

KHALIFAH

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Khalifah

A novel of conquest
and personal triumph

John Elray

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Chapter 1 October, AD 632

In a desolate land of barren hills and shifting windswept sand, a cloud of dust spiraled high into the air. Two riders galloped along the road to Yemama where Al-Muthanna ibn Haritha, the preeminent sheikh of the Beni Bekr clans, had pitched his camp. It was the month of Shaban in the eleventh year after the Hijrah, the Prophet Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina. Fewer than four moons had passed since the death of the Prophet and already the unifying influence he had exerted on the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula was disintegrating. Rebellion was rampant from the Nafud in the north, to the shore of the boundless ocean in the south, and past the parched, dune-filled Rab al-Khali to the eastern coast. Only the area between Mecca and Medina in the Hijaz, bordering the Red Sea, remained firmly under control.

Al-Yemama was a small interior settlement on the trade route to Al-Hafir, which lay at the head of the waters that separate the land of the Arabs from the land of the Persians. As the riders approached the outskirts of the settlement, the fires of Al-Muthanna's garrison broke through the twilight. A score of Beni Bekr clansmen intercepted the pair at the perimeter of the encampment, their reception being one of suspicion and speculation. The riders claimed to carry an urgent message from the Khalifah, Abu Bakr, Muhammad's chosen successor.

I was one of those two riders.

Chapter 2
AH 11/ AD 632

At the point of his lance, a black-skinned Bedouin ordered us to dismount. The air buzzed with shouts and percussive words as his cronies pointed and nodded while they debated amongst themselves. The untrusting eyes of the Black One narrowed.

"Who are you?" His voice strained to be heard above the clamor. "What is your business here?"

I brushed my hand over my beard, cleaning away a crust of embedded grit.

"We come in peace," I replied, "...to talk with your leader."

The cronies milled about us, scanning our persons and muttering to each other. Someone made a joke and they all laughed.

"Why would Al-Muthanna wish to see *you*?" he asked.

"We bear important news."

"What news?"

"Words for his ears alone."

The Black One paused, casting a critical eye over me, then reluctantly motioned for us to follow him, instructing his men to maintain close guard. He led us with haste through a maze of black tents, thousands of them, long and low with shallow peaked roof lines reminiscent of waves on the sea. They stood in endless rows, each tent not much higher than a tall man, open only on the long side that faced away from the often fierce desert winds. This

Bedouin enclave formed the last outpost before entering the hostile territory to the north and east.

My companion, Ibrahim, son of my father's cowardly brother, eyed our surroundings. His upper lip curled in obvious distaste. "We don't belong here, Mu'awiya; this is a place of the old ways. Why didn't you insist that the Sword of Allah send one of his own messengers?"

I answered without looking at him, concentrating instead on the composition of the camp and its ability to provide a battle-ready force.

"If I had, it would have only ensured that he would do just the opposite," I replied. "I thought he would insist."

Close by, but out of sight, a baby cried and women wailed. A dull recurring thud signaled tragedy. Shortly, we passed an open space between two tents where eight women lamented, extending their arms, then pounding their breasts with both fists, their tongues modulating a ghostly high pitched tone. At their feet, two men knelt before a hole in the ground. One man held a crying baby girl that he placed into the hole, while the other relentlessly pushed in sand to entomb the infant. The crying stopped. I shook my head. The Prophet had forbidden this practice, but the Bedouin were set in their ways. Life was cruel in the desert. The burden of too many daughters far outweighed the benefits.

We marched on.

The last vestiges of daylight faded, cooling the air rapidly and producing a mild breeze that did little to stifle the sickening stench of manure that permeated the camp. The great herds of camels and goats – with which the Beni Bekr traveled – snorted, brayed, and bleated as nighttime fell. The foul odor of fresh dung, and that being dried by fire to be used later as fuel, burnt my throat and nostrils. The odor lessened as we approached what appeared to be our destination. There, a cadre of ten guards milled about the entrance to the largest of all the tents.

The Black One raised his hand. "Wait here," he said, and disappeared into Al-Muthanna's lodging after a brief salutation to the captain of the guard.

My cousin's apathy toward our journey east was evident from the moment we left Medina. He wouldn't be pleased with what he would soon learn. I avoided his eyes, feigning interest in the tent before me. It was made of the same black cloth of woven goat hair as all the rest and was of sufficient size to require four tent poles, set in a row along its length. Six hemp ropes, spaced a camel's length apart and anchored in the sand, pulled the roof taut from each of the two long edges, front and back. Unlike many of the other tents, whose leeward sides were rolled up to catch the fleeting daytime breezes, the walls of this desert house hung like curtains from the edge of the roof and were secured to the ground by long wooden pegs.

Terse words, a short distance away, distracted me. An old man massaging a camel's flank to stimulate urine flow, reprimanded another, younger man, who cleansed a newborn in the camel's stream.

"Keep it out of his eyes you fool! Do you want to blind my grandson?"

The young man, agitated, retorted with a flurry of words as he continued to wash the birthing blood off the child under the hissing torrent. A multitude of droplets, capturing the light from a nearby campfire, scattered off the little body like sparks from a red-hot sword being hammered into shape.

"You see, Mu'awiya," Ibrahim said, nudging my arm. "The Bedouin live like animals. For them the old ways will be their way forever."

"You judge too readily, cousin. These people have survived the ages in ways you or I never could."

"I'd sooner be dead than wash in camel piss every day."

"It kills parasites. You'd use it if it was all you had."

One of the guards was taking more than a passing interest in our conversation, so I hushed my cousin. After a while, the

Black One reappeared. We entered the tent upon his signal, followed by three of the others.

Al-Muthanna, smoking a huqqah pipe, sat on a stuffed goat-hide cushion and gazed at the fire in the center of the enclosure. The sere flesh of his face aged him beyond his reputed years. His right hand, weathered and dry like the shriveled skin of a dead lizard, held the pipe stem tenuously. Smoke hovered at eye level, casting a blue pall inside the tent and scenting the air with an aromatic fragrance that intoxicated as the cloud rose slowly upward and seeped out through the narrow gap between the roof and the walls.

As I waited for Al-Muthanna to acknowledge us, I surveyed his possessions, attentive to what his collection might reveal about him. Two exquisite swords caught my eye. Engraved with ornate inscriptions, not Arabic, maybe Persian, they hung waist high from a peg inserted in the inner-most tent pole. Hung higher up, from another peg, his longbow and quiver of arrows proudly displayed the scars of battle.

I shifted my feet on the camel hides that covered the ground inside the tent, making certain not to step on the stack which served as Al-Muthanna's bed. An undulating curtain that separated the tent into two unequal halves, the larger of which undoubtedly housed the sheikh's women, rippled its rainbow colors inward, then outward, as air flowed alternately from one side to the other. In the darkness outside, the animals had quieted – their sounds muted and less frequent.

"These are the city dwellers," the Black One said.

A phantom of smoke drifted across the space between us and the sheikh as he exhaled. Al-Muthanna looked up at us momentarily before returning his attention to the fire. He waved a finger toward his men.

"Hold their weapons until they depart. Now leave us so that I may talk with our visitors privately." The men did so, taking our scimitars and knives.

Al-Muthanna broke the corner from a flat, amber-colored brick of hashish which lay on the ground by his side. He sniffed

the freshly broken surface while shifting his gaze from me, to my cousin, then back to me again. His eyes, bright yet stern, shone in a dark complexion which betrayed his Bedouin lineage. Under ponderous brows, the eyes conveyed the reality of those who live with warfare each day of their lives. The sheikh was thinner than I, a man of medium build with black hair dressed in six long braids that reached to his waist. His full, albeit heavily graying beard made me yearn for one less sparse than my own. As he reached to the fire for an ember, I noticed that on either side of his waist the belt around his red and white striped robe secured two khanjar, curved daggers, with lavishly jeweled handles. Our host straightened his posture and raised his head. He nodded.

I began with cautious words.

"Al-Muthanna, we come in peace from the camp of Khalid ibn al-Welid at Buzakha, where we have won a magnificent victory over the first of the false prophets," I announced in my most stately voice, trying to elicit from him acknowledgement of our peaceful intent. Bedouin, fiercely honor bound, would always honor their word – even when dealing with their enemies. It was, therefore, important that he verbally accept us as friends.

"Allahu Akbar, God is most great," Al-Muthanna replied, with a slight bow of the head. As he spoke, he exposed a sole missing tooth, the pointed one on the top left.

"Allahu Akbar," we echoed in unison.

The sheikh crumbled the chunk of hashish into the bowl of the pipe, placed the lit end of the ember on top of it, and puffed on the stem until smoke billowed from his mouth. He filled his lungs and released the breath slowly, adding to the cloudiness inside the tent. I sensed that the man before us was one who would take his time to weigh things carefully. Al-Muthanna looked us over.

"Peace," he said, giving the hand sign that welcomed us as his guests and placed us under his protection. "I always welcome good news. Sit. I will have food brought for us, but in the meantime have some khat tea to invigorate yourselves after your

long journey." He motioned to a steaming kettle suspended from an iron tripod which straddled the fire.

Al-Muthanna clapped his large hands twice. A guard dashed into the tent with his sword drawn, the flickering firelight reflecting yellow off the blade.

"We are hungry. Bring food."

The guard hesitated, looking at us, then to Al-Muthanna, before bowing and exiting the tent as fast as he had entered.

I tilted the kettle with a rod intended for that purpose, pouring tea into two bowls from a nearby stack. I passed one to my cousin, already seated on a pile of cushions which surrounded the sheikh's camel saddle. I lowered myself opposite him and sipped my drink cautiously. The scalding tea had the odor and taste of wildflowers. Its warmth streaked down my throat, past my heart, and radiated throughout my stomach.

"Now," Al-Muthanna said, "who might you be that brings these glad tidings." He gathered several small pieces of the amber brick, which had fallen from the broken corner, into a little pile on the camel-hide carpet.

"I am the Khalifah's envoy. My name is Mu'awiya; this is my cousin Ibrahim." I briefly turned my head toward my companion.

"That means nothing to me," Al-Muthanna replied, head bowed slightly. His eyes peered out from beneath half-lowered lids as he picked up the pieces, one by one, and placed them into the palm of his hand.

I hesitated. "I am of the House of Omia, named after an ancestor four generations past. My father is Abu Sufyan, a most successful trader from Mecca."

Al-Muthanna brushed the crumbs of hashish into the pipe, then nodded. "I have heard the great Khalid talk of your father, and not in a kind manner."

Since Al-Muthanna most likely knew the details, I decided that I had better reveal them to him myself lest he perceive me as deceitful. I placed the bowl to my lips and drank

some more of the tea to dispel a dryness in my mouth, but the tea made it worse. My heart raced.

"A blood feud existed for ages between my family and that of the Prophet Muhammad, the House of Hashim, even though we're all cousins. My father attempted to have Muhammad killed some ten years ago. The attempt failed. The Prophet eventually returned the gesture, which was also unsuccessful. Three years later, after Mecca fell to Muhammad, our families reconciled. To bind the pact, my sister was given to the Prophet as wife, and the following year I was selected to be his scribe. Needless to say, my position as scribe ended when he died four moons ago, just prior to my twenty-sixth year. I am here now, with my cousin, emissaries to the great tribes of the east, because the journey was deemed too dangerous to send my elder brother."

Al-Muthanna fingered the pipe stem. He maintained the blank stare which he had given me after I'd told him my father's name.

"And what brings you to my garrison?" His hand left the pipe momentarily to pose the question, and then returned.

"We bring a message."

"Yes, a message," Ibrahim said, thrusting his hand into the air, a solitary finger pointing toward the heavens.

I grasped his hand and pulled it down before continuing. "A message from the Khalifah himself, who told his second – Omar – who told me, and now I am to pass it on to you."

"So share this knowledge with me, young one."

I made eye contact with Al-Muthanna. Finally, I seemed to have secured his interest. "The Khalifah instructs you not to advance on the enemy. You are to fall back to Al-Bitah and await the arrival of Khalid, who commands a substantial force."

"I take my direction from the great Khalid and from no one else," Al-Muthanna said.

His answer did not surprise me. I produced, from within my robe, a parchment that I had exchanged for one of the two copies of the Khalifah's orders. "Khalid sends you this,

conveying his concurrence." I passed the coarse-textured document to him.

He looked at me suspiciously as he unfurled it, and then stared at the dispatch for some time. His eyes didn't move. I realized then that he couldn't read, but Khalid's mark was plainly visible at the bottom. The sheikh betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

"Are you satisfied?" I asked.

Al-Muthanna looked up. "Everything appears to be in order."

I breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"But you said your direction came from the Khalifah?"

"Yes."

"Do you have a writing from him to verify this?"

I paused, with my mouth half open. "I do."

"May I see it?"

On the outside I was composed, but inside I laughed. "Of course." I reached into my robe once again and handed him the orders.

Al-Muthanna unrolled the dispatch and held it at arm's length, tilting his head from side to side. After a moment he gave the orders back to me.

I tucked the letter in its safe place. "You know that the Khalifah's army has suffered a terrible loss here in the northeast. What you may not know is that our commander here has been relieved and sent south to Oman with half of his remaining forces."

Al-Muthanna drew a sustained breath through his pipe. "What of the other half?" A puff of smoke emerged with each word.

"You will command them in addition to your own troops. They await you at Al-Bitah."

Al-Muthanna raised an eyebrow. "It is a distinguished honor that I, a Bedouin chief, have command over troops from the Khalifah's army. I am deeply moved, even though I realize that I must submit to leadership of the great Khalid once he arrives. We

are, however, a poor people out here in the desert, so far from the rich cities of the west. I had expected more of a ..." he paused, gazed upward, and made a slow circular motion with his hand, "... tangible expression of the Khalifah's appreciation for my support."

I could have wagered my sister's honor on that response. Dealing with Bedouin means constant haggling, but I'm good at that. I plucked a hair that I had been playing with from my mustache, from the thin side, making it one hair thinner.

"That will come, soon, with victory," I promised. "In the meantime, Al-Muthanna, I will leave with you something more precious than gold or silver: my cousin, Ibrahim."

Ibrahim's eyes widened at the surprise announcement. He gave me the look, the kind that's intended to burn a hole in your head when you try to avoid it.

Al-Muthanna chuckled until he realized I was serious. "My sincerest thanks, but what am I to do with your cousin Ibrahim?"

"He will serve as your liaison to Medina, should you desire to communicate with the Khalifah directly."

The sheikh paused, befuddled. He reached toward two piles far to his right, grabbing a patty of dried camel dung and some kindling, and placed them on the fire. The manure quickly released a dense smoke laden with the odor of rotting vegetation, before it burst into flame.

"So be it," he replied, shrugging as the words parted his lips.

Ibrahim began to fidget. The effect of the khat, and my announcement, no doubt made him restless. He stood and started to pace around the tent. Al-Muthanna's eyes narrowed while he watched. The sheikh rose abruptly as three women carrying food entered. The bearers laid the food at our feet and departed, leaving behind a steaming cauldron that smelled of rancid oil, a large platter overflowing with flatbreads, and lastly an even larger platter which held what appeared to be dates. Three empty bowls completed the offering.

Al-Muthanna gestured at the jet-black kettle as he made his way to leave. He looked thinner than when he was seated. "My gratitude for bringing me this news, and ... your cousin," he said. "Please partake of this modest meal. My apologies, but I must attend to other matters. We shall talk again later."

Ibrahim continued pacing after Al-Muthanna left. His face, effeminate despite the darkness of his closely cropped beard, glistened with sweat. He wore only white, since he had once been mistaken for a veiled woman while wearing a black turban and robe. Ibrahim wiped his brow.

"Why did you tell him I'd be staying? I don't want to remain behind, I want to return to Medina."

"Calm yourself," I said. "You'll be back in Medina before long, but right now Omar needs someone to serve as his eyes and ears here. I told him you would do it."

My cousin looked up and shook his open hands in front of his face, barring his teeth. He glanced my way as he paced. "Someday I'll return the favor."

Ibrahim nodded his head towards the kettle. "The food, what is it?"

I looked inside the pot and sniffed the aroma. "A stew. Smells like camel."

Ibrahim wrinkled his nose and winced. "I hate camel!"

"Get used to it."

"What about those?" He pointed to the tray of dates.

I picked one up and examined it. It was reddish brown

and had legs and wings and was covered with white granules.
"Roasted locusts in salt."

He gave me the look again.

We ate sparingly while recounting the events since our departure from Medina over one moon ago. The meat of the stew was tough and had a strong, gamy taste like lamb that has been left too long – the bread made it somewhat palatable – the locusts, we left untouched. Al-Muthanna's fire crackled and popped throughout our conversation. Only the occasional sound of passing voices, slowly increasing in strength, then fading, interrupted us. Ibrahim fetched more fuel and fed it to the fire.

I was in one of my more talkative moods, perhaps also induced by the tea. Unlike many, I spend more time thinking than talking. Soon, however, I became transfixed by the orange flames which, while less vigorous than when we had first entered the tent, still made lively shadows dance on the walls in a soothing and rhythmic fashion. I fell deep into thought.

After a short while I heard a voice, subdued yet firm.

"Mu'awiya. Mu'awiya," Ibrahim said. "You in a trance?"

I shook my head.

"I had a dream last night, Ibrahim." My eyes were still trained on the flames. "I dreamt of fire, fire all around, consuming everything in sight – tents, trees, buildings. I was there and Khalid was there, right in the midst of it, but instead of him being the great one and I the insignificant one it was just the opposite. As the inferno closed in upon us the dream ended, and I awoke. I don't know when or where this was supposed to be, maybe here, because it was in a land far from home, *that* I could feel."

I turned to face my cousin. "What do you think?"

"I think it means an early grave if Khalid ever finds out about it," he mumbled, as he chewed his food with much difficulty. "I don't believe in dreams but I know he does, and you would do best to keep that one to yourself."

"You think me a fool? I don't expect to share this with him. But you're right. Forget it, and so too will I." I again focused on the flames and fell back into a profound reflection, attempting unsuccessfully to peer into my future.

Ibrahim continued. "Don't let me hold back your ambition – not that I could – but the implication of what you've told me is clear. It would give Khalid an added excuse to rid this earth of your person, aside from the blood feud. You don't need to complicate your dealings with him further."

"Yes, yes. I know. Between Khalid's clan and the House of Hashim it's a wonder that any of our family is still alive."

At that moment Al-Muthanna re-entered the tent.

"I have just received word that a group of your people were attacked on the route which leads to the west," Al-Muthanna said. He sat down by the fire and crossed his legs. His face had a solemn look.

I began to pull at my beard, feeling for a spot long enough to get a good hold on.

"Were they able to escape?" I asked.

"Many were killed, I don't know if any were able to flee to safety. Allah smiled upon you in that your journey here was uneventful. Perhaps you were too few to be noticed."

"We traveled by night except for today when we knew we could make your camp before nightfall," Ibrahim explained.

"This attack," I said, "do you know who's responsible?"

"I am told it was the Beni Yerbu, a clan of the Beni Temim who live in this area." The sheikh waved his finger at us. "This broth we are in is beginning to boil. We had best start for Al-Bitah before it's too late."

Al-Muthanna got up and ambled over to his bed of hides. A shower of dust rose from the skins as he flopped down upon them. "A small tent has been pitched for you behind mine. Get some sleep. We leave at sunrise."

Chapter 3
AH 11/ AD 632

The green of the oasis at Al-Buzakha – a verdant gem in a matrix of waste – contrasted with the surrounding browns and grays in a way that made the heart serene while there, and ache upon departing. The encircling desert, especially hot and still on this day, simmered like a threat. Within the oasis, Khalid ibn al-Welid conferred with his commanders over a map inscribed in the sand, in preparation for the army's relocation. The map showed the oases of Al-Bitah, Al-Yemama, and Al-Buzakha along with the positions of friendly, enemy, and neutral tribes. The intended route was a circuitous line running from the camp at Buzakha, southeastward to Al-Bitah. Khalid drove his drawing stick into their destination and, placing his hands on his hips, raised his head, eliciting nods of approval from his leaders. Khalid expected approval, and nothing less than unquestioned loyalty. Behind Khalid, clansmen, conscripts, and slaves broke camp, dropping the pointed-top, circular-walled tents whose light earthen color blended well into the desert landscape. Absent were the sounds of children playing, babies crying, and women wailing or gossiping over their communal chores. Loved ones had been left at home in Mecca or Medina, whence this army had traveled. Only the voices of men could be heard as they dismantled and bundled the tents securely, moving them from beside the sweet scented grove of date palms to the rank staging area, next to the livestock. Slaves watered and loaded the pack animals – camels