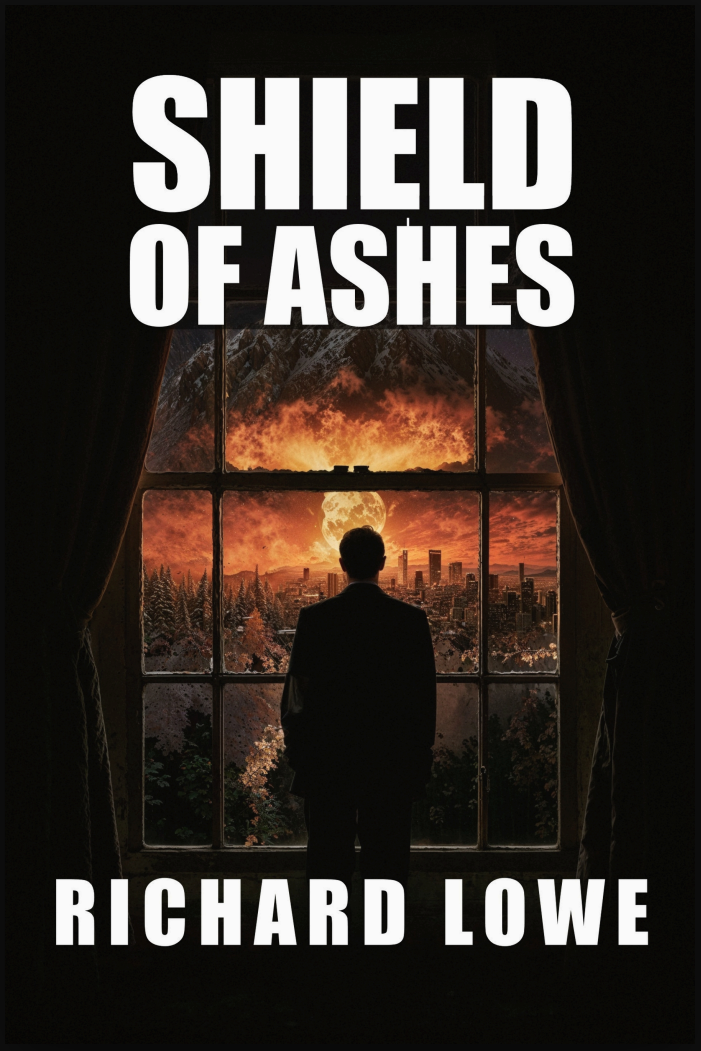
A FREE COMPANION TO SHIELD OF ASHES

Low in the Water

Spring 2028. A Romanian freighter leaves Karachi riding far too deep for farm machinery, and a nineteen-year-old cadet goes looking under the tarps.



RICHARD LOWE

Low in the Water

Arabian Sea, Spring 2028, Night

The door to hold three was supposed to be dogged shut, and it wasn't.

Captain Ion Dragomir stood in the passageway with his hand on the steel and listened. Two in the morning, the Constanta Spirit four days out of Karachi, and the engine was a steady thud he felt through the soles of his boots more than heard. The handle was cool and damp, and the dog that should have been down hung loose at an angle.

He had walked this round every night of his career that he could walk it. Thirty-eight years at sea, the first of them on Romanian state ships that leaked oil from every flange, and the habit had outlasted the ships, the state company and two owners who went bankrupt. His chief officer, Costel Bratu, called it the ghost patrol and pretended it was funny.

Dragomir pulled the door and stepped through onto the catwalk.

The hold smelled of grease and warm canvas and the cardboard the Pakistani dockers had wedged between the lashings. Below him, in rows, sat forty-one shapes under green tarpaulins stenciled DOBROGEA AGRICULTURAL MACHINERY in letters a meter high. None of them was shaped like a tractor.

He had counted them going in, because he couldn't help counting. Afterward he went to his cabin and drank two glasses of țuică. He hadn't counted anything since.

A light moved under the fourth tarp from the forward bulkhead.

It was small and white, a phone, and it went still the moment his boots rang on the ladder. Dragomir went down anyway. His knee complained on the last rungs, the way it had complained for ten years, and he stood on the tank top in the half dark and waited.

"Come out."

Nothing. The ship rolled a few degrees and the tarp creaked against its lashing.

"I can see your light. Come out, or I'll have the bosun drag you out by the ankles, and he'll enjoy it."

The tarp lifted at the corner and Radu Ilie climbed down off the vehicle underneath it. He was nineteen and built like a broom handle, a deck cadet from the maritime university on his first long voyage, and his coverall was smeared black across the chest where he'd crawled over grease. He held the phone against his leg with the screen turned in.

Behind him, where the tarp had come loose, Dragomir saw a slab of armor painted the color of sand and the boxy edge of a turret. A short, thick barrel pointed at the forward bulkhead.

"It's a Bradley, an M2A2," Radu said. "The Americans left half their army in Afghanistan, everybody knows, and this is part of the half, and that's a twenty-five millimeter gun, Captain, I've driven a thousand of these on my laptop, I know every..."

He stopped, because Dragomir had put out his hand.

The boy looked at the hand and then at his phone.

"Give it to me."

"I didn't do anything with them."

"Give it to me."

Radu put the phone in his palm. It was warm from his body and the screen was cracked across one corner. Dragomir thumbed it awake and the camera roll came up in a grid: tarps, lashings, the sand-colored hull, a data plate stamped in English, the gun barrel with a camera flash glaring off it.

Eleven photographs. One had a small red mark on it.

"What's this?"

"It didn't go." Radu's voice climbed. "I tried to send it to my brother Sorin, he's in the army in Craiova, he'd lose his mind."

"And?"

"And the crew internet's been off since Karachi, so it just sat there. It's still sitting there, I swear it never went anywhere."

Dragomir knew the crew internet had been off since Karachi. He'd switched it off himself, at the request of the man in cabin six, and told the crew the satellite dome had a fault. Nobody believed him and nobody complained, because a ship's crew knows the difference between a fault and an order.

He held the phone and felt the hold around him: forty-one shapes, the containers stacked in hold one with their own lying paperwork, the boy breathing too fast in the dark.

"How did you get the door open?"

"It wasn't dogged." Radu lifted his chin. "I swear on my mother, I was going to the paint locker for the bosun and it was hanging open."

"So you went in."

"I saw the stencils first. They're wrong, Captain, tractors don't need chain lashings that size. I only wanted to see."

Dragomir believed him about the door. That was the part that sat cold in his stomach. Somebody had come in here before Radu and hadn't bothered to close up, and on this ship one man had a reason to walk into hold three at night.

He put the phone in the breast pocket of his shirt and buttoned the flap over it.

"You were asleep in your bunk tonight," he said. "From midnight. Bratu will say so, because I'll tell him to."

"Am I in trouble?"

"You're nineteen, so you're always in trouble." Dragomir pointed at the ladder. "Go up and dog the door behind you, hard enough to hurt your hand."

Radu went up the ladder fast, without touching the rails. At the top he hesitated and looked back down at the vehicle under its tarp. His face had a hunger in it that Dragomir remembered from a long way back, from a boy on the quay at Constanța staring up at a freighter with a Greek flag.

The door clanged. The dogs went down, one, two, three, four.

Dragomir stayed a while longer. He pulled the loose corner of the tarp back over the armor and tied it off with a rolling hitch. His fingers shook on the line, and he blamed his age.

* * *

Arabian Sea, the Next Morning

Yuriy Danyliuk took his coffee black with three sugars and drank it on the starboard bridge wing every morning at eight, rain or sun. He was fifty-six, with a thick neck and a gray brush of hair and the hands of a man who had spent thirty years inside engine rooms. His papers said he was the supercargo, the consignee's man, along to watch over the machinery for Dobrogea Agricultural.

After four days he knew more about the Spirit's two auxiliary generators than her own second engineer did.

He was there now, mug in one hand, the other resting on the rail, watching the sea come up gray and slow under a sky the color of dishwater.

“Your cadet,” Danyliuk said, without turning around. “The tall one, does he sleep badly?”

Dragomir came out onto the wing with his own mug. The wind was warm and wet and smelled of nothing, the way the open Arabian Sea smells of nothing. A flying fish skittered off a wave crest and vanished.

“He sleeps like a dead man. Bratu has to kick his bunk.”

Danyliuk drank. “The tarp on number four in hold three was tied with a bowline yesterday. This morning it's a rolling hitch.”

Dragomir took his time over the coffee. It was too hot and he drank it anyway and let it burn his tongue.

“You check the knots.”

“I check everything. It's the job.”

Danyliuk turned at last. His eyes were pale and ordinary, and they weren't unkind.

“I like you, Captain,” he said. “You're a good seaman and you run a clean ship, which is rare enough these days. So I'll ask you once, and then we can both go back to pretending we carry tractors.”

“You left the door undogged last night.”

Danyliuk didn't blink. “Yes.”

“You went in there at midnight and didn't close it.”

“The lashings on number nine are chafing, and your second engineer called me away to look at a pump, and I forgot the door.” He shrugged. “It was a mistake, and I make them, but not many.”

“The boy found it open. A boy found a door open on a ship and looked inside, like every boy on every ship in the world would do.”

“And what did the boy see?”

“Tarpaulins.”

Danyliuk set his mug down on the rail, carefully, so it wouldn't slide when the ship rolled. Below them a deckhand was hosing salt off the hatch covers. The water ran in sheets toward the scuppers.

“In my business, two kinds of people know things,” he said. “Some know because they're paid to know, like me, and like you now, a little, whether you wanted it or not. Those are safe, mostly, because they have something to lose.”

“And the other kind?”

“They know by accident, and they talk. They aren't bad, only excited, or drunk, or in love, or their brother is in the army in Craiova and would lose his mind.”

Dragomir felt the phone against his chest through the shirt.

He hadn't said anything about Craiova. He hadn't said anything about a brother. Danyliuk had been in the crew mess at some point in the last four days, eating sarmale with the Filipinos and listening to Radu talk, because Radu never stopped talking.

“He's a cadet, and his mother sells cheese at the market in Medgidia,” Dragomir said. “I signed for him, so he's mine.”

“Then I'm glad he has you.” Danyliuk picked up his coffee again. “In Constanța, some people will want a conversation with him.”

“What kind of conversation?”

“The kind where he signs a paper and understands what happens if he breaks it.” Danyliuk looked out at the sea. “The colonel is a careful man, and he didn't put eight ships to sea so a photograph could end up on a website.”

The coffee went cold in Dragomir's mug while he stood there. He thought about the colonel, the lean man who couldn't leave his watch strap alone, who had come aboard in Karachi to shake hands and said nothing about the boxes. He thought about the money in the owners' account in Piraeus, the smaller sum in his own account in Constanța, and the roof on his sister's house in Galați that it would pay for.

"Nobody talks to the boy without me in the room," he said.

Danyliuk considered that. He lifted his mug an inch, a small toast, and went inside. The bridge door sighed shut on its closer behind him.

* * *

Suez Canal, Spring 2028

The northbound convoy formed at dawn off Suez, nineteen ships strung out in a line that would take all day to push through the ditch. The Egyptian pilot came up the ladder at six with a briefcase and a cough. Within ten minutes he had asked for two cartons of Marlboro and received them, both of which were the custom.

He was a cheerful man with a mustache, and he spent the first hour talking about football. Then he stood at the window and studied the draft marks on the bow as the ship settled into the channel.

"Heavy," he said. "Very heavy, Captain. What do you carry?"

"Farm machinery for Romania."

"Romania must have very big farms." The pilot laughed and coughed and laughed again. "My cousin has a farm in Sharqia, and his tractor is a donkey."

Dragomir laughed too, because the pilot expected it, and watched the desert slide by. On the west bank the land was green and crowded with palms, canals and small brown towns. The east bank was sand climbing to a white sky.

The heat came off the sand through the open bridge door like air from an oven. The Spirit's air conditioning had been dying for a year and chose this morning to finish. By ten the bridge was thirty-five degrees and everyone stank.

Bratu came up the ladder from the main deck with his face shut like a fist.

"Captain. A word."

They went out onto the port wing, away from the pilot, into light so bright Dragomir had to squint. Bratu was forty, a big soft-spoken man from Tulcea who had sailed with him for nine years. He didn't bring problems up the ladder unless they were real.

"Eddie says the Ukrainian was in the cadet's cabin half an hour ago, while the boy was on deck with the mooring gang." Eddie Ramos was the bosun, a Filipino from Batangas who missed nothing that happened forward of the accommodation. "He put everything back, and Eddie only knew because the mattress was turned."

"Did the boy notice?"

"The boy notices girls and food." Bratu wiped his forehead with his sleeve. "What did the kid see?"

Dragomir looked down at the brown water sliding past the hull and the bank beyond it. A boy on a bicycle was racing the ship along the service road on the Sinai side, standing on the pedals. He was winning.

"Tractors," Dragomir said.

Bratu looked at him for a long time. Then he went back down the ladder.

* * *

The pilots changed at Ismailia in the early afternoon. The second one was older and silent and wanted only one carton. Dragomir handed the con to Bratu and went below.

Danyliuk's cabin was the owner's cabin, on the deck beneath his own. Dragomir didn't knock. The Ukrainian sat at the little desk in a sleeveless undershirt, sweating, a laptop open in front of him and a satellite phone beside it, and he closed the laptop without hurry.

“You searched my cadet's cabin.”

“I did.”

“You didn't find anything.”

“No, because you have it.” Danyliuk swiveled the chair to face him. “It would have been simpler if the boy had hidden it in his socks.”

Dragomir took the phone out of his shirt pocket. He had carried it for six days, through his sleep and his showers, where he set it on the shelf beside the soap. He held it up so Danyliuk could see it.

Then he climbed to his own cabin, and Danyliuk followed because he had no choice. Dragomir opened the ship's safe behind the framed photograph of the Spirit's launching. He set the phone inside on top of the crew's passports and the cash for port fees, shut the door and spun the dial.

“Eleven photographs, and one waiting to send,” he said. “In Constanța I'll give it to you, and you can delete them or smash it with a hammer.”

“And until then?”

“Until then it stays with me. So does he.”

Danyliuk stood in the doorway with sweat running into his undershirt and the face of a man doing arithmetic.

“Why?” he said.

“Because he's mine.”

“That's not a reason, that's a sentence.” Danyliuk came in and sat on the edge of the bunk without being asked, and the springs complained under him. “You took the money and knew enough not to ask what for, so why do you care what happens to one Romanian boy with a big mouth?”

Dragomir didn't answer at first. Through the porthole, a burned-out armored vehicle sat half buried in the sand of the east bank, left over from a war so old nobody had bothered to tow it away. A word had been painted on its side in Arabic, faded now to pink.

“My sister lives in Galați, on the Danube,” he said. “From her balcony you can look down the river toward Ukraine. In the second summer of your war I was home on leave, and we sat out there at night and listened to the drones go over the water.”

Danyliuk waited.

“They sounded like mopeds with bad engines until the light came downriver, and the sound after it.” Dragomir turned from the porthole. “Her grandson was four, and he clapped because he thought it was fireworks.”

Danyliuk looked at the floor.

“I'm not doing this for you, or the colonel, or Ukraine, or anybody's flag,” Dragomir said. “The owners took your money and I took my piece, and I'll fix my sister's roof with it.”

“Then what is the boy to you?”

“The boy is the part I don't sell. Nobody puts him in a room on my account and makes him sign a paper he doesn't understand.”

“The paper is for his protection.”

“The paper is for yours.”

Danyliuk rubbed his face with both hands. When he took them away he looked older, and tired around the eyes.

“Fine,” he said. “I'll speak to the colonel.”

He went out. Dragomir sat down at the desk, and when he opened his hands there were white ridges across both palms from the edge of it. He flexed them until the color came back.

* * *

Bosporus Strait, Night

The Turkish pilot came up the ladder off the old city at a quarter past eleven. She was young, with a ponytail and a radio on her hip, and she spoke English better than anyone on the bridge. Istanbul rose on both sides of them as the Spirit pushed north into the strait.

Mosques lit gold on the hills, apartment towers stacked up behind them, and ferries crossed in front of the bow. One passed so close that Dragomir could see people on its open deck drinking tea from small glasses. He had made this passage maybe sixty times, and it had never gotten easier or less beautiful.

The current ran hard against them in the narrows, and the pilot talked the helmsman through every bend in a low, steady voice. “Port ten, midships, starboard five.”

The first of the great bridges went over them, strung with lights, its traffic a river of red and white.

Danyliuk came up at midnight and stood at the back of the bridge in the dark. He didn't speak until the pilot was busy with a tanker coming south.

“The colonel says the boy goes home,” he said. “No conversation, no paper.”

Dragomir watched the tanker slide by, a black wall with a single deck light, close enough to hit with a stone.

“Why?”

“Because I told him what you said, and because the colonel has a son.” Danyliuk folded his arms. “And because I said I'd vouch for the boy myself, which was stupid, and now it's my neck instead of his.”

“Why would you do that?”

Danyliuk was quiet for a while. A ferry blew its horn off the starboard side. On the Asian shore a wedding party was setting off fireworks from a waterfront terrace, green and gold over the black water.

“My son is twenty-four, and he was a mechanic at a tractor plant in Mykolaiv, real tractors,” Danyliuk said, with a small sound in his throat. “Now he's in the army, learning to drive the thing under tarpaulin number four.”

Dragomir waited.

“He'll drive it somewhere I'm not permitted to know about, and maybe he comes home.” Danyliuk's voice stayed level. “Every time I go into that hold, I think this one is his, and that one, and that one.”

The fireworks went up again, three of them, and broke into loose stars. They drifted down and went out before they touched the water. Dragomir thought of his sister's grandson on the balcony, clapping.

“So I check the lashings, every night, every knot,” Danyliuk said. “When I see your cadet crawling over them with his phone, like they're toys, I want to throw him in the sea.”

“And?”

“And then I see his face when he talks about them, and it's my son's face at nineteen.” Danyliuk shook his head. “Exactly that stupid.”

The pilot called a course change and the helmsman repeated it. The Spirit leaned into the turn, and the lights of Istanbul swung slowly across the windows.

"Tell me something," Dragomir said. "When this is over, whatever it is, does it end well?"

Danyliuk unfolded his arms and put his hands in his jacket pockets.

"I'm an engineer, Captain," he said. "I make sure things arrive."

The Black Sea opened in front of them at three in the morning, dark and wide. The pilot went down the ladder to her boat and waved once from its deck. The wind came cold out of the north, smelling of rain, and Dragomir stood in it with his coat open.

* * *

Black Sea, off the Bulgarian Coast, Morning

The radar showed the contact at dawn, eleven miles off the starboard bow and closing.

Bratu had the watch. He called the captain without being asked, because the contact was making eighteen knots and had turned toward them the moment it came over the horizon. By the time Dragomir reached the bridge, his shirt still unbuttoned, the AIS showed nothing for it, no name, no number, no destination.

That meant a warship, or someone who wanted to look like one.

Through the binoculars it was gray and lean, with a raked bow, a gun forward and a helicopter deck aft. Dragomir didn't need to see the ensign to know it. It came on at an angle that would put it on their beam in twenty minutes.

"Russian," Bratu said. He said it flat, like a weather report.

"In international water."

"They have a right to be here."

"They have a right to be anywhere." Dragomir lowered the glasses. "Wake the Ukrainian quietly and tell him to stay in his cabin."

Bratu went. Dragomir buttoned his shirt with fingers gone stiff and clumsy and looked down at the main deck, where the morning work was starting. Eddie Ramos and two of the Filipino ratings were rigging a stage over the side to chip rust off the bulwark.

Radu was with them in a hard hat and a harness, holding a chipping hammer.

The VHF crackled at twenty past seven.

"Motor vessel Constanta Spirit, Motor vessel Constanta Spirit, this is Russian Navy warship on your starboard bow. Over."

The English was careful and correct, the accent heavy. Dragomir picked up the handset and waited three seconds before he keyed it, as a busy merchant captain would.

"Russian warship, Constanta Spirit. Go ahead."

"Constanta Spirit, state your last port of call, your cargo and your destination. Over."

"Last port Karachi, cargo agricultural machinery and general cargo in containers, destination Constanța. Over."

The pause stretched. Dragomir heard the hiss of the open channel and the engine under it. Somewhere on deck a chipping hammer rang against steel.

"Constanta Spirit, you are very deep in the water for agricultural machinery. Over."

It was so close to what the pilot in Suez had said that Dragomir nearly laughed into the handset. He let three more seconds go.

"Russian warship, we carry a lot of agricultural machinery. Romania has big farms. Over."

Bratu had come back. He stood at the chart table without looking at the captain, his hands spread flat on the chart as if to hold it down.

"Constanta Spirit, thank you. Maintain your course and speed. Out."

The patrol ship didn't fall away. It came around in a long curve until it ran parallel to them a mile off the starboard beam, matching their speed, and it stayed there.

Twenty minutes later the drone came.

It rose off the patrol ship's helicopter deck like an insect off a pond, a small gray thing with four rotors. It crossed the gap and came along their starboard side at the height of the bridge. It flew slowly and looked at everything.

It looked at the hatch covers, the deck containers and the cranes. Then it hovered for a long time off the bow, where the draft marks were. Dragomir could see the little dark eye of its camera turning.

Then it came down the side of the ship toward the stage where Radu was working.

Dragomir picked up the phone to the deck and put it down again. Any word he sent them would look like a warning. He stood at the window and watched.

Eddie saw the drone first. He looked up, said a word to the others, and went back to chipping, steady as ever. The two ratings glanced up and went back to it.

Radu looked up last.

The drone hung perhaps ten meters away, its rotors a gray blur, its camera pointed straight at him. Dragomir saw the moment the boy understood whose drone it was and what it wanted. His hand went tight on the hammer and his shoulders came up.

His eyes went to the hatch cover of hold three. Only for a second, but they went there.

Dragomir's stomach turned over.

Then Radu grinned, the big stupid grin of a nineteen-year-old on his first voyage. He waved at the drone with the chipping hammer, like a tourist on a ferry, and shouted a word the wind tore away. Then he turned back to the bulwark and swung at the rust.

A flake of old paint came off and spun into the sea.

He didn't look at the hatch again. Not once, for the whole hour the drone stayed.

At half past nine it flew back to its ship. At ten the patrol ship increased speed and turned northeast, toward Crimea. Forty minutes later it was a gray smudge on the horizon, and then the horizon was empty.

Dragomir's hand was pressed flat against the window glass. When he took it away it left a print, five fingers and a palm, misted at the edges. He wiped it off with his sleeve.

"Get me a coffee," he said to Bratu. "Put some țuică in it."

* * *

Danyliuk had been in his cabin the whole time. The satellite phone was in his hand, and a second phone Dragomir had never seen before lay on the desk. He set both down when the captain came in.

"Gone?"

"Gone."

"They'll have pictures of the draft marks, the cranes, the containers." Danyliuk rubbed his eyes. "That's all right, half the ships in this sea carry something in a container, but what did they see on deck?"

"Rust, and four men chipping it." Dragomir sat down on the bunk, his legs shaking now, late. "The boy waved at it."

Danyliuk looked up.

"He waved at the drone with his hammer, like an idiot," Dragomir said. "Then he went back to work, and he never looked at the hatch again for an hour."

"You watched him the whole time?"

"The whole time." Dragomir rubbed his knee. "I couldn't have done it at nineteen."

Danyliuk was quiet. Then he laughed, short and hoarse, and the laugh turned into a cough. He leaned back in the chair and laughed again at the ceiling.

"He waved," he said.

"He waved."

Danyliuk shook his head. "Maybe he doesn't have such a big mouth after all."

* * *

Constanța, Romania, Night

They docked at the far end of the south port at nine at night, in a cold drizzle that turned the floodlights into soft yellow balls. Dragomir had been bringing ships into this harbor for thirty-eight years. He had never been sent to this berth, a long empty quay at the edge of the container terminal, fenced high, with no other ship within half a kilometer.

Trucks were waiting, twenty of them at least, low-loaders and container chassis lined up in the rain with their engines running and their lights off. Men in work jackets stood in small groups by the cabs, smoking. None of them spoke Romanian.

The customs officer came up the gangway at half past nine, a heavy, polite man in a wet raincoat. He read the manifests for four minutes, stamped every page and drank a coffee in the captain's office. He didn't ask to see the holds, and he didn't look out the porthole at the trucks.

"Agricultural machinery," he said, setting down the cup. "Good, we need it. Have a good night, Captain."

He went back down the gangway, and the cranes started.

They worked all night. Dragomir watched from the bridge wing in his heavy coat, because he couldn't sleep and didn't try. The containers went first, swung out of hold one and off the deck onto the chassis.

Each truck took its box and rolled out the gate into the dark without lights. Then the hatch covers on hold three came back. The shore crane lowered its spreader into the floodlit square of the hold, and the first shape rose under its green tarpaulin, swaying and streaming rain.

The tarp had come loose at one corner in the lift. Dragomir saw the sand-colored armor and the short thick gun before it went down out of his sight onto a low-loader.

At two in the morning a woman came up the gangway.

She was in her forties, small, in a dark parka with the hood up, and she walked like someone who expected doors to open. They did. Danyliuk met her at the head of the gangway, the two of them spoke in Ukrainian for a minute, low and fast, and he brought her up to the bridge wing.

"The captain," Danyliuk said in English.

The woman pushed back her hood. Her face was thin and pale, with dark circles under the eyes, and she looked at Dragomir without saying anything.

"You have a phone," she said.

Dragomir took it out of his coat. He had taken it from the safe at midnight and carried it since. He held it out and she didn't take it.

“Give it to him,” she said, and tipped her head at Danyliuk. “He'll do it.”

Danyliuk took the phone and woke it. His thick fingers went through the photographs one by one: tarps, lashings, the data plate, the gun with the flash on it. He deleted each one.

Then he opened the outbox and deleted the picture with the red mark. He emptied the deleted folder last. It took him two minutes, and nobody spoke.

“Where's the boy?” the woman said.

Dragomir's back stiffened. Danyliuk said a few short words to her in Ukrainian and she answered. He answered again, longer this time, his voice rough, and Dragomir understood nothing except one word he thought meant son.

The woman looked at Danyliuk. Then she looked at Dragomir.

“Bring him,” she said. “Only so I can look at him.”

* * *

Radu came up to the bridge wing in his coverall with his hair wet from the rain. The moment he saw the woman in the parka, his face went the color of paper. He stood by the door with his hands at his sides.

Danyliuk held out the phone.

“Your photographs are gone,” he said. “All of them. You understand?”

Radu took the phone. He looked at the empty grid where the pictures had been, and then he looked up.

“I understand.”

“You were never in hold three.”

“I was asleep in my bunk from midnight, and Mr. Bratu can tell you,” Radu said.

Danyliuk's mouth twitched.

The woman studied the boy the way Dragomir had seen surveyors study a hull, slowly, from the keel up, hunting for the weak plate. Radu stood in the rain and let her look. He didn't fidget or talk, which for Radu was close to a miracle.

At last she nodded once and pulled her hood back up.

“Good luck with your studies,” she said in English, and went down the ladder without another word.

Radu's knees gave a little, and he caught himself on the rail.

Danyliuk put a hand on the boy's shoulder and held it there.

“Your brother in Craiova,” he said. “When you see him, tell him you saw some tractors.”

“Tractors,” Radu said.

“Big tractors, heavy ones, for very big farms.” Danyliuk squeezed the shoulder and let go. “Go to bed.”

Radu went. At the door he turned and looked past them, down into the floodlit square of hold three, where the shore crane was lowering its spreader toward the last row of green shapes. He looked a long time before he went inside.

* * *

The last truck left the gate at a quarter to six, as the sky over the Black Sea turned from black to pewter. Danyliuk went with it. He came to the bridge first, in a wool cap with a bag over his shoulder, and stood beside Dragomir for a minute watching the empty quay.

“I won't see you again,” he said. “Probably.”

“Probably not.”

Danyliuk held out his hand and Dragomir shook it. The engineer's grip was hard and dry, and he held on a moment longer than he needed to.

“Fix your sister's roof,” Danyliuk said.

“Find your son.”

Danyliuk looked at him. Then he let go and went down the gangway with his bag, and climbed into the cab of the last low-loader beside a driver who was already moving.

The truck rolled toward the gate with its lights off. The gate opened and closed behind it.

Dragomir stood on the wing in the cold.

When the light was full he went down the gangway himself, stiff in the knee, and walked along the quay to the bow. The drizzle had stopped. Gulls worked the oily water between the hull and the fenders, crying at each other.

He looked up at the draft marks on the stem.

For three weeks the black numbers had sat drowned at the waterline, and pilots, harbor men and a Russian officer with careful English had all looked at them and made the same joke.

Now the Spirit rode high and light against the fenders. A broad band of red antifouling showed above the water, rusty and streaked with weed.

She looked like a ship that had never carried anything at all.

Dragomir put his hands in his coat pockets and stood looking at the red until Bratu called down from the rail. The agent was on the phone, and he wanted to talk about the next cargo.

The World of Shield of Ashes

Who is who, what happened when, and where it happens. Everything here comes from the novel, and nothing here gives away how it ends.

The Main Characters

Shield of Ashes follows about sixty viewpoints. These are the ones a new reader meets first, or keeps meeting. Real heads of state appear in the novel as fictional characters; here they are listed by title.

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
The President of the United States	Eighty-three, in a third term made possible by the Twenty-Eighth Amendment. Survived an assassination attempt in 2026 and lives on an artificial heart. Built the National Missile Shield.
Patricia Morrison	Secretary of Defense. Former Army colonel and Raytheon veteran, two Purple Hearts from Iraq, widowed by Afghanistan. Delivered the missile shield ahead of schedule.
Rebecca Sterling	CIA Director, thirty years in the intelligence community.
Victor Dray Saunders	Vice President. Former Marine general and senator from Virginia.
Commander Marcus Avery	Commanding officer of the destroyer USS Kidd in the Yellow Sea. Divorcing. His daughter Emma studies at Stanford.
Captain Jessica Hayes	Commanding officer of the carrier USS Gerald R. Ford in the South China Sea.
General Catherine Hawkins	Commander of NORAD. Her husband teaches history.
Colonel Kim Jong-su	North Korean missile officer at the Hwasong launch facility.
Admiral Liu Huawei	Commander of China's Eastern Theater Naval Forces, aboard the carrier Liaoning.
Ayatollah Mojtaba Hosseini-Rad	Supreme Leader of Iran, chosen in June 2025. Taught jurisprudence in Isfahan for thirty years and was jailed twice by the regime he came to lead.
Deputy Director Hamid Rezaei	Officer of Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, twenty-three years in the service.
Colonel Nasser al-Otaibi	Saudi air defense officer commanding a THAAD battery. Twenty-eight years of watching other people's wars pass overhead.
Ananya Sharma	Signals analyst at India's Research and Analysis Wing, three years in the service.
Fatima Hussain	Mother of two in Lahore. Her husband works double shifts in a hospital emergency room.
Colonel Andriy Kovalenko	Ukrainian military intelligence officer, fourteen years in the field. Runs the night at Karachi.

Major Oksana Bondarenko	Ukrainian intelligence officer at Kovalenko's side in Karachi.
Anatoly Kravchenko	Nuclear engineer at the Rivne plant in Ukraine. He was at Chernobyl in 1986.
Anya Kuznetsova	Schoolteacher in Moscow, mother of a seven-year-old girl.
Private Alexei Morozov	Nineteen-year-old Russian conscript from Saratov. His mother teaches third grade.
Marcus Williams	Fairfax County firefighter and Army medic veteran, father of eight-year-old twins.

In this story only

NAME	WHO THEY ARE
Captain Ion Dragomir	Master of the Romanian freighter Constanta Spirit. Sixty-one, thirty-eight years at sea, from Constanța.
Yuriy Danyliuk	The consignee's supercargo. A former ship's engineer from Mykolaiv with a son in the Ukrainian army.
Radu Ilie	Deck cadet, nineteen, from Medgidia. Talks too much.
Costel Bratu	Chief officer, from Tulcea. Nine years with Dragomir.
Eddie Ramos	Bosun, from Batangas in the Philippines. Misses nothing.

Timeline

WHEN	WHAT HAPPENS
June 2025	American and Israeli strikes kill three Iranian Supreme Leaders in eleven days. The Assembly of Experts meets a fourth time in Mashhad and chooses Hosseini-Rad, who tells his chief of staff to do nothing for four years.
2026	An assassination attempt stops the American President's heart for ninety seconds. He comes back.
2027	The Twenty-Eighth Amendment passes, opening the way to a third presidential term.
Autumn 2027	An American-brokered peace deal ends the fighting in Ukraine. The maps are redrawn and Washington moves on to other problems.
December 2027	Three men, a Ukrainian, a Pole and an Israeli, dine in a private room in Geneva and talk about vineyards. They toast the harvest.
Spring 2028	Eight freighters under Romanian, Bulgarian, Turkish and Greek flags leave Karachi carrying “agricultural machinery.” One of them is the Constanta Spirit, and this story follows her home.

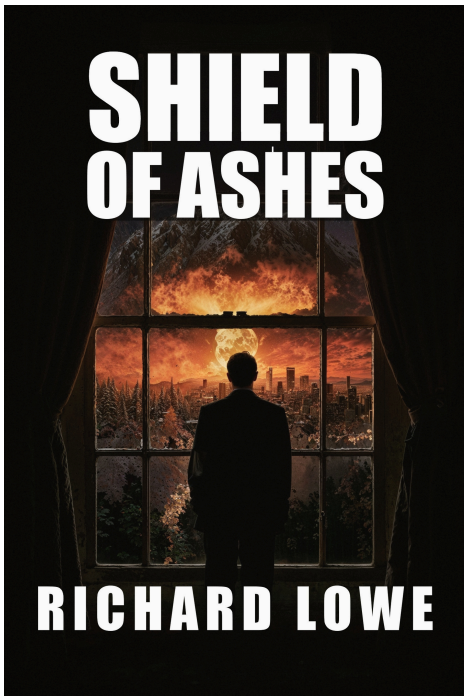
Election Night 2028	The President wins a third term at eighty-two.
2029	The National Missile Shield stands complete: twelve hundred interceptors, AI targeting, three hundred billion dollars, four years to build.
Late October 2029, Day One	A North Korean missile colonel fires on Beijing. An American destroyer and a Chinese destroyer both try to stop the missile. The novel begins its twelve Phases here, and the war that follows takes less than two weeks.

Places and Terms

TERM	MEANING
Constanta Spirit	Romanian freighter loaded at Karachi in spring 2028, the ship Kovalenko watches take on the last container that night.
Karachi Port	Pakistani harbor where the eight ships load under clean paperwork and a harbor captain with a gold tooth.
Bradley	American armored fighting vehicle with a twenty-five millimeter gun. Part of the cargo that came the long way round from Karachi.
Supercargo	A cargo owner's representative who sails with the goods.
Draft marks	Numbers painted on a ship's bow and stern that show how deep she sits in the water. A heavy cargo puts them under.
Międzymorze	Polish for “between the seas.” A century-old proposal by a Polish marshal for a federation of nations between the Baltic and the Black Sea. The great powers laughed.
Hwasong Launch Facility	North Korean missile site under two hundred meters of granite.
USS Kidd (DDG-100)	American destroyer in the Yellow Sea carrying SM-3 Block IIA interceptors.
USS Gerald R. Ford	American nuclear carrier on station in the South China Sea.
MOIS	Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, with a crisis center in the Alborz foothills.
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing, India's foreign intelligence service, headquartered in New Delhi.
THAAD	American missile defense system. Al-Otaibi's battery at King Khalid Military City in northern Saudi Arabia is run by Saudi crews.
National Missile Shield	America's new missile defense, ninety-seven percent successful in testing. It has never faced a real attack.

Read the Novel

The eight ships that left Karachi were one quiet piece of a much larger plan. In Shield of Ashes, October 2029 brings a single missile over Beijing, and within days a war nobody planned is burning across four continents, told through about sixty soldiers, leaders and civilians.



Shield of Ashes

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