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CLIVE
CUSSLER
AND DIRK CUSSLER



CELTIC EMPIRE

A DIRK PITT NOVEL

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



CAST OF CHARACTERS

1334 B.C.E

Meritaten Egyptian princess, daughter of Pharaoh.

Gaythelos Meritaten's husband.

Osarseph Prophet aided by Meritaten.

Ahrwn Osarseph's brother.

2020

NUMA TEAM

Dirk Pitt Director of the National Underwater and Marine Agency.

Al Giordino Director of Underwater Technology, NUMA.

Rudi Gunn Deputy Director, NUMA.

Zerri Pochinski Pitt's longtime secretary.

Michael Cruz Marine engineer and salvage expert, NUMA.

Dr. Rodney Zeibig Archeologist, NUMA.

Summer Pitt NUMA Special Projects director and daughter of Dirk Pitt.

Dirk Pitt, Jr. NUMA Special Projects director and son of Dirk Pitt.

Hiram Yaeger Computer Resources director, NUMA.

James Sandecker U.S. Vice President and former Director of NUMA.

OFFICIALS, POLITICIANS, AND BUSINESSPEOPLE

Loren Smith-Pitt Dirk Pitt's wife and congresswoman from Colorado.

Senator Stanton Bradshaw Chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Evanna McKee CEO of BioRem Global Limited.

Audrey McKee Field manager with BioRem Global Limited and daughter of Evanna McKee.

Rachel Associate of Evanna McKee's.

Ross FBI agent protecting Elise Aguilar.

Abigail Brown Former prime minister of Australia.

Gavin Operative working for Evanna McKee.

Ainsley Operative working for Evanna McKee.

Irene Operative working for Evanna McKee.

HISTORIANS, EXPERTS, AND MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS

Elise Aguilar Scientist with United States Agency for International Development in El Salvador.

Phil Scientist with United States Agency for International Development in El Salvador.

Rondi Salvadoran villager aiding the U.S. scientists.

Dr. Stephen Nakamura Epidemiologist, University of Maryland.

Dr. Susan Montgomery Head of the Environmental Health Laboratory, Centers for Disease Control.

Dr. Miles Perkins Scientist, Inverness Research Laboratory.

Dr. Harrison Stanley Emeritus professor of Egyptology from
Cambridge University.

Riki Sadler Biochemist and archeologist and daughter of
Evanna McKee.

Dr. Frasier McKee Biochemist and deceased husband of
Evanna McKee.

Aziz Egyptian Antiquities Authority agent.

St. Julian Perlmutter Nautical historian and longtime friend of
Pitt's.

Byron Lab Research director, Centers for Disease Control.

Dr. Eamon Brophy Former archeology department head,
Dublin University.

OTHER

Manjeet Dhatt Father of ill boy in Mumbai.

Pratima Dhatt Mother of ill boy in Mumbai.

Ozzie Ackmadan Proprietor of the Abu Simbel Inn.

Friar Thomas Franciscan Friary of Killarney.

Captain Ron Posey Captain of the *Mayweather*.

Gauge Helmsman of the *Mayweather*.

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PROLOGUE

NILE FLIGHT



MEMPHIS, EGYPT

1334 B.C.E.

Wails of grief drifted over the city like a black aria. The mud brick dwellings burst with anguish, as the sorrow swirled into the night desert. But the winds ferried more than just the cries of mourning.

They carried the stench of death.

A mysterious scourge had descended upon the land, striking at nearly every household. The young were most afflicted, but not exclusively. The claws of death had grasped even the royal family, snatching the Pharaoh himself in their cold grip.

Crouched in the shadows of the Temple of Aten, a young woman tried to block the din and odor. As the moon slipped from behind a cloud, casting its glow over the landscape, she rubbed a heavy gold amulet on her chest and listened for sounds of movement. The rustle of leather soles on stone pricked her ears, and she turned to a figure running toward her across the temple's front portico.

Her husband, Gaythelos, was tall, with dark curly hair and broad shoulders. His skin was damp in the hot night air as he grasped her hand and pulled her to her feet. "The way to the river is clear," he said in a low voice.

She gazed beyond him. "Where are the others?"

"Securing the boats. Come, Meritaten, let us delay no further."

She turned to the shadows behind her and nodded. Three men emerged from along the temple wall, armed with spears and heavy *khopesh* swords. As she followed her husband, they took up a triangular defensive position around her.

Gaythelos led them away from the temple entrance and down a side street, their sandals kicking up dust. Despite the late hour, many houses showed the gleam of burning oil lamps through cracks in their shutters. The group moved at a quick pace, keeping silent as they crossed the former capital city.

The road sloped gently toward the riverside, where rows of small merchant boats were tied to a dock. As they moved along the bank, two men arose from the reeds. They wore long gray beards and were dressed in shabby linens.

The escorts raised their spears and sprang forward.

"Guards! Cease!" Meritaten cried.

The armed men froze.

She stepped past them and greeted the two men. "Osarseph, Ahrwn, what are you doing here? Why have you not departed?"

The younger of the two men stepped forward. His eyes held a determined look, shrouded by a weathered face. "Meritaten," he said, "we could not taste freedom without offering you our thanks. Your influence with Pharaoh was instrumental in his edict. I am saddened for you to learn of his passing at Amarna."

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“My influence was debatable,” she said. “What is not questioned is that Pharaoh’s high priests are now in control of our lands—and have blamed the royal family for the sorrows brought upon Egypt.”

“You are guilty only of having an open heart for the down-trodden.” He slipped a goatskin bag from around his neck and passed it to her. “You saved us from the tainted waters of the Nile. I pray it is now time to save yourself.”

“You took heed where Pharaoh did not. It is Gaythelos you should thank, not me.” She nodded toward her husband. “He knew the power of the apium.”

Osarseph turned and bowed to the man. “You will join us?” He waved an arm toward the river. On the opposite bank, the glow from a thousand campfires dotted the horizon.

“No,” Meritaten said. “We will cast our fate to the sea.”

The old man nodded, then knelt before her. “My brother and I shall carry your deeds close to our hearts. May you live in peace for the life of the stars.”

“And you as well, Osarseph. Good-bye.”

The two men climbed aboard a small raft, pushed into the dark river, and paddled for the opposite bank.

“Perhaps we should join them?” she whispered.

“The desert brings nothing but hardship, my love,” Gaythelos said. “More hospitable lands await. We must delay no longer.”

He led the company along the shoreline, turning away from the vessels at the town’s landing to a trio of boats hidden in the reeds downriver. As they approached, they were challenged by armed sentries, who then guided them aboard one of the boats.

Meritaten and Gaythelos took a seat on a bench beneath the lone mast as the boat was released from its mooring. Crewmen rowed away from the bank, following the other two vessels to the Nile's center.

Meritaten cast an uneasy eye about the boat. It was less than 100 feet long and open-decked, with an upward-curving hull stem and stern. Pots and baskets filled with provisions littered the deck. Soldiers lined the gunwales, most rowing with short oars. The other two boats, veteran merchant ships that had crossed the Mediterranean many times, sat equally low in the water.

Square mainsails were partially raised and rigged fore and aft for maneuvering as the boats navigated north, propelled by the current. Small oil lamps dangled off the prows, providing faint light to the dark waters ahead. Leaving the city of Memphis in their wake, the boats sailed silently, except for the slap of water against their hulls and the dip of oars into the river.

Twelve miles downriver, murmurs rippled through the boats. Ahead, a string of lanterns had appeared. It was a vessel moored in the center of the river.

Meritaten squinted at the illuminated barge. Ropes stretched from it to either shore, to serve as a ferry during daylight hours, while at night it served as a tax station for passing merchant boats. But shouts of alarm from the barge revealed it was prepared this night for more than tax duty.

"Extinguish the lantern!" called the captain of Meritaten's boat, a gruff man with a clean-shaven head, and looked to the other boats.

Too late. All three had been seen. A team of archers assembled on the barge let loose a barrage of arrows.

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Gaythelos shoved Meritaten to the deck. A crewman screamed and grabbed his neck where an arrow had struck.

“Stay down!” As two guards stood watch alongside, Gaythelos dragged a sack of grain across the deck and covered his wife with it.

Under the sack, she could only listen to the battle. The three boats turned to the far shoreline, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the barge. The first boat approached one of the barge’s ropes, and men with swords leaned over the bow to sever it. Several were picked off by the archers, others sliced the barrier free.

The three boats continued downriver, but the barge released a small chase vessel, filled with warriors and more archers. Putting oars to water, the pursuit craft made for the closest merchant vessel, the one carrying Meritaten and Gaythelos. It closed the distance quickly and pulled alongside. Its warriors swarmed over the side, expecting little resistance.

Gaythelos and the armed contingent sprang from the shadows, thrusting spears and striking their attackers with bronze swords. Hand-to-hand fighting spilled across the deck as every crewman fought to repel the boarders. Archers on the attack boat fired arrows into the melee, killing warriors on both sides. Bodies of the dead splashed into the Nile. The battle raged back and forth until the attackers seemed to gain the upper hand. Sensing defeat, Meritaten rose from her hiding place and picked up a dead warrior’s sword.

“Seize victory!” she implored, plunging the blade into an attacking boarder.

The defenders rallied at the sight. Charging the attackers,

they drove them to the stern, killing them without mercy. The attack boat came next. The princess's raging swordsmen jumped into the vessel and massacred the remaining archers, then shoved the boat to drift away with its cargo of the dead.

Meritaten stepped to the bow in search of her husband. The deck was soaked in blood, dead and wounded men lay everywhere. Gaythelos appeared, holding a bloody dagger. She wrapped her arms around him.

"We are safe now," he said. "You have led us to victory." He turned to the captain, who sat at the steering oar, an arrow protruding from his shoulder. "Isn't that true?"

The man nodded. "There will be no more obstacles. We are nearly to the Delta—and multiple paths to the sea. By morning, Egypt will be in our wake."

The armada sailed through the night, squeezing down an eastern branch of the Nile Delta bordered by fields of ripe barley. The Mediterranean soon beckoned, and the three boats glided into the turquoise sea. They kept their distance from an approaching line of trading ships from the Levant as the sun brightened the morning sky.

Meritaten sat with Gaythelos as the Egyptian shore drifted away behind them. She clutched the goatskin bag tight to her chest, contemplating her future. While she had saved untold lives, she had also sacrificed everything she held dear.

Rising to her feet, she stepped to the ship's bow with a newfound sense of destiny. Facing the horizon across the open sea, she gazed toward the unknown world that beckoned her.



PART I

CASCADE



1

May 2020

COPAPAYO, EL SALVADOR

Elise Aguilar watched with somber eyes as the funeral procession marched through the dusty village square. The four male pallbearers strode with downcast faces as they balanced a child's white casket on their shoulders. A small bouquet of yellow orchids had been slid across the lid, covering a hand-painted image of a soccer ball.

The dead child's family followed, weeping openly despite words of comfort offered by the townspeople.

Elise tracked the entourage until they disappeared around a bend thick with foliage. The town's tiny cemetery lay on a small hill just beyond.

She ignored a black Jeep that skirted the funeral procession as she turned and followed a worn footpath in the opposite direction. She walked past a handful of low-roofed, white stucco buildings that were home to the village's thirty residents. The

path ambled downhill and opened onto an expansive view of a shimmering blue lake.

Cerrón Grande was a reservoir, the largest in El Salvador, built to supply hydroelectric power for the region. Hundreds of families had been resettled when the Lempa River was flooded in 1976, some to the hastily constructed village of Copapayo. Elise glanced at the lake. A fisherman in a canoe and a small workboat cruised across the waterway. To the right, a powder-gray concrete barrier marked the upper lip of the Cerrón Grande Dam that had created the lake.

Elise descended the path nearly to the water's edge. She stopped and wiped her brow in front of a large awning made from gnarled tree roots and covered with palm thatching. A half-dozen red tents were pitched in a semicircle around the awning's opposite side, facing the shaded interior. To either side lay a large tract of farmland, bursting with rows of green cornstalks.

Under the awning, fellow scientists from the United States Agency for International Development sat around makeshift worktables, performing experiments or computer analysis. The group wore shorts and T-shirts in the steamy climate.

A lanky man with thick glasses and a straggly beard looked up from a microscope. "Why the long face?" he asked in a heavy Boston accent.

"There's a funeral in the village today. The procession just passed."

"For the little boy?"

Elise nodded.

"Very sad. Rondi told me there was a sick boy from the village at the Suchitoto clinic. I didn't realize it was serious."

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He shouted to a local teenage boy sorting stalks of corn from a bin. “Rondi, what happened to the little boy?”

The teen hurried over to the scientists. “He was *enfermo* for a short time. A doctor came and took him to the hospital last week, but they could not help him.”

“What was the diagnosis?” Elise asked.

Rondi shrugged. “*Un misterio*. The doctors, they don’t say. Just like the others.”

“What others?”

“Three other children from the village have died in the past few months. Same thing. They get *enfermo*, and it is too late for the doctors to help them.”

Elise looked at her colleague. “Phil, do you think it could be related to the food crops?” She pointed to the bin of corn Rondi had been sorting.

“Due to the genetically modified seeds we provided the farmers here last year?” He shook his head. “Not a chance. This variety is only engineered to withstand drought, and has been safely used all over the world.”

She nodded. “It’s just heartbreaking to see children get sick.”

He shrugged. “We’re agricultural scientists, Elise, not doctors.” He glanced at the thriving cornfield. “And tomorrow, we need to pack up and move ten miles north.”

He saw the disappointment in Elise’s eyes. “Okay, maybe we can do more. I’ll email our country manager and have her make a request to the World Health Organization. They have an established presence in El Salvador. I’m sure they can send someone to investigate.”

“Thank you. The people here deserve to know what’s creating the illness.”

He nodded. “In the meantime, I need you and Rondi to assess the yields in Plot 17.” He pointed to a diagram of the fields around the village. Plot 17 was a narrow field close to the lake.

“Sí, I know which one that is,” Rondi said. He grabbed a canvas bag and looped it over his shoulder.

Elise followed him down a footpath through a neighboring cornfield. As they hiked, she kept thinking of the funeral procession and the small white coffin.

“Rondi, have there been sick children in the other villages, too?”

He nodded. “A cousin named Francisco. He died a short time ago. He lived in San Luis del Carmen, across the lake.”

“How old was he?”

“Four, I think.”

“I don’t recall that village. Did we provide seeds to the farmers there?”

“No, they always have strong crops. But I did see the *científicos* there last week.”

“What scientists?” Elise said. “Our team just arrived at Cerón Grande four days ago.”

“I don’t think they were U.S. workers. Nobody seemed to know where they were from.”

“What did they want?”

Another shrug. “They asked about the *niños* and took some food and water samples.” He stopped at a plastic marker pinned to the ground with the number 17. “This is our plot.”

Elise retrieved a yellow spool of string from Rondi’s bag and strode a few yards into the cornfield. She uncoiled the string

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onto the ground, forming a square around a patch of stalks. With Rondi's assistance, she examined every stalk in the enclosure, recording the number of buds and ears forming on each. She jotted the figures on a clipboard, then moved the string to a patch several yards away and repeated the count. Back at the camp, she would calculate the predicted yield for the entire field.

"Let's return to the camp by the lake," Rondi suggested, once they completed their measurements. He guided Elise through the cornfield.

They emerged on a low bluff overlooking the reservoir. Less than a mile to their right was the eight-hundred-meter-long concrete wall of the Cerrón Grande Dam. They turned the opposite way and followed the shoreline toward camp.

Near the path to the village, Elise stopped to admire a small aluminum windmill on a concrete pad at the water's edge. An eight-bladed fan spun in the light breeze, and water sloshed beneath the structure's base. "I don't remember this being here last year."

"The village well was running low, so the government provided it. Now we can get water from the lake. Mr. Phillip helped us install it last year, after you left."

"The water is used to irrigate the fields?"

"Sí, and for the village. It draws water from a pipe that extends into the lake. We can direct it to the fields or to a filtered cistern that can be pumped into the village."

Elise gazed at the windmill, then turned to Rondi. "You have a boat, don't you?"

"Tied up just around the bend."

"Can you take me out into the lake? I'd like to get some water samples near the inlet pipe."

“I’ll get the boat and be right back.”

Elise jogged to the camp and dropped off the duffel bag and yield records. In its place, she grabbed a satchel with a half-dozen test tubes secured in Velcro pockets. She returned to the shore and waited until Rondi motored up in a small aluminum boat.

“Sorry.” He gave a toothy grin. “The engine, it does not always like to start.”

The dented, oxidized craft was powered by a little six-horsepower outboard that was older than Rondi and smoked as it idled. She tossed the satchel onto a bench, shoved the prow from shore, and hopped aboard. Rondi reversed into deeper water, then turned and motored offshore. They traveled just a short distance before he killed the engine and let the boat drift.

Rondi eyed their position relative to the windmill. “The pipe opening is about here.”

Elise took two of the test tubes from the satchel, removed their stoppers, and dipped them into the cool, clear water. As she capped them, she noticed a dead fish floating nearby. “Do you see many dead fish in the lake?”

Rondi delivered another shrug. “I’ve seen some by the dam.”

“Will you show me?”

Rondi tugged on the outboard’s pull starter a dozen times until it rasped to life. He aimed toward the dam, passing an old fisherman in a canoe who was pulling in a purse seine net. They approached the dam’s safety barrier, a simple steel cable stretched just above the water. Rondi cut the motor and allowed the boat to rub against the cable. Bobbing in the water were dozens of dead fish, their bloated white bellies turned skyward.

Elise snapped some pictures with her cell phone, feeling sick

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at the thought of the village people drinking untreated water from the lake. She collected two more samples, then looked across the reservoir.

“Let’s go north toward San Luis del Carmen. I’d like to collect one more sample near there.”

As Rondi nodded, three sharp, deep rolls of thunder echoed from the opposite side of the dam. Elise and the teen looked at each other—and a deep rumble burbled up beneath them. In a slow cascade, the center face of the concrete dam in front of them crumbled away with a roar.

Elise screamed as Rondi tried to start the outboard. The motor coughed to life, and Rondi turned the throttle full over. The little boat surged away from the collapsing dam, gaining a dozen yards, before losing headway. The tiny motor wailed, but the boat went nowhere.

“What’s happening?” Elise cried.

“The current . . . it’s too strong.” Rondi looked at her with large eyes, his hand on the tiller trembling.

Behind him, the dam was disintegrating into the ravine a hundred meters below as the flow of water accelerated.

Squeezing the throttle until his knuckles turned white, Rondi stared back at the watery edge and shook his head.

He and Elise could only watch as the boat was drawn backward to the widening gap in the dam and the deadly waterfall just beyond.



2

The rumble echoed across the reservoir. “What was that?” Dirk Pitt raised his head from behind a pair of computer monitors where he’d been watching a sonar image of the lakebed. He peered across the cramped wheelhouse of the workboat at the short burly man piloting the vessel.

“It wasn’t thunder.” Al Giordino glanced out the side window at blue skies. “Or my stomach, despite our meager excuse for lunch.” He crumpled a potato chip bag and tossed it onto the dash, then shifted his gaze out the windscreen.

He suddenly sat upright. “Oh, brother, take a look at that. It’s the dam.”

Pitt stood, stretching his six-foot three-inch frame, and looked off the bow. Less than a quarter mile ahead, the rim of the Cerrón Grande Dam stretched across the reservoir. But now

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the structure had a huge gap at its center. Two small boats were just in front of the opening, being drawn into the void.

“The dam’s given way,” he said, “and those boats are going with it.”

Giordino jammed the throttle forward. The thirty-foot workboat surged ahead, driven by a twin set of 250-horsepower outboards. Rather than turn away from the danger, he aimed straight for the havoc.

He glanced over his shoulder across the open stern deck to a taut blue cable that trailed in the frothy wake behind them. A hundred meters back, a yellow sonar towfish broke the surface and bounded through the water.

“No time to reel it in,” Pitt said, reading Giordino’s thoughts. He stepped to the rear cabin door. “Get as close as you can.”

Pitt stepped onto the open deck, retrieved a life ring from the bulkhead, and tied it to a coil of line stored in a bucket. He moved to the transom and tied off the free end to a stern cleat. Looking over the side toward the dam, he wondered if they would get there too late.

ELISE DIDN’T NOTICE the survey boat charging toward them. She focused on the old fisherman in the nearby canoe, fighting for his life. Despite his fierce attempt to paddle clear, the narrow wooden craft was quickly being drawn backward toward the cascading torrent. The old man’s skinny arms flailed with hard, even stokes, but he was powerless against the gushing force.

“Rondi, can you help him?”

She had to yell over the roar of the falling water. The teen winced, then adjusted the tiller, angling the boat toward the fisherman's path.

Elise slipped the satchel over her neck, then grabbed the side of the canoe and pulled the two boats together. The fisherman nodded thanks—and continued to slap the water on the opposite side with his paddle.

It was a losing battle. Both boats were sliding toward the abyss, now less than a hundred feet away.

Above the din of the waterfall, Elise noticed a new sound: the whine of large engines. The survey boat was charging toward the dam at top speed.

The boat curled around in a wide arc, trailing a blue cable, then slowed as it pulled just in front of them. A tall man with black hair standing at the stern tossed them a line.

"Tie off one of the boats," he yelled. "We'll pull you clear."

The rope landed on the aluminum boat's bow, and the fisherman grabbed it. Rather than tie it to one of the boats, he wrapped it around his waist and jumped into the water.

Elise couldn't believe her eyes. She glanced back and saw the plunging water was less than fifty feet away. The draw of the falls was getting stronger, even as Elise let go of the canoe.

But the survey boat was following their position, its pilot feathering the twin outboards to stay near. On the stern, the tall man furiously pulled on the rope until the fisherman's head bobbed alongside. He yanked the old man from the water and freed him from the line. Gathering the rope together, he again tossed the line toward the boat.

"Tie it off," he shouted.

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As the line flew through the air, the aluminum boat pivoted in the accelerating current. The line went high and to the side, but Rondi grabbed for it anyway. "I've got it." He stood and stretched over the side.

A few feet ahead of him, Elise attempted a similar move. With both their weights shifted to the starboard rail, the boat dipped to the side, and the top of the gunnel kissed the water.

Elise tried to jump back. It was too late. The water poured in, flooding the interior, capsizing the boat.

Elise instinctively grabbed onto the boat, but it pulled her under as it sank. She let go and flailed to the surface. Gulping for air, she glimpsed Rondi rushing by, clinging to the line. With a flash of terror, she realized it was he who was stationary. She was the one speeding through the water.

With renewed panic, her heart pounding, she tried swimming away from the dam. The swift current drained her strength as she heard and felt the rumble of the falls closing in behind her.

Stroking harder, her arm slapped into something. Someone else was in the water with her. For an instant, she hoped she had reached Rondi and the line. One look above the surface told her it wasn't so. Instead, she found the dark-haired man from the survey boat next to her.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her tight against him. Confused, she continued to kick and stroke. Then she heard his calm voice. She stopped and looked up into his face.

"Hang on tight to me and take a deep breath." He winked at her through the greenest eyes she'd ever seen.

Adrenaline overtook analysis, and she did as he said. There

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was nothing else she could do, as they'd reached the edge of the falls.

He raised a finger in the air and twirled it as she wrapped her arms around him and took a last breath.

Then gravity took command and carried them over the falls.