The Thirty-six

By Joshua Even chen

1. Chapter

Jerusalem, August 70 CE – the 9th day of the 5th Hebrew month, Av

“Flavius, how long has it been since we became brothers in the Imperial Legion?”
“Your lordship knows as well as I that we have been brothers in arms for the past 15 years,” Flavius reminisced. “First Artaxata, then Syria, Gamla…and now Jerusalem.”

Titus paused for a moment in thought before continuing. “Flavius, you know that you are my most trusted commander… which is why I am entrusting you, and only you, with this mission.”

Flavius looked away briefly, then stood even more erect and looked squarely at his commander. “Sir, I must inform you that some of the men are uncomfortable with this task.” He considered how to phrase his next words correctly. “They see it as a…a breach of contract with the gods.”

Titus nodded sagely. He had anticipated this. “You must realize that the defeat of the city is a moot point. The fall of Jerusalem is already guaranteed.” Flavius’ expression showed confusion, so Titus continued. “It is the victory over the damned Jews and their god that I seek!” His voice rose, full of intensity. “Therefore you must not fail!” he cried.

“Yes your eminence! For the legion!” Flavius struck his sword against his shield.

“For the Emperor!” Titus too stood at attention, his eyes burning with ambition.

“For Rome!” they agreed in unison.

- - -

Fear. Fear of death? Ha! The main fear was running out of time... Elazar ran through the city streets, up the stairs strewn with discarded weapons and down the narrow alleyways. On the way he encountered groups of rebel fighters and refugees, most of them heading in the opposite direction, hampering his progress. Dodging between obstacles he weaved his way ever closer towards his destination.

Fear. The city was rank with it. The sounds of the wounded and the dying could be heard from both the lower and upper parts of the city. The sounds of the enemy’s copper trumpets mingled strangely with the wails of the *shofar*, the ram horns of the few rebels who still possessed the strength to sound the call.

Fear. He could see it in the faces of those coming towards him… running past him.

Fear and death. Although he too felt a sense of fear, it was a not the fear of dying, but rather the fear of failing in his mission. Once his mission was complete, death would not be an option…it would be a given. “You must not fail!” his master had implored.

“Yes, Master! For the rebellion!” Elazar said clutching his dagger.

“For God!” the old Master responded, his eyes burning with zeal.

“For Jerusalem!” they agreed in unison.

1. Chapter

The Negev Desert, April 2002

Salah loved the silence of the desert at night. And yet within the still silence, if you paid attention, you could hear the magnificent orchestra of nature. From miles around the jackals’ howl provided the vocals; the chirping desert crickets - the strings; the stomp of the camels beat out the percussion; Allah himself - the maestro. On this night however his ears were attuned to a different song - the fading sound of aircraft engines in the distance followed by a very soft fluttering in the breeze.

- - -

Three hours earlier and fifty kilometers away across the rocky desert, Adir sat alone in the briefing room, a closed military manila envelope on the desk in front of him, its seal unbroken. Nothing else was in the room save the single incandescent bulb suspended from the ceiling. Eighteen months of training had not only hardened his body - it had hardened his resolve as well. Nonetheless, he couldn't help reflecting excitedly even for a brief moment that *this was it* - the final and ultimate test. Of all the elite units in the IDF the ‘Desert Foxes’ reconnaissance unit was the only one authorized to conduct solo navigation exercises. With cool anticipation he slid his finger under and through the seal and removed the contents.

For the most part, the information provided was already known to him. He was to be airlifted from the base and parachute from a low altitude jump into the desert. From there he was to make his way back to base which would have been simple enough, but for the fact that the entire rest of his unit would be out there searching for him, and his assignment was to make it back undetected. Everyone knew that the point of the exercise wasn’t really to complete it, as in all the years from its inception, only one cadet had ever fully accomplished the mission. The main goal was to test how long the candidate would last until he was ‘captured’, or gave himself up in desperation. The only point of the sealed envelope was to guarantee that out of all the ‘team players’ only the candidate would know the exact coordinates – thus ensuring that no ‘shortcuts’ could be taken by the ‘search crews’. Rumor had it, that the commanding officer of the unit, a colonel in rank, would personally make coffee – the ultimate social equalizer - for any soldier who completed the task. Adir fished into his IDF issue cargo pants side pocket, removed a small packet of Turkish coffee, affectionately known in the military as *botz* – mud, placed it on the table and headed for the door.