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Opening extract from

Jango

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THE FIRST STAGE
IN THE TRAINING OF
THE NOMANA

LEARNING

In which the novice receives the skills,
wisdom and memory of the Community.



CHAPTER ONE

THE SECRET SKILL

SEEKER adopted the combat stance known as the Tranquil Alert: feet a pace apart, flat on the ground, arms loose at his sides, head erect, balanced and steady. He softened the focus of his gaze so that his eyes became sensitive to the smallest movement. He calmed his breathing until his breaths were slow and even. For a single brief moment he attended to the feelings in his bare feet: the prick of grit on the worn pavers, the slickness of water on stone.

A chill winter rain was falling steadily from the grey sky. It soaked into his hair and his tunic, and formed puddles among the loose stones of the courtyard.

He heard his teacher's intake of breath, and knew he was about to give the first command. He exhaled a single long slow breath, and slid into the attack stance called the Hammer and Nail. Two fingers of his right hand were the nail, tingling and still by his side. The entire combined force of his being, that his teachers called the *lir*, was the hammer. He had chosen his weapon and his initiating strike.

'Pay respect!'

The scratchy voice came from his combat teacher, a short middle-aged Noma with a sleepy face. All his features, his eyebrows, his cheeks, the corners of his

mouth, seemed to droop downwards, and his heavily-lidded eyes were half closed. However, as Seeker well knew, he was far from sleepy.

Obediently Seeker bowed, first his upper body from the waist, then his head: paying respect. Only as he straightened up did he allow himself to see his opponent, standing a pace away from him in the rainy courtyard, beneath the shadow of the high dome of the Nom.

It was the Wildman: his friend and fellow novice, and the only one of their group of eight he had never yet defeated. In the course of nine months of training, during which Seeker had felt his body grow strong and the lir flow to his command, he and the Wildman had met in combat fourteen times, and he had lost every bout. He had never yet, facing the Wildman, achieved that sudden overwhelming strike which breaks the opponent's guard and shatters his concentration. With Jobal he could do it, and with Felice, but never with the Wildman.

His friend was now also straightening up from the respect. Their eyes met, unseeing as strangers. Seeker tracked for clues over the Wildman's beautiful rain-streaked face.

The throat. He'll strike for my throat.

It was the Wildman's usual move. But he was so fast and so strong that knowing it was coming was not enough. Seeker's mind moved smoothly and rapidly, using the few seconds now left to him. When the teacher gave the second command, the combat would begin. It would last for one,

or two, or possibly three strikes – no more. Trained Nomana did not require lengthy bouts. Each fighter had at his disposal a single devastating blow, the blow into which his lir was concentrated, like the force of a great river funnelled into a narrow jet. If this win-all or lose-all blow was struck too soon, or fell wide, the fight was lost. Timing was all.

Seeker's web of feelings, instincts and thoughts fused into a single bright blade of decision. Roll the attack, play the riposte, follow with the kill. His plan formed, he let his entire body hang loose, dangle in the rain, swing in the wind.

Don't think. Never think.

React into action.

Meet your plan like a stranger.

Surprise yourself.

So much teaching. So much training. 'Know everything and then forget everything,' their teacher told them.

To one side stood the line of silent novices, watching the combat that was about to begin. Morning Star, third in line, watched like the rest, hands clasped before her, silent in the rain. A thought flickered in Seeker's brain.

Who does she want to win? Me or the Wildman?

On the other side rose the stone pillars of the cloister, and beyond, the great outer wall of the Nom. Slots pierced this wall at intervals, and through the slots could be glimpsed the sea, stretching away, horizonless, into the iron-grey sky.

The voice of the combat teacher sounded as if from far off.

'Engage.'

The Wildman struck first, for the throat, as Seeker had guessed. Seeker swayed back, out-reaching the strike hand, and stabbed at the crook of the attacking arm, but only playing the riposte. If the Wildman went for the kill now, Seeker knew he would break him.

No time to hesitate. On he flowed, pouring his lir into the about-to-be launched strike, begging the Wildman to make his throw now, at the bait moment, when he seemed so vulnerable, on the second strike, which had always been the Wildman's strike of choice.

But not today. With dismay Seeker realised he had committed, and the Wildman had not. His timing was out. In his frustration Seeker lost perfect concentration, and felt the lir spreading from the two speeding fingers over his right hand and up his arm, dissipating his force. His blow powered through, hammer on nail, and caught the Wildman's left shoulder, rocking him back, but it was not enough to break him.

At once Seeker sucked back what lir was left and locked himself to the ground, but even as he did so the Wildman struck, the heel of his hand to Seeker's brow: the kill-blow. Not all his power was in the strike, of course. Seeker was not killed. But he was broken.

He fell as he must, crippled by pure force and by shame. The Wildman had pulled his blow and had still broken him. The impact of the wave of power rippled from his stunned brow all the way down to his stomach, making him want to retch.

'Withdraw.'

The teacher called the moves as if nothing of any significance had taken place. Seeker rose and bowed, a little shakily, and resumed his place in the line of silent novices, as did the Wildman. They stood still, hands clasped before them, maintaining the rigid discipline that had been drilled into them.

Their sleepy-eyed teacher now proceeded with the analysis, dabbing at his wet head with one end of his badan. His name was Chance.

'What did he do wrong? You.'

He pointed at Morning Star.

'He committed too soon,' said Morning Star.

'Could he have done otherwise?'

'Yes,' said Morning Star softly, glancing towards Seeker. 'He could have waited. But he knew his opponent had the longer reach. His decision to attempt a first-strike win was sound.'

'Therefore predictable.'

'Yes, teacher.'

The teacher nodded, and raising his hands above his head, clapped twice. This was the signal for a break. The novices retreated into the shelter of the cloister – all but the Wildman who stood apart from the rest, by one of the slots in the wall that looked out over the sea.

Morning Star came to Seeker's side. The last eight months had changed her greatly, as it had changed them all. In appearance she was the same, with her round face

and her little button of a nose, and her gentle blue eyes; but she seemed to Seeker to have grown older and more serious. Seeker found himself admiring her more each day.

'Almost won that time,' she said.

'What do you call someone who almost won?'

'Loser.'

He grinned. This was what made him feel so close to Morning Star. Their minds worked the same way.

But her attention was directed to the Wildman.

'Look at him,' she said. 'He doesn't smile any more. Why is he so unhappy?'

'Is he unhappy?'

Morning Star turned, reproachful eyes on him.

'You hadn't noticed?'

'I don't see people's colours like you.'

'Yes, he's unhappy.'

Seeker had noticed how silent his friend had grown, and how he liked to stand apart from the rest, but he had put that down to the training. Before all else, the Nomana were taught the art of stillness. Now that Morning Star voiced her concern he saw that she was right, and was angry with himself for not having seen it before.

'I'll talk to him.'

Seeker crossed the courtyard in the rain and touched his friend lightly on the arm.

'You win again,' he said. 'But I'll have you one day.'

He wanted him to feel some pleasure in his victory.

The Wildman turned and looked at Seeker. It was clear

from his face that he hadn't heard him. He gave an indifferent shrug.

'Yes,' he said. 'Why not?'

'They're saying you could be the best warrior ever.'

'Are they?'

He shook his long golden hair, now dark with rain, and looked up at the high dome of the Nom. On the far side of the dome, invisible from this courtyard, lay the silver-walled enclosure called the Garden. In the Garden, at the heart of the great fortress-monastery, lived the god of many names: the All and Only, the Always and Everywhere, the Reason and the Goal.

Seeker followed his friend's gaze, and he thought he understood. He knew how fervently the Wildman longed to enter the Garden. There, he had been told, he would find peace.

'You're tired of waiting, aren't you?'

'One day soon,' said the Wildman.

'When we're ready.'

'I'm ready now.'

He spoke so quietly, so unlike his old bold voice with which he had cried out his heedless demands.

'There's so much we don't know,' said Seeker. 'We have to be patient.'

'Like Noman was patient?'

He flashed Seeker a sudden grin, a glimpse of the old Wildman. Noman was the warlord who had come to Anacrea long ago, made curious by the reports of a child

god who lived there. Noman had not waited for permission to enter the Garden.

'You think I can't climb that silver screen?' said the Wildman. 'I'd be over it before they saw me move.'

Seeker was appalled.

'What are you talking about? The Garden's defended in ways we don't even understand.'

'Only one way to find out.'

'Are you crazy? You'd be caught! You'd be – you know what they'd do to you.'

'I'd be gone.'

'Gone where? The doors are locked. There's no way out.'

'There's one way.'

'This is all wrong. This isn't how you're supposed to be feeling. Why haven't you said this before? You should talk to a teacher. Or talk to the Elder. He'd understand. He'd tell you what to do.'

The Wildman turned his dark eyes back to the grey infinity of sea and sky beyond the wall.

'Why do you think I don't know?' he said.

'Don't know what?'

'They don't want me here. They never have.'

'That's not true.'

'Look out there,' said the Wildman, as if Seeker hadn't spoken. 'Down there, the open sea. One perfect dive, and I'd be gone for ever.'

Seeker looked down. Three hundred feet below, the waves smashed against the rock on which the great walls

were built. Anyone who jumped would be dashed to pieces in the roaring surf.

'Impossible,' he said.

'One perfect dive,' said the Wildman again, softly, to himself.

The teacher returned, and clapped his hands, and the novices took their places in line in the open courtyard. The rain was still falling, and the air was filled with the sound of water gurgling down gutters.

Chance looked at his class from beneath his heavy drooping lids, and was silent for longer than usual. They waited patiently, accustomed by now to their teacher's methods. The longer the silence before a class began, the more significant the teaching.

At last they heard the slow exhalation of breath that preceded speech.

'It has been my task,' he said, his voice sounding weary, as if he grudged the effort, 'my task and my duty, over these last few months, to teach you to fight. I have taught you to command the life power that we call *lir*. I have taught you to deliver that power in combat.'

He then shook his head, and let out a sigh.

'But you are not yet Noble Warriors. You do not yet possess the secret skill.'

A tremor ran through the line of novices. Seeker stole a look at Morning Star. The secret skill! Every one of them knew it. For all their recently acquired strength and

stamina, they had not yet learned to fight as the Nomana fought. The Noble Warriors in action rarely struck with their fists, and never with weapons. They felled their opponents without touching them.

'Remember,' said Chance, 'the Noble Warriors do not seek dominion.'

He looked from face to face, to satisfy himself that each one had heard and understood.

'However strong you become, you will never seek to exercise power over others.'

They all knew this: it was the fundamental teaching. Their vow called them to bring justice to the oppressed and freedom to the enslaved, and no more. The Rule of the Nomana was absolute on this point. The Noble Warriors were not, and never would be, a ruling class.

'You're cold,' said Chance. 'You're wet. You're hungry. You're weary of these long slow weeks of training. All this is as it should be. Now I am going to show you what you still have to learn.'

He scanned their faces.

'You.'

He pointed at the Wildman.

'Come before me. Pay respect.'

The Wildman stepped forward and bowed to his teacher, first from the waist, then the head.

'Prepare.'

The two stood a pace apart, as earlier Seeker and the Wildman had done.

'Engage.'

The teacher made no move of any kind. For a few trembling moments the Wildman stood his ground. Then, abruptly, as if he had been hit with a club, he buckled and fell. He lay on the rain-soaked stones, curled on to his right side, breathing deeply as he had been taught, rebuilding his strength.

The teacher turned to the class.

'What did I do?'

None of them could answer. The teacher gestured to the Wildman to rise.

'Did I use force?'

The Wildman pushed the wet hair from his face and shook his head.

'No,' he said. Then, 'Yes. I suppose so.'

Morning Star watched and listened intently. She could not explain what she had just seen any more than the rest of them, but she had an additional cause to be perplexed. She could always predict an act of aggression long before it took place. She could see the change in the attacker's colours. The faint aura that hovered round him would turn an angry red. But the teacher's colours had given no warning. It was as if he had made no assault at all.

'Something I did caused you to fall,' said the teacher to the Wildman. 'Did you feel the effects of force?'

'Yes. I think so.'

'What did this force feel like?'

The Wildman shook his head. The questions confused

him, and made him feel stupid in front of the class.

'I don't know.'

'Did it strike you like a fist?'

'No.'

'Like a gust of wind?'

'No.'

The teacher turned to the rest of the class.

'Any suggestions?'

Sweet-faced Felice spoke out, in her soft voice.

'Your spirit struck him?'

'No. That's not the answer.'

Jobal, the slowest-witted member of the class and the most good-natured, reached up his hand to speak.

'You whacked him,' he said. He swiped the air with one fist to demonstrate. 'You whacked him so fast that none of us could see.'

Chance shook his head, smiling. Everyone smiled at Jobal.

'No,' he said. 'I'm fast, but I'm not that fast.'

'Maybe,' said Winter, raising one eyebrow, 'he just got tired, and wanted to sit down.'

Winter was the oldest of the novices, and liked to tease his younger companions with wry and cynical comments. But this time, to his surprise, the combat teacher clapped his hands.

'There!' he said. 'Now we're getting there.'

Seeker picked up the clue and followed it.

'You took away his strength?'

'Go on. More. How did I do that?'

'With your mind?'

'Simpler, simpler. What did I *do*?'

Seeker frowned and concentrated.

'You looked at him.'

'Aha! Yes, I looked at him.'

He beckoned to the Wildman.

'Come closer.' To the others: 'Watch closely. See if you can work out what I'm doing.' And to the Wildman, 'Hit me. Strike me with your open palm.'

The Wildman raised his right hand and struck.

He missed.

'Try again.'

He struck again, and missed again. His blows either landed short, or skidded off to one side. To the watchers it was as if the teacher was protected by an invisible shield.

'Wildman,' called Seeker, following his earlier hunch, 'close your eyes, and then hit him.'

The Wildman closed his eyes and struck. This time his palm caught the teacher square across his cheek.

'Bravo!' cried Chance, rubbing his stinging cheek. 'Enough.'

The Wildman stepped back, and allowed himself a quick grin. It was the first blow any of them had ever landed on their teacher. Morning Star caught that mischievous smile. His long hair was swept back off his face, and for a moment he looked quite different. He looked older, with his high cheekbones gleaming in the rain-bright light.

'I know!' cried Jobal, one step behind everyone else as usual. 'You do it with your eyes!'

‘What do I do with my eyes?’

The teacher looked up and down the line of soaked novices. He raised one hand and passed it through the air, from left to right. All down the line they jerked their heads to the right, one after the other, as if he had slapped them.

‘There,’ he said. ‘You all felt it. But what did you feel?’

None of them were able to answer.

‘You.’

The teacher beckoned to Morning Star. She stepped forward.

‘Pay respect.’

Morning Star bowed. She braced herself for combat.

‘Stand,’ said the teacher.

Morning Star adopted the Tranquil Alert stance. She studied her teacher’s colours closely, but could see only the soft blues of a quiet spirit.

‘Why don’t you fall down?’

‘You haven’t struck me, teacher.’

‘If I were to strike you’ – he reached out a hand and pushed at her, but only gently – ‘you would harden your muscles against me. You would resist me. I would have to overpower your resistance with my force.’

‘Yes, teacher.’

‘I am not doing that.’

‘No, teacher.’

‘And yet you don’t fall down. Why is that?’

‘Because I don’t want to fall down, teacher.’

‘Ah, I see. So if you were to want to fall down, you

would release the muscular tension that keeps you upright, and you would fall. I need do nothing. Is that so?'

'Yes, teacher.'

'Like this.'

She caught a flash of red and felt her legs give way beneath her. Unable to stop herself, she fell to the ground.

'She falls,' said Chance to the class, 'because she wants to fall. Her body obeys her will.'

'And her will,' said Seeker, 'obeys your will.'

The teacher nodded, pleased.

'That,' he said, 'is the secret skill of the Noble Warriors. The stronger will controls the weaker will.'

He gestured to Morning Star to rise and return to her place. Morning Star did so in thoughtful silence. In that moment of power, when her teacher had overwhelmed her, she had seen something curious. His colours had flowed out and embraced her. She had felt it as well as seen it. Never before had she known that the colours of one person could unfold like a cloak and embrace other people.

She listened closely as the teacher explained.

'When my friend here' – Chance indicated the Wildman – 'tried to hit me, and missed, he was not failing in his aim. He was choosing not to hit me. I had control of his will. I made him not want to hurt me.'

Of course, thought Morning Star. The colours are more than just a picture of feelings – they're the force of those feelings. So maybe other people's colours can be changed.

If it was true it meant you could make other people do

whatever you wanted. And then what? What sort of world would it be where everyone and everything surrendered to your desires? Morning Star shook her head, wanting to banish such wild fancies. It couldn't be so, she told herself. I don't want it to be so.

Meanwhile Winter, thinking himself ahead of his teacher, stepped forward out of the line, a pretend-innocent smile on his face.

'Make me fall down,' he said.

He shut his eyes.

The combat teacher nodded approval.

'Without eye contact,' he said, 'I can't control another's will. However –'

He swept one hand through the air, boxing the side of Winter's head so hard that he staggered and fell to the ground.

'People with their eyes shut can't see you coming.'

The class laughed. Winter sat on the ground and ruefully rubbed at his ear.

'In the normal course of events,' said Chance, 'those who fear you will watch you. If they watch you, you can control them. But only if you have the stronger will.'

Winter rose to his feet and rejoined the line. The combat teacher surveyed the class with his heavy-lidded eyes in silence for a long moment.

'For that, you need true strength.'

He made the class a formal double bow: the bow of farewell.

'And for that, you need a new teacher.'

*

The novices entered the study hall, grateful to escape the persistent rain, and took their accustomed places on the semi-circular bench before the fireplace. A novitiate meek came scurrying in to light the fire that was already laid. The dry kindling caught with a crackle. Soon the split logs were ablaze, and a welcome heat was reaching out to the novices' chilled wet bodies.

The combat teacher had not followed the class into the study hall, so they sat quietly on the bench and let their cold hands grow warm and waited for the promised new teacher.

A resinous log caught fire, and exploded in a series of small pops, sending out sparks. Morning Star, inattentively watching the fire, still absorbed in her own thoughts, caught a flicker of colour in the air beyond. Looking up, she saw with surprise that there was a person sitting by the window. It was a young woman, in full view of them all, her tall figure outlined by the light from the window, on the far side of the room from the only door. She must have been there when they came in. Somehow they had not noticed her.

She had short-cropped fair hair, and wide-spaced dark eyes, and soft smooth skin that was golden-brown as honey. She met Morning Star's surprised stare with silent amusement. From her dress it was evident she was a Noma, about thirty years old, and perfectly, effortlessly lovely.

Morning Star was about to speak, but the new teacher

raised one finger to her lips. At that, all the class saw her, and all were as surprised as Morning Star. The teacher kept her finger to her lips, so no one spoke, but they all rose to their feet and bowed. The teacher bowed in return, from the head only, and made a sign for them to sit once more.

The novices waited for the teacher to speak. They sat on the bench in silence, and kept their eyes on her, and she sat with her hands folded on her lap, and said not a word, half smiling, seeming to show interest, but revealing nothing. The firewood hissed in the grate, and the rain tapped at the windows, and nobody moved. They heard the cries of the gulls circling the dome of the Nom, and the rush and suck of the waves on the shore far below. They heard the humming of the wind and the changing rhythms of the rain, now sweeping over the tiles above like a soft broom, now drumming with a marching beat.

So time passed.

When at last the great Nom bell sounded noon, the new teacher spoke.

'My name is Miriander,' she said. Her voice was low, but they heard every word. 'It is my task and my duty to teach you true strength.'

She met their eyes one by one, giving no more time to one than to another, but causing each of them to feel he or she was the object of her special interest.

'Please prepare yourselves. In order to find your true strength, you will be stripped of everything that protects you.'

The bell's last deep boom sounded, and the vibrations slowly faded into the hiss of the rain. Through the high windows, the ocean mist was closing in.

'This,' she said, 'will hurt.'