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Opening extract from

Noman

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THE FIRST STAGE
OF THE
EXPERIMENT:

OBSERVATION

As I slept, I dreamed that all men and women long to live in peace; but when I woke I saw that the world is ruled by fear. Fear makes men cruel. Cruelty breeds hatred. Anger feeds on anger, and misery gives birth to misery down the generations.

I saw how men and women turn to their gods for protection. I saw their hunger to believe their gods are strong, and their dread of the gods of others. I saw how gods drive men into wars, and the wars of the believers are the most merciless conflicts of all.

Then I asked myself: must it always be so?



CHAPTER ONE

THE HUNTER

HIS prey would not escape him now.

Seeker climbed the narrow mountain track at a steady pace, following in the agile footsteps of his guide. Ahead and above them loomed the steep face of the mountainside, a fractured wall of rock that rose and broke and rose again – like a giant's staircase.

'There,' said his guide, pointing, breathing hard with the exertion of the climb. 'You see where the track comes to an end?'

Seeker looked, and saw that the rock face above was scored by regular lines.

'Is it a wall?'

'That's the way into the cave.'

They continued up the zigzag track, and as they came closer he saw it clearly. The wall was made of blocks of the same stone that formed the mountain, and laid flush with the mountain's side – but this was the work of men.

'They're in there?'

'That they are,' said his guide. 'But once the mountain men close the door, there's no one can breach it.' He spoke in the peevish tones of one who suspects he is not

believed. 'I told you you'd have a wasted journey.'

'I see no door.'

'No one sees it. But it's there.'

They climbed on, and so at last reached the shelf of rock where the track ended. Here rose the wall, each block as high as a man and as wide as a man's arms can reach. They were set tight one against the next, and cut clean into the mountainside. High above, in the third row of blocks, a horizontal line of small circular holes had been drilled through the stone to admit light and air.

Seeker studied the fortification. He felt the cracks between the blocks with his fingers, and pushed with his hands against each block in turn. It seemed impossible that one of these massive stones could swing open.

'Now you see for yourself,' said the guide. 'You wouldn't believe me. But you asked me to lead you to the cave, and I've done as you asked.'

He rubbed his hands together, anxious to receive his payment and go.

'Can they hear us?' said Seeker. 'Do they know we're here?'

'Oh, they know. They'll have been watching us since we left the valley.'

'If I call to them, would they hear me?'

The guide became agitated.

'Best not to anger them. We should go back now.'

'I'm not going back.'

'But there's no use in it,' whined the guide. 'These old

ones you seek, they'll have paid well. The mountain men keep their bargains.'

'And so do I,' said Seeker.

He stood back from the high wall as far as the narrow shelf allowed, and called in a loud voice.

'Mountain men! Open your doors! I mean you no harm!'

'No!' cried the guide, frantically waving his arms. 'No! They'll stone us! Leave them be! We must go!'

Seeker turned to the guide and spoke to him quietly.

'You go, my friend. My business is here.'

The guide shuffled his feet and rubbed his hands together and looked at the ground.

'And my payment?'

'I have no money.'

'No money? But you promised me payment! Am I to be cheated?'

Seeker touched his cheeks.

'I will pay you as I promised.'

He held the guide's face lightly between his palms.

'I give you peace.'

The guide became very still. Then he gave a small shudder, and looked up at Seeker with shy uncertain eyes.

'Thank you,' he said. In place of the shrill whine there came a soft whisper.

Seeker withdrew his hands. The guide looked round him, blinking, as if he had just woken from sleep. Then he stretched all his body, reaching his arms out wide, and sighed deeply. Then he smiled.

'Thank you,' he said again.

With that, he set off back down the track. Seeker watched him on his way. Then he turned back to the high rock wall.

'Open your doors!' he cried. 'Or I'll break them down!'

From deep within the rock he heard the sound of mocking laughter.

'So be it.'

He let his arms fall to his sides, and he closed his eyes. He felt his own weight on the warm ground. He felt the pressure of his bare feet on the mountain rock. Deep below he felt the slow stirring of the mountain's lir. He drew two long steady breaths, and drove down and down until he touched the heart of that great slumbering power. Then steadily, surely, irresistibly, he drew it up into himself, making of himself a channel for the force of the mountain range.

All things are connected. All power is one power.

He opened his eyes and raised both arms. He stretched his arms out before him and summoned the lir to flow down his arms to his fingertips. He touched his two forefingers together.

A bolt of pure force struck the rock wall. The wall shuddered under the impact. Dust rose from the lines of mortar. The shuddering intensified, and the great stone blocks began to part. Seeker held his ground, arms outreached, streaming power into the shivering wall. Now the stones were rattling against each other like teeth. One high block cracked with a sound like a hammer blow, and fell crashing

and tumbling down the mountainside. There followed a deep grinding roar. The lower blocks began to bulge outwards as if pushed from within, opening up gaping cracks. The tall square-cut stones were rocking, moving, advancing like limbless giants. One block in the lower line staggered and fell. With a rending crash the rest came toppling down, one on another, amid a gush of debris and stone dust.

Seeker lowered his arms and waited for the dust to settle.

'Send out the old ones!' he cried. 'I have no quarrel with anyone else.'

There was no answer. From far below came the rattle of falling fragments, bouncing down the mountainside to the valley floor.

The broken outline of the cave mouth now became visible. Seeker stepped into the shadowy space. The walls and roof were those of a natural cave, which narrowed as it penetrated deeper into the mountain. The only light came from the opening. Within, all was darkness.

Seeker felt no fear, and no weariness. The destruction of the last two savanters was his mission and his obsession. Until it was accomplished he had no other life. But now he had hunted them to the end. There would be a kill, and a kill.

And afterwards? Peace, if allowed. Rest, if deserved. Love, if given. And a home on the quiet side of the world.

He strode into the dark tunnel. As he went the light behind him grew fainter, and the only sounds he could hear were

his own footsteps. The tunnel narrowed and twisted and turned. He began to feel his way with outstretched hands. The light dwindled, and was gone. He advanced in utter blackness. No longer guided by sight, he concentrated his attention on the sounds round him.

Nothing moved, but the sounds were changing. The passage was becoming wider. He sensed space opening up on either side of him. He came to a stop.

Now, his footfalls silent, he heard the faint sound of men breathing.

'You can't hurt me.' He spoke his warning into the blackness. 'Don't make me hurt you.'

There came a soft stirring in the still air. Seeker's hyper-acute senses traced the source: invisible arms reaching up, preparing to strike. Then came the rush of sudden motion, the hiss of hurled missiles. Too turbulent for spikes. They were throwing stones.

He stood still and flooded his body with force. The stones struck him and fell harmlessly to the ground. When the last missile had rattled into silence, he spoke to his attackers, saying again, 'You can't hurt me.'

There came a cry of fury, and the unseen mountain men fell on him from all sides. Seeker stood rooted as the mountain itself, while his attackers dashed themselves against him like waves against a cliff. Every blow they struck made him stronger, and left them weaker.

'What sort of devil is this?' they cried in terror.

A spark flickered. A candle flame swelled into

brightness. An older man held the candle high. By its light Seeker saw the mountain men who had attacked him, lying groaning and helpless on the ground.

A rapid scan of the cave told him that the ones he hunted were not here.

'Where are the old ones?' he said.

'We promised them protection.' The man with the candle spoke in a voice full of bitterness. 'They paid well.'

'Did they pay a price worth dying for?'

The mountain man broke into a harsh laugh.

'They offered us eternal life,' he said. 'And now you come to kill us.'

'I've no quarrel with you,' said Seeker. 'Just tell me where they are.'

'Deeper in,' said the mountain man, handing Seeker the candle. 'Follow the cave.'

Seeker set off, holding the candle before him. The tunnel narrowed once more as it cut deeper and deeper into the mountain. In one place it opened out into a larger chamber, where there were signs of the life lived here: clay pots of water, rolls of bedding; but Seeker saw no other people. Evidently the savanters had retreated to the innermost reaches of the great cave.

The candle flame began to flicker. A little further down the twisting tunnel, and it flickered more violently. Then came a rush of air and the candle went out. In the sudden darkness Seeker felt wind on his face. Ahead, he caught a glimpse of a faint light.

Filled now with fear, he hurried forward. As he went, the light grew. He rounded a bend in the tunnel, and there before him was the bright glare of a disc of sky. He raced down the last stretch of tunnel, and found himself emerging into open air.

He was on the far side of the mountain.

Bitter with disappointment, angry with himself for not having anticipated such an obvious possibility, he scanned the scene before him. A broad road ran down the mountain to a gorge. A bridge carried the road across the gorge to the flanks of the next mountain on the far side. And there, toiling up the distant slope, was a wagon drawn by two horses.

Seeker strained his eyes to see. On the flat bed of the wagon lay two white-canopied litters of the kind used to carry the dead. The wagon was making good progress, and was far away. The savanters had escaped him again.

Now as he studied the terrain Seeker saw that the fleeing savanters had taken another precaution to slow down his pursuit. The timber bridge that spanned the gorge was anchored by ropes on either side. The ropes on the far side had been cut. The main span was still attached on his side of the gorge, but the roadway now swayed untethered in the wind, tilting down at a steep angle.

He looked up again and watched the wagon crest the far peak and disappear out of sight. He lifted his gaze to the sky to gauge the position of the declining sun. The wagon was heading east.

He loped down the road to the broken bridge, and from there he made a rapid survey of the gorge that cut off his pursuit. The savanters had planned their escape well. The sides of the gorge were vertical, and very deep. Without the bridge in place it was impassable.

For a few wild moments he considered whether he could jump it, but he knew the gap was too wide. He stared at the far side of the gorge. He lifted his eyes to the steep mountain slopes that rose above it. Then he had an idea.

'If I can't get myself to the far side,' he said, 'I'll have to get the far side to me.'

It was a crazy idea. It would take time. But he had the power.

Once again he planted his feet square on the rock, and merged his own life force with the life force of the mountain. Once again he hurled his unstoppable power at the rock face. But this time it was the far side of the gorge that he struck. His blows cracked open the rock and caused it to fall away in a shower of fragments, down and down to the dry riverbed far below. Again and again he struck, driving jagged fissures into the slopes above the gorge, and ever larger sections of the mountain broke loose and slithered down into the smoking depths.

Never relenting, hammer blow after hammer blow, through the afternoon hours as the sun sank in the sky, he pounded the mountain into rubble, and the rubble piled up higher and higher in the gorge. So at last the time came when he could scramble down below the broken bridge

and make his way through the swirl of dust over the newly made mound of debris to the other side.

From here he was on his road. Half a day had been lost, but the hunt was on again.

'You won't escape me,' he said aloud, as if the savanters could hear him. 'You'll never escape me.'

At the top of the pass he paused to study the land ahead. The road wound its way down the mountain to a desert valley studded with rock formations. Beyond the valley rose a further line of hills, much lower than the mountain range on which he stood. Beyond the hills he could make out a wide plain; and in the far distance, a forest. He searched long and hard for the wagon, and saw it at last making its way between the columns of rock in the desert valley below.

The road looped back and forth down the mountain's broad descending flank. Seeker took the direct route, springing from loop to loop, landing each time on the flat road, steadying himself for the next jump. In this way, making up for lost time, he found himself in the valley as the sun was setting.

From here he could see the wagon clearly. It was now climbing the slope of the far hills. In the still evening air he could hear the tramp of the horses' hooves, and the creaking of the wagon wheels, and the thin high cry of the driver urging on the weary horses: 'Tuk-tuk-tuk!'

He was so focussed on his prey that he barely noticed the curious features of the valley down which he was

passing. It was dominated by a soaring massif called the Scar, a lone crag whose sheer sides rose up from the sandy ground like a castle in the sea. Beyond the Scar stood hundreds of towering sandstone tines, jagged needles of rock that cast before them long shadows, bruise-blue on the hot amber of the desert land. Seeker strode on, now lost in the shadow of one of these natural columns, now emerging suddenly golden into the slanting sunlight, throwing before him as he went like an avenging army his own long purple shadow.

As the setting sun touched the ridge of the Scar, some instinct told Seeker to pause and look back. The sun's final descent was rapid. The burning disc dwindled to a dome, a streak, a gleam, and it was gone. Then all at once a spark sprang to life on the upper wall of the Scar, and without warning a shaft of brilliant light streamed out over the valley. There followed another and another, and then a curtain of light burst through a narrow cut in the crag. As the angle of the sun's rays changed second by second, so the beams of light came and went, and the Scar glittered like a colossal lantern. Cracks and fissures in the sandstone, invisible to the eye of the traveller, were penetrated by the brilliant light and turned into lancets of crimson and gold. The long beams lit up the tines in the valley, picking out one here, one there, as the rest of the land slipped into soft twilight.

Seeker saw the streams of dazzling light, and was overwhelmed with awe. The crag was glowing as if it was

alive. Only a trick of the setting sun, but all at once the whole world was charged with light. At any moment now, it seemed to him, the very earth on which he stood might shiver and crack and send forth from its secret depths rays of glory, as if it were a second sun.

What is this place? I must come back.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, the dazzling display was over. The sun sank below the mountain horizon, and darkness flowed over the valley like sleep.

Seeker set off again, moving more rapidly now to make up for lost time. The wagon was out of sight over the crest of the hill. Beyond the line of hills lay the plains; beyond the plains, the great forest. Somewhere between here and there he would meet the savanters for one last time.

Then it would be over.