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Farlander

Written by Col Buchanan

Published by Tor

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COL BUCHANAN

Farlander

THE HEART OF THE WORLD

Book One

TOR



First published 2010 by Tor

This edition published 2011 by Tor
an imprint of Pan Macmillan, a division of MAcmillan Publishers Limited
Pan Macmillan, 20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-51188-9

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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the British Library.

Typeset by Ellipsis Boks Limited, Glasgow
Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

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For my wife, Joanna

A heartfelt thank you to my agent Louise Burns
and my editor Julie Crisp.

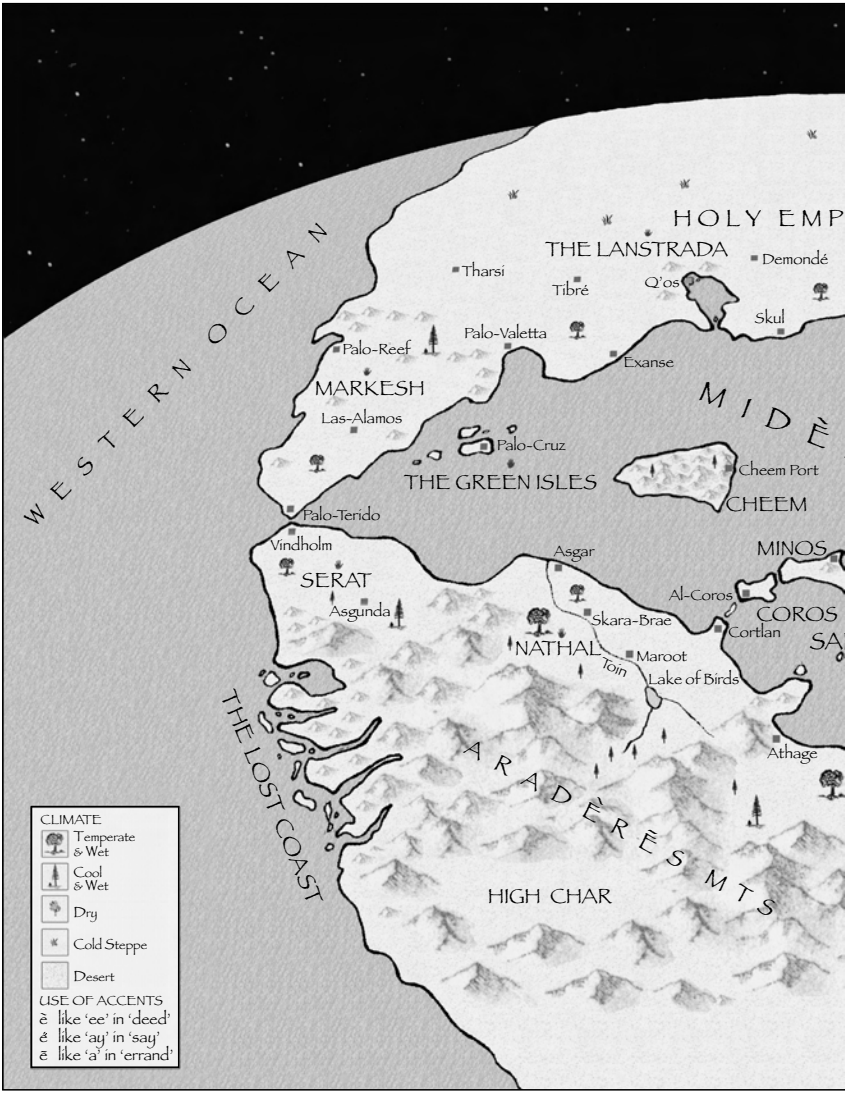
To my early test readers
Ben Fox, Ian Chapman and Art Quester.

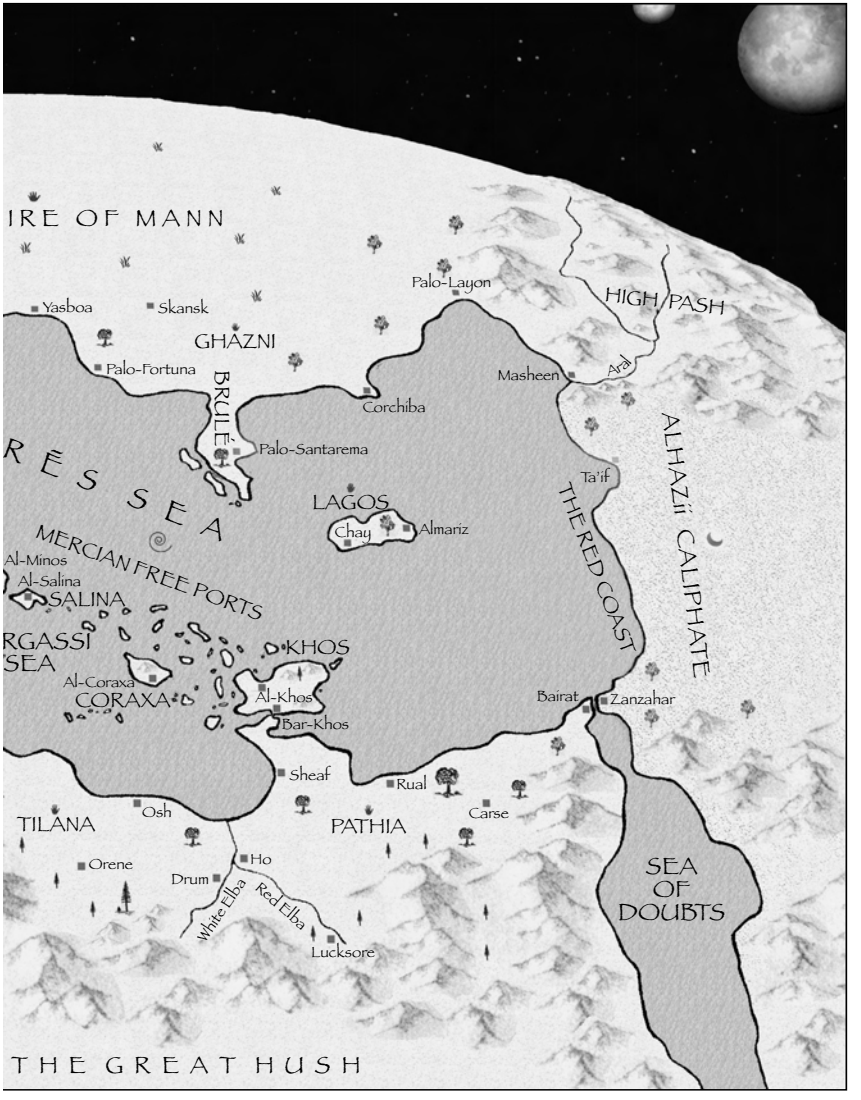
To all the folk at FD,
especially the ever-supportive Michael Duffy.

And to Deborah, for old times' sake.

The son breathes,
the father lives.

ONO, THE GREAT FOOL


WESTERN OCEAN
HOLY EMP
THE LANSTRADA
Demondé
Tharsi
Tibré
Q'os
Skul
Palo-Valetta
Palo-Reef
Exanse
MARKESH
Las-Alamos
MIDE
Palo-Cruz
Cheem Port
THE GREEN ISLES
CHEEM
Palo-Terido
Vindholm
Asgar
MINOS
SERAT
Al-Coros
Asgunda
Skara-Brae
COROS
Cortlan
NATHAL
Maroot
Toin
Lake of Birds
THE LOST COAST
ARADER MTS
Athage
HIGH CHAR
CLIMATE
Temperate & Wet
Cool & Wet
Dry
Cold Steppe
Desert
USE OF ACCENTS
è like 'ee' in 'deed'
é like 'ay' in 'say'
ē like 'a' in 'errand'


IRE OF MANN
Yasboa
Skansk
GHAZNI
Palo-Fortuna
BRULÉ
Palo-Layon
HIGH PASH
Masheen
Corchiba
Palo-Santarema
RESSEA
LAGOS
Chaty
Almariz
MERCIAN FREE PORTS
Al-Minos
Al-Salina
SALINA
RGASSI
SEA
KHOS
Al-Coraxa
CORAXA
Al-Khos
Bar-Khos
Ta'if
THE RED COAST
ALHAZII CALIPHATE
Bairat
Zanzahar
Sheaf
Rual
Osh
TILANA
PATHIA
Carse
Orene
Ho
Drum
White Elba
Red Elba
Lucksore
SEA OF DOUBTS
THE GREAT HUSH

PROLOGUE

Big Boots

Ash was half dead from exposure when they dragged him into the hall of the ice fortress and threw him at the feet of their king, where he landed on the furs with a grunt of surprise, his body shaking and wanting only to curl itself around the feeble heat of its heart, his panting breaths studding the air with mist.

He had been stripped of his furs, so that he lay in underclothing frozen into stiff corrugations of wool. His blade had been taken from him. He was alone. Still, it was as though some wild animal had been thrown into their midst. The villagers hollered amid the smoky air, and armed tribesmen jabbered for courage as they prodded at his sides with bone-tipped spears, hopping and circling with caution. They peered through the steam that rose off the stranger like smoke; his breath spreading in clouds across the matted surface of lice-ridden skins. Through gaps in these exhalations, droplets of moisture could be seen running down his frosted skull, past ice-chips of eyebrows and the creased-up eyes, dripping free from sharp cheek bones and nose and a frozen wedge of beard. Beneath the thawing ice on his features, his skin looked black as night water.

The shouts of alarm rose in volume, until it seemed the frightened natives would finish him there and then on the floor.

'*Brushka*,' growled the king, from his throne of bones. His voice rumbled from deep within his chest, echoing around the columns of ice arrayed along the length of the room, and rebounding back at him from the high-domed ceiling. At the entrance, tribesmen began to shove the wide-eyed villagers back through the hangings that veiled the archway. They resisted at first, voicing their complaints; they had been drawn there in the wake of this old foreigner who had staggered in

from the storm, and felt compelled to see what would happen to him next.

Ash was oblivious to it all. Even the occasional jab of a spear failed to draw his attention. It was the sensation of nearby heat that roused him at last, causing him to lift his head from the floor. A copper brazier stood nearby, with bones and cakes of animal fat smoking and burning in its innards.

He began to crawl towards the heat, as clubbing spears tried to deter him. The blows continued as he huddled against the brazier's warmth and, though he flinched under every blow, he refused to move from it.

'*Ak ak!*' barked the king, and his command finally forced the warriors to draw back.

A silence settled in the hall, save for the snapping flames and the tribesmen's heavy breathing as though they had just returned from a long run. Then, through it all, a groan of relief sounded loud and clear from Ash's throat.

I still live, he thought with some wonder, in something of a delirium, as the glow of the brazier seared through him. He clenched numb hands into fists to better feel the precious heat held within them. He felt the skin of his palms begin to sting.

At last, he looked up to take in his situation. All around he saw the gleam of grease on bare skin, blankets worn like ponchos over bodies half-starved in appearance, faces pierced with bone, gaunt and hungry-eyed; a little desperate.

He counted nine armed men in all. Behind them, the king waited.

Ash gathered himself, though he doubted he could manage to stand just then. Instead, he shuffled on to his knees, to face the man he had ventured all this way to find.

The king studied him as though considering which part to devour first. His eyes were like flints nearly lost in the fleshiness of his face, for he was a huge man, so grossly inflated with fat that he required a girdle of stiffened leather slung across his lap to support the sag of his belly. Otherwise he sat there almost naked, his skin agleam with a thickly applied layer of grease, with only a necklace of leather hung against his chest, and his feet bound in a massive pair of spotted-fur boots.

The king took a drink from an upturned human skull, and

smacked his lips in leisurely appreciation. A belch erupted from his gullet, the flab of his neck quivering, then he produced a long, self-satisfied fart that quickly polluted the smoky air with its tang. Ash remained silent and unperturbed. It seemed that all his long life he had been confronting men like this: petty chiefs and Beggar Kings, once even a self-proclaimed god: figures who sometimes hid behind the glamour of status, or even a semblance of polite gentility, but remained monsters all the same – as was this man before him, and as all self-made rulers must be.

'*Stobay, chem ya nochi?*' the king asked of Ash, his gaze moving over him with a ponderous intelligence.

Ash coughed life back into his throat. His dry lips cracked open and he tasted blood on them. He stroked his neck in a gesture of need.

'Water,' he finally managed.

A royal nod. A water sack landed at his feet.

For a long time, Ash drank greedily from it. Then he gasped, wiped his mouth dry, leaving a smear of red on the back of his hand.

'I do not speak your language,' he began. 'If you wish to question me, you must do so in Trade.'

'*Bhattat!*'

Ash inclined his head, though he did not respond.

A frown creased the king's face, muscles trembling as he barked an order to his men. One of the warriors, the tallest, strode to one side of the great chamber, where a box sat by the wall of carved ice. It was a simple wooden chest, the kind used by merchants to transport chee or spices. All eyes in the hall looked on in silence as the warrior unbuckled a leather latch and wrenched open the lid.

He stooped and grabbed something up in both hands. Without effort he pulled it out – a living skeleton still clad in flesh and tattered clothing. Its hair and beard were overgrown and matted, and it peered about with red-rimmed eyes that squinted against the light.

Bile surged in Ash's gut. It had never occurred to him there might still be survivors from last year's expedition.

He heard the grinding of his back teeth. *No. Do not become attached to this.*

The tribesman held the starving man upright, until his stick-like legs had stopped shaking enough to support his weight. Together,

slowly, they approached the throne. The captive was a northerner: one of those desert Alhazii, judging from what grim looks were left to him.

'*Ya groshka bhattat! Vasheda ty savonya nochi*,' the king ordered, addressing the Alhazii.

The desert man blinked. His complexion, once swarthy like all his people, was now as yellow as old parchment. By his side, the tribesman nudged him until his gaze came to rest on Ash. At that his eyes brightened, and some flicker of life returned to them.

He opened his mouth with a dry clucking noise. 'The king . . . would have you speak, dark face,' he rasped in Trade. 'How did you come to this place?'

Ash could see no reason to lie, just yet.

'By ship,' he said, 'from the Heart of the World. It still waits for me now on the coast.'

The Alhazii recited this information to the king in the tribe's own harsh tongue.

The king waved a hand. '*Tul kuvesha. Ya shizn al khat?*'

'From there,' translated the Alhazii. 'Who helped you to come from there?'

'No one. I hired a sled and dog team. They were lost in a crevasse, along with my equipment. After that, I was caught in the storm.'

'*Dan choto, pash ta ya neplocho dan?*'

'Then tell me,' came the translation, 'what is it you will take from me?'

Ash narrowed his eyes. 'What do you mean?'

'Pash tak dan? Ya tul krashyavi.'

'What do I mean? You come here from a long way.'

'Ya bulsvidanya, sach anay namosti. Ya vis preznat.'

'You are a northerner, from beyond the Great Hush. You come here for a reason.'

'Ya vis neplocho dan.'

'You come here to take something from me.'

The king jabbed a sausage-sized thumb at one of his sagging breasts. '*Vir pashak!*' he spat.

'That is what I mean.'

Ash might have been a rock carved in the perfect likeness of a man, for all the reaction he now gave to the question hanging between

them. A frigid gust whistled in from outside, flapping the heavy furs draped across the entrance archway behind him, causing the flames of the brazier to recoil. The storm reminding him of its existence, and that it was waiting for his return. For a moment – though only for a moment – he wondered if perhaps now was the right time to introduce a few choice lies. It was not in Ash's nature to ponder overly long on matters of consequence. He was a follower of Dao – as were all Rōshun – therefore better to remain calm and act spontaneously, guided by his Cha.

Internally, he followed the steady flow of air as it entered his nostrils, infiltrated stinging cold into his lungs, then emerged again as warmth and steam. Stillness came upon him. He breathed and waited as the words of his answer formed themselves, then listened as he spoke them, as intrigued by them as everyone else.

'You wear something that belongs to another,' rang out Ash's voice as he raised a finger to point at the necklace hanging between the king's drooping breasts – and he thought: *the direct path, I might have known*.

The object strung on a length of twine was the size and shape of an egg cut vertically in half. It was the colour of a chestnut, and wrinkled like old leather.

The king now grasped it like a child.

'It is not yours,' Ash repeated. 'And you do not know what purpose it serves.'

The king leaned forward, his throne of bones creaking.

'*Khut*,' he said, quietly.

'Tell it,' the Alhazii supplied.

Ash stared at him for the length of five heartbeats, studying the flakes of skin in the man's thick eyebrows, the crusts of sleep in the corners of his eyes. His black hair, saturated with grease, hung in a sheer curtain to his shoulders, like a wig.

In the end, Ash nodded. 'Beyond the Great Hush,' he began, 'in the Midèrēs, what they call the Heart of the World, there is a place which man – or woman – can call on for its protection. With coin, a large amount of coin, they buy from it a seal like the one you wear now, to hang from their necks so that all might see it. This seal, Old King, offers them protection, for if they die, then it dies with them.'

The Alhazii's subsequent translation rolled and chattered over

these words. The king listened, rapt. 'That seal you wear now was worn by Omar Sar, a merchant, a venturer. It has a twin, which we watched, as we watch all of them, for signs of death. Omar Sar travelled here many moons ago on a trading expedition. Rather than allow him to trade here, amongst the settlements of your . . . *kingdom*, you thought it better to murder him and all his men, and seize what goods he had brought with him. But you did not realize that his seal protected him. You did not know that if he was slain, then his seal would die too, and its twin would also die, and more than that . . . the twin would point to the one who had killed him.'

Slowly, his knees and hips exploding with pain, Ash unfolded himself from the floor to stand before the king. 'My name is Ash,' he declared. 'I am Rōshun, which in my tongue means "autumn ice" – *that which comes early*. It means I come from that place of protection where all Rōshun come from, for that place is where we carry forth vendetta.'

He paused to let his words sink in, then continued, 'So you are correct, you fat pig, I have come here to take from you. I have come here to take your life.'

As the translation rattled nervously to a stop, the king roared in outrage. He shoved the Alhazii away from the throne, sending the man spilling to the floor. With blazing eyes, the king hefted the skull in his hand and launched it at Ash.

Ash swayed slightly to one side, and the skull shot past his head.

'*Ulbaska!*' The king bellowed, the excess flesh of his face quivering in time to the syllables.

His tribesmen stood frozen for a moment, fearing to approach this black-skinned old man who dared to cast threats at their king.

'*Ulbaska neya!*' he roared again, and then the warriors converged on Ash. The king sat back, ample breasts heaving, and unleashed a torrent of angry words as the spear points settled against Ash's flanks. From the floor, sprawled on his back, the Alhazii pattered out the royal diatribe in Trade, like a clock that could not be stopped.

'You know how I came to be ruler here?' the king was demanding. 'For a whole dakhusa I was sealed in the ice cavern, with five other men and food for none. One moon later, when the sun returned and melted the entrance, out came me. Me, alone!' And he pounded his chest as he finished this, producing a heavy, fleshy, animal sound.

'So threaten me if you will, old man fool of the north,' – and the Alhazii paused even as the king paused, both drawing in a lungful of air – 'for tonight you suffer, you suffer hard, and tomorrow, after I awake, we will make good use of you.'

The tribesmen gripped Ash tightly, with shaking hands. They stripped him of his underclothing till he stood naked and shivering in the frigid air.

'Please,' whispered the Alhazii from the floor. 'Sweet mercy, you must help me.'

The king gave a jerk of his head, and they hauled Ash away.

Through the hangings they went, where the fighting men stopped long enough to pull on heavy skins, and then he was dragged along the passageway and beyond.

Outside, the storm still tore through the night. Ash's heart almost stopped with the cold shock of it.

The wind pounded him relentlessly, shoving him even as the warriors shoved him. It howled for his body heat as snow lashed against his bare skin like fire. Pain entered his bones, his internal organs, his heart that was skipping and hammering in disbelief.

He would die in just moments, this way.

The grim-faced men pulled him across the snow towards the nearest of the ring of ice huts. The tallest took the lead, ducking inside, while the others came to a stop. They held their spears aimed at Ash, ready to thrust if need be.

Ash hopped about on his feet, arms wrapped about himself helplessly as he treaded snow. He turned slowly, offering one side of his body to the wind, and then the other. The men around him laughed.

From the entrance of the ice hut emerged a couple carrying bundles of their sleeping furs. They cast dark looks of resentment at the tribesmen, though they said nothing as they stumbled off towards another dwelling nearby. The tall warrior backed out next, pulling with him the skins that had covered the floor of the hut, before he yanked off the further skins that shielded its tunnel-like entrance.

'*Huhn!*' grunted the leader, and the warriors bundled Ash inside.

It was black as a pit within, and quiet, but the air felt warm in comparison to the gusting winds outside. Without any clothing, though, he would soon be freezing again.

Behind him, they set about sealing the entrance with blocks of ice.

Ash heard water being splashed against it, and waited without moving until finally he was trapped inside.

He kicked at the wall of the hut with the side of his foot, but it was like kicking stone.

Ash sighed. For a moment he swayed on his feet, close to fainting. In that instant he could feel, pressing down on him, the crushing weight of his sixty-two years.

He collapsed to his knees on the hard-packed floor, ignoring the burn of ice against his shins. It took all his focused will not to simply lie down and close his eyes and go to sleep. To sleep now would be to die.

Cold. So cold he was likely to shake himself apart. He blew into his cupped hands, rubbed them vigorously, slapped his body with stinging palms. It roused him somewhat, so he slapped his face too for good measure. Better.

Noticing his scalp was cut, he pressed a ball of snow against the wound until it stopped bleeding. After a while his eyes began adjusting to the dark. As the ice walls brightened, they seemed to become infused with the faintest milky light.

Ash exhaled purposely. He clasped his hands together, closed his mouth to stop his teeth from chattering. He began a silent mantra.

Soon, a core of heat was pulsing outwards from his chest, seeping its steady course into his limbs, his fingers, his toes. Vapour began to rise from his goosebumped flesh. His shivering stilled.

High above his bald head, the wind keened through a small airhole in the dome-like ceiling, as if calling to him, carrying with it the odd flake of snow.

*

He imagined he had erected his heavy canvas tent, and was now huddled inside it, safe from the wind, warming himself at the little oil stove made of brass. Broth simmered with smoky cheer. The air was steamy, heavy with the stench of his thawing clothes, the sweetness of the broth. Outside, the dogs moaned as they hunkered down in the storm.

Oshō was with him in the tent.

'You look bad,' his old master told him in their native Honshu, lines of worry creasing ancient skin as dark as Ash's own.

Ash nodded. 'I'm almost dead, I think.'

'You are surprised? All of this, at *your* age?'

'No,' confessed Ash, though for a moment, chastised by his master, he did not feel his age.

'Broth?' Ash, asked, as he scooped some into a mug, though Oshō declined by raising a single forefinger. Ash drank on his own, sipping loudly. Heat trickled down into his stomach, revitalizing. From somewhere elsewhere a moan sounded, as though in longing.

His master observed him with interest.

'Your head,' he said. 'Any pains?'

'Some. I think another attack might be coming on.'

'I told you it would be this way, did I not?'

'I'm not dead yet.'

Oshō frowned. He rubbed his hands together, blew into them.

'Ash, you must see how it is time, at last.'

The flames of the oil stove sputtered against Ash's sigh. He looked about him, at the noisy flaps of the canvas, at the air rolling visible from the broth. His sword, perched upright against his leather pack, like the marker of a grave. 'This work . . . it is all I have,' he said. 'Would you take it from me?'

'Your condition does the taking, not I. Ash, even if you survive tonight, how much longer do you think you have?'

'I will not lie down and wait for the end, no purpose left to me.'

'I do not ask you to. But you should be here, with the order, and your companions. You deserve some rest, and what peace you may find while you still can.'

'No,' Ash responded hotly. He glanced away, staring far into the flames. 'My father went that way, when his condition worsened. He gave in to grief after the blindness struck him, and lay weeping in his bed waiting for the end. It made a ghost of him. No, I will not squander what little time I have that way. I will die on my feet, still striving forwards.'

Oshō swept that comment aside with a gesture of his hand. 'But you are in no shape for this. Your attacks are worsening. For days you can barely see due to them, let alone move. How can you expect to carry on in this way, to see a vendetta through to the end? No, I cannot allow it.'

'You must!' roared Ash.

Across the sloping confines of the tent, Oshō, head of the Rōshun order, blinked but said nothing.

Ash hung his head, then breathed deeply, composing himself.

Softly came the words, offered like a sacrifice on an altar: 'Oshō, we have known each other for more than half a lifetime. We two are more than friends. We are closer even than father and son, or brothers. Listen to me now. I need this.'

Their gazes locked: he and Oshō, surrounded by canvas and winds and a thousand laqs of frozen waste; here in this imaginary cell of heat, so small in scale that they shared each other's breath.

'Very well,' murmured Oshō at last, causing Ash to rock back in surprise.

He opened his mouth to thank him, but Oshō held up a palm.

'On one condition, and it is not open for debate.'

'Go on.'

'You will take an apprentice at last.'

A gust pressed the canvas of the tent against his back. Ash stiffened. 'You would ask that of me?'

'Yes,' snapped Oshō. 'I would ask that of you – as you have asked of me. Ash, you are the best that we have, better than even I was. Yet for all these years, you have refused to train an apprentice, to pass on your skills, your insights.'

'You know I have always had my own reasons for that.'

'Of course I know! I know you better than any soul alive. I was there, you recall? But you were not the only one to lose a son in battle that day – or a brother, or a father.'

Ash hung his head. 'No,' he admitted.

'Then you will do so, if you make it safely out of this?'

Still he could not look directly at Oshō; instead his eyes were filled with the scattering brilliance of the oil stove's flames. The old man did know him well. He was like a mirror to Ash, a living breathing surface that reflected all that Ash might try to hide from himself.

'Do you wish to die out here alone, in this forsaken wilderness?'

Ash's silence was answer enough.

'Then agree to my offer. I promise you that, if you do, you will make it out of this, you will see your home again – and there I will allow you to continue in your work, at least while you train another.'

'Is that a bargain?'

'Yes,' Oshō told him with certainty.

'But you are not *real*. I lost this same tent two days ago . . . and you were not journeying with me when I did. You are a dream. An echo. Your bargain means nothing.'

'And yet still I speak the truth. Do you doubt it?'

Ash gazed into the empty mug. The heat had faded from its metal curvature, leaching the warmth from his hands.

Ash, long ago, had accepted his illness and its eventual, inevitable outcome. He had done so in much the same way as he accepted the taking of those lives he took in pursuit of his work; with a kind of fatalism. Perhaps a touch of melancholy was the result of such a vantage, that the essence of life was bittersweet, without meaning save for whatever you ascribed it: violence or peace, right or wrong, all the choices one made, though nothing more – certainly nothing fundamental to a universe itself purely neutral, seeking only equilibrium as it unfolded for ever and endlessly from the potentials of Dao. He was dying, and that was all there was to it.

Still, he did not wish to end it here on this desolate plain. He would see the sun again if he could, with eyes and mouth open to savour its heat; he would inhale the pungent scents of life, feel the cool shoots of grass against his soles, listen to the flow of water over rocks, before that. And here, in his dream fantasy, Oshō was a creation of that same desire: in that moment, Ash dared not hope that he could be anything more.

He looked up, speaking the words as he did so. 'Of course I doubt it,' he replied to his master's question.

But Oshō was gone.

*

It was a slow, nauseous pain that now came upon him, sickness washing his vision. The headache tightened its vice-like grip against the sides of his skull.

It drew him out of his delirium.

Ash squinted through the darkness of the ice hut. His naked body shook, convulsed. Minute icicles hung from his eyelashes. He had almost fallen asleep.

No sounds intruded through the hole in the roof. The storm had

ceased at last. Ash cocked his head to one side, listening. A dog barked, followed by others.

He blew the breath from his lungs.

'One last effort,' he said.

The old Rōshun struggled to his feet. His muscles ached, and his head contracted with pain. He could do nothing about that, for now, since his pouch of dulce leaves had been taken from him, along with everything else. No matter, it was hardly a serious bout yet; not like the attacks he had experienced on the long voyage south, confining him in agony to his bunk for days on end.

Ash stamped his feet and slapped his body until sensation returned. He breathed hard and fast, gathering strength with every inrush of breath, purging exhaustion and doubt as he exhaled.

He panted into each palm, clapped twice, then leapt upwards. He slipped a hand through the ventilation hole so that he hung there with his legs dangling below him. With his other hand he began to stab at the ice around the hole, each strike delivered with a low '*Hu!*' that was more a gasp than a word. Each impact sent a sickening shock along the bones of his arm.

Nothing happened at first. Again he was reminded of futilely striking stone.

No, he would get nowhere like this. Instead he thought of melting ice covering a pond, its crust thin enough to break through. As air whined through his nostrils, he became light-headed, making him focus that much harder.

A sliver of ice at last broke free. He allowed this moment of triumph to wash over him, without pausing in his efforts. More chips of ice loosened, until shards of it were raining down against his face. He squeezed his eyes shut to clear them of sweat. But it was more than sweat: his hand was darkly bloody from the work. Drops of blood splashed on to his forehead, or fell to the ground, to freeze there before they could soak in.

Ash was wheezing heavily by the time he had cleared a hole large enough to see a portion of night sky. For a moment he stopped and simply dangled there, to catch his breath.

As the moment lengthened, it took another effort of will to rouse himself. With a grunt of exertion, he hauled himself through the opening, scraping naked flesh as he went.

All seemed quiet throughout the settlement. The sky was a black field scattered with stars as small and lifeless as diamonds. Ash slid to the ground and crouched knee-deep in the snow, not looking back at the line of blood that now streaked the domed roof of the ice hut.

Ash shook his head to clear it, then took his bearings. Ice houses lay all around him half buried in snowdrifts. Small mounds shifted where dogs lay sleeping for the night. In the distance, a group of men prepared a sled team for the morning hunt, unaware of the figure watching them calmly through the dimness.

Keeping low, Ash took off towards the ice fortress, his bare soles crunching through a fresh crust of snow.

The structure loomed against the stars as he approached.

He did not slow his pace, kept running to the tunnel entrance, snapped his way through the hangings into the passage within. He startled the two tribesmen standing guard there beside a burning brazier. The space was small, no room to move easily. Ash drove his forehead straight into one guard's face, cracking the man's nose and knocking him, stunned, to the floor. Pain flashed through his own head, at which point the other guard almost caught him with a lunge of his spear. Ash ducked in time, felt the carved bone tip slide across his shoulder. Muted grunts, then the slap of flesh against flesh, as he sent a knee into his opponent's groin, his pointed knuckles slamming into the man's throat.

Ash stepped over the two prone bodies, narrowing his eyes as he ventured within.

He stood in a constricted passageway. Ahead lay the main hall, its entrance covered in skins. Behind the hangings all seemed quiet. But, no, not entirely quiet. He could hear snoring beyond.

My blade, Ash thought.

He darted left through a different archway. It lead into a small space thick with smoke, lit only by a small brazier standing in one corner, a red glow emanating from the fatty embers it contained illuminating the room for a few feet of air all around, and then darkness.

A pallet bed lay next to the brazier, where a man and a woman lay asleep, pressed against each other. Ash remained a dark shadow as he padded over to the far wall, where his equipment had been piled. It was all still there.

He fumbled through his furs until his hands came upon the small

leather pouch of dulce leaves. He took one out, then thought better of it and took out two more, stuffing the brown leaves into the side of his mouth, between teeth and cheek.

For a moment he sagged against the wall, chewing and swallowing their bitter flavour. The pain in his head lightened.

He ignored his furs. Steel glinted as he drew his blade from its sheath. The couple slept on regardless as he padded back towards the entrance to the main hall.

Light spilled across his bare toes from the gap beneath the hangings. Ash sucked in a bellyful of air. Exhaling through his nostrils, he stepped through, still as naked as the blade held low in his grip.

The king sat asleep on his throne at the far end of the hall. His men, some partnered with women, lay in heaps on the floor before him. To one side of the entrance a tribesman leaned on his spear, half dozing where he stood.

Ash no longer trembled. He was in his element now, and the cold became something he wore like a cloak. He was not afraid, fear was a distant memory to him, as old as his sword. His senses heightened in that moment just before he struck. He noticed an icicle, high on the ceiling above a brazier, a soft hiss each time it loosed a drip into the flames below it; he scented the sharp odour of fish, sweat, burning fat, and something else, almost sweet, that made his stomach rumble. He felt his muscles sing in rising expectation.

Movement had caught the guard's eye, stirring him to wakefulness where he stood. The tribesman looked up in time to see Ash sweeping down on him with bloodied face and bared teeth. The blade swung towards him. It cut an arc through the smoky air and met the brief resistance of the man's chest. He choked out a cry even as he fell.

It was enough to wake the others.

The tribesmen reached for their spears as they struggled to their feet. Without order, they rushed at Ash from all sides.

He scattered them as though they were children. With single strokes of his blade, he butchered each tribesman who came across his path, no sense of self in what he did. He was silence in the midst of confusion, his motions propelled by their own trained instincts to advance, and only to advance, his slashes and thrusts and swerves timed in a natural rhythm with his steps.

Before the last tribesman had fallen Ash was in front of the throne, a mist rising behind him from the floor of leaking corpses.

The king sat there trembling with rage, his hands straining against the bone arms of his chair as though he was trying to stand. He was drunk, the stench of alcohol thick on his breath. His lungs heaved as though he needed more air, and a thin drool ran from his parted lips as he watched, with half-lidded eyes, the Rōshun now standing before him.

He looks like an angry child, thought Ash, before casting the notion aside.

Ash flicked blood from his blade, settled its point beneath the chin of the king. The king's breathing grew visibly faster.

'Hut!' snapped Ash, pressing the blade until it broke the skin, forcing the king to raise his head so that their gazes met more clearly.

The king glanced down at the blade held to his throat. A rivulet of his own blood coursed down the groove in the steel without resistance, like water trickling over oiled canvas. He looked up at Ash and, beneath his left eye, a muscle twitched.

'*Akuzhka*,' the king spat.

The blade suddenly pierced up into his brain. One moment the gaze of hatred was there; in the next, all life had faded.

Ash straightened up, gasping for breath. Steam billowed from around the throne, as the contents of the dead king's bladder suddenly splashed to the floor.

Ash removed the seal from the king's neck, dropping it over his own head. As an afterthought, he closed the man's eyes.

He moved next to the wooden chest by the wall and opened it, hauling out the Alhazii curled within.

'Is it over?' the man croaked, gripping hold of Ash as though he would never let go of him.

'Yes,' was all that Ash replied.

And then they left.