

WEAPON OF FLESH

A NOVEL

—  BY  —

CHRIS A JACKSON



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CHAPTER III



The boy's feet padded through the patch of loose shale without disturbing a single stone. Rain pelted him, slicking every surface, but each time his foot landed, his step was sure and silent. When the shale gave way to sandy soil he ran on, just as he had for the last ten miles, as he had for every morning of the last year. Each day he ran a new course, and nowhere on the plateau was there a single footprint to mark his passage. His trainers had taught him well.

His age was now somewhere in the middle of his sixteenth year, though he would not have known it if asked. He was still slim, but muscle rippled under his well-tanned skin, and his height was that of most men, though he would not have been called tall by anyone but a dwarf. The last two years had added discipline and focus to the previous training. One instructor had been a defrocked monk of some distant and obscure order, and had taught him the value of focusing his body's energy. His last instructor had taught mental discipline, and the importance of a still and ordered mind. But all of his trainers, however varied in their abilities and strengths, taught him to apply their teachings for only one purpose: To kill.

He had learned his lessons well.

The boy now knew more techniques of killing than he knew names to describe them. Yet every day, for one hour after

sunset, he lay on the Master's table in the needle room and the ink vanished into his skin. The magic was part of him now; it would never fade, would never diminish. He was one with it. He could not always feel the power within him, but power there was, he knew, for he saw in the eyes of his trainers their astonishment at the feats he could accomplish.

But today was different.

Yesterday, his last trainer had departed, so today he was expecting a new one. He was not particularly surprised when he entered the courtyard of the keep to find a stout, two-wheeled cart attached to a pair of sturdy horses. What puzzled him was that the servants were putting baggage into the cart, not taking it out. Bedrolls, food and equipment were being piled in carefully and lashed down. He had never been in the stables, so he did not know that this cart belonged to the Master.

He stilled his curiosity as he'd been taught and entered the keep, prepared for anything, or so he thought.

"There you are!" The Master snatched him aside as soon as he entered the great hall, now in much disarray with scurrying servants. "Here," he snapped, handing the boy an armful of soft clothing. "Clean yourself, then put these on. Return as quickly as you are able. Go."

"Yes Master," he said, scurrying off to the baths, unsure of the command, yet forced to comply by the magic that coursed through his veins. He placed the strange cloth on a chair in the bathing room and quickly stripped out of his loincloth. Soap and water was applied judiciously, though he was again unsure why he would need to bathe after only a ten-mile run in the rain. But bathe he did, and thoroughly; he could *not* disobey.

The real dilemma was the Master's order to put on the clothing he'd been given. He'd seen others wearing such things, and these were not any different than what the servants wore, but he'd never worn pants or a tunic, and he'd never watched anyone dress. It took him a while. He put the pants on back-to-front once and struggled briefly with the tunic, unsure of the lacings, which he eventually decided to leave hanging loose. The cloth

belt he wrapped double around his waist and cinched tightly in a knot he knew would not slip. The last he did as he sprinted back to the great hall, which was now slightly less chaotic, thought still strange.

Every servant he had ever seen in the keep stood in a straight row, all facing the hall's entrance, and all fidgeting nervously. Something was definitely amiss!

The boy stilled his mind and took his place, exactly where the Master bade him return to, for he could do naught else. He stood and waited, enduring the itching clothing, calming his hammering heart and stilling his tumultuous thoughts.

"Good!" The Master's bellow echoed through the hall, surprising everyone except the boy. Now the Master approached him and his face changed. It stretched into a smile, something the boy had never seen. His eyes raked the boy from toe to brow, and his staff rapped the floor smartly. "Very good! We are ready to leave."

"Leave, Master?" The boy did not understand; leaving was something other people did. The trainers, the people who brought food and other things, they left. How could the Master leave? How could *he* leave? He had been here in the keep, on the plateau, his entire life. Where else was there? His agile mind briefly flashed with memories of lights in the distant forest. Maybe they would go there.

"Yes, boy, it is time to leave. Your training is complete, as are the spells I have woven into your flesh. It is time to fulfill your destiny."

"Destiny? *My* destiny, Master?"

"Yes. Now, go stand by the cart and wait for me."

"Yes, Master." The boy sprinted out of the great hall and stood by the sturdy two-wheeled cart, questions whirling around his mind like leaves on the wind. What was a *destiny*? He'd heard the word before, of course, but never really understood its meaning. If they had to leave for him to fulfill his, perhaps it meant something people did when they left. If the Master was leaving with him, would they find the Master's destiny as well?

He forced the questions down, knowing that he would not get answers to them until the answers presented themselves. Two cleansing breaths brought calm, and shifted his mind into the enforced quiescence of a light meditation.

He took in his surroundings -- the keep, the courtyard, the sights, sounds and smells that he had known throughout his short life. The thought that he would not ever see any of it again came to him, and he mulled it over, finding the concept difficult to grasp. He could find no remorse in leaving his lifelong home, though he may not have been capable of such an emotion. He had no desire to leave, and he had no desire to stay. His desires had never been a significant issue in his creation, so he did not consider them. All he considered was what lay beyond the plateau, what they might encounter and what his destiny would hold. For curiosity was an emotion inseparable from every human psyche. The Master had deemed it necessary for survival, and it had not been suppressed by the magic like many of his other emotions. The magic had not taken everything human away from him; not quite.

The groan of bronze hinges stirred the boy from his calming meditation; the Master stood at the great doors of the keep, drawing them closed with a dull boom of finality. Then his hands moved in graceful arcs, and words that the boy could not understand pulsed through the air with power. When the words ended, a subsonic tremor shook the castle to its very foundations, and a fine spiderweb of white light traced every seam in wood, metal, glass and stone. The Master turned and descended the steps to the courtyard, dusting his spotless hands upon his robes.

“There we are, safe and sound.”

This did not make sense to the boy, but his comprehension was not required, only his obedience. The Master climbed into the seat of the wagon and released the creaky brake, and then turned to his silent minion.

“We are going on a journey. At the end of that journey your destiny awaits. You will walk beside the wagon and remain wary, for the world beyond the plateau is dangerous. If there is

trouble upon our path, you will use all the skills you have been taught to combat it. Is that clear?"

"Yes Master," the boy said, tensing and relaxing muscles in the rhythmic patterns that brought him to a state of calm preparedness.

"Good."

The whip cracked over the backs of the two stout horses, and the wagon lurched forward. The boy followed without a word, too many unanswered questions whirling in his mind as he walked away from the only home he had ever known.



In the city of Twailin a tower rose in the midst of a grand estate. It loomed above the tile roofs and ornate balconies of the homes of the richest nobles and merchants that populated Barleycorn Heights. But the master of that estate, while more wealthy than the vast majority of his neighbors, was not a highborn noble or a merchant, as many thought; at least not in any commodity that anyone wanted for their own.

The master of the estate stood upon his tower this evening, looking down on his wealthy neighbors, disdainfully. His name was Saliez, though none of his associates used that name. They called him only "Grandfather," though he had sired no children, nor taken any under his care. He was the Grandfather of Assassins, the headmaster of their guild, a merchant in death. Terror and killing were the only commodities in which he dealt.

Business was good.

Business was so good, in fact, that not a facet of commerce, government or graft within the city of Twailin was beyond his grasp. He wielded more power than that sniveling Duke Mir, sitting so smugly in his walled keep, high on the bluff that overlooked the city, and surely garnered more respect from his guild members. Why, not even the city constabulary, half of whom were on the Grandfather's payroll, respected that doddering old fool. Only the Royal Guard remained steadfastly loyal to Duke Mir, but he had spies aplenty among them. They were no threat.

The Grandfather's minions, the entire Guild of Assassins, respected him utterly. They had learned to respect him. They had learned that disrespect resulted in death, or worse. And there *was* worse. They had all witnessed worse first hand. They had witnessed it from the Grandfather's own hand, for he was not only their guildmaster, he was their foremost practitioner.

But this night, despite the disdain he expressed toward his highborn neighbors, the Grandfather of Assassins was elated. He had come to this, the highest point in all the city save for the spires of the Duke's Palace, not to gaze down at those who were nothing but contracts or clients to him, but to take delivery of a message that his eyrie-master had just received. He held that message now in his triumphantly clenched fist, for his life was soon to become much easier, and his business tenfold as lucrative. The message he clenched so tightly bore only two lines, lines that only his eye would ever read and understand. He flattened the crumpled parchment once again, though he had read it many times already.

*Your weapon is ready.
I will arrive with it in seven days.*

~ Corillian ~

"Arrogant bastard," he muttered under his breath, crumpling the parchment again. "Sixteen years, and he makes me wait another week! Ha!"

He turned and stalked back into the tower, casting the crumpled note into one of the glowing braziers that lit and warmed the eyrie. He could wait one more week. After all, he'd been waiting almost two decades for this. What was seven more days?



By the beginning of their third day on the road, the boy was beginning to think that the only true danger in the world beyond

the plateau was boredom. They'd been plodding along at a pace that could be challenged by any tortoise in good health, and the most dangerous thing they'd encountered had been a nasty patch of poison sumac. Every night they ate their stew and he watched while the Master slept; then in the morning they would eat their porridge and the boy would pack their gear. The Master allowed the boy the few hours of sleep he required in the back of the wagon during the early part of their daily travels. He would wake him around mid-morning and order him to once again resume his plodding pace beside the wagon. The boy's keen senses attended to their surroundings as the Master studied his books and scrolls, lounging in the driver's seat.

The trip would have been endurable, even pleasant, if not for the boy's nagging curiosity. So many questions rattled around inside his head that he began to be distracted by them. *Where were they going? How long would it take to get there? What was a Destiny, and was his different than anyone else's?* He had even tried to ask the Master for some answers to these questions, but had just been told to be quiet and vigilant.

After three days, he was bored with being vigilant. Oh, he was still watching and listening as best he could; the spells of obedience required him to do exactly as he was told. Yet, while his eyes and ears were tuned finely to their surroundings, his mind wound through complex trails of thought, surmising this and imagining that, all concerning his destiny. It was undoubtedly the distraction of his own tumultuous thoughts that allowed him to be so caught unaware.

The snort of a horse snapped his attention back to his razor-sharp senses in a heartbeat, and he immediately knew that there were at least six people on horseback hidden in the brush on either side of the road. They were still a stone's throw away, three on each side of the muddy track. The boy could hear their breath, their mounts shifting, the creak of leather on harness and belt, and the click of an arrow being nocked onto a bowstring. This did not bode well.

"Master," he said in his usual calm tone.

“Yes, boy. What is it?”

“Men with horses and weapons are hidden on either side of the road fifty paces ahead.” He heard the rustle of paper and the thump of one of the Master’s books landing in the bed of the wagon.

“Well, now.” The Master’s voice held a waiver of interest, perhaps anticipation. “Well, well, then. Keep walking boy, but be ready. They mean to rob us, and we will have to kill them.”

“Yes Master.” Some of the Master’s words were unfamiliar, but the last were clear enough. The boy relaxed, slipping into the pre-fight meditation that prepared his body and mind. He catalogued his opponents, their number (which was seven, not six as he’d previously thought), their weapons and their positions. From this, he estimated the order in which they would attack and whom his first target would be.

As he predicted, the bandits crashed from the woods when they were about ten paces away, startling the carthorses, and bringing their bows to bear.

“Ho there, old man!” the burliest of them said, leveling a heavily-built crossbow at the Master and bringing his fidgety black mount abreast of the two cart horses. “This here’s a toll road, and you’re only allowed to pass if you pay up.”

“Toll road?” the Master said, a quirk of amusement in his voice. “I wasn’t aware of that. This is open land, sir, unless I miss my guess. And you are nothing but a thief. I’ll not pay, and you’ll let us pass.”

The boy could hear the falseness in the Master’s voice and quickly reassessed their foes; six men and one woman sat astride well-kept mounts. They all had bows: three crossbows, three hunting bows and the woman bore a short hornbow. Her eyes flickered between the boy and his Master, nervously. The crossbows were cocked and loaded, which meant they could be fired readily. Those would be his first targets. The others would have to draw and take aim first, which would take at least two seconds; plenty of time. He shifted his feet upon the rocky road, readying himself.

“That’s where you’re wrong, old man,” the burly man said, shifting his aim from the Master to the boy. “I own this road, and you’ll pay up, or I’ll put a quarrel in your young son’s eye.”

“Very well, you brigand!” the Master snapped, reaching to his belt and plucking out a bulging pouch. “This is all the real money we have. The rest is just goods, things we’d planned on selling. Take the money and go, but leave us the goods to barter in town for something to eat this winter.” He tossed the jingling pouch at the leader, forcing him to lower his weapon to catch it. The others relaxed visibly as their leader laughed and hung his crossbow over the saddlebow. He loosened the strings and drew the bag open, but instead of coins pouring out, a skeletal hand much too large for the bag to hold lunged from the dark interior.

“Kill them all, boy,” the Master said in a whisper as the long, clawed fingers plunged into the man’s throat. As the bandit fell from the saddle, screaming through the blood flooding his throat, the boy blurred into action.

He leapt into the air, tossing up the stone that was clenched between his feet and catching it as he spun. Before his feet hit the ground, he sent the stone whistling at the nearest bowman, scattering bits of skull and brains among the bandits. A crossbow cracked, but the boy had already calculated the bolt’s trajectory and intercepted the shaft in flight. Spinning again, he flung the heavy crossbow bolt into the eye of the next bowman, and then bounded past their dying leader, his foot snapping the bow of another before his fist smashed the astonished man’s throat.

A bow twanged, the hornbow from the sound, but the Master had erected a shield of shimmering energy, and the arrow glanced off. The boy snatched a dagger from the man choking at his feet, and flung it into the chest of the bandit who had not yet fired his weapon. As he turned to the other crossbowman, he saw that the man had dropped his weapon and drawn a long saber. The bandit’s sturdy mount bore down on the boy, the curved sword cocked back to take his head. The boy simply ducked under the blow, grabbed the saddle and swung up behind

his attacker. His hands grasped the man's head and twisted sharply. Hoofbeats rang in his ears as he stared into the man's dying eyes and thrust him out of the saddle. The woman was fleeing.

He was untrained in horsemanship, so chasing her was out of the question. He hopped out of the saddle beside the dead man, pulled a bolt from his quiver, and retrieved the discarded crossbow. There was a crank for cocking the thing, but the boy simply placed the stock against his chest and pulled the string back until it clicked. He placed the quarrel in the notch, took aim, adjusted for windage and fired at his fleeing foe.

She toppled from the saddle, the bolt lodged squarely between her shoulder blades.

"Well done!" He turned to the Master's voice, but stopped in shocked surprise.

"Mast --"

He leapt, but it was too late.

Another crossbow cracked, and the thick shaft plunged through the back of the Master's neck before the boy's fingers could intercept it. The last bandit, who had been hiding behind them in the trees, spurred his mount into the deep forest. The boy wrenched the heavy bolt free and considered his chances of knocking the fleeing bandit from the saddle; they were miniscule, so he dropped the bloody shaft and surveyed the scene.

Seven bandits lay dead, their mounts scattered, some still running. The Master lay slumped over his knees in the seat of the wagon. One bandit had escaped.

He had failed.

"Master," he said, doubting that he would receive an answer. The bolt had severed the spine. The Master was dead.

The boy's head cocked to the side as his eyes took in the details that his mind was ill-prepared to handle. He had seen death. But this was the *Master*.

The boy stood on the wagon for some time, wondering what he should do. He had failed to do as he had been instructed,

which troubled him. But the Master was dead, which made him feel strange. There would be no repercussions for his failure, but there would also be no instruction from the Master as to what to do next. Should he dispose of the bodies, as he'd seen the servants do? He didn't know how. Should he stay here? He doubted that anything would change if he did. The Master would stay dead, and he would be no closer to his destiny.

"Destiny," he muttered, wondering why he said the word aloud. He looked down the road in the direction that they had been traveling. The dead brigand still lay there; her mount had returned and was nosing the corpse.

Midday arrived, so the boy ate an apple and a piece of jerky from the cart's stores, thinking only that this had been his instructions at midday the previous two days, so he should do the same today. When the shreds of core and stem dropped from his fingers, he had made a decision.

"Destiny," he said clearly, dropping from the wagon to the road.

How far?

There was only one way to find out.

What is my destiny?

The answer was the same.

For the first time in his life, the boy initiated an act of his own volition: He placed one foot in front of the other in the direction that he knew his destiny lay. He then repeated that act, then again, until he was walking. He did not look back, did not regret and did not mourn the loss of the only man he'd ever known. Such things were not part of his makeup. There was only a burning curiosity about his destiny, what it was and where it lay? And would he know it when he found it?

He walked away from the wagon without taking a single thing with him. The two sturdy draft horses stood in their traces, the wagon sat there, full of their supplies and equipment, the Master still slumped dead in the seat.

He had been trained to kill, not to survive.



The boy walked through the rest of the afternoon, his pace somewhat faster than the plodding gait of the Master's wagon. When darkness began to descend, he slowed, thinking for the first time about food.

His steps faltered, the weight of his very first decision crashing down like a stumbling block. There would be no stew tonight. The Master had made the stew, and the Master was dead. He looked back in the direction of the wagon. There was food in the wagon, he knew, and he could be there easily before dawn. He would miss dinner, but he might yet have breakfast.

His head turned the other direction; his destiny lay somewhere down this road. How far could it be? He was hungry, but not starving, and at this particular time his curiosity burned more urgently than the empty pit of his stomach. He estimated how far he could travel without food, but the information gained him little. He did not know how far he had to go, or even how much road there was. Surely it couldn't go on forever.

He walked on.

The night descended, and his eyes took on the faint glow of the magic, illuminating the road for him to see. His mind mulled over the decisions he had made, wondering how he could have improved them as his feet trod on, tirelessly eating up the miles between him and his goal.