

ADAM WINN

KILLING

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MESSIAH

A NOVEL



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PROLOGUE

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As he looked around the room, Judah saw the faces of his closest and most trusted friends, all young men like himself, none older than twenty-five. He had known most of them from childhood. A paradoxical mixture of pride and humility filled his heart. He was proud of their commitment to this, the greatest of causes, and humbled by their commitment to his leadership to see that cause through.

Tonight, God's kingdom would be one step closer. Tonight, God's enemies would bleed. Tonight, Israel's oppressors would taste the pain they so eagerly delivered.

Each man had experienced Roman oppression firsthand. When Simeon was only twelve years old, a childish game disrupted a group of Roman soldiers who were throwing dice. Simeon paid dearly for the disruption. His right cheekbone was crushed, and his once handsome face was permanently deformed. Joseph's mother, who ran a small tavern, regularly fed Roman soldiers. They thanked her service by refusing to pay, due to complaints about the food—a dishonesty betrayed by their repeat visits. And now their bluster and vulgarity drove away other customers. There were whispers that she could not keep the doors open much longer.

At one time or another, Roman soldiers had forced each of them to carry heavy equipment for a mile, often to their personal detriment—a sale lost, an appointment missed, or a commitment unkept. And while all had paid the heavy price of Roman taxation, Jacob and Nathaniel, the sons of John, had lost long-held family businesses because of unmanageable financial burdens. But Samuel, Judah’s closest friend and Joseph’s cousin, had been victim of the worst transgression of all: Roman soldiers had raped Samuel’s sister just two weeks before. The mere thought turned Judah’s stomach and filled him with rage. The elders of Jerusalem were seeking justice, but everyone at the table knew there would be no justice—no Roman soldier would pay for this crime. Pain and anger now distorted Samuel’s once boyish and handsome face. Pain and anger marked every face that looked back at Judah. While each man here believed that his God had called him to this cause, it was that pain and anger that fueled their desire for the blood that would be spilled that night.

Judah’s voice broke the silence. “I see the pain in your faces. I know the lives you have lived under the thumb of these Roman blasphemers. I know the trouble they have brought to your families. Tonight we enact God’s justice!”

The room exploded with a guttural roar that would have possibly drawn unwanted attention if they were not secluded in the underground scriptorium of a prominent Pharisee.

Judah continued, “Tonight our hearts are true, our zeal for God and his promises pure, and our plans are blessed by God’s good fortune.”

All of them at once began to whisper prayers of thanksgiving to the God of Israel.

For God’s good fortune had certainly fallen on them. Several months ago, Joseph overheard two drunk soldiers in his

mother's tavern. Apparently, each week a small group of Roman soldiers arrived in the city from Caesarea carrying important correspondence from the governor and a small chest of gold and silver. With this news, Judah and his friends had spent the last two months trying to determine which night these soldiers arrived and at which gate. Three weeks ago, they had found out both: the first day of the week at the Joppa gate. With this knowledge they began to monitor weekly activity, and a clear pattern had emerged. A group of five Roman cavalry arrived at the gate at approximately nine o'clock. Each time they carried a small scroll, which the guard noted but did not inspect, and a small chest, which the guard always opened. After this brief interaction with the gate guards, they proceeded through the city to the Antonia fortress, the Roman military headquarters in Jerusalem. They used the same route every time—a route that gave Judah the perfect place for an ambush.

"We have planned, we have trained, and we have purified our hearts before God. As he did with our ancestors before us, God will surely match our faithfulness with his own. He will meet us in the battle and give us victory! Tonight Rome will bleed, but it will not be the last time. Tonight we deliver a mere flesh wound, but it will be the first of many. In the end our resolve will drive these vile Romans from our holy city!"

Again a roar filled the hall.

"The time has come. You know what to do. God grant us strength and victory."

They left the scriptorium, made their way through the house above, and scattered through a variety of exits into the cool Jerusalem evening. They had planned the routes to their stations to avoid attention or suspicion. Each concealed a small bow and a quiver of arrows beneath a heavy cloak. Roman

authorities did not allow the inhabitants of Jerusalem to possess such weapons, but one could procure them with the proper connections. Judah and his nine companions had been secretly training with the bow for a little over a year. It would be the best way to ambush and kill Roman soldiers, who were virtually unbeatable in close combat.

As Judah made his way to his assigned station, he thought of his father, Isaac. It was his father who repeatedly told him the stories of Joshua, Samson, Jonathan, David, and his own namesake Judah, called Maccabeus, who smashed the pagan Greek armies like a hammer and led the Jews to independence just two hundred years ago. “These are men of true faith,” his father would say. “They did not sit back and wait like cowards for God to move on their behalf. They stepped out in faith, met God’s enemies head on, and God rewarded that faith with victory!”

His father despised the Pharisees, a sect of Jews who opposed any violent resistance and taught the people that they could only obtain God’s promises through patience and purity. Such ideas were laughable—as if the proper washing of hands or strict forms of Sabbath observance would have the Romans shaking in their boots! Though the Pharisees were certainly no friends of Rome, their teaching was rendering the people powerless. It was this system that allowed Rome to exercise its pagan authority in the holiest of cities.

But things were starting to change. There was a growing unrest in the city. Judah could feel it. The patience called for by the Pharisees was wearing thin, and the desire for deliverance was beginning to grow greater than the fear of Roman power. Judah knew all they needed was a spark, something that would turn the embers of discontent into the fire of revolution. His deepest desire was to be that spark.

Judah came to the place of the planned ambush. Here the road made a sharp ninety-degree right turn, and then after about sixty feet it picked up its original direction by making a sharp left turn. This created a small space in which they could easily hem in the five mounted soldiers. Judah had placed his men on the surrounding rooftops, which were relatively low, giving each a good angle on his target but also providing cover from which they could shoot. He placed three archers, including himself, facing the approaching soldiers, and a single archer each on the soldiers' right and left flanks. The goal was for these five archers to do the most damage. They would have the element of surprise, and if their arrows flew true, they had a chance of taking out all the soldiers. Judah knew this was unlikely, but he hoped the initial attack would eliminate at least three. Judah placed the remaining five bowmen at the two exit points so that a volley of arrows would meet any soldier attempting to break out of the trap. If all went according to plan, there would be no survivors.

Judah was first to arrive at his station, but Jacob and Nathaniel soon joined him. He then heard one low whistle, followed by an additional three signifying that the others were in place. Judah's heart was racing, and he could hear the nervous tension in the short quick breaths of his friends. While they had all trained with the bow, they had never engaged in live combat. Would they be able to overcome their nerves in the face of Roman soldiers? Would fear paralyze them? Would it overwhelm their training? Their aim?

The sound of hooves in the distance interrupted Judah's thoughts. His muscles tensed and he fought back the lump in his throat. His long, low whistle signaled the others to draw their bows. No one was to fire until all the soldiers had made their first turn into the trap. As the sound of the hooves

drew closer, Judah and those with him drew and strung their arrows. In the light of the torches that lined the streets, Judah saw the first soldier round the corner. He felt a calm come over him. His grip on the bow was firm. There was no tremor in his hands.

Another whistle signaled that all the soldiers had rounded the turn and that the time for action had come. Judah took aim at the lead soldier; he released his arrow and watched it rip a hole through the neck of its target. With a guttural cry the soldier clutched at his bloody throat and fell. In an instant the strum of bowstrings and whir of arrows filled the air, bringing the cries of soldiers and panicked horses. Chaos ensued. Horses reared, throwing their riders to the ground. Soldiers scurried for weapons or to help the wounded. Judah had caught them unawares, but it seemed the first volley had only killed one soldier. Had it even wounded another?

He felt his courage weaken as the surviving soldiers began taking defensive positions behind their shields. He signaled a second volley and then a third, but the arrows fell harmlessly against Roman shields. The full weight of fear seized him and a million thoughts flooded his mind at once. How had their training failed so badly? Would God not grant them victory? Should he call the retreat now, while they could still get away? *Could* they get away? Would the soldiers pursue them? If they stayed, how long would it be before the reinforcements arrived and his men were trapped? Had he doomed them all?

But then a break! The soldiers were retreating backward behind their shields—right into his trap! The sound of whirring arrows again filled the air—not Judah’s arrows but those of his men set to block off a retreat. All fear vanished as the arrows hit their marks. Shrieks of pain pierced the air again, and the wall of shields melted away. Without need of an order,

his men let loose another volley of arrows, most of which found their marks. Three of the four remaining soldiers were down, but one remained standing! The soldier charged forward under cover of his shield, and with deft agility jumped on one of the remaining horses. Momentarily, Judah feared the soldier's escape, but an arrow struck the horse in the hindquarter. It shrieked, reared, and threw the soldier to the ground. Within seconds, Judah and his men filled his back with arrows and he lay motionless.

At last, all five Roman soldiers were down. One was clearly dead, and perhaps a second, but the movement and groans of the others made it clear they were only wounded. Both groans and movement ceased after a final volley of arrows. With that, a chilling silence replaced the chaos that had filled the last several minutes. Three short whistles—the signal to disband. They would regroup at the scriptorium.

But Judah had one more job to do. With a nod, he gave his bow to Joseph, who quickly departed. Judah climbed down the back side of the building to the street level. As he passed by the side of the house into the street where the Roman soldiers now lay, he pulled out a short dagger. Fear engulfed him. If any of these soldiers were not actually dead and could still fight, Judah knew he would be outmatched. Even a wounded Roman soldier was deadly.

He quietly approached the leader of these soldiers, the one he had taken down with an arrow through the neck. Shock and dread still filled the soldiers' dead eyes, a sight that brought Judah a surge of pleasure. He knelt next to the body, lifted up the scarlet cloak, and there he found what he was looking for—the small scroll! He had hoped to get the small chest of coins, an infusion of financial support for the movement, but in the chaos the horse carrying the chest had fled.

But after unsealing and reading the scroll's contents, he realized he had found something far more valuable: the names of two Roman informants. He recognized one of the names. Further bloodshed would come soon.

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