

The Pharaoh's Secret (The NUMA Files)

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When the NUMA crew is exposed to a dangerous toxin, Kurt Austin and Joe Zavala will stop at nothing to find a cure foretold by Ancient Egyptian lore in this exhilarating novel from the #1 New York Times-bestselling series

Head of NUMA special assignments, Kurt Austin and his most trusted friend, Joe Zavala tangle with a ruthless powerbroker scheming to build a new Egyptian empire as glorious as those of the Pharaohs. Part of their adversary's plan rests on the manipulation of a newly discovered aquifer beneath the Sahara, but an even more devastating weapon at his disposal may threaten the entire world: a plant extract known as the black mist, discovered in the City of the Dead and rumored to have the power to take life from the living and restore it to the dead.

With the balance of power in Africa and Europe on the verge of tipping, Kurt, Joe, and the rest of the NUMA team will have to fight to discover the truth behind the legends-but to do that, they have to confront in person the greatest legend of them all: Osiris, the ruler of the Egyptian underworld.

Clive Cussler is the author or coauthor of over fifty previous books in five bestselling series, including Dirk Pitt[®], NUMA[®] Files, Oregon[®] Files, Isaac Bell, and Sam and Remi Fargo. His nonfiction works include *Built for Adventure: The Classic Automobiles of Clive Cussler and Dirk Pitt*, plus *The Sea Hunters* and *The Sea Hunters II*; these describe the true adventures of the real NUMA, which, led by Cussler, searches for lost ships of historic significance. With his crew of volunteers, Cussler has discovered more than sixty ships, including the long-lost Confederate ship *Hunley*. He lives in Colorado and Arizona.

Graham Brown is the author of *Black Rain* and *Black Sun*, and the coauthor with Cussler of *Devil's Gate*, *The Storm*, *Zero Hour*, and *Ghost Ship*. A pilot and an attorney, he lives in Arizona.

M.V. Torino, seventy miles west of Malta
Present Day

The M.V. Torino was a three hundred foot steel hulled freighter built in 1973. With her advancing age, small size and slow speed, she was nothing more than a "coaster" now, traveling short routes across the Mediterranean, hitting various small islands on a circuit that took in Libya, Sicily, Malta and Greece.

In the hour before dawn, she was sailing west, seventy miles from her last port of call in Malta and heading for the small Italian controlled island of Lampedusa.

Despite the early hour, several men crowded the bridge. Each of them nervous and with good reason. For the past hour an unmarked vessel running without lights had been shadowing them.

"Are they still closing on us?"

The question came as a shout from the ship's master, Constantine Bracko, a stocky man with pile-driver arms, salt and pepper hair and stubble on his face like coarse sandpaper.

With his hand on the wheel he waited for an answer. "Well?"

"The ship is still there," the first mate shouted. "Matching our turn. And still gaining."

"Shut off all our lights," Bracko ordered. Another crewman closed a series of master switches and the Torino went dark. With the ship blacked out, Bracko changed course yet again.

"This won't do us much good if they have radar or night vision goggles," the first mate said.

"It'll buy us some time," Bracko replied.

"Maybe it's the customs service?" another crewman asked. "Or the Italian coast guard?"

Bracko shook his head. "We should be so lucky."

The first mate knew what that meant. "Mafia?"

Bracko nodded. "We should have paid. We're smuggling in their waters. They want their cut."

Thinking he could slip by in the dark of night, Bracko had taken a chance. His roll of the dice had come out badly. "Break out the weapons," he said. "We have to fight."

"But Constantine..." the first mate asked. "That will go badly with what we're carrying."

The Torino's deck was loaded with shipping containers, but hidden in most of them were pressurized tanks as large as city busses and filled with liquefied propane. They were smuggling other things as well, including twenty barrels of some mysterious substance brought on board by a customer out of Egypt, but because of the rampant fuel taxes throughout Europe, it was the propane that brought the big money.

"Even smugglers have taxes to pay," Bracko muttered to himself. Between protection money, transit money and docking fees, the criminal syndicates were as bad as the governments. "Now we'll pay double. Money and cargo. Maybe even triple, if they want to make an example of us."

The first mate nodded. He had no wish to pay for someone else's fuel with his life. "I'll get the guns," he said.

Bracko tossed him a key. "Wake the men. We fight or we die."

The crewman took off for the weapons locker and the berths on the lower deck. As he disappeared, another figure entered the wheelhouse. A passenger who went by the odd sounding name of name Ammon Ta. Bracko and the crew called him the Egyptian.

Thin and spindly, with deep set eyes, a shaven head, and caramel colored skin, there was little about the man that seemed imposing to Bracko. In fact, he wondered why anyone had chosen so un-formidable an escort to accompany what he only assumed to be barrels of hashish or some other drug.

"Why has the ship been darkened?" Ammon Ta asked bluntly. "Why are we changing course?"

"Can't you guess?"

After a moment of calculation, the Egyptian seemed to understand. He pulled a 9mm pistol from his belt, held it limply and stepped to the door where he gazed out into the dark void of the sea.

"Behind us," Bracko said.

Even as Bracko spoke he was proven wrong. From just off the port bow, two beams of

light snapped on, one painting the bridge with a blinding glare, the other lighting up the rail.

Two rubber boats raced in. Bracko instinctively turned the ship towards them, but it was no use, they swung wide and turned back, quickly matching his course and speed.

Grappling hooks were thrown up, catching the three metal cables that acted as the safety rail. Seconds later, two groups of armed men began climbing up and onto the Torino.

Covering fire rang out from the boats.

"Get down!" Bracko shouted.

But even as a spread of bullets shattered one bridge window and ricocheted off the wall, the Egyptian didn't dive for cover. Instead, he stepped calmly behind the thick bulkhead, glanced outside and snapped off several shots from the pistol in his hand.

To Bracko's surprise, the gunfire was deadly. Ammon Ta had drilled two of the boarders with perfect head shots despite the pitching deck and the difficult angle. His third shot put out one of the spot lights being aimed their way.

Following the shots, the Egyptian stepped back without haste or wasted motion as a furious hail of automatic fire answered.

Bracko remained on the deck as incoming fire rattled around the wheelhouse. One bullet grazed his arm. Another shattered a bottle of Sambuca that Bracko kept for good luck. As the liquid spread out on the deck, Bracko considered the ill omen. Three coffee beans contained in the bottle were supposed to herald prosperity, health and happiness, but they were nowhere to be seen.

Angry now, Bracko slipped his own pistol from a shoulder holster and prepared to fight. He glanced at the Egyptian, who remained on his feet. Based on the man's demeanor and deadly accuracy, Bracko's opinion of him quickly changed. He didn't know who this Egyptian really was, but suddenly figured he was looking at the most lethal man on the ship.

Good, he thought, at least he's on our side.

"Excellent shooting," he called out. "Perhaps I've misjudged you."

"Perhaps, I intended you to," the Egyptian said.

More gunfire boomed in the dark, this time from the aft section of the ship. In response Bracko stood and fired out through the shattered window, shooting blindly.

"You're wasting ammunition," the Egyptian said.

"I'm buying us time," Bracko said.

"Time is on their side," the Egyptian said. "At least a dozen men have boarded your ship. Perhaps more. There is a third rubber boat nearing the stern."

A second exchange of gunfire well aft of their position confirmed what the Egyptian was saying.

"That's no good," Bracko replied. "The weapons locker is on the lower deck, aft. If my men can't get to it or make it back here we'll be badly outnumbered."

The Egyptian moved to the bulkhead door, opened it a crack and stared down the passageway. "It appears as if that's already the case."

The sound of lumbering footsteps came down the passageway and Bracko readied himself for a fight, but the Egyptian opened the door to let a limping, bleeding crewman stumble through.

"They've taken the lower deck," the crewman managed.

"Where are the rifles?"

The crewman shook his head. "We couldn't get to them."

The crewman held his stomach where the blood was spreading from a bullet wound. He slumped to the floor and lay there.

The boarding party was coming forward, shooting anything that got in the way. Bracko left the wheel and tried to help his crewman.

"Leave him," the Egyptian said. "We need to move."

Bracko hated to do it but he could see it was too late. Furious and wanting to draw blood, Bracko cocked the pistol and stepped to the hatchway. He was ready to go into battle guns blazing and come what may, but the Egyptian grabbed him and held him back.

"Let go of me," Bracko demanded.

"So you can die uselessly."

"They're murdering my crew. I won't let that happen without answering."

"Your crew are meaningless," Ammon Ta replied coldly. "We have to reach my cargo."

Bracko was stunned. "Do you really think you're going to get out of here with your hash?"

"Those barrels contain something far more potent," the Egyptian replied. "Potent enough to save your ship from these fools if we can get to it in time. Now take me to them."

As the Egyptian spoke, Bracko noticed an odd intensity in the man's eyes. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't lying. "Come on."

With the Egyptian behind him, Bracko climbed through the shattered bridge window and jumped to the nearest shipping container. It was a six foot drop and he landed with an awkward bang, bruising his knee.

The Egyptian landed bedside him, immediately crouching and turning.

"Your cargo is in the first row of containers," Bracko explained. "Follow me."

They took off running, hopping from container to container. When they reached the forward row, Bracko climbed down between the containers and dropped to the deck.

The Egyptian stayed with him and they hid for a moment between the huge metal boxes. By now the muted sounds of gunfire were far more sporadic: a shot here, another shot there. The battle was ending.

"This is the one," Bracko said.

"Open it," the Egyptian demanded.

Bracko used his master key on the padlock and yanked hard on the lever that secured the door. He cringed as the ancient hinges sang out in a falsetto screech.

"Inside," the Egyptian ordered.

Bracko stepped into the dark container and flicked on a hand held light. One of the cylindrical propane tanks took up most of the room, but against the far wall were the white barrels the Egyptian had brought aboard.

Bracko lead Ammon Ta to them.

"Now what?" Bracko asked.

The Egyptian didn't answer. Instead he pried the top from one of the barrels and put it aside. To Bracko's surprise a white fog spilled out over the rim of the container and drifted downward.

"Liquid nitrogen?" Bracko said, feeling an instant coolness to the air. "What on earth do you have in there?"

Ammon Ta continued to ignore him, working in silence, bringing out a cryogenically cooled bottle with a strange symbol on the side. As Bracko stared at the symbol it dawned on him that this was probably nerve gas or some type of biological weapon.

"This is what they're after," Bracko blurted out, lunging for the Egyptian and grabbing him. "Not propane or protection money. It's you and this chemical they want. You're the reason these thugs are killing my crew!"

The initial move had taken the Egyptian by surprise, but the man recovered quickly. He knocked Bracko's hands free, twisted one of the burley captain's arms backwards and flung him to the ground.

An instant after he landed, Bracko felt the weight of the Egyptian coming down on his chest. He looked up into a pair of merciless eyes.

"I don't need you anymore," the Egyptian said.

A sharp pain ripped through Bracko as a triangular dagger plunged into his stomach. The Egyptian twisted it and then removed it and stood.

In excruciating pain, Bracko tensed and released his grip. His head fell back against the metal floor of the container as he clutched at his stomach, feeling the warm, dark blood that was soaking his clothes.

It would be a slow and painful death. One the Egyptian saw no need to hasten as he stood and calmly, wiped the blood from the stubby triangular blade and slid it back into a sheath, pulled out a satellite phone and pressed a single button.

"Our ship has been intercepted," he told someone on the other end of the line. "Criminals it seems."

A long pause followed and then the Egyptian shook his head. "There are too many of them to fight... Yes, I know what must be done... The dark mist shall not fall into the hands of others. Remember me to Osiris. I'll see you in the afterlife."

He hung up, moved to the far side of the propane tank and used a large crescent wrench to open a relief valve. A loud hiss of gas began escaping.

Next he pulled a small explosive charge from a pocket in his coat, attached it to the side of the propane tank and set the timer. That done he returned to the front of the shipping container, opened it a crack and slipped out into the darkness.

Even lying in a pool of his own blood, Constantine Bracko knew what awaited him. Despite almost certain death either way, he decided to stop the explosion if he could.

He rolled over, grunting in agony at the movement. He managed to crawl to the edge of the tank, leaving a trail of blood behind him. He tried to shut off the relief valve using the crescent wrench, but found he lacked the strength to hold the heavy tool steady.

He dropped it to the deck and inched forward, crying out in anguish with each move. The smell of propane was nauseating, the pain in his gut like a fire inside him. His eyes began to fail. He found the explosive charge but could barely see the buttons on the face of the timer. He pulled at it and it came away from the tank, just as the doors to the shipping container swung open.

Bracko turned. A pair of men rushed in, weapons aimed at him. Reaching him, they noticed the timer in his hand.

It hit zero, exploding in Bracko's grasp and igniting the propane. The shipping container blew itself apart in a brilliant flash of white.

The force of the explosion dislodged the forward stack of shipping containers and sent them tumbling over the side into the sea.

Bracko and the two men from the syndicate were vaporized in the flash, but Bracko's action had foiled the Egyptian's plan. Pulled away from the thick steel wall of the propane tank, the charge was not strong enough to puncture the cylinder. Instead, it caused a flash

explosion and lit a raging fire fueled by propane still jetting through the open valve.

This tongue of flame shot directly outward from the tank, burning through anything it touched like a cutting torch. As the tank shifted, the tip of the flame angled down and onto the deck.

As the surviving criminals fled, the steel deck beneath the tank began to soften and buckle. In several minutes the deck became weak enough that one end of the heavy cylinder fell partially through. Held up at an odd angle the jet of flame was now redirected along the side of the tank itself. From this point, it was only a matter of time.

For twenty minutes, the burning ship continued west, a traveling fireball that could be seen for miles. Shortly before dawn it hit a reef. It was only a half a mile off the coast of Lampedusa.

Early risers on the island came out to see the blaze and take pictures. As they watched the propane tank rupture, fifteen thousand gallons of the pressurized fuel burst forth and a...

Other Books

Judgement of the Pharaoh. In the popular imagination Ancient Egypt is seen as an idyllic place where, for 3000 years, wise Pharaohs governed a peaceful and plentiful kingdom. Historians, although sceptical of the truth of this image, have always struggled to penetrate it to discover the realities of life for ordinary Egyptians. That is until now.

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