

AN·ECHO·OF·THE·ASHES
BOOK II

SHADOW
♦ OF THE ♦
NIGHTINGALE

♦ ANTHONY KEARLE ♦

ONE

Island of Ephilion, Gulf of Lamrei

Ephilion, once the crowning glory of the Gulf of Lamrei, lay ruined. A haze of smoke arose from its ashes, while the bodies of the dead lay abandoned. Those that hung in steel cages were left to rot in the sun, a great feast for the crows. The ships once moored at harbour now rested at the bottom of the bay.

“Elara came,” Luana Marquez murmured, as she led a dozen of her crew through the ruined harbour town. Her hand tightly clasped her broad-bladed sidesword. The sight of this once-beloved safe haven chilled her to the bone.

Like the rest of her crew, the captain of the *Emeralis* wore a sash of green tightly around her waist, beneath her wide belt. A dagger with an emerald imbued in its pommel sat atop her right hip, while a jade-coloured bandana kept her curling brown tresses at bay. Beads ran through her hair, and a trio of necklaces hung from her throat. Her fingers were covered in rings of emerald and jade. The Jade Queen, some called her, and for good reason. It was said that though she wore green, she had a tongue of pure silver. It was said that she led without mercy. It was said that that was why she’d become captain in the first place.

“That marks four settlements in as many weeks,” murmured Luana’s first mate. The simple loose-fitting garb that he wore, along with his foreign sword and eaglelike eyes, marked him as Tariki.

“Aye, Calvillo,” Luana replied.

Her crew was quiet as they trudged toward the centre of Ephilion, for they all knew what its destruction meant. The conquest of the Gulf was now inescapably under way. Many were about to die. Many who had called Lamrei home.

Calvillo's ears pricked as a sound no greater than a whisper reached them. "Voices," he hissed.

He flicked his sword into both hands. Luana took up her dagger and nodded to her crew. Swords were readied, while two of their number nocked arrows into powerful bows. Luana set her jaw before she rounded the corner into Ephilion's town square.

Her eyes widened as she saw what lay ahead. Two dozen pirates stood in the square, the vanguard of not one but two crews. One man knelt beside the body of a boy who would have been no more than twelve. A pair of crucified men rose before the pirates. Luana knew them both, and the sight sent a shiver down her spine.

"Marquez," one of the pirates called, as he noticed her crew.

The mere act revealed how serious this had become. They may have respected each other, but every crew was rival to the next.

"Laven," Luana returned in greeting.

Garrett Laven was more of a schemer than a true-blooded pirate. A man who many sought for his wisdom. His ship, the *Aglaeca*, had plagued these waters for nearly ten years.

Luana sheathed her blade and made her way over. All was quiet as the boy whispered something to the second captain, Cillian Teague of the *Oridassey* was crouched above him. A fierce man, Aureian to the bone. One of the six. One of the old guard.

The boy's words faded with his breath. His grip on Teague's hand loosened, and his arm fell limp to the ground. Teague reached out and gently shut his lifeless eyes.

"Rest easy now, lad," Teague said, his voice quiet. "Drift deeper and deeper. The sirens are calling your name."

Luana did not allow the tears that threatened to flow. Not just for the boy, but for all the lives taken needlessly. For a haven from

the cruel outside world, sundered before their very eyes.

“What happened here?” she asked.

Teague rose to his feet. His hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword so tightly that Luana could see the white of his bones. Now there was a true pirate in every sense of the word.

“When we arrived, they were long gone. The boy said that they came like ghosts in the night.” Teague gestured up to the crucified men. “Aulous and Fabian resisted. They made the Elarans pay for every step they took with blood, yet in the end, they fell like all the others. None were left alive... blood, bones, and cinders. That is what’s become of us.”

Garrett Laven’s lips curled back as he snarled, “Elara will bleed for this.”

“And how do you plan on doing that, exactly?” Calvillo of Tarik asked him. “Look around you. Ephilion is no more. The fourth of our harbours, in little more than a month, to be left as ash and scorched earth. Landonsport has joined these invaders and now willingly supplies them. Aulous and Fabian are dead. The old guard are dead.”

“Not all,” said Teague.

“No, not all,” Calvillo continued. “All the same, the days of fortunes pouring down upon us are over.”

Fury etched itself upon Luana’s heart. Its venom sprang from her lips. “And that is why we must fight back,” she growled. “They are burning our seas from shore to shore. Each day brings them closer to finding those places that remain as our safe havens.”

Captain Teague looked from pirate to pirate. He brushed the hilt of his sword as he stepped away from the boy’s body. “When we of the old guard founded Lamrei twenty-five years ago, we did so with a single purpose,” he started. “To create a place of freedom for all who sought it, free from the rule of tyrants and fools. Thousands joined as our kingdom of the sea grew.”

He nodded to Luana, Laven and Calvillo in turn.

“Escaped slaves, banished men.” Teague’s gaze shifted to the dead boy. “And those just in search of a better life. All came together to make this place what it is... what it *was*. I can still hear the principle that started this all burning in my mind. Freedom. We are all just stories in the end. Let us make it a good one.”

Teague’s gaze shifted a final time. It moved to the crucified corpses of their former leaders.

“We have all stood idle too long. Do you agree, Laven?” Teague asked.

“Aye, I do,” Laven nodded thoughtfully. “Yet the future is not a gentle river to carry us. It is the ocean in which we drown if we are not prepared.”

Luana Marquez took a deep breath as her fellow captains spoke. A short life, but a good one. That was their code. Here in that place where all were equal.

“And so, prepared we must be,” she said. “The old guard did it wrong. They tried to fight Elara alone, without the aid of their brothers, and they paid the price.”

“What do you suggest?” Captain Laven asked with a frown. “We are pirates. Working alone on the seas is the only way... it is who we are.”

“Then we must change,” Luana replied with a deadly certainty, before she strode into the centre of the ruined square. “Friends, they come for us now. Circling like vultures. Waiting... watching for any sign of weakness,” she cried as her eyes moved from face to face. “They think us defeated, broken. We who were once feared. I say that we remind them that they were right to be afraid. I say we remind them that we are more than just the dogs that they would brand us as. We are lions, and lions hunt in packs.”

Eyes glowed as her words began to fade. Teague nodded. He slowly made his way to Garrett Laven. He looked Laven in the eye and held out a hand. They had spent so long working alone; it had been necessary to survive on the open water. Ending such a

life was a hard thing for them.

Captain Laven gave a small nod, and they joined hands.

“And you, Marquez?” Teague asked. Again, he held out a hand. He watched her. He dared her. He stepped closer.

“We are lions, then,” she told him.

They clasped hands. An alliance had begun.



Darkness covered the sea. It engulfed the waters that stretched from horizon to horizon in its ebony maw. The moon and its silver light were hidden beyond the clouds as they often were in the heart of autumn. Only the lamps of the Red Fortune broke the dark veil. The only sound was that of the vessel cutting through the gentle waves. The Fortune was an Elaran treasure galleon bound for the harbour city of Landonsport, a prospering town held within the clutches of the Gulf of Lamrei. Vanor Pasion, captain of the Red Fortune, sighed as he ran his gaze over the maps stretched out on the table before him. In his thirty-five years he had spent near twenty aboard ships. Fifteen of which had been with the Elaran navy. He had fought in dozens of skirmishes, against pirates, vagabonds, and even the Valkir, yet never had he been dragged into a conflict such as this. War had been declared on the filth that called Lamrei home. The scourge of the Sacasian. The ones who stole, burned, and murdered in cold blood. The orders had been simple. Kill or capture the pirates and burn their harbours. Imprisoning those who believed that they fought for freedom was poetic justice. The thought gave Pasion something of a smile.

Yet now Landonsport, one of the four great cities that had all but helped the pirates in creating their havens across the seas, had turned coat and thrown themselves upon the League’s mercy. Magister Imrohir of Elara had accepted the surrender, but the surrender came with condition. The League would now use the

port as a base, and the city would give over command of their fleet.

Pasian believed this folly for the people of Landonsport were no better than the rats. Now he was sailing a cargo of near unimaginable value to them. Food, supplies, weapons, and – most importantly – gold. Why have a turncoat ally when you could have a good friend?

“STARBOARD!” came a roar from the Fortune’s deck.

Pasian’s head snapped up as the cry was echoed once more.

“STARBOARD!”

The warning bell began to sound. Something large slammed into the side of the ship.

They were under attack.



Illis heard the screams from above as the Red Fortune was boarded. Fear ran down the boy’s spine, as he heard the clash of steel and the cries of the dying. He had seen fights and brawls in his fifteen years, yet never anything like this. He was nothing more than a cabin boy and had never wielded a sword; let alone swung one. He hid in the crews’ quarters beneath the main deck. Here, at least, he would not be in the way.

Something heavy thudded into the boards overhead. It was followed by a snarl, and the unmistakable sound of steel being driven into flesh. The Elaran boy reached into his shirt and wrapped a hand around his amulet.

“Azaria protect me,” he murmured, and shut his eyes as a great roar assaulted his ears. His blood turned to ice. Trembles rocked his thin body, as the men above began to chant.

THUD!

The door to the main deck was flung open. Illis snatched up his knife as a pair of boots began to descend into the bowels of the Red Fortune. He ducked around one of the side posts as the

boots left the wooden stairs and reached the hard flooring of the crews' quarters. The sound of heavy breathing reached his ears as the wood creaked underfoot.

"Anything?" a savage voice called, no more than three paces from Illis' hiding spot.

"I'm not sure," another replied.

The boy could barely keep his frightful gasping breaths at bay as the footsteps drew closer. His trembling fingers tightened around the hilt of the dagger.

"I think I smell a rat," the first voice growled, and its menacing edge cut deep into Illis' terrified heart.

The boy turned his head as the blood left his face. Staring at him across the quarters was a man. His hair wild, and his face a mask of blood. His right hand was covered by the curling guard of a sidesword, while his eyes were gateways to hell. Illis stumbled back with a whimper as the pirate came toward him. Fear. It was all he felt. The dagger fell from his grasp and rang as it hit the wooden planks beneath. Illis' gaze was drawn to the pirate's bloody sword. A second pirate joined the first with a sneer and brought his vicious bearded axe into a two handed grip.

"You a coward?" he growled in disdain.

Illis' heart near stopped. The pirates could see the fear in his eyes. From birth he had been told about the bloodthirsty raiders of Lamrei. He knew how they treated their victims and prisoners.

"Please..." he stammered, as he backed into the side of the ship, "I'm just the cabin boy."

The man with the sword snorted. His hand shot out and grabbed Illis' arm. The boy screamed as the pirates dragged him toward the wooden stairs.

The deck of the Red Fortune was slick with the cold, salty water of the Sacasian, mingled with the thicker crimson coloured tide of blood. Splashes came from the sea as bodies were thrown overboard. The pirates were clad in their loose shirts, coats, and

blouson pants. Under the moonless night, they appeared as devils.

Now that he was above deck, Illis realised how they had been taken by surprise. No lights had been kindled aboard the pirate vessel and so it had made its approach unknown. The dark sails had helped with the illusion. The boy's eyes widened as he was shoved toward the main mast. There, covered in his own blood, was Captain Pasion. Beside the captain knelt eight of the other crewmen. Their hands bound tightly.

Another man crouched before Vanor Pasion. A midnight-blue coat was pulled tightly around his strong form. A white shirt sat beneath the embellished coat, while a pair of belts were wrapped around him. The first ran from shoulder to hip, while the second was bound around his waist.

The pirate murmured something to Captain Pasion before he turned to face the boy and his captors. Everything about the man was evil and chilled Illis to the bones. A trio of scars ran down the left side of his head while his dark hair hung loosely down to his shoulders and disappeared into his beard. A slight frown furrowed his brow. His eyes burned deep into Illis' soul.

"Found him skulking below deck," one of Illis' captors told the man.

The scarred man raised his bloodied sword and placed it upon Illis' shoulder.

"Do you know who I am boy?" the menacing voice growled coldly.

Illis's eyes dropped to the deck, for he could not bear to look at that evil face any longer. There his gaze fell upon the gore below, and gods, did it frighten him.

"Cillian Teague of the Oridassey," the pirate captain told him, as he wiped his sword on Illis' shirt. He twitched his wrist and placed the cold edge of his blade upon the side of the boy's neck. "Time once was, if we took a ship, its crew would be offered the choice to join our brotherhood," Teague continued. "But those

days are long gone. Do you know why?”

Illis' lip trembled, yet he clamped his jaw tightly shut. For such was his fear.

Teague leaned closer and cast his hot, stinking breath on the boy's face. “Sacira, Famier, Androna, and Ephilion, all washed away like the tides. Bodies left to rot in the sun as carrion for crows. Men, women, children... all dead. And for what? For what?”

“You are a traitor and a butcher, Teague,” spat Vanor Pasian, as he glared up at the pirate captain. “No more than that. Here you stand under the moonless sky, attacking in the dark like a coward.”

“Yet here I stand,” Teague replied, “aboard *your* ship, with *your* men kneeling at my feet.”

“The Crown will make you bleed for this.”

“They have tried many times over.”

Teague locked his gaze with Illis'. The boy could not look away from that consuming glare, that bottomless pit of burning rage, even as Teague spoke.

“Kill the crew.”

The men of the Red Fortune cried out as rough hands seized their bodies. Pasian closed his eyes and bowed his head. He had failed his men. One by one, the pirates sank their blades into the throats of their prisoners and watered the deck with their blood. Illis began to sob as their lifeless bodies collapsed before his eyes.

His comrades. His friends.

Was he next to fall?

All he felt was the biting wind, and the numbing fear that chilled him to the bone. Tears spilled freely down his cheeks, as Teague turned those evil eyes back on him.

“Did you know that Pasian was my brother once?” Teague murmured. “No matter.”

He lowered his blade and glanced to one of his brethren. “Prepare a longboat. We do *not* kill children.”

Teague stepped away. He met Captain Pasian's eyes, and the man gave him a nod and a slight smile. Like the rest of the crew, Pasian had always been good to him. It was all he could do to stop the sobs from wracking his body.

"Is it wise, sparing the boy?" one of the pirates whispered to Teague, as the two drew close. "They do not know we are this far west."

Illis' heart skipped a beat. He had good ears and could just barely make out their words.

"And that is how it shall remain," Teague replied. "Trust me, brother – they will not be ready when we attack Landonsport from the north."

The captain of the Oridassey turned and gazed around the deck. "We have won a great victory here and it shall not be the last. Lock the Fortune's captain in the brig, and then we sail with our new prize."

