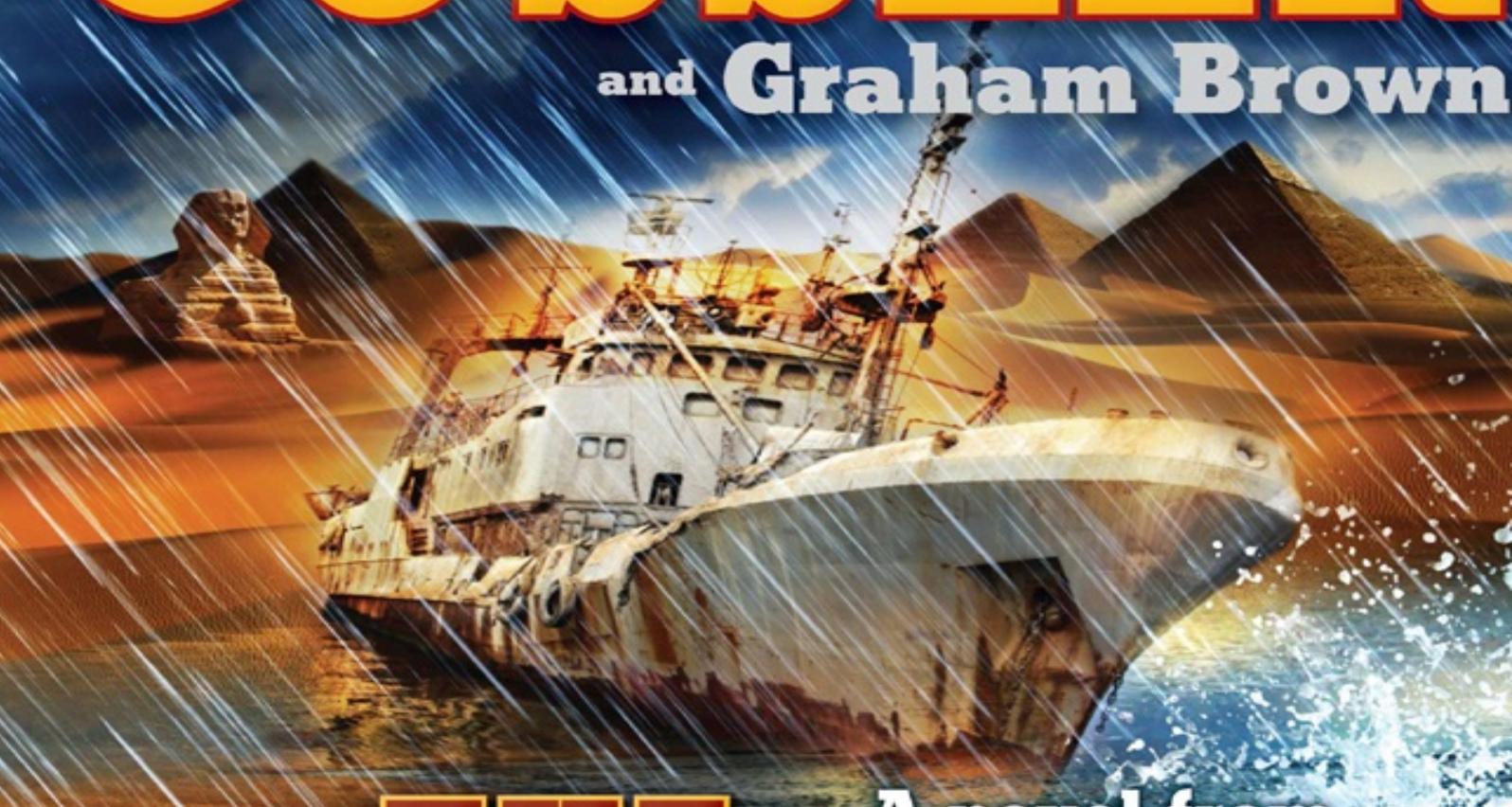


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and **Graham Brown**



THE STORM

A novel from
the NUMA[®] Files

A Kurt Austin Adventure

THE STORM

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A NOVEL FROM
THE NUMA® FILES

CLIVE CUSSLER

AND GRAHAM BROWN

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
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PROLOGUE

INDIAN OCEAN
SEPTEMBER 1943

THE S.S. *JOHN BURY* SHUDDERED FROM BOW TO STERN AS it plowed through the rolling waters of the Indian Ocean. She was known as a “fast freighter,” designed to accompany warships and used to traveling at a decent clip, but with all boilers going full out the *John Bury* was moving at a pace she hadn’t seen since her sea trials. Damaged, burning, and trailing smoke, the *John Bury* was running for her life.

The ship crested a ten-foot wave, the deck pitched down and the bow dug into another swell. A wide swath of spray kicked up over the rail and whipped back across the deck, rattling what was left of the shattered bridge.

Topside, the *John Bury* was a mangled wreck. Smoke poured from twisted metal where rockets had pounded the superstructure. Debris littered the deck, and dead crewmen lay everywhere. But the damage was above the waterline, and the fleeing ship would survive if it avoided any more hits.

On the dark horizon behind, smoke poured from other vessels that had been less fortunate. An orange fireball erupted from one, flashing across the water and briefly illuminating the carnage.

The burning hulks of four ships could be seen, three destroyers and a cruiser, ships that had been the *John Bury*’s escort. A Japanese submarine and a squadron of dive-bombers had found them simultaneously. As dusk approached, oil burned around the sinking vessels in a mile-long slick. It fouled the sky with dense black smoke. None of them would see the dawn.

The warships had been targeted and destroyed quickly, but the *John Bury* had only been strafed, hit with rockets and left to run free. There could be only one reason for that mercy; the Japanese knew of the top secret cargo she carried and they wanted it for themselves.

Captain Alan Pickett was determined not to let that happen, even with half his crew dead and his face gashed by shrapnel. He grabbed the voice tube and shouted down to the engine room.

“More speed!” he demanded.

There was no response. At last report a fire had been raging belowdecks. Pickett had ordered his men to stay and fight it, but now the silence left him gripped with fear.

“Zekes off the port bow!” a lookout called from the bridge wing. “Two thousand feet and dropping!”

Pickett glanced through the shattered glass in front of him. In the failing light he saw four black dots wheeling in the gray sky and dropping toward the ship. Flashes lit from their wings.

“Get down!” he shouted.

Too late. Fifty caliber shells stitched a line across the ship, cutting the lookout in half and blasting apart what was left of the bridge. Shards of wood, glass and steel flew about the compartment.

Pickett hit the deck. A wave of heat flashed over the bridge as another rocket hit ahead of it. The impact rocked the ship, peeling back the metal ceiling like a giant can opener.

As the wave of destruction passed, Pickett looked up. The last of his officers lay dead, the bridge was demolished. Even the ship’s wheel was gone, with only a stub of metal still attached to the spindle. Yet somehow the vessel chugged on.

As Pickett climbed back up, he spotted something that gave him hope: dark clouds and sweeping bands of rain. A squall line was moving in fast off the starboard bow. If he could get his ship into it,

the coming darkness would hide him.

Holding on to the bulkhead for support, he reached for what remained of the wheel. He pushed with all the strength he had left. It moved half a turn, and he fell to the ground holding it.

The ship began to change course.

Pressing against the deck, he pushed the wheel upward and then brought it back down again for another full revolution.

The freighter was leaning into the turn now, drawing a curved white wake on the ocean's surface, coming around toward the squall.

The clouds ahead were thick. The rain falling from them was sweeping the surface like a giant broom. For the first time since the attack began, Pickett felt they had a chance, but as the ship plowed toward the squall the awful sound of the dive-bombers turning and plunging toward him again put that in doubt.

He searched through the ship's gaping wounds for the source of that noise.

Dropping from the sky directly in front of him were two Aichi D3A dive-bombers, Vals, the same type the Japanese had used with deadly effect at Pearl Harbor and months later against the British fleet near Ceylon.

Pickett watched them nose over and listened as the whistling sound of their wings grew louder. He cursed at them and pulled his sidearm.

"Get away from my ship!" he shouted, blasting at them with the Colt .45.

They pulled up at the last minute and roared past, riddling the ship with another spread of .50 caliber shells. Pickett fell back onto the deck, a shell clean through his leg, shattering it. His eyes opened, gazing upward. He was unable to move.

Waves of smoke and gray sky rolled above him. He was finished, he thought. The ship and its secret cargo would soon fall into enemy hands.

Pickett cursed himself for not scuttling the ship. He hoped it would somehow go down on its own before it could be boarded.

As his eyesight began to fail, the sound of more dive-bombers caught his ear. The roar grew louder, the banshee scream from their wings calling out and announcing the terrible inevitability of the end.

And then the sky above darkened. The air turned cold and wet, and the S.S. *John Bury* disappeared into the storm, swallowed up by a wall of mist and rain.

She was last reported by a Japanese pilot as burning but sailing under full power. She was never seen or heard from again.

CHAPTER 1

NORTHERN YEMEN, NEAR THE SAUDI BORDER AUGUST 1967

TARIQ AL-KHALIF HID HIS FACE BEHIND A CLOTH OF SOFT white cotton. The kaffiyeh covered his head and wrapped around his mouth and nose. It kept the sun, wind and sand from his weather-beaten features as it hid him from the world.

Only Khalif's eyes showed, hard and sharp from sixty years in the desert. They did not blink or turn away as he stared at the dead bodies in the sand before him.

Eight bodies in all. Two men, three women, three children; stripped naked, all clothes and belongings gone. Most had been shot, a few had been stabbed.

As the camel train at Khalif's back waited, a rider moved slowly up toward him. Khalif recognized the strong, young figure in the saddle. A man named Sabah, his most trusted lieutenant. A Russian-made AK-47 lay slung over his shoulder.

"Bandits for certain," Sabah said. "No sign of them now."

Khalif studied the rough sand at his feet. He noticed the tracks disappearing to the west, headed directly toward the only source of water for a hundred miles, an oasis called Abi Quzza—the "silken water."

"No, my friend," he said. "These men are not waiting around to be discovered. They hide their numbers by sticking to the hard ground, where no tracks are left, or they walk on the softest sand, where the marks soon fade. But here I can see the truth, they're heading toward our home."

Abi Quzza had belonged to Khalif's family for generations. It provided life-giving water and a modicum of wealth. Date palms grew in abundance around its fertile springs, along with grass for the sheep and camels.

With the growing number of trucks and other forms of modern transportation, the caravans that paid for its gifts had begun to dwindle, and the role of camel-raising Bedouins like Khalif and his family were fading along with them, but they were not yet gone. For the clan to have any prospects at all, Khalif knew the oasis must be protected.

"Your sons will defend it," Sabah said.

The oasis lay twenty miles to the west. Khalif's sons, two nephews and their families waited there. A half dozen tents, ten men with rifles. It would not be an easy place to attack. And yet Khalif felt a terrible unease.

"We must hurry," he said, climbing back onto his camel.

Sabah nodded. He slid the AK-47 forward to a more aggressive position and nudged his camel forward.

Three hours later they approached the oasis. From a distance they could see nothing but small fires. There were no signs of struggle, no ripped tents or stray animals, no bodies lying in the sand.

Khalif ordered the camel train to a halt and dismounted. He took Sabah and two others, moving forward on foot.

The silence around them was so complete, they could hear the crackle of wood in the fires and their own feet scuffling in the sand. Somewhere in the distance, a jackal began to yelp. It was a long way off, but the noise carried in the desert.

Khalif halted, waiting for the jackal's call to fade. When it died away, a more pleasant sound

followed: a small voice singing a traditional Bedouin melody. It came from the main tent and flowed quietly.

Khalif began to relax. It was the voice of his youngest son, Jinn.

“Bring the caravan,” Khalif said. “All is well.”

As Sabah and the others went back to the camels, Khalif walked forward. He reached his tent, threw open the flap, and froze.

A bandit dressed in rags stood there, holding a curved blade to his son’s throat. Another bandit sat beside him, clutching an old rifle.

“One move and I slice his neck,” the bandit said.

“Who are you?”

“I am Masiq,” the bandit said.

“What do you want?” Khalif asked.

Masiq shrugged. “What don’t we want?”

“The camels have value,” Khalif said, guessing what they were after. “I will give them to you. Just spare my family.”

“Your offer is meaningless to me,” Masiq replied, his face twisting into a snarl of contempt. “Because I can take what I want, and because ...”—he gripped the boy tightly—“except for this one, your family is already dead.”

Khalif’s heart tightened. Inside his tunic was a Webley-Fosbery automatic revolver. The self-cocking revolver was a sturdy weapon with deadly accuracy. It wouldn’t jam even after months in the desert sand. He tried to think of a way to reach it.

“Then I’ll give you everything,” he said, “just for him. And you can go free.”

“You have gold hidden here,” Masiq said as if it were a known fact. “Tell us where it is.”

Khalif shook his head. “I have no gold.”

“Lies,” the second bandit said.

Masiq began to laugh, his crooked teeth and decay-filled mouth making a horrific sound. Gripping the boy tightly with one arm, he raised the other as if to slice the boy’s neck. But the child slipped loose, lunged for Masiq’s fingers with his mouth and bit down hard.

Masiq cursed in pain. His hand snapped back as if he’d been burned.

Khalif’s own hand found the revolver and he blasted two shots right through his tunic. The would-be murderer fell backward, two smoking holes in his chest.

The second bandit fired, grazing Khalif’s leg, but Khalif’s shot hit him square in the face. The man fell without a word, but the battle had only just begun.

Outside the tent, gunfire began to echo through the night. Shots were being traded, volleys flying back and forth. Khalif recognized the sound of heavy bolt-action rifles, like the one in the dead thug’s hand, they were answered by the rattling sound of Sabah and his automatic rifle.

Khalif grabbed his son, placing the pistol in the young boy’s hand. He picked up the old rifle from beside one of the dead bandits. He plucked the curved knife from the ground as well and moved deep into the tent.

His older sons lay there as if resting side by side. Their clothes were soaked with dark blood and riddled with holes.

A wave of pain swept over Khalif; pain and bitterness and anger.

With the gunfire raging outside, he stuck the knife into the side of the tent and cut a small hole. Peering through it, he saw the battle.

Sabah and three of the men were firing from behind a shield of dead camels. A group of thugs dressed like the bandits he’d just killed were out in the oasis itself, hiding behind date palms in knee-high water.

There did not seem to be enough of them to have taken the camp by force.

He turned to Jinn. "How did these men get here?"

"They asked to stay," the boy said. "We watered their camels."

That they'd played on the tradition of Bedouin generosity and the kindness of Khalif's sons before killing them enraged Khalif further. He went to the other side of the tent. This time he plunged the knife into the fabric and drew it sharply downward.

"Stay here," he ordered Jinn.

Khalif snuck through the opening and worked his way into the darkness. Moving in a wide arc, he curled in behind his enemies and slipped into the oasis.

Preoccupied with Sabah and his men at their front, the bandits never noticed Khalif flanking them. He came up behind them and opened fire, blasting them in the back from close range.

Three went down quickly and then a fourth. Another tried to run and was killed by a shot from Sabah, but the sixth and final thug turned around in time and fired back.

A slug hit Khalif's shoulder, knocking him backward and sending a jolt of pain surging through his body. He landed in the water.

The bandit rushed toward him, perhaps thinking him dead or too wounded to fight.

Khalif aimed the old rifle and pulled the trigger. The shell jammed in the breach. He grabbed the bolt and worked to free it, but his wounded arm was not strong enough to break loose the frozen action.

The bandit raised his own weapon, drawing a bead on Khalif's chest. And then the sound of the Webley revolver rang out like thunder.

The bandit fell against a date palm with a puzzled look on his face. He slid down it, the weapon falling from his hands into the water.

Jinn stood behind the dead man, holding the pistol in a shaking grip, his eyes filled with tears.

Khalif looked around for more enemies, but he saw none. The shooting had stopped. He could hear Sabah shouting to the men. The battle was over.

"Come here, Jinn," he ordered.

His son moved toward him, shaking and trembling. Khalif took him under one arm and held him.

"Look at me."

The boy did not respond.

"Look at me, Jinn!"

Finally Jinn turned. Khalif held his shoulder tightly.

"You are too young to understand, my son, but you have done a mighty thing. You have saved your father. You have saved your family."

"But my brothers and mother are dead," Jinn cried.

"No," Khalif said. "They are in paradise, and we will go on, until we meet them one day."

Jinn did not react, he only stared and sobbed.

A sound from the right turned Khalif. One of the bandits was alive and trying to crawl away.

Khalif raised the curved knife, ready to finish the man, but then held himself back. "Kill him, Jinn."

The shaking boy stared blankly. Khalif stared back, firm and unyielding.

"Your brothers are dead, Jinn. The future of the clan rests with you. You must learn to be strong."

Jinn continued to shake, but Khalif was all the more certain now. Kindness and generosity had almost destroyed them. Such weakness had to be banished from his only surviving son.

"You must never have pity," Khalif said. "He is an enemy. If we have not the strength to kill our enemies, they will take the waters from us. And without the waters, we inherit only wandering and death."

Khalif knew he could force Jinn to do it, knew he could order him and the boy would follow the

command. But he needed Jinn to choose the act himself.

“Are you afraid?”

Jinn shook his head. Slowly, he turned and raised the pistol.

The bandit glanced back at him, but instead of Jinn buckling, his hand grew steady. He looked the bandit in the face and pulled the trigger.

The gun’s report echoed across the water and out into the desert. By the time it faded, tears no longer flowed from the young boy’s eyes.

CHAPTER 2

INDIAN OCEAN
JUNE 2012

THE NINETY-FOOT CATAMARAN LOLLED ITS WAY ACROSS calm waters of the Indian Ocean at sunset. It was making three or four knots in a light breeze. A brilliant white sail rose above the wide deck. Five-foot letters in turquoise spelled out *numa* across its central section—the National Underwater and Marine Agency.

Kimo A'kona stood near one of the catamaran's twin bows. He was thirty years old, with jet-black hair, a chiseled body and the swirling designs of a traditional Hawaiian tattoo on his arm and shoulder. He stood on the bow in bare feet, balancing on the very tip as if he were hanging ten on a surfboard.

He held a long pole ahead and to the side, dipping an instrument into the water. Readings on a small display screen told him it was working.

He called out the results. "Oxygen level is a little low, temperature is 21 degrees centigrade, 70.4 Fahrenheit."

Behind Kimo, two others watched. Perry Halverson, the team leader and oldest member of the crew, stood at the helm. He wore khaki shorts, a black T-shirt and an olive drab "boonie" hat he'd owned for years.

Beside him, Thalia Quivaros, who everyone called T, stood on the deck in white shorts and a red bikini top that accented her tan figure enough to distract both men.

"That's the coldest reading yet," Halverson noted. "Three full degrees cooler than it should be this time of year."

"The global warming people aren't going to like that," Kimo noted.

"Maybe not," Thalia said as she typed the readings into a small computer tablet. "But it's definitely a pattern. Twenty-nine of the last thirty readings are off by at least two degrees."

"Could a storm have passed through here?" Kimo asked. "Dumping rain or hail that we aren't accounting for?"

"Nothing for weeks," Halverson replied. "This is an anomaly, not a local distortion."

Thalia nodded. "Deepwater readings from the remote sensors we dropped are confirming it. Temperatures are way off, all the way down to the thermocline. It's like the sun's heat is missing this region somehow."

"I don't think the sun's the problem," Kimo said. The ambient air temperature had reached the high nineties in the nineties a few hours before as the sun had been blazing from a cloudless sky. Even as it set, the last rays were strong and warm.

Kimo reeled in the instrument, checked it and then swung the pole like a fly fisherman. He cast the sensor out forty feet from the boat, letting it sink and drift back. The second reading came back identical to the first.

"At least we've found something to tell the brass back in D.C.," Halverson said. "You know they always think we're on a pleasure cruise out here."

"I'm guessing it's an upwelling," Kimo said. "Something like the El Niño/La Niña effect. Although since this is the Indian Ocean, they will probably call it something in Hindu."

"Maybe they could name it after us," Thalia suggested. "The Quivaros-A'kona-Halverson effect."

QAH for short.”

“Notice how she put herself up front,” Kimo said to Halverson.

“Ladies first,” she said with a nod and a smile.

Halverson laughed and adjusted his hat.

“While you guys figure that out, I’ll get started on the mess for tonight. Anyone for flying-fish tacos?”

Thalia looked at him suspiciously. “We had those last night.”

“Lines are empty,” Halverson said. “We didn’t catch anything today.”

Kimo thought about that. The farther they sailed into the cold zone, the less sea life they’d found. It was like the ocean was turning barren and cold. “Sounds better than canned goods,” he said.

Thalia nodded, and Halverson ducked into the cabin to whip them up some dinner. Kimo stood and gazed off to the west.

The sun had finally dropped below the horizon, and the sky was fading to an indigo hue with a line of blazing orange just above the water. The air was soft and humid, the temperature now around eighty-five degrees. It was a perfect evening, made even more perfect by the notion that they’d discovered something unique.

They had no idea what was causing it, but the temperature anomaly seemed to be wreaking havoc with the weather across the region. So far, there’d been little rain across southern and western India at a time when the monsoons were supposed to be brewing.

Concern was spreading as a billion people were waiting for the seasonal downpours to bring the rice and wheat crops to life. From what he’d heard nerves were fraying. Memories of the previous year’s light harvest had sparked talk of famine if something didn’t change soon.

While Kimo realized there was little he could do about it, he hoped they were close to determining the cause. The last few days suggested they were on the right track. They would check the readings again in an hour, a few miles to the west. In the meantime, dinner called.

Kimo reeled the sensor back in. As he pulled it from the water, something odd caught his eye. He squinted. A hundred yards off, a strange black sheen was spreading across the ocean surface like a shadow.

“Check this out,” he said to Thalia.

“Stop trying to get me up there in close quarters,” she joked.

“I’m serious,” he said. “There’s something on the water.”

She put down the computer tablet and came forward, putting a hand on his arm to steady herself on the narrow bowsprit. Kimo pointed to the shadow. It was definitely spreading, moving across the surface like oil or algae, though it had an odd texture to it unlike either of those things.

“Do you see that?”

She followed his gaze and then brought a pair of binoculars to her eyes. After a few seconds, she spoke.

“It’s just the light playing tricks on you.”

“It’s not the light.”

She stared through the binoculars a moment longer and then offered them to him. “I’m telling you there’s nothing out there.”

Kimo squinted in the failing light. Were his eyes deceiving him? He took the binoculars and scanned the area. He lowered them, brought them up and lowered them again.

Nothing but water. No algae, no oil, no odd texture to the surface of the sea. He scanned to both sides to make sure he wasn’t looking in the wrong place, but the sea looked normal again.

“I’m telling you, there was something out there,” he said.

“Nice try,” she replied. “Let’s eat.”

Thalia turned and picked her way back toward the catamaran's main deck. Kimo took one final look, saw nothing out of the ordinary, then shook his head and turned to follow her.

A few minutes later they were in the main cabin, chowing down on fish tacos Halverson style while laughing and discussing their thoughts as to the cause of the temperature anomaly.

As they ate, the catamaran continued northwest with the wind. The smooth fiberglass of its twin bows sliced through the calm sea, the water slid past, traveling silently along the hydrodynamic shape.

And then something began to change. The water's viscosity seemed to thicken slightly. The ripples grew larger and they moved a fraction slower. The brilliant white fiberglass of the boat's pontoons began to darken at the waterline as if being tinted by a dye of some kind.

This continued for several seconds as a charcoal-colored stain began spreading across the side of the hull. It began to move upward, defying gravity, as if being drawn by some power.

A texture to the stain resembled graphite or a darker, thinner version of quicksilver. Before long, the leading edge of this stain crested the catamaran's bow, swirling in the very spot where Kimo had stood.

Had someone been watching closely, they would have noticed a pattern appear. For an instant the substance shaped itself like footprints, before becoming smooth once again and slithering backward, headed toward the main cabin.

Inside the cabin, a radio played, picking up a shortwave broadcast of classical music. It was good dinner music, and Kimo found himself enjoying the evening and the company as much as the food. But as Halverson fought against divulging the secret of his taco recipe, Kimo noticed something odd.

Something was beginning to cover the cabin's broad tinted windows, blocking out the fading sky and the illumination from the boat's lights high up on the mast. The substance climbed up the glass the way wind-driven snow or sand might pile up against a flat surface, but much, much faster.

"What in the world ..."

Thalia looked to the window. Halverson's eyes went the other way, glancing out at the aft deck with alarm on his face.

Kimo swung his head around. Some type of gray substance was flowing through the open door, moving along the deck of the boat but flowing uphill.

Thalia saw it too. Heading straight for her.

She jumped out of her seat, knocking her plate from the table. The last bites of her dinner landed in front of the advancing mass. When it reached the leftovers, the gray substance flowed over the bits of food, covering it completely and swirling around it in a growing mound.

"What is that?" she asked.

"I don't know," Kimo said. "I've never ..."

He didn't have to finish his sentence. None of them had ever seen anything like it. Except ...

Kimo's eyes narrowed, the strange substance flowed like a liquid, but it had a grainy texture. It seemed more like metallic powder sliding across itself, like waves of the finest sand shifting in the wind.

"That's what I saw on the water," he said, backing away. "I told you there was something out there"

"What's it doing?"

All of them were standing and easing backward.

"It looks like it's eating the fish," Halverson said.

Kimo stared, vacillating between fear and wonder. He glanced through the open door. The rear deck was covered.

He looked around for a way out. Moving forward would only take them down into the catamaran's berths, trapping them. Going aft would mean stepping on the strange substance.

"Come on," he said, climbing onto the table. "Whatever that stuff is, I'm pretty sure we don't want"

to touch it.”

As Thalia climbed up beside him, Kimo reached toward the skylight and propped it open. He gave her a boost, and she pulled herself up through the opening and onto the cabin’s roof.

Halverson climbed onto the table next but slipped. His foot slammed into the metallic dust, splashing it like a puddle. Some of it splattered onto his calf.

Halverson grunted as if he’d been stung. Reaching down, he tried to swipe it off his leg, but half of what he swiped clung to his hand.

He shook his hand rapidly and then rubbed it on his shorts.

“It’s burning my skin,” he said, his face showing the pain.

“Come on, Perry,” Kimo shouted.

Halverson climbed up on the table with a small amount of the silvery residue still clinging to his hand and leg, and the table buckled under the weight of the two men.

Kimo grabbed the edge of the skylight and held on, but Halverson fell. He landed on his back, hitting his head. The impact seemed to stun him. He grunted and rolled over, putting his hands down on the deck to push off with.

The gray substance swarmed over him, covering his hands, his arms and his back. He managed to get up and brace himself against the bulkhead, but some of the residue reached his face. Halverson pawed at his face as if bees were swarming around him. His eyes were shut tight, but the strange particles were forcing themselves under his eyelids and streaming into his nostrils and ears.

He stepped away from the bulkhead and fell to his knees. He began digging at his ears and screaming. Lines of the swarming substance curled over his lips and began flowing down into his throat, turning his screams into the gurgles of a choking man. Halverson fell forward. The spreading mass of particles began to cover him as if he was being consumed by a horde of ants in the jungle.

“Kimo!” Thalia shouted.

Her voice snapped Kimo out of his trance. He pulled himself up and scrambled through the opening onto the roof. He shut the skylight and sealed it hard. From the spotlights high in the mast he could see that the gray swarm had spread across the entire deck, both fore and aft. It was also creeping upward along the sides of the cabin.

Here and there it seemed to be swarming over things as it had done to the fallen dinner items and Halverson.

“It’s coming up over here,” Thalia shouted.

“Don’t touch it!”

On his side the invading swarm had made less progress. Kimo reached over and grabbed for anything that would help. His hand found the deck hose and he turned it on, grabbing the nozzle and spraying high-pressure water at the gray mass.

The jet of liquid swept the particles backward, washing them off the cabin’s wall like mud.

“On this side!”

He stepped to her side and blasted away at the muck.

“Get behind me!” he shouted, directing the hose.

The pressurized stream of water helped, but it was a losing battle. The swarm was surrounding them and closing in on all sides. Try as he might, Kimo could not keep up.

“We should jump,” Thalia shouted.

Kimo looked to the ocean. The swarm extended out from the boat and onto the sea from which it had come.

“I don’t think so,” he said.

Desperate for something that would help, he scanned the deck. Two five-gallon cans of gasoline sat near the aft end of the boat. He aimed the hose at full pressure, sweeping it from side to side and

blasting a path through the swarm.

~~He dropped the hose, ran forward, and leapt. He landed on the wet deck, skidded across it and slammed into the transom at the rear of the boat.~~

A stinging feeling on his hands and legs—like rubbing alcohol had been poured over open skin—told him some of the residue had found him. He ignored the pain, grabbed the first jerry can and began pouring fuel across the deck.

The gray residue recoiled at the flow, curling out of the way and retreating but probing for a new path forward.

Up on the cabin's roof, Thalia was using the hose, blasting the water around her in an ever smaller circle. Suddenly, she cried out and dropped the hose as if she'd been stung. She turned and began to climb the mast, but Kimo could see the swarm had begun covering her legs.

She screamed and fell. "Kimo!" she shouted. "Help me. Help m—"

He splashed the deck with the rest of the gasoline and grabbed for the second can. It was light and almost empty. Fear knifed through Kimo's heart like a spear.

Only gurgling noises and the sound of struggling came from where Thalia had fallen. Her hand was all he could see, writhing where it stuck out from beneath the mass of particles. In front of him, that same mass had resumed its search for a path to his feet.

He looked once again to the surface of the sea. The horde covered it like a sheen of liquid metal all the way out to the limits of the light. Kimo faced the awful truth. There was no escape.

Not wanting to die like Thalia and Halverson had, Kimo made a painful decision.

He dumped the rest of the fuel onto the deck, forcing the swarm back once more, grabbed for a lighter he carried and dropped down to one knee. He held the lighter against the gasoline-soaked deck, steeled himself to act and snapped his finger along the flint.

Sparks snapped and the vapors lit. A flashover whipped forward from the aft end of the catamaran. Flames raced through the approaching swarm all the way to the cabin and then roared back toward Kimo, swirling around him and setting him ablaze.

The agony was too intense to endure even for the brief seconds he had left to live. Engulfed in fire, and unable to scream with his lungs burned out, Kimo A'kona staggered backward and fell into the waiting sea.

CHAPTER 3

KURT AUSTIN STOOD IN A SEMIDARKENED WORK BAY ON THE lower level of his boathouse as the hour crept past midnight.

Broad-shouldered, relatively handsome, Kurt tended more toward rugged than striking. His hair was a steel gray color, slightly out of place on a man who looked to be in his mid-thirties yet perfect for the man all Kurt's friends knew him to be. His jaw was square, his teeth relatively straight but not perfect, his face sun-kissed and lined from years spent on the water and out in the elements.

Sturdy and *solid* were the terms used to describe him. And yet, from that rugged face came a piercing gaze. The directness of Kurt's stare and the brilliance of his coral-blue eyes often caused people to pause as if taken by surprise.

Right now, those eyes were studying a labor of love.

Kurt was building a racing scull. Thoughts of performance ruled his mind. Drag coefficients and leverage factors and the power that could be generated by a human being.

The air around him smelled of varnish, and the floor was littered with shavings, wood chips and other types of debris, the kind that piled up and marked one's progress when crafting a boat by hand.

After months of on-and-off work, Kurt felt he'd achieved something near to perfection. Twenty feet long. Narrow and sleek. The wooden craft's honey blond color shined from beneath nine coats of shellac with a glow that seemed to light up the room.

"A damn fine boat," Kurt said, admiring the finished product.

The boat's glasslike finish made the color seem deep as if you could look into it for miles. A slight change in focus, and the room around him was caught in the reflection.

On one side of the reflection, a new set of tools sat untouched in a bright red box. On the other side, pegged to the backboard of the workbench with meticulous precision, were a set of old hammers, saws and planes, their wooden handles cracked and discolored with age.

The new tools he'd bought himself, the old ones were hand-me-downs from his grandfather—a gift and a message all at the same time. And right in the middle, like a man caught between two worlds, Kurt saw his own reflection.

It seemed appropriate. Kurt spent most of his time working with modern technology, but he loved the old things of this world; old guns, antebellum and Victorian homes and even historical letters and documents. All these things grabbed his attention with equal power. But the boats he owned, including the one he'd just finished, brought out the purest sense of joy.

For now, the sleek craft rested in a cradle, but tomorrow he would lift it off its frame, connect the oars and take it down to the water for its maiden voyage. There, powered by the considerable strength in his legs, arms and back, the scull would slice through the calm surface of the Potomac at a surprising clip.

In the meantime, he told himself, he'd better stop looking at it and admiring his own work or he'd be too tired to row in the morning.

He lowered the bay door and stepped toward the light switch.

Before he could flick it off, an annoying buzz startled him. His cell phone was the culprit, vibrating on the work desk. He grabbed the phone, instantly recognized the name on the screen and pressed answer.

It was Dirk Pitt, the Director of NUMA, Kurt's boss and a good friend. Before he'd taken over as Director, Pitt had spent a couple of decades risking life and limb on special projects for the

organization. Occasionally, he still did.

~~“Sorry to bother you in the middle of the night,” Pitt said. “I hope you don’t have company.”~~

“Actually,” Kurt replied, looking back at his boat, “I’m in the presence of a beautiful blonde. She’s graceful and smooth as silk. And I can see myself spending lots of time alone with her.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to postpone all that and tell her good night,” Pitt said.

The serious tone in Pitt’s voice came through loud and clear.

“What’s happened?”

“You know Kimo A’kona?” Pitt asked.

“I worked with him on the Hawaiian Ecology Project,” Kurt replied, realizing that Pitt wouldn’t start a conversation that way unless something bad was coming. “He’s first-rate. Why do you ask?”

“He was working an assignment for us in the Indian Ocean,” Pitt began. “Perry Halverson and Thalia Quivaros were with him. We lost contact with them two days ago.”

Kurt didn’t like the sound of that, but radios failed, sometimes entire electrical systems did, often the boaters turned up safe and sound.

“What happened?”

“We don’t know, but this morning their catamaran was spotted adrift, fifty miles from where it should have been. An aircraft from the Maldives made a low pass this afternoon. The photos showed extensive fire damage on the hull. No sign of the crew.”

“What were they working on?”

“Just analyzing water temps, salinity and oxygen levels,” Pitt said. “Nothing dangerous. I save those jobs for you and Joe.”

Kurt couldn’t imagine any reason such a study might offend someone. “And yet you think it was foul play?”

“We don’t know what it was,” Dirk said firmly. “But something’s not right. We can see the life-raft containers from the air. The casings are burned but otherwise untouched. Halverson was a ten-year vet, he was a merchant marine sailor for eight years before that. Kimo and Thalia were younger, but they were well trained. And none of us can come up with a reason for a widespread fire aboard a sailboat to begin with. Even if we could, no one can tell me why three trained sailors would fail to deploy a life raft or get off a distress call under such conditions.”

Kurt remained silent. He couldn’t think of a reason either, unless they were somehow incapacitated.

“The bottom line is, they’re missing,” Dirk said. “Perhaps we’ll find them. But you and I have been around long enough to know this doesn’t look good.”

Kurt understood the math. Three members of NUMA were missing and presumed dead. Something both Dirk Pitt and Kurt Austin took personally.

“What do you need me to do?”

“A salvage team from the Maldives is getting set up,” Pitt said. “I want you and Joe on-site as soon as possible. That means you’re on a plane in four hours.”

“Not a problem,” Kurt said. “Is anyone still looking for them?”

“Search-and-rescue aircraft out of the Maldives, a pair of Navy P-3s and a long-range squadron from southern India have been crisscrossing the zone since the boat was spotted. Nothing yet.”

“So this isn’t a rescue mission.”

“I only wish it was,” Pitt said. “But unless we get some good news that I’m not expecting to receive, your job is to figure out what happened and why.”

In the dark bay, unseen by Pitt, Kurt nodded. “Understood.”

“I’ll let you wake Mr. Zavala,” Pitt said. “Keep me posted.”

Kurt acknowledged the directive, and Dirk Pitt hung up.

Placing the phone down, Kurt thought about the mission ahead. He hoped against all reason that the

three NUMA members would be found bobbing in their life jackets by the time he crossed the Atlantic, but considering the description of the catamaran and the length of time they'd been missing he doubted it.

He slid the phone into his pocket and took a long look at the gleaming craft he'd built.

Without another second of hesitation, he reached for the light switch, flicked it off and walked out.

His date would have to wait for another morning.

CHAPTER 4

CENTRAL YEMEN

A FIGURE CLOAKED IN WHITE STOOD ON A ROCKY OUT cropping that jutted above the sand of Yemen's sprawling desert. The wind tugged at his caftan, producing a muted flapping sound as it waved in the breeze.

A gleaming white helicopter sat on the bluff behind him. A green insignia, depicting two date palm shading an oasis, decorated its side. Three stories below lay the entrance to a wide cave.

In times past, the cave would have been guarded by a few Bedouin men hidden in the crags of the bluff, but on this day there were a dozen men with automatic rifles in plain view, another twenty or so remaining hidden.

Jinn al-Khalif raised a pair of binoculars to his eyes and watched as a trio of Humvees rolled across the desert toward him. They rose and fell on the dunes like small boats crossing the swells of the sea. They traveled in an arrow formation, headed his way.

"They follow the ancient track," he said, speaking to a figure beside and slightly behind him. "In my father's time they would have been spice caravans and traders, Sabah. Now only bankers come to see us."

He lowered the binoculars and looked to the bearded older man who stood beside him. Sabah had been his father's most loyal hand. Sabah was dressed in darker robes and he carried a radio.

"You are wise to understand their motives," Sabah said. "They care nothing for us or our struggle. They come because you promise them wealth. You must deliver before we can do as we choose."

"Is Xhou with them?"

Sabah nodded. "He is. Upon his arrival, all the members of the consortium will be present. We should not keep them waiting."

"And what of General Aziz, the Egyptian?" Jinn asked. "Does he continue to withhold the funds he's promised?"

"He will speak with us three days from now," Sabah said. "When it is a better time for him."

Jinn al-Khalif took a deep breath, inhaling the pure desert air. Aziz had pledged many millions to the consortium on behalf of a cadre of Egyptian businessmen and the military, but he had yet to pay a cent.

"Aziz mocks us," Jinn said.

"We will talk with him and bring him back in line," Sabah insisted.

"No," Jinn said. "He will continue to defy us because he can. Because he feels he is beyond our reach."

Sabah looked at Jinn quizzically.

"It's the answer to the riddle of life," Jinn said. "What matters isn't money or wealth or lust or even love. None of those things were enough to save me when the bandits took our camp. There is only one thing that matters, now just as it did then: power. Raw, overwhelming power. He who has it, rules. He who doesn't, begs. Aziz has us begging, but I will soon turn the tables on him. I will soon attain a kind of power that has never been held by a man before."

Sabah nodded slowly and a smile wrinkled his beard. "You have learned well, Jinn. Even better than I could have hoped. Truly, you surpass your teacher."

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