

Brown/G—Full Title

CLIVE CUSSLER'S DARK VECTOR

A Novel

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G. P. Putnam's Sons

New York

Prologue: The Crimson Flag

Chapter 1

September 1808

South China Sea

Jun Chu stood on the deck of a three masted *junk* given the auspicious name *Silken Dragon*. The ship was a feast for the eyes, with an emerald-green hull, golden adornments and sails dyed a resplendent blood-orange hue.

The ship sat at anchor in a tranquil bay. Clear, aquamarine water lay beneath the hull, while a steep mountain peak rose from an island beyond.

The peak had given them some morning shade. But the sun was now high above and the temperature had soared. If not for the breeze blowing in from the west, the heat would have been unbearable. As it was, an odd sulfur-like smell could be detected. The source of the aroma baffled Jun, but he had bigger issues to worry about.

He pulled a brass telescope from a leather case. The beautiful instrument was polished and gleaming. Engraved characters on the casing reminded him that it had been given as a gift, from the powerful pirate queen Ching Shih.

The captain of the vessel moved up next to him. "What do you see?"

Jun gazed through the spyglass. His face turned grim. "It seems our escape from Macau did not go unnoticed. Three ships are approaching."

"This is a trade route," the captain reminded him. "Many vessels ply these waters. Do not assume danger where there is only the company of other travelers."

"I assume nothing," Jun said. "Take the spyglass. You'll see that I'm not wary without reason. Those ships fly the red banner of Madam Ching. They're hunters sent to slay us or bring us to Macau for punishments that I choose not to imagine."

Jun focused on the nearest of the approaching ships. It was a larger vessel than the *Dragon*. Four sails to his three and a topmast adorned with banners red as blood.

The other ships in the squadron were further back, too far to see any details, but they tracked the same heading.

The captain offered a hopeful suggestion. "It's said Madam Ching will spare a ship's crew if the master surrenders their cargo without a fight."

Jun lowered the telescope. Ching Shih had indeed created a code of honor among her pirates, but such considerations would not be extended to Jun. "Her code will not apply to us. We are thieves and traitors, not honorable adversaries."

There was no need to say more. The treasure in their hold had been pirated by Madam Ching's ships once already, but instead of being turned into the collective and disbursed fairly, a rogue captain of hers had set much of it aside. He'd sold it to Jun, assuring him the

truth had been hidden.

“Your friend must have been caught short,” the captain said.

Jun shivered at the man’s fate. “To withhold captured plunder is punishable by death,” he said. “To steal it outright...Beheading would be the best fate such a man could hope for. No doubt he’s been killed. Though not soon enough to keep him from speaking our names.”

“We cannot outrun them,” the captain said. “Each of her ships are larger and faster.”

“Then we must fight,” Jun said. “We have cannonades we bought from the East India Company. We have crossbows and harquebuses.”

“We’ll be outnumbered five to one.”

“They cannot come all at once,” Jun said. “And her large ships will not be able to cross the reef. If we remain here, they will have to come in small boats, hoping to climb aboard using ladders and grappling hooks. In my experience, *grenadoes* and flaming arrows are quite effective at such range.”

The captain’s face began to soften. “You hope to bleed them one small group at a time.”

Jun nodded. It was truly their only hope. “And when they’ve bled enough, they’ll depart from us and return to Macau, where they’ll tell Madam Ching we burned the ship rather than surrender and face death.”

The captain’s face was inscrutable. He took the spyglass back, gazing at the red flagged ships as they turned toward the bay. “You have a silken tongue Master Jun. You almost make me believe we might survive.”

* * *

As the men aboard the *Dragon* steeled themselves for battle, Ching Shih’s fleet

approached the reef and pulled back. Small boats were called for and the better part of each ship's compliment prepared to sail forth.

Each of Jun's predictions had so far proved accurate, all except one. There was no condition under which the small fleet would return to Macau with a false story to tell their master, since Madam Ching was aboard the largest of the ships, and her fury had stoked like a bonfire.

Zheng Yi Sao, or Ching Shih as she was known, walked the deck before her men. An average-sized woman with broad shoulders and piercing eyes, her face remained as beautiful as it had been when she'd been taken by the Lord Cheng as a wife.

Together they'd built a dynasty, ultimately controlling the towns and waters around Macau with a pair of iron fists. After Cheng's death, Ching Shih had assumed full control, building the empire ever larger, making allies out of conquered people, creating order out of chaos.

A large portion of that order stemmed from the code she'd put forth. It required fair treatment of crews, captives and concubines. It punished officers who mistreated their men. It demanded swift and ruthless retribution to anyone who betrayed the collective good of the red banner fleet.

With these rules in place, she became the de facto governor of a sprawling region and the most feared and respected pirate lord in all of Asia. One did not steal from her and live to tell the story.

Striding resplendently across the deck in a shimmering gown of lilac and grey, she commanded the full attention of every man on board. A red scarf adorned her neck, a black three-pointed hat rested on her head. Not a sound emanated from the hundred men standing

before her as she climbed the steps to address them.

“These traitors have not stolen from me,” she said, “they have stolen from you.” She allowed that to sink in and then asked them a question. “What is the law of the plunder?”

They replied in unison. “What is taken must be presented. It must be shared by all.”

Her pride grew as they spoke. “And what is the punishment for stealing?”

“Flogging and death.”

She was pleased. Her fleet was disciplined. Her men, a well-trained army. Knowing they would suffer heavy losses she made a promise. “All who go forth shall receive a double share. All who are wounded shall receive triple. All who die today will have their family’s prosperity secured for the length of the next generation.”

They stood still. The air silent and hot.

“And whoever brings me the living body of the traitor,” she finished, “shall be rich beyond the dreams of an emperor.”

The men cheered loudly, chanting her name repeatedly, their minds and bodies ready for battle.

“Go,” she said. “Retrieve what is yours.”

Sixty-four men climbed down the ladders into four boats. Eight additional boats were launching from Ching’s other ships. In each boat half the crew worked the oars while the other half stood ready to fight, either armed or waiting to throw up ladders and hooks.

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Jun watched the fleet of small craft as they crossed the reef and continued toward him on the strength of the oarsmen’s arms. Twelve small boats. Perhaps a hundred and eighty men. He had only seventy-five. But he stood aboard a floating castle.

“They’re coming,” he shouted. “Be ready!”

Warnings were called out from bow to stern. Jun’s men swarmed the top deck of the junk, carrying weapons of every kind. The first group went to the rail carrying crossbows and muskets. Other groups stood behind them ready to fill the gaps. They opened fire as soon as the approaching boats came in range.

The muskets were inaccurate at any sort of range and, aside from the noise and smoke, mostly ineffective. The crossbows, on the other hand, were lethal. The first flight of darts pierced several men in the leading boats. Several oarsman took bolts to the back. They slumped forward or writhed in pain. Two men holding a ladder were hit in the chest. They toppled into the sea.

In the second boat several men were hit in the legs and pinned to the wooden planks beneath them. They shrieked in agony, but the fleet kept coming.

With the leading boats decimated, the men in the following boats opened fire from long range, hoping to forcing Jun’s men back.

Jun ducked as musket balls whistle overhead, but this return fire was more sound and fury than danger. The rocking boats and the inaccurate firearms made for a wild spray of lead that passed without hitting a single crewman.

Subsequent volleys were more effective, and for several minutes the crews traded fire, with each side losing men in the process.

It was a war of attrition, one that Jun’s men were winning, but with each passing second Ching Shih’s men sailed closer. Soon they’d surrounded the *Dragon*, with half of the small boats in reach of the junk’s hull.

“They’re splitting up,” Jun called out. Several boats had rowed across to the port side.

Others were making for the bow. “They plan to take us on all sides. Disperse the men.”

The defenders fanned out, attempting to protect all sections of the ship at once as the pitched battle resumed.

“Our ability to concentrate fire has been sorely reduced,” the captain said.

Jun pulled out his flintlock pistol and cocked the hammer. “They still have to get aboard.”

That task was already under way. Grappling hooks had been thrown up on the port side. Rickety ladders on the starboard.

“Push them back!” the captain ordered.

Jun’s men attacked with axes, raising them high and hammering down with vicious blows. Their targets were not the men but the hooks and the lines. The vicious blows cleaved the ropes in two and dug into the ship’s painted wooden rail.

On the other side of the vessel, ladders were forced backward with long poles. They were pushed hard until gravity took over and the men climbing them tumbled into the sea.

The pirates attacked with covering fire overhead, using a barrage of arrows, gunfire and even spears to keep Jun’s men from repelling them. For each grappling hook and ladder knocked loose, Jun lost a defender, or two, or three. And still Ching Shih’s men came on.

Additional hooks were thrown up and the first invaders reached the deck. The attackers were smaller men—renowned for the speed with which they climbed. They raced up the side of the jade green hull and vaulted over the rail, firing pistols and slashing wildly with swords at anything within reach.

Expecting exactly this type of attack—and knowing the first wave of men would often climb in bare feet for better speed and traction—Jun had covered the deck in ‘*crow’s feet*’:

sharp barbs of twisted metal designed to impale the soles of the men who leapt over the rail.

But Ching Shih knew all the tricks. Her men were clad in thick boots. The *crow's feet* did nothing to slow them. They rushed forward, short swords and daggers in hand.

Jun blasted one of them with his pistol, sending the man to the deck with a bloody chest wound. A crossbow took out the second arrival. And the captain dispatched a third with a slash of his sword. But others were climbing up behind them. Both sides of the ship were now in question, while a score of Ching Shih's men had come aboard near the bow, which was closer to the water and more easily accessible.

The combat became hand to hand. Pistols could be used but not reloaded. Muskets were useless except as blunt instruments to parry a sword or cave in an attacker's skull.

Jun's men were forced back on all sides, pushed inevitably inward from the rail and back toward the raised stern where they would make their final stand.

Another flight of crossbow bolts went forth, thinning the number of attackers, but still more boarders came up the ropes and ladders.

"They seem willing to empty their boats to the last man," the captain shouted.

Jun was shocked by this, but the captain was correct. Several boats could be seen drifting near the stern with no one aboard but the injured or the dead.

"Form two lines!" Jun shouted.

The crew did as ordered but the lines didn't hold for long. The survivors were forced to retreat even further, relinquishing space on the blood-stained decks.

They retreated up the stairs and onto the stern castle. Less than thirty men survived, with twice that number coming their way.

Ching Shih's pirates massed for a final charge, rushing the stairs and surging toward

the top. They came forward shoulder to shoulder, a wall of men and swords. At the last moment, Jun shouted an order with all the breath in his lungs.

His forces spread to the sides and dropped to the deck, revealing four cannonades and an equal number of arquebuses standing on their mounts. The weapons weren't aimed outward to defend against seaborne attack, but inward and down. Their yawning barrels pointed toward the stairs, now packed with attacking pirates.

The cannonades went off with a deafening explosion of black powder. The sound was loud enough to throw a man to the deck, but the devastation came from the munitions inside.

The smooth-bored barrels were packed with chains, broken blades and other fragments of metal and glass. They sent this hail of shrapnel flying into the onrushing force of men. It spread out as it flew, the chains whipping in a circular motion, the glass and metal acting like a hundred musket balls fired simultaneously.

In an instant, the attacking force was cut in half. Of those who survived half again were injured. Even the untouched fell back in stunned disbelief.

The swivel-guns fired next. Not as deadly or destructive, but effective enough to reduce the pirate forces further.

"Finish them!" Jun shouted.

The captain rushed forth with his sword. The surviving members of the crew charged alongside him, hacking and stabbing in a fury.

Jun stood where he was, gloating over his master stroke. By waiting to employ his greatest weapons until Madam Ching's soldiers were massed together, he'd slaughtered most of them in a single instant.

With his men counterattacking, Ching's pirates were forced off the boat, diving over

the rails and into the bay. Some swam for the safety of the island, others to the drifting boats or even toward the reef beyond.

Rushing to the aft rail, Jun pointed through the smoke at one of the departing boats. “Swing the guns around,” he shouted. “Destroy the boats so they can’t attack again.”

A pair of his men worked to turn one of the cannonades. A third crewman packed it with powder and solid projectile. But before they could light the fuse, a deafening blast rang out. It shook the bay, louder than any cannon or echo of thunder, or anything Jun had ever heard or felt.

The shockwave knocked him to the deck, threw several men off the ship and snapped one of the masts in half. The *Dragon* itself shuddered, leaning and threatening to roll over in the bay.

Face down on wooden planks, Jun felt fingers of heat dancing on the nape of his neck. A wave of hot air burned his nostrils and dried his eyes. He rolled over, fearing himself on fire and trying desperately to damp out the imaginary flames.

He wasn’t burning, just being buffeted by three-hundred-degree winds and pelted by small rocks falling from the sky. Looking up, he watched the sun vanish behind a cloud of darkness.

Only now did he understand. The mountain had exploded. Its upper third—pulverized by a volcanic explosion. A mushroom cloud of ash could be seen bulling its way upward into the sky. Boulders the size of houses flew across the sky like birds. Trees and bushes, most of them in flame, rose alongside them. Lightning caused by static charges rippled through maelstrom above.

“My god,” Jun whispered.

All fighting stopped. The battle no longer mattered; the treasure no longer mattered. A single thought obsessed every mind. *Get away from the island or die.*

“Flare the sails,” Jun shouted. “Cut the anchor loose.”

The men rushed to do the work. Out beyond the reef, the red banner ships were leaving their stations, abandoning their rowing comrades to certain doom.

Boulders and rocks began to fall, towers of whitewater erupting from the bay as they landed, drenching the ship and everyone on board.

With the anchor gone and the remaining sails catching the wind, the ship began to move.

Ash began to fall around them, coating the deck with grey snow. Looking back, Jun understood the good fortune that had kept them alive so far. The eruption had been concentrated on the far side of the island. The force of the blast had been to the east, outward away from the bay. The ash and pumice were spreading more widely, but the constant breeze of the trade winds was propelling the cloud eastward as well. Even the *Dragon* was picking up speed faster than he'd imagined it could.

“Perhaps the *Dragon* still favors us,” Jun said.

The captain, wounded in one leg and limping, shook his head. “The bay is emptying,” he said.

Jun stared through the falling ash. Large heads of coral were emerging from the bay, rising from the water like a barricade of dripping teeth. Stretches of wet sand were appearing, leaving pools of water between them, filled with desperate fish.

“What’s happening?” Jun asked.

“The island is rising,” the captain said. “The eruption isn’t finished.”

The ship ground to a painful stop, planks in the hull breaking against the reef.

They settled in what was left of the water, sinking lower and tilting over on one side as if they were careening the ship on beach at hightide.

Another tremor hit and the gasses and magma stored up in a chamber below the island were released all at once.

The remnants of the peak were obliterated. The ground beneath the ship collapsed and the sea rushed back in. At the same exact moment, a pyroclastic flow of fire, ash and mud surged down what was left of the mountain. The two surges collided over the sinking ship, crashing together like a pair of gigantic hands, erasing the ship from view and from history.

Chapter 2

Present Day

One hundred miles northeast of Taiwan

The *Canberra Swift* sailed through the night, heading north from Taiwan. She was a mid-sized cargo vessel, with a high beltline and an aerodynamic shell covering the front half of the ship. Her bridge emerged from this shell near middle of the ship, while twin funnels, raked sharply backward, extended aft.

A leading nautical magazine described her as unattractive in nautical terms, suggesting a Japanese bullet train and seagoing ferry had borne a child together. But the strange shape had a purpose.

The ship had been designed to carry oversized cargo in a *roll-on/roll-off* configuration, much like a ferry. Freight and equipment were loaded on the ship at the stern, using a ramp wide enough to accommodate six lanes of traffic. It would be parked or stored inside, in a vast, unbroken cargo hold which ran the length of the main deck from bow to stern. Upon reaching its destination, the cargo was simply driven forward and off another ramp at the front of the ship.

Because of her size shape and speed, the *Swift* had been used to transport everything from the fuselage sections of large aircraft, to rocket parts, and even nuclear waste which traveled in sealed, lead-lined containers. If a war ever broke out, she was already committed by an option contract to be pressed into service carrying oversized military equipment to bases near whatever combat zone arose.

Jobs like these fell to the *Swift*, not only because she'd been designed to carry unique cargos, but because—as the name implied—the *Swift* was one of the fastest cargo ships ever built. She could make forty knots in a sprint and travel at thirty-five all day long. She could cross the Pacific in seven days, a third of the time required for the average containership.

Standing on the bridge, the *Swift*'s captain studied the radar. There were no vessels near enough to be a bother. "All ahead full," he ordered. "There's a storm heading down the Canadian coast from Alaska and I'd very much like to beat it into San Francisco Bay."

The helmsman acknowledged the order and using the computer panel in front of him, ordered the gas-turbine engines to maximum output.

With the engine room answering, the captain was satisfied. He turned to the first officer. "The ship is yours. I'll be in my quarters if you need me."

The first officer nodded as the captain left the bridge. Expecting a peaceful night, he took a seat in the command chair as the *Swift* put on more speed.

* * *

Clinging to the outside of the ship with magnetic hand and knee pads, Teng Kung-lu, known to his men as Lucas, did not appreciate the additional speed in quite the same way. The electromagnetic force holding him in place was substantial, but every additional bit of velocity increased the gusting slipstream which threatened to break the magnet's grip.

He pulled himself close to the hull, doing all he could to prevent the air from getting between him and the ship. Turning his face away from the wind, he looked to the side and down. The eight men of his team were doing as he was, clinging to the ship like barnacles. Each of them dressed in black, their submachineguns held tight under Velcro covered flaps.

He could see the strain in their arms and the tension on their faces as this part of the heist had gone on far longer than intended.

Looking up he counted the seconds until finally the main lights of the ship went dark. Third watch had begun. Using his thumb, he triggered a pinpoint light in the magnetic pad under his left hand. Three dots constituted an order to begin climbing again. They needed to get up and inside before the wind blew them off the hull.

With his right thumb, he pressed down on a button connected to the gauntlet wrapped around his right arm. It disabled the power on that magnet allowing him to pull it from the hull and move it upward. Stretching as far as he could, he released the button.

The electro-magnet switched on instantly and his arm was pulled back to the steel plate where it locked into position. Pressing a second button he was able to move his right leg upward. He then repeated the procedure on the left side, slowly but surely crawling toward a waiting hatch.

His men did the same, following him up. A trail of human ants, heading for the sugar inside the ship.

Reaching the hatch, he risked detaching his left hand long enough to pound on the metal plating. Nothing happened. He hammered it harder, using the metal part of the gauntlet to elicit a metallic clang.

This time he heard something: a latch releasing, a wheel—which was sometimes called a dog—spinning inside. *Thank God*, Lucas thought.

The hatch, large enough to set a gangplank on and load ships stores through, swung inward as it opened. A crewman wearing the shipping lines' uniform appeared. He had black hair with an odd white streak down the middle. He made eye contact and offered a hand.

Lucas took it, released the other magnets and was pulled inside.

The crewmen moved back into the shadows as Lucas helped his men through the hatch and into the shelter of the small compartment.

All went well until the last man came through. The man disengaged his magnets a moment too soon. His leg slipped and he dropped.

Lunging forward, Lucas grabbed the strap of the submachine gun. The weapon wedged up under the man's shoulder and held tight, even as Lucas was pulled to the deck and nearly dragged out through the hatch.

"Callum!" Lucas shouted. Despite their Chinese ethnicity, the members of the group chose Western names when they joined. They knew each other by no other name, so that in the event of capture they could not give up any of their comrades.

"Re-engage!" Lucas shouted, "Use the couplers!"

Realizing that Callum was frozen with fear and concerned that he might be pulled over the edge, Lucas engaged his own magnetic system and locked himself to the deck.

"Climb over me," he shouted.

The man looked up.

"Hurry," Lucas said, "before you pull my arm out of the socket."

With several of the other men now crowding around to assist, Callum pulled himself up using Lucas like a rope ladder. As soon as they could reach him, Callum's comrades grabbed him and hauled him inside.

Lucas relaxed and disengaged the magnets, pushing back from the edge. Callum offered a hand and helped him to his feet.

Rubbing his shoulder and stretching, Lucas moved closer to Callum. "That was foolish," he snapped, glaring at the man who'd almost fallen. "Get sloppy again and I'll let you die."

The words were harsh, but the men knew better. Lucas was the leader of a band of brothers, pirates who looked after their own. Unlike the famous pirate code of old, Lucas had never left a man behind.

Callum nodded and looked away, ashamed. As he stepped back, Lucas turned to the man who'd let them in. "You were late."

"Couldn't be helped," the crewman said. "The captain stayed on watch thirty minutes later than usual. He's gone to bed now."

Lucas nodded. "Anything else we should know?"

The crewman shook his head. "The security systems are disabled. You should have no problem getting into the engine room or the communications suite."

"Good," Lucas said. He sent three men to the engine room and two others to the communications center, where the satellite receivers, multi-band radios and controls for the various automatic beacons lay.

Turning to the *Swift's* crewman, he made a change. "Take one of my men and go to the captain's quarters. Wake the old man up and bring him to me."

“I thought you’d want me to lead you to the bridge,” the crewman replied.

“That, we can find on our own.”

The various groups left the compartment, heading in opposite directions. Lucas took Callum with him. They went forward toward the nearest stairwell.

Moving calmly, Lucas raised the Velcro flap covering his belly. Without breaking stride, he removed a QCW-05 submachine gun that was strapped diagonally across his chest. He slung it into place and screwed a cylindrical compressor into the barrel.

The QCW was a Chinese submachine gun that fired a subsonic 5.8 millimeter round made of hardened steel instead of soft lead. It was compact and well suited for close quarters combat. The shell could punch through a quarter inch steel plate.

Lucas had trained his men to use them to lethal effect, but if things went as planned, they wouldn’t have to fire a single shot.

Reaching the bridge, they found the *Swift’s* first officer and a pair of crewmen at the helm. Avoiding the theatrics of bursting into the compartment shouting threats, Lucas stepped quietly over the threshold, clearing his throat to get everyone’s attention.

The men on the bridge reacted with glacial speed. Their collective surprise at the appearance of armed men in commando gear was so complete that they froze in confusion.

“Get down on the deck,” Lucas said calmly, “if you’d rather not be shot to pieces.”

The two crewmen did as ordered. The first officer seemed stuck in his chair. Finally, he spoke. “We have cash in the safe,” he said, raising his hands, easing out of the seat and dropping to one knee. “It’s unlocked.”

“Of course it is,” Lucas said.

The lack of resistance and an unlocked safe were marks of the modern state of piracy. An unspoken agreement had arisen between the world's various pirates and shipping lines whose vessels plowed the seas.

Pirates came aboard vessels where they could. Usually in tight coastal waters near poor, unstable countries. Instead of fighting them off and risking death and destruction, officers and crew often hid in safe rooms or *castles* which the pirates could not access, thus allowing the pirates time to search the ship for cash or valuables. Safes were left open and supplied with a modicum of currency. Just enough to give the pirates an easy score, and incentive to get off the ship as fast as possible. At times, cell phones and laptop computers were used to augment the bribe, left out for the taking, like cookies for Santa Claus.

The deal was simple. Pirates didn't kill or injure the crews, they didn't steal cargoes worth millions or damage the ships, and in return, the shipping lines didn't fill their vessels with armed guards, ex-special forces members or former MOSAD agents.

The system was more akin to bribery or a protection racket, but it worked for the most part. Except when it didn't.

As he stared down the barrel of the gun, the first officer realized, *this* would be one of those times. He studied Lucas and his comrade, studying their clothing and weapons and considering the stealth with which they'd come aboard. "You're not here for cash," he said. "Are you?"

Lucas ignored the question. "Call your other officers to the bridge," he instructed. "Make no attempt to alert them to our presence, we know your code words for security threats."

The first officer stood slowly and stepped to the console. Setting the PA system for ship-wide, he made the call. “This is first officer Crawford speaking. All officers report to the bridge for general briefing. We have new orders to review.”

As the sound of his voice played out on the ship’s speakers, Crawford looked at Lucas pleadingly. “I had to give them a reason,” he said, justifying his extra words.

Lucas nodded. “At least you didn’t lie.”