything from you," grunted one of the men in the same language.

"All right, all right. I won't sell. I'll offer these free and then half price on the rest of my merchandise. Anything you want." Fox held the robes high enough to block their view.

With the clothes dangling in front of them, they didn't see Fox's attack coming. Fox leaned forward slightly, forcing his legs into the ground, and then he burst forward into the devil on the left, driving one arm downward onto his arm, forcing him to point the rifle away from him. With his forward momentum, he used his opposite hand to strike his opponent causing him to stumble backwards with a collapsed windpipe.

As expected, the second opponent thought of using his assault rifle against Fox at close range. But Fox was able to move his hands faster than the devil could lift his weapon. Fox struck him in his upper torso while wrapping his opposite leg around his opponent's—hooking him and creating a loss of stability. Gravity then took over and the devil was thrown onto his back, causing him to lose grip on his rifle, which slid a few feet away. The devil had no time to react, as he was left vulnerable to Fox's downward heel strike to his nose. His head rolled to the side as blood poured out from what was left of it. Fox shook the stinging pain from his hand—that happened less now than it did when he had first joined the military.

He used the robes he'd purchased from the merchant to tie their arms and legs together, and then he dragged them by their collars inside the school, where they would be out of sight should the other devils return.

He ran outside and grabbed their assault rifles, removed the ammunition clips, and brought them into the school with him. He tossed them into a classroom. Weaponry made these men fierce, and they used this against defenseless women, children, and elderly villagers. But these guys were no match for Fox. He was not only skilled with a gun, but also with knives and hand-to-hand combat. Their mistake was doing business with Ares, because now, it put them on Fox's hit list.

Fox walked down the darkened hallway. There were no lights in any of the classrooms he walked by, and none in the hallway either. He heard voices, and it sounded as though the men were quarrelling. *So much the better.* Fox took out the HK from inside his robe. He removed the suppressor and screwed it on as he approached the classroom where he heard the voices.

Fox reached the doorway of the classroom and stood to the side of it. He took out a dentist's mirror and used it to see into the classroom. He didn't see any wooden tables, chairs, or teacher's desk, as he was used to in elementary school. But he spotted his targets—five of them that had assembled the tripod. A few feet away from them, on the ground, lay an open briefcase which had a fluorescent-green glow emanating from it. It was the same as he'd seen in the underground lab outside of Groznyy.

Now that he knew exactly where each of them stood and that Pandora was safely in the briefcase, he put the mirror away and casually walked into the classroom with the HK raised. Two of the men were quicker to spot him than the other three. That didn't matter to Fox. He popped a single bullet into each of them first, before nailing the other three, who were slower to react.

There were only three devils left and they were in the market. As long as the merchants distracted them, he could easily slip out of town and make it peacefully to his rendezvous point. If they got in his way he would deal with them.

He examined the bright-green light that shone from inside the briefcase. Fox couldn't believe that a vial as small as the test tube he saw could wreak so much damage. It was well incubated in thick foam to prevent the slightest scratch. Whatever horror was about to be unleashed on these people, Fox didn't want to know about it.

One of the devils had a key attached to the waist with a chain. It must be the one used to unlock the metal case. Fox placed his foot onto the devil's waist at the end of the chain, grabbed the end with the key, and broke it off. He then closed the metal case, locked it, and took it with him.

Fox went back to the marketplace where he suspected the three remaining devils were. There was still minimal activity at the marketplace, just as when he had left it. Then he saw them, each of them taking things off the tables of the stalls and looking at them. They kept what they wanted and threw to the ground what they didn't, just as Musa had described.

Speaking of Musa—he unexpectedly heard loud bawling...It was Musa. He was running after one of the men who had taken his soccer ball and was holding it high above his head, making Musa jump for it.

"Please, he's only a child. It's the only toy he has. Aren't the clothes you took from me enough?" pleaded a woman that ran up to the bully and grabbed onto his other arm.

"You dare touch me, filthy peasant woman." With a single blow to her head, he sent her to the ground. Musa rushed to her, as the man spat on her.

"Is that your mother, you silly little boy? Tell her you'll get your ball back once you've earned it," said the man, as he tossed the ball in the air repeatedly, laughing.

That was none of Fox's concern. These villagers went through these problems on a daily basis. Fox had what he came for—there was no time for pit stops.

Less than a dozen paces later, Musa's crying still went on. A few more seconds went by and Fox closed his eyes hard, hoping somehow it would block Musa out. It didn't.

*Christ, this wasn't some kid that was crying over a video game he didn't get for his birthday. Some asshole just slapped his mother right in front of him. The same guy would probably kill Musa's mother in front of him, too.* He sighed as he turned to look at them. *Fuck. How did I become so selfish?*

"Leave my mother alone." This was all Fox heard from Musa as he looked back and saw him on the ground beside his mother. The devil took out his assault rifle and waved it in the air. Musa screamed and quickly jumped on his mother as though to shield her.

The sight of the gun even startled Fox. *You got to be shitting me.* He headed towards them and clenched a fist that grew tighter as he got closer to the devil from behind.

Fox put down the briefcase. "Hey!"

The devil hardly had time to turn and look in Fox's direction before the rifle was pulled out of his hand. By the time he had fully turned, Fox's left fist was already in full flight. The blunt of the impact got both the upper level of teeth and the lower bridge of his nose and lifted him into the air briefly before he hit the ground. Heads turned and people rushed from way inside the marketplace to catch what was going on.

Fox looked down at him as he shook out the stinging of his hand. He pulled the magazine out, pocketed it, and looked at the gun. It was a QBZ-95 Chinese Assault Rifle. He then looked at Musa who looked back at him with a tear-stained face.

His mother sat up and pulled her son into her tightly. Musa glanced at the unconscious devil and then back at Fox. “You came back. You *did* come to save us.” Fox felt a rush of heat to his face as Musa’s face lit up with a smile.

Fox breathed heavily and looked to the growing crowd. The two other devils would be showing up soon. And he knew they were coming, when people in the crowd dispersed, as two men in fatigues emerged.

Fox turned to Musa and his mother and motioned them to the side. “Move away, quickly.” Musa backed up as he helped his mother slide backwards in a seated position as Fox stepped away.

The bullies glanced down at their fallen colleague and then at Fox. He could’ve easily disposed of them with his HK, but doing so in front of the children would have been inappropriate. That’s a line he would never cross.

He tossed the empty rifle aside, picked up the briefcase and held it out in front of him while he faced them. “You know what’s in here, don’t you? You know you can’t risk damaging the contents of this briefcase?”

There was a pause from the two men as they appeared to think about what he just told them. They both looked at each other briefly before lowering their rifles. The one on the left handed his gun to the other, and from inside his robe, he withdrew a machete and rushed Fox with a war-like cry.

*What an amateur.*

The man was quick with the blade as he swung downwards to the left. Fox leaned back on his right leg and pivoted to the right to dodge it. He did the same thing but to the opposite side as the man swung the machete downwards to the right, missing him again. The man swung across, but Fox raised the briefcase and caught the blade with it, then kicked his assailant in the groin. The man doubled over, dropping the machete. With his free hand, Fox grabbed the devil’s head and pulled it downwards into his upward swinging knee, dropping him.

Fox looked up at the remaining devil. He seemed to have trouble managing both assault rifles. Fox was about to rush him as he fumbled with them, but a frying pan suddenly crashed down on the devil’s head from behind. When he dropped to the ground, a few others jumped at the opportunity to have a go at him by kicking him while he was down—including the woman who had sacked him with the frying pan.

The confrontation was brief, but ended with the three devils being lifted and carried overhead by small groups of men. Fox observed this and decided that the townspeople would take care of them as they saw fit, now that they were unarmed and posed less of a threat.

Fox felt something at his feet and saw Musa’s soccer ball. He picked it up and walked over to Musa, who stood next to his mother. She was back on her feet, surrounded by a few more of the villagers. Fox knelt down and handed Musa his ball.

Musa took it with both hands and smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. That was very brave what you did, standing up to that Janjaweed bully. You’re a good kid, Musa. Take care of your mother. She’ll always need your help.” Fox rubbed Musa’s bald head, making him laugh. “I’ll see to it that some help comes soon to keep those bad men away.”

Just then, Ibrahim and Adam ran up to him, laughing as they all threw their arms around Fox. For a second, Fox felt an emotional attachment to the three boys that made him not want to let them go, but he had to. For the moment he couldn’t do anything more for them.

The boys let go of him and Fox stood up, walked up to one of the camels that belonged to one of the devils and climbed onto its back. He then waved to the crowd before he rode off.

The entire village waved back to him and cried out their thanks and praises. Musa, Ibrahim, Adam, and dozens of other children ran after him, up until the edge of the village, cheering and waving their goodbyes to Fox as he rode away into the desert.

Fox didn't quite reach a mile before he pulled the reins of the camel to make it stop. He dismounted and took out his satellite phone from under his robe.

"There's no need for that, Warrant Officer," came a voice from the sand.

At that point, five figures sprouted up from the sand, dropping their sand-colored robes to reveal their army fatigues.

Warrant Officer Pat Hiller, Fox's friend in the SEALs, walked up to him. "I take it things went smoothly."

Fox handed Hiller the metal briefcase without answering. Something stirred at the bottom of his gut and it got worse. A familiar acidic taste followed and he ran off to the side, fell down to his hands and knees and threw up.

Hiller ran to him. "Whoa, buddy. You okay?"

Fox waved him off without answering. *A mother and son were nearly slaughtered, maybe more, and I was about to walk away. How the hell could I be okay? Shit, Jessica would still be alive had I followed up on my instincts on her employers instead of ignoring them.*

Fox spewed his stomach contents into the sand a second time. Tears soon followed. He'd become a killer with a single-minded purpose—not the man Jessica was going to marry.

"Listen, buddy. You don't look so great," said Hiller. "Extraction's supposed to be in precisely four minutes. The Chad border ain't too far away. Are you sure you can handle the helicopter ride?"

Fox took out a handkerchief, dabbed his eyes, and then wiped his mouth. "I'll be okay. It's probably just traveler's sickness."

"Traveler's sickness my ass. We're getting you to a medic." Hiller helped Fox get up. Fox walked back to join the other SEALs and looked at each of them. He didn't know their personal stories, only their individual skills. Looking at them, he saw himself as he was five years ago. Those were the days when testosterone drove him, rushing into battle—whether he was rescuing hostages from Somali pirates, or from other terrorist cells. Those were the days, when he killed an enemy, it was out of self-defense. Since Jessica's death, self-defense for him was nothing more than a euphemism. It was only now that he began to realize this. It must be why he threw up.

A helicopter would be arriving soon to pick them up. He'd know by the time it landed whether or not he could continue with this life.

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