

Khalifah

A novel of conquest
and personal triumph

John Elray

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KHALIFAH

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.