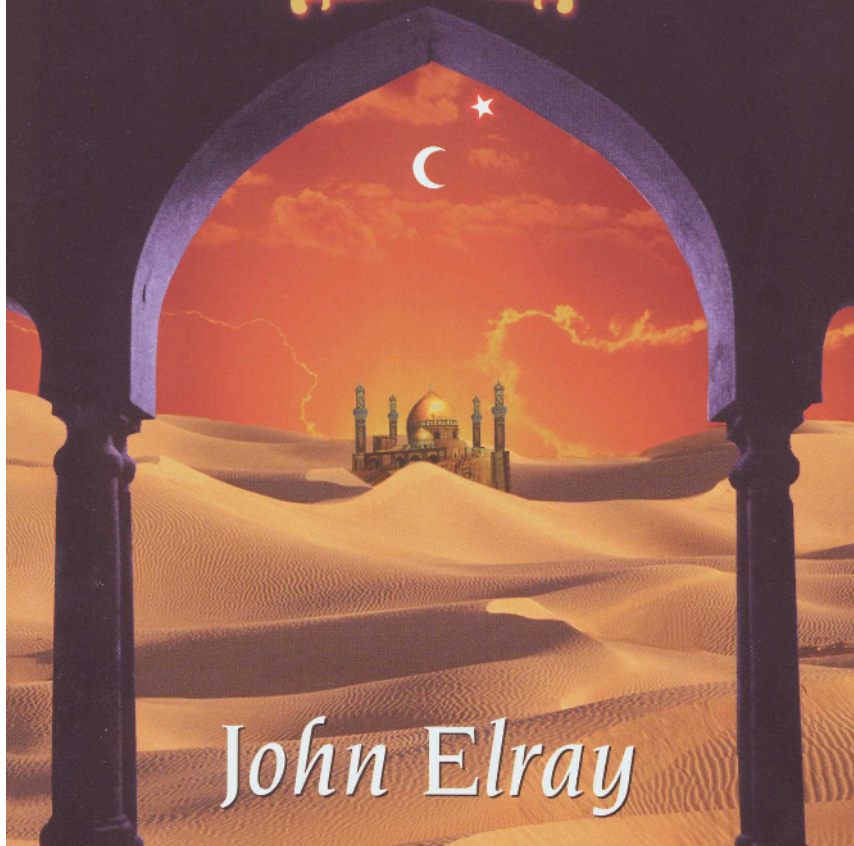


KHALIFAH

A NOVEL OF CONQUEST
AND PERSONAL TRIUMPH



John Elray

Historical fiction

KHALIFAH

The greatest story never told

A forced Muslim convert defies all odds to become the supreme ruler of an empire that stretches from Egypt to Persia in this drama which pits Arab against Arab during the Muslims' rise to power in the seventh century AD.

Through his memorable characters, John Elray exposes the inner workings of a movement whose conquests rivaled those of the Romans and whose influence on modern day life spans the globe.

The author takes you on a captivating journey back in time, delving into the mystery of the people, places, and customs of Islam in this true-to-life tale of passion and deceit. A timeless story which will thrill and entertain you.

Mu'awiya is the son of the most vehement foe of the Prophet Muhammad. Amid the treachery, war, and political intrigue that follow the Prophet's death, Mu'awiya embarks on a thirty year odyssey to redeem his family's name and realize his ambition to be a leader in the new order. His modest hopes for a governorship soon seem unattainable, hampered by the lurking hatred of a former enemy determined to resurrect age-old blood feuds. Mu'awiya's fortunes take an unexpected upturn when he falls in love with a beautiful young Bedouin woman, captured as a slave and later freed, and marries her against his father's will. But in the turmoil of Islam's infancy, assassination of the Khalifah triggers a gripping onrush of events which catapult Mu'awiya into a battle against the heirs of the Prophet for control of the fledgling empire.

KHALIFAH

"Elray employs magnificent imagery to depict the brutality of war and the harsh realities of desert life (and) sweeps you across a landscape as unforgiving as those who vie to control it."

- *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"...Excellent. Skillfully written and handled at every turn."

- *Writer's Digest*

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- *Midwest Book Review*

"Elray writes a colorful and informative historical novel
...(which) readers will find rewarding."

- *The Small Press Book Review*

"Unexpectedly mesmerizing. 5 stars."

- *Bookreporter.com*

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- *MyShelf.Com*

"Elray ...excellently convey(s)...the culture of the medieval Middle East and the tenants of a budding Islamic religion."

- *Suzanne Crane, Historical Novel Review*

"...An awe-inspiring work that spans generations and honestly portrays the shift in values that occur when one obtains power. The old adage of absolute power corrupting absolutely has never felt more real than it does in this tale."

- *Fearless Books*

"Khalifah is historical fiction at its best. A very relevant read for non-Muslims seeking to understand Islam." - *Metapsychology Online*

Khalifah

A novel of conquest
and personal triumph

John Elray

Aardwolfe Books

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To Duk Sin,

for her endless patience with my
seemingly endless preoccupation.

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By the descending star, your compatriot is neither
in error, nor is he deceived...
He was taught by one who is great and powerful.

The Qur'an, Sura 53:1,2,5

Main Characters

Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan - son of Muhammad's arch-rival Abu Sufyan, Mu'awiya, a forced convert, defies all odds to become the supreme ruler of an Islamic empire torn by civil war.

Khalid ibn al-Welid - the Sword of Allah – the foremost general of Islam, whose disregard for human life is superseded only by his hatred of Abu Sufyan and his sons.

Omar ibn al-Khattab - the second Khalifah; sworn enemy of Khalid and protector of Mu'awiya, until his untimely death at the hands of an assassin.

Ali ibn Abi Talib - cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, champion of Khalid, who by unfortunate circumstance becomes a de facto hostage of his own constituency and is forced into a bloody conflict for the Caliphate.

Othman ibn Affan - the third Khalifah, and elder cousin of Mu'awiya.

Amr ibn al-As - mentor to Mu'awiya and the second-most preeminent general of Islam, whose guile tips the balance in the battle for the empire.

Umm-Sadir Sajah - Sajah, the prophetess.

Al-Ashtar ibn Harith and Farouk al-Ashath ibn Keis -Bedouin sheikhs, minions of Khalid, and later Ali.

Meisun - Mu'awiya's Bedouin wife, his last protector.

Al-Hasan - Ali's son, who inherits an untenable legacy doomed for disaster.

Name Pronunciation

Al Muthanna ibn Haritha	• Al Moot-hawna iben Hareetha
Abu Bakr	• Aboo Backer
Ibrahim	• Ib-raw-heem
Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan	• Mwa-wee-ya iben Abee Soofyon
Khalid ibn al-Welid	• Kaw-leed iben ul Wa-leed
Shurahbil ibn Hasana	• Shoo-raw-beel iben Hasana
Omar ibn al-Khattab	• Omar iben ul Kat-tawb, (Umar)
Ali ibn Abi Talib	• A-lee iben Abee Tawleeb
Othman ibn Affan	• Othman iben A-fan, (Uthman)
Amr ibn al-As	• Amer iben ul Ah-ss
Umm-Sadir Sajah	• (Oom Sawdeer) Sawja
Al-Ashtar ibn Harith	• Al Ashtar iben Ha-reeth
Farouk al-Ashath ibn Keis	• Faw-rook al Ashath iben Kay-eese
Meisun	• Maysoon
Al-Hasan	• Al Hassan

[illegible]

*** Othman married Muhammad's daughters
Rokeiya and Um Kulthum

** Fatima by Muhammad's first wife, Khadijah

The Muslim Calendar

The Muslim calendar is based on the lunar cycle reckoned in years after the Hegira (Arabic, Hijrah), Muhammad's emigration from Mecca in July AD 622. Years in the Muslim calendar are accordingly designated as years AH. The months of the Muslim calendar have no fixed relationship to those of the Gregorian calendar, used throughout the Christian world, due to the shorter length of the lunar year as compared with the solar year. Consequently, the beginning of the Muslim year retrogresses through the months of the solar calendar. The months of the Muslim calendar are shown below.

- | | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| 1. Moharram | 7. Rajab |
| 2. Safar | 8. Sha'ban |
| 3. Rabi I | 9. Ramadhan |
| 4. Rabi II | 10. Shauwal |
| 5. Jumada I | 11. Dhu'l Ka'da |
| 6. Jumada II | 12. Dhu'l Hijja |

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.

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 and donkeys – after tending first to the horses. Only amirs, those who were in a position of command, or highly respected warriors were permitted a horse – the animals required too much water.

Despite the activity within the camp, a silence prevailed which reflected a needed respite from the recent spate of death and destruction, and that which was destined for the immediate future. The landscape echoed this silence, from its massive protrusions of volcanic rock that stood as ghostly sentinels frozen in time, to the dry river beds which lay like fallen warriors, their life blood drained.

A pair of mares, being led, plodded along in Khalid's direction, their heads bobbing in time with each other. A third, carrying a rider, pranced alongside them, its tail arched in a fountain of hair. As the trio passed, Khalid and his amirs tightened their circle around the map. Although previously an opponent of Muhammad, Khalid, now of age forty, was the foremost general of Islam, having converted several years past after the marriage of his aunt to the Prophet. He was not the only former foe to convert. So too had his nemesis, Omar ibn al-Khattab, now the Caliph's protégé.

Khalid, the Sword of Allah, outstretched a battle scarred arm to point at a position on the map. His fingernails, long and yellowed, were sharpened to a point. His face, light skinned like the Caliph's, bore a scar too, running from the corner of his right eye to within a thumb's width of his mouth. Eyes, dark and piercing, sat like unlit coals above a beard of black which held no gray, identical to the hair hidden under the turban that adorned his head. Khalid ran a fingernail along the crimson fissure in his face, a souvenir which made his appearance more frightening – and that, he relished.

"Museilima, the Great Liar, who has defiled the words of the Prophet and twisted them to serve his own purpose, has forty thousand of the Beni Hanifa convinced that he is their prophet," Khalid said to his amirs. His eyes narrowed. "They stand ready

to do battle against us upon our arrival at Al-Yemama. We shall win them to our way, the way of the one true Prophet, or they shall perish at our hands, hell bound, with Museilima at their head."

He looked up toward the heavens. "May Allah cause that your genitals should wither and that you and your entire family and all your descendants die painful deaths." Khalid spat on the ground. His commanders followed suit.

A latecomer, stout and dressed all in white, craned his neck to get a look at the map. Shurahbil ibn Hasana had led the remnants of the Muslim forces in the northeast to Al-Bitah where they were to join with the army of Al-Muthanna.

"There will be work to do on the way, Commander," he said, brushing his hand through the thick, shaggy hair of his uncovered head. "On the journey here, my small party was stopped by a band of several hundred Bedouin under a sheikh whom they called Malik. Amongst them were several fighters from Mesopotamia, judging from their attire."

Khalid's dagger-like fingernails dueled with each other. "Hmmm, from which clan is this sheikh Malik?"

"My guides told me that he is the leader of the Beni Yerbu," Shurahbil replied.

"And these fighters from the north, who might they be?" Shurahbil shook his head. "I'm not certain."

One of the lesser amirs, a young man, called out to Khalid. "O Fearless One. I know of this sheikh Malik and have heard tell that he consorts with another false prophet, a woman, from Chaldea. Perhaps these men are of her people."

"Don't be ridiculous," Khalid replied. "If there was another false prophet, especially a woman, I would have heard of her."

"I learned of this only recently, maybe two moons ago, before we departed from Medina. The news came to me through a friend who works the trading caravans," the amir said. He began to wring his hands.

Khalid riveted his gaze on the amir. "And I don't receive the word? No one tells me anything? Why didn't you tell me?"

The amir nodded, as if to bow. "My tongue has offended you, my tongue has offended you," he chanted and, producing his knife, drew the sharp edge downward along the length of his tongue. He was about to do the same crossways when Khalid grabbed his hand. Red welled up from the wound and dripped from the end of the amir's tongue onto Khalid's robe.

"Are you mad?" Khalid wrenched the knife away from the amir. His voice rose in anger. "You *must* be mad, or stupid. Either way you are not wanted here... be gone!"

Khalid cuffed the amir across the side of the head. The young man moved backwards, bowing as he did so. Khalid's eyes followed him as he left. "That he should think he knows something of which I know nothing."

Open-mouthed, Shurahbil watched the episode in silence. Khalid turned back to him and resumed his previous line of questioning. "Then what happened?"

Another moment of silence elapsed before Shurahbil spoke. "Ah, eventually they set upon us. My men on horseback were able to escape. Those on camel, or on foot, remained to fight. I pray that we shall see them again."

A flood of curses emanated from the mouths of the other leaders who encircled the map in the sand.

Khalid paused momentarily before issuing his orders. "We break camp for Al-Bitah tonight. We shall deal with this sheikh Malik on the way."

Just then, the amir whom Khalid had rebuked ran back towards the council, yelling and waving his arms, his eyes wild, blood from his tongue flying with each word.

"Malik comes, Malik comes!"

From atop his charger, on a hillock at the edge of the oasis, Khalid watched as the Beni Yerbu forces massed along a nearby ridge well outside arrow shot yet close enough to count

individual men. He reckoned there were a thousand Bedouin, half of them mounted on camels. Ten of Malik's champion fighters marched down from the ridge and took a stand near the midpoint between the two armies. Khalid called Shurahbil to his side.

The Sword of Allah pointed to a shallow depression which snaked through the earth and ran to the north of his adversary. "Ride down that wadi. See if Malik has more men on the other side of the ridge." Shurahbil scratched himself as he nodded, and rode off.

Khalid motioned to another of his amirs. "Pass word to the others. Make all horses battle-ready immediately and hasten preparations for the camp's departure."

By the time Shurahbil returned, seven hundred khaiyalah – mounted fighters, armed and in the saddle – stood ready for action. Most of Khalid's ten thousand soldiers, however, remained hidden in the oasis; only two hundred were shown to the enemy. Each carried a bow and a quiver of arrows. Some possessed swords, but many did not.

The enemy taunted and clamored for battle. Mounted fighters brandished their lances while the infantry banged clubs on leather shields. Both groups shouted insults, heard only as a low roar in the Muslim camp.

Khalid laughed. They want battle, they'll get it.

Shurahbil rode up next to Khalid. "What we see before us is all he has."

"Good." Khalid drew his sword, a quick kill at the forefront of his thoughts. "Send ten of ours down the center on foot," he commanded his amirs, "but we will break protocol. When they are halfway to Malik's ten, we unleash the khaiyalah, all of them, with swordsmen in front."

Malik's rear echelon cheered as ten Muslim champions arrived on the field of battle, but the cheers turned quickly to silence when the onslaught began to pour out of the oasis. The khaiyalah, led by Khalid, rode at full gallop. The ground boomed with each hooffall. Swords drawn, they converged on Malik's

champions, beheading several on the first pass without slowing. Screams of terror and despair were stopped short. Swords sang as vertebrae shattered and headless bodies fell, painting the ground red. Khalid halted his charger and turned to view the slaughter, drawing a certain energy from what he saw. Almost imperceptibly, he smiled.

A second wave of horsemen slowed to engage the lances of the remaining Beni Yebu champions. Malik's foremost champion caught a khaiyallah under the chin with his lance, pulled him off his stallion, and suspended the rider in mid air, shaking the spear until it penetrated to the brain. The victim squirmed like a fish on a hook before the Yebu fighter was cut down from behind, and both dropped to the earth. Another of Khalid's men was lost when his sword became stuck in a lance, its Beni Yebu owner dragging him to the ground to be trampled by his own horse. By the time the Muslim foot soldiers arrived, however, Malik's champions were no more. The khaiyallah had ridden on to meet the enemy's main contingent.

As they neared the ridge, Khalid split his forces into two groups – one going to the left, the other to the right. When the attack commenced on Malik's flanks, the apostate army broke and ran. The Beni Yebu disappeared behind the ridge, with Khalid and his cavalry in full pursuit.

Chapter 4
AH 11/ AD 632

It had been five days since my cousin Ibrahim and I departed Al-Yemama, under the safety of Al-Muthanna's caravan, for the larger oasis town of Al-Bitah. Late on the morning after our arrival, I watched as Khalid's entourage, suffering under the searing heat of the desert sun, entered the town. On that day, unshaded skin burned with pain while the intense brightness blinded the eyes to anything in the shadows. Al-Bitah's elevation on the high desert plateau ensured sufficient rainfall to feed the aquifer on which the town stood. Cool water from wells sunk deep into the earth, indescribably refreshing after a daylight march through the desert, would soon revive the weary travelers.

My steps kept pace with the incoming army as I walked past stall after stall in the bazaar on the north side of town. Long rows of canopies, either secured to buildings or supported by poles, mimicked the drabness of the light brown mud-brick structures they abutted. Under the canopies' shade, a pathetic array of merchants and miscreants hawked their wares.

In the midst of Khalid's caravan I could see some fifty Beni Yerbu prisoners, their hands bound together in front of them. They staggered from exhaustion like a band of drunkards. The captives, who reportedly included sheikh Malik ibn Nuweira, would soon be tried for their crimes along with other offenders of the Faith. I later learned the details of Khalid's initial attack and

of how Malik's forces had escaped into sandy desert where our horses could not follow with any great speed. Nonetheless, Khalid and his army tracked the Beni Yerbu to their camp. Malik's men offered little resistance and after a mere half-day of fighting, chose instead to embrace Islam. Most of the Beni Yerbu were then left in peace, with only their leaders and certain suspect individuals being taken captive. Several prisoners collapsed during the long trek which had begun early on the morning of the previous day. The less important ones were left where they fell. At the head of the remaining fifty walked Malik, his beautiful wife Leila, and his brother Mutemmam.

As the army continued to file into Al-Bitah, I engaged a merchant selling qirbah, water skins. The interior of his stall was dark, cast in the shadow of a modest building – perhaps his home. To the left of him, a scrawny boy, no older than ten, offered passersby de-fanged snakes from a squirming collection in a large wicker basket. Once money had changed hands, the child would snatch the snake of your choice from the writhing mass, smack its head on his rock of death, and present it to you to take and cook. The foul oily odor of the reptile orgy forced any thoughts of eating from my mind. While I listened to the qirbah merchant, I noticed that one of the snakes had escaped into the stall on my right. There, a hag selling palm oil and chicken eggs spied the serpent just as its distended mouth encircled the widest part of an egg which had fallen onto the sand. A great verbal fight ensued across the qirbah stall between the hag and the boy, disturbing my concentration.

"But kind sir, surely you can see they are worth much more, at least eighty," the qirbah merchant said, vying for my attention above the commotion.

Eighty dirhams! They probably cost him eight. Without comment, I picked up one of the skins and felt the soft nap of the thick leather. This was a good one. It retained the shape of its donor, a sheep or a goat, headless, with the stumps of the legs tied off to prevent leakage.

As I pondered a counteroffer suitable to indicate my displeasure with the merchant's outrageous request, an egg flew past me, striking the serpent boy on the side of the head. Amid a torrent of curses, the boy flung a snake at the hag, hitting her and forcing the old woman to flee her stall shrieking.

The qirbah merchant wheeled to his right, raised his fist, and screamed at the boy. "Go, now, before I shove those snakes up your anus!" The boy shrunk into the corner of his stall, silent. The merchant, wearing a disingenuous smile, returned his attention to me.

"Eighty dirhams, master – a bargain, to be sure."

"I know of a vendor in the bazaar at Mecca who had his tongue cut out for daring to demand so much for pieces of trash such as this." I waved the qirbah in front of the merchant's face.

"Twenty."

"Surely the kind sir is mistaken. These are the finest qirbah in the whole of the peninsula. But since you are a stranger to these parts I will let you have them for only... sixty dirhams each."

At this point, a voice from behind me entered the conversation.

"Sixty seems like more than a fair price."

As much as being angered by the rudeness of this interference, I was taken aback by the accent of the speaker. I rested my hand on the hilt of my dagger and slowly turned around. My eyes widened in surprise.

"Shurahbil!" My hand left the dagger and made its way to my friend's shoulder. We embraced in the customary fashion, with a kiss on each cheek.

"If it's qirbah you need, there's another merchant selling them across town," Shurahbil said. "Where are you going?"

"Back to Medina," I replied. "You came here with Khalid?"

"Yes, he's in that crowd somewhere." Shurahbil looked through the mass of dismounted turbans and head cloths. He

pointed to a girl who appeared to be about sixteen, with long dark hair, and very pleasing to behold. I felt an erection coming on.

"You see that woman?"

I nodded.

"Her name is Leila; she's the wife of the enemy sheikh, Malik. Khalid hasn't taken his eyes off her during the whole journey. Her husband is living on borrowed time, and for my liking his end can't come soon enough. I overheard Khalid arranging the accident."

The merchant cleared his throat. "Ah, kind sir, since you are a friend of the great Khalid I will let you have the skins at only forty dirhams a piece. Shall we finalize the deal?"

"That does not surprise me, Shurahbil. I've traveled with his army before. I know his ways."

"Twenty-five, twenty-five dirhams," the merchant called out.

At this point I turned back to him. "I will pay you ten dirhams a piece for these skins and no more."

"Ten?" The merchant paused. "Not that ten is not a fair price for such esteemed customers," he added quickly. "I'll take ten."

Money and merchandise changed hands and then Shurahbil walked with me as we continued to talk.

I had not seen Shurahbil in over a year owing to the length of his stay in this part of Arabia. He had been the chief of a Christian tribe located at Muta, in southern Palestine, until his forced conversion, brought about after he slew one of the Prophet's messengers. It was Muhammad's army under the leadership of Khalid that delivered him defeat, in the eighth year after the Hijrah.

Shurahbil was older than me, but not by much. He might have been in his twenty-ninth year at most. He was as tall as a horse at its shoulder height and heavy set, a feature accentuated by his all white attire. His wavy, shoulder-length brown hair,

rarely covered by a turban, had been lightened by the sun to produce a handsome match for his swarthy complexion. Shurahbil and I looked very much alike, so much so that people often mistook us for brothers. The main difference was in the fullness of our beards, mine being thinner and somewhat patchy, and, being of the Quraysh, I always wore a turban.

We wended our way through the marketplace, pushing past the aimless crowds in a direction away from Khalid. A coffee vendor, under a large black canopy, beckoned for us to avail ourselves of the ample shade his establishment offered. He told us that the beans from which his coffee was made came from Medina. Any reminder of home was a welcome one. We sat, on mats, cross-legged on the ground, a flat rock table between us, watching the throng of people in the street jostle each other.

"You are a sight to behold, my friend," I said, as I leaned forward and delivered a hearty handclasp to Shurahbil's shoulder. "We must have almost crossed paths on our travels of the last few days. I journeyed from Khalid's camp at Buzakha to Al-Yemama and from there to here."

"I have traveled from the east of Yemama to here at Al-Bitah then to Buzakha and back again, and not without incident. I'll tell you about that later. How long have you been here, Mu'awiya?"

The vendor returned and poured an opaque coffee into two glazed earthen cups that he had set on our table. I placed the cup under my nose and inhaled the steam slowly and deliberately. The priceless aroma traveled up my nostrils and filled my head completely. Paradise. I sipped it.

"About twenty days," I replied. "However, I depart for Medina shortly. Omar has given me a commission as second in command in the army of Amr ibn al-As. My foremost concern right now is leaving here alive. Between the rebel tribes, bandits, and Khalid's presence, I feel ill at ease in these parts. If I can survive the next fortnight I will finally have an opportunity to

make something of myself. Such an opportunity may never come again."

Shurahbil laughed. "Such grand aspirations. You should go far under Omar's watchful eye... unless you get drawn into his intrigues."

I became more cautious with my words lest I jinx the outcome. "I'm interested in a governorship of some conquered territory, no more than that. To be a leader of men and to make my father proud of me. That's what I want."

The call of the coffee vendor, soliciting customers, momentarily drowned out our conversation. He enticed four Bedouin to enter and take their place next to us. The scent of urine wafted our way.

Shurahbil drank from his cooling cup, half swallowed, and sprayed the remaining contents from his mouth into the air. He spit a bean sized cockroach onto the palm of his free hand, looked at it, and threw it aside. It scurried away. Shurahbil gave the vessel a jaundiced look before returning his attention to me.

"What brought you here all the way from Medina that allows you to leave so soon?" he inquired.

I cautiously took another sip of my drink. "The Khalifah sent me as his personal representative to the eastern tribes who support our cause. My work here will be done soon, but before I leave I have one other task. Omar gave me a written message to deliver to Khalid." I patted the area of my robe which contained the document. "I am to pass it to him before he moves on the false prophet Museilima."

"What's it contain?"

"Instructions for the treatment of captives, truce conditions, and the like."

Shurahbil's look grew serious. "Be careful. I have seen that he does not take unexpected news well."

"I'm not concerned for my own safety," I said, knowing full well this was not true. Over the years, several of my relations had lost their lives at the hands of Khalid's clan. "Khalid knows

he'd be the first whom Omar would suspect if anything were to happen to me, and he could not win a confrontation with Omar. I'll hold the message until the day before I leave, though, just in case."

Shurahbil scratched his buttocks. "It will be interesting, as an ally, to see how he commands in battle. I've never fought alongside Khalid before, only opposite him in the days leading up to my..." he hesitated, "...conversion."

We looked each other straight in the eye.

"You were in the same position as my father was when Mecca fell," I said. "We had no choice." I glanced around and saw that one of the Bedouin men next to us was looking our way; the others were engrossed in their own conversation. I quickly changed the subject since this was a dangerous topic to be discussing, especially for me. "Tell me about your journey here. You mentioned an incident earlier... you had difficulties?"

"I lost twenty-seven men in battle going from here to Buzakha. We found their bodies on the way back. It was the work of the Beni Yerbu, but they paid for it, and will pay yet more before all is said and done. We have brought their leaders here for trial. Khalid's justice will set things right."

I nodded. "I heard the news of this. But why bother with a trial? Khalid's justice has always meant death, whether it's deserved or not."

"No matter." Shurahbil spit. "These swine deserve whatever punishment they receive. The butchery with which the Beni Yerbu slew our brothers brought tears to my eyes. They deserve nothing less than a painful termination of their miserable lives."

I swallowed the last mouthful of my coffee and placed the cup on our rock table. "Bedouin can be very cruel. They love to see blood flow."

"No one's blood should flow sooner than that of Malik and his men," Shurahbil replied.

"In that case, Shurahbil, Khalid's justice will be a fitting end."

I chanced to look out onto the thoroughfare and noticed one of Khalid's minions gawking about in search of something. When he spied my friend and me, he hastily entered the coffee vendor's stall.

"Shurahbil ibn Hasana, the Sword of Allah summons you. You are to come now."

Chapter 5
AH 11/ AD 632

"Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.
I bear witness that there is no god but Allah.
I bear witness that there is no god but Allah.
I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.
I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.
Come to prayer, come to prayer.
Come to prosperity, come to prosperity.
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.
There is no god but Allah."

Khalid looked up as the shrill call of the muezzin rang out from atop the tallest building in Al-Bitah, summoning the faithful to midday prayer. Longtime followers and recent converts, apostates who embraced Islam rather than suffer the consequences of opposing it, flocked to the makeshift mosque to kneel facing the holy city of Mecca and pray. Those who could not fit inside remained outside, laying their body-length prayer mats on the ground in preparation.

From the corner of his eye, Khalid inspected the place of prayer as he stood talking with Shurahbil and two of his other amirs a short distance away. The canopy of tent material, secured to a grid of poles sunk upright in the earth, caught the slight wind like a sail, causing it to billow upwards, testing the chords which

anchored its eastern edge to the western-most building in the town. Even though it had no other walls except for that shared with the adjacent building, the mosque at least provided refuge from the sun for the two hundred or so worshipers within. It would do.

A shepherd arrived with ten sheep, each with a bell hung around its neck that made a dull clanking sound as they moved about. He pushed to locate himself and his flock under the canopy, but was turned away by a newly conscripted guard anxious to prove his worth.

Khalid was to conduct prayers this day, but he delayed until Malik and the other prisoners were brought to him. Khalid counted the hours until he could rightfully lay claim to the woman of his enemy, her name escaping him at the moment, but her beauty etched into his soul.

"I think I see them coming now," Shurahbil said.

The words echoed among the lustful thoughts meandering through Khalid's mind – a stream whose rhythm was finally broken upon delivery of the captives.

Khalid shot the rebel leader a malevolent glance. "Did you not hear the call to prayer?"

Malik, attractive albeit slight, and some ten years younger than Khalid, showed no fear. "Perhaps you forgot that you made us prisoners," he replied, hardly giving the Sword of Allah time to finish speaking.

Khalid scowled and turned to his captain of the guard. "Did he or any one of them ask to be allowed to come to pray?"

"No, they did not."

Khalid turned back to Malik. "You make false claims of devotion only to save yourselves. You do not behave as would true Believers who have accepted the Faith." Khalid quickly looked around, peering at the gaggle of prisoners. "Is this all of your men?"

Malik's brother, Mutemmam, interceded. "We are all Believers now. The long journey and our confinement has dulled

our wits, for otherwise we would have surely sought permission to come to prayer." He droned on apologetically, begging forgiveness for himself, the other prisoners, and all Beni Yerbu wherever they might be.

As Mutemmam spoke, Khalid motioned Shurahbil to come closer. "Who of these people accosted your party on the road to Al-Buzakha?" he whispered.

"Not the one who's speaking, but Malik was among them, as you know, and so were these misfits." Shurahbil nodded in the direction of three near toothless but otherwise seemingly fit men standing side by side near the canopy's corner post.

"When the service has ended, divide the prisoners into two groups. Confine these and any others you recognize as your attackers separately from the rest," Khalid said. "I wish to make an example of them."

Before Mutemmam had finished talking, Khalid dismissed the episode and commanded that prayers begin. As he walked to the mosque, Khalid turned to the captain of the guard. "Guide the prisoners so they know what to do."

The captain quickly explained. "Prayers are of two types. Dua, which you can do on your own, anytime, and salat, which is required five times a day – dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset, and after nightfall. It is salat over which the Sword of Allah now presides. In salat you must perform at least two rakas depending on the time of day. For this salat you will perform four rakas and you must declare to yourself that you are going to make this salat and the number of rakas you will offer, otherwise Allah will not listen to you. For each raka you must bow and prostrate yourself while saying the prescribed verses. Listen to me and follow."

Mutemmam nodded acknowledgment for the group.

As prayers began, the worshippers stood upright facing Mecca, Khalid at their head. With their hands raised, palms facing forward, the assemblage let out a resounding "Allahu Akbar." They then fell to their knees, bowed, lay outstretched on the ground, and in a low voice recited passages from the Quran.

After all rakas had been completed, the crowd sat back on their heels, knees on their mats.

"Now you must recite the shahada, silently," the captain said. "It goes like this: La ilaha illa Allah, wa Muhammad rasul Allah; There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah. Repeat it once back to me, softly." The Beni Yerbu recited it with varying degrees of accuracy. The captain paused. "That will have to do," he said.

Prayers ended with each member of the congregation turning his head first to the right, then to the left, addressing a salutation to the two angels which each knew was observing him.

After prayers, Khalid spoke to the crowd about the virtues and rewards of being a good Muslim, much in the fashion that the Caliph would have, had he been there. He reminded everyone of Abu Bakr's decree that the apostate tribes would be pardoned if they re-embraced Islam and accepted all its obligations, including the annual tithe. He also reminded them of its one condition – that anyone who had harmed a Muslim must be delivered up to receive like-kind punishment for their transgression. Eager converts readily accused those known to have killed, injured, or slandered Muslims. Khalid listened with great interest to the litany of names and crimes before sending out deputations to round up the offenders. Those who were destined to survive would witness the gruesome fate of those who were not.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Al-Muthanna and I returned to town from the countryside where we had been attending to other business since shortly after dawn. The heat of the day had not yet started to abate and no protection was afforded from the merciless sun which burned bright in the clear blue sky. A pungent scent from Al-Muthanna's herds greeted us on wings of wind that also brought their sounds, long before we reached Al-Bitah. The sheikh gazed about imperiously from the proud

perch atop his prized stallion, a sorrel with white markings on the face and front legs, Al-Muthanna's loose brown robe flowing over its sides. With one hand, Al-Muthanna adjusted the two braided bands of black goat hair which held in place the white kaffiyah that covered his head and which remained open at the throat. I rode beside the sheikh, followed by twenty of his bodyguards and the clattering of their camels' hooves on the stony desert floor.

As we entered town, the sorrel neighed, rearing its head high as if to announce the arrival of a superior. Shurahbil met us on the dusty main thoroughfare of Al-Bitah and reported the day's events to me while Al-Muthanna went off to be with one of his wives.

"The blood will flow like camel piss today," Shurahbil said. "Khalid will conduct trials, and pass sentences, and deliver justice in his own special way. You are just in time to witness it. Come."

Shurahbil motioned for me to follow as he walked off.

"No," I said. "I've seen enough of it before, and I'm weary from the day's ride." I had, not long ago, witnessed Khalid's handiwork at Buzakha and had no inclination to see it again. The sight of blood made me cringe, even more so when it was my own. I feared the day, not far off, when I must once again personally engage on a field of battle.

"Come," he repeated. "Khalid will dispatch some of the Beni Yerbu today. The more who watch, the greater our enemy's shame. You owe it to our dead. Come."

I reluctantly overcame my aversion and dismounted, following Shurahbil through town to a place just north of the bazaar, my horse in tow. There, a sparse grove of date palms grew in a shallow depression which afforded good viewing from the slopes that encircled it. Several dead palms lay toppled on the ground, some with their trunks broken off near the base where they had rotted through, leaving only stumps in place. A well, a simple hole in the earth surrounded by large rocks, was situated in the center of the grove. Still high in the sky, the sun afforded

ample light to illuminate the scene. Many of the townspeople were present, as was Khalid and half his army. Those charged with committing crimes against Islam were huddled together, seated on the ground at the base of the eastern slope.

We had only a brief wait before the Sword of Allah clapped his hands twice to start the proceedings. A cadre of guards herded the accused into the center of the grove and made them kneel in a ragged square formation. They were called up by name, one at a time, and the charges against them read. Occasionally Khalid would find someone innocent, in which case that person was freed, but more often he pronounced them guilty and the offenders were dealt the prescribed justice. In the case of those who killed our brethren, the punishment was death in a like manner – on this the Quran was clear.

Twenty perished by the sword. Seven of those were beheaded, the jagged tree stumps making suitable chopping blocks. One was thrown off a nearby cliff, and two were drowned in the well – suspended by their ankles and lowered in until the water reached their knees. When the squirming stopped, they were hauled out and unceremoniously cast aside. The crowded slopes rang with jeers and catcalls. Only those whose relations met their end grieved. They wailed endlessly.

Sentences commensurate with the crime were also handed down to those who maimed or disfigured their victims. The cruelest retribution of all, however, was meted out to two harp playing songstresses accused of ridiculing the Prophet in their songs. That's when I was drawn into this orgy of blood. The elder, unrepentant one was dealt with first while the younger of the two looked on.

Her hands were secured, far apart, to a fallen palm trunk. Her feet were bound likewise to another. On Khalid's signal, two of his men descended upon her, the first forcing her mouth open as the second loosened her front teeth, one by one, with a fist sized rock. Two broke off from misplaced blows. Khalid's man

pulled the remaining teeth out by hand, using a thin piece of camel leather to maintain his grip. He grunted out the count.

"One, two, three, four."

I groped at my beard, twirling a strand between my fingertips and isolating a hair that felt too long. I yanked the rogue from my face.

Shurahbil turned to me. "Four teeth from the top and four from the bottom – so now, no more singing for her."

Her screams rang in my ears long after they had stopped. Then I heard Khalid's voice call my name.

"Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan."

I looked towards him as he tossed me an execution sword. I made no bold attempt to catch it before it fell to the ground in front of me. I felt my stomach churn. I knew I shouldn't have come.

"I require some assistance." He pointed to the palm trunk to which the songstress's hands were tied. One of his personal guards stood by her right hand.

I picked up the sword. The blade was broader and heavier than most, the weight being concentrated near the cutting edge. Though I loathed what I knew was coming, to decline would have been a sign of weakness and a disgrace. I took my position on her left.

Khalid hoisted his arm into the air. The guard, holding a torch in one hand, unsheathed his sword and raised it high. Khalid's arm fell to his side, signaling the guard to unleash a lightning quick stroke that took off the songstress's right hand with a single blow. Upon seeing this, the second songstress fainted.

I stared at the severed appendage. The earth around it turned red.

"Now!" Khalid yelled.

I heard his voice but I couldn't react. My own sword hand tingled, as if it were the one which had been lost.

"By the Prophet's beard, *now* I said!"

I forced my weapon up and it came back down with great force, cutting off the songstress's left hand, however, it wasn't until the torch was put to the stump of her right arm to cauterize the wound that she fainted.

At Khalid's behest, the guards waited until the younger songstress had regained consciousness before subjecting her to the same fate as the first. The crowd murmured.

I stood silent. My eyes focused in turn on the four bloodstained hands, my fingers alternately curled and tugged at my mustache. I still held the sword but I could hardly maintain my grip. I couldn't muster the strength to make a fist. I have killed by necessity, in my defense, but I had never done anything like that before. Hatred ate at my heart. Hatred for Khalid, hatred for myself. But I would quickly force myself to forget – it would not be the first time. One must purge one's consciousness in order to survive the unpleasantnesses of life.

Of the Beni Yerbu, less than half were executed that day – those who admitted their crime or who were accused by their own. Malik admitted nothing, but his days were numbered.

By the time the butchery ended, sunset was at hand and the call of the muezzin rang out for the fourth time that day.

Chapter 6
AH 11/ AD 632

The nighttime wind chilled my extremities as Shurahbil and I made our way from Al-Muthanna's camp, on the east side of Al-Bitah, to Khalid's camp on the west side for a meeting of the amirs. We were to devise a strategy for the assault on Museilima, the second of the false prophets.

Darkness had fallen upon the desert oasis, yet the darkness was tempered by a full moon that illuminated the edges of clouds distant on the horizon. The moonlight lent a steel-like coldness to the landscape, bathing it in hues of blue and ivory – colors made all the more vivid by the crisp clear air. Serenity now reigned in what was, a short while earlier, a sea of chaos.

Al-Muthanna and four of his confidants were already waiting outside Khalid's tent when we arrived. Two guards flanked the entrance. Above them, the concave lines of the tent's conical roof alternately straightened and slackened in the gusty breeze.

Khalid walked briskly from amongst the shadows of several nearby tents and bade us follow him inside his quarters where his old friend, Farouk al-Ashath ibn Keis, sat with several of Khalid's own commanders. Two of these I recognized as respected Companions of the Prophet, as those who were closest to Muhammad were called. The others were notable men from Mecca and Medina, all well-kept in their physical appearance.

This was in contrast to the Bedouin amirs, Farouk and Al-Muthanna and their men, who had dark leather-like skin, missing teeth, and a general haggard look about them. As we sat, one of Farouk's men waved away one of Al-Muthanna's, who responded by raising a fist in anger. They sprung to their feet amid a storm of vitriolic words. Had it not been for Khalid's intervention, blood might have been shed. Bedouin men are easily provoked.

Farouk, chief of the Beni Kinda, was an apostate who had recently been accepted back into the fold of Islam by the Khalifah, Abu Bakr. In return, Farouk and his men had traveled far from their home in the southern coastal province of Hadramaut to battle the enemies of the Faith, under the banner of the great Khalid. I faced an equally long trip back to Medina and then on to Tebuk, a ten-day journey northwest of Medina, to fight the Beni Kodaa alongside Amr ibn al-As, a long time acquaintance of both my father and of Khalid.

Khalid looked at the assembled leaders seated around the small fire that burned in the center of the tent. He dwelt for a moment on each of the faces in turn. "Peace be upon you all," he said.

"Peace," we replied.

Khalid waved his finger in the manner of one scolding a child. "We must devise an infallible strategy to ensure that our smaller force can cut the enemy down to a manageable size. Only then can we attain victory." He gazed upward and raised his hands to head height, close together in front of him, shaking them back and forth gently. "May Allah grant us the strength to prevail." He became silent for a moment.

I took the opportunity afforded by his pause to offer my opinion.

"Another ally is required to bolster our ranks," I said. "With less than twenty thousand men against Museilima's forty thousand our chances of victory are slim, even if our fighters are superior."

Khalid looked at me with disdain out of the corner of his eye. "I welcome all new allies to our cause. Whom do you have in mind?" Khalid removed a string of beads from his belt and fingered them, drawing the loop through his hand one bead at a time with his thumb.

"The Beni Temim."

"Aren't the Beni Yerbu part of that tribe?" Khalid asked, rhetorically. His gaze, now face on, hardened. "The Beni Temim are supposed to be neutral. It worries me that they can't control the clans."

My eyes met Khalid's, but cautiously. "Of all their clans only the Beni Yerbu opposed us, and now that is of no matter. The Beni Temim are the best hope for augmenting our forces. We talked with their amirs today. They would be inclined to join us, given the proper incentives."

Khalid turned to Al-Muthanna. "What about this?"

"It is so," the sheikh said. "I have ties to the leader of the Beni Temim. I believe I could convince him to commit his tribe to our cause, at a not unreasonable cost."

"Then you shall do so. We will develop two plans; one which includes the Beni Temim, and one based on our existing forces alone in case you don't succeed or in case we are attacked before the Beni Temim arrive." Khalid shot a glance in my direction. "Is this not wise, my young friend?"

"Most wise," I conceded.

The night passed quickly as we formulated and reformulated our strategy. In the distance, sharp shouts and cries of pain told of a commotion brewing in the compound. At Khalid's urging, we ignored it and continued our task, eventually completing the war plans.

At length, I stood and prepared to leave. I approached Khalid and produced a piece of parchment, folded and secured with a wax seal. The wax bore the imprint of Omar's sign – his stylized first name written on a background of delicately inscribed leaves and flowers, all contained within a circle.

Khalid observed the seal. "Where did you get this?" he demanded, rising to equalize our eye level.

"It came in a dispatch which I received from Medina two days ago," I replied.

"Two days! You wait until now to give it to me?"

"I was instructed to deliver it just prior to my departure. I leave tomorrow."

Khalid eyed me contemptuously as he opened the letter and began to read. The veins in his temples bulged and his face deepened in color. I could hear him breathing heavily.

"This is indeed the work of the Left Handed One. He presumes too much, thinking that he can direct my campaign!" He looked up. "How much of this did you know?"

I knew I must answer cautiously lest I get caught up in the rivalry between him and Omar.

"I know naught of Omar's communication with you other than that he has sent this letter. I have not read it nor were its contents revealed to me."

"Come now," Khalid said, "he favors you, he must have shared something of this. What is his thinking?"

The tent closed in around me. All eyes were trained on mine. I wondered whether Khalid would explode into a violent rage as he was apt to do to enforce his authority in the presence of onlookers. It suddenly became very hot. I wiped the sweat from the palms of my hands onto my robe as discretely as I could. Outside, the wind whistling through the tent ropes consumed my thoughts.

"I know nothing of Omar's intent. If you like, I'll inquire with him when I arrive in Medina. If you have a response, I will gladly take it back with me."

Complete silence enveloped the meeting. Khalid glowered at me. He clenched his jaw and hung his head. Khalid paused for what seemed to be an eternity, then he laughed. The amirs followed suit, tentatively, one at a time, until as a single voice they filled the tent with laughter.

Allahu Akbar, relief – but I refrained from laughing.

The Sword of Allah glanced around the tent, nodding.

"Very well," he said, looking me straight in the eye, "this is my reply." Khalid took the letter to the fire and touched a corner to the flames. Holding the parchment slanted downwards, he turned to face me with Omar's message burning at arm's length. An unsettling feeling of recollection possessed me as the letter blazed in a ferocious rage fed by the wax seal, obscuring more and more of Khalid's face. As the flames peaked, Khalid let the parchment drop to the ground.

Just then, one of Khalid's personal guards entered the tent unannounced and out of breath.

"Master, trouble in the north end of camp."

"What kind of trouble?" Khalid asked.

"Fighting between our men and the prisoners," replied the guard, running his words together. "Many are dead, mostly theirs, but the remaining Beni Yerbu are rousing our Bedouin allies against us. Your presence is required."

Khalid and Shurahbil arrived at the scene of the skirmish, not far from the palm grove where the executions took place earlier that day. As he approached, Khalid recognized Mutemmam at the head of a gang of unarmed Beni Yerbu, confronted by a host of Muslim soldiers with swords and bow strings drawn. Between them, sprawled on the ground, lay the motionless bodies of many Yerbu prisoners, their garments covered with blood, their exposed flesh displaying deep gashes.

"Hold! All of you!" Khalid ordered.

Leila wept as she bent over a lifeless Malik. She looked up upon hearing her captor's terse voice. Her dark hair framed tear-filled almond eyes, eyes as exquisite as Khalid had ever seen. The wind had blown Leila's robe up to expose one of her legs and

when the Sword of Allah saw it, he groaned like a camel in heat, but feigned that his utterance was in sympathy for the dead.

Mutemmam pointed at the striding conqueror. "He's the cause of all this, he's responsible."

Khalid addressed the captain of the guard. "What happened?"

Before there was time enough to reply, Mutemmam echoed his previous sentiments. "You know well what happened, you explain it."

"Hold your tongue or I'll feed it to the cats," Khalid snapped. "I had nothing to do with this."

"Liar!" Mutemmam bellowed. "Murderer!"

Khalid closed in on Malik's brother at a brisk gait. As his left foot met the ground on his last step, his right foot rose swiftly and connected squarely in Mutemmam's crotch. The Beni Yerbu spokesman doubled over and dropped to the earth, gasping for breath. Khalid bent over and fished his left hand into Mutemmam's mouth to grasp the errant tongue while producing a knife in his right hand.

Leila screamed and ran over to Khalid to stay his arm. "Please don't," she said, as she held onto his wrist, "too much blood has been spilled today."

Their eyes met.

Khalid seized the opportunity to be merciful, much against his disposition, hoping that it would offset some of the harshness she had observed in him since her capture. He extracted his fingernails from Mutemmam's bleeding tongue and pushed his head away, then he turned to Leila. Her head hung low and her shoulders drooped. A tear ran off the end of her nose but her beauty still shone through. Her flawless bronze skin glistened as the moonlight reflected off the rivulets which coursed down her face. Khalid burned inside. He wanted her, right there, right then.

"Your brother-in-law's first words to you after this had better be a profound thanks. Had it not been for you he would

surely have never spoken again." Khalid scanned the ground, making a quick count of the casualties – only two of his men had fallen compared to a score of Malik's. "I will free your people soon, after I have dealt with Museilima," Khalid said. "In the meantime, we have some things to discuss. Come to my tent tomorrow morning and bring this Mutemmam with you. I will send someone when it is time."

As the guards supervised the Beni Yerbu's task of clearing away their dead, Khalid hurried off into the night accompanied by Shurahbil. When they had moved out of earshot, Khalid gave the order.

"Later tonight, bring me the woman."

Shurahbil, still looking straight ahead, shifted his eyes sideways toward the Sword of Allah. "But... her husband..."

Khalid stopped in his tracks and turned to Shurahbil.

"Just bring her!"

The next morning Shurahbil, accompanied by two of Khalid's lieutenants, mulazims, made their way to the Beni Yerbu enclave where Malik's people waited under heavy guard. No sign of the previous night's devastation remained. All the bodies had been removed and blood stained earth had been dispersed and mixed with the surrounding sand. Shurahbil conversed with the sentries who stood watch over the tent where the family of the deceased Malik was housed. Two of them entered the tent, re-emerging shortly with Leila, Mutemmam, and an elderly man who was Leila's father. The two sentries, along with the two mulazims, escorted the men to Khalid's tent, while Shurahbil accompanied Leila. He observed how gingerly she stepped over the stony terrain, as if her legs hadn't the strength to support a more vigorous pace.

Khalid was in his tent when the party arrived. Shurahbil hesitated. There appeared to be a heated argument going on inside, although the words were indiscernible.

Chapter 7
AH 11/ AD 632

It was shortly after dawn and the desert sand was already scorching. The morning sun hung low in the sky, enlarged and reddened by a distant sandstorm, its heat causing objects close to the ground to waver. People in the distance appeared to be split at the waist, their upper halves walking separately from their lower halves through a vast shimmering lake which I knew was not really there. On a nearby hillside, a herd of goats foraged for food prior to their mid-morning retreat into a rare enclave of shade, the plaintive bleating of a kid separated from his mother penetrating the air. A gentle breeze carried their unmistakable stench to my nostrils. I held my breath until the odor passed. As I approached Khalid's tent, I saw Shurahbil heading to the north on foot with two men. Today was the day of my departure and I was to meet with the Sword of Allah one last time. I was late, as usual, and from its start the encounter did not go well.

"I wasn't sent here to courier prisoners back to Medina for your convenience," I said. "My journey will be even more dangerous if I take Mutemmam back with my party. Much of the route runs through hostile territory where he is likely well known."

"You *will* take him back," Khalid demanded, "unless you wish Omar to receive the bittersweet news of your heroic martyrdom in the battle to restore the Faith!"

Khalid and I stood facing each other, a sword's length apart. His eyes, narrowed so that almost no white could be seen, locked onto mine. I stood my ground, arms folded, leaning forward without actually advancing my position.

"I'll be gone before your battle begins, and if I were to mysteriously disappear on my way home there are those amongst us who would implicate you. The only reason you won't put him on trial and deal with him here is to avoid looking like a butcher in the eyes of Malik's widow."

The look in Khalid's eyes softened and he nodded, as if he had just thought of a better way to impose his will. He brandished his finger at me.

"Then maybe this will convince you. I brought Mecca to its knees for the Prophet and defeated the Quraysh, but I had help. Your father colluded with Muhammad to deliver up the city in return for protection of his family and his wealth. That is why Mecca fell so quickly. Your father betrayed your own people. Take the prisoner back or I will make this information about Abu Sufyan known when I return to the west."

I covered my jaw and pulled my hand down heavily over my beard. "Liar!"

"Am I?" A knowing smile appeared on Khalid's face. It was the only time I could ever recall seeing the man smile.

Bastard! I didn't believe what he was saying but couldn't run the risk of ignoring the threat.

The guard outside the tent took this moment of silence to break into our conversation. "Amir Shurahbil has arrived with the lady Nuweira and her kin."

"Come," Khalid responded as we stared at each other. I attempted to divine, but without success, whether he might have been sworn to secrecy by the Prophet on such a matter, if indeed it were true.

Shurahbil entered, followed by Leila, her father, and Mutemmam who was made to enter on his knees. Lastly, two mulazims came in and remained by the entrance. Leila's eyelids

drooped, telling of little sleep the previous night, no doubt from anguish over the slaying of her husband. The news of the fracas and its tragic results had already spread throughout the camp. Mutemmam's face was badly bruised and blood had discolored his left eye. The only one of the lot who appeared unaffected was Leila's father who looked ancient but seemed fully aware. Wisps of thin white hair covered his sun-darkened face which sagged greatly under its own weight.

Khalid looked them over. He commanded all, except Mutemmam, to sit.

"I intend to free the Beni Yerbu before the next full moon," he said, "but before that time certain things must take place. First, your people must submit to the will of Allah and become true Believers. Furthermore, those held here will make tents for my troops, one each day until they are freed. Third, this dog," he pointed at Mutemmam, "will be sent to Medina to have his fate decided by the Khalifah, under the precepts set down by the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him."

A chorus of "peace be upon him" echoed through the tent.

I looked away from Khalid but could still feel his eyes on me. I hesitated for a moment and then addressed Mutemmam.

"You will ride with my caravan. We leave today." There was no response from Mutemmam, but there was from Khalid.

"No," he said with the look of victory in his eyes, "you shall leave five days from now. You will first accompany Al-Muthanna to enlist the Beni Temim, since it was your idea. I want you there in case we have to make promises on behalf of the Khalifah. You may leave for Medina upon your return here."

I remained silent.

Khalid turned his attention to Leila. The expression on her face was neutral – not sad, nor happy; more inquiring than anything else. The combination of her brazen complexion, dark elongated eyes, and raven black hair against a flowing white robe accentuated her exquisite beauty. I sensed, by his tone of voice,

that Khalid was becoming aroused... as was I. I felt the stirrings of lust beneath my robe. I wanted what Khalid coveted.

The Sword of Allah sat motionless with his legs crossed, staring at his desire. "Finally, I will bear the responsibility of providing for the lady Leila. I will take her as my wife the day after next. You, old man," Khalid shifted his gaze to her father, "will stay behind to give your consent to the generous terms I'm about to offer you in exchange for your daughter's hand in marriage. The rest of you, leave us now."

I motioned for the guards to remove Mutemmam and followed them to the exit. I looked back to see Shurahbil helping Leila to her feet, as a single teardrop ran down her cheek.

Two days later, as Khalid formally consummated the marriage with his seventeen year old bride, Sajah, the prophetess, was similarly engrossed in her own carnal pleasures with Museilima at his camp one day due east of the oasis town of Al-Yemama. They too were about to marry.

Sajah, born Umm-Sadir Sajah of the Beni Yerbu, struggled to gain some satisfaction from her undersized partner. Raised in a mixed Christian and pagan environment amongst her mother's tribe in the Persian controlled area of Mesopotamia known as Chaldea, Sajah had seized on the opportunity of the times to start her own religion. Sexual rituals, in which she often figured centrally, were commonplace and on many occasions Sajah would pleasure herself with several men and women simultaneously. The prophetess was never concerned with the consequences of her depraved escapades; being barren meant complete freedom in this regard. Her unique combination of spiritual and physical love attracted many devoted followers. It was with these followers and their clans, in all numbering close to twenty thousand, that she entered Arabia bent on conquest.

Instead, she was convinced by the false prophet Museilima to join forces with him in resisting the Muslim onslaught.

"Ah Sajah, the joining of our religions, our armies, and soon ourselves is the perfect union." Museilima rolled to shift his weight for better leverage and resumed a frontal assault on the prophetess. She moaned as his body was alternately pressed against hers and then withdrawn. While so engaged, Museilima nestled his head into Sajah's more than ample breasts, softly teasing her nipples to erection with his tongue. The intensity of the moaning increased. The lovers writhed in each others' clutches until the loudness of Sajah's feigned orgasm signaled to Museilima that it was time to finish, which he did and at the same time did not, despite his best attempts. Soon the two of them lay splayed, face up, on the sheepskins that covered the tent's earthen floor, their chests heaving as they caught their breath.

Sajah turned to rest on her side and fondled the hair on Museilima's chest. Her own long brown braids dangled about her bosoms. "I'm reluctant to bring up the subject of money at a time like this, but we should agree on my bridal gift."

"Anything. What is it you wish to have?"

"Half of your revenue from the district of Al-Yemama."

"Half!" Museilima grit his teeth. "Don't you think that's a little... excessive?"

"We're going to be equals, are we not?" Sajah replied.

"The prophet and the prophetess?" She parted her lips to reveal a brilliant smile, with not one tooth missing.

Museilima paused. Sajah knew his initial offer of an alliance was merely a means to preclude the very real threat of an attack by her forces. Even without her Beni Yebu allies, recently worsted by Khalid, Sajah's army was formidable. She realized that with the Muslims preparing to march on him, Museilima could take no chances.

"One-third of my yearly revenues," Museilima said.

"Remember, I have other wives to provide for."

"Half," Sajah insisted, caring not the least about his other wives, "and we shall marry tomorrow."

The prophetess could see in Museilima's devilish eyes exactly what he was thinking as he sat in contemplation. It was better to take care of one problem at a time.

"Agreed," he conceded, after an inordinately long delay.

Sajah held no illusions about the man she was to marry. While he was not unpleasant to the eye, the false prophet of Al-Yemama was a small man, no taller than most women and shorter than Sajah herself. His dark complexion, black goatee, and somber dress did nothing to enhance his appearance. For Sajah, it was a marriage of convenience.

And Sajah knew his story, how through lies and chicanery he had convinced his people that he not only had a prophetic gift, but that the true Prophet concurred with and supported his claim. Museilima's charisma and knowledge of sleight of hand added to his credibility. When summoned to Medina by Muhammad to recant his claim, he sent a provocative reply demanding half of the territory under Muslim control. Muhammad responded with an edict directing Museilima to submit to Islam or suffer the consequences, an ultimatum which after the death of the Prophet fell to the Caliph, Abu Bakr, to enforce. Khalid was his chosen enforcer.

The next morning, Sajah awoke from a restless night's sleep alone and unfulfilled after her tedious romp with Museilima. She had expected him to try a little harder to please her, most small men did, to compensate for their perceived shortcoming. Museilima, she thought, must have had too much on his mind to put forth any extra effort. This day, he rose far in advance of her. His agents had spent many days scouring the countryside for news of Khalid's activities. Today, he would hear what they had learned.

Museilima held audience beneath a canopy which spanned twenty paces on each side and sheltered several large rocks, aptly sized and shaped for sitting. As he gazed into the distance, Sajah

saw hope in Museilima's eyes that the dark clouds gathering on the eastern horizon would perhaps hold rain to quench his parched, stony land, replenishing wells and creating pools. For now, however, the sun raced far ahead of them. A waning campfire smoldered at the lee edge of the pavilion. In it, the prophetess roasted two bustards, stilt legged desert birds the size of a hen, which she had cut into quarters and tossed on the hot coals. From a nearby sandy mound, two live bustards looked on. Sajah returned from the fire to take her place beside Museilima as Majaa, a clan chief of the Beni Hanifa, arrived to provide the first report.

"Khalid ibn al-Welid is camped at Al-Bitah with fifteen to twenty thousand men," Majaa explained. "He has taken about one hundred Beni Yerbu prisoners, among them their leader; this I learned from the Beni Temim who have accepted the remaining Yerbu back into their qabilah. Since the Beni Temim are neutral, any attack on us now by the Beni Yerbu is unlikely."

Museilima grinned and rubbed his hands together. "Good, good... but tell me more about ibn al-Welid – his positioning, his troop movements."

Majaa stood uncomfortably, shifting his footing and avoiding eye contact with Museilima. "I regret that I cannot report on those things at this time, holy one," he answered. "We were unable to get close enough to his camp without being seen. All I have told you was obtained secondhand."

"Liar!" the false prophet shouted. "You didn't even attempt to get that close, you couldn't have, you weren't gone long enough. Go back and get me that information. Disguise yourselves as townspeople from Al-Bitah, or shepherds, or something, and get a spy into his camp – I must know his strategy."

Majaa begged forgiveness as he backed away from Museilima and his consort. The look on Majaa's face told Sajah that he couldn't quite understand why a prophet would need a spy.

Nevertheless, he would re-assemble a small expeditionary party to gather the intelligence his leader demanded.

Museilima stroked his chin while he pondered the facts presented to him. He looked to the prophetess who had left her seat for the fire to turn over the half cooked fowl. The pieces sizzled as juices from the quartered birds spilled onto the reddening embers. The sweet aroma of thyme, which Sajah placed in the fire to spice the meal, drifted to her nose and made her mouth water. She picked out the overdone crops and intestines, still full of partially digested herbs and hairy caterpillars, and brought the delicacies in a bowl to her betrothed. He ate them with gusto.

"With the Beni Temim uncommitted, and Khalid having only half the fighting force I do, I'm confident that I can easily vanquish the Muslims," Museilima said, caressing the light-olive skin of Sajah's arm as he spoke. "But to be absolutely sure, I need to determine their tactics. What can you foresee?"

"Oh, husband to be, my gift comes when it pleases the giver of that knowledge. I cannot always control it," Sajah replied, touching Museilima's arm in return, her dark hypnotic eyes conveying true regret. "Besides, you yourself are a prophet. Do you not see anything?"

"Alas, my little desert blossom, it seems that we who possess the prophetic gift cannot use it to divine our own destiny." He plucked a solitary wildflower which grew within arm's reach of the rock on which he sat and presented it to Sajah. "I can see nothing of my future. Please try. See if anything reveals itself to you."

Sajah closed her eyes and concentrated. "Oh, it's no use," she said, "I see naught. No matter, however, for I have at this very moment some thirty horsemen scouting the land, and have specifically instructed them to bring back word on our enemy's disposition, or of any movements in the desert."

She didn't tell Museilima that their primary mission was to collect her bridal gift. The sheikhs of the Beni Hanifa, when

informed of the magnitude of the dowry, had agreed to part with their share only under the threat of force. Sajah's riders now traveled from clan to clan, securing payment in gold and silver whenever possible, and taking other commodities as a last resort.

Sajah and Museilima would marry later that day.

It took Al-Muthanna, Farouk, me, and one hundred men almost two days to reach the Beni Temim. It was a fruitful journey – they would fight on our side against Museilima. As I had predicted, we gained a needed ally. Thirteen thousand Beni Temim would rendezvous with Khalid's forces at the oasis between Al-Bitah and the settlement of Al-Yemama in seven days time. There, camels and horses would be watered, and the leaders could negotiate battle plans. It was Ramadhan, the month of fasting. Even so, in my present company deep in the frontier territories, not one of us observed the requisite rituals. We were at the halfway point crossing the desert on our return to Al-Bitah when one of Al-Muthanna's men, a rider from the advance party, returned with some news.

"Fires?" Al-Muthanna said, repeating the rider's words. "Where, how many?" His horse nudged the rider's horse with its nose.

"A short distance ahead, to the east," the rider responded. "I saw three burning close together."

"How close?" I asked.

"Difficult to tell – close enough to indicate a single camp."

Al-Muthanna pulled back on his horse's bridle to steady the beast. "With only three fires, the travelers can't be many. Do you know who these people might be?"

"No, the fires were too distant to see any detail, but close enough to our route to be a threat if these travelers be hostile."

"It sounds like too few to be a clan movement," Al-Muthanna replied, "small enough to be a family or two, but no

family would willingly venture forth in these parts without the protection afforded by the clan overall."

I tugged on the reins to keep my horse in check. "So they are either outcasts or adventurers... or spies."

"Very well," Al Muthanna said to the rider. "It's close to sunrise. Return to the others. Tell them that they are to draw these Bedouin out at first light. Lead them to us."

The rider bowed his head in acknowledgment, gathered his reins, and galloped off.

Farouk had been listening to the conversation. "What do you wish to do with the strangers, take them captive or kill them?" he asked.

"That depends," Al-Muthanna said. "If they're outcasts I might just as well let them go, if I can be sure they are outcasts. If they are adventurers I will have them slain, for they are a blight on the land. But if they're our enemies, then they will be of more value to us alive, as hostages or as informants. In any case, they must first be taken alive to ascertain who they are. Look for a suitable place to launch an ambush as we make our way forward, both of you, and I will do likewise."

At sunrise we came to a place where large outcrops of rocks flanked both sides of the route. Al-Muthanna ordered his men to conceal themselves, but remain mounted. I scaled a precipice to keep watch – it was not long before I spotted something. A column of dust driven by a nascent shamal, a north wind, whirled upward in the distance, scattering the reddish orange light of the early morning sun. As the plume drew nearer I saw that it was actually two columns of dust which merged as they rose to the sky, the second column following the first. The distance between them narrowed until the columns halted their advance.

"They've been caught!" I called out from above.

Al-Muthanna immediately gave the order to move with all speed to rescue our people. Ten, twenty, fifty, eighty men rode out from the natural formations which had sheltered them, with

Al-Muthanna and Farouk at the lead. Owing to the time it took me to descend from my watch post, I rode out last.

The dust created by the mounted combat ahead of us obscured the attackers' vision so much that they were unaware of the trap which had been set until the thundering of our horses hooves was upon them. A more vigorous battle ensued. A few of the attackers fled, riding off in the direction from which they had come, with Farouk and a handful of our soldiers in hot pursuit. One of the attackers, however, fled in the opposite direction and emerged from the cloud of dust, surprising me, just as I approached. He circled his sword above his head as he closed in on me. I prepared to fend off the blow. I was on my own.

I mustered every last shred of courage I had and took the offensive. My hand shook as I raised my sword into the air, its weight seeming to far exceed what I knew it to be. Our weapons clashed. Sparks shot out from the impact, the shock of which raced down my arm and left it tingling. We slowed our horses and reversed direction, riding back toward each other at an ever increasing pace. Again the swords engaged, twice this time. The ringing of metal on metal filled the air. On the third pass, my opponent's sword broke at its midpoint with a clang that stopped abruptly. The half sword which he still held cut through my robe and into my upper arm. My garment reddened but there was little pain. I swung my sword backwards as he passed and sunk it into his neck. He fell from his mount onto the ground and lay there twitching, blood flowing liberally from the wound. I looked at my adversary and then at my injury. My head felt light. My stomach churned.

As one of Al-Muthanna's Bedouin fighters arrived to assist me, I dismounted and prepared to finish off my foe.

"No, my cousin," he said, "leave him as he is, it will be better that way. He will suffer more."

Many of the opposition were killed on the spot as Al-Muthanna gained control of the situation. Finally overwhelmed, the remainder dropped to their knees and proffered their weapons.

Those who had fled were brought in; three dead, multiple arrows in their backs, slung over their horses; and three alive. When the dust had settled it became apparent that only four of our advance party of eight had survived, one of them seriously wounded. The rider who had initially alerted Al-Muthanna had been killed. As the prisoners were assembled, twenty-three in all, their leader stepped forward to plead for mercy for himself and his men. His name was Majaa.

Chapter 8

AH 11/ AD 632

A tall dark figure strode with commanding presence down the main street of Medina, the seat of power for the Islamic movement which had swept the Arabian peninsula only a few years earlier and which was now on the verge of collapse following the death of Muhammad. He made his way along the row of blanched, flat-topped, mud-brick buildings toward the Caliph's residence, cat-o-nine-tails in hand. As he proceeded, the throng of people in the street parted to let him pass. He towered above the crowd, his penetrating gaze causing men and women alike to divert their eyes from his. Handsome, but with a ruddy complexion, his face radiated under the black turban hiding his head which was bald on the top and fringed with an unkempt mass of dark brown hair. The gray in his beard had been dyed to make him appear younger than his forty-six years. A slave opened the dome-shaped doors to the courtyard of Abu Bakr's house as this giant among men approached, then entered, and proceeded to the Caliph's meeting room.

Abu Bakr lived in what had been Muhammad's house, the first mosque in Medina. It was fronted by a large open area surrounded by a high wall, with entrances on three sides, and a portico at each end. The portico adjacent to the living quarters ran the width of the courtyard and was supported by two rows of tree-trunk columns. Date palms, their faded green fronds dancing delicately in the mild breeze, paralleled the courtyard wall a short

distance inside it. The living accommodations consisted of twelve small square enclosures, one for each of the wives and concubines, and a larger one where Abu Bakr received visitors or adjourned for privacy. The small rooms allowed only enough space for sleeping and the storing of a few personal belongings... clothes, a loom, some baskets. The larger room held a rare wooden table on legs so short that its top rose to less than knee high off the ground. The only other wooden objects on the premises were the lintels of the windows and doorways and the doors themselves.

The Prophet's successor sat behind the table, busily writing. The visitor broke the silence.

"Allahu Akbar."

"Omar! Allahu Akbar. I've been waiting for you. What news do you bring?"

"Good news," Omar replied. "All troops are at or near their prescribed destinations. As we speak, Amr ibn al-As engages the Beni Kodaa in the northwest, Al-Ala has retaken Bahrain, Khalid ibn al-Welid at last word had defeated Toleiha near Buzakha and is camped at Al-Bitah, Ikrima and Hodheifa are converging on Oman, and Al-Muhajir has just arrived in the Yemen."

"Excellent." The Caliph pointed to a large plump cushion on the floor across the table from him. "Please, sit."

Abdallah ibn Othman Abu Kohafa had acquired the nickname Abu Bakr, or father of the young camel when, as a child, he had taken particular interest in a sickly foal which he nursed back to health. He was also referred to as As-Siddik, the True, for his unwavering devotion to the Prophet. Physically, he stood in marked contrast to Omar. At sixty years of age, the Caliph had developed a rounded back which caused him to walk with a stooped posture. Short and light framed with fair skin, a thin face, and a sharply hooked nose, he was dwarfed by his second in command. A high forehead accentuated his mild eyes which were deeply set and spaced far apart. The dyed red hair of

his head and beard had become scant, revealing the veins on his face and around his temples. The Caliph's expression was one of mildness and wisdom, but one which indicated a firm resolve. In temperament, Abu Bakr and Omar were at the same time similar yet different. Both men demonstrated a strong sense of justice, and both were generous to their friends and to the poor. They also shared another common tie in that each had a daughter married to Muhammad. The influence of the Prophet, however, while strengthening Abu Bakr's normally yielding disposition, caused Omar to temper his stern and unshakable mindset.

The Caliph finished scribbling some notes from Omar's report and looked up.

"Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan wants an audience with me the day after tomorrow. Do you know what this is about?"

"Mu'awiya is on his way to join the fight against the Beni Kodaa," Omar replied. "He will lead a thousand volunteers from Medina to serve as reinforcements for Amr."

"I know of this," Abu Bakr said, "and I still have reservations about your plan to make him Amr's deputy. I don't believe anyone in Abu Sufyan's family deserves a reward for doing what was inevitable." He brushed his lips with the feather end of his quill. "Why does he wish to see me?"

"Khalifah, he brings with him from Khalid's camp at Al-Bitah a prisoner, Mutemmam ibn Nuweira, a non-believer and brother of Malik ibn Nuweira. You are to judge his case."

"Who are these sons of Nuweira – to what tribe do they belong?" the Caliph asked.

Omar folded the thongs of his whip back upon its handle and softly, but repetitively, struck the palm of his hand. "Malik was sheikh of the Beni Yerbu, a clan of the Beni Temim. A group of his men, including Malik and Mutemmam, were taken captive by Khalid while on his way from Buzakha to Al-Bitah. Malik is now dead. Mutemmam is accused of inciting an uprising of the prisoners at Al-Bitah."

"So why did Khalid send him to me? It doesn't sound like anything out of the ordinary."

Omar placed his whip on the table and began to twirl the end of his mustache around his finger. "Apparently, he felt that the act of punishing Mutemmam would, in itself, cause another riot and decided it would be better for you to issue the execution order. Knowing the way Khalid thinks, I can only speculate that this is his motive. I'm surprised, even more so, that he didn't order this Bedouin killed on the journey here."

"Maybe Khalid did order it," Abu Bakr replied, "and for some reason the order couldn't be carried out. Mu'awiya wouldn't have done it, although oftentimes he looks the other way when there are occurrences of which he wishes to claim ignorance." The Caliph cleaned his ear using the point of the quill, then resumed stroking his face with the other end.

"He wouldn't ignore outright murder," Omar said, "but others bound to Khalid would have gladly performed the deed. That opportunist and his followers have no regard for the sanctity of life."

The Caliph countered. "You whip people in the streets, on these patrols of yours."

"Yes, to enforce the will of Allah," Omar responded, the fire burning in his eyes, "not to kill them."

Abu Bakr motioned to Omar to come closer, as if he was going to whisper something. As Omar leaned over the table, Abu Bakr grabbed him by the beard and yanked his head down to a common level. Omar's eyes bulged and his jaw dropped.

"Khalid is our most able military leader. You will not defame him, especially in public. He too is fighting on the side of Allah."

Omar acquiesced to Abu Bakr's command, for the present.

Abu Bakr sensed that Omar was smarting from the rebuke. He quickly changed the subject.

"What news of Farouk?"

"The sheikh Farouk arrived at Khalid's camp thirteen days ago. I am pleased to report that he appears to be complying with your wishes – attending prayers, assisting with the campaign. His long journey with so many of his people attests to a true conversion. He is a model for all the sheikhs of the outlying provinces. May Allah bless him and provide him the rewards of this life and the next."

"I can't believe he would lead a rebellion against us in Hadramaut... just one moon before he was to marry my sister!" The Caliph shook his head. "I should never have pardoned him, but she insisted on it, and on being allowed to fulfill her marriage contract with that man. And you know," Abu Bakr said, in a confidential tone, "I fear we've not had the last of our problems with him."

Omar's eyes widened to the size of walnuts. He jumped to his feet. "The *leader*? He, Farouk al-Ashath ibn Keis? He *led* the revolt in which my brother Zeid died defending our faith? How could you have forgiven him?" Omar picked the cat-o-nine-tails up from the table and began flailing the air.

"Omar..." The Caliph's voice dissipated as he saw that his second was oblivious to all.

A look of revenge crazed Omar's face. "I pray that he reach the next life *very* soon. May Allah plague he whose name I dare not mention for fear that I will harm us both should I hear it. He is vermin, next only to the lice which surely infest his repugnant person. No!" Omar shot his finger into the air, "he is lower than the louse. May his body be home to all the boils of this land and may his skin ooze with open, festering sores." Omar flopped down on the cushion once again, this time totally drained. He hung his head and became silent.

After this great expenditure of emotional energy Omar grew hungry, but this being Ramadhan he could not partake of food or drink during the daylight hours. Fasting during Ramadhan also included abstinence from sexual activity. For Omar, this was not especially hard since he had little interest in

women for that purpose, preferring to devote his time to other activities such as studying the writings and teachings of the Prophet.

Fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam, was no less important than the other four – faith, prayer, the giving of alms, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. Faith was embodied in the declaration of the shahada, the belief in one God with Muhammad as his messenger. Any man or woman simply had to recite the shahada to a Muslim, and he or she then also became a Muslim. This was an irrevocable declaration – the penalty for apostasy was death. Farouk had escaped this punishment for his lapse of faith, as had many others, due to the precarious state of Islam at this time. Implicit in the declaration of faith was the acceptance of the Quran as the word of God, belief in angels as God's agents, and acknowledgement of a final Judgment Day. Both Abu Bakr and Omar could recite the Quran from memory.

Prayer took form as the Dua and the Salat.

Alms giving was a way for a Muslim to purify himself and the remainder of his wealth. Alms could be of two types – the voluntary sadaqa, and the mandatory zakat. The latter was used by the Caliph to support the poor and widows and orphans, and to finance holy wars such as the wave of expeditions which Abu Bakr had commissioned to regain control of the Arabian Peninsula. In addition, one-fifth of all plunder from Muslim conquests flowed into the treasury in Medina to support these and other necessary expenditures.

The last pillar of Islam, the hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca, took place once each year in the month of Dhul Hijja, just two months after Ramadhan. All able bodied Muslims were to make this pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime. Abu Bakr made the pilgrimage every year. Omar tried, but missed on occasion.

As Omar contemplated his hunger, Abu Bakr considered the best time to receive Mu'awiya and his prisoner. The Caliph,

having concluded that Omar's rage had subsided sufficiently, was the first to speak.

"Has it passed?"

The Caliph's second stared at his feet. "It has passed," he said softly.

"Have Mu'awiya come as he wishes, the day after tomorrow – early in the morning. I will see him then. Leave me now, I must continue my work."

Omar acknowledged the Caliph's request and departed. He decided to patrol the town, determined that somebody was worthy of punishment that day.

Chapter 9
AH 11/ AD 632

The shadows had grown long by the time Omar emerged from Abu Bakr's residence onto the streets of Medina. It was yet a good while before sunset, the time when Omar could satisfy his hunger, but the aromas of this evening's iftar were already tempting his willpower. He could almost taste the chicken, onions, and spices he smelled frying together as he wound his way toward the center of town. His mouth moistened. The sweet odor escaped from a house where a wide-eyed little boy, hair braided and dressed in a tiny white robe, watched Omar cautiously from the open doorway. Another young boy, taller, dirty faced, called from across the street for the wide-eyed one to come, but the smaller child waited in safety until the giant cloaked in black was well out of range.

Omar surveyed the fading sky and took a deep breath of the cooling afternoon air. With sufficient time left before the meal, and nothing pressing, Omar elected to walk to the edge of town. Ensuring that the rules of Ramadhan were being observed would provide a needed distraction from his hunger.

As he traveled along his course, Omar began to suspect that word of his approach preceded him – he saw none of the usual transgressors behaving improperly. Any offender caught breaking fast early, drinking, or gambling would suffer the sting of Omar's lash across the face. Its mark would serve as a visible

reminder to others who dared disobey the laws of Islam. This day, he observed no violations.

Omar passed into Medina's center. Numerous fine homes, made from cut granite or porphyry quarried in the adjacent Madian mountains, graced this most affluent section of town. Geometric designs and inscriptions, carved around the borders of the dome-shaped doors and windows, warded off evil while parapets encircling the flat topped roofs aided in the collection of precious rainfall and served as protection against attackers.

Omar took his time to admire the homes, whose beauty surpassed that of his own, before he re-entered the neighborhoods of mud-brick which surrounded the town's center. There, less affluent dwellings mimicked the style of the finer stone structures using a clay-like material found in the nearby wadis which dissected the mountainous terrain north of town. The streets quickly narrowed as vendor storefronts encroached on the public way with crates of live chickens, fruit stands, merchants selling cloth, and assorted others littering Omar's route. The chaos of cock crows, men arguing, and the klip klop of carts on cobblestones made Omar's head ache. Farther on, a mosque built prior to Muhammad's death was filling for late afternoon prayer, the muezzin's call emanating from its modest minaret.

On the outskirts of Medina, beyond the city wall, sprawled a conglomeration of tents. Some of these housed the poor while others belonged to the Bedouin who had pitched camp there temporarily in order to trade camels, horses, and donkeys with the townspeople. Omar decided to go no further than the mosque, for it was there that he spied something which made his patrol worth its while.

I arrived in the vicinity of Medina mid-morning after a twelve day journey across the central plateau of the Nejd. Our party numbered almost forty, including Mutemmam who was well

behaved, up until the end of the journey. The Nejd is not a sandy desert like the wastelands that surround it to the north, east, and south, and water can be readily found if one knows where to look. There are a few small oases along the way, rich enough to provide dates and some figs, but not much else. Much of our time was spent crossing dusty plains which supported no more than the occasional group of acacia trees. We traversed the lands of the Beni Asad, past the mountain Jebel Saq and across the stony desert, adhering mainly to the high ground where rain is most likely to fall. We then followed the wadis back to Medina.

It was late afternoon when I entered the town to look for Omar. I was in luck. I saw him approach the new mosque as if going to prayer, but then he stopped to interrogate someone. The man backed away, bowing with his hands raised. Omar produced his whip and began to flail the man violently about the head and shoulders. The recipient attempted to shield himself from the blows with his forearms and cringed to the ground, pleading for mercy. Omar raised his hand to strike again, but never followed through and motioned the unfortunate bastard away.

Omar crossed the thoroughfare and walked briskly toward the center of Medina. I called out to him, and I could see that he heard me above the tumult of the crowded street. He turned to look around and I periodically saw his head through the throng of people which obscured my view as I made my way to him.

I had established few important political alliances – the one with Omar was worth all the others combined. He first began to look out for me during the time when I was scribe to Muhammad. My father and Omar were friends prior to the fall of Mecca, and Omar, who was also related to the Prophet through the marriage of a daughter, was indebted to my father for sheltering him during a blood feud with Khalid's clan in their early years.

I weaved my way through the crowd making slow progress toward Omar. I knew he sensed my concern from the look of alarm on his face. The tail of his black turban flapped

from a sudden gust of wind funneled down the narrow street from the east. I came to a standstill.

"Omar!"

"What brings you to seek me out like this, my young friend?" Omar coiled the thongs of his whip around its core and shoved it into the belt which encircled his robe.

"I must know when I am to see the Khalifah," I replied while trying to catch my breath.

"The morning after next. Why do you ask?"

"The prisoner Mutemmam has escaped, my men are searching for him but they need help."

Omar's face grew grim. "How did this happen?" He shook his head, then pointed to the mosque. "No matter, come, prayers are about to begin."

I followed Omar, doubtful that praying would solve this immediate problem. We entered the mosque, a three-year-old work of art that looked new, the people of Medina taking great pains to keep it clean and in a good state of repair. Its single, almost cylindrical, minaret soared thrice the height of a fully grown male camel. The minaret stood like a guardian in the northwest corner, opposite the street, constructed of the same pink and gray granite as the walls which surrounded the spacious palm punctuated courtyard. The setting sun cast the tower's long black shadow across the ground while at the same time igniting the sky in a blaze of orange and red above the western wall.

We took our places, standing near the front of the assemblage. Omar, eyes closed and silent, looked to be concentrating intently. A donkey brayed from outside the walls. Omar opened one eye in reproach, then closed it again. When the sun had disappeared completely beyond the horizon, the service began.

"Allahu Akbar!" the congregation cried as we all dropped to our knees, bowed, and began to pray. The audible whispers and muttering of the faithful permeated the open space like a swarm of bees. By the time the fire in the sky faded, prayers had

come to an end. Before anyone could leave, Omar hurried toward the pulpit, shouting, pulling me along by the sleeve of my robe.

"A word, a word."

Omar climbed the few steps of a covered platform at the head of the courtyard. I followed. We looked out upon the crowd – a sea of turbans, Bedouin kaffiyah, and flowing locks of hair. All were standing once again. Foremost in the crowd was an old Bedouin, almost toothless, staring up at us wide-eyed from the front row as if in a stupor, waiting breathlessly for some great revelation.

"Brothers, a terrible thing has happened. An unbeliever by the name of Mutemmam ibn Nuweira was brought to Medina for trial, and has escaped by treachery. It is imperative that he be found and brought to me alive before this time tomorrow. This man," he pointed to me, "will provide you with a description of the Bedouin apostate whom we seek."

I proceeded to describe the escapee in great detail, from his physical characteristics to the manner of his dress. The crowd became frenzied and began to chant, "In sha Allah! – May God grant it." They flocked to the gates of the mosque and into the narrow street to search for Mutemmam, all the while repeating their war cry, "In sha Allah! In sha Allah!"

We left the mosque for Omar's home where I would be his guest for that night's meal. I had never been inside Omar's house before although I had passed by it on many occasions. By the time we arrived, the sky was turning dark, night was almost upon us. Omar's wife, Koreiba, greeted us at the door. Omar had seven wives but Koreiba was his favorite, and I could see why. She had a stately posture and was a very... handsome woman, would be the best way to describe her. She had enormous breasts which were readily evident even under her loose fitting robe. I was alarmed to realize that I had developed an erection from looking at her. I quickly diverted my thoughts to Khalid, so as to purge my mind of any impurity. It was a sin to covet another's wife,

especially that of a friend and such an important figure as Omar. I had heard that Omar was entering into yet another contract to marry, this one to the daughter of a prominent merchant from Mecca.

I had been married once, when I was much younger. The marriage had been arranged when we were both children, a gesture of reconciliation to the Makhzum, Khalid's clan. She was stolen by money seekers and my father refused to pay the ransom; he didn't like her very much after she grew up. We never saw her again. So much for reconciliation. He said that I'd thank him some day. He said that he wished that someone would have done the same to his wife, my mother, many years ago – before I was born.

The house of Omar, like the man himself, was plain. Omar considered himself pious and dressed accordingly in simple, well worn clothes – hardly suitable for the second most powerful figure in the realm. Similarly, the house bore no embellishments or decoration other than the inscription above the main entrance from the street which simply read 'Allahu Akbar'. We entered a long dark passageway which led into a small courtyard bordered on all sides by rooms, seven in all, with heavy black curtains the only barrier between private and communal spaces. Four slaves were busy cooking dinner over a fire pit in the center of this open area. Acacia-scented smoke lingered between the shelter of the courtyard walls. I gazed about the interior, both at the lower level and the second identical layer built on top of the first. At the juncture between the two, a wide goat-hair overhang protruded which encircled the courtyard to provide shade during the day. We walked across the hard clay to the largest of the rooms which consumed one side of the square. In it were piles of cushions; numerous candles; two man-sized cisterns, one on each end, to cool this gathering place; and several small air vents in the walls.

With the exception of Koreiba, Omar's wives lived in rooms on the upper level. They would join the gathering later in

the evening. Omar's sister and her husband were already present as was Omar's daughter, still dressed in black mourning the death of her husband, Muhammad, six months earlier. Omar's son was far away in the desert, sent as part of the contingent charged with reversing the apostasy in the southeast, at the behest of Omar himself. While the women directed the preparation of the iftar, we men talked about the state of affairs in the Arabian peninsula, especially those to the immediate north where I would soon travel. The army of the Byzantine empire had become very interested in Amr's activities so close to their territory.

A slave brought out a tray of fruits and sweets – dried dates covered with a crystallized syrup, pomegranates, plums, and a thick drink made from apricots called qamar-al-din. In the distance, the call of the muezzin signaled the start of this night's Ramadhan festivities. The bazaars would be open till late, with storytellers, poets, acrobats, and conjurers providing entertainment in the streets, and plenty of sumptuous foods.

Omar popped a date into his mouth and began to talk as he chewed.

"Mu'awiya, tell me of your travels in the east – I want details." He stuffed two more dates into his mouth and then grabbed a handful. He scowled as he bit hard into a seed which he spit into his free hand before letting it fall to the ground.

I briefly contemplated what to say. Although it was not my business to pit Omar against Khalid, a few well placed words could work to my benefit. "You know about Toleiha and his defeat at Buzakha, but had you heard that Toleiha escaped just before the surrender?"

Omar, his mouth full, shook his head.

"He was recaptured several days later. Khalid personally decapitated Toleiha in front of his whole tribe and then, with an ax, quartered the man's head, as you would cut up an orange. Khalid ordered the pieces be taken to the four corners of the oasis and cast into the desert."

Omar's fist clenched and continued to tighten until the dates he held oozed between his fingers. He set the pulpy mass aside.

"Following Buzakha, I rendezvoused with Al-Muthanna to pass on Abu Bakr's directive. This Muthanna is an interesting man. He commands great respect amongst the peoples of the east. He's even done battle with the Persians!"

"And won?" Omar asked.

"A great many died on both sides," I replied. "It's hard to say who won, but according to him he made away with much Persian treasure – gold, silver, women. This man will prove to be a valuable ally in the months to come, mark my words."

Omar nodded. "The Persians are formidable adversaries, I admire his courage." He searched for another date, but there were none left. "What about this incident with your prisoner and his brother? Explain that to me."

I pulled at my mustache, probing for a long hair. The left side had become so thin from my habitual plucking that one could see the underlying skin in spots. "I don't know the details of the initial confrontation but Khalid had the brother, Malik, killed because he wanted Malik's woman. Mutemmam reacted by inciting his people to fight back and trying to bring some of our Bedouin converts over to his side. A few days later, Khalid took Malik's widow to wife."

Omar's face flushed. "That bastard! Where's my lash?" The words reverberated throughout the courtyard. He spied the cat-o-nine-tails on the ground near the closest cistern and quickly made his way to retrieve it. The women, except for Koreiba, ran for cover, as did the slaves. Omar picked up the whip and, with his teeth bared, flailed at one of the posts supporting the overhang. When he was done, he tossed it on the ground near where it first lay and slowly made his way back to where I was sitting.

I remained seated and silent. The others took this as an opportunity to move to the far end of the room and begin the evening meal while Omar and I continued our conversation.

"So tell me, Mu'awiya," he said, "how did Khalid receive the message I sent him?"

I hesitated. "Are you sure you want to know?" I asked, cautiously.

"Yes, yes," Omar said, "I'm all right now." His turban had slid half off his head from the violence of his rage. He removed it completely to expose a shiny white dome surrounded by thick dark hair which shot outward like so many bird tails.

"As you wish. But tell me, what exactly did you say in that letter?"

"Among other things, I told him that I thought he was not well enough equipped to do battle with Museilima's forces and that he should delay taking any action until I arrived with reinforcements."

"Well, he resented the letter and thought I was somehow involved with it, of course I knew he would assume that. He ultimately dismissed the communication and burned the letter saying *that* was his reply."

Omar leaned back against the wall and folded his arms. His face took on a solemn appearance. "That insolent dog... burn my letter indeed. He needs to be taught a lesson."

"An opinion on that is above my station, but I will say that I agree with you completely. He's dangerous. If he were of a mind, he could use his power to the detriment of Medina. Do you plan to journey out there, to Al-Yemama?" I asked.

Omar remained quiet with a serious expression and a distant look in his eyes before breaking his silence. "The Khalifah has forbidden me to leave Medina. His health is failing and he says I must remain here to assume his duties lest he be unable to perform them himself. Reinforcements, however, are already under way."

My stomach growled as the scent of sage from one of the night's delicacies played with my priorities. "That reminds me, I need to journey to Mecca to see my father before I embark for Amr's camp."

Omar shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mu'awiya, but the troops I promised Amr have been ready to leave for days now, and they're badly needed. You haven't the time to get to Mecca and back. You must depart as planned."

I nodded. "Very well. I wanted to talk to him about something Khalid had said, but it can wait."

We got up to make our way over to the food but Omar stopped before we got too close to the others. He gazed watchfully in the direction of his family and touched my chest with his hand to prevent me from going beyond where he stood.

"You must promise to keep me informed of any rumors you hear regarding Khalid," he said in a subdued voice. "Many years ago, when I was sheikh of the Beni Adi, I suspected Khalid of being involved in the killing of several of my people, not relations, but people for whom I was responsible nevertheless. He proclaimed his innocence in the matter, as he is ever apt to do, but I didn't believe him. Khalid is wary of me, and I must be wary of him. He expects that I will use my power to make him pay for the past."

"It's his nature," I replied, matter-of-factly. "He's overly suspicious."

Omar turned to face me, his eyes betraying the full fury which burned within him. "No... he's right."

Early the next morning, just before sunrise, the beating of a drum signaled a last brief meal before the day's fast began. For many of the Bedouin traders camped outside the confines of Medina, fasting was a necessary burden which they endured during Ramadhan while doing business in the Hijaz, but which

they largely ignored otherwise. Mutemmam awoke to the slow rhythmic pounding of the drumbeat and the aroma of a potent herbal tea being brewed in the center of the large tent in which he had taken refuge the evening before. He could see the silhouette of a male figure crouched before the fire, tasting the contents of a simmering pot. An audible sound of approval waxed and waned as the figure swallowed, once, twice, then a third time.

Mutemmam tried to remember his host's name but could not; he could only remember him as the old coot whose son was herding horses to be sold in Mecca. From where he lay, Mutemmam watched the man's family, still asleep, scattered about the ground. The son was nowhere in sight, although in the flickering orange light of the fire it was hard to tell who was who. Mutemmam hissed at the old man to get his attention.

"Ah, you are awake at last," the near toothless gray haired wretch said. He approached Mutemmam until their faces almost touched. The firelight illuminated the left half of the man's head in the same way the sun illuminates the half moon. Dark shadows cast by the features of his wrinkled face, and his unkempt appearance, made him look even more hideous than Mutemmam remembered from the previous night. The closeness of the encounter was made yet less pleasant by the stench which emanated from this foul person. The old man continued to speak, both hands waving wildly, his voice creaking, his words indistinct.

"I thought you would sleep forever," he said, breaking into a maniacal cackle which began to wake the others.

"How long have I—" Mutemmam was cut short.

"How long have you been asleep, was that what you were going to ask? Oh, about half a day. You missed the big meal last night, slept right through it. It was good too." The hag-like laughter commenced again.

"Kasim, stop that insane noise, you old fool," a man's voice called out. Kasim's face grew serious. He glared at the young man who got up and exited the tent, letting in the first

morning rays. Kasim looked back at Mutemmam, his expression changing to a gaping toothless smile, and the cackling resumed.

Mutemmam, still groggy from his long sleep, wondered just how long he would have to endure this lunatic.

At that moment Jarir, son of Kasim, entered the tent and walked toward the fugitive.

"Father, tend the fire, I'll take care of our guest."

Kasim got up and ambled quietly back to the simmering pot. He stirred the contents with a large wooden paddle which clanged against the iron cauldron. Nutmeg-laced vapors rode the weak air currents within the tent and stimulated Mutemmam's hunger.

Jarir reminded Mutemmam of his deceased brother, Malik, although the resemblance was not striking. He relaxed somewhat as Jarir crouched beside him.

"Please excuse my father, he was kicked in the head by a camel several years ago and has since lost his wits. But never mind that, we have more important matters to discuss. All the arrangements have been made to return you to your people in the east. A caravan camped on the other side of Medina leaves at mid-morning. I will provide a horse to get you there for, say... five pieces of gold."

"I have no pieces of gold," Mutemmam replied. "The Muslims took everything I had."

Jarir looked him over. "What's this?" He pointed to a thin camel-hair rope which hung heavily from Mutemmam's neck and from there disappeared into his robe.

From within his garment Mutemmam produced a solid gold ring on the end of the braided rope chain.

"For good luck," he said. "I've had it since I was a boy."

Jarir responded quickly. "You won't need luck any more, everything has been arranged, that is your good luck." He held out his hand, palm up. "The ring, as payment for my services. I will send someone with you to retrieve the horse once you've reached the caravan."

Reluctantly, Mutemmam slipped the rope over his head and dropped it, ring attached, into his host's hand. Jarir stood to leave.

"I will command my daughter to bring you food and drink before you depart. I trust you are hungry – it must be over a day since you've eaten."

"It's been a day and a half," Mutemmam acknowledged.

"Thank you for your help and hospitality."

"This is business, I need no thanks." Jarir bowed his head slightly. "May your journey be safe and swift."

When the meal arrived, Mutemmam first clutched at a deep bowl containing drink to satiate his thirst. It was warm and had the nutmeg aroma of Kasim's brew mixed with something sweet. Mutemmam drank half, ate the hard bread which formed the bulk of the repast, and then finished the drink. It burned his throat slightly, not from its heat, but rather from its composition, and left a tart aftertaste in his mouth. He asked for more, but Jarir's daughter explained that there was only enough for one serving each. After some time, the girl led Mutemmam outside and pointed him in the direction of a man in the distance who was holding two horses by their reins. Mutemmam thanked her and started walking toward the man. As he walked, Mutemmam thought that he must not be fully awake. He felt numb, and he was making interminably slow progress in reaching the man with the horses. Shortly, the sensation intensified. Mutemmam heard a loud ringing in his head and felt flushed and oblivious to everything around him. Suddenly, all went black as Mutemmam stumbled and fell to the ground, unconscious.

A group of four people approached Mutemmam as he lay sprawled on the earth; the man with the horses, Jarir and his father, and the young man who had earlier rebuked Kasim. They stood silently over him while blowing sand began to cover Mutemmam's garments. Jarir was the first to speak.

"There. Delivered as agreed."

The young man, an officer in Mu'awiya's employ, prodded Mutemmam's body with his foot. "How long will your potion keep him like this?"

"Three, maybe four hours. It depends on how it's made," Jarir replied. "It can be made to last forever, if one wishes."

"Excellent! Three hours should be more than enough time." The officer motioned to the man with the horses. "Help me get this one secured to my mare." Then, turning to Jarir, he tossed a small bag of coins which Jarir caught in mid-air. Mu'awiya's men lifted Mutemmam's body onto the horse so that he lay on his stomach across it. They tied him down, then mounted the two remaining steeds and rode off with Mutemmam's horse trailing.

Jarir opened the bag and emptied the contents into his hand as Kasim looked on with utmost curiosity. Jarir counted out fifteen coins, ten gold and five silver. Kasim gazed at his son approvingly and the cackling resumed once more.

I awoke from a restless sleep feeling tense, knowing that in a day's time I was to arraign the prisoner Mutemmam – a prisoner over which I no longer had custody – before the Khalifah. I tried to concoct plausible explanations for my failure but none were sufficient to justify it. This would be a serious setback. One who would allow such a thing to happen was not fit for command. Surely, Abu Bakr would instruct Omar to find another to fill my position.

I walked to the window of the room on the upper floor of Omar's house where I had spent the night, and looked upon the world outside. I had already missed morning prayer and people were starting to go about their daily business. A small group of important looking Habash, probably from Abyssinia judging from the blackness of their skin, made their way up the street toward the Khalifah's residence. They wore robes of fine silk – brightly

colored in reds, greens and yellows – and walked with staves, skillfully carved and adorned with gold. Across the way, two dogs growled at each other while they engaged in a tug of war over a piece of meat. Then I saw it. I mumbled to myself as I rushed from the room, down the stone staircase, out the dark passageway to the street and into the narrow lane which ran alongside the house. There I found Omar, one of my officers, and several guards surrounding Mutemmam as he sat propped up against the wall, semiconscious.

I raised my arms into the air and looked skyward. "Allahu Akbar! I don't believe it. You found him!" I proceeded to do a little dance, hopping in a circle, rotating my body, and clapping my hands together above my head.

"How did you capture him?" I asked.

The officer responded. "An acquaintance of mine, Jarir, a Bedouin trader, was at the mosque last evening and heard your plea for recovery of the prisoner. When he returned to his camp, he found a stranger who matched Mutemmam's description seeking refuge and passage to the east. Jarir convinced him that nothing could be done until the next day and that Mutemmam should stay hidden while arrangements were made. Then, Jarir sought me out and we devised the plan to drug him, to ensure we could take him alive."

I slapped my hands together. "Excellent. How long has he been unconscious?"

"Close to two hours. At one point we thought he had died."

Omar turned to me. "That would have been unfortunate for us, my friend. After the speech I gave the Khalifah about Khalid, the last thing we would need is to bring him a dead body tomorrow."

"Looks like he's starting to come out of it," the officer said. "I'll help him."

He produced a sizable penis from beneath his robe and proceeded to urinate on Mutemmam's head.

Not to be outdone, the rest of us, all who could, also urinated on the prisoner. The streams hissed upon hitting the skin of his face. Mutemmam flinched as the foul smelling liquid ran into his eyes and mouth. He awoke sputtering, still half dazed.

"Where am I?" Mutemmam said, barely understandable, not being in a posture to fully rid his mouth of the watery waste and obviously daring not to swallow it. He closed his eyes and became silent.

Omar stared at him for a moment before bending down to get a closer look. Nothing. He pried one of Mutemmam's eyes open.

Mutemmam quickly adjusted his position and ejected the liquid from his mouth into Omar's face with substantial force.

"Ahhhhrrrr," Omar growled. "Give me my lash."

"It's in your belt," a voice called out.

Omar produced the cat-o-nine-tails and swiftly raised his arm high into the air.

Mutemmam's eyes widened and then shut tightly as Omar's whip came down hard on Mutemmam's right cheek. His head snapped to the left in reaction. With a backhand stroke Omar delivered a second blow, equally forceful, to Mutemmam's left cheek. His head snapped back to its original position. The wounds imparted by the whip bled, and swelled rapidly.

"Stake him out in the sun," Omar commanded. "Let the flies have at him." Thereupon, Omar strode off, wiping his face as he walked.

The Khalifah's meeting room was silent except for the sound of fingers tapping on wood. It seemed as though it had been going on for hours, but in reality only a short time had passed. All of the room's occupants focused on Abu Bakr's hand as each finger, in quick succession, fell to the table making repetitive clicks and pops like a cogwheel machine in motion. He

dropped first the little finger, then the third, then the middle, then the first finger, over and over again, varying in speed, sometimes letting his nails hit, but never ceasing. The Khalifah remained deep in thought, pondering what to do with Mutemmam. He received a full account of the events which had occurred at Al-Bitah from both perspectives, from Mutemmam in his own words, and from me. He had also heard of the Bedouin's attempt to escape. Mutemmam knelt on the floor, sitting on his heels, several feet away from the Khalifah who sat on a large cushion behind his prized short-legged table. Mutemmam's sunburned face was hideously swollen, with welts on both cheeks and numerous little scabs scattered all over his skin. I stood beside the prisoner while two guards flanked the room's entrance. All of the others present in the room were seated, Omar to the right of Abu Bakr, and Ali ibn Abi Talib and Othman ibn Affan to the left. Ali was both cousin and son-in-law to the Prophet, the latter by virtue of his marriage to Muhammad's daughter Fatimah. She had recently passed away, not long after the death of her father. Othman was a close advisor to the Khalifah, his long-time friend, and my elder cousin.

The tapping continued as Abu Bakr considered the facts. There was little doubt that Khalid had contrived to appropriate Malik's wife. Similarly, Mutemmam's role in the ensuing unrest was uncontested even by Mutemmam himself. The Khalifah's eyes locked onto those of the prisoner. The tapping stopped.

"The question I've been trying to resolve," he said in a stern voice, "is whether your action should be pardoned as an instinctual response to your brother's slaying, and risk compromising discipline, or whether I should make an example of you as a deterrent to other would-be insurgents. I have made my decision."

Abu Bakr leaned forward and rested his forearms on the table. His voice softened.

"I cannot condone your actions at Al-Bitah, and therefore will not grant you a pardon. I am, however, prepared to spare

your life, given the circumstances of this situation, providing that you submit to the will of Allah. Of course you will still be punished for your deeds and this punishment will take the form of a scourging of thirty lashes to be carried out in public after mid-day today."

Mutemmam did not speak, nor did he take heed of my motion until the butt end of my whip connected across the side of his head. I had made a cat-o-nine-tails for myself, just like Omar's. Mutemmam winced.

"Have you no gratitude, you Bedouin dog?" I yelled. "The Khalifah has just spared your wretched life and you cannot even summon the breath to express your thanks?"

At that moment, one of Abu Bakr's slaves timidly poked his head past the half-opened door and beckoned someone across the room. Ali got up and, walking behind the Khalifah, left to see what the matter was while I continued to berate the prisoner.

"Stop! Enough!" Mutemmam hollered. "I am not deserving of this. Your amir in the east is an animal, he should be the one dead, not my brother. You go too far." He began to rock back and forth on his knees. Mutemmam dropped his face into his hands, his back began to heave erratically. He had been drugged, urinated on, beaten, and left exposed to the merciless Arabian sun. The thought of being flogged must have taken him past the limits of his endurance. Mutemmam stuttered a hoarse acknowledgment of the Khalifah's beneficence while trying to hold back his sobbing.

I suddenly felt sorry for Mutemmam, and guilty for my own manufactured bluster.

"Take him away," Abu Bakr ordered, stern-faced again. He motioned to Omar to come close. "Make it fifty lashes," he said in a low voice, "and get a guard to administer them, don't do it yourself – it's unbecoming to your rank." Omar nodded but would carry out the sentence himself anyway.

As Mutemmam rose to be escorted away, Ali re-entered the room in a state of great excitement.

"Good news from the east. Khalid has moved against Museilima and already has won two major victories. He has the remnants of the Great Liar's forces trapped in a walled enclosure at the oasis of Al-Yemama."

Chapter 10
AH 11/ AD 632

Khalid trod on body after body in what became known as the Garden of Death, a plot of land at Al-Yemama surrounded by a high gated wall that housed an orchard of pomegranate trees. The orchard itself, he determined, would have been a foreboding place even before the slaughter. The trees, small and twisted, each possessing multiple intertwined trunks, were ideal homes for malevolent jinn, spirits of the desert. Low hanging tentacular branches laden with fruit swayed in the afternoon breeze, the mangled red orbs weeping their own thin blood in sympathy for the dead. Khalid inhaled the subtle scent of a misplaced sweetness that lingered high above an orchard floor barely visible through the confusion of bodies that lay upon it. He stopped to survey the win. A host of vacant eyes stared up at him. The Sword of Allah plucked a blade-shaped leaf from one of the branches – it had the feel of soft leather, soothing to the touch. He rubbed it between his fingers as he looked about. All was quiet now, in a relative sense. Khalid relished the contrast to the previous three days when the din of battle on the nearby plain of Akraba let none sleep, save for the dead.

Khalid recalled his victory, conjuring up the tens of thousands of warriors from each side armed with lances, bows, and swords, engaged with utmost ferocity, leaving trails of viscera and severed limbs on a sanguineous earth. The tide of the battle had ebbed and flowed as one side, then the other, gained ground

on the sandy plain. Khalid complimented himself on his ingenuity in reorganizing the army so that Bedouin and city dwelling Arabs fought as separate units, stimulating competition between them. Losses were high on both sides. Among those Muslims who fell were thirty-nine of Muhammad's chief Companions. When the balance tipped decisively in Khalid's favor, the greater part of Museilima's army retreated into the desert while Museilima himself and a thousand of his men ran to the Garden for protection. This was where the final carnage took place on the morning of the third day. Khalid knew that the orchard, rather than affording protection, would hamper Museilima's ability to maneuver and preclude his escape.

Khalid walked on, swatting at the multitude of flies which buzzed through the air while the heat of the afternoon sun thickened streams of blood flowing from the dead and wounded. The vacant eyes followed him. Khalid stopped and turned one of the fallen over to reveal a shock stricken face.

"Is this your leader?" Khalid said to Majaa.

The chains of Majaa's leg irons rattled as he moved forward and craned his neck to see around Khalid's arm. "No. Museilima is much shorter." Majaa, his hands manacled together, pointed at the body. "But I know this man. He was a braver and nobler man than Museilima."

Khalid motioned to the prisoner and his guard. "Let us continue."

They inspected many other casualties until at last they came upon one whom Majaa identified as Museilima.

"This is he. This is the false prophet," Majaa said with a look of contempt.

Museilima lay face up, his eyes closed, his neck pierced by an arrow which entered on one side and protruded through the other by a hand's breadth. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

Khalid stood over Museilima and looked down at him, transfixed by the spectacle of the arrow which had bisected the

man's throat. He cocked his head, amazed that the shaft had remained intact after Museilima's fall.

"See if there's any breath of life remaining in this blasphemer," Khalid ordered.

Majaa knelt beside the body and placed his ear just above Museilima's mouth. "He's breathing, slightly – I can hear him rasping, almost as if he's trying to say something. He's calling a name." Majaa raised his head to view the vanquished face and as he did so, Museilima's eyes popped open.

"He lives!" Majaa screamed. He looked up and saw Khalid with his sword drawn and raised into the air. Majaa quickly rolled out of harm's way as the razor sharp edge came down across Museilima's throat making a soft percussive sound. If Museilima's eyes could have left his head, they surely would have at that instant. His body convulsed in one rippling movement that briefly raised his torso from the ground. A fountain of crimson gushed forth from Museilima's jugular in spurts, each one successively smaller than its predecessor, until it slowed to a uniform flow.

Majaa, on his knees, covered his head with his arms and bowed repeatedly. "Oh ender of misery, most merciful one. You have stopped the suffering of an enemy, a truly magnanimous act befitting only an apostle of God."

"Stop groveling," Khalid said, "your life is safe, for now. Get up, we have other work to do. You will assist us in reclaiming the people of this area. First, you must tell me who are the other leaders of this rebellion."

Majaa stammered as he recited a litany of names which ended with Sajah the prophetess, and a Beni Hanifa sheikh named Al-Ashtar ibn Harith.

"Al-Ashtar was designated by Museilima to keep track of Sajah's activities, under the pretext of acting as her liaison to the clans of the area."

"Ah yes, the false prophetess of Chaldea, I know of this person," Khalid said, nodding his head and stroking his beard.

Khalid turned to Majaa's guard. "Gather my amirs together so that I may speak with them. I will watch over the prisoner while you do so." The guard departed, shouting a call to assembly, and returned shortly with most of the commanders. Khalid waited for them to settle into some semblance of order.

"We have found and dealt justice to the leader of the Beni Hanifa, the false prophet Museilima; behold him." Khalid pointed to the now pale corpse, propped against one of the larger pomegranate trees. Above Museilima's body, Khalid had used his khanjar to crudely carve a list of names into the trunk of the tree. "We know who his amirs are – their names are those inscribed. I entrust to you the task of identifying from amongst the dead as many of the ringleaders as can be found, then scour the countryside to locate any of those unaccounted for. I'll take a force to the main settlement and set up garrison there. Al-Muthanna and Farouk shall accompany me." He turned towards Al-Muthanna. "I'll draw a sufficient number to support the garrison from the ranks of your people, since they will be required to stay here." Al-Muthanna nodded once.

Khalid then turned back to the other amirs. "Go now and do as I have bid. Allahu Akbar."

"Allahu Akbar!" the group responded in unison.

As the sun traveled lower in the afternoon sky – and the inspection of the carnage resumed – Khalid, Al-Muthanna, and Farouk took control of the village of Al-Yemama.

A campfire burned brightly among several which dotted a dune enclosed depression on the southern edge of the north Dahna desert. Al-Ashtar ibn Harith and Sajah tended it alone so that they could converse in private. It was almost night and the heat of the daylight hours had rapidly escaped the dryness of this punishing wasteland.

Al-Ashtar thought back to the minutes just prior to the Battle of the Garden of Death. Foreseeing the impending doom, he had advised Sajah to give up the fight and escape with him. Independent of her, Sajah's army had the same idea and retreated during Museilima's flight into the Garden, bypassing the enclosure and continuing to ride in the direction of Chaldea. He recalled Sajah's look of surprise as she became separated from her troops and, in the mayhem, was thrown to the ground when an arrow crippled her horse. If it were not for him and his men, Al-Ashtar reasoned, the prophetess would surely have been killed.

"We must press on to rendezvous with my army," Sajah said. She removed two pieces of seared meat from the campfire and passed one to Al-Ashtar. "It is better that we travel in the darkness, for cover, and to avoid the heat of the day."

Al-Ashtar, a man of medium height, albeit slight build, with very dark skin and a nose which curved like an eagle's beak, sniffed at his food. His hair and beard, both jet black, were cut short with the hair on his head covered by a sheikh's kaffiyah and that on the sides of his face pared so close that his full beard looked more like a goatee.

"Rendezvous! A rendezvous is planned. Your army has deserted. I'm not sure they'd want to meet up with you after the beating they took today. They were prepared to leave you to die."

"I don't believe that," Sajah replied. She tossed her head back to reveal a faded scar on the side of her neck. "There was a misunderstanding of my orders. My people would never have intentionally abandoned me."

"Believe what you will, but you've lost your following." Al-Ashtar bit off a chunk of the steaming flesh and chewed momentarily before spitting it into the fire. He stared at the remainder before tossing it aside. "Don't eat this, it's spoiled."

"There's nothing for me here," the prophetess lamented. "I must return in any case – they will have my bridal gift. I must recover it."

Al-Ashtar gazed at the dwindling fire as he poked it with his sword. New life burst forth from the glowing embers which popped and hissed as the infusion of air ignited the unburned portions of the coals, bringing the aromatic scent of the dead acacia branches to his nostrils. He sat silently, lusting over the treasure, recalling that a great deal of Al-Yemama's wealth was in foreign hands heading north.

"Listen to me. It would be foolhardy to meet up with this army of yours here in the desert. If they've turned against you, they'll kill us – our numbers are no match for theirs. The best way for us to proceed is to return to your home in Chaldea and assert your claim in the presence of allies. That way, if there's any reluctance on the part of your commanders to give back this wealth, you can publicly accuse them of desertion and let your true followers enforce your interest."

Sajah looked at the ground and nodded. "You speak true, Al-Ashtar," she said, the usual air of confidence absent from her voice.

"So tell me," Al-Ashtar continued, "what remains of the bridal gift, and where is it?"

Sajah hesitated for some time before responding. "Horses and camels – many of those were taken into battle. Some is in the form of gold, silver, and gems, and some was given as food or goods, most of which was sold and converted to coin."

"And other than the horses and camels, where is it now? Certainly it wasn't carried into battle."

"No," Sajah replied. "The gold and silver was hidden in a cave about two days ride north of Al-Yemama on the route to Al-Hafir."

"Then we'll follow in your army's path and check this cave on our way, to make sure they haven't left the treasure hidden before we continue on to stake your claim." Al-Ashtar contemplated his options as he peered into the evening sky. The darkness of his brown eyes made them appear pitch-black in the flickering firelight, imparting a detached, inhuman look to the

sheikh. He could either let Sajah lead him to the treasure, if it was still there, and then dispose of her; or, if it was not, help her win her claim and then marry her. He found both choices distasteful, but viable, alternatives. Sajah, while not wholly unpleasant to behold, had a certain masculine look about her face and appeared somewhat under nourished. She would not age gracefully, and at thirty-five years, four years Al-Ashtar's senior, was well beyond her time for marrying.

Al-Ashtar leaned forward and stirred the fire with his sword once more. A shower of sparks rose from the fire pit. He stretched his left leg, stiff from an old wound behind the knee that made him walk with a slight limp which was most noticeable when he was fatigued. Al-Ashtar wondered what it would be like to be married to a prophetess. It could have its advantages. Maybe she could predict which battles he would win and which ones he should avoid – that would truly be worth marrying for. But what if she could know his every move, read his every thought! He looked over at Sajah. She smiled at him. Al-Ashtar returned a forced smile as he slowly looked away and focused into the distance. Better to kill her, he acknowledged in a fleeting thought, purposely keeping it brief lest she intercept it. He must devise a way to learn of her abilities.

Sajah's voice broke into Al-Ashtar's concentration. He looked at her quizzically.

"Shouldn't we be starting our journey?" she asked for a second time.

"Yes... yes we should," he replied, nodding as he did so, "but my men won't travel through the desert at night." He shook his head.

"Why not?" Sajah demanded.

"The spirits – jinn, araq, many of them evil – they come out at night. They could be anywhere; in that dead shrub, in a sand dune, in this rock." He held up a roughly shaped stone as he uttered the last word and then, realizing what he had said, dropped it as if it were scalding hot.

"Chastise them for being old women Al-Ashtar, there's nothing to fear in the desert after darkness, I've traveled it many times. Tell them."

"They won't be persuaded, believe me, I know. It will only cause them to question their allegiance to me, something which I can little afford now."

Sajah grabbed her head with both hands and closed her eyes momentarily. "Offer them a portion of my bridal gift when we recover it," she said. "That should motivate them."

Al-Ashtar considered Sajah's proposal. His men had not been privy to his thoughts concerning the bridal gift but it would not be long before he would have to tell them anyway, and once he acquired any part of it he would have to share, even if he were to withhold the better part of it for himself.

Al-Ashtar agreed. He got up and hobbled off to speak to his followers, stepping lightly with his left leg until the stiffness dissipated. He had escaped from Al-Yemama with only sixty of his nine hundred men. This small group was large enough to discourage most marauding bands of thieves, but not large enough to withstand any military assault. Al-Ashtar gathered his men together to present the offer.

"The prophetess Umm-Sadir Sajah requests our help in returning her to her people and asks that we embark immediately. What say you?"

Silence prevailed initially, followed by some indiscernible grumbling in the midst of the assembly.

Al-Ashtar continued. "As a reward for our help each one of us will receive a portion of her wealth – gold and silver coins, precious stones, as well as nubile young women from amongst her tribe for our pleasure."

After a short pause the anticipated question issued forth. "What about the jinns of the desert?"

Al-Ashtar shifted his weight onto his good leg. "The prophetess tells me that there are no araq on this route."

A burst of laughter arose from the crowd and died down as quickly as it had arisen.

"The araq are everywhere, you know that, Al-Ashtar," said a voice from the back of the group. At this point, Sajah marched over to Al-Ashtar's side and addressed the men directly.

"I have used my prophetic gift to look ahead on this journey and I can assure you that nothing evil will befall any of you. If you will not accompany me on this expedition I will go alone, then it will be said that the men of the Beni Hanifa have not even the courage of a woman."

There was once again dead silence while Al-Ashtar's men weighed the risk of a nighttime journey through the desert versus the stigma of waiting behind while a woman went ahead alone.

"We will go," one of the men called out, "but first we must pay homage to Bal, jinn of the wadis, so that we will be able to find water along the way."

"Yes," said another voice, "and to Al-Manat the goddess of good fortune."

"How long will all this take?" Sajah inquired.

"Not long," answered a third.

"Go find icons then, so that we may worship," Al-Ashtar commanded.

A block of sandstone the length of a man's arm was found to represent Al-Manat. Several dead twigs placed vertically in the sand were used to represent Bal. In between the two, a campfire roared, hurling a smoky blend of acacia and dung upwards while dusk darkened into night. The men of the Beni Hanifa danced in a circle, facing each other around the icons, chanting, and waving their swords in the air. The flames leaped high into the starry blackness, casting long pulsating shadows which radiated outward from the circle as the firelight strobed off the faces of the dancers and created eerie designs of dark and bright. An almost full moon invaded the eastern sky – a good omen. The excitement heightened. Shortly, Al-Ashtar brought Sajah into the center of the circle where she began to disrobe. Al-Ashtar did likewise.

She dropped her garment onto the sand and laid on it with the Bedouin sheikh following on top of her. They began to copulate to the rhythmic sounds of the ceremony. While the act continued, the tempo of the chanting and dancing quickened until it reached a frantic pace. Sajah began to experience orgasm after orgasm, her body writhing, her legs raised and shaking. The Beni Hanifa cheered as their leader delivered the final few thrusts and then fell limp on the prophetess.

"Did your prophetic gift foretell of this?" Al-Ashtar asked as he caught his breath.

Sajah smiled. "It told me of this and much more," she said.

Al-Ashtar forced another reciprocating smile as his mind raced to understand the meaning of Sajah's words. They picked up their robes and left the circle of men which was still engaged in the ritual.

As the circle rotated, the panorama of the nighttime horizon came into each man's view. The silhouette of the surrounding hills was now plainly visible against a moonlit sky, as was the circle of dancers plainly visible to the eleven men hidden atop the largest of these dunes.

"I told you that was a woman down there," one of the men said.

"Maybe, but I know these Bedouin – they'll fornicate with anything, so I'll reserve judgment on that," another replied.

There was laughter.

"Come," ordered the band's leader, "we must go back to our camp and report. There is plenty of time to return with a party large enough to subdue this lot."

As the early-morning sun intensified, Khalid, Al-Muthanna, and Farouk sat in a Bedouin tent with Majaa and the five principal elders of Al-Yemama to lay down the terms of

peace with the Beni Hanifa. The two contingents sat, crossed-legged, opposite each other with a steady but slowly waning fire between them. The brisk wind outside caused the flap covering the tent's entrance to alternately open and close, varying the brightness inside. Khalid enumerated the conditions.

"To begin, all must submit to the will of Allah – on this, there is no compromise. Second, all men of fighting age will be assembled so that we may select volunteers to serve our Cause, and to assist us in identifying the principals of this rebellion. Third, any men of fighting age who defy this call will be hunted down and slain." He looked into the eyes of his audience, a pathetic collection of old men incapable of anything but submission. A single nod came from the foremost of the elders. Khalid continued. "Fourth, an annual tithe of ten percent of all revenues will be paid by the Beni Hanifa to the Khalifah through his representative who, for this district, will be Al-Muthanna." The elders of Al-Yemama muttered amongst themselves until their leader commanded silence.

"In return," Al-Muthanna said, "I will support the Beni Hanifa in any conflict, and assist in protecting their interests overall."

The list went on.

One of the guards outside shouted an announcement a split second before yanking open the entrance flap to the tent. As it fluttered and snapped in the breeze, two Muslim soldiers entered followed by a young woman carrying a tray of bread and dates.

"Ah, my daughter," Majaa said with the look of fondness in his eyes. "Serve the great Khalid and his friends first, for they are hungry. This is my daughter Oleiyah, she is my only remaining child," he added, turning toward Khalid as he spoke.

Oleiyah offered food to Khalid, Al-Muthanna, and Farouk, and then to the two soldiers who had preceded her into the tent before doing the same for the elders and lastly, her father. Khalid glanced at Oleiyah from the corner of his eye as she bent over to

serve Al-Muthanna. She rivaled Leila in her appearance but looked to be several years older. Khalid's eyes followed her as she served the others. He chewed monotonously, his mind distracted by thoughts of carnal pleasure. After all were served, Oleiyah begged her leave and departed. When Khalid had finished eating, one of the soldiers spoke.

"It is my privilege to address the Sword of Allah."

"Of course it is," Khalid replied, picking his teeth with the tip of his dagger. "What is it you have come to see me about?"

"Our small party was searching the area north of here and we came across a band of Bedouin, fifty or sixty strong."

"And you captured them?" Khalid said, waving the khanjar as he spoke. He grinned at his amirs, looking first to the left, then to the right, to make sure they acknowledged his humor. A short and subdued bout of laughter ensued, ending as abruptly as its nature was forced.

"Well, ah..., no – there were only eleven of us. We returned to ask for more men so that we may go back and apprehend this band. More importantly," the soldier continued, "there was a lone woman amongst the group. It may be this so-called prophetess."

Khalid inspected the dagger and then wiped it on his robe. "The false prophetess comes from Chaldea," he said, without looking up. "Could you tell if the Bedouin that accompanied this woman were Chaldean?"

"From their dress, they appeared to be men of the Beni Hanifa."

Khalid rolled his eyes back into his head as he gently probed for a piece of date skin lodged between his two front teeth.

"How far away are they?" he said in a barely understandable voice.

"Less than half a day's ride."

Khalid removed the knife from his mouth and picked something brown off the end. He examined it in his fingers before flicking it away, then he turned to Farouk.

"Find one hundred askariyah to accompany these men so that they may apprehend the fugitives they've located."

"It will be done," Farouk replied.

He looked back at the two visitors. "Go with my amir, he will tend to your needs. Upon your return here, report to me immediately."

The two arose and acknowledged Khalid's instructions with the obligatory Allahu Akbar, then, following Farouk, they left the tent.

Khalid dismissed all but Majaa, amid the whistle of an impending storm outside. When they were alone, Khalid imposed a final condition on the peace.

"Why must you have my daughter?" Majaa said. "She is all I have left."

"Think of it as providing a bond between our peoples," Khalid replied, raising his eyebrows. "Give me your daughter to be my wife and she will be treated like a queen."

"And if I refuse, what will you do, have me killed as you did your last obstacle." Majaa nodded. "Oh yes, I have heard talk about that. Well, I can't do it, I won't do it!"

Khalid's eyes narrowed and his voice became gruff. His scarred right hand clenched Majaa's wrist. "Give me your daughter, man. Give her to me or I will hand her over to my garrison as a plaything, after which no one will want her."

Majaa cringed. "You'll burn in hell for this," he said, painfully conceding to Khalid's demand, his eyes riveted on those of his captor.

"Leave me now," Khalid ordered. "Find her and send her to me at once."

Majaa exited the tent wearing a stone-faced expression. He wondered how he could save Oleiyah. If he tried to flee with her, Khalid would surely hunt them down and kill them. And besides, he had nowhere to run. If he gave her to him, his tribe would think he betrayed them for his own benefit – he would

bring shame upon his clan. He couldn't decide, he must let her make the decision.

Majaa glanced about, looking for Oleiyah as he walked. The strengthening wind blew funnels of dust up from the ground and obscured his vision. Majaa drew his kaffiyah across his mouth and nose. He winced as the sand pelted his face, forcing its way into his eyes, making them water. He turned his back to the wind, wiped the sand out, and continued toward his tent. When he arrived, Majaa found Oleiyah seated on the ground inside, weaving wool into cloth. He stood and watched her for a while before speaking, reflecting on his memories of her, realizing that he would soon be alone. Majaa had several brothers and sisters but, except for Oleiyah, his immediate household had all perished. His last wife had recently succumbed to the pox, his eldest son had been killed in battle a year earlier, and two other children died in infancy. Majaa's eyes began to water again but this time not from the sand.

"What is it, father?" Oleiyah said. "Why do you look at me so?"

"My child," Majaa said, "arrangements have been made for your marriage."

Oleiyah's eyes brightened. "To whom, father? Cousin Mazhar, yes?"

"To Khalid ibn al-Welid, whom you served only a short while ago."

Oleiyah's expression grew blank. She stood, letting the mountain of black wool fall from her lap. "I thought I was to marry Mazhar. I've known him all my life, and we're very fond of each other."

Majaa clasped his hands together and gave Oleiyah a look of despair. "The conqueror wants you for his wife – the alternative would be unpleasant and would cause Mazhar to lose all interest in you. The great Khalid," Majaa paused to spit on the ground, "curse him, would make you harlot to his army if I had refused his demand."

Oleiyah's voice became loud and strained. "I don't want to marry Khalid, he will take me away from you and from our clan, I want to marry Mazhar." She set upon her loom and began to frantically rip out the work she had just completed until it tangled and refused to separate further. Oleiyah pushed the loom over, then fell to her knees and buried her face in her hands.

Outside, the wind howled through the tent ropes, making them hum an ominous song, while the sand hissed as it struck the walls of the tent.

"Oleiyah, you should go to Khalid now, he waits for you. I won't force you to marry him, however, I see no other choice."

She nodded and wept silently as Majaa crouched down beside his daughter to hug her for the last time. She embraced him. Oleiyah got up to gather the belongings that she could carry, wrapped them in a large bundle, and looked with longing at her father as she departed.

Once outside, she slowly made her way to Khalid, her eyes half closed and her chin nestled into her chest to protect her face against the blowing sand. The sun had reached its high point of the day, yet the sky was blackened by furious clouds of grit. Oleiyah made a detour past the tent which belonged to Mazhar's family, so that she could explain her predicament to him, but Mazhar was not there.

When she arrived at her destination, she found the Sword of Allah reclining on a pile of sheepskins, clad only in a cloth draped across his lap.

"Come to me —" Khalid searched for her name but could not remember it.

The roof of the tent boomed repetitively, flapping and pulsating in the wind.

As Oleiyah approached, Khalid removed the cloth to expose his erection. She put down her bundled possessions and undressed, shaking the sand from her robe and placing it, folded, near the bundle. She extracted an item from the package that

glinted in the firelight as she turned around. Oleiyah, now also stark naked, with knife in hand, faced Khalid. Khalid's erection collapsed as his thoughts turned to assassination. His initial reaction was to go for his own weapon until he realized that the knife was not intended for him. Khalid watched in horror as Oleiyah turned the instrument of death on herself, plunging it deep into her chest and penetrating her heart. Her eyes bulged until the whites shone like the light of the full moon. She staggered backwards and fell to the earthen floor with a resounding thud. Oleiyah's blood poured profusely from the fatal wound as Khalid, silent at first, stared with widened eyes and open mouth at the spectacle which lay before him.

"Bring me Majaa!" Khalid bellowed.

A guard rushed in to see what the matter was. Khalid stood naked on the opposite side of the tent. The guard, bewildered, looked at Khalid, then at Oleiyah's body, then back at Khalid.

"Bring him!"

"Who?"

"Majaa, you fool!"

The sentry made a hasty exit, shouting orders to the other guards as he disappeared into the worsening sandstorm. After a short while, he returned to announce that Majaa had been found dead in his tent.

"He has slit his left wrist and his throat," the guard explained. "I found him lying in a sea of blood."

Khalid, now fully dressed except for the absence of his turban, sat with his head in his hands, rubbing his temples.

"Runs in the family, I guess," he said with disgust. He motioned at the lifeless body which lay on the ground. "Get her out of here, and then resume your post. I don't want to be disturbed, by *anyone*. Do you understand?"

"I understand," the guard replied. He summoned another guard from the outside and together they removed the body.

For the rest of the day Khalid sat in his tent, contemplating the meaning of the morning's unsettling events until these thoughts were displaced, to the exclusion of all else, by the screaming wind which rang in ever increasing intensity through Khalid's mind.

By the next morning the sandstorm had stopped. It was close to mid-day, however, before Khalid ventured out of his tent and instructed the sentry to summon Al-Muthanna and Farouk, that they might inform him of the latest developments.

"The party sent to apprehend the false prophetess, Sajah, returned this morning," Farouk reported. "Only half have come back. They found the spot where they had first seen the renegades, but by the time our men arrived Sajah was gone. The storm had obliterated their tracks so our people split to follow the two most likely routes. As the storm worsened it became evident that pursuit was hopeless. The group that returned made its way to the rendezvous point, dug in, and waited through the night – the other half never showed up. Several riders were dispatched to search for them after sunrise, but no sign could be found."

Khalid stroked his beard as he listened. "If they've not come back by day's end, send a rescue party to look for them tomorrow."

"That's none too soon if they've ventured into the Dahna," Al-Muthanna said. "They had supplies enough to last only two days when they left here and there is no water in the Dahna at this time of year. But there's also another reason why we may want to send out an expedition."

"And why is that?" Khalid said, with indifference.

"The townspeople have informed me that this Sajah had married Museilima, and that as a bridal gift she received a substantial portion of the riches of this district. All indications are that this treasure, which rightly belongs to these people and hence to us, was removed from the area prior to the battle."

Khalid's eyes narrowed. "We must recover it."

"If we can intercept Sajah before she reaches Chaldea," Farouk added.

"Regardless of where we intercept her," Al-Muthanna replied, momentarily glancing at Farouk before returning his attention to Khalid. "Chaldea could easily be subdued, it is not well organized. There are two outlying strongholds in the south, Khaffan and Al-Hafir, widely separated and more or less independent of each other. Take either one of these and you have access to the cities of Al-Iraq, and that's where the real wealth lies."

"What kind of wealth are we talking about, my friend?" the Sword of Allah asked, his expression conveying heightened interest.

"Gold, silver, rubies, food..." Al-Muthanna paused, "...beautiful women. All in substantial quantities." He watched for Khalid's reaction.

Farouk countered. "Al-Iraq is under Persian control, it would be insane to engage in hostilities with the Persians when Arabian unity is not yet assured."

"The Persian throne is in turmoil, each new monarch killing off family rivals, only to be overthrown by outsiders," Al-Muthanna explained. "Furthermore, they've been at war with the Greeks, the Byzantine Christians, for decades. They're vulnerable and this presents an opportunity for us."

"The Khalifah would never permit it," Farouk said. "His desire is to suppress dissent in Arabia, not for foreign conquests."

Khalid listened as the debate continued, weighing each man's arguments. Finally, he spoke.

"Our armies have had much success in subduing the states which lie along the Sea of Persia, and we have regained most of the territory in the north. The only areas still in dispute lie far away from here, in the south and the extreme northwest. It appears to me that we are now in a position of strength. Farouk, send word to the Khalifah that we are pursuing Sajah northward into Chaldea, to recover the property stolen by the invaders. Tell

him we have already set out." Turning to Al-Muthanna, he continued. "Dispatch fifty riders to conscript additional forces to swell our ranks, and then make plans to carry out your strategy."

Khalid placed a hand on each of his amir's shoulders and, in turn, with the greatest sincerity, looked them in the eye. "We shall march on Al-Iraq."

Chapter 11
AH 11/ AD 633

"I know these parts," Al-Ashtar said, looking condescendingly at the prophetess. "I've lived here all my life and I say the route to Al-Hafir is that way." He gestured toward the largest of several featureless dunes to the northeast. After making substantial progress on his initial nighttime march, Al-Ashtar had made none during the past day while he and his party waited out the sandstorm. The camel trails which served to guide the Bedouin through the Dahna had largely been obscured by shifting sand. The winds which brought the storm had cleared the skies so that as Al-Ashtar looked about he could see only blue up above, with its blinding midday sun, or the reddish-brown of the desert. The party's supply of water was running dangerously low. Not far from where Al-Ashtar stood, an adder slithered along the sand, its head motionless while its stout body propelled the serpent sideways through the waterless sea, its tongue silently probing the air. In its wake, parallel ripples remained, miniatures of the dunes themselves.

"I am a prophetess and I can see well beyond the limits of these hills," Sajah replied, giving her head a nod towards the northwest. "I say the route is that way."

Al-Ashtar made a rude hand gesture. "I too am able to see beyond the dunes, by merely going to the top of one of them and that is just what I'm going to do, then we will settle this." He turned to one of his men and pointed upward. "Go to the top of

that dune and determine which way we must go to find the route to Al-Hafir."

"Now we shall see," he said to Sajah. The sheikh drew the sleeve of his robe across his forehead, removing an abundance of his precious bodily moisture. The previous day's tempest, while carrying no rain, brought with it a rare blast of humid air from the Sea of Persia and the marshes that border it.

It took an hour for Al-Ashtar's man to make his way to the summit of the dune. He flagged his arrival and circled about, looking in every direction before descending to report his findings.

Al-Ashtar cocked his head and thrust his hands out, palms up. "Well?"

"I could see nothing, magnificent one, only more dunes."

"Maybe now you'll listen to me, Al-Ashtar," Sajah said.

"Bah! Go then, lead us out of here." Al-Ashtar limped off, muttering, cursing the sandstorm which diverted them from their intended path.

After some minor course corrections, Sajah led the Beni Hanifa back to the road to Al-Hafir. The going was still difficult, with many hills to traverse and parts of the route hidden by newly deposited sand. Midday gave way to afternoon as the troop forged ahead, up one hill after the next and down into the shallow intervening valleys which separated them. It was at the summit of one of these hills that a startling sight greeted them. They proceeded cautiously down the slope to investigate. Al-Ashtar stopped and stared at the numerous bodies lying helter skelter in the hot desert sand. It was the remnants of Sajah's army.

"Over two hundred, ...two hundred dead, Prophetess," one of Al-Ashtar's men reported.

"Here's one that's not yours," Al-Ashtar called out.

Sajah went to see.

The dead man was dressed differently from Sajah's people, more in the manner of Al-Ashtar's tribe. A flowing black robe covered his body and a white kaffiyah lay beside his head, its

black headband cut open – a corresponding gash on his temple was one of many littering his face and neck. The remaining dead wore long open over-garments, loose fitting pants, and turbans.

Al-Ashtar pointed at the corpse. "He is of the Beni Temim; they must have crossed paths with your contingent on their way home from the battle. I wonder if any of your men escaped this carnage. Could this be all of them?"

"I don't know," Sajah replied. "With so many of my people dead and apparently so few of theirs, it very well may be. I see little chance of any survivors in such a one sided fight."

Al-Ashtar's gaze grew distant. The bridal treasure must still be safe in its hiding place.

"Sajah, how far is it to the cave for which we search?"

"I'm not certain – the delay caused by the storm has disturbed my reckoning. I can't be sure how far along we are, but I'll know the place when I see it again."

"*If* you see it again," a nearby voice said. The shaman of Al Ashtar's band glared at the prophetess. "I warned you – and the jinns will do us more harm yet. They plagued us with sand, they have sent the evil one with a fiery messenger from the sky last night, and now they have brought us to this place of death. I foresee that they will lead you away from your precious bridal gift for us all to die of thirst in the desert, mark my words."

"Silence!" Al-Ashtar commanded. "There will be no more of this talk. Nothing but slaughter awaits if we turn back. Our only future lies ahead of us. We're on the main route once again, we know that water can be found. We *will* go on."

The group reassembled and began to make their way over the next hill. Sixty of Al-Ashtar's Beni Hanifa and Sajah, most leading tired horses, and ten camels carrying supplies and riders, plodded up the sandy slope. The camels bore saddlebags, of a size to carry two men lying down, that had been filled with qirbah and dried foods. The water and food were now almost gone. Al-Ashtar and Sajah rode two of the camels. The horses were far too dehydrated to bear riders. When Al-Ashtar's party reached the top

of the dune, the view that greeted them made every heart sink. A huge encampment of Beni Temim lay directly in their path, occupying an urgently needed oasis.

"We've been spotted!" one of the group shouted.

The shaman wheeled around, barring his teeth, his eyes afire. "I'll cut your heart out for this Al-Ashtar, and you too... Prophetess." Al-Ashtar paid him no heed but instead concentrated on the enemy's action and his options. He tapped his beast on the loin with a long riding stick to make it kneel, and dismounted. The other riders followed his lead.

Several columns of horsemen rode out of the camp and headed toward Al-Ashtar's position. Others followed, mounted on camel. All appeared to be armed, although no weapons had yet been drawn.

Realizing that the size of his party would invite immediate attack and certain annihilation, Al-Ashtar ordered the bulk of his force to backtrack and lay down amongst the dead. The shaman refused, being one of only a handful that accompanied Al-Ashtar and Sajah as they moved slowly towards the approaching force on foot, until the two sides met.

The leader of the Beni Temim pulled back on the reins of his steed but remained mounted as the animal snorted and danced in a circle around Al-Ashtar and his small group. He eyed them warily before speaking.

"Anta jasus – you are a spy," he said to Al-Ashtar in the Temim dialect.

"No, most excellent one," Al-Ashtar replied, raising his hands, palms outwards, in a sign of peace. His dark eyes, normally devoid of any expression, became submissive. He moved closer so as not to have to shout. "I have captured the famed prophetess of Mesopotamia and that scum of the earth, Al-Ashtar ibn Harith. That's him over there." Al-Ashtar subtly indicated the shaman. "I seek to deliver them to our Muslim allies."

Of the fugitives, only Sajah was close enough to hear Al-Ashtar's proclamation. Her jaw dropped.

Without responding, the Beni Temim sheikh drew his sword and rode over to the man which Al-Ashtar had identified as himself. The shaman's eyes widened as he realized the treachery which had befallen him, but before he could utter a sound the sword whistled through the air and slashed across his throat. He fell to the ground emitting a gurgling noise.

One of the Beni Temim ran over to his leader and pointed to Al-Ashtar. "That man is no ally; it is *he* that is Al-Ashtar ibn Harith of the Beni Hanifa, the one for whom we search, I have seen him before. Stay your sword though, for he is worth something to us alive, but nothing if he is dead."

The sheikh's nostrils flared and he growled in anger. "Khalid only wants the woman alive," he said, keeping his eyes focused on Al-Ashtar as his horse strayed, first to the left, then returning to the right after a tug on the reins. The stallion whinnied and sneezed, shaking its head violently.

"If he wants him dead maybe he would like the pleasure of doing it himself," the subordinate replied, "and if he doesn't, you will not have deprived him of an informant, and that will bring money."

The Beni Temim sheikh spit at Al-Ashtar. "How many more of your people did you bring?"

"Just those you see here excellency," Al-Ashtar said, hands flattened together, bowing repetitively as he spoke.

The sheikh paused for a moment. "You are lying! You are trying to deceive me." He motioned to one of his men. "Go to the top of that hill and search for other Beni Hanifa."

"You are now my prisoners," he said, turning back to Al-Ashtar. "I will send word of your capture to the great Khalid and await his arrival, and then I will personally petition him for your head."

Soon several Beni Temim reappeared over the hill top.

"Only yesterday's dead and a number of Al-Ashtar's horses and camels are on the other side," the scout reported.

"Bring the animals," the leader of the Beni Temim commanded.

As the beasts were brought over, they began to exceed the number of Al-Ashtar's compatriots who were on foot. Soon there were many more than there were pedestrians.

"Hold," the Beni Temim sheikh shouted. "Why so many animals for so few riders ibn Harith?"

Al-Ashtar had to think quickly. "To sell or to trade for food. We took whatever form of wealth we could when we left."

The Beni Temim sheikh nodded and smiled, fully exposing his mouthful of yellowish-brown teeth, several of which were missing. "Ah, you try to deceive me once again, my cousin." He continued nodding for a moment and then stopped. He turned to his men. "Fools! You have been tricked. Go back over there with a hundred men and lance those bodies."

He tugged on the reins until his horse re-oriented him towards Al-Ashtar. "It will give me great satisfaction to be the instrument of your demise ibn Harith," the sheikh said, and he rode off.

The scene on the other side of the hill was gruesome. Frightened Beni Hanifa lay on the ground as the Beni Temim came through and plunged spears into the bodies which formed the initial buffer zone between the top of the hill and the hodgepodge of the living intermingled with the dead. A strong smell of sulfur, like that from rotting eggs, emanated from the corpse-strewn earth. The sun, low in the afternoon sky, edged toward the horizon, its heat moderating sufficiently to permit hordes of flies to appear from nowhere. The air immediately above the ground was suddenly filled with a black haze and the constant buzz of the winged pests. Suddenly an agonizing scream rang out, the first of the living had been mortally wounded. There was another scream, and a little later yet another. A grin appeared on the face of a Beni Temim who saw a fallen warrior's eye open

and close. He stepped on the man's head to hold him down and inserted the tip of his lance into the neck of one of Al-Ashtar's sons, just far enough to contact the spinal cord. The Beni Temim twisted and shook the lance, delighting in the display of involuntary movements evoked from the victim who gagged and growled as other Temim gathered around to laugh.

The remaining Beni Hanifa quickly surrendered – on their knees, hands in the air, pleading for their lives. Some, while striking this pose, took a lance through their chest, but most were herded away over the hilltop to rejoin Al-Ashtar and the others, and then led en masse back to the Beni Temim camp.

Khalid, with many thousands of men, was already on the march northward when word reached him concerning the capture of Sajah and Al-Ashtar. He commanded that they be brought to him at his camp northwest of Al-Yemama, just east and south of where the Great Wadi meets the sand desert. Two days later, the prisoners arrived. Khalid promised to spare their lives if they assisted him in locating the treasure which had been taken from the Beni Hanifa.

The Sword of Allah paced back and forth as he spoke, fanning himself with the gold handled horsehair fly whisk which the King of Abyssinia himself had presented to Khalid, long before Muhammad's death. The refreshing wafts of air set in motion by the whisk bathed Khalid's face and cooled the burning rays of the late morning sun.

"In addition, you must both become Believers and you, Al-Ashtar, and all the men of your clan, must join our ranks to fight as part of the Khalifah's force in the battles which lie ahead. Sajah will be permitted to return to her people, if she wishes."

He paused and then addressed Sajah directly.

"...with the provision that you conscript additional troops for us in Chaldea and refrain from any further prophetic ventures.

In return, I will provide safe conduct for you on the long journey to your home. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Sajah said. "But my bridal gift—"

Khalid cut her short. "That you consider the treasure your bridal gift is of no matter. It belongs to me now. I will hear no more of bridal gifts, is this understood?"

"It is understood," she replied, softly.

"You will also use your influence to mediate the surrender of Al-Hafir, which will save an untold number of lives on both sides," Khalid said, knowing full well that a peaceful capitulation of his first target for conquest was unlikely.

Sajah stood speechless for the longest while. "I will try."

The trek to Al-Hafir began in Dhul-Hijja, the twelfth month of the eleventh year after the Hijrah. After searching for several days, Sajah found the hiding place where the riches of Al-Yemama lay – a cave high up in an outcrop of volcanic rock visible from their path. According to what had become customary, Khalid sent one-fifth of the booty back to Medina to help replenish the Caliph's coffers. The other four-fifths was distributed amongst his army as a taste of things yet to come. The Muslim force now numbered eighteen thousand which included eight thousand of Al-Muthanna's men and one thousand of Al-Ashtar's. It was with this contingent that Khalid continued to push north toward Al-Iraq, following the Great Wadi, a route which assured the army an ample supply of water from beneath the ancient river bed.

It was not long, however, before the Muslim horde encountered the waterless Dahna desert, the sandy strip of wasteland connecting the vast desert of southeast Arabia to the smaller Nafud in the northwest – the same desolation through which Al-Ashtar had ventured just days before. Although it would take the passage of a moon to travel the Dahna from end to end, it was only a three-day march at the point where they were to cross on their northeasterly course for Al-Hafir. Normally a

distance that could be covered in two days, the journey was lengthened by the slow progress of the horses in the fluid desert sand. Camels, taken for transport and use in battle, fared much better in this terrain, while donkeys – a minority of the pack animals – traveled only marginally faster than the horses. With the remainder of the journey uneventful, Khalid and his army arrived in the vicinity of Al-Hafir in the first month of the new year, Moharram, 12 AH.

To allow his forces time to recuperate from the long and arduous expedition from Al-Yemama, Khalid bypassed Al-Hafir and set up camp midway between it and the Euphrates River delta. In this way, he would also gain the element of surprise by approaching the settlement from the rear. He soon sent reconnaissance parties west to Al-Hafir and north, in the direction of the river, to glean whatever intelligence they could from the countryside. Farouk led a party north, toward the Euphrates, into an area like no other he had ever seen. The great waterway nourished the land and created a sea of green unlike anything in Arabia. Fields of corn stretched forever to the east, and rows upon rows of date palms along with groves of fig, pomegranate, and mulberry trees could be seen in the west. Fellahin, the local peasantry of Arab descent, tended the crops while a handful of Persian overseers monitored the work. As the party made its way closer to the river, it encountered vast marshes overgrown with reeds and rushes. Water buffalo wallowed in the swamp to escape the swarms of flying insects which plagued the Delta, and to gain relief from the oppressive humidity. Farouk took all this in as he surveyed the area, steering clear of any settlements, and returned to camp within two days.

Khalid's inner circle sat, listening intently, as Farouk related his story.

"What he says is true," Al-Muthanna affirmed. "I saw it myself many years ago. Of all the places I have seen, the magnificence of the Delta is unparalleled. Now I will tell you of

my less than magnificent journey to Al-Hafir. That place, indeed the whole region including the Delta, is ruled by a Satrap named Hormuz, appointed by the Persian court. He is despised by our Arab brethren whom he subjugates, so it was easy to enlist their support. Sajah spoke to him, under the guise of a friend and fellow countryman offering advice on how unwise it would be to oppose our impending advance. I and two others were with her, dressed in the garb we recovered from the bodies of her army."

Khalid played with a short length of knotted hemp cord, metering it out one knot at a time from his left hand, into his right, and back again. "Did you give him my ultimatum?" he asked Sajah.

"Yes," she replied.

"And...?"

"He read it and laughed."

Khalid's expression grew stern. He threw the cord aside and in the same motion grasped the hilt of a dagger which lay on the ground beside him, raising it into the air. He drove the instrument into the dark earth with so much force that its blade completely disappeared from view.

"Hormuz knows not with whom he deals. Has he not heard of our victories to the south? Does he think that his insignificant frontier outpost can withstand our numbers. By the breath of Allah, Hormuz will pay dearly for his insolence. Are we prepared to march, Al-Muthanna?"

"Yes, and I have left spies and agitators amongst the populace in Al-Hafir so that they may arouse dissent prior to our arrival. I expect to have over a thousand additional men from the ranks of the townspeople."

"Good, then make preparations to break camp – we don't want to give Hormuz time to secure reinforcements. He will be expecting us to come from the south, so we will attack from the north after drawing off as much of his strength as possible in the opposite direction. Have your agitators create the pretense of an

army approaching from the direction of Al-Yemama. See to it. Go, now."

All arose and made off to tend to the work required to enact Khalid's plan.

Al-Ashtar, camel brush in hand, looked over his followers as they prepared for the upcoming assault – inspecting weapons, packing possessions, and grooming their mounts. Likewise, both he and Sajah groomed the dhaluls, racing camels, given to them for the campaign. A sultry overcast, carrying not a breath of wind, hung low in the afternoon sky. Al-Ashtar perspired from every pore, saturating his robe and succumbing to an overpowering feeling of lassitude to which he was unaccustomed. Dragonflies hovered around the camels, darting this way and that in apparent random motion to snatch gnats and other delicacies from the air. Al-Ashtar brushed his dhalul with long steady strokes, periodically immersing the brush in an urn filled with urine to rid it of captured fleas.

Sajah at last broke the awkward silence. "I still can't believe you told those Beni Temim I was the prophetess and that you had captured me for the Muslims. What on earth prompted you to say that when we could have remained anonymous and have been let alone. I'll never forgive you, Al-Ashtar." Sajah brushed her beast and as she did so it emitted a mighty belch. The odor of rotting vegetation drifted Sajah's way.

"Because as someone important we were more valuable alive than dead, which we'd surely be now if I had tried to pass us off as stray Bedouin," Al-Ashtar replied. "And if the Beni Temim didn't do the job, that swine who threatened us surely would have. Besides, one of them recognized me. In the end, you fared well. You're alive, you get to return to your home," he paused as he stuck a piece of goat-hair cloth in his camel's ear to clean out the mites, "and you have a camel."

"I don't like camels," Sajah said. "They're nasty, obstinate animals that are rendered useful solely by their stupidity. They bite, they kick, they smell... they're not even good eating."

As if listening to every word, Sajah's dhalul swiftly swung its sinewy neck around, its head missing her own by but a hair's breadth. She threw down her brush and backed away.

"Ah, but to us who live in the desert the camel is a godsend," Al-Ashtar said. "It's a source of food and medicine, and they're valuable beasts of burden." He stopped grooming and turned to face the prophetess, waving the brush in his hand.

"Why, a good camel can traverse the width of the Dahna at its narrowest point in one day, unencumbered by all the trappings of a caravan. Then you're lucky to make it in two days, but it will carry the weight of three men. And they're very inexpensive to keep. They'll eat what most other beasts will not – thistles, thorn bushes, and the like. When the vegetation is lush, it can go without drinking water for as long as two moons – two moons! – and during the dry season they can go without for up to seven days. A horse drinks much more than a camel and can't store its own water supply. Our lives in the desert are inextricably tied to this creature. Be thankful you have one."

"I don't care," Sajah replied. "I still don't like them, and I don't like you!"

Just as Al-Ashtar was about to respond, Farouk approached.

"Peace, both of you. No time for lovers quarrels, we leave at sunset. Be ready."

The Muslims arrived at Al-Hafir just after sunrise the following day and pitched camp north of the town near a spring which provided its water. According to plan, the bulk of Hormuz's forces had been drawn off far to the south, expecting the attack to come from that direction. After Khalid's army was settled, he ordered that the spring be diverted into a wadi which ran away from Al-Hafir. He then sent a small contingent of

horsemen to watch the southern approaches to the settlement so that any couriers entering or leaving the town could be intercepted. Following this he sent a message to Hormuz.

"What does it say?" Hormuz asked his chief administrator.

The administrator, struggling with his knowledge of Arabic, recited the note's content slowly.

"It says that... our army in the south has been decimated... and that the Muslims have captured and cut off our water supply. The message concludes with a challenge ...for you to fight one-on-one combat with their leader, Khalid ibn al-Welid, at the springs, to decide the fate of Al-Hafir," he raised his eyes from the note, "...rather than subjecting the general populace to a bloody siege of the town."

Hormuz's face flushed. "Who is this Khalid, and who in the name of Ormazd does he think he is, invading us this way, unprovoked?"

He looked at his administrator and noting the blank look on his face, did not give him an opportunity to respond before asking more questions.

"Why haven't I heard from the troops I sent out?"

"I don't know – maybe they have indeed been defeated," the administrator said in a feeble voice.

Hormuz slammed his fist down on the arm of his throne. "Find out what's happening. Send a messenger to recall those troops, and muster all the men left in Al-Hafir. They will accompany me to do battle with this Khalid."

The administrator bowed and scurried off to carry out his master's bidding.

By nightfall, what had been a small but swift flowing river through Al-Hafir had dwindled to a trickle. The next morning, Hormuz left his fortress with two thousand men and an expectation of reinforcements to follow. It took half a day to reach the spring. Upon his arrival, Hormuz advanced on horseback with fifty men to meet Khalid, who rode forward with a like sized party. The sound of rushing water, being abruptly

redirected, made such a noise that Hormuz could barely understand the words of his men. They took to shouting amongst each other, repeating themselves multiple times. Khalid was highly amused.

The opulence of Hormuz and his Persian retinue, with their well tailored war tunics of fine cloth, adorned with riches, was in stark contrast to the simple robes of the Muslims. Instead of a turban, Hormuz wore a jewel encrusted helmet in the form of a metal band encircling his head to which were attached four curved metal strips that met at a point above the band, with thick leather pads joining the strips. On the back of it hung a mesh of iron rings to protect his neck. His weapons – sword, knife, and bow – stylized and bearing ornate designs, exhibited the highest quality workmanship.

The Persians' standard bearer unfurled a leopard-skin banner and drove the supporting pole into the ground, reasserting claim to the springs. Hormuz dismounted and drew his sword. Khalid did likewise. The two warriors walked toward each other.

"By what right do you vermin of the desert lay claim to my water?" Hormuz demanded.

"By the right bestowed upon me by Allah, through his messenger Muhammad, who instructs me to spread the faith, a faith which you must accept, and pay tribute to, or die."

"It is you who will die for your impudence in seizing these springs," Hormuz replied. He raised his sword and struck at Khalid.

Khalid deflected the first blow which came crashing down with such force that it made his knees buckle. He recovered just in time to fend off a second blow, then a third, and a fourth. By this time, Khalid's footing was strong and sure, and he was able to study his opponent's style and weaknesses while engaging in purely defensive tactics. The boisterous crowds yelled words of encouragement for their leaders and jeered the opponent. Suddenly, Khalid went on the offensive.

The palms of Hormuz's hands started to sweat. He reevaluated the worthiness of his adversary based on the seemingly effortless manner in which Khalid was able to defend himself – he was not the unskilled, ill prepared Arab which Hormuz had assumed. Khalid stepped in close to deliver his blows, and as Hormuz blocked them Khalid pushed him back, further and further, until at last he was able to maneuver the Persian close to a fallen tree. Hormuz tripped backwards over it and lay on the ground still grasping his sword. Before Hormuz had time to yield, Khalid slashed the sword from his hand and plunged his own into the Satrap's chest. A guttural roar stopped short of completion as Hormuz's head lurched forward and coughed a storm of blood. His head fell back to the earth and Hormuz remained motionless.

Upon seeing this, the Muslims went wild and descended on the enemy like a swarm of locusts on a garden, putting them to flight. As instructed by Al-Muthanna's spies, those Chaldeans sympathetic to the Muslim cause had congregated to one side of their formation and removed their headgear to identify themselves at the onset of the assault. All others were pursued by the Muslims and, with great slaughter, were soundly defeated. The sympathizers accompanied the victors back to the fortress of Al-Hafir where they were left with a contingent of Al-Muthanna's men to oust the remnants of their Persian overlords. Meanwhile, the Muslims continued southward beyond the settlement to engage the remainder of Hormuz's army. The attack from the rear took the Persian force completely by surprise and they too surrendered after a heavy loss of life. Al-Hafir had fallen.

Chapter 12
AH 13/ AD 634

It was dusk. I sat alone in my tent at our camp near Ayla at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba which separates the Sinai from the northwestern-most part of Arabia. A single oil lamp, suspended in a chain cradle from one of the tent poles, cast a dull light around me. The lamp gave off the acrid odor of the black surface pools from which the oil was collected and produced a smoke that soiled all upon contact. The odor made my head ache, a sensation that worsened with the flickering light of the lamp which made it difficult for me to see what I was writing. The parchment that lay before me would carry my next dispatch to Omar and the Khalifah. I paused for a moment to review the last two reports I had received from Omar when I sensed that someone had entered my quarters unannounced. My worst fear was that I would feel the bone-piercing pain of a knife in my back before I had a chance to get up and defend myself.

I rolled onto the earthen floor, unsheathing my dagger as I did so, and pivoted around on one knee to face my would-be assailant.

"Amr! ...when did you get back?"

Amr ibn al-As looked at me as if I were half crazed.

"Not but a short while ago, Mu'awiya. You were probably consumed with whatever it is you're doing."

He paused to look around my tent from where he stood and then started pacing slowly. The scattered sheets of parchment caught his eye.

"You seem nervous tonight. Is everything all right?" he asked.

I got up from the ground. "I must have started to fall asleep and was startled by your presence." I was indeed somewhat nervous, I had been ever since my direct involvement in the fighting.

"You're not worried about our next encounter with the Greeks are you, because—"

I interrupted him. "I'm fine... just a little tired."

He gave me a probing look and a nod. "As you will."

Amr, a former opponent of Islam who had converted at the same time as Khalid, had gained high position as one of the Prophet's chief Companions. Fifteen years my elder, he was short and heavy set with a large head, dark eyes, and a good-humored expression. His abilities as a military strategist were unequaled. Amr had served as an emissary to both Abyssinia and Oman before being placed in charge of subduing the northwest quadrant of Arabia. That accomplished, his primary mission now was to guard against incursions by the Christians of the Byzantine empire.

Amr stopped pacing and craned his neck. An owl hooted in the distance, signaling that night had come.

"What is it you're writing?" he said, as he attempted to view my work from a distance.

"I was preparing the letter you asked me to send to the Khalifah detailing our progress. I had stopped to read the reports Omar sent us on Khalid's advances in Al-Iraq." I bent down under the pulsating yellow light of the lamp to pick up the longer of the two communications. "Listen to this list, he has worked his way right up the Euphrates: Al-Hafir, Walaja, Ulleis, Amghisiya, Al-Hira, Anbar, Ain at-Tamr, and Firad – on the Syrian border." I looked up at Amr. "All this in little more than a year."

Amr rubbed the stubble on his cheeks. He never let his beard grow fully, it made his face look too fat. He shrugged. "And *we* will work our way up through Palestine and bring the Green City, Damascus, into our realm."

"The Khalifah has sanctioned this?" I asked.

"Not yet, but he will when he reads your report and finds that we have already invaded Byzantine territory and have slain one of their governors."

I nodded my head in agreement and rubbed my arm where a wound I had received in that very battle lay healing. Being second in command doesn't bring the notoriety that being commander does, but at this point I was in no position to expect anything more. So far, though, we had engaged in only minor battles. To be a principal in the taking of Damascus would be a crowning achievement.

"You have a plan?"

"Roughly," Amr replied. His head twitched slightly but quickly to the right, a tick he had developed many years ago. "I've made arrangements to bring Shurahbil and your brother, Yezid, here from Al-Iraq. They'll lead an attack on the Hauran from the east while you and I move northward through Palestine. We will join forces, somewhere in between, before moving on to Syria. I shall recommend that the Khalifah send Khalid to meet us near Damascus for a combined assault. The Green City is heavily fortified; we'll need a much larger force than we have now to take it."

My heart sank upon hearing that both my brother and Khalid would be involved in the siege, but I put the news aside. "I have been to Damascus, with my father's trading caravan, six years ago," I added. "It was during the same trip that my father was summoned to Jerusalem to meet with the Byzantine emperor, Hercules.

Amr corrected me. "His name is Heraclius."

"*Heraclius* questioned my father as to whether Muhammad was truly a prophet. You've probably heard tell of this meeting."

"Everyone, Mu'awiya, has heard stories of that meeting. It's one reason why your family hasn't been wholeheartedly accepted into the fold by all."

My eyes scanned the ground as I grunted an acknowledgement, then changed back to the original subject. "Ah, but Damascus, a magnificent city indeed, breathtakingly beautiful and rich beyond imagining. Surely we must conquer her."

"Allah willing," Amr replied.

Just then, a small voice emanated from the entrance to the tent.

"A thousand pardons, master. I have brought you something to eat."

It was Meisun, my girl servant. Slender, with long thick disheveled hair the color of pitch, she wore a simple but clean brown robe and bore a pot of warm food and a loaf of bread. I beckoned her to enter, which she did, placing the pot on the ground and the loaf of bread on top of the pot.

Amr looked her up and down. "A spoil of war?" he asked.

"A twenty year old Bedouin woman taken captive during the suppression of the Beni Kelb. I claimed her as a slave a short time ago but she has also become my... companion. Is she not beautiful?"

"Indeed she is, and though it would please me greatly to stay and gaze upon her, I must go. I'll leave you to eat in peace. We will talk more tomorrow."

Amr departed. I motioned for Meisun to sit beside me and took a large bite of the dense loaf as the aroma of roast lamb escaped from the covered crock and invaded my nostrils. I removed the lid so my eyes could confirm what my nose already knew. The meat looked and smelled delicious, already sliced, with an abundance of garlic – the perfect way to poison someone

with an appetite. Arsenic smells so much like the herb that I could easily eat enough to kill me twice before suspecting any danger.

I poked my knife into a seared chunk of the lamb and offered it to Meisun. "You look hungry. Eat with me."

She took it and ate, after which I did the same.

"I forgot the tea, the khat tea!" she said, and as quickly as she had sat down, she jumped back up and ran to fetch the stimulating drink. She returned momentarily with a bowl of dates in sour sheep butter, to eat with the bread, and a pitcher of hot liquid.

"Just strained from a fresh brew pot," she said, setting the items down. Meisun had learned that I enjoyed the intoxicating beverage and that it allowed me to remain sexually aroused for extended periods. She waited until I had finished eating before offering me the tea. I drank it slowly and then reclined on the pile of camel skins which served as my bed.

Meisun nestled in beside me. I could feel her warm breath on my neck, her compact body mapping the contour of mine down to the point where hers stopped and mine continued. She had exposed her upper half and, when I put my arm around her, the flawless texture of Meisun's silky skin greeted my fingertips. I caressed her softness, it felt soothing to the touch. We lay there quietly for some time, staring into the distance, before Meisun broke the silence.

"What is it that steals your attention so, master?"

I turned to look upon her child-like face – large soulful eyes and a delicate smile that sprouted dimples in her cheeks.

"I was thinking about the work that lies ahead of us; the many battles, victories and defeats, the inevitable deaths. Not something I should be thinking about during our time together. My report to Medina has all this racing through my head and it won't stop. But I shouldn't burden you with these details."

"I do not mind," Meisun responded, "I enjoy hearing you talk, even about these things. Please, continue."

Not yet fully trusting Meisun, I decided not to elaborate on my thoughts about the upcoming campaign. There were not many people I trusted. Omar was one, and perhaps Amr – him I had to, there was no choice if I expected to advance.

"No, this is our time to relax," I said, and rolled on top of Meisun to commence a night of carnal delight.

Night all too soon gave way to morning, which brought a message from Amr that I should come to continue our discussion of the evening before. Not long after the meeting began, we were interrupted by shouts which grew progressively louder.

"Allah protect us! Allah save us!" The messenger ran through the camp yelling the attention-getting phrases over and over as he neared Amr's tent. We emerged to see what was the matter. The messenger stopped just short of us. He was not much more than a boy, maybe of fourteen years, surely not over sixteen.

"What is it that Allah should save us from?" I inquired.

"Those sodomite Byzantines, there's thousands upon thousands of them."

Amr laughed. "What a picture you paint, my friend."

The messenger looked puzzled.

"And they are coming here to sodomize us too?" Amr's laughter was cut short by a particularly violent head twitch.

"No... I don't know, maybe. What I mean is that there is a huge armed force coming our way. There must be a hundred thousand of them."

"Where? How far away?" I asked.

"They were staging in Caesarea and are now on the march southward along the Mediterranean coast toward Gaza."

Amr's head twitched again. "Did you see all this yourself?"

"No, but the Bedouin who frequent that area and whose word is reliable have seen it. They had traveled four days before we encountered them yesterday."

Amr turned to me. "Even with those numbers the Christians could reach us within a week. Take a small party to Gaza, no more than ten soldiers, with provisions for ten days. We'll need an accurate assessment of the Byzantines' strength and movements. In the meantime, send word to Medina for reinforcements, include it in your dispatch to Omar."

I acknowledged Amr's request and went off to assemble the reconnaissance party, conscripting nine additional horsemen, including the messenger, to travel deep into foreign territory and learn what we could about the Christian horde. It took us four days to reach our destination. We traveled through the arid rocky country of southern Palestine, into canyons and up mountainsides, following the valley which ran north from Aqaba as best we could in order to keep close to the wadis. As we progressed, the mountains turned into billowing hills of striated light and dark browns with occasional patches of dark green scrub dotting their windward sides. When we reached Muta, Shurahbil's birthplace – near the southern tip of the Dead Sea – we bore west, skirting the snow-white salt flats of the saline lake and then crossing the plateau of the Negev desert in a northwesterly direction. The flats were the most barren place I had ever seen – no features, no color, no life. The Negev was bleak too, with only a few jagged yellow monuments of hardened sand, laying like sleeping giants, to interrupt the flatness. It's a land of despair. Near the northern edge of the Negev, we came upon a hermit living in a tent of white oryx skins, the animals' straight horns serving as tent pegs. A camel's length in front of the tent, in a perverse turn of nature, a vulture roasted on a spit above a cooking fire. As we passed by, the hermit emerged from the rounded hut, his torso cloaked in animal fur, his hair and beard wild and overabundant. Upon seeing us, he darted back into the confines of his abode and peered out cautiously, awaiting our passage. Once through the desert, we avoided the settlements between the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean coast, until we finally came upon the Byzantine army bivouacked near Ramleh.

Our group spied on the enemy from the safety of an outcrop of rocks high on a hill above the plain where the Christian army reposed. Their camp was ringed by a rectangular trench as wide as two men tall and was further enclosed with a pike wall, on the inside of the trench. Four openings breached the perimeter, one at each end of two broad paths which ran through the camp to form a cross – no doubt a plea to their God for safety. The camp was packed with olive-brown tents, long and low like those of the Bedouin but with straight rooflines, entrances on the ends, and walls which sloped continuously from the roofline to the ground. An enormous tent, with vertical walls, stood at the crossroads. Small groups of soldiers waited outside, one group entering as another left.

"Look at them all," said one of the scouts. "How many tents do you think are down there; five thousand, ten thousand?"

"There looks to be about twice as many on the east side of the camp as on the west," said a second.

"I'd say... eight thousand," replied yet another of the Iyun, the eyes.

I twirled a strand of my beard between my fingertips.

"That would mean a total strength of about eighty thousand."

Just then, the messenger called out. "What are *those* things?"

I strained to see what he was referring to.

"Down there," the messenger pointed, "look, those beasts."

Everyone huddled around him to gain the same perspective. I finally saw what he was pointing at. Gigantic gray balls with legs the size of tree trunks and two tails, one at each end of the body – a large tail in front and a smaller one in the rear – ambled about, not straying far from each other.

"Those must be elephants," I said. "I've heard of them before but this is the first time I've actually seen one."

"Elephants? Elephants, yes of course," the group muttered, disjointedly.

"What are they used for?" the messenger inquired.

"For clearing land," I replied, "and sometimes they are used in battle."

Another of the group spoke. "I'd love the chance to bring down one of those animals. It would feed my family for a year."

I laughed out loud. "If it didn't bring you down first. The only way to kill one of those behemoths is an arrow or a spear through the eye. Can you imagine how hard it is to put an arrow through something's eye, even something as large as an elephant? And more than likely it would charge you. The Persians used elephants against our forces last year and the beasts trampled hundreds of brave men before our people were able to stop them. No, my friend, you don't want to confront one of those."

I returned my attention to the camp.

Amr told me that if the Christians had erected watch towers it meant they would stay in place for more than two nights. I saw four such towers, partially completed, one at each corner of the camp. This army would not be on the move any time soon. Large columns of men, organized in rows of many across, marched within the fortification, although we were too far away to count the number of men in each row. As the columns turned I could see the glint of sunlight off the upper bodies of some – they were wearing metal helmets and breastplates. Against that type of gear, close combat with swords would be more effective than arrows at a distance.

We continued observing for another day until we had gathered all the information we could, and then started the trip back to our encampment at Ayla. We arrived tired and hungry one day after our provisions ran out. The messenger had become sick and was tied to his horse which was in turn tethered to mine. His impassive face, resting on his horse's neck and partially hidden by a curtain of his own hair, had turned pale. I too felt weakened. The eyes of all the others in the party were glazed, reflecting the fast pace of this expedition.

Amr listened intently as I described what we saw. He was particularly intrigued by the sighting of the elephants, although he had actually witnessed them in action before.

"So tell me," he said, "did it appear that the Byzantine infidels were preparing to move out in any particular direction?"

"We saw nothing which would indicate the direction they're about to take," I replied. "But three days ago, on our return across the Negev, we encountered Bedouin who had talked to some residents of the town of Ramleh. The townspeople overheard a conversation between two of the enemy who indicated their destination to be Medina."

Amr looked concerned, and with good reason. "I have the Khalifah's assurance that Khalid has been dispatched from Al-Iraq with a sizable force to rendezvous with us, but we will need to establish a second line of defense behind us to protect our borders and to draw on if we so require. We must strategize. Let us talk this evening, Mu'awiya."

He thanked his Iyun, with special praise going to the young messenger for his prompt action on learning of this new and dangerous threat, and then departed. The messenger, feverish with beads of sweat reappearing on his forehead as fast as they were wiped from it, seemed oblivious to all. He died later that day.

It was already well past sunset – the campfires roared. An aroma of charred meat, carried by a cool northerly wind, filled the air and awoke my hunger. The liquid in my stomach boiled. I wound my way through the compound passing first one then another group of men seated on the ground, encircling the fires, telling stories of heroic deeds and fantasizing about future wealth. The orange hue which illuminated each group dimmed quickly not far beyond the circles of storytellers. A cascade of sparks shot into the air as a new log was tossed into one of the flaming pits, some sparks dying on the path to the apex of their journey while others faded slowly as they fell back toward the ground.

Around one fire, a reciter told the story of the sword of Kosai, the progenitor of the Quraysh, and direct ancestor of both Muhammad and me, seven generations past. Kosai, it is said, saw a star fall from the heavens one night and heard a tremendous explosion nearby his village as it hit the earth. The next day, after many hours of searching, he discovered the star's cinder in a hole the size of a house less than half a day's ride east of Taif, but it was so hot he was unable to touch it. In his infinite wisdom, he positioned his camel over the blackened saddle-sized rock and stimulated the animal so that its urine flowed over the gift from above. The rock hissed and sputtered before bursting into several smaller pieces, each gleaming like the stars of the firmament. One of these pieces he took and had a sword fashioned from the metal extracted from it. The sword was as light as a falcon's feather and possessed an unnatural silvery-blue sheen. It is said that he who wields that sword cannot be defeated in battle, and it has been so for over two hundred years. The weapon was passed down from father to son until it reached Muhammad. After the Prophet's death, it went to his son-in-law, Ali, since Muhammad had no male heirs.

As I approached my destination, the sounds of the camp changed from a jumble of voices to music. Off to my right, the sound of methodically clapping hands kept time for a solo singer who warbled his nasal tone to the accompaniment of a rabab, an irritating, single-stringed bowed instrument which always reminded me of a whining cat. After a short distance, the singing grew fainter and I was greeted by the sounds of a cymbal drum and ud. The soft yet incredibly rich timbre which the short, pear-shaped instrument produced, as its strings were gently plucked, differed markedly from the rabab and provided the perfect complement to the percussive sound of the drum and its jingling metal discs. I found the combination irresistible. I could play the ud, a little. I stopped to listen for a while before continuing on my way. When I finally reached Amr, I found him sitting in the

darkness, far behind his tent, staring at the multitude of stars in the night sky.

"Order more reinforcements," he said, after listening to my full account of the situation. "Insist on twenty thousand, but I doubt that we'll get more than ten. Including Khalid's forces that would give us close to fifty thousand, forty of which would be forward deployed for offense. Even then, the Byzantines will have a two-to-one advantage."

"Yes, but it appears that some of their conscripts are prisoners. Our men saw many in the Greek camp who were chained one to the next at the ankle. I've also been told that they've enlisted troops from the local population who, by and large, lack commitment to their Byzantine rulers – so there may not be as large an advantage as first appears. The one advantage they do have is the elephants."

"How many?"

"We counted twelve."

Amr looked off into the distance. "I saw them used when I was in Abyssinia but I've never had to fight against them. They leave terror in their wake – men crushed, their innards vomited from their mouths – a horrific sight. We must carefully prepare our soldiers for this battle for otherwise they may break ranks and run when the elephants are used."

"We have little time," I said.

"Start tomorrow."

Amr leaned back to rest against a large flat rock and, with hands clasped behind his head, resumed his inspection of the heavens. The hunter was out, club arm raised, shoulder red and wounded, ready to smite the prey held by his left hand. The three bright stars of his belt shimmered a bluish-white, while those of his scabbard were enveloped in a natural haze. We stared upwards in silence.

"You know, Mu'awiya, those points of light have been up there forever, and will continue so as they are now, but things down here change constantly. Empires flourish then fall, battles

are fought, friends die." He turned to face me. "This engagement with the Christians won't be like fighting the Beni Kelb or the Beni Kodaa. Anticipate great carnage regardless of the composition of their army. These people call themselves civilized but they are more barbarous than the worst you've ever seen."

"I'm prepared," I replied, squatting to pick up a handful of sand. I stood watching as it escaped in a small stream from the bottom of my fist. "I have gained much experience over the past two years and have seen blood shed on more occasions than there are grains of the desert falling from my hand. I have planned battle strategy, and have fought alongside the best."

"But you haven't fought against a foreign army before." Amr shook his finger at me. "That encounter in Gaza was not representative. The Christian mind does not think in the same way as the Arab mind. You must learn the differences."

I ran my fingers down a single long beard hair which would soon meet its fate. "What differences?" I plucked the hair and began to chew on the end as I held it.

"The Byzantines are logical and organized. They operate like a machine, like a catapult, for example. Everything works well when all the steps take place as they should. But they are trained to follow rules, not to think for themselves. We, on the other hand, are good at improvising but lack control – we are, to a great extent, undisciplined, but have unity of Cause. There are many different types of Christians, all at odds with each other. How old are you now?"

"Twenty-eight."

Amr shook his head. "Twenty-eight. You still have much to learn, and you had better learn fast and well – I won't tolerate mistakes. I promised Omar that I would make you a leader among men and I intend to do so, if Allah so favors it." He paused and averted his eyes from mine. "I have come under great criticism from other of the Companions for accepting this charge."

It took me a moment to break my silence. "I know you have, and I am honored for the privilege of serving under you," I replied. "My sincerest gratitude for this opportunity."

Amr waved his hand, still looking away. "Let us join in the festivities before the night gets too late."

We got up and walked back into the tumult of the music and other sounds of the camp, talking as we went.

Khalid watched impatiently in the searing heat of the mid-morning sun at the oasis of Korakir as man and beast prepared to depart. Weeks of travel lay ahead before he would join with Amr's forces in Palestine. Khalid's men baled together piles of kindling and packed stacks of dried, flattened dung into sacks with reckless disregard for the integrity of the fuel. Others placed identifying marks on the haunches of their animals using blood from the most recent slaughter. Tents, previously erected just the night before, were dismantled, rolled up, and secured to the sides of camels.

Korakir was the last outpost on the way from Al-Iraq to Syria, the first milestone on a journey which would include a long march through waterless desert. Since much of the route traversed territory belonging to the Beni Kelb, Khalid had ordered that a guide be found from amongst the Kelb who could quickly and safely navigate the Muslim caravan across the parched wasteland.

The fronds of the surrounding date palms swayed in the gentle breeze as horses, donkeys, camels, and men crowded the oasis, hoarding water for the trip. Bedlam prevailed as people and animals vied for the life sustaining liquid – men in authority yelled orders, horses neighed, and camels roared as their tenders separated them to prevent fighting. The clamor and dust created amid the omnipresent odors of excrement and musk, which followed the army wherever it traveled, made control of the

operation next to impossible. Through the haze, near the periphery of the oasis, Khalid instructed the Beni Kelb guide. Several of Khalid's amirs, including Farouk and Al-Ashtar, stood by their commander. Al-Muthanna stayed behind at the city of Al-Hira, in charge of the remainder of the Caliph's forces in Al-Iraq, to guard against attacks by the Persians. Sajah also remained in Iraq to assist Al-Muthanna in administering the conquered territory.

"I beseech you, master," the guide pleaded, "do not travel this route with so many horses. They require too much water and, in that terrain, will make our progress perilously slow. They will be the downfall of us all. Take the easier path which parallels the great river."

Khalid stood with his arms folded and shook his head. "That's not possible," he replied. "It would be an easy matter for the Greeks to cut us off and prevent us from aiding our brothers. Besides, I have already considered what you are saying and have made provision for carrying extra water." Khalid pointed to a large open area between four palm thickets which had been roped off. "Do you see those camels set apart from the rest?"

The guide's eyes followed Khalid's finger. "Yes."

"They have been deprived of water and greens for over a week. Just before we're ready to depart we will let them drink until their humps cannot hold another drop. Then," he squinted, shielding his eyes from the sun, as he turned to Al-Ashtar, "see to it that each and every camel's mouth is bound shut and their ears plugged to prevent them from regurgitating the water and drinking it themselves." He turned back to the guide. "When the horses need water, we will slay a sufficient number of these camels to provide it. The carcasses will provide meat for my men. These camels will bear only light loads of firewood – they won't be worked too hard. The others will carry regular loads including water skins for the troops. Have I forgotten anything?"

"You have planned well, master," the young man said sheepishly.

"Then let's finish our business here and be on our way."

The amirs set about doing their part to bring order to the chaos and to make final preparations for the arduous journey. By twilight, all was ready. The caravan left the oasis in a mass migration five hundred camels abreast and one hundred long, enveloped in an eruption of dust kicked up from the desert floor. The horses, except for those used to direct the caravan's flow, were tethered, riderless, to the side of each man's lead camel by a frail connection to the horse's black woolen headgear. A thin, roughened leather saddlecloth, held by a narrow girth, was the only other encumbrance. More camels followed in the rear, their long necks undulating as they ambled onward, each beast secured to the one before it. Unlike the mares, most of the camels were heavily laden with trappings. Light silver chains, surrounding woven halters decorated with blue and red beads, graced their necks and flanks while blankets with thigh length tassels cushioned the weight of the bulky saddles used to negotiate the hump. The rattle and jingling of the animals' loads, combined with their braying and squealing, could be heard far ahead of the bow wave of airborne debris that heralded their coming.

Khalid and Farouk yelled to hear each other as they rode at the head of the procession, the full moon looming large on the horizon behind them. Al-Ashtar and the guide followed close in their tracks.

"I've counted on a five day journey through this desert before we reach water and another day beyond that to reach Tadmor, in Syria," Khalid said. "From there I would anticipate ten days southward to our rendezvous with Amr."

Farouk picked something out of his long, unruly beard. He examined it briefly and then summarily discarded it. The wrinkles in Farouk's dark, weathered skin made him look much older than the thirty four years he claimed to be, although this was not so evident in the rapidly failing light of day. "Is Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan still Amr's second?"

"I've heard nothing to the contrary. Too bad. There were far better choices for that position than him."

"True, he's still much too inexperienced. I don't know why Amr selected him above all the others."

Khalid gave Farouk a cynical look. "Well I know. It was the doing of the Left Handed One."

Farouk thought for a moment. "Omar?"

"Precisely. Omar, at the urging of Mu'awiya's father, no doubt. Amr has long been a friend of mine but I have no love for Abu Sufyan, and therefore none for his son. And as for Omar, he continually frustrates me."

"Why would he do so, after all the victories you have brought us?"

"I'll tell you why – because he's jealous." Khalid's eyes flashed with anger as they riveted on Farouk's. "He wants to lead our people to glory himself, but he can't. Abu Bakr keeps him so busy with administrative matters that Omar is rarely able to even leave Medina, let alone put his life at risk leading men into battle. And that vexes him to no end, so he takes it out on me. We were always in competition, neither of us could stand to lose. Now I am winning and he is not, therefore he tries to diminish my reputation."

"Surely Omar must see that the greatness of our Cause, and hence that of himself and the Khalifah, is enhanced by you," Farouk said.

"Apparently not, or at least he would rather have it be someone else who takes us to glory. Let's change the subject. All this talk of Omar makes me weary."

Farouk went on to another topic, and then another, until the moon passed high overhead and eventually set ahead of them in the west as dawn broke. Four waning moons came and went until, on the fifth day, all the water was gone and Al-Alamein, a small oasis where Khalid expected to find a wadi, had not yet been reached. The sun blazed white in a sky which promised no rain, its light reflecting undiminished off the endless sea of

glittering brown-gray flint chips that covered the stony desert between Al-Iraq and Syria. The animals walked tentatively over the shifting surface, slowing progress even further, the flints crunching and clattering with every step. Horses and men alike dripped with sweat until, dry as the desert beneath them, they dropped. Even young camels started to fall, and as soon as one did, several slaves of the Bedouin would descend upon it, cut around the neck, legs, and along its underside, remove and scrape the hide, drain any usable liquids from the carcass, and cut up the meat, all in the time it took for ten living animals to pass. Only the head, bones and useless organs remained. Nothing of value was wasted.

On the sixth day the caravan arrived at Al-Alamein, the point of the two way-marks. Al-Ashtar escorted the Beni Kelb guide to the front of the procession. The kaffiyah covering the guide's face was wrapped so that an almost imperceptible slit existed between the layers, in front of his eyes, to filter out the blinding light. His vision had all but vanished, in part due to lack of water and in part due to the extreme daytime brightness. He stretched out his arm to feel about him as they stopped. His hand touched an immovable cloaked figure.

"Are we at Al-Alamein?" he asked.

"We are at Al-Alamein," the serious voice of Khalid answered.

"Seek out the box thorn tree," the guide ordered. "It is the size of a man kneeling. There should be several grouped together, that is where we will find water."

"There is nothing of the sort in sight, Al-Ashtar replied.

"Are you sure you brought us to the right spot?"

"Can you see the marker stones, the two large pointed rocks?"

Khalid viewed the two toppled monoliths, porous black columns of volcanic origin that may have consumed ancient trees and now served as guideposts. "The markers are there, but there

are no thorn bushes nor any other vegetation for that matter," he said, the words quaking slightly as they left his lips.

"Then you are doomed!" the guide answered, waving his frail arms frantically. "I warned you. I begged you to take another route. Even lone travelers fear this path but a caravan travels far too slow across this country – now you have doomed yourself and all the rest of us as well."

"Silence!" Khalid yelled, his face flushed and contorted. "We will continue as far as we can and pray that we find water. At the rate we are traveling, it will take two days to get from here to Tadmor. Water awaits us there, but so does an uncertain reception – that is a chance we must take. Let us continue." Khalid began to walk back to his camel.

"No!" exclaimed the guide, following the voice, his arm sweeping back and forth in front of him.

All froze.

Khalid stared a penetrating gaze, unseen by the guide. "Explain your impertinence, you who have led us astray."

"There is water here, I know it, I have been here before." The guide, his face still wrapped in his headcloth, grasped the sleeve of Khalid's robe. "If we continue now we must do so by day otherwise we might miss the subtle signs which will lead us to water, but travel by day will work against us – many will die. In the summer, all withers and it appears barren here but the springs which lie under the earth remain and sustain the roots so that the plants may live again. We must stay a while and seek out these springs."

Khalid pondered the two alternatives. The wind picked up and fluttered the tail of his turban. He looked up at the cloudless sky and surveyed the weary expressions in the caravan. It was not yet midday.

"We will stay until dusk, but if we do not find water here you will be the first to die."

He motioned to his amirs for them to start searching and they in turn assembled parties to scour the vicinity. The guide

was taken to the way marks where he explored the ground on his hands and knees, still unable to make adequate use of his failing eyesight, trying to detect temperature differences in the mixture of sand and flints which might indicate the cooling action of sub-surface water.

The day advanced quickly until the time came when the sun was nearing the western horizon. A sole seeker in an area well beyond the way marks began to wave and shout – Khalid couldn't make out the words but in a matter of minutes a large crowd had gathered around the man. Khalid pushed his way through the thicket of people to see a young Bedouin kneeling, sweeping aside the red and yellow-brown sand from around a grayish stump. No wider than a man's thumb, the remnants of the box thorn bush looked as though it had been cut down years ago. The dead roots, firmly embedded in the ground, stopped the young man's progress. He started digging a hole beside the stump with his hands. Others helped. Even the Sword of Allah was on his knees burrowing. An orgy of digits exhumed sand and flints from the hole which widened perceptibly as the daylight dimmed. When it was a forearm deep, dampness could be felt. More joined in to assist in expanding the cavity. Earth and stones flew in all directions as anticipation heightened. After the elongated hole was a full arm's length deep, Khalid got up and stood back.

"This is the place! We have found water. Water!" He turned around to face his army, then looked to the sky. With his eyes closed, he gazed upwards, raised his arms, and shook his clenched fists.

The guide, fumbling through the crowd, made his way to hole. "I knew we would find water here, I knew it. I have been to this place only once before but I knew I could find it."

Khalid's head snapped back to the horizontal, his eyes widened, like those of a panther ready to spring. "You were here only *once* before?"

"Yes," the guide replied gleefully.

"When?"

"When?" He hesitated for a moment. "Why, with my father when I was a boy."

Khalid kicked the sand. "You led ten thousand of my men through this desert having been here only once when you were a boy?"

The crowd became silent.

"It is *you* who almost doomed us all." A silence fell over the spectators. "Which is the route to Tadmor?"

The guide was visibly shaking as he answered. "The larger of the two markers points the way."

Upon hearing this, Khalid drew his dagger and plunged it into the masked man's heart, removed it, and plunged it in again. A crimson patch, the size of a hand, then quickly growing to become the size of a head, stained the guide's white robe. The bystanders gasped, then fell silent once more as the guide dropped to his knees and keeled over face first into the sand. The crowd looked on in utter bewilderment. This tragic event, occurring on the heels of such good fortune, could only portend ill.

Khalid wiped his dagger clean on the victim's robe and re-sheathed it. He looked at the expressionless faces which surrounded him. "Get about your business," he shouted. "Enlarge this trench and partake of what water you need for yourselves and your animals. We will depart the night after next." And with that, he stalked off.

Al-Ashtar, stunned, looked at Farouk. "Even I wouldn't have done such a deed."

Farouk, continuing to look straight ahead, replied. "Be silent."

The night of departure came and the caravan set out on its way, using the north star to navigate through the wilderness. The Muslims reached Tadmor within two days and their reception was uneventful. Camel, horse, and man once again drank their fill, this time from the multitude of cool, clear, sulfurous streams which flowed out of the hills surrounding the ancient town.

Following a day's stay to replenish supplies, Khalid and his army resumed the march, southward this time, to rendezvous with the larger force under the command of Amr. Within six days of their meeting, in the month of Rabi, 13 AH, the combined army of forty thousand moved within striking distance of the Greek camp at Ramleh and was ready to take the offensive.

Amr had gathered the principle leaders of his now swelled legion together within his tent, its leeward side fully open to better allow the afternoon heat to dissipate. Amr used only Bedouin tents outside of Arabia since it made our camps less conspicuous, less readily identifiable as the army of Allah. Most of the faces seated around Amr's fire were familiar to me – there was only one that wasn't.

Amr clapped his hands to silence the idle chatter which rang throughout the tent like the sounds of a marketplace. "Let us begin," he said, and he turned to me. "Your report, Mu'awiya."

I leaned forward. "Our scouts have confirmed that the Greeks are breaking camp. Chances are they've discovered us and are preparing to meet our army on the field of battle. We must act swiftly, before they march."

A round of overlapping invectives ensued as the other amirs concurred in turn.

"I agree," Amr said. He plunged his dagger into the ground.

My elder brother Yezid went next. "Misery and death to the Byzantines!" he said, and followed Amr's lead with his dagger. Yezid was the son of my father's favorite wife. He had been reared to be a warrior and was quite proficient in battle, despite his small size. I feared my brother, but only because I knew he feared my ambition, and *that* made him dangerous.

"We will string their entrails end to end in a line longer than the Yarmuk River," Farouk said, and he too drove his dagger into the earth.

A fourth amir, Al-Ashtar ibn Harith, the one who was not known to me, removed his dagger from its sheath. "We will make their leaders eat those entrails," he added, and the sand swallowed his blade likewise.

Khalid spoke last. "We are ready."

"Good, then we will launch our first foray late tonight," I said, "they won't be expecting that. We shall employ horsemen only, as many as we have, to reduce as great a portion of their army as possible with a single pass through the center of the camp on the way in, and a single pass on both sides on the way back. After the initial charge, Khalid's forces will return by the east side, ours by the west. We'll be vastly outnumbered so get in quickly, do what damage you can, and get back out. Understood?"

Most of the amirs, with the exception of my brother, nodded in agreement, but Khalid called to Amr.

"Are you relinquishing your command to this whelp?" Khalid pointed to me while gazing into the eyes of his old comrade-in-arms.

"I am in full agreement with what Mu'awiya says, my friend," Amr replied. "You and I have already discussed this. He plans the initial attack while I contemplate battlefield strategy for the coming days."

"I fear for our success. He has not the experience to lead such an assault."

Yezid took the opportunity to jump in. "Not to side with Khalid over my own kin, but I too have reservations about placing my men under an unproven commander, even if he is my brother. I should share command with him in this endeavor."

I quickly became irritated with the open attacks on my abilities. I replied without even acknowledging my brother's words.

"With all due respect to the great Sword of Allah, I've gained much experience in the time since you saw me last. I led my own men when we put down the rebellion of the Beni Kelb, and have already engaged this enemy in Gaza not two moons ago. If you choose not to join us tonight, so be it. We have sufficient strength to do this without you."

Khalid hissed. "We shall be there. You'll need all the help you can get to come out of this alive."

I'd probably stand a far better chance of that if you were elsewhere. "We will be honored by your presence," I said.

I turned to the amirs. "We depart tonight, after the moon has set."

Khalid rose and the others followed. "If that's all, let us go and prepare our forces so that we may strike as the scorpion in the bedding, swiftly and unexpectedly. May Allah be with us."

"Allahu Akbar," we all responded.

The group broke and went their separate ways. Amr and I stayed behind in his tent. The fire had stopped burning – only the embers remained alive, glowing orange, then fading to a dull red. Amr reached forward and tossed in a small amount of kindling to rescue the coals from extinction. The darkness inside the tent contrasted sharply with the blanched panorama visible through the open side of Amr's lodging. The brightness of the outside hurt my eyes. A group of black robed men from the Hijaz, heads clad in white turbans, walked by, peering in as they passed. Their robes blended into the background of a nearby black tent, making it appear that only their seven heads floated by. I prayed it wasn't a sign.

"Amr, those elephants we talked of before, I intend to free them tonight during our attack. We will stampede the beasts through the Greek camp, following up the rear of our assault. I will lead this party."

Amr gave me a disapproving look and shook his head. "Too dangerous."

"No more dangerous than this raid itself," I replied. "It's worth running those beasts off so that they can't be used against us at some later time. I plan to enlist twenty others to help."

"I don't like it. It'll slow you down too much."

"We'll be among the first in."

A look of resignation crossed Amr's face. He waved his finger at me. "As you will, you're the master of this one – but remember what I told you about mistakes."

We talked some more before agreeing to meet at sunset to finalize our plans with the other amirs. Thereupon, I left to be with Meisun and strengthen myself for the upcoming ordeal.

My time with Meisun went quickly. Before long, sunset, and the meeting of the amirs, came and went. The half moon, not yet a crescent, floated high in the sky, slowly making its way to the western horizon. When it set, around midnight, eight thousand warriors under my command mounted and rode off to wreak havoc on the slumbering enemy.

The Greek encampment was located on the plain outside the town of Ramleh, north of Be'er Sheva. I took an advance party of fifty hand picked men to the very spot from which we had spied on this camp just fourteen days earlier. In the camp, all was quiet except for an occasional barking dog. Five sentinel fires burned – one at each of the four manned gates and one in the center. With the moon having set, it was too dark to make out any detail in the compound other than in the vicinity of the fires. The moonless night, however, worked to our benefit. I sent one of my men back to the main contingent with the message to commence the attack. The other amirs, safely hidden behind a broad rise a short way to the south, waited with their men for my signal. Given the distance separating us, my advance party would have little time to breach the rear gate before the arrival of the

horde. I could hear and feel the pounding of my heart as my anticipation rose.

We approached the palisades on horseback as quietly and swiftly as we could. The beasts in the camp became restless – horses whinnied and the dogs' barking increased. The elephants remained silent. Although the animals could probably hear it, the thundering of hoofs in the distance was not yet audible to the human ear. Eventually, the guard in the gate tower spotted my advance party as we drew nearer and dispersed. He challenged us with words I could not understand and sounded a general alarm. One of my men, from his hiding place in the surrounding trench, let loose an arrow which pierced the sentry under the chin and disappeared halfway into his head. The guard fell from the platform. Others inside the gate cried out while my men, using ropes and hooks, hurriedly scaled the pike wall. Christian arrows felled several on their way over but our numbers exceeded theirs by more than two to one. The clanging of sword against sword sang its deadly song amid a backdrop of grunts, yells, and screams. I engaged a brutish figure who wore a heavy chain mail shirt over a tattered tunic. He struck with such force that the bones of my arm hurt with each blow I deflected. My mind reeled as my palms perspired causing my grip to loosen. I was constrained solely to this weakening defense until an attack from behind him sent a blade up his anus. He let out the most hideous cry of pain I'd ever heard and fell to his knees, allowing me a clear opening to his throat, of which I did not hesitate to avail myself. My face became wet with a mist as his blood sprayed the air.

One by one, the guards were slain until we controlled the sentry post and were able to throw open the gates. The deep rumbling caused by the footfalls of thousands of horses shook the ground. I watched as the shadowy figures of my army filled the horizon to the south. Like the bowstring which is drawn taut and then released to give flight to an arrow, I felt the first of the several great burdens of that night pass. Five from the advance party who had stayed outside the walls brought our horses. We

mounted and, after a brief pause to await the main force, rode into the camp with great fury. What little warning the guards had been able to give was insufficient for the Byzantines to present any significant resistance.

The first wave of our horsemen rode through the compound clearing a path for the second wave which brought fire to the Christians' tents, setting many ablaze. The would-be defenders were cut down as they scattered in all directions to save themselves. A Byzantine with a flaming arrow in his back ran in circles, clawing futilely for the shaft just beyond his reach. Others emerged from burning tents with hair or clothes on fire. They rolled on the ground, yelling and screaming, in vain attempts to extinguish themselves. A third wave brought yet more carnage to the scene. Arrows whistled through the air as attackers and defenders alike sought to bring down as many of their foes as possible. All this while, I worked with a small band of men to free the captive elephants. The large chains securing them were wrapped tightly around their hind leg, with the free ends of the chains anchored to the ground with long curved iron rods. With some difficulty, we released the chains from the rods, but once the smell of smoke reached the leviathans' nostrils, the beasts became unruly. Five of my men were injured in the midst of the elephants' jostling. A young man who had tripped during his attempted escape was crushed when one of the infuriated monsters used its head to press him against the hard earth. In all, we liberated nine out of the twelve elephants, driving them into the mayhem to trample tents, occupants, and anything else they happened upon. This task accomplished, we joined the assault on the periphery of the camp during our egress. As we distanced ourselves from the Christian stronghold, I looked back on the flames and general confusion. My first major operation was a success, with no mistakes. The last of that night's burdens was lifted from my shoulders.

The battles that ensued over the next several weeks took a heavy toll on both sides, but the speed and agility of our forces eventually overcame the superior numbers possessed by the Greeks. One unseasonably cool night in the month of Jumada, Amr assembled the commanders in his tent at our camp near Bosra, on the far bank of the Jordan River, half way to Damascus from Ramleh. Outside, the cooking fires roared, fanned by a brisk northerly breeze – the occasion, a victory feast. Inside, we sat around Amr's fire, savoring the numerous delicacies he had brought in from the surrounding area. Cattle, sheep, goats, goat cheese, gourds, oranges, sweet bread, dates, pomegranates, and... women; young, beautiful, perfumed Hebrew and Syrian women, for later in the evening. Greek boys too, if that was your inclination – not men yet – captured from the enemy after the last skirmish. Meisun shared quarters, well removed from mine, with the other Beni Kelb women that we took captive the previous year. I had the privacy I would need.

The women and boys served the food, but our own people did the cooking. Most of us had never tasted cow before. It was very good, but not as good as the lamb roasted with cloves of garlic embedded in it. The outside of the lamb was dark and crisp and the pungent odor of the herb permeated the whole carcass. I offered a piece to my brother, but he declined it. Farouk, who had arrived late, and Al-Ashtar attacked the lamb voraciously though. I waited until they had finished their portions before devouring mine. I had some of most everything before Amr began to talk, but took two oranges to eat after sex.

"We have defeated the enemy under the command of the brother of emperor Heraclius himself," Amr said, waving a strip of cow meat that he had been nibbling on. "This bodes well for us in further conquests of Byzantine territory. We will be feared as a force to be reckoned with."

"We should move on Damascus at once," Khalid said. Using a short stick, he drew something in the sand between

himself and Amr, so small that only the two of them could see it. "We must not give the Christians time to recover from their losses."

Amr looked at me. "Mu'awiya?"

After three recent victories, I offered my opinion confident that it wouldn't be questioned. "I agree, but we must first replenish our own ranks. I'll petition Abu Bakr for reinforcements to continue our conquests."

Farouk frowned and pressed his lips together. His hands met in a sudden clap. "I almost forgot. On my way to your tent, Amr, I heard that a messenger had just arrived from Medina. He is probably on his way here as we speak."

No sooner had Farouk spoken than a guard announced the messenger's arrival. A tall, gaunt young man entered Amr's tent, his robe ashen with dust. His weary face sagged.

"Your coming is well timed my son," Amr said, extending his hand. "Sit, join us and partake of this food, we have important news to send to Medina." He placed the last of the cow strip into his mouth and chewed contently.

"I too have important news, and it is sad tidings which I regretfully bear," he replied.

Amr's expression changed from jubilation to caution. Khalid shifted his position. He held the branch with which he had been drawing taut and motionless, one end in each hand. The messenger continued.

"Abu Bakr is gone to his paradise," he said. "Omar ibn al-Khattab is now Khalifah." All eyes widened in the prevailing silence, shattered only by the sharp crack of a breaking stick.

Chapter 13
AH 13/ AD 634

On the morning of his death, 22 Jumada in the year 13 AH, the body of Abu Bakr, eyes closed, lay in cold repose in the dimly lit meeting room of his home in Medina. His end had come quickly and unexpectedly. Omar let out a deep sigh as he stood over his predecessor and looked upon him, with the deceased Caliph's wife, sister, and daughter at his side. Abu Bakr's normally white skin and sharp features made him look, in death, not markedly different from the living man, although his color had grayed somewhat. During the Caliph's month-long illness, he had continued to dye his beard so that he would maintain his image to those with whom he met. Only a small amount of white appeared at the base of each reddish hair. Even his expression, his resolute mildness, lingered. Abu Bakr's relations wept openly while Omar held back his sorrow, his eyes welling with tears.

From the adjacent courtyard, the sounds of mourners weeping and admirers relating exemplary stories about the Caliph seeped into his resting place. A solemn-faced Omar ambled across the room and opened the window just enough to allow the Caliph's family to better hear the outpouring of public sympathy for the man they all loved. A ray of sunshine penetrated the cracked shutter and drew a thin bright line on the floor at Abu Bakr's foot. It illuminated the center of the room but left the corners hidden in darkness. The Caliph lay clad in his best robe on several sheepskins which had been placed upon the wooden

table he treasured so much, to give him comfort even in death. Covering the robe, a black over-cloak, sleeveless and open at the front. Abu Bakr's widow handed Omar a small sheet of white cloth. From it, he tore an arm's-length strip and bound Abu Bakr's jaw shut, tying the cloth lengthwise around the Caliph's head.

"Go, bring the other Companions," Omar commanded one of the two slaves who attended the family. "And you," he said to the other, "bring fresh water, three large bowls full." Omar returned to the window and bent down to lift the lid of a recent gift from the governor of Yemen – a chest made of dark wood, fastened together with wide iron straps. From it, he removed the white burial cloth in which he would wrap the Caliph for his interment. As prescribed, in order to purify it, the shroud had been dipped in the water of the sacred Zamzam well on one of Abu Bakr's many pilgrimages to the holy city of Mecca.

The slaves re-entered the room following Abu Bakr's closest friend Othman, and Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law.

Ali ibn Abi Talib, thirty-three years of age, still mourned a loss of his own – his wife, Muhammad's daughter Fatimah, who had borne him two sons during their nine year marriage. She was seventeen when she died, twenty moons before the passing of Abu Bakr. After her death, Ali had gained considerable weight and began to lose much of his hair, retaining only a dense fringe circling his crown and a few strands on the top which were concealed safely under a turban that he rarely removed.

Othman ibn Affan, a descendant of the house of Omia, was a long-time friend of Abu Bakr and Muhammad, as well as being the husband of the Prophet's other two daughters, both now deceased. Othman – tall, slim, and attractive with a well proportioned physique – moved swiftly but gracefully to Omar's side. His thinning white hair hid the true extent of a receding hairline which accentuated his uncharacteristically straight, thin nose. As a personality, he stood in sharp contrast to Ali, routinely alienating many of his friends and readily making new enemies.

At sixty, Othman was twenty-seven years older than Ali and, having known him from birth, knew how to manipulate him. This controlling influence had waned lately, however.

Ali approached the table upon which Abu Bakr lay, coming to a halt on the side opposite Omar and Othman.

"I need assistance," Omar said. "The Khalifah must be washed and wrapped." He turned to the women. They knew their place was elsewhere at this time, and departed, along with the slaves.

Omar spread a clean camel hide on the ground and laid upon it the white burial cloth and three other large white sheets. Othman and Ali began removing Abu Bakr's clothes. Omar soon joined in, covering the Caliph's groin with a square cloth which reached from the navel to the knees. Othman and Ali propped up Abu Bakr's torso to permit cleansing of the back and a downward runoff for the water.

"In the name of Allah," Omar said softly, as he commenced the washing.

Ali wore a troubled expression. Finally he broke his silence. "Omar, you know I have the utmost respect for you, but tell me, how was it determined that you should succeed Abu Bakr as Khalifah?"

Omar, eyes wide, unsure of how to respond, looked up at the Prophet's cousin.

Othman spoke before Omar could. "It was Abu Bakr's wish that the realm be left in the hands of the person most capable of continuing what we have begun. He consulted with the foremost of the Prophet's Companions beforehand to confirm that he was making the right choice. I wrote the proclamation which appoints Omar as Khalifah word for word as Abu Bakr recited it to me."

"Yes," Omar added, "I had no part in this, it was decided for me. But this is no time to talk of such matters."

"I don't disagree that you are a most capable individual, but no one so much as sought my opinion – I, who am of the

same lineage as the Prophet himself. Was I not also one of Muhammad's chief Companions?"

Omar, daring not to raise his voice during the sacred ritual lest it disturb Abu Bakr's spirit, threw the first soiled washing cloth to the ground and picked up a second from the table. He soaked it in one of the bowls of water and continued cleansing the body.

Othman placed his hand on Ali's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "You are half the age of those whom Abu Bakr looked to for advice. Do not view this as a reflection upon yourself, but rather the drawing of knowledge from the wisdom of years. I too believe Omar to be the best choice to succeed your grandfather-in-law. Although Omar sometimes shows not the goodness which is within him, he has learned to temper his severity and indeed has moderated Abu Bakr's actions when they were either too harsh or too lenient. He is also the most experienced in running the affairs of the state, and a devout Believer. Be not concerned. Omar will be a good Khalifah for he is unequaled in our land. And besides, it's too late to bellyache now."

Omar looked askance at Othman.

Ali hesitated, shifting his gaze from one man to the other. "The process appears to have been conducted with the best interests of our people at heart. I will not contest this succession and will do my part to assist you, Omar, in your duties as Khalifah."

"A decision that shows wisdom in the making," Othman said, patting Ali on the back. "But you have a talent for writing and making people laugh. Why bother yourself with matters of state at all, it only brings problems. Leave that to those who are so inclined."

Ali stared blankly at the elder man.

Omar and Ali lifted Abu Bakr onto the camphor scented burial cloth and dried him while Othman anointed the body on the knees, hands, and feet with rose water. Ali placed Abu Bakr's left hand on his chest, and his right hand on top of his left, as in salat.

Omar then draped one of the white sheets over his mentor. All three worked together to wind the Caliph in the shroud, tying it with four long ribbons of cloth – one above the head, one below the feet and two around the body.

With the wrapping complete, Othman and Ali departed to attend to other business. Omar remained to help the family prepare for the burial ceremony. The two men emerged from the house into the courtyard of the mosque of the Prophet, the crowd parting to let them pass as they made their way.

Omar watched from the window as Othman crossed the earthen expanse dispensing platitudes in response to the townspeople's questions and condolences. Ali followed a couple of steps behind, head bowed, still clearly displeased.

That afternoon, Omar presided over the Salat ul Janazah, the funeral service, offering prayers over the lifeless body of the Prophet's first successor in the courtyard of the old mosque. The sky was clear – the air, dry and motionless. The remains of Abu Bakr lay on a bier, waist high, wrapped in the seamless white shroud which he had saved for this occasion. The mourners faced the bier, southward, toward Mecca; first Omar, then behind him ordered rows of men, children, and finally, the women. Ali, Othman, and other Companions of note were prominent in the first row. To the north, its volcanic wrath silenced long ago, Mount Uhod loomed black and placid, a distant spectator to Abu Bakr's farewell.

Omar raised his hands to head height, palms forward. They trembled as Omar's words refused to come. He lowered his hands and bowed his head for a moment before trying again. Once more, the congregation followed his lead.

"Allahu Akbar," they cried as one.

Hands were brought together, the right being folded over the left, while the Fatiha was performed silently.

A second "Allahu Akbar" resounded throughout the courtyard upon completion of the prayer.

"In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful, recite aloud with me the Tashahood," Omar commanded.

"O Allah,
Grant peace to Muhammad and his family, as you
granted to Ibrahim and his family.
Bless Muhammad and his family, as you blessed
Ibrahim and his family.
Truly, You are the most glorious, the most
praiseworthy.
Allahu Akbar."

Women and children wept softly after the service as they departed for their homes. Only the men would accompany Abu Bakr to his interment. His bier was carried by the same Companions who bore Muhammad to his final resting place, and it was to this very spot across the courtyard to which they now took the deceased Caliph. They placed his body next to the Prophet's, on its side, so as to face the holy city. As the crypt was being re-sealed, Omar, the gloom of the interment weighing heavily on him, recited one of his favorite passages of the Quran from memory.

"Know that the life of this world is but a sport and
a passing scene wherein you quest for greater
wealth and more children.
It is like the plants that flourish after the rain.
The tillers of the soil rejoice to see them grow, but
they soon wither, turn yellow, and die, becoming
worthless stubble.
In the life to come a dreadful scourge awaits you,
or the forgiveness of Allah and His pleasure.
The life of this world is but a vain shadow.

Therefore, strive for the pardon of Allah and for a paradise more vast than heaven and earth, prepared for those who believe in Him and his messengers. Such is the grace of Allah. He bestows it upon whom He will. Allah's grace is boundless."

When Omar had finished, the call of the muezzin rang out signaling the time for general prayers, after which the men went back to their homes in great sadness at the loss of a beloved leader.

It wasn't until several days after the funeral that Amr, Khalid, and I arrived to pay our last respects to Abu Bakr. Omar received us in the office of the Khalifah, the same room where Mutemmam was tried, and which was now Omar's official place of business.

Omar stood to greet us. "It's a pity you couldn't have arrived earlier so as to attend the ceremony. All of Medina was there, and many of our brethren came from Mecca and the other towns of the Hijaz." He hung his head, pressing his lips together, causing them to whiten. "I feel a void in my own self with Abu Bakr's passing."

Amr nodded. "As do we all. Next to the Prophet, he was like a father to every one of us, indeed to all in the realm."

"Yes, indeed," Omar said. "He provided sound advice to me on many occasions when I was about to do the wrong thing. May Allah grant him entrance to each of the seven paradises. He is buried across the courtyard, with Muhammad, peace be upon him. Go there after we have concluded our business and say what you will to him for the last time." Omar walked across the room, stopping in front of an ornately carved chest situated under the window. He opened it, reached inside, and removed three

parchment scrolls marked and fastened with the new Khalifah's seal. He handed one to each of us in turn and took his seat behind the short-legged table.

"Abu Bakr wanted me to write these before his death but I was unable to complete them before yesterday. They are your specific instructions and guidance for the missions which await you in the months ahead. Read them in private before you leave Medina. To you all, though, I will say this. I expect absolute loyalty from each of you, and you are to support our Cause to the exclusion of all personal gain wherever your travels may take you. You will not kill women, children, or the elderly; you will mutilate and torture none; neither will you destroy crops or livestock. Promise those whom you conquer fair rule, and live up to that promise."

I saw an opportunity to make our case for the much needed reinforcements which would be required before we moved against the Christians again. I nodded.

"It's most timely that you have brought this up now, for we will soon lay siege to Damascus and, Allah willing, bring her under our control. We've already won three battles against the Byzantines but we'll need more reinforcements to take such a major stronghold. We ask that you lift Abu Bakr's ban on conscripting the apostate tribes which are once again with us. There is no other way we can hope to raise our strength enough to invade and conquer the heart of the Byzantine provinces."

Amr seconded the request while at the same time Khalid audibly ejected a puff of air through his lips. "Pffffff." It sounded like gas.

I ignored the dissenting gesture but Omar did not.

"You take exception to Mu'awiya's proposal, Khalid?"

"Only to the idea of placing inexperience at the head of such an important operation," Khalid said, flipping his hand in my direction. "Abu Bakr summoned me from Al-Iraq in order that we should win this confrontation with the Greeks, not to stand idly by whilst we entrust our fate to untested would-be leaders."

My anger was getting the best of me and I began to move toward Khalid when Amr grabbed my arm and held me back.

"Amr has the ultimate responsibility for our success in Palestine and Syria," Omar said, "and I placed him in charge of seeing that Mu'awiya gains the experience he needs to be a commander in his own right. If Amr feels that he has proven himself sufficiently to warrant a position of independent leadership at this time, that is his prerogative. Furthermore, it is my understanding from the last report I received that the assault on Damascus will be a cooperative effort of separate forces led by each of you." He turned to Amr. "Is this not so?"

"It is so," Amr replied.

Omar's eyes met Khalid's. I could see the contempt flow in both directions. Omar stood and looked down on the Sword of Allah.

"Let it continue to be so, and if that does not meet with your approval, Khalid ibn al-Welid, then you will remain in Medina and another will be found to lead in your place!"

Khalid, wearing a seldom seen look of concern, glanced nervously at each of us. It was evident that he stood alone on this matter. He certainly would not want to be removed from what promised to be our crowning campaign.

"You are Khalifah," he said in a monotone voice. "If it's your will that we take this risk then so be it. I am but your servant in these matters and will do as bid."

Khalid's stomach must have knotted as he forced these words to part his reluctant lips – his eyes conveyed a different message. I was delighted at seeing him put in his place. Few were able to do it and live. Omar was now unreachable in that regard.

At long last everything was falling into place for me. My mentor was the most powerful figure in the land, I shared command with the preeminent military strategists of our time, and a major opportunity for notoriety was at hand. Things couldn't have been going better.

Omar's voice interrupted my thoughts.

"I apologize that I cannot talk with you further, but I have other appointments which I must keep. We'll talk again later, before you return to Palestine. In the meantime, do pay your last respects to Abu Bakr."

We parted company with Omar, leaving the Khalifah's house and entering the courtyard. There, Khalid was met by Al-Ashtar and Farouk who waited with him while Amr and I walked to Abu Bakr's resting place.

Khalid removed the parchment scroll given to him by Omar from a nook inside his robe and broke the seal. The parchment scratched upon itself as he unrolled it, opening the scroll to a length twice as long as his hand and just about as wide. The writing screamed in red, with two small crimson spots, unequal in size, haphazardly interfering with the message.

"The bastard wrote me a letter in blood!"

Al-Ashtar looked over Khalid's shoulder. "What's it say?"

"What's it say!" Khalid turned to his minion. "What's it matter, it's a letter in blood – it can't be anything good."

Khalid started to read it despite his own admonition.

"Hmm, let's see. He accuses me of being a murderer, ...an adulterer, ...and of having 'no conscience whatsoever, nor compassion for any life on the face of the earth'. He goes on about what I must and must not do if I'm to remain in any position of leadership under his rule." Khalid's face soured. He crumpled the parchment in his fist and began walking to put more distance between himself and the Caliph's residence. The others followed.

"How dare he berate me so, after all I've done toward regaining the realm and expanding its frontiers. How dare he! Bastard!"

Al-Ashtar and Farouk looked at each other with great concern.

As the three approached the crypt where Abu Bakr lay, the shadow of a bird of prey crossed their path.

Khalid placed the message back in his robe. "Say nothing of this," he ordered, "...to anyone."

The next morning was hot and cloudless, the sky a clear rich blue, except in the immediate direction of the sun. The shadows were short by the time I arrived at the house of my cousin, Othman, with my bride to be. We were greeted by Othman's door slave, a large man whose sole function was to announce visitors and guard against intruders. As she entered, Meisun stared in awe at the magnificence of Othman's home, her already sizable eyes widening further. She had been little exposed to life in the cities and Othman's home was as opulent as any in Medina. Meisun caressed the smooth cut stone on the interior wall of the enclosed courtyard, displaying her finger tips to show me that it left no residue as would mud bricks. Cascades of water leapt from Othman's fountain, a spigot shaped like the head of a fish, embedded in the north wall and fed from the small underground stream that ran beside the residence. Meisun listened attentively as water, falling from the fountain, slapped the surface of the catch pool below, within which several orange, white, and black carp hovered motionless under a patchy blanket of emerald lotus leaves. Othman's house slaves worked diligently around us, making way as we walked, tending with utmost care to the flocks of yellow and white lilies thriving in large ceramic pots inlaid with turquoise. Meisun pointed with approval at the stylized paintings of trees, and abstract designs in blue and black, that graced the south wall, complemented by the occasional live palm.

Othman called to me as he descended the staircase from an upper level. I held off introducing my guest until he drew closer, to avoid competing with the background chatter of three

slaves debating the best way to capture one of Othman's falcons which had escaped to the rooftop.

"This is Meisun, cousin. We are to marry shortly, I wrote to you about her."

"I'm sorry, I don't recall," Othman said. He eyed Meisun up and down while she continued to gawk at the surroundings. She was dressed in her best black robe, and wore a black head cloth folded into a band three fingers wide, tied around her head, leaving her hair mostly uncovered. The long ends of the headband were draped around her neck, concealing her throat. Othman sensed Meisun's obvious interest in his abode. He was good at sensing the obvious; not so good, however, at interpreting indications which lay veiled beneath the surface.

"Would you like my wife to show you our home?" Othman asked.

Meisun, still speechless, just nodded.

"Wife!" Othman called out. From a room off the courtyard a middle-aged woman with a coil of gray hair wound on the top of her head appeared.

"Entertain Mu'awiya's woman whilst I talk with my cousin."

"As you wish, my husband," she said, ushering Meisun away.

Othman's bushy white brows dove downward on the ends closest to his nose, like eagles in free fall. "Mu'awiya... are you daft? She is Bedouin. You intend to marry her? It would be like inviting a wild dog to live in your home. She doesn't know our ways and will not be accepted by the townspeople."

My jaw dropped and, at first, no words issued forth. "It matters naught. It is right, I feel it in my heart."

"From where does she come?"

"I took her from the Beni Kelb last year, but I've since freed her so that we may marry. She's the ideal companion, cousin Othman – reliable, a good cook, a trustworthy confidant. I think that I've found the love of my life."

"Have you seen your father since your return?" Othman inquired.

"No, but he'll approve." A lump forming in my windpipe, made it difficult for me to swallow. "Besides, she'll be with me in foreign lands for many months. I can teach her all she needs to know during that time. I plan to ask Omar to act on her behalf when we draw up the marriage contract."

"She has no living male relations?" Othman asked.

"None of suitable age."

Othman's face grew serious. "I'm sorry, Mu'awiya, but I cannot give you my blessing on this. The Bedouin are animals; they live only for the present, without compassion, without regard for property. I must advise your father against this marriage."

My mouth became dry and my blood began to boil. I felt like unraveling Othman's turban and rewinding it around his throat – I could see why most people shunned him. Before I could become too enraged over Othman's callous disregard for my wishes, he changed the subject.

"Now, there is something else we must discuss," he said. "It concerns Ali. I spoke with him last week, in the presence of Omar, and he is becoming much more interested in the workings of the realm than he has been in the past. He questioned Omar's succession as Khalifah and took offense that he was not consulted in that decision. I believe he feels that the house of Hashim is losing its influence, and I am certain he harbors ill feelings towards you because of your father. I am telling you this because I have been informed that he has met with Khalid, another one who has reason to be disgruntled now that Omar is Khalifah. They both see you as a threat."

My mind raced with thoughts of calamity. "Khalid has already tipped his hand in this regard," I replied. "I would no more trust him than I would set myself on fire. This news of Ali, though, troubles me. I have always held him in high regard and it would be a mistake to let a barrier once again come between the house of Omia and the house of Hashim. I shall be prepared to

deal with such a situation if it happens, but we must try to avoid it. We should speak to Omar of this and ask him to help mend any impending rift between our houses."

"We will do that," Othman replied.

"We should do so quickly before this brews into something which can't be stopped. Will you talk to him today?"

"I am to see Omar tomorrow. I'll speak with him then."

"Please also ask him about my marriage, and tell him for me that I wish to come to see him within a day or two."

Othman stared at the floor for a moment, his eyes tracing the turquoise design on the fired brick as it ran from one glazed tile to the next. The shadows had grown shorter in the time that we had talked. It was close to midday. He looked up.

"I told you how I feel about this. You insist on proceeding? Your father will never approve."

My anger festered. "I'll do it without his approval."

The voices of Meisun and Othman's wife grew louder as the women approached.

"Cousin Othman, they come... will you?"

"No," Othman replied.

At that moment, Meisun reentered the room.

"My love," she said, "this home is so beautiful, I hope we have one like it someday."

Othman developed a broad but artificial grin. "I'm sure you will," he said.

I gave him a look of disgust and then I changed the subject.

"One other matter, cousin," I said as I took him aside.

"Khalid threatened to expose some lie, something regarding my father being involved in a complicity to bring about the downfall of Mecca four years ago, during the Prophet's attack on it. Do you have knowledge of such a thing?"

Othman's posture became erect. "I have no such knowledge," he said. "I've never heard anything so outlandish in all my life. It's as you have stated, nothing but lies."

I thanked Othman for his time and left with the woman who might or might not become my wife.

We walked along the narrow streets of Medina, talking as we went.

"I overheard the conversation you were having with your cousin about Khalid being a threat," Meisun said. "My brother had a similar problem once."

When it came to dealing with Khalid, I was willing to accept any and all help.

"What did your brother do?" I asked.

"He had his opponent assassinated, before the swine could do the same to him. It was done in such a way that it looked like a band of thieves committed the murder. The victim's family was never the wiser, there was never an attempt at retribution."

"I can't do that," I said, "even though I've thought about it. Khalid is one of our most honored warriors, amongst the living or the dead. If I were ever found out, I'd be ripped to pieces. Even the Khalifah would be powerless to prevent that. Besides, I don't believe that Khalid would go that far, at least not at this point."

"What about that person he had killed over a woman?"

"Malik – he was of the enemy. No, I must find a subtler way to neutralize him; maybe convince Omar to send him to some obscure place on the frontier to keep the peace. That wouldn't be difficult to do, but it wouldn't happen until after we've achieved victory in Syria."

"Then I know," Meisun said, giving my robe a sharp tug on the sleeve. "We will put a spell on him."

"You can't put a spell on anyone," I replied.

"No, but I know of an old woman in my clan who has the power to do so, and we must pass through my people's land on the way back to Syria. We could say that I was going to visit my family after our marriage and while we are there..." she paused, "...we can have her put a spell of invincibility on *you*! That way Khalid will still be able to fight on our side at Damascus but you

will be safe from him, and from the Christians. What say you, husband?"

"I'll let you know. By the way, whatever happened to your brother?"

"Last year when your people were fighting mine, a Beni Kelb man with only half a nose was killed. Do you remember him?"

I could feel my eyes drift upward in my head as I thought for a moment. I shook my head. "I don't." But I did. I slew him myself, he reminded me of a pig.

Meisun looked at me. "That was my brother."

Othman sat in the shadows, in the corner of the Caliph's meeting room while Omar, partially silhouetted against the open window, drew the end of his mustache into his mouth and chewed on it. At length, he pulled the mustache out of his mouth and repeatedly twirled it around his finger.

"This is a very serious development, and I blame myself for not seeing it coming until Ali's outburst. When the closest living relative of the Prophet feels this way it could have dire consequences for the Cause and for unity throughout the land. His meeting with Khalid troubles me even more so. I'll see to it that those two are separated by as much distance as possible. Today I will order that Khalid return to Syria with Amr to continue our preparations for the assault on Damascus. Then I shall talk with Ali."

"My additional concern," Othman said, "is that we not allow the differences of the past to once again cause disharmony between the house of Omia and the house of Hashim." Othman repeated these words over to himself silently to make sure they sounded sincere. "Please do speak to Ali."

"Another matter has also come up, Khalifah. Mu'awiya knows about the collusion between his father and us during the fall of Mecca."

"How did he come to know of this?" Omar asked.

"Khalid taunted him with it, threatening to expose the information."

"All the more reason to send Khalid somewhere where he can't be a thorn in our sides."

Othman replied almost before Omar had finished.

"Exactly my thoughts, Khalifah."

"What else?" Omar reinserted the mustache into his mouth.

Othman stared up at the ceiling and fondled his chin, trying to think if there was anything more he wanted to bring to Omar's attention, but before he could speak the Caliph broke the silence.

"What's this I hear about Mu'awiya getting married, Othman? One of my wives told me that she heard this from one of your wives at the market. Mu'awiya never mentioned it when I met with him but two days ago. Why didn't you share this news with me?"

Othman's face acquired a disconcerted look. "He has not yet consulted with his father," Othman said, "but he specifically asked me to tell you the good news when I met with him at my home yesterday. That was the other matter of which I came here to speak. Mu'awiya wants you to act as the girl's representative in the marriage contract, as there are no eligible male relatives to stand up for her."

"It would please me greatly to be of help in any way that will get him married. He needs a good woman in his life, especially considering that lunatic he has for a mother. Who will he take to wife?"

"A lovely Bedouin girl of the Beni Kelb. She seems a pleasant young woman and might make a good match for my cousin."

"I have many friends of Bedouin stock," Omar said. "Most honorable people they are, and resourceful too. I have great admiration for them."

"Now that you mention it, Khalifah, I do recall you always talk highly of the sons of the desert," Othman replied. "I share your sentiments."

"Has she accepted the faith?"

"Yes, she has submitted to the will of Allah. But even so, I have serious doubts that Mu'awiya's father will approve. You know how Abu Sufyan can be."

"Never mind," Omar said. "I will take care of Abu Sufyan. When will this take place?"

Othman hesitated. "The marriage – I'm not certain. Mu'awiya wishes to see you, though, during the next day or two, as your time permits."

"Tell him to come at his leisure and that I'm most happy for him."

"I will do so," Othman said in a soft voice, while silently cursing his wife. He bowed and departed, leaving Omar to attend to his business.

Omar was writing when I arrived at his meeting room with Meisun the next day. He had taken a liking to Abu Bakr's short-legged table. Its surface was completely covered with sheets of parchment, seals, quills and an inkwell. The Khalifah greeted us and then spoke to Meisun.

"I'm told that you are of the Beni Kelb. I was chief of the Beni Adi. That was before I found the way of the truth. The Prophet, Muhammad, peace be upon him, showed me this truth. Before that time, I was blind – I saw but I did not see; I heard but I did not hear. Now I hear," Omar said, raising his left hand and touching it to his ear. He leaned closer to Meisun. "And now I see. I have learned that there is but one greatness, Allah, and all

that is, is because of the will of Allah. There is no need to invent lesser greatness, no need to worship idols. Do you understand what I am saying, my child?"

Meisun was transfixed. Although Omar seemed gentle enough, his sheer size and striking appearance reinforced his position as commander of all the Arab world. She remained speechless for some time. At last, Omar started to change the subject.

"I understand," Meisun blurted out, nodding her head. "Mu'awiya has instructed me in these matters and I have learned the ways of Islam."

Omar cocked an eyebrow. "Good," he said. "You must carry the message back to your people whenever you see them. Now, Mu'awiya, I understand that you two wish to marry."

"Yes, and I'm prepared to draw up the contract at this time."

"And you wish for me to act as representative on behalf of Meisun in this matter?"

"Yes," I replied.

Omar turned to Meisun. "And you? Are there no men of your family that can speak for you?"

Meisun's eyes were directed downwards to the floor. "No," she said in a barely audible voice. "My father has been dead for many years and my elder brother was killed one year ago doing battle against your army."

Omar's widened eyes searched for mine. I shot him a sideways glance for an instant but avoided looking directly at him.

Meisun continued. "I bear no grudge. He was cruel to me, not a good brother. He beat me severely once, when I was twelve, for ...a minor indiscretion. I never forgave him." Meisun looked up at Omar and gave a hint of a smile. "One night after that, while he slept, I painted his nose with goat's blood and let a wolf that my father had captured into his tent. I can still hear him screaming."

Omar sat, silent, his mouth open and a blank expression on his face. "So ... you're both sure that you want to do this?" He looked my way. I nodded tentatively.

"Very well then, Meisun. Give us some time alone to work out an agreement. I will have one of the slaves attend to you in the meantime."

Omar had several slaves, most of whom were prisoners taken during the campaigns of the past year. By law, slavery was limited to non-believers captured in battle or carried off from hostile territory, or the offspring of a female slave – as long as the father was not the owner of the woman. The acquisition of slaves by purchase and sale was not permitted. They were to be treated humanely, and dressed and fed consistent with their masters' means.

After Omar made arrangements for Meisun, he returned to the meeting room where I sat upon a cushion on the floor.

"How much wealth is at your command, Mu'awiya?"

Omar paused for a moment to give me time to think, but resumed speaking before I could answer. "She should get half."

"Half!" I almost gagged on my own spittle. I thought Omar was my friend. "Why so much?"

"Did you not hold her as a slave for some time? Did she not serve you well?"

"She did, but I also gave Meisun her freedom – that's worth more than money or livestock," I argued, plucking several hairs from my beard, one at a time, in quick succession.

"But the very fact you freed her in order to marry indicates you wanted something more, and it is for that which we now negotiate."

I made a counter offer. "One quarter. One quarter is fair."

Omar shook his head. "Half is not so much. At one time, I gave away my entire estate for the greater good of the Cause and had to re-accumulate what I have now. Half is nothing, and more than likely it will eventually pass back to you anyway."

We haggled until we eventually reached a compromise. One-third of my wealth would go toward the bridal gift and five percent would be given as alms to help the poor.

"My apologies for taking such a hard stance," Omar said, "but by agreeing to represent Meisun's interests I was duty-bound to seek the best terms for her, regardless of our friendship."

"I understand. I'm satisfied with the agreement." I stood up. "The wedding will be three weeks from today. In the meantime, I will get word to my father."

I thanked Omar, collected Meisun, and left.

Chapter 14
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As Othman had predicted, my father would not give me his blessing to marry Meisun and forbade me to proceed. Fortunately, the messenger didn't arrive back in Medina until after the day of my wedding, and after I had officially consummated the marriage. The wedding took two days, and what a time it was. It started with a great feast of which the men partook while the women, with the exception of the bride and her attendants, served. The crowning delicacy was roast lamb stuffed with rice from Malabar and mixed with eyes, testicles, and cloves of garlic. Following the meal, the men sang and danced well into the night, to the whistling of their swords as they twirled them through the air, until exhaustion set in and storytelling began.

The nuptials took place on the second day. Omar again acted on behalf of Meisun to accept her dowry and the terms of the marriage contract. We then clasped hands while the muezzin recited the acceptance which the two of us repeated three times. Meisun was not present at these proceedings, it is not permitted. After the muezzin had read the prescribed verses from the Quran – those dealing with the treatment of wives, forbidden relations, and marriage to unbelievers – the ceremony was complete. The feasting and merrymaking resumed, culminating for me later that evening when I formally relieved Meisun of her honor. She presented me with a white lambskin rug, the virgin fleece, as is the Bedouin custom. I chose the day of our marriage to coincide

with her time of the month, to make it appear that she was previously untouched. Afterwards, I displayed the rug, bloodied just enough to prove Meisun's chastity.

Although I wished that the festivities could have continued, a more solemn occasion approached for which many of the townspeople were busily preparing – the pilgrimage to Mecca. The pilgrimage, a traditional Arab rite from ancient times, sought to bring people together at a common point where they could pay homage to that which was sacred to them. This point was the Kaaba, the shrine founded by Abraham and his son Ishmael, which housed the sacred relics of the people of the Hijaz. Muhammad designated the Kaaba to be solely the place of Allah and adopted this pilgrimage, the hajj, as one of the five pillars of Islam. He made it obligatory for every believer capable of making the journey to do so at least once in their lifetime. Omar had done so many times, as had Ali and Othman. I had performed the hajj once before, but for Meisun and many of the others this would be their first time. Amr and Khalid had already left to return to Syria, so they would not be a part of this hajj. We spent several days readying for the sojourn until the day of departure finally came.

Omar proclaimed that we'd use the Darb es-Sultani, the safest, although not the fastest route. It would take us in a southwesterly direction into mountainous country, to Hamra, but from there the going would become easier, with water plentiful the whole way.

Meisun and I kept in the company of Othman, while Omar rode with Ali in order that they would have some time to talk in private.

On the first day, we traveled up the chain of mountain roads to the plain of Fereish where we camped. Guards were posted throughout the night, mainly to protect the pilgrims from panthers which lived in these hills. We had already seen the bloodied, half eaten carcass of an antelope on the plains below, reminding us that we were without the protection afforded by the

city. The second day, we traversed terrain more mountainous still. The passes were so narrow in spots that the horses and donkeys of the caravan were forced to travel in single file. One horse lost its footing, sending it and its rider tumbling to their deaths. Such is the will of Allah. That night we spent on the plain of Naziyah, sheltered by a thicket of acacia trees. By the end of the third day we had reached the village of Hamra where we stocked up on provisions – mostly dates, coffee beans, and water. From this point, the journey consisted of a series of descents to near sea level. The west side of the mountains was much more rugged than the east side. Deeply incised valleys, largely devoid of vegetation, separated jagged ridges of barren black primeval lava, jeweled here and there with dark iridescent blue or green outcrops. At the foot of the western slope, we passed through the town of Bedr where a decade earlier one of my family's trading caravans was set upon and robbed by those loyal to the Prophet. For five more days, we traveled along the narrow sandy coastal plain to the wadi named in honor of Muhammad's daughter, Fatimah.

The day before we reached the Wadi Fatimah, Othman exercised his prize falcon, al-Rih, named for the wind, in honor of the bird's speed and stealth. Othman loved the hunt, and was presented an opportunity to engage in his favorite pastime when a pair of ostriches appeared in the dry grasslands at the base of the Madian mountains, at this point much diminished in their stature.

"Bring me my sword of the sky," Othman commanded as he stopped his horse and dismounted. Meisun and I did the same.

The bird – a Peregrine, stately and erect, blue-black plumage on top, its underside a mottled brown on white – had not been fed in two days. One of the two Abyssinian slaves who attended Othman on this hajj passed the hooded falcon to his master. Deadly talons sank into the small square of camel hide tied to my cousin's arm. Othman removed the gold-bordered purple hood to reveal a small but regal head on this most expert of

hunters. Its smooth gray beak curved like a khanjar – its brilliant oversized eyes missed nothing.

Rih stretched his wings, each, when extended, longer than his body and tapering to a point at the tip.

Othman stroked its neck. "This magnificent creature can fly higher and maneuver with greater agility than any other," he said to me.

"In my tribe, we have many like this ...the best in Arabia," Meisun said. "They are fine animals, valued as much as a good horse."

Othman didn't respond to my wife, other than with a sneer that bid her be quiet.

Rih searched to his left, then right, then left again, each time his head stopping in the center. The falcon let loose a long series of sharp, high pitched cries that expressed his eagerness, as if to say "I am hungry, time to kill".

Othman untied the jess from Rih's leg and twice raised and lowered his arm, ending in a forceful upward thrust which launched the majestic creature into flight. Rih shot effortlessly through the air and began a wide turn that became an ever expanding spiral high into the sky. He hung motionless, almost beyond view, while sighting his quarry. The purveyor of death descended slowly in wide, deliberate circles which constricted in size as he took aim. Suddenly his wings retracted and Rih hurtled toward the ostriches faster than the human eye could follow. The ostriches recognized the approach of doom and bolted in a desperate attempt to flee from the talons. Rih leveled his descent and glided swiftly at a camel's height above the ground, closing on the smaller of the two targets. As he was about to strike, the ostrich swerved. Rih angled his wings to catapult himself back into the heavens. Another wide circle brought him a second chance. The small ostrich had turned in the direction of the open plain, heading toward us.

Once again Rih plunged earthward, leveled, and sped above the grassy terrain, pursuing his victim to exhaustion, until it

was within reach. Othman's falcon extended its legs, exposing knifelike talons that firmly grasped the head of its prey, puncturing the conspicuous eyes. The ostrich flung its gangly neck this way and that, trying to shake Rih off, but to no avail. It tripped and fell, tumbling over itself – feathers flew in all directions. Rih disengaged at the last possible moment and landed at the spot where the gigantic flightless bird came to rest. All motion stopped as the cloud of plumage settled to the ground.

We mounted our horses and rode to the scene of the kill. Rih perched on the ostrich, holding its head down with one claw while using the other to rip open its throat, the quarry quivering with each tear. That night, the four of us, along with Omar and Ali, dined well in preparation for the ten days of hardship which lay ahead.

For another day and a half, we followed the Wadi Fatimah inland to our destination. We reached the outskirts of Mecca on the eleventh day of our journey.

Being much further to the south, Mecca was hotter and drier than Medina. While both lay on the bandit-plagued Yemen-to-Syria caravan route, Mecca, unlike Medina, needed no city wall. Its placement in a long narrow valley, adjacent hills rising high on both sides, afforded it more than adequate protection. The only fortifications were the gates which controlled access to the three entrances into the valley. Houses, all made from stone, lined the main streets which ran parallel to the hills. The climate was akin to that of an oven, the surrounding rises sheltering the town from the cooling effects of any breeze. The soil, brown but porous, so lacked in goodness that little food could be grown in Mecca – almost all had to be brought in from the Yemen, Nubia, or the towns of northern Arabia. Even much of the water was transported from distant springs so that people and livestock could survive here. I could easily see why, in this forsaken land, Abraham was compelled to build the temple of the Kaaba – a plea

to Allah for food and water to sustain him while traveling through the desert.

Mecca was the place of my birth and home to my tribe, the Quraysh, the traders. Despite its inhospitable nature, Mecca had become a pivotal way point for the caravans, in part due to the corridor it provided into interior Arabia and in part due to the ancient tradition of pilgrimage to the Kaaba, the most sacred spot on the face of the earth. Tens of thousands of others had arrived for this hajj. Clusters of tents, both the Bedouin style and the conical roofed style of the Hijaz, littered the land surrounding the city. Between the clusters, an army of exhausted camels and horses knelt in their resting positions, or stood motionless except for the occasional flick of a tail to chase off bothersome flies. The smell of overworked animals assaulted the air.

A long procession of the Faithful, ten abreast, clothed in pure white with their heads covered by turbans or head cloths, snaked its way along the road, past the preparation tents, towards the Kaaba. The sun burned viciously, casting short shadows and delivering its punishing heat to the pilgrims from both above and, indirectly, from the searing sand below.

"There are several things we must do before entering the holy city," I explained to Meisun. "We must first go to the preparation tents and wash from head to foot in order to purify ourselves. From then on, for the duration of the hajj, we will not cut our hair or nails and we can have no sex."

"None?" Meisun asked, her eyebrows raising as she spoke.

"None," I confirmed. "After we are cleansed, we'll don the garments which we brought for this occasion."

Meisun examined her attire, a long plain robe. Mine was two seamless lengths of white cloth, one of which would be worn around my waist, the other slung over the shoulder and wrapped around my torso.

"No rings, amulets, or any other such items may be worn during the hajj," I said, "and all violence is forbidden, even

toward plants and animals. The exception to this is the sacrifice of the Id al-Adha which will be performed on the tenth day."

"Then what?" she asked.

"Then all believers, here and elsewhere, will cut the throat of a goat, sheep, or camel, and feast. What we can't eat will be given to the poor, and if you can't manage to kill the sacrifice yourself there are those here who will do it for you, for a modest fee."

"I can do it," she said, thrusting out her chest and holding her head high. "I cut the throat of my uncle's baby boy when I was fifteen. I learned that my uncle had counseled my father to bury me alive when I was an infant – I was the last of many girls. My uncle thought that my brother killed the child, since he and my brother were feuding at the time, so one night he painted my brother's groin with goat blood..."

I stood silent for a moment, my mouth half open, recalling the story of her brother's nose. "Come now – you tease me."

Meisun laughed heartily, it was like music. "Just a little," she said with a gaping smile.

"And you never really killed your baby nephew either, did you?"

Her expression transformed quickly into a most serious one. "That part is true," she said, pointing her finger in the air.

I pressed my hand hard on my forehead and drew it down across the side of my face. I understood how she may have felt about her uncle, but I could not imagine her doing something so terrible to get even with him. The eternal fires of damnation pale before a Bedouin's revenge.

I motioned to a group of tents off to my left. "Go to the women's side and don your robe, wife. While you dress, the helpers will teach you the verses you must recite."

After we had prepared, Meisun and I, and the others from Medina, entered the city and proceeded directly to the Kaaba. The one room sanctuary loomed above us, the height of ten men, a massive cube made from dark gray stone blocks each a full

arm's length high. A single doorway led inside, although no one was allowed to enter at this time. I have seen the interior before, on my first pilgrimage, during the ceremonial washing of the structure. It's empty, except for the three pillars which support the roof and several gold and silver oil lamps suspended from the ceiling.

We joined the many pilgrims already present in prayer, circling the Kaaba and kissing the sacred Black Stone on the eastern corner as we passed it. This final building block of the shrine, set in place many centuries earlier by Abraham himself, is said to have been carried from the Garden by Adam. Originally white, the stone has turned black from absorbing the sins of those who have touched it over the ages.

After our visit to the Kaaba, we ran between the nearby hills of Safa and Marwa seven times to commemorate Abraham's search for water in the desert. Over the next three days our party engaged in various hallowed rituals, as did all the pilgrims who had traveled to Mecca from throughout Arabia. On the fourth day, we journeyed to the mount of Arafat, three hours from Mecca by way of the town of Mina. There, all in unison performed the rite of standing before Allah, the most important ceremony of the pilgrimage. From noon until sunset we repented and prayed for Allah's forgiveness. The fifth day brought us back to Mina where we stoned three pillars of rock which symbolize the evil in the world, each of us casting forty-nine pebbles over a three day period. The hajj climaxed in Mina with the Id al-Adha, the solemn festival of the sacrifice. Meisun had no difficulty dispatching her sacrificial lamb. I rubbed my own throat as I watched her draw the khanjar's sharp edge across the animal's jugular. On the last day, we returned to Mecca for seven final passes around the Kaaba and as many transits between the hills of Safa and Marwa.

Our entourage stayed in Mecca for one week after the rituals of the hajj had ended. Omar had pressing business to

attend to, in which Ali, Othman, and I assisted – the raising of a levy of troops to reinforce our armies in Al-Iraq and Syria. We sat in a public eating place, talking and strategizing throughout the afternoon.

Some distance behind us a boy alternately pulled and slackened a rope causing the large square of heavy embroidered material, hung from the ceiling, to fan the air over us. In the corner, two female servants prepared nabidh, a mild fermented beverage made from raisins. Legal nabidh was just two days old, anything stronger was forbidden. While one of the servants crushed the fruit in a vat with her feet, the other skimmed off the liquid and strained it through a cloth suspended over an earthenware jug in which it would remain until ready.

"We raised over five thousand volunteers in Medina," Omar said, "and I hope to double that number in Mecca."

"I alone can recruit ten thousand here," Ali said.

"And I can likely enlist an equal number," Othman added.

Seeing where this could lead, I quickly changed the subject. "What news from Amr?"

Omar shook his head. "I have heard naught," he said, donning his impatient look.

Ali scented his beard with rosewater from the house-provided flask and then passed it on. "And from Al-Iraq?" he asked.

"Al-Muthanna has advanced on several Persian positions in an attempt to regain lost territory," Omar replied. "He now awaits reinforcements from Medina. I trust he will do nothing too ambitious before they arrive."

Omar reached across the raised platform, around which we sat, to pluck a morsel from one of the many platters of food. He nibbled on it some before popping the piece into his mouth and consuming the remainder. I grabbed the only orange, before anyone else could, and set it aside to eat later. I then attacked the meat and flatbreads.

Ali continued.

"Al-Muthanna is a good man, Omar, but he is not Khalid. It was Khalid's strategies that won Al-Iraq for us. Until we are in complete control there, it will likely take his leadership to hold on to it."

"To be sure," Omar replied. "Al-Muthanna cannot remain our leader in Al-Iraq permanently. His primary motivation is plunder, not the Cause."

Omar did not divulge his plan to replace Khalid as the commander of our forces in Al-Iraq after Damascus had been taken. Omar had told Othman that he hoped to find a new commander amongst the many notable warriors in Mecca before returning home. I was privy to this information only because Othman knew and, although he was sworn to secrecy, could not keep it to himself – another reason why many shunned him.

I had learned from Othman that Omar had resolved to place Khalid in some obscure locale where he couldn't amass much of a following. Omar feared that allowing Khalid to return to Al-Iraq would result in an excess of uncontrolled power outside of Arabia. What none of us knew, however, was that Khalid ibn al-Welid was not the real threat.

I had not seen my father in over two years. During that time, our only communication had been that regarding my marriage to Meisun, so the next morning I left Meisun with Omar's women and went to visit him. Abu Sufyan was sixty nine. He had lost his left eye at the battle of At-Taif five years earlier and the sight through his right was becoming cloudy. My father was very rich and very miserly. His residence paled in comparison to Othman's even though Abu Sufyan was far wealthier. While the house was built of stone, it occupied but a single level, with no fountains and many less lamps – to conserve oil. From the outside, I could smell the tantalizing aroma of date

bread cooking, and hear my father scolding one of his few slaves, whom he made do with by working them doubly hard.

The first thing Abu Sufyan did when I entered his home was to hit me hard across the face with the back of his hand.

"Dare you disobey me and marry," he yelled. "Have you no respect?"

He prepared for another strike but I moved into the field of his bad eye to gain time to explain.

"I waited for your answer but it didn't come," I said, "...not until after the wedding day."

He swung again but I dodged it.

"You should have waited longer. I'm ashamed to have you as my son. What do you think my friends are saying?"

I said nothing.

"They're saying that Abu Sufyan is a doddering old fool who's ignored by even his youngest son."

My father stared at me with his cloudy eye, gazing slightly off center. His other eye looked horrid, the lids crudely sewn together in a jagged black line that hid their juncture.

He continued to advance toward me, and I continued to retreat in an oafish dance, avoiding his swipes, until my mother entered on his blind side. She stuck her leg into his path. Over he went, breaking his fall to the ground with his hands and his bad knee. He looked up at Hind with fire in his eye, his mouth agape, drool flowing into his scraggly white beard.

"By the powers that be, woman, I should strangle you!"

"Be silent," she said. "You *are* a doddering old fool. Is this how you treat our son after so long an absence? This is not his first marriage. He's free to choose as he will."

She walked back from where she had come. My mother had gained an unenviable reputation for herself many years ago when, on the field of battle at Uhod, she opened up the fallen warrior Hamza and bit his liver into chunks, spitting the pieces liberally on the ground. It was reported that he was still breathing while she did this.

"I should have rid myself of that one long ago – and I still might," Abu Sufyan muttered as he got up from the ground. He looked at me, sighed, and shook his head. "Come over here," he said, motioning to me to sit on the floor.

I approached cautiously.

"Why can't you make me proud of you, like your brother, Yezid?"

"I will, soon," I replied. "I have always been proud to have you as my father."

"Ha! It's only my wealth of which you're proud. If it wasn't for that you'd never come back." Abu Sufyan adjusted the position of the soiled turban that crowned his head.

I lowered my eyes, ashamed that what he said was mostly true. "That's not so," I said. "The money means nothing to me. I have my own now."

"Why did you come here today?" My father looked at my eyes alternately.

"Someone has slandered your name. I must know the truth."

"Who?" he said, raising his voice.

"Khalid. He says you conspired with the Prophet to give up Mecca after all those years of opposition. Cousin Othman says it's a lie. I must hear it from you, otherwise I will have Khalid's tongue cut out for it."

"Why don't you cut it out yourself? Where's your courage?" my father taunted.

"I'm a pragmatist." I waited for his answer.

Abu Sufyan looked away. "Have his tongue cut out," he said.

"Then it's not true?"

"Yes it's true!" he hollered. "I would have lost all if I had resisted longer. Too many were going over to the other side, there were constant attempts on my life. I did what any pragmatist would have done. Surely you can understand that. You make me feel even more humiliated to be your father, asking me this.

Leave my house now and don't come back." He rose to come at me again and then buckled on his bad knee.

I left, not even saying goodbye to my mother, and never saw Abu Sufyan alive again.

I sat in the midday shade of a palm grove, near the main market, at the well where travelers would come before venturing out of Mecca. The absence of the sun's direct rays, at this time of day, felt like a winter reprieve. Meisun was to meet me here but had yet to arrive.

I had not intended to fight with my father – however, there was always something which would drive us apart, something to justify his using my brother as an example of what I should be. But perhaps my father was right, I should never have asked him that question. What did it really matter after all these years?

As my attention was distracted in the direction of a cat in heat, I spotted my wife in the distance, on horseback, coming toward the grove. I could tell her riding just as easily as I could distinguish her walk from anyone else's. She rode with the confidence of a sheikh, poised proudly on her mare, posture erect, surveying her surroundings. Her horse trotted toward me and stopped within arm's reach. She dismounted.

"Meisun, what delayed you?"

"I had to wait for Omar to finish his meeting with some emissaries from the north," she said. "He sent this message." She handed me a small rolled parchment. I opened it and began to read.

"Is your family ready to meet me now?" she asked.

I looked up at her, slowly. "No... I think another time would be better," I said, and then lowered my head to continue reading.

Meisun looked over my shoulder at the message, but she couldn't read. "You look troubled. What has happened?"

I continued to look at the note while I spoke. "Our forces have suffered a major reverse at the hands of the Greeks. We

must leave for Syria immediately and rendezvous with a new contingent of troops on the way, at Medina." I bade Meisun to remount, did so myself, and we rode back to our camp to prepare for the long journey northward.

Chapter 15
AH 13/ AD 634

We arrived back in Syria late in the year, after an absence from Amr's camp of almost three moons. For protection against the Christian advance, our forces had retreated into the desert where the Byzantines dared not follow. When it was safe to do so, Amr re-grouped near Jarash, just north of the Nahr az Zarqa, one of the two main tributaries of the River Jordan. It was nighttime and Meisun and I sat together in our tent, beside the fire, to ward off the chill of the approaching winter. The intensity of the sallow firelight peaked and waned as the blaze crackled, popped, and hissed to the point of distraction. Over it, I could hear the call of a wolf, and a short while later a faint reply.

I placed my hand gently under Meisun's chin and turned her head to face me. "Tomorrow I leave with Amr for the hills above Thaniyat al-Okab, to survey the vicinity around Damascus. I will miss you while I'm gone." I stroked her cheek.

"Must you go?"

I nodded. "Khalid and his amirs have seen this area during their journey from Al-Iraq."

"Then take me with you," Meisun replied, her sad brown eyes imploring me to say yes.

"I must go alone."

Meisun pouted. I put my arm around her and pulled her close.

"It would be too dangerous to take you. This is not a journey for pleasure."

"If it is so dangerous why are you and Amr going? We cannot afford to lose either of you. You said the others have already seen it. Can you not just rely on their recollection?"

I attempted to pull at a tuft of hair within my beard that was too short to grasp. "It's necessary for us to actually see what's there in order to formulate our battle strategy. I don't want to depend on Khalid for any information that will involve my safety. I must see it for myself. Besides, that old woman from your village charmed my life, remember? What can happen?" I tried to say this without revealing the skepticism I felt, but an emptiness gnawed at the pit of my stomach as if to warn me not to tempt fate.

"You could be captured," she replied. "The charm only protects you from an untimely death." She stared at me with a look of resignation that said she knew I would go and that she would not, and I looked back at her in a way which confirmed this.

It took three days for Amr and I and a party of forty, including my brother, to travel to Thaniyat al-Okab from our encampment between the Nahr az Zarqa and the Nahr al Yarmuk, about a day's ride east of the River Jordan. The land fed by these waterways differed sharply from any other we had seen. The fertile countryside was dotted with towns that bore the imprint of Roman civilization and which the Byzantine empire now occupied. Aqueducts carried water from the rivers and springs to areas that would otherwise be barren. Buildings sporting facades carved with decorative devices and the likenesses of human figures – Roman soldiers, civilians of stature and their wives, or maybe their concubines – and peristyles encircled with huge columns, were commonplace. Green pasturelands lay to the north and south of the rivers with great golden fields of grain in between, the cool northerly wind commanding the unitary

movement of every shaft and blade. Here and there a cluster of trees, olive or sycamore, or a thicket of shrubs fed by the many small streams of the plain, adorned the uncultivated landscape with its multitudes of wild flowers and songs of countless birds. Viewed from the highlands above the Yarmuk River, the nearby azure-blue Sea of Galilee glistened in the morning sun and, in the direction of Damascus, the snowcapped summits called Lebanon and Hermon shone like beacons from afar. Once beyond the Yarmuk highlands, we raced eastward to the desert's western edge and drove north, passing to the east of the Green City, until we reached our destination.

From our vantage point, high on a rise just northeast of Damascus, we could plainly see all that was strategically significant to the planned assault on this queen of cities. The great plain which surrounded Damascus was well watered by swift rivulets whose sources lay in the nearby mountains to the west. These cold streams sustained bountiful orchards of fig and apricot trees and lush green meadows. The city itself stood within an ancient wall of roughly rectangular outline, the height of four men and more than half that in thickness. We counted six gates, each one capable of being defended from its adjacent turret. In the center of the walled town stood the cathedral of Saint John, a massive block of a building, its colossal slate-gray dome capping a hexagonal tower that loomed over the city from the midpoint of the church. The head of a Christian martyr, John the Baptist, rests within the cathedral. I saw it on my only other journey to Damascus, seven years prior. The gruesome relic, mummified and blackened with age, sits in a small cedar box with a door that opens, which itself is housed at a side altar protected by an enclosure of iron bars. Even though the eyes and tongue were absent, I could picture the expression he must have borne from the open mouth and contorted shape of his face.

Amr nudged me and pointed off to the left. "That's where we met our recent defeat. It's called the birds' meadow, Merj as-Sofar."

"How did this tragedy come to pass?" I asked.

"One of our amirs became too ambitious. He was led into a trap. The enemy closed in behind our forces and cut off their retreat. A great many were lost but some did escape. I believe he acted in haste in order to try to disrupt the Greeks' effort to re-supply the city."

"I assume they succeeded in getting supplies in."

"We have word that Damascus is well provisioned and will, as expected, be heavily defended," Amr said. "It'll take many months to starve this city into submission, maybe a year." Amr seated himself on the ground and leaned back against a boulder. He removed his dagger from its sheath and began to clean it using part of his robe.

"If that becomes necessary, time is on our side," I replied, "but we will need sufficient troops to fend off attacks on our ranks by Christian reinforcements, which are bound to come. It may mean marching part of our army to meet the enemy at a place sufficiently distant from here."

"And without reducing our numbers laying siege to the city to the point where we can no longer contain those inside," Amr added. He spit on the blade and wiped it furiously. "We don't want to end up fighting on two fronts in the open."

I nodded. "Agreed. In that case, I would recommend waiting a while longer until we can bring more troops from home. When I left, Omar was conscripting the men of Mecca and he intends to issue a general call to arms throughout the country. We shall need far more men than we have now, upwards of seventy thousand I'd say."

Amr eyed his khanjar, slanting it to the horizontal to obtain the best reflection off it and then placed the dagger back in its sheath. "We are probably not too far short of that number," he said, looking my way. "Khalid was able to secure over ten thousand additional troops from the Bedouin of this area, who have no love for the Byzantines."

"I would like command of those recruits," I replied, knowing full well that Amr was unlikely to grant such a request. I wanted to test my limits.

Amr squinted one eye and shook his head. "You know Khalid would never stand for that. He controls those whom he has brought to our side and would accept no other as their commander. Khalid will lead his own forces and you will command half of mine, as we agreed. I see what you are attempting to do here and we have talked before about you competing with him – don't do it, you're bound to lose. He is more likely to succumb to his own weaknesses than be bettered by another."

I knew Amr was right and felt stupid for asking a question with such an obvious answer, but I had to hear it. "His own lust for power may be working against him even as we speak. It came to my attention while I was in Medina that Khalid has been in contact with Ali, who appears disaffected by his meager role in the affairs of state. If this causes dissent against Omar, Khalid's head will be the first to roll."

"Yes, I know all too well," Amr acknowledged.

A call from one of the parties standing watch above us distracted him.

"Many approach from the north on horseback!"

Having obtained all the intelligence for which we had come, we gathered our men together and prepared to leave. As we did so, a handful of horsemen clad in Byzantine war tunics galloped at great speed onto our position. Both sides were taken by surprise. I grabbed a lance from the nearest of our men and plunging it through the abdomen of the first of the mounted enemy. He fell from his horse and rolled once until the protruding spear stopped his motion. A general fracas began amid the cries of our lookout as he monitored the approaching horde.

"They're getting closer!"

Amr ordered us to mount and ride out, but as he prepared to depart an arrow whizzed through the air and lodged in the back of his shoulder. He flinched and growled upon the impact but mounted and began to lead the exodus out of Thaniyat al-Okab. The Byzantines continued to ride through our ranks, wreaking havoc until they finally overtook us. I saw my brother Yezid, already mounted, haranguing a Christian straggler, both of them closing on me fast. I hoisted myself onto my mare and looked back to see the dust kicked up by hundreds of approaching horsemen hidden from view by the curve of the hillside. Before I had turned fully, a blow to my head which seemed to come from nowhere sent me reeling. I fell from my horse with flashes of bright and dark alternating before my eyes, as if I was tumbling into a deep well, and then all went black.

The mid-morning sun had driven out nighttime's chill at the Muslim camp near Jarash. Two ravens rasped at each other in the tree beneath which Khalid sat, legs crossed, staring intently at the small, wrinkled parchment he held in his hand. The message he viewed was the one given to him by Omar on the occasion of Abu Bakr's passing, four months earlier. Since then, Khalid had read it several times, each time becoming increasingly angered that Omar dwelt on petty personal grievances to the exclusion of Khalid's many contributions. A voice from behind him spoke, calmly and softly, but in a manner meant to incite.

"It is you who are the great one; you who should have the power over this campaign, and more," Al-Ashtar counseled. The sheikh limped closer to Khalid and sat to his right. His face possessed the looks of a devil.

Farouk grunted a note of agreement from his seat on the opposite side of Khalid.

Al-Ashtar shifted closer to the Sword of Allah. "You have delivered up Al-Iraq to the Khalifah, and soon you will deliver

Syria to him. Why should you not have higher position and greater influence in the realm? It is no exaggeration to say that if you decided to do so, you could command all the forces outside of Arabia."

"Enough!" Khalid replied, raising his voice. "You talk of treason and I will hear naught of it. That's just what Omar would need to have my head on a stick."

Al-Ashtar placed the palms of his hands together. "A thousand pardons, commander. I do not suggest that you should do this, I only say it to emphasize the degree of your magnificence." He watched Khalid's eyes.

The Sword of Allah readily accepted Al-Ashtar's compliment.

"Forgiven," he said quietly. "Both you and Farouk have been trustworthy confidants throughout the campaigns in Al-Iraq, and you shall remain so through the current one and beyond. Farouk and I have held a longtime friendship for each other. For that friendship, I am grateful."

Farouk nodded. "It is my honor," he replied.

"You, Al-Ashtar, are cunning and quick of mind and have helped me in resolving many complicated situations, and for that I thank you."

Al-Ashtar had advanced from being Khalid's prisoner to being his amir in the space of little more than a year and a half. In that time, he had greatly bettered his lot in life compared to what it would have been, had he remained with his own clan. Al-Ashtar bore a certain resemblance to Khalid, and perhaps it was this reflection of himself that had caused Khalid to spare the Bedouin sheikh. Khalid worried, however, that Al-Ashtar's cunning would not only work toward the furtherance of the caliphate, but would eventually cause serious problems within it.

The Sword of Allah rose to his feet and placed Omar's message in a compartment in his robe. The others rose likewise. He turned to Farouk. "What of our Syrian partisans? They

should've arrived by now. Did I not put you in charge of seeing to this?"

"They are Bedouin," Farouk replied, "they hold to no rigid schedule. But the Beni Ghassan will be true to their word – they will be here."

"They should hurry." Khalid started to pace. "They'll need to be trained in our way of fighting. All they are trained for now is to be as sheep, subservient to their Greek masters."

"There are many good warriors amongst these people," Farouk said. "I've worked the caravans from Yemen to Damascus and have come to know the Beni Ghassan. Not an insignificant number of our conscripts are of this tribe and you may believe me when I say they'll serve us well. Shurahbil, along with some of our people, is accompanying them to assure their speedy arrival. They'll be here soon."

Khalid nodded repeatedly but before he could speak Al-Ashtar broke into the conversation.

"Amr's party is past due as well. We'll need their report to perform the final planning for the assault."

"We have enough information," Khalid replied. "I'm not sure their report will add anything significant."

Just then, Khalid became transfixed with something in the distance. His head turned ever so slowly as he watched with a calculating expression. Farouk scanned the general direction of Khalid's interest and stopped upon seeing a woman in her early twenties dressed in a white robe which flowed to and fro in the breeze as she walked across the camp.

"That's Mu'awiya's wife, Meisun," Farouk said.

Khalid's eyes remained fixed on his target. "Is it?"

Farouk drew closer. "This isn't another Malik ibn Nuweira you're dealing with here," he whispered. "You know Mu'awiya is the Khalifah's favorite. Coveting his woman is yet another thing for which Omar could have your head on a stick."

"Be silent, I'm just looking. I can look, can't I?" Khalid laughed. If he had his way with Meisun and only the two of them

knew, she'd never tell. The stigma of the incident, for her, in her position, would not be worth risking justice.

The sun was close to setting when a messenger arrived with news from Al-Iraq. A guard entered Khalid's tent, soon to follow his master back out.

Khalid squinted and shaded his eyes. The red sun, enlarged and out of round, hung in solitude just above the horizon like a pomegranate ready to be plucked.

"Allahu Akbar!" came the salutation from the messenger.

"Allahu Akbar," Khalid responded, stepping around the man to block out the sun. "I am told you come here from Chaldea."

The messenger gave a curt bow. "I have traveled here to report to you from my master and your humble servant, Al-Muthanna ibn Haritha," he said breathlessly.

"Excellent." Khalid extended his arm toward the entrance of the tent. "Join me and we shall talk." He called to one of his slaves to bring drink and nourishment, as he led the way inside. They sat.

"So, what news do you bring from Al-Iraq? Good news, I trust."

"Yes, mostly good," the messenger said. "Our forces under the brave direction of Al-Muthanna have won yet another splendid victory over the Persians, this time at Al-Buweib near the ancient city of Babylon."

"At what cost?"

"Thousands."

Khalid pressed his lips together until they turned white. "Anyone of particular importance amongst the fallen?" he asked.

"No – mostly Bedouin. The enemy's losses numbered in the tens of thousands. Had it not been for a Christian tribe of Arab blood which reinforced us, our losses would have been much worse. Al-Muthanna's brother fell in battle and Al-Muthanna himself was weakened by a serious wound which he

had received two moons earlier. But the spoils were many. Great quantities of grain to feed our troops, herds of livestock, and gold and silver from the Persian's war chest. Once again, we control all of lower Mesopotamia."

Khalid nodded and stroked his beard. "I am grieved to hear of my friend's misfortune. Is the wound healing?"

"Not well, I'm afraid. A lance pierced the chain links of his armor just below the shoulder, about here." He pointed to a spot high up on the left side of his chest. "It penetrated a finger's length into Al-Muthanna's flesh and now he finds it difficult to gain much movement in that arm."

Khalid clasped his hands together and placed them against his forehead. "May Allah speed his recovery."

The discussion continued, centering on the general situation in Al-Iraq, until nighttime fell and the muezzin summoned all to prayer for the last time that day. Following prayer, Khalid walked alone through the camp to monitor the night's activities. As usual, the men were gathered around campfires telling stories of their bravery, fantasizing about riches to be had, or arguing about the most trivial of points, with no one willing to concede. Khalid continued to walk toward a less traveled part of camp and stopped in front of Mu'awiya's tent. He stared at the entrance. Then, as a shaman summoning a jinn, the figure of Meisun appeared at the opening. She started upon seeing Khalid.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Khalid hesitated for a moment. "I have news of Amr and Mu'awiya's expedition that I must discuss with you. May I enter?"

Khalid returned to his own tent late that night to rest up for what was expected to be a demanding next day. He lay on a bed of camel hides with his hands clasped behind his head and stared up into the blackness at the top of his tent. All was silent. The embers of his fire glowed a dull red, the faint odor of the

charred coals soothing his spirit. Khalid closed his eyes and reviewed the events of the day while other, extraneous, thoughts meandered through his mind. As he slipped into semi-consciousness, his thoughts turned into images; first of Meisun walking across the camp, her white robe flowing in the breeze. She stopped and turned toward Khalid and then suddenly was face to face with him. A smile appeared on the sleeping Khalid's mouth. He reached out to touch her but, as he did so, the vision began to fade. The farther he stretched, the faster she faded, until the image vanished. The smile slowly disappeared and changed into a frown as the likeness of the beautiful Meisun was replaced with that of Mu'awiya. He seemed to be sleeping, in the open, beside a large outcrop of rocks. Shadows surrounded him. A wisp of smoke clouded the picture. Another wisp clouded it further, and then another until small flames appeared which grew rapidly into a wall of fire that obscured the scene. Khalid's mouth opened, his breathing quickened. He grunted, three times, as if being prodded, each successive grunt more forceful than the previous. His hand migrated unconsciously to the handle of his sheathed khanjar, still worn, even during slumber. Beads of sweat materialized on his forehead and he called out sharply.

"Omar!"

Khalid's head tossed from side to side, then came to rest, face up. His breathing slowed as he drew air deep into his lungs. The Sword of Allah snorted, rolled onto his side, and fell into a deep sleep.

"He's alive... bring water," I heard a voice say.

I opened my eyes a slit, it was as wide as I could. Everything was blurry. I could see a bloated qirbah, full with water, being passed hand over head from one man to the next until it reached Amr. He propped me up with one arm while his

free hand poured a small amount of water into my mouth. I promptly spit it up, coughing frantically.

"Can you hear me?" Amr said. I knew the voice and I could sense it coming from Amr, but it didn't sound like his. He wiped my forehead with a damp white cloth, the color of which had turned bright red by the time he was finished.

"What happened?" I asked blearily. My vision had cleared a little but everyone seemed to glow. My head throbbed mercilessly, like it was exploding over and over again. "Am I dead?"

Amr laughed. "No, far from it," he said. "You fell from your horse and knocked yourself unconscious. You should be fine."

I gently touched the brow over my left eye. I felt a large, rough lump which stung tremendously. "Something hit me."

"That Greek infidel struck you with a sling," another voice said. "How do you feel?" It was Yezid.

I looked at him and hesitated. Words were slow to come for some reason that I knew but, at the moment, would not present itself to me. "Dazed, and hot. Move me into the shade, I don't think I'm able to walk."

Amr commanded that I be moved to a spot a short distance away and laid beneath the only tree around. My ribs and left leg pained me greatly as I was carried.

"Ah yes, shade. Set me down here and let me sleep for a while, then I'll feel better." I could hardly keep my eyes open. The light seemed to intensify the aching in my head.

"No!" Amr exclaimed. "You must stay awake." He resumed wiping my forehead. "I once had a friend who was struck unconscious. After waking, he lapsed back into sleep – an eerie, unnatural sleep. His eyes were open, and he would blink now and again, yet he responded to nothing. It was like he was possessed by demons. He never woke again – just wasted away, starved to death."

"I feel so tired," I said, "but I'll stay awake, I just need to cool down a little. What of the attackers?"

"They rode off," Amr replied. "They were fleeing from the same oncoming horde that our lookout saw. It was Shurahbil, leading a thousand volunteers back to our base at Jarash. They're here with us now."

Shurahbil, Yezid and several others stood behind Amr, watching as I felt for lumps and gashes on my skull. My brother looked at me with a detached expression that carried a certain degree of incredulity. I looked back at him with distrust.

I shifted my gaze and raised up my arm. "Shurahbil, is that you? It's been so long."

He grasped my hand firmly. "Yes. I arrived while you were still in Mecca and was sent north to stir up the local population and find recruits. This group is the first of our conscripts."

I tried to squeeze Shurahbil's hand, but was unable to. I had no strength to my grip at all.

As the shadow of my tree grew long and the sunlight reddened, I got up and walked about, somewhat tentatively at first, then more confidently as I regained my faculties. Within a day I felt almost normal, except that my leg and ribs still hurt. The following night we commenced our return journey southward, to Jarash, to rejoin the main contingent of the army of Islam.

Chapter 16
AH 14/ AD 635

My recovery from that blow to the head, and the fall, occurred much faster than did our preparations for battle. Almost four moons passed before the siege of Damascus began in the month of Moharram, 14 AH. During this time we accumulated additional troops and finalized the strategy for the assault. The defenders of Damascus, the Byzantines and their Syrian subjects, had stockpiled provisions within the security of the town's massive walls, while we were forever required to send out parties to collect food and water. The numerous wells of Damascus made it impossible for us to cut off the town's water supply and force a battlefield confrontation, for which we were aptly suited, as had been done at Al-Hafir two years earlier. Our exposed position left us vulnerable to attacks from bands of enemy horsemen from the surrounding towns, who attempted to divert our strength from our objective, but to no avail. The encirclement of the city held fast. My forces concentrated on the west gate with Amr on the north, Khalid and his amirs on the east, and Shurahbil and Yezid opposing the southern entrances. The long-awaited liberating reinforcements from the Byzantine emperor, Heraclius, never came – perhaps a border outpost was not worth the potential cost at a time when his empire closer to home was itself threatened by the Persians. Whatever the reason, it was the eventual death knell for Syria itself. Such was the state of affairs on the day before Damascus fell.

It was early morning, the sky was brightening, the sun had not yet risen. All our commanders were gathered at Amr's camp to discuss a change in tactics which we hoped would expedite victory.

"We must concentrate a larger portion of our forces on the eastern gate," Amr said. He fanned his cheek which had developed a bright red rash, plainly visible under the mixture of gray and black stubble on the side of his face. It looked painful. "Even though we've tried this previously at the north gate, I believe the battlements around the eastern gate are less able to accommodate enemy reinforcements to oppose us. Nevertheless, I think the enemy will mass more troops inside the eastern gate in response and thus weaken the defenses at some of the other gates. It is at one of those points that I feel our chances will be best at..." Amr's head twitched hard to the right, "...breaking through. Otherwise, it may be time to reconsider this siege."

"Persist," I replied. "They can't hold out forever, and if outside help were forthcoming it should have been here by now. I'm for trying your plan." I wanted Damascus, more than anything, including my wealth, or my wife, who had become somewhat distant lately. The quest for power and control had been ignited within me. If we gave up now my chance might never come again.

"As much as I hate to, this time I must agree with the young amir," Khalid said, one black brow angled sharply downward. He winked at me. "We have invested too much here to give up now. With a larger force under my command I feel confident we can take the city through the eastern gate, regardless of any change in the enemy's strength there."

My stomach knotted. I was resolved to penetrate the western gate. If the Sword of Allah did enter Damascus, he wouldn't enter alone.

"Good," Amr said. "I hoped that would be your desire. Are you also in agreement, Shurahbil?" Amr shifted his gaze slightly. "Yezid?"

"Yes," my brother replied. "We stand with the others."

Amr clasped his hands together, making an audible pop.

"Very well then. Each of us will send one fifth of his forces to the eastern approach of the city to be temporarily under Khalid's command. We must make it plainly visible to the Greeks what we are doing so they respond in the intended manner."

Amr concluded the meeting and bade us all return to our camps and commence action on the plan. Not long after sunrise, I received word that the first of the augmentees had arrived at Khalid's position. The morning brought clouds over the mountains to the west of Damascus and the clouds, in turn, brought distant showers. Rays of sunlight colored the leading edge of the gray mass a deep pink, then a soft orange as the brilliant disk turned from red to yellow, making its way higher in the eastern sky – quickly at first, then slowing to an imperceptible crawl.

As the realignment of our forces proceeded far outside the city walls, so too a corresponding movement of troops occurred within the city, as hoped. The inhabitants of the town ran along the battlements, stopping to consult with their amirs who were closely observing the mass migration. I took the opportunity provided by the commotion to make some preparatory arrangements which would facilitate the assault upon the western gate. My camp was sufficiently distant from the perimeter of Damascus to afford the occupants some advance warning of any major offensive action. The obvious movement of strength to the east caused them not to take notice of the diversion of a few men inwards, toward the city, through an orchard that grew in the area between the west and south gates.

"We have saturated the western entrance with pitch," my mulazim said. "Once set alight, that wood will burn like you've never seen before."

I grinned and nodded. "Excellent. Ignite the gates early in our assault to give them sufficient time to burn through. It'll take most of this day for the additional forces to assemble at Khalid's

position, so he won't launch his attack until dawn tomorrow. We shall do likewise. Continue the preparations as I've instructed. We'll move our army close to the city under the cover of darkness. Tomorrow, by the will of Allah, we shall prevail."

My men worked throughout the day making extra arrows, sharpening swords, and reinforcing spears. By the time the sun was once again red and low in the sky, all that could be done had been done. We ate, then rested, for there would be no rest from the mid of night until after the assault on Damascus. Soon, the position of the stars told me that the time to embark had come. The goat, the archer, the horse, and the eagle were all in full view. It would take most of the remaining nighttime hours to get under way, travel to a suitable siege position, and take up formation prior to launching the attack. We broke camp when the constellation of the eagle was well into the night sky of the east. Although it's small, al-Ata makes a good timekeeper since it is so easy to find – its blue-white eye, al-ta'ir, is one of the brightest stars in the heavens. The night was a favorable one, moonless and just windy enough for the noise of rushing air to mask any trace of our activity. The wind blew from the north, and so carried neither sound nor scent from the horses and camels which accompanied my army to the enemy. By the first glimmer of dawn we were ready to attack. When word of Khalid's assault on the eastern gate arrived, I released the onslaught.

It began with a trumpet blast and a volley of flaming arrows sent into the pitch-soaked western gate. The gate caught slowly at first, then exploded into a torrent of fire with long blazing jets of gas that hissed as they forced their way out of small cracks in the wood. A thick black smoke from the blazing pitch billowed upward, obscuring the view of the enemy directly above the entrance, and choking them. The fumes from the inferno carried a heavy smell, tainted with sulfur, that weakened my men also. As the gate burned, thousands of my soldiers targeted the defenders high up on the city walls, launching their arrows to provide cover for others scaling the battlements. The

enemy poured cauldrons of boiling oil over the sides to stop these advances. All the while, fire continued to consume the gate. It burned until the sun was half way to the zenith and then extinguished itself. Before my men could breach the gate, however, a commotion arose to the rear of our formation.

"Allah protect us! Monsters!"

I brought my horse about and rode back to see what the matter was.

Five elephants with riders and a contingent of Byzantine imperial soldiers marched stalwartly forward and began to split our ranks. The Greek warriors advanced shield to shield, chanting their battle cry. Based on my newly acquired but limited knowledge of Greek, I determined that they were saying 'the cross will conquer'. They were heavily armed and armored, wearing chain-mail – or leather tunics with metal disks sewn to them – that covered their upper bodies, and helmets which came to a point at the front. Thin curved iron plates protected their shins so that only the area about their knees was exposed. Each man bore a host of weapons – a spear; a shield, shaped like a smoothed, miniature mountain; a short broad-blade sword which hung from the waist on the left side, a quiver of arrows from the right; and a bow slung diagonally across the back. Those not using their shields carried them on their backs as added protection. Some carried battle axes, with a thin sharp blade on one side of the head and the likeness of a serpent on the other. The elephants lumbered at the vanguard of this formation, being driven before the moving wall of shields. I had to react quickly.

"Archers and lancers, hold your positions," I ordered.

"Aim for the beasts' eyes." Many either ignored or didn't hear the order. They fled under a rain of Christian arrows which vaulted over the elephants from behind.

I rode back to the gate. "Make haste! Use a battering ram to break through – we must occupy the battlements."

Since only one elephant could fit through the gate at a time, gaining access to the city would make it much easier to

concentrate a lethal measure on each from above. My archers again shot their arrows upward at the defenders on top of the walls. Battering rams crashed into the smoldering gate which buckled upon impact, the surrounding air still hot from the fire. A second attempt created long vertical cracks in each side of the gate, but it wasn't until the third try that the crucial penetrations formed which allowed us to begin dismantling the huge wooden doors. As we pushed in the first large portion, a hail of arrows flew outward through the hole felling many of my men. In response, a volley of arrows sped inward toward the enemy, sending a goodly number of them to the ground. All this while, we were still being besieged by the imperial troops at our rear. My askariyah would scatter at the approach of an elephant except for a brave few who attempted to bring them down. Only one of the monsters succumbed while many on our side were trampled trying to stop them. Fortunately, the number of Greek soldiers who came to aid in the defense of Damascus was not many and their impact on the assault was more a nuisance than a real threat to its success.

At last, a great hurrah emanated from the direction of the gate – we were in. Hundreds of my soldiers passed through the portal with every Allahu Akbar, bow strings drawn back then released, letting loose a torrent of deadly projectiles upon the enemy. The occupants responded in kind until all the arrows were spent. Both sides drew swords or daggers and engaged in hand combat as wave after human wave entered the city. Before long, we controlled the battlements and were able to drive off the imperial troops and their elephants, permitting even more of my men to enter the town. The defenders could no longer withstand our might. By the time the sun reached its highest point of the day, the commander of the Byzantine forces assigned to the western gate had surrendered.

I accepted the commander's sword and ordered his men to disarm the inhabitants – it took three attempts before I was able to make myself understood. We segregated the Christians of

fighting age so that they could be guarded, preventing them from leaving to fight in another part of the city. I then took the bulk of my forces and proceeded toward the center of Damascus.

Early in the afternoon, on the opposite side of the city, Khalid also met with success. The Sword of Allah rode into Damascus at the head of his army with Al-Ashtar riding beside him, both men – their white robes brightly illuminated by the midday sun – surveyed the defeated with stern-faced contempt. The governor had capitulated and flung open the eastern gate even before a single Muslim had forcibly entered the town. The superior numbers which Khalid possessed, due to the diversion of troops from the other amirs, made the fall in the east of this last frontier bastion of the Byzantine empire only a matter of time.

The governor led the entourage on foot, hands bound and a rope around his neck, but at the same time holding his head high. Muslim riders – most on horses, some on camels – formed a river of bobbing turbans and kaffiyah that meandered down the Street Called Straight, the only one which completely traversed the city. Wary citizens watched in dismay as the procession passed between the Corinthian columns that lined both sides of the street and advanced through the triumphal arches erected centuries earlier by the Romans, to honor their own warriors. The conquerors greeted the crowd with a potpourri of bland expressions, menacing scowls, and gaping smiles which begged for a complete set of teeth.

When the army reached the bazaar of the oil merchants, Khalid stopped abruptly. He reached over and grabbed Al-Ashtar by the shoulder, almost pulling him off his horse. "What's this? Do my eyes deceive me or is that the son of Abu Sufyan up ahead?"

"Surely it is, but I don't understand how," Al-Ashtar replied.

"Nor do I. I thought I gave orders to have him eliminated."

"Farouk was to attend to that."

"Summon him here, now."

Al-Ashtar turned his horse and spied Farouk a little ways behind. He gestured for him to come forward.

Farouk rode up beside the Sword of Allah who had his arm outstretched, pointing ahead.

"Explain that," Khalid said.

Farouk shifted uncomfortably on his steed and blew out a stream of his breath through the hole left by a missing tooth. "I just received the report. It seems that all arrows either missed their target or were deflected by random occurrences. Remember, these attempts could not be overt – many times the shots were made from the waist, without the benefit of a true aim."

"Excuses!" Khalid cast a doubtful eye at Farouk. "How many men did you charge with accomplishing this?"

"Two, so as to keep the plan secret," Farouk replied.

Khalid fondled the hilt of his sword. "Tonight cut off one of their hands each, they are obviously of no use to these persons." He paused for a moment. "No, better yet, execute them on the pretext that we had learned of their plot to assassinate one of our leaders. Be sure to announce that *after* they've been disposed of. Understand?"

Farouk nodded.

"His good fortune aside, I still can't understand how he could have gained access to the city before us," Khalid said, "especially with reduced strength."

"Perhaps when we entered in the east all gates were opened," Al-Ashtar replied.

"If that were so then where are Amr and the others?"

Khalid turned to his interpreter, a old Persian scribe captured in Al-Iraq. "Ask the governor if he has directed all the inhabitants of Damascus to cease resistance and lay down their arms as I commanded?"

"No," came the answer.

Khalid stared down at the governor from atop his horse.

"Do so, now, or forfeit your life!" The interpreter translated.

The governor quickly obeyed and summoned messengers to run to all the gates and pass on word of the surrender.

I heard Khalid's order to the governor as I approached with the captain of my guard and several other men.

"No need to inform the west gate," I said. "They've already surrendered." With a wave of my hand, the commander of the west gate was brought forward and delivered to the governor. "I'm now prepared to accept your surrender of this city." I awaited the expected response.

Khalid and Al-Ashtar turned and looked at each other in disbelief.

"Hold a moment, my young compatriot," Khalid said. "It is I who will take the surrender of Damascus – the governor himself has opened the city to us at the eastern gate. He has relinquished control of the entire settlement to me."

"Apparently not, if he's just giving the orders to cease hostilities now," I replied. "We conquered the western gate and gained entry by force, and did so prior to your entry from the east, otherwise we couldn't have arrived at this spot before you. *I* should therefore be the one to accept his surrender." I knew this argument was weak. Capitulation by the ranking authority would normally hold for the whole city, if that were the only event that had occurred. But I was not about to give in to Khalid.

"When he arrives, Amr will decide," Khalid countered.

This I expected, but not so quickly. Amr's interpretation would favor Khalid based on precedent, and I was not in a position to object to such mediation.

"Very well," I agreed, "Amr shall decide."

The next day the treaty securing Damascus for us, and the safety and personal possessions for its inhabitants, was signed in a small church known as the Maxillat. The treaty bore the name of Khalid ibn al-Welid as the representative for the conquering forces and was dated the fifth day of the month of Rajab in the year 14 AH. As I predicted, Amr determined that protocol demanded the honor be given to Khalid, although he told me privately that he had wished to bestow it upon me. In his report to Omar, Amr stressed that it was my forced entry in the west which caused the realization of the inevitable and hence the city's capitulation to Khalid in the east. I understood this outcome and it was not of great concern to me. What was important was that I had proven myself before my harshest critic. The Sword of Allah would finally have to accept me as one of the realm's acknowledged leaders.

As we made preparations to establish a standing garrison for the administration of Damascus, and debated the reassignment of troops to other planned battles with the Christians, urgent news came by messenger from the Khalifah. Amr received the report and relayed Omar's words to me and the five other amirs encircling the fire within Amr's tent at the evening meal. A gusty wind blowing in from the desert caused the tent walls to boom as they alternately flexed and relaxed.

"We have sad tidings from Al-Iraq," Amr began. "Al-Muthanna is dead. He succumbed to a previously inflicted wound and died delirious with fever. The Khalifah has appointed Sa'd ibn Abi Wakkas to assume command there while he considers the best course of action in the east. Khalid and I have been directed to lead armies to the north and south of here, respectively, and complete the conquest of all of Syria and Palestine with the exception of the seaports of Sidon and Beirut which will be the responsibility of Mu'awiya. Mu'awiya will also be the commandant of the garrison here in Damascus."

Khalid pounded his fist into the earth. "I should rightfully be the commander of Damascus," Khalid said, "especially if I am being charged to subdue the remainder of Syria."

"These are not *my* orders," Amr replied. "They come from the Khalifah. It will do you no good to complain to me about his decisions."

Khalid twisted his neck to gaze my way with an unsavory expression. He looked disgusted. I, on the other hand, was quite content, having gained stature in obvious recognition for my part in the taking of a most prized city. I could trust that Omar would look out for me... or at least avenge my death should something unfortunate befall me.

Amr continued. "These orders are effective immediately. Are there any questions – that aren't complaints?"

All were silent.

Over the next year and a half, our fortunes ebbed and flowed as incursions by the Greeks took place periodically in their attempt to regain lost territory. Damascus even changed hands twice more; first to the Greeks, then to be recaptured by us a year to the month after its initial fall, following a decisive battle to the south on the plains of the Yarmuk River. From that point on, it was very much one-sided. Our army not only recovered all formerly held ground, but advanced to conquer new lands too. My brother Yezid and I captured Sidon, Irka, Jubeil, and Beirut on the coast of the Mediterranean; Khalid pushed northward and took key towns as far away as Antioch; Shurahbil led our forces into Palestine seizing Acre, Tyre, and Sepphoris; and Amr led the siege of the ultimate prize of all, Jerusalem.

Late one afternoon in the town of Sidon, Meisun and I sat on a low stone wall, watching the fishing boats return from the day's catch. Date palms lined the shore, their silhouettes black

against a sea brightly illuminated by the setting sun. Long feathery shadows stretched across an uneven patchwork of grass, rocks, and sand to reach us amid the softening light. A two-wheeled cart drawn by a solitary mule passed in front of us, stirring up a trailing cloud of tawny dust. In the distance, the call of the muezzin echoed through the air beckoning the masses to the day's next to last worship. This was a new sound in Sidon – its former Christian rulers had forbidden the practice of other religions. Two men jumped from the front of one of the approaching boats to pull it onto shore, then the others disembarked and began to unload fish and squid into the cart, which had stopped at the water's edge. Small waves broke upon the sand, making a short, regular rushing sound that I found relaxing. The shoreline, however, reeked of discarded catch and rotting seaweed – an odor I found revolting at first, but which later became tolerable. Several of my men patrolled nearby, lest any harm should come our way. They watched cautiously the goings on at the shore.

"Husband," Meisun whispered, "can we not go someplace where they will not follow?" She pointed at the guards. "They are with us constantly."

"But that's their duty my love. Would you have then shirk their responsibility and let calamity befall us?"

"No, of course not. That is not what I mean." She eyed me knowingly while she caressed my arm. As I was being lulled into comfort, a disturbance arose by the boat. My guards rushed toward it but not in time to prevent the driver of the cart from firing an arrow in our direction.

"Assassin!" Meisun screamed, as she pushed us apart. The arrow whizzed by, passing between us, and embedded itself in a tree behind the rock wall. The assailant fled along the beach with my guards pursuing, while the fishermen got back in their boat and rowed furiously out to sea. Some of my men raced toward the boat, but not soon enough to prevent its escape. The two remaining guards continued their pursuit until they caught the

attacker, pouncing on him and dragging him to the ground. The taller, heavier one of the pair brandished a knife and was about to exact revenge on the would-be assassin.

"Hold!" I said, panting as I arrived on the scene. "I want this one alive." I gestured for the guards to follow me. Meisun caught up to us and peered around my shoulder and over the back of the guard who was still kneeling, holding his knife to the throat of the assailant. The guard began to get up from the ground, pulling the cart driver up with him. At that moment, Meisun leaned forward and spit at the attacker, hitting him in the face.

The man flinched. "Whore!" he roared.

My foot didn't take long to deliver a swift kick to the cart driver's stomach. He doubled over and fell to his knees, groaning.

I shook my fist in his face. "Call my wife a whore, will you? You excrement! For that, your interrogation will be doubly painful." I turned to the guard and motioned with my head. "Bring him."

At mid-morning the next day, the prisoner was taken to a desolate area outside of town where a colony of ant hills dotted the earth. I ordered that he be staked down at a spot where several mounds lay clustered together. The assailant was stripped and his wrists and ankles secured to pegs which had been driven deep into the soil. He lay splayed face up under the scorching sun, directly on and surrounded by the nests of the voracious insects. I knelt on one knee close to the cart driver's head and looked him in the eyes while explaining exactly what my men were going to do to him if he didn't cooperate. The ants were already starting to bite.

"I won't talk," the prisoner vowed. He squirmed and arched his back.

"We'll see about that," I replied. "A day in this heat in the company of our little friends will drive you insane. You'll soon break, and then you'll talk."

A strengthening breeze blew sand across the largely colorless, overgrazed landscape and onto the prisoner. I walked over to a nearby tree, broke off a small branch and handed it to one of the guards, instructing him on my intent. The guard subsequently drove long slivers from the branch under the prisoner's finger nails, eliciting blood-curdling screams from the cart driver.

As time passed, we watched from the relative comfort afforded by the tree's shade while the prisoner writhed and growled in response to his torment. As more time elapsed, he finally cried out. "Water! Water!"

"Yes," I said from a distance, "we have water here." I held up a qirbah, waved it at him, and poured a few mouthfuls on the ground. I walked over to the prisoner and placed a couple of drops of the life sustaining liquid on his tongue.

"More, more!" he begged.

"Not so fast. You must first tell me who your cohorts were, and who put you up to this attempt to assassinate me."

The captive stared coldly at me, his jaw quivering, beads of sweat dotting his now crimson face. He grimaced as the ants fed on his flesh. "Never," he said. "I have my word and my honor to uphold."

"So be it, then – there'll be no more water for you." I took my dagger and broke open an ant hill adjacent to the cart driver, stirring it up before returning to the shade of the tree.

"Ahhhhhhh, grrrrrrrrrr!" The prisoner screamed, growled, and wriggled uncontrollably as an army of the tiny insects attacked him in full force, the frenzied mob biting at the softest parts of his body.

One of the guards approached me. "We must catch him at the right moment, commander. If he becomes too crazed there will be no telling what lunacy he will pass on to us, *if* we can understand his raving."

The midday sun continued its relentless attack on the cart driver while the ants feasted on the roasting delicacy. Three hours

under the blazing orb, being eaten morsel by morsel, was taking its toll on the prisoner, who was now swollen badly over all parts of his person.

"Help me!" he cried, feebly.

I walked casually over to him and looked down at his desperate face. "Are you ready to talk?"

"Yes, yes, anything! Just cut me loose."

I produced my dagger and prepared to free him of his bonds. "First, some answers. Who were your accomplices?"

The prisoner rattled off a handful of names with an occasional growl interspersed between them, in reaction to the continuing assault of the ants.

I knelt on one knee and pushed his chin upward with my khanjar. "And who commanded you to do this?"

The captive looked at me, his eyes wild with hate, madness, or both. "One of your own people. Al-Ashtar ibn Harith."

In the month of Dhul Kada, 15 AH, Jerusalem was surrendered. Omar himself traveled from Medina with Othman and Ali and a retinue of guards and followers to formally accept the terms of the peace, despite warnings from his advisors that he should not do so. Othman told me that he had to persuade Omar, some distance prior to entering the city, to dismount his camel and instead ride a horse into the town, and to shed his worn camel-hair shirt in favor of apparel suitable for a head of state. Omar did this reluctantly, in opposition to his normally pious nature, and rode through the city gates to be met by the Patriarch of Jerusalem who we kept safely in our company for that specific occasion.

Amr had summoned me and his other amirs to Jerusalem to partake in the capitulation. The winter coolness in the hills upon which the city sat caused me to shiver, even during the day.

It had rained twice since I had been there and once a small amount of snow fell, but didn't stay long. Nevertheless, except for its trees, Jerusalem looked dry. I arrived almost one moon before Omar entered the city from the north, through the gate bearing the name of the famous Roman emperor, Hadrian. A cross of solid gold, the height of a man, sat atop a tall marble column on the cobblestone plaza just inside the gate, towering over the city like a proud bird of prey. It would come down the day after the treaty was signed. The pillar-lined *Cardo Maximus*, with its somber churches and hectic bazaars, ran long and straight from the plaza through the entire length of the town. Half way down, on the west side of the street, the most revered of the city's Christian places of worship, the Church of the Resurrection, stood amongst an enclave of modest dwellings. Built of a mysterious brown stone that changes hue as the sun transits the sky, its roof an undulating sea of red tiles, the church is said to mark the spot where the Prophet Jesus died and was buried.

As Omar arrived, a hooded holy man dressed entirely in white blew into a ram's horn. The long, loose-spiral instrument emitted short, pulsating, nasal blasts to announce the *Khalifah's* coming. A Byzantine soldier scolded the holy man and seized the horn, pointing him off to the south along the *Cardo*.

"Welcome to Jerusalem, the crowning jewel of our conquests," Amr said as he approached Omar's horse. The *Khalifah* dismounted and brushed the dust from his clothes, an elegant robe of deep blue – a kingly color – and a freshly wound white turban. As he looked about, I could see newly formed fringes of gray around the upper edge of his beard and mustache.

"It's good to see you again, Amr. It has been a long time and you've done well for us since our last encounter." Omar and Amr braced arms and delivered a kiss to each other's cheeks.

The two men were followed by Othman and Ali as they walked toward Khalid, Shurahbil, and myself. The Patriarch waited alone, largely ignored, while we exchanged greetings with Omar.

"You are all to be commended on your splendid accomplishments of the past year," Omar said, reiterating the praise he had given Amr. "You have advanced our cause far beyond my expectations and, with your gains, we now control all the territory from the Sea of Persia to the Mediterranean. We have just recently taken Al-Medain from the Persians after an eight month siege. Today, the fire worshippers hold nothing in Al-Iraq. Islam has triumphed over the two most powerful empires in the world and we shall go on to take their very homelands, mark my words."

We all nodded and voiced our enthusiastic concurrence.

"Now, let us attend to the business for which I came. The treaty."

Omar introduced himself to the Patriarch who in turn did likewise. "I am Sophronius, the Patriarch of this holy city which your soldiers have defiled by their very presence."

Omar recoiled at the rudeness of the introduction. His eyes narrowed as he straightened his posture, dwarfing the Greek who stood no higher than Omar's chin.

"Your implication concerning my people is unwelcome," Omar replied angrily. "This city is as holy to us as it is to you. Surely you are misguided to think that my men have no right to be here. This is the place where the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, made his ascent into heaven. It was the first Kibla of Islam – we faced here to pray. So you see, Jerusalem is venerated by us true believers too, not only for these reasons but out of respect for your prophet Jesus as well."

This aroused the Patriarch. "Jesus was no mere prophet as you would believe, he is the Son of God, God Incarnate, one of the Holy Trinity. Your people seem not to be able to comprehend this and feel that your... whatever his name is, is of equal importance."

Omar's eyes flashed. He curtailed the conversation, exercising uncommon restraint.

"Let us conclude with the capitulation of the city," he said. "Where's a suitable place?"

Sophronius looked away from Omar. "Any place other than a church," he replied.

We walked down the east side of the Cardo under the shade of a sloping wooden canopy which spanned the gap between the street's hewn stone walls and a parallel row of pillars. Every so often we passed a niche cut into the gray wall which housed a merchant selling his wares, the patrons yielding to let us by. A baker, two stalls ahead, yelled in Hebrew as he ran from his nook to pursue a young, dirty-faced thief whose oversized, hole-ridden robe impeded his escape. Meanwhile, an even younger accomplice loaded a sack with bread and himself ran off as we approached. It was not long before we encountered, on our left, the first church.

"This place will do," Omar said.

Sophronius sneered. We entered, escorting the defiant Patriarch across the threshold.

The damp, chilly interior was dimly lit, except near the door. There, the afternoon sun shone dust filled beams of light on a brown and white mosaic floor depicting a lamb in the lap of a saintly figure. A host of candles burned in alcoves on either side of the church, while oil lamps suspended from the ceiling by long chains provided a meager amount of illumination throughout the rest of the structure. Omar stopped a short distance away from the door, beside a small wooden table. On it, a quill and a bowl of ink, along with a list of names. The soft pat, pat, pat of a monk's sandals on stone echoed at the far end of the church where a sizable alter was situated. Around it, a shadowy wraith performed his duties.

"I have brought with me an agreement that I've drawn up myself," Omar began. "It stipulates the terms and conditions under which we will accept your surrender, and grants to your people certain privileges and freedoms. These will include the safety of their lives and property, and the freedom to practice their

own religion... as long as it doesn't threaten or denigrate ours." On this point, Omar gave the Patriarch a particularly sinister look. "In return, all Greeks must leave and go back to their motherland. All remaining able-bodied men must pay a tax of thirty dirhams each year as well as providing a specified amount of food and oil to sustain the Arab population which will reside here."

Omar gestured to Ali, who handed him a scroll. The Khalifah unfurled the document and presented it to the Patriarch.

"Sign it," he commanded. Sophronius placed it on the table and signed it, reluctantly, whereupon Omar also put quill to parchment. Following this, Amr, Khalid, Shurahbil, and I signed the document, in that order, as witnesses. Othman and Ali, not having participated in the conquest of Palestine, did not sign.

Omar picked up the scroll and inspected it. He blew on the parchment to hasten the drying of the signatures. "It is done." He looked up at the Patriarch. "Go, Sophronius. Spread the word to your people that we are now masters of this place, and notify them of the terms of this agreement. You will have one of your scribes meet with Ali forthwith to translate these provisions into Greek and Hebrew. You shall post them so the townspeople may know their responsibilities."

"Greek will suffice," Sophronius replied. "There are few Hebrews here and those that remain are able to read my language."

Omar placed his hands on his hips and glowered at the Patriarch. "Greek *and* Hebrew!"

Sophronius looked Omar in the eye, saying nothing for a moment. "Greek and Hebrew," he repeated.

As Sophronius left, I overheard Omar whisper to Amr. "After he has served his purpose, relieve this blasphemer of his tongue, then send him back to Constantinople."

Amr gave a slight nod.

Omar then turned to me. "Come, we must talk."

We continued down the Cardo, followed by several guards who were ready to intervene at the slightest sign of trouble.

"Mu'awiya, I am about to make you an offer, one which will undoubtedly cause displeasure to Khalid and perhaps to Amr as well. I feel, however, that you are better suited for this duty than Khalid and as amply qualified in temperament as Amr, but I have another mission for him." Omar looked into my eyes. "Do you feel confident in your ability to govern all of Syria? If you say yes, it's my intent to appoint you to do so."

A governorship! This is what I'd been waiting for. At last, it was mine for the asking, and of a rich land with a famed capital. I was tingling all over, my mind reeled, I felt like jumping up and down like a child.

"I do," I replied, in a serious, matter-of-fact manner, "and I will govern firmly yet justly, as you would have it. But I'm concerned about how Khalid will react to this news. You've replaced him as leader of our forces in Al-Iraq and passed him over as commandant of Damascus. After aiding in the conquest of Syria and Palestine, he must feel that he's owed something."

"He has amassed a small fortune from the spoils of his victories, more than he should rightfully have. Although I can't prove it right now, I believe that he's been understating the value of the treasures gained in his conquests. He is owed nothing."

"And what of Amr?"

"I'm hoping that he'll be content with the task I have for him. After giving Amr some time to rest, I will ask him to lead our army to the land of the Pharaohs. We'll take that from the Greeks as well."

I was satisfied that the challenges I might receive to Omar's decision had been thought through and that my appointment could be defended convincingly. "Very well, I accept your offer. But what do you plan to do with Khalid? He'll certainly cause me grief if he stays in Syria."

Omar became distracted as we neared the end of the Cardo. On the east side of the street he spied a magnificent church of great proportions. He pointed toward it. "Remind me to tell Amr that this should be the site of our first mosque here."

I told him I would do so.

"I shall recall the Sword of Allah to Medina where he can be watched more closely, until I can find a suitable place for him. Fear naught of Khalid, I will keep him in check. Now, let us return."

Experience told me that keeping Khalid in check wouldn't be easy. Even from Medina he could direct his minions to interfere with me if he so desired. We turned and walked in the direction from which we came.

"Khalifah, I would also ask that you order Farouk and Al-Ashtar back to Iraq along with Khalid's troops, who are to return there soon anyway, otherwise these two will be troublesome. I believe Al-Ashtar was behind an attempt on my life several months ago."

Omar stopped in his tracks and turned to face me. "This is the first I've heard of *that*. Where did it happen?"

"In Sidon... but the assailant was murdered before I could confront Al-Ashtar with his testimony, and the others named in the plot denied any knowledge of it."

The Khalifah fed the end of his mustache into his mouth and began to chew. "Where are those two now? I have something to settle with Farouk."

"They haven't arrived here yet," I replied. "I'm not sure they will."

Omar stood motionless with a deeply troubled expression on his face. "Very well," he said. "It shall be done. I'll announce your appointment to the others at this evening's meal."

Omar made the pronouncement as he had promised and the reaction of the amirs was as expected. From that point on, I was governor of all of Syria. Omar also took the opportunity to

inform the Sword of Allah of his orders and those for his two amirs as well. But somehow I knew that Khalid would not comply with Omar's instructions, and I was right.

Chapter 17
AH 15/ AD 637

Khalid waited impatiently for the last of his guards to leave the building, the sound of their footfalls diminishing steadily until, at last, they could be heard no more. One week had passed since Omar's departure for Arabia. Khalid had not yet told Al-Ashtar and Farouk that he intended to ignore Omar's directions – a move Khalid knew risked division and strife within the emerging empire, but that didn't matter anymore. The three sat opposite each other on the floor of the dank nave of Jerusalem's Nea church, the church Amr had directed be used as a mosque until one could be built. The Nea was the largest structure Khalid had ever seen – wider than eighteen camels queued end to end, and twice that in length. At its strongest points, the eastern wall was as thick as the city wall of Damascus. On its inside, bitten out of the wall, stood three immense semi-circular prayer niches, the southern-most of which would serve nicely as the mosque's mihrab since it was aligned with the direction of Mecca. Khalid's head pivoted to one side, then the other, as he gazed upward at the enormity of the interior. A multitude of candles burned in the iron ring chandeliers hung from the ceiling, encircling the mosaic-filled dome which crowned the building. The Sword of Allah had purged the church of its Christian caretakers, turning them out into a soggy winter overcast that drizzled whenever he was outside and stopped as soon as he sought shelter. Other than the

three amirs, and the strong lingering odor of incense, the church was deserted.

"I will not go to Medina," Khalid said. His thumbs battled each other while his fingers locked his hands together, whitening the knuckles. "I would feel no more at ease there than I would in a pit full of snakes. Combat is in my blood. I must be at the battlefield, not at a seat of administration."

Al-Ashtar lunged forward until his face almost touched the other two. His dark dagger eyes bulged as if they might jump out at any moment, his breath reeked of garlic. "Yes, and you are right to feel that way! The Khalifah cannot treat you so, after all you've done for the Cause." He shook his fists at the air and then settled back onto the cold stone floor, arms folded, looking off to the side at an incense burner which smoldered beside the statue of a holy woman cradling an infant. A thin stream of white smoke drifted upwards, interrupted by an occasional current of morning air that fragmented the plume in a zig-zag fashion.

Khalid turned his attention to Farouk. He could barely make out the features of the sheikh's deep bronze face against the backdrop of daylight which invaded the church through its open doors.

"You always have an opinion on such matters, Farouk. What say you?"

Farouk's fingers combed through the ends of his chest length beard, slowly untangling the bird's nest of strands.

"It is not wise to incur Omar's wrath so soon," Farouk said. "Disobeying an order from the Khalifah is an affront to his position – you will be inviting a harsh reprisal. Consider going to Medina, for a short while, until Omar becomes involved with something else, and then return quietly."

"Hmmm... that idea has merit," Al-Ashtar said, waving his finger at Farouk.

Khalid thought for a while, then shook his head. "No. If I go back now I shall never return. I dreamed of this once. I will take my chances and delay for the time being. There are still

cities to be taken in the north and as long as I am involved in these campaigns I can justify my absence from Medina. You, Al-Ashtar, must lead a portion of the army back to Al-Iraq for it appears they are truly needed there. Farouk shall accompany me north."

Farouk quickened the pace at which he preened his beard. "If I too refuse to do as Omar has bid, he will certainly suspect that I've counseled you to defy his authority. My ties to the previous Khalifah's family won't protect me. He'll view such an act as treason – it will surely cost me my life, especially considering my rebellious past. Maybe it would be better if I accompanied Al-Ashtar to Iraq. He'll need my help."

"No, I want you to come north with me," Khalid said.

"There will be ample reward in it for you, my friend."

Farouk swallowed hard, and agreed to Khalid's request.

Ali sat silently with Omar and Othman around the short-legged wooden table that had been Abu Bakr's favorite possession. A Persian slave hurried to finish lighting all ten oil lamps in the Caliph's meeting room as the open shutters of the room's sole window ushered in the cool evening air of Medina. Ali watched above the courtyard wall where the pink and gray haze of the eastern sky gradually turned to orange, then blood red, before all color faded and the day succumbed to the darkness of night. An owl called to its mate. When the lamps were lit and the slave departed, Omar continued the conversation.

"Let us review the facts."

"The facts are plain and simple, Khalifah," Othman said sternly, leaning forward over the table toward Omar. "Khalid disobeyed your order to return to Medina, he still diverts substantial sums of money away from our treasury into his own, and one of his henchmen tried to assassinate your governor in Syria." A deep furrow appeared in Othman's brow. As he

approached his sixty-third year, the wrinkles in Othman's face and forehead grew more pronounced, giving him a perpetual look of concern which added to, rather than detracted from, his stately features.

Ali bristled at Othman's obvious partisan slandering of the man who had done more to advance their interests than any other, except for Muhammad himself. He jumped to the defense of the Sword of Allah.

"Stay your tongue, Othman." Ali turned to Omar. "Khalifah, you know Khalid fights our enemies in the name of Islam. Surely you realize that one such as he cannot ignore the call of conquest for such a noble cause. I'm confident that when Antioch falls, he will return to Medina. On the question of monies, nothing is proven, and as for the assassination attempt, I find it preposterous to even suggest that Khalid had anything to do with it. Al-Ashtar was engaged in northern Syria at the time and had never ventured into the coastal area. How could this assailant, a lifelong resident of Sidon and unknown to us, have come into contact with him?"

Othman pounded the table. The parchments and quill which rested upon it shifted position and ripples appeared in the oil of the open-topped lamp. "He could have sent one of his uncouth Bedouin countrymen who didn't have the sense not to convey the source of the order to the assassin. He didn't need to have direct contact. You make flimsy excuses to protect this renegade bunch. Why?"

Omar intervened. "My cousins, let us not quarrel. We're all concerned about an attempt on the life of one of our amirs. I know you, Othman, are particularly troubled since Mu'awiya is family to you. And Ali, regardless of the past contributions of any of our leaders, insubordination and theft will not be tolerated. If the latter of these charges proves true it will be the undoing of one of our finest, and as much as I do not wish that to happen, I must investigate this apparent misappropriation."

Ali's breathing became quick and deep. He searched within for the right thing to say, but erred. "Omar, you have never been a friend to Khalid. You mustn't let your personal feelings influence your actions in this matter, you..."

"Enough! This has nothing to do with the past – only the present. I would do the same even if it were my own son. This matter will be looked into further, and if the circumstances warrant it, Khalid will answer for his actions. There is no middle ground here."

"But..."

Omar raised his hand, silencing Ali.

Ali fumed as he noticed Othman trying, not too successfully, to suppress a sly smile. The Caliph's eyes remained riveted on Ali.

"We have talked enough for tonight," Omar said. "It's time for you both to leave and reflect on the situation before us – difficult decisions must be made. Go now."

Ali and Othman left together, Ali loathing the elder man's presence. The Prophet had taken Othman into his innermost confidence. Now, the once trusted advisor returned to the age old ways of the house of Omia. Ali slowed his pace until they were outside when he could put more distance between himself and his new-found enemy.

Ali walked slowly from the Caliph's meeting room, across the courtyard of the mosque, to the burial place of Muhammad and Abu Bakr. They lay under what had been the earthen floor of the abode of Aisha, Muhammad's favorite wife and the daughter of Abu Bakr. The small mud-brick room was separate from the other accommodations, its door bolted shut by long iron pegs imbedded into the ground and its lone window sealed. Ali ran his hand across the abrasive exterior, removing a thin layer of grit on his fingertips. He knelt down, sitting on his heels, facing the crypt.

"Cousin, there is more here than meets the eye. Your successor's successor seeks revenge on our most notable amir and

the Cause will suffer for it. I must get word to Khalid. I will send my eldest son, your grandson, Al-Hasan. He has seen thirteen years this very month. It is time for his first test of manhood."

Ali looked up into the blackness of the night. The scorpion stretched ominously across the southern sky – danger lurked. "May Allah bestow upon me the strength to do what I must, and the wisdom to see the way." He fixed his gaze on the crypt once again. "Fatimah gave me two wonderful sons and two beautiful daughters. Watch over them all."

The moon had passed from full to new and back to full again before Al-Hasan arrived in the town of Kinnasrin, in northern Syria, the place where the Sword of Allah resided when not on the field of battle. Ali's son had, however, not arrived in time. When he reached Khalid's palatial residence, a Byzantine villa built on the site of an earlier Roman settlement, he found two former Companions of the Prophet confronting Khalid, questioning him. The three stood within an arm's distance of each other in the open-air atrium of Khalid's home, the sounds and sights of the proceedings escaping through the door and window cavities into the late afternoon.

The villa looked to Al-Hasan like the type of dwelling a provincial governor might have made his home, prior to abandoning it during the Christians' retreat northward in the face of the Muslim advance. The main building, an unassuming two story hexagon of hewn brick, sprouted peripheral rooms of various sizes and shapes – round, rectangular, polygonal, all with peaked roofs capped with red clay tiles. Delicate stone columns supported covered archways that connected adjacent structures to the hexagon. The apparent plainness of the exterior was deceiving. Beautifully executed dome-shaped windows ushered in an abundance of sunlight to illuminate mosaics in the marble floors of the atrium and other interiors. The mosaics depicted

subjects which were not to be rendered, according to the teachings of the Prophet – people and animals, the creation of which was solely the prerogative of Allah. One of the Companions had remarked so, being careful not to tread on any of the images.

Too late to warn Khalid, Al-Hasan decided to loiter on the outside, near the north window, in order to overhear what was being said, until the time came when he could speak alone with his father's friend.

"Understand, it is not our wish to be here doing this," one of the emissaries said to Khalid. "We come at the behest of the Khalifah and must report back to him."

"I should have your heads shaved and mounted on sticks for this insult – Omar's too! He has no right to accuse me of embezzling." Khalid stretched out his arm and pointed at the emissary. The scars on his hand shone smooth in the afternoon light which revealed gray forming in his, heretofore, uniformly black beard. His eyes narrowed. "And try as he may, he will find no connection to me in this attack on Mu'awiya's life, although I applaud the attempt." He began to clap.

Al-Hasan peered a little further into the window, being careful not to expose himself too much.

"Take care what you say," the other emissary responded, sounding unimpressed by the Sword of Allah, "...lest your own words be used against you."

Khalid's hand crept toward his dagger but he aborted the move, folding his arms and widening his stance. "Let Omar prove what he can. I stand by my actions."

"Just give us some explanation for all this," the first Companion said, as he made a sweeping motion with his arm to indicate the rich trappings surrounding them. A rectangular opening, the length of two men and half that in width, cut into the ceiling of the atrium, hovered directly above a shallow pool of like size and shape. Under the water lay a magnificent mosaic of the surrounding countryside. Across from the pool, an exquisite carpet of obvious Persian origin with intricate red and black

designs graced a windowless wall. Two marble statues of partially clad women, their hair and garments overlaid with silver, flanked the entryway to the remainder of the villa. "And what of this gift to your friend, Farouk, one thousand gold pieces. Where did that come from?"

Khalid was silent. He maintained his crossed-arm deportment.

"We need an answer that we can take back to the Khalifah, something to placate him and show that we did what was required of us. By your silence you are admitting guilt."

Khalid's emotionless eyes stared deeply into those of his primary interrogator. "I am innocent of any wrongdoing," he stated. "Take *that* back to Omar. I shall say no more. Now leave me before I lose my patience."

The emissaries looked at each other with despair and, without another word, turned and departed.

The Sword of Allah watched Omar's men leave and then walked toward the north wall. Al-Hasan's heart raced as he yanked his head back from the window. The sun's rays had not yet entered through the casement, flat on the bottom and rounded on the top, which ran from knee level to above a grown man's head, but they would, before sunset. To his alarm, Al-Hasan noticed the movement of his own shadow across the ground. He pressed his back hard against the atrium's brick wall, holding his breath so as to remain silent. He could barely see a slit of the casement in the brown face which his whole body hugged. He waited. Perhaps the Sword of Allah had moved, giving Al-Hasan the opportunity to go to the main entry way and introduce himself properly. He moved his head slightly away from the wall to better glimpse the window.

At that moment, Khalid thrust his torso through the opening, grasping the boy's robe by the collar, and pulled him inside.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Khalid demanded, his face flushed.

Al-Hasan fumbled for words. "I...I..."

"You're a spy."

"No, no I'm not a spy, Great One. I ..."

"Explain yourself." The gruffness of Khalid's voice made the boy tremble.

"I am Al-Hasan, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin of the Prophet."

Khalid loosened his grip on the boy but still kept hold of him. And he was a boy, not yet a man. Al-Hasan showed no signs of facial hair but grew a forest of long, thick black, curly locks on his crown, exposed as the hood of his white robe, grayed from dust, fell back.

"You can prove this?" Khalid said, in a skeptical tone.

"I have a letter from my father."

Al-Hasan started to reach inside his garment but Khalid stopped him, reaching in himself. He retrieved a small bent piece of parchment, folded and fastened shut by a wax seal impressed with the sign of the house of Hashim. He released the boy, broke the seal, and began to read the letter.

"I'm sorry to be late," Al-Hasan said, "but we had trouble finding this place, and it is such a long journey from home."

Khalid said nothing as he continued to read Ali's account of events in Medina concerning the accusations with which he had just been confronted. He paused. "What was that?"

Al-Hasan repeated his words.

Khalid waved his hand from side to side and shook his head. "No matter, I would have done nothing differently. I'm surprised you were able to find me. Surely you didn't come all this way on your own."

Al-Hasan stopped trembling, the fear drained from his face. "My father sent a small party to accompany me for safe passage."

"Where are they now?"

"Camped on the outskirts of town," Al-Hasan replied.

"I will send someone for them. Come," Khalid said, putting his arm around the boy, "tell me about yourself and of the other news from home. I'll have some food brought and we shall talk."

Al-Hasan stayed in Kinnasrin for seven more days before embarking on the journey back to Medina. He carried a sealed message for his father from Khalid, but was not privy to its contents.

For Khalid, things remained quiet for many months until, in the latter part of the year 17 AH, Khalid learned that he would be put on trial for embezzlement, on the orders of the Caliph. The trial was to be held in the town of Hims, three days ride south of Kinnasrin and, at Omar's direction, would be presided over by a Companion of high standing, Abu Obeida. Tall, slender, and seven years Omar's senior, Abu Obeida had been another of the Prophet's chief advisors. He was a modest, peaceful man who adhered dogmatically to the word of Allah, as conveyed by Muhammad, yet he abhorred the task before him.

The trial was a decidedly unpopular event. Khalid had always proved himself to be a leader beyond comparison, despite his flaws – nevertheless, Abu Obeida was obligated to carry out his duty. Al-Ashtar had traveled from Iraq to join Farouk in protest of their benefactor's treatment, but their pleas were ignored. Farouk bowed his head as Khalid, hands bound, was brought before the public to be arraigned as would a common criminal. Al-Ashtar clenched his jaw defiantly and focused a menacing gaze on Abu Obeida.

When confronted with the charges, Khalid remained silent. Repeated questioning was to no avail – he did not admit guilt, nor did he defend his innocence. At length, Abu Obeida halted the proceedings and commanded that Khalid be taken to

Medina to be relieved of his official position and provide restitution as seen fit by the Caliph.

Ali stood with Omar in the courtyard of the mosque of the Prophet, where Khalid was brought after arriving in Medina under heavy guard. The cloudless morning sky presented a serene azure backdrop to the bleached walls of the compound that blocked a meager northeast breeze. The Sword of Allah, hands tied in the front, dismounted with assistance from his keepers. Ali looked away as the two preeminent leaders met each other with dark piercing stares. Omar was the first to speak.

"You are already familiar with the charges brought against you. I am told you have not responded to them."

For a moment Khalid hesitated, then he lashed out in a bitter tirade.

"With Allah as my witness, you accuse me falsely. You blatantly shame me in the eyes of our people even though you owe me much for the many incalculable successes which have brought you to the position of power you currently enjoy." Khalid raised his arms, each bound to the other at the wrist, and pointed a finger at Omar. Fire burned in his eyes. "Who won back the tribes of the northeast? Who established our footholds in Mesopotamia? Who turned the tide in our battle against the Byzantines and who is still conquering territory north of Syria? It is I, and now you cast me aside with ingratitude, as you would discard the pit of a date. I demand you cease your persecution of me."

Ali's eyes shifted nervously between Omar and Khalid. He wet his lips and cleared his throat. "Khalifah, he has done so much for the Cause, surely you must give him the benefit of the doubt."

"There is no doubt in my mind that wrongdoing has occurred," Omar said, diverting his gaze to Ali. "That the

perception of tolerance of such acts on high should exist will be our undoing, for every petty sheikh and amir in the land will then do the same." He looked back at Khalid. The Caliph's teeth were barred like those of a wolf about to attack. "Whence came the wealth to allow you to live in such luxury and make such extravagant gifts?"

The Sword of Allah stood silent.

Omar repeated the question. "How did you come by that money?"

Khalid set his jaw. "I have only that wealth gained from the spoils of war which Allah has bequeathed unto me during the rein of Abu Bakr and yourself. Abu Bakr sanctioned my stipend during his years and at the time of his death I had accumulated sixty thousand pieces of gold. Anything which I now possess in excess of that was obtained during your rule."

"Very well," Omar replied, arm outstretched, waving his finger in Khalid's face. "We shall value your holdings and anything over sixty thousand pieces will be forfeit, including your palace. I am also, as of this moment, relieving you of your position as an amir in the service of Allah."

Ali's stomach sank and his heart stuck in his throat as though he himself had suffered the renowned warrior's fate. He knew it was pointless to beg Omar to reconsider. Khalid was finished.

Chapter 18
AH 17/ AD 638

After his deposition, Khalid retired with his family to a place within the bounds of Syria known only to Farouk and Al-Ashtar. Farouk, in need of an alliance, accompanied Al-Ashtar back to the newly founded Muslim capital of Iraq at Kufa.

Al-Kufa lay one day by camel south of Babylon, the ancient and ruined capital of Mesopotamia. The new city bordered the desert, providing a ready route for reinforcements from Arabia while still retaining access to the fresh water of the Euphrates, a short distance to the north. In keeping with his frugal nature, Omar approved building Al-Kufa using money from the treasury in Medina, with the stipulation that no man should have more than three dwellings for himself and his wives and children, and that each should be of the unassuming mud-brick style of the Prophet's home. The Kufa Farouk entered was a city laid out on regular lines with a spacious central square that housed a mosque, a livery – where the amirs deposited their camels – and a marketplace. The market bristled with activity amid the combined odors of live animals from the stable and those being cooked as food for sale in the bazaar. The competing shouts of Arab and local Bedouin rang throughout the market as they vied for the best of the late morning fare arriving from the farms and pastures of the Euphrates River valley. Farouk and Al-Ashtar walked in the shade of a wide portico fronting the bazaar, interrupted only by a pair of fine marble pillars, brought from

Syria on the Euphrates, to stand watch at the entrance to the mosque. One street removed from the marketplace, they reached their destination.

Al-Ashtar welcomed his friend into the home he shared with Sajah and several of her relations, none of whom were present when they arrived. The duo found two comfortable cushions, sat, and talked inside the one room structure which was no more than a tent with mud-brick walls. Black curtains of woven goat hair partitioned the interior.

"Omar has gone too far," Al-Ashtar said, with a coldness that belied his thoughts. "Something must be done – this cannot go unanswered."

"Take care in choosing your words when it involves the Khalifah," Farouk replied. He looked nervously about. "It's talk such as this over which people lose their heads."

"We're safe here, you worry too much. Besides, there is more sympathy in Al-Kufa to shed the rule of Medina than I think you realize."

Farouk made a rude gesture. "Just be cautious, at least when I'm in your company."

A single short burst of laughter escaped from Al-Ashtar. "As you wish," he replied. His voice resumed a threatening tone. "But it incenses me to think that after all the victories Khalid has bestowed upon us, this is the thanks he receives. And by our association with him you and I are now outcast too! Look at this place." Al-Ashtar spread his arms, motioning with first his right hand, then his left. "We deserve better than a house of mud." He leaned forward to come face to face with Farouk. "I for one will not sit idly by and see my future disappear like camel piss into the desert sand."

Al-Ashtar reached for a nearby jug and poured a red liquid from it into a cup.

"What do you intend to do?" Farouk asked.

"I'll establish alliances, talk to the army, garner popular support, and whatever else it takes to protect my interests."

"You talk of rebellion, my friend, and I fear it stands not a chance of succeeding."

Al-Ashtar drank from the cup and exhaled a sigh of satisfaction. "Not at this instant. It'll take time and careful thought – I can wait." He offered the cup to Farouk, who stretched out his arm to receive it. "But one person who could be instrumental to us in this is Ali ibn Abi Talib."

"The Prophet's cousin? And why do you say *us*?"

Al-Ashtar shrugged his shoulders. "Why not? He's not content with the state of affairs in Medina, is he?"

"I've heard that, but he is of the Quraysh. Why would he abandon his clan to help the people here in a revolt?"

Al-Ashtar leaned forward. "Power. He has none."

Farouk drank from the cup, swallowing a little and spraying the remainder onto the earthen floor.

"Take care where you spit, donkey," Al-Ashtar said angrily, "remember, you are in my *home*."

"This is wine!"

"Yes, it is wine," Al-Ashtar replied.

"It is forbidden!"

"If you don't want it, give me the cup." Al-Ashtar reached for the vessel.

"It's not a matter of wanting it, it's... forbidden." Farouk hesitated. "Maybe just a little is permissible." He drew the cup close to his chest. "What was I saying? Oh, yes, Ali. He may not want power. Ali has shown little interest in the affairs of state so far and he's not well suited for it. He procrastinates and avoids difficult situations at every opportunity. What kind of leader is that?"

A menacing smile appeared on Al-Ashtar's face, his eyes sparkled. He leaned forward again. "The kind we can manipulate."

At that moment, Sajah entered the house. The men stopped talking.

It had been years since Farouk had last seen the wife of Al-Ashtar, and time had done her no favors.

"Ah, Sajah, you look well," Farouk said, smiling. "Your very presence beautifies this home."

"You are most gracious to say so, Farouk. You are also a great liar. You forget, I am a prophetess, I possess powers of insight that others do not."

Oh excrement, he thought. This woman can't really divine my thoughts, can she? "Whatever do you mean?" Farouk said with a look of bewilderment.

Sajah gave Farouk a knowing glance and then looked away as she set her load of kindling on the floor. "Ali will join you, eventually," she said, "but first there will be a great upheaval, many calamities will come to pass. And this one," she motioned to Farouk while looking at her husband, "will outlive you both."

Farouk delighted in the prediction of his longevity, but noticed that Al-Ashtar was visibly disturbed.

"What prompted you to talk of Ali, whom you know not?" Farouk inquired. "Did you read our minds?"

"I overheard you talking as I approached the house. You two should learn to be more discrete."

Farouk scowled at Al-Ashtar who waved him off, ignoring the rebuke.

"Besides, Farouk, your mind is hard to read." Sajah smiled. "When I try, I see nothing."

Farouk also smiled, and nodded, pleased at this pronouncement until he realized he had been insulted. The smile turned into a frown.

Al-Ashtar, however, was concerned with more important things. "By how much will he outlive me?" he asked.

"That, I don't know," Sajah replied. "What I do know is that there will be great hardship and much more blood shed in the years to come. As for Farouk, when his time is at hand, he will die like a dog." And with that revelation Sajah bowed and, smiling to herself, left the house.

In the year 18 AH, a severe drought caused a famine the likes of which had not been witnessed within living memory. It was the same year that Omar married Ali's daughter, Um Kulthum – a marriage designed to mend the discord created by Omar's treatment of Khalid. I had been governor of Syria for two years, and without major incident. The famine mostly affected the northern half of Arabia, including Medina. Back home, this time was known as the Year of Ashes, for the dry wind which yielded no rain but only dust for nine moons. The Bedouin, hoping to obtain the necessities from prosperous communities that would take pity on their plight, converged on the cities, aggravating the hardship. Omar was determined to bear the same burden as his subjects and refused to eat differently from them, growing gaunt and pale as a result. Wild animals came into the towns and villages – antelopes and ostriches from the plains in the lee of the Madian mountains, feral camels from the desert, even wolves, sought food and water from man. The wolves were killed on sight. Many domesticated herds of sheep, camels, and goats died of starvation or became unfit for use as food. The only animals to eat well were Othman's falcons.

Fortunately, the famine spared Syria. Consequently, I was able to send substantial quantities of food, carried by nearly four thousand cattle and camels which were ultimately slaughtered and consumed with their cargo to feed the people of the Hijaz. By the end of the year, the rains finally returned, restoring crops and herds to levels sufficient to sustain the townsfolk and permitting the animals and people of the desert to go back to their normal way of life. But this did not end the distress in the empire, for the next year plague broke out in Syria and much of Al-Iraq.

The dreaded disease hit Damascus especially hard and it fell to me to control the spread of the pestilence. On the morning

of the day following the last quarter moon of the month of Safar, I conferred with Shurahbil on this matter. We met in my offices next to our mosque which shared space with the Christians in the cathedral of Saint John. The fragrant scent of cinnamon and nutmeg from a souq, a short distance away, permeated the air. It provided a pleasant distraction from the scent of death which had assaulted my nostrils the previous day. We sat opposite each other in wooden chairs with arm rests, a marvelous invention which could revolutionize the art of sitting back home. Three small windows, directly behind Shurahbil, flooded the room with light – crimson from the two containing red glass and white light from a clear pane in the middle. Through it, I could see the distorted ruins of the Temple of Jupiter, a remnant of Roman times. All that was left was a wall of columns supporting arches which ran from one pillar to the next. I sat erect, clutching the arm rests, wearing what felt like the most serious expression I had ever donned.

"It's too dangerous," Shurahbil said, shaking his head.

"No matter. I need you to help lead our people out of the infected areas. They must be taken into the countryside where there is ample space to separate them."

"I have a wife and family..."

"Would you deprive a multitude of others of the same for fear of your own well being? The decision is yours, but if you refuse, our friendship shall end here and now."

Shurahbil looked up at me, distraught, hands clasped, his elbows resting on his knees. "How many people are to be relocated?" he asked in a subdued voice.

"Hundreds of thousands," I replied. "We will then have to go back into the abandoned areas and cleanse them by fire. I've talked with elders who have lived through a plague. They paint a grim picture of what to expect."

The look on Shurahbil's face told me that he wished he was already far away from here. "Which is?"

"Many thousands dead, the problem of burying them, the difficulty in eradicating this scourge. I'll work Damascus and the cities to the north if you'll evacuate our people from the settlements in the south. Conscript whomever you need to assist you but we must begin immediately. For safety, send your family back home to Muta, as I have sent Meisun to be with her people in the desert."

Shurahbil pondered for a moment. "I will do so. Give me one day to organize and obtain supplies. I'll leave tomorrow, if that's acceptable."

I nodded.

The next day, I administered the first dose of unpleasant medicine to heal a city on its deathbed. All the dead and dying were collected by all the sick and transported outside the city walls – Believers to the southwest, Jews and Christians to the southeast. There the dead were burned by those stricken but still living. I begged Allah's forgiveness for disposing of Believers in such a dishonorable manner and forced myself to watch the incinerations, so as not to take lightly the action I had ordered. Funeral pyres, which alternated layers of wood from the East Lubnan mountains with the bodies of the dead, three thousand in all, were soaked with lamp oil and then ignited.

The flames caught slowly at first, but rapidly accelerated into conflagrations that billowed clouds of dense ebony smoke in a southeasterly direction, away from the city. Nevertheless, the ghastly smell of burning flesh and acrid odor of the oil still reached me. I gazed at the spectacle from atop the Bab Jabieh, the west gate, transfixed by the orange flames as they licked the sky and raced around the infernos, caught in a whirlwind. At the same time, whole neighborhoods, mostly in the eastern and southern quarters of Damascus, were set ablaze. A corridor along the north edge of town, bordering the river, was also put to the torch. By day's end, half the city lay in smoldering ruins, burned-

out blackened shells, their roofs open to the sky. Only the northwest quarter remained relatively unscathed.

The sick, whose loathsome duty it was to perform the cremations, were afterwards housed south of the city, in tents erected for them several days earlier. Omar had delivered four thousand Bedouin houses of hair to Damascus as repayment for my help during the famine of the Year of Ashes. Daily supplies of food and water for the outcasts would be set outside the Bab al-Saghir, at the southwest curve of the wall. The sick were charged with the continual removal of those who died and, as complete families were eradicated, with the destruction of that family's tent as well. Only a fifth of those sent to the camp survived.

Two days after the Day of Flames, I led an exodus of fifty thousand out of Damascus and into the surrounding highlands, depositing them in small groups here and there as I made my way northward. These were people, still in good health, from the three contaminated quarters of Damascus. The rich as well as the poor, young and old alike, none was beyond the reach of the pestilence. Except those of privilege and the aged, most of the refugees walked, trudging disconcertedly with whatever belongings they could carry, urging weary and whining children along. I and my soldiers traveled on horseback. The others who rode did so on camel – the wealthy in enclosed litters or lofty riding tents.

When we reached the town of Hims, I did as I had done in Damascus, cleansing the contaminated areas by fire. In one of these areas I was summoned to settle a dispute.

"It's a house in which many family members have died of the plague and which has been marked to be burned," the messenger said. "The landowner is refusing to leave. He says he has no money to go elsewhere."

I followed the messenger on my horse, riding swiftly past countless homes that were engulfed in flames. Thick columns of dark smoke rose into the sky and rained flakes of ash, like black snow, back down upon us while tongues of fire shot hither and yon from the adjacent dwellings. The crescendo of a roof

collapsing shattered the monotonous crackling of burning wood, which gave off a pleasant odor reminiscent of a cooking fire. I stopped behind a man who had his hand outstretched, palm up, arguing with one of my soldiers.

"What's the matter?" I demanded. "Why do you delay? You must leave this place at once."

The man, who was dressed in worn and unclean garments, coughed and cleared his throat before he replied.

"I must have money, my home is all I have."

He turned to faced me as he spoke and a bone piercing chill ran up my spine and back down through my innards. It was Khalid, the Sword of Allah. Our eyes met and there was a silence. He looked as though he hadn't eaten in a week, and in the three years since I'd seen him last, he had aged ten. He lacked his turban, exposing a head of hair that had turned the whiter side of gray, the color of his beard being not far behind. His lean face had developed deep wrinkles around the eyes and from the corners of his nose to the edges of his mouth, following the outline of his mustache. I might not have recognized him but for the scar down the right side of his face, and the dark penetrating eyes which proved an unfathomable window into his black soul – eyes of a kind possessed by no other.

I sat mounted, in a stupor, with my mouth open. White smoke drifted along the ground between us. I recalled the dream I had many years earlier at the camp of Al-Muthanna and I could hear my own words:

"I had a dream last night. I dreamt of fire, fire all around, consuming everything. I was there and Khalid was there, but instead of him being the great one and I the insignificant one, it was just the opposite. 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."

Goosebumps covered my arms until I ran my hands over them to make the bumps subside.

Khalid pulled the robe off his left shoulder to expose a long red scar which crossed his breast. He pointed to it.

"This is a souvenir from the east gate of Damascus, five years ago," he said. "Is that not worth a few dirhams? Do you remember how, together, we brought the Green City to its knees? Or what about this one?" Khalid bent down and raised his garment above the knee to reveal a thin slash mark, the length of one's hand, on his right leg. "I received this one here, during the siege of Hims."

He gazed up at me. "I've lost thirty sons to this plague. Your soldiers have seized my last possession. Surely I'm owed something."

I looked at the haggard warrior, the once great leader, now but a pathetic wretch. For a moment, I thought I saw pain and despair in his eyes. I was mistaken. I remembered Damascus five years before, and the cruelty and humiliation Khalid enjoyed inflicting so much, and the attempt on my life by his crony, Al-Ashtar. I recalled what Omar had said when he suspected Khalid of embezzlement.

"You are owed nothing," I replied, shifting position on my saddle and reining in my horse to keep her centered on the Sword of Allah. The more I remembered, the more it gave me pleasure to see him in this state. "Your present condition is fitting punishment for a lifetime of barbarous acts and deception. You even used the Cause solely to further your own ends."

Khalid laughed. "And you didn't?"

"I carry out the wishes of the Khalifah and rely on his judgement to serve Allah's will."

"I did likewise for Muhammad and Abu Bakr. Were it not for me, you wouldn't be governor today." Khalid coughed several times, eventually ejecting a thick yellowish mass from his mouth.

I stared into his eyes. "You received what was due you long ago. You're owed nothing."

I brought my horse about and slowly rode away from Khalid, indicating to a torch bearer to proceed with the demolition. Khalid's voice rang out loud for all to hear.

"I had your wife!"

I stopped but did not turn to look at him. He repeated the words, slowly and deliberately.

I wheeled my mare around and charged the motionless Khalid, stopping within a hair's breadth of him, unsheathing my sword. I raised it high into the air, and made ready to strike. With my teeth barred, I let out a primal growl, my eyes burning into his... but my arm would not fall. I don't know whether it was because he was just standing there, unarmed, or whether I abhorred the thought of going down in history as the man who murdered the famed Sword of Allah. In either event, it did not matter. Khalid turned and walked silently into the house, which had already been soaked with oil, and sat on the ground in full view through the doorway.

I threw my sword down and galloped over to the torchbearer, grabbing the burning bundle of reeds from his hand, and flung it into the house. The oil fed the seed and fire spread quickly throughout the structure, catching on furnishings and the roof. I watched through the entrance as the figure of Khalid became progressively obscured, his face sometimes visible, then lost behind a wall of flame.

I barked an order at my mulazim. "Watch around the back. Don't let him out."

The plague took almost eighteen moons to abate and, in all, some twenty-five thousand perished. Shurahbil had fallen victim to it as had my own brother, Yezid. Shurahbil's demise was particularly distressing for I felt responsible, coercing my friend into putting himself at risk.

I was with Yezid when he passed, and at that time I experienced great confusion since he was as much an adversary as a brother. But he repented his misdeeds toward me and cried,

asking for my forgiveness, which I gave him. As for Khalid, my men weren't quick enough. I heard that he had escaped both the inferno and the deadly disease, but succumbed to other maladies shortly thereafter. He died in Syria, alone and destitute, in the year 21 AH.

I confronted Meisun with Khalid's assertion that they had sinned together. She vehemently denied it. I chose to believe her. I had to.

Al-Ashtar felt pleased with himself. Repeated forays across the Persian border, mostly at his instigation, caused Omar to rescind the previous Caliph's order banning incursions into that country. As a result, province after province in the land of the fire worshippers fell before the Muslim onslaught. So too in the west, in Egypt, where Amr displaced the Byzantine Greeks as the ruling power in a series of defeats culminating in the fall of their capital, Alexandria. Following this, he pushed even further westward, to Tripoli. By the year 22 AH, the empire extended from North Africa to central Persia, but all was not calm as the seeds of discontent began to ferment in the heart of Al-Iraq. It began in the new capital, Al-Kufa.

In mid-year, 23 AH, Al-Ashtar increased his seditious activity, tacitly aided by Omar's ill advised appointment of Al-Moghira ibn Shoba as governor of Al-Kufa. Al-Ashtar knew Al-Moghira to be an opportunistic, morally corrupt individual, and it was through him that Al-Ashtar was determined to further polarize the Bedouin and Quraysh and work himself into a position of power.

Al-Ashtar gazed about the Governor's audience hall in the "Palace of Sa'd", so named by Omar for the extravagance of the first governor of Al-Kufa. It was not that Al-Ashtar had never been there before, in fact, this would be his fifth meeting with Al-

Moghira in the month of Rajab alone, but he never tired of the lust he felt for the hall's opulence. The Palace was the only building in Al-Kufa built of stone, quarried from the mountains beyond the River Tigris. Its trappings were luxurious transplants from the old Persian capital of Iraq, Al-Medain, which lay eight days due north on the banks of the country's second great river. Al-Ashtar ogled his favorite objects in the audience hall – the life-sized replicas of cats, rams, and foxes, rendered in solid gold, which surrounded a flowing landscape of leopard skins, arranged to permit three to recline in comfort. He pictured himself there, with a couple of concubines, enjoying their delights. A colorful tapestry, depicting birds in a garden – a portrayal one would never see in Medina – hung on the wall opposite.

In the center of the room, Al-Moghira sat before a dark and sturdy wooden table, staring at its scarred surface. Several paces away, Al-Ashtar stood facing him.

Al-Moghira looked up. "So then tell me, Al-Ashtar; given that all you have said is true, why is this happening now when I assume the leadership. Are the Bedouin unhappy with me?"

"They are unhappy with their lot," Al-Ashtar replied.

"Many in our army who conquered Al-Iraq are Bedouin. They saw these lands as their prize of war, but Omar refused to apportion the land. He said it would cause severe unrest amongst the inhabitants, which would threaten our hold on the territory. Right now, they are happy to be rid of the Persians."

Al-Moghira nodded knowingly. "So our Bedouin received nothing for their efforts?"

Al-Ashtar shook his head. "No, they do receive something. They receive a pension from the tax assessed by Omar on the landowners. But the Bedouin feel they get too little, and that the Quraysh receive too much, solely because they were born in Mecca or Medina." Al-Ashtar shifted the weight off his bad leg. "This has now become an even greater problem. Many of the local inhabitants have become Believers and are now

entitled to a stipend themselves, so everyone's share is declining, but the Bedouin's share is declining fastest."

"I am neither Quraysh nor Bedouin," Al-Moghira stated. "Even so, we should right this."

"I'm trying to do just that, and quell the fire of jealousy that the Bedouin have for the Quraysh, but with Allah as my witness, it is not easy." Al-Ashtar looked sincerely into the eyes of his leader. "The Khalifah is reluctant to do anything that might slight the Quraysh."

Al-Moghira thumped his fist on the table. "Omar is not administering Al-Kufa! He placed me in charge because the other Companions forced him to, in order to assert control here, not because he had a choice. That money comes to me and I will distribute it as I please." He straightened his back and his voice assumed a subdued tone. "Of course, I'll need to determine what my share is to be," he said, in a matter of fact way which left no doubt that his share would be substantial.

"The people from Mecca and Medina will not be pleased with any redistribution, regardless of its size," Al-Ashtar said. "But you see, great one, an opportunity presents itself. There is a whole constituency out there who are just waiting for a strong leader to rally behind." Come Al-Moghira, be greedy.

Al-Moghira tilted his head, his eyes focusing far off in the distance. "The Bedouin," he said to himself.

"Yes, the Bedouin," Al-Ashtar whispered as he gazed intently at the governor.

Al-Moghira ran his fingertips over the smoothed blemishes in the tabletop, his eyes locking onto Al-Ashtar's. "While I have latitude in the governance of this place, Omar will not sit idly by whilst I commandeer his seat of power in Al-Iraq. He will strike back with a vengeance, if he is able. My guess, though, is that between the Greeks in the west and the Persians in the east he may not have sufficient resources to devote to a third battle, and that's what we are talking about here – civil war, is it not?"

Al-Ashtar stepped forward, coming to rest with both hands on Al-Moghira's table, his back arched like a cat warding off an intruder. "Do not concern yourself about Omar, he won't trouble you."

Al-Moghira leaned over the table and stared deeper into Al-Ashtar's diabolical eyes. "How can you be so sure of that?"

"Omar will be taken care of."

"How?"

"Leave that to me."

At that instant, Farouk was announced and entered the chamber.

"Ah, this is how," Al-Ashtar continued. "What news Farouk? We need specifics." He nodded permission.

Farouk looked at the governor, then addressed his friend. "I've found the perfect man for our needs. He is Bedouin, knows Medina, and despises Omar. His name is Mutemmam. He has suffered directly at the hand of the Khalifah and therefore is highly compelled to do a thorough job and maintain secrecy."

Al-Moghira hesitated. He looked uneasily, back and forth, between the two compatriots. "It seems to me that if he has crossed Omar's path before there's a good chance he'll be recognized. Omar has a long memory."

"It was over ten years ago, and he says Omar saw him only a day or two. Mutemmam's appearance has changed significantly as well," Farouk replied. "The only one who might recall him is Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, and he resides in Damascus. I don't think he'll be recognized."

"What about this fervor of his for Omar's blood? That could cloud his judgment and cause him to do something stupid," Al-Ashtar argued.

"That's unlikely to happen, and if he does get caught they'll naturally assume his motivation is revenge for the past. He has a strong sense of loyalty to any cause which will adversely affect the Khalifah. Be assured, he won't give us away – I guarantee it."

"Very well then, we will use him," Al-Moghira said, pointing at Farouk. "But if anything goes wrong, your head will be the first to roll! You will be my sole liaison with Mutemmam, I cannot afford to be associated with him. Understood?"

"Understood," Farouk acknowledged.

Al-Ashtar motioned to the governor. "With your permission, most excellent one, we should go now to plan for this most significant of missions, for it will take many months to put things in place so that it's executed properly."

Al-Moghira nodded. "Then do so, and tread with great care."

Mutemmam ibn Nuweira watched attentively, in the garments of a beggar, as people of all stations entered and exited the mosque of the Prophet in Medina. There was only one, however, who merited his interest. When Mutemmam spotted Omar, he made a mental note of when his target arrived and when he departed. Mutemmam did this for several days running. On the last day, he followed Omar to his home.

Mutemmam peered down the lane beside Omar's house and recalled his humiliation. He could almost smell the pungent odor of urine which had imprinted itself in his memory. The Bedouin rubbed his hand over a cluster of pock marks, high on his cheek, where the flies had eaten his flesh. Omar's signature lash marks lay under the beard which covered the better part of Mutemmam's face. "I will repay you a thousand-fold, Omar ibn al-Khattab; a thousand-fold!" Mutemmam looked around nervously, to the left and to the right, to make sure no one was within earshot. Best just talk to his inner self, he thought. Ears have no need to hear what the heart already knows.

The next week, Mutemmam followed the Caliph, every other day, and then increasingly less as the month of Dhul Kada progressed. Omar started his day early, with private prayer

followed by a small meal at sunrise. Afterwards, he either patrolled the town, inspecting the goings on for that day, or attended to administrative matters. He always presided over the noontime prayer service in the mosque and, following the mid-day meal, Omar held audience with the townsfolk to hear their grievances and resolve disputes. He returned home late in the afternoon, sometimes stopping to socialize on the way. His evenings were generally reserved for his family. The Caliph rarely varied his routine.

On the night of the last quarter moon of Dhul Kada, Mutemmam walked the streets of Medina. He stared at the ground, watching it pass beneath him as he strode past the houses of the town's wealthiest citizens. A sudden, forceful blow to his shoulder spun Mutemmam about.

"Mind where you're going. Have you no eyes in your head?" Omar's words reverberated between the stone walls on either side of the narrow street. The Caliph and his two companions stopped and turned to face the Bedouin.

Mutemmam gasped, taking in several short breaths in quick succession without exhaling. "I'm sorry, Khalifah," he said, bowing at the neck to shield his face from Omar's eyes. "I was praying as I walked and must have lost my direction."

Omar cocked an eyebrow. "This *is* a novelty. Who are you of my people that keeps the faith so religiously?"

Mutemmam's heart pounded. "A stranger, Khalifah; visiting from the north." He turned his head slightly to the left while maintaining its downward slant.

"Very well, be on your way, but take heed of others. May Allah watch over you." Omar and his friends turned and walked towards the center of town.

Mutemmam let out a deep sigh as he watched the backs of the three men recede into the distance. Shortly, they disappeared around a corner. He stood motionless for some time, peering down the street, his chest heaving.

"Are you lost?" an aged voice asked him.

Mutemmam wheeled around. Before him stood a short, white haired man whose face was so wrinkled that his features had no definite boundaries. The old man smiled, revealing a mouth absent of teeth.

"No, I'm not lost," Mutemmam said. "I just stopped to think."

"I've seen seventy years, and I can still think as I walk," the old man replied. He cackled, and as his amusement waned, he tilted his head. "I never forget a face, I know you, we've met before but I can't place where."

"We have never met before, I assure you." Mutemmam searched for the old man's name...Kasim, that was it. "No, I would remember you."

"But you can't even think and walk at the same time. How can you be expected to recall a meeting ten, maybe fifteen years past?"

Mutemmam knew that he must dispose of Kasim, but he could not do so then and there, not after the encounter with Omar. "Perhaps you're right. Let's walk together for a while and talk – maybe that will refresh both our memories."

During the last moon of the year 23 AH, in the month of Dhul Hijja, Omar met his end. I witnessed the tragic occurrence. It happened just after the pilgrimage to Mecca in the eleventh year of his reign. He had returned to Medina with Othman and the widows of the Prophet. Meisun and I followed a few days behind on our way back to Syria. I had been governor of Syria for seven years, ruling the lands which extended from Antioch in the north to Gaza in the south, and had seen thirty-eight years in all. As usual, we were guests at Othman's home during our stay in Medina.

On the evening before his death, Omar asked us to his abode to partake of the nightly meal. Othman declined the

invitation. He had important business to attend to with his newest wife, a twenty-three year old widow, and being more than three times her senior he needed to attend to such business early. The stars shined most brightly that night, the air was crisp and clear as it is in Medina at the approach of winter. There was an unusual stillness to the night for this time of year though – not a breath of a breeze. Omar and I talked in the large room containing the cisterns while Meisun helped Omar's wives prepare the food. I sat beside one of the cisterns, absorbing the stored warmth from the water inside.

Omar sprawled on a pile of cushions, some of which sprouted stubby legs. He produced a small sack of dried apricots and tilted it towards me. I removed two pieces.

"It's a great responsibility being the protector of the faith throughout this vast empire we've created, Mu'awiya. Sometimes I feel it's too much to bear but, you know, I would gladly do it again." Omar bit a morsel of apricot in half, and then in half once more. "This charge which has been handed down to me from the Prophet through Abu Bakr is the greatest of honors and one which those chosen cannot set aside. Were it not that I was meant to be the instrument of Allah, I believe we would have been granted none of the numerous victories we've achieved." He popped the last quarter of the fruit into his mouth and sat up. "I plan to add even more conquests to our collection too, for as we speak the outlying provinces of Persia are falling in the east and I've instructed Amr to push west from Tripoli, toward the mouth of the Mediterranean. It will be your responsibility to expand our frontiers northward into Anatolia, and to the gates of Constantinople. In time, we'll rule the home of the Greeks itself. So you see, I have much to tend to."

I tossed the two apricot halves into my mouth, one after the other. "I'll do better than that. I'll conquer the lands from Constantinople to Rome, and beyond, to meet Amr at the monkey's rock." A vision of my former mentor appeared in my

mind. My thoughts drifted. "Amr. It's been years since I've seen him."

"He comes to Medina as we speak and is expected to arrive in a few days," Omar replied. "There are many things I want to discuss with him regarding his upcoming campaign."

"Then I must make a point of seeing him before I leave." The smell of a savory chicken stew cooking over the fire pit made my mouth crave food. I reached for another apricot. "I'm pleased to hear things are going well in the east, but I've also heard that there's much discontent in Al-Kufa."

"There is some, but no more than in the other provinces we've taken from the Persians. Al-Moghira has everything well in hand. He seems to have solved the Bedouin problem."

"Al-Moghira is one whom I would not trust to protect *my* interests so far away."

Omar raised his hands into the air and then let them fall. "He wasn't my first choice to govern but rather the best of a number of poor alternatives. He's capable of doing the job whereas others were not, and that's what I needed at the time. I watch the situation there closely. But come, we must eat. We'll talk about your assignment tomorrow in my office."

I nodded, and we moved into the communal area to feast on the meal which had been prepared for us.

When we awoke the next day, we prayed and had the morning meal as was Omar's custom. We then left his home to tour Medina and talk with the townspeople. The day was beautiful, still cool and clear as the weather of the previous night prevailed, even as the blinding sun raced above the city walls. We strolled up one street and down another until several hours had passed and we had covered the entire town, sometimes conversing with the inhabitants, sometimes just acknowledging a greeting. As the sun reached its zenith, we made our way to the mosque of the Prophet where Omar would conduct prayer service. The courtyard was filled by the time we arrived. Omar was late.

He hastened to assume his position at the head of the congregation, at first facing them, then exposing his back to the crowd. He lifted his arms toward the sky and began to pray.

"Allahu Akbar." His voice, deep and resonant, echoed throughout the mosque.

He had barely finished uttering these words when a figure emerged from the front row of worshippers and swiftly made his way to Omar. Dagger in hand, the stranger hoisted it head high, ready to strike at the Khalifah.

I jumped to my feet. "No!" I cried, one voice in a thousand, but despite all the warnings from the faithful, Omar didn't even have time to turn around before the assailant delivered the first thrust into his back. The Khalifah let out a thunderous groan as a crimson streak ran down his alabaster robe. Five more times the blade penetrated his body, each time producing an inverted red teardrop. Several of us rushed the assassin, who turned his attention to those attempting to subdue him, wounding me and three others. When at last he was disarmed and restrained, one of this small group himself produced a dagger and plunged it into the assailant's heart, claiming revenge for the blood of the Khalifah and then disappearing into the throng of bystanders. Meanwhile, members of the congregation tended to Omar, placing him in a comfortable position and administering small amounts of water. Being in robust condition, despite his fifty-eight years, the Leader of the Faithful was still conscious and lucid, although growing steadily weaker. I momentarily left his side to view the assailant again.

I grabbed the dead man's hair and turned his head toward me, staring at his face for some time. "I know this person – a troublemaker, from many years past." I released my grip on the man's hair, letting his unfeeling head hit the ground, and returned to Omar's side.

The Khalifah lay supine on the hard-packed earth of the courtyard, a rolled prayer mat supporting his head. Bloody finger marks stained his grey beard. "Who was it?" Omar asked in a

weak voice. His eyes meandered as he gently probed his body. Red continued to consume the white of his robe.

"I don't recall the name. He was one whom we punished for inciting prisoners to revolt in the east after the death of Muhammad," I replied. "He's dead now, but we must get you home and have you cleaned and bandaged."

"Yes, yes – take me to my home."

We removed Omar from the mosque on a large prayer rug. I assisted his son and several of the chief Companions in carrying him back to his house, where his wives had already heard the news of the attack. The women dressed the gashes in the Khalifah's torso while waiting for one trained in the art of healing to arrive. When he did, he examined the wounds in Omar's stomach. He made Omar drink a cup of goat's milk, which exited the wounds not long after and much the same, save for the streaks of red, as it had entered his mouth.

"Khalifah, these injuries will undoubtedly prove fatal," the healer said. "It would be wise to make your last testament now."

Omar closed his eyes momentarily and then reopened them. "That has been taken care of. Summon the Companions of the Prophet to my bedside that I may give direction for the preservation of the Faith."

Koreiba answered, choking on the words. "They are here my husband." Her eyes welled with tears.

"Abd ar-Rahman, Talha, Othman, Ali, Az-Zubeir, Sa'd – they are all here?" asked Omar.

"All except Talha who is still in Mecca," Koreiba replied. "Mu'awiya and your son Abdallah are here also."

Othman waved his hand in front of the Khalifah, watching for a reaction. "By the Prophet's beard," Othman lamented, "he cannot see!"

Koreiba covered her face with her hands – I placed mine on her shoulders.

Abdallah dropped to his knees with his hands clasped together and looked up. "Allah! Take him not from us. He serves You like no other. Take me instead." And he too cried.

"Listen to me, Companions," Omar said, straining to be heard. "I haven't much time. You are to chose my successor from amongst yourselves and you will do so by the seventh day after my death. The majority shall prevail and in the event of a tie, my son shall cast the deciding vote." He paused to rest for a moment. "Mu'awiya, I'm sorry but you cannot have a say in this since you are blood kin to Othman."

My heart sank. I finally realized that Omar, my friend, mentor, and protector would soon be gone forever. An emptiness filled me as, I swear, I heard the sound of metal on metal, but all was quiet at Omar's house, within and without.

Omar continued to talk at length about the duties and responsibilities of the next Khalifah. His voice grew weaker with every word. He motioned for his son to come close and whispered something to him. Abdallah nodded and drew back, wiping his eyes.

"Leave me now," Omar said softly, "that I may say farewell to my family." Time, however, did not permit him this, for as the first of the Companions passed through the door, Omar breathed his last breath.

Chapter 19
AH 24/ AD 644

According to his wishes, Omar was buried next to Muhammad and Abu Bakr in the courtyard of the mosque of the Prophet. The chief Companions – along with Amr, Omar's son, and me – laid the Khalifah's body to rest.

For years, in the face of Omar's trust, I lived uncomfortably with the guilt of my doubts of faith. But this guilt weighed more heavily on me, not less, after his death. At the same time, my doubts were reinforced by the cruel manner of end for such a devoted servant. Nevertheless, I promised myself that I would continue to appear a staunch Believer and protect the faith, if for no other reason than the sake of Omar's memory.

Several days of mourning followed the Khalifah's passing but, before long, the business of choosing a successor took precedence, lest the empire be left leaderless and vulnerable.

"An inquiry!" Othman insisted, as he paced back and forth across the Khalifah's meeting room. "That's what's called for in a case such as this. If a conspiracy exists, then the next Khalifah is also in danger."

Ali responded. "There's no evidence of conspiracy – the man was a lunatic bent on revenge." He turned to me. "Is this not so?"

"His name was Mutemmam, I remember him from many years ago. It's not inconceivable that he should seek revenge on

us, and Omar in particular, but why he should wait so long I can't explain."

Othman stopped pacing and sat on the floor at the short-legged table with the rest of us; myself, Ali, Amr, Abdallah, and the Prophet's Companions Talha, Sa'd, Az-Zubeir, and Abd ar-Rahman. The dull yellow light of the solitary oil lamp, centered on the table, made the nighttime gathering look more like a conspiracy of thieves than the solemn assembly it was. The air was cool, as it had been on the night before Omar's assassination, and the wind, which had returned with considerable intensity, portended a storm.

"In any event," Othman continued, "if I'm chosen to be Khalifah I'll see to it that any conspiracy is exposed and dealt with swiftly."

Talha, a relative of Abu Bakr and a distinguished warrior in his own right, interrupted. "We must continue with the selection. Six days have passed since the death of our leader. A decision must be reached by tomorrow."

And so the process continued, each candidate pressing his own claim. Talha himself, as well as the Prophet's cousins Sa'd and Az-Zubeir, had little to support them as qualified contenders. Abd ar-Rahman, a wealthy merchant and man of respected character, was ambivalent about assuming the responsibility attendant with the position, even though he was acknowledged as Omar's choice to succeed him. That left just Ali and Othman.

Ali had the strongest claim to the succession as he was a blood relative of Muhammad and the father of his two grandsons, but he had always been largely inactive in the matters of state. Othman had been the Prophet's friend and confidant and was deeply involved in the politics of the realm as well as himself having been married to two of the Prophet's daughters.

I listened to their discussion over the sound of the wind whistling through the shutters of the room's only window. Outside, an unsecured shutter banged arrhythmically against its window frame.

Amr, seated to my right, produced a small leather pouch into which he inserted his fingers. The faint odor of khat made its way to my nostrils. I last saw Amr during the time of the famine, five years past. The stubble on his face had all turned gray and, from but a short distance away, made it appear that he no longer even had a beard.

"This does not bode well for the future," Amr said under his breath, without looking up. "The house of Hashim opposing the house of Omia once again. This will split the Hijaz."

"Maybe not," I replied, continuing to watch the debate. "Much time has passed since the days of strife between my family and Ali's, and much reconciliation has taken place. We are all Quraysh, it's time to put old gripes behind us."

Amr removed a large oval leaf from the pouch and rolled it into a ball. "For your cousin to rule a divided people he'll need to be a diplomat and exercise even judgement, qualities which elude Othman." He placed the leaf in his mouth and began to chew.

I turned to face Amr. "The Companions will guide him."

Amr gave me a sideways glance. "But will he heed their advice?"

"That's hard to say. He will if he feels he needs to." I looked across the table at Othman, advanced in his years, but still displaying the vigor of youth. "Unfortunately, he's never felt the need to do so in the past."

"Take no offense, Mu'awiya, but Abd ar-Rahman must commit himself to this contest. If Ali wins, he'll be at the mercy of his advisors – if Othman wins, it will bring disaster."

Ali and Othman bandied claims and counterclaims until, at last, Abd ar-Rahman spoke. "In order to help us reach a timely decision, I will set myself aside from consideration as successor if you will all abide by my choice between Ali and Othman to be our next leader."

Amr looked at me with a vacant stare.

"We will agree to this as long as you thoroughly consider the merits of each and not base your decision on personal preference," Talha said. The others concurred in an unruly unison, except for Amr who remained silent.

"You may be assured of it," Abd ar-Rahman replied.

He talked through the night with each of the other Companions and to both Ali and Othman to determine which of the two was better suited to assume the duties of Khalifah. By daybreak, Abd ar-Rahman had decided that the contest was too close to call without knowing the people's sentiment. We marched, single file, into the courtyard for morning prayers. A shutter on the crypt where Omar had been interred only days prior had come open and, propelled by the still present wind, clattered against the tomb's bricked-in window. The day was clear and bright, casting the perfectly defined shadows of a thousand faithful on the tawny earth. Before the crowd which had convened in the mosque, Abd ar-Rahman put Ali and Othman to the test. After asking each an identical series of questions, he addressed the populace.

"Which of these two men has proven himself worthy of the office to which he aspires?"

The cries from supporters of each side reverberated equally throughout the mosque. Without an obvious favorite amongst the public, Abd ar-Rahman made his selection.

"Then hear me people of Medina and swear loyalty to the new Khalifah... Othman ibn Affan."

A tumultuous roar emanated from those who favored Othman, but all was quiet on Ali's side. Even so, everyone present took the oath of allegiance and saluted their new leader as Othman raised his arms high into the air and unabashedly accepted the decision.

Othman was seventy years old when he assumed the Caliphate and his rule lasted for almost twelve years. His appointment to the post ultimately proved ill-fated, however, not only for himself but for the empire as well. In accordance with Omar's wishes, Othman replaced Al-Moghira as governor of Kufa and averted certain rebellion, but the seeds of dissent were firmly sown in Al-Iraq. The dissatisfaction of Ali and his followers with the outcome of the selection further fragmented the Muslims and in particular re-ignited the rivalry between the house of Omia and the house of Hashim. Over the years, Al-Ashtar, ever vigilant, watched and waited in Iraq for another opportunity to undermine the Quraysh to his own benefit. In the summer of the year 35 AH, his opportunity arrived.

Othman's rule was punctuated by favoritism, corruption, and nepotism as many of his relations were appointed to important offices within the government. Othman's crass, argumentative, and self-indulgent personality made him unpopular with all. He cared little for the welfare of the people and his actions, in many instances, fueled the antagonism between the Bedouin and the Quraysh. Al-Kufa remained the locus of this discontent and Al-Ashtar openly became the standard bearer for the renegades. It was with this portrait of Othman in mind that Al-Ashtar incited the citizens of Al-Kufa to turn out Othman's second appointed governor, and the Caliph's submissive reaction to this event signaled to the insurgents that they could reach into Medina at Othman himself. The Caliph's plight was made worse by the rift which separated him from Ali, who remained on the sidelines in Othman's time of need.

Othman's allies, sensing the urgency of the situation, offered to send reinforcements to Medina, but Othman declined the offers. They also entreated Ali to help Othman for the sake of Islam and the empire and, although Ali did not reject the pleas outright, his assistance was measured. This prompted Othman to publicly accuse Ali of being in collusion with the rebels, an accusation which only served to further isolate the Caliph. On the

eighteenth day of Dhul Hijja, after several escalating incidents in Medina, the insurgents, posing as pilgrims bound for Mecca and acting on orders from Al-Ashtar, stormed the Caliph's residence and savagely murdered him.

So ended the reign of Othman ibn Affan.

Chapter 20
AH 36/ AD 656

It was stifling in Damascus on the day I convened my council to formulate a response to Othman's assassination. I'd not seen a hotter day in all my nineteen years in Syria. Sweat streamed from my forehead, down my face, into my eyes, and off the end of my nose. Had it not been for the slight wind, breathing would have been impossible. We sat under the shade of a large canopy suspended by poles, one at each corner, in the courtyard that formed the entrance to my home. It was from there, four streets westward from the mosque along the souq and three streets down toward the Little Gate, that I conducted my affairs when the weather made my official offices unbearable. The breeze rippled across the canopy with a fluttering sound that would have soothed the spirit on a less melancholy occasion. Around the courtyard, bright red roses, their sweet fragrance enhanced by the heat, sagged as both petals and leaves wearied from competition with the air for precious moisture. The amir that I had placed in charge of assisting Othman sat opposite me.

"Your emissary arrived yesterday," I said.

The amir nodded repeatedly. "We came within two days of Medina only to turn back after hearing the news of the Khalifah's demise." He laid a folded, bloodstained cloth on the ground in the center of the council.

"I received this from a cleric fleeing the holy city."

He opened it to display three severed fingers.

"These are said to be Othman's. They were found close to where his body lay." He pointed to the third finger. "This one bears a signet ring which I have examined and verified that it is, in fact, the Khalifah's."

I picked up the bundle and examined Othman's ring finger, cocking my head this way and that, in order to bring it into focus. "Indeed, this is his ring. Tell me more. What's the current state of affairs in Medina?"

"I've received this information third hand," the amir replied, "but I consider it reliable. Othman's killers mutilated him, they hacked at his body and cut off his head. Then they ransacked his home and looted the treasury. After his murder, bedlam prevailed for many days until the conspirators forced the people to select a new Khalifah. In the end, by either design or circumstance, Ali was chosen to lead. All swore allegiance to him. He has not yet moved to seek out and punish those who assassinated your cousin. Many of your relations have fled to Mecca."

I played with the hair on the side of my beard and plucked one out, a gray one like most, but not all, of those which I retained. "It is as Amr had foreseen – the two great houses will be at odds once again."

"Sooner than you think," the amir said. "It's rumored that Ali will replace all the provincial governors with men of his own choosing."

"Is it known who the murderers are?"

"There were many involved. A few were from Medina but most were outsiders, from Al-Kufa."

Cries of "vengeance now" emanated from the council.

I started to raise my hand to quiet them, but thought better of it. My jaw tightened and I could feel my lips almost vanish as I pressed them together. Although I had to look a long way back, I could see a pattern.

"This smells of Al-Ashtar." I motioned to a servant. "Summon my scribe."

"The loyalty of my people is far greater than Ali knows," I said to the amir. "He'll be making a serious mistake if he tries to install someone else in my place. I can assure you all that any such pretender who sets foot in this territory will return to Medina a corpse!"

The council shouted words of concurrence and encouragement. "Hold fast Mu'awiya." "Yours is to command." "We stand with you."

I wrapped the fingers in the bloody cloth and handed it back to my amir. "Take these remains and display them prominently at the entrance to the mosque. I'll see to it that the masses understand what has happened and rally them to our cause."

I dismissed the council as a plump middle aged man dressed in the cloak of his profession approached us.

"You called for me?" the scribe asked, in obvious discomfort from the additional layer of clothes.

"You may remove your outer vestment," I said, pointing to his cloak. "You'll be of no use to me whatsoever if you drop dead from this heat." He shed the garment, folding it and draping it over a branch of the olive tree which grew in the corner of my courtyard.

I directed him to sit and dictated a letter to Amr suggesting an alliance. I had not seen nor communicated with Amr since Othman's selection as Khalifah. I hoped that we were still on good terms. I knew that he held some disaffection for Othman after being replaced as governor of Egypt with Othman's foster brother, nine years prior. I felt ill at ease requesting his help, but I needed Amr now, more than ever.

Ten days later, I received a dispatch from Ali officially declaring himself Khalifah and demanding my allegiance. It stated that failure to submit to his authority would result in unspecified severe measures. I learned that similar letters had been received by the governors of Egypt, Al-Basra, and Al-Kufa.

All acquiesced, to one degree or another, although the Bedouin in Al-Kufa were still at odds with the Quraysh elite there. I did not respond for several weeks, detaining Ali's envoy all the while. Then I prepared my reply and sent it back to Medina with the messenger.

Ali received his visitor in the meeting room of the Khalifah, *his* meeting room, at the mosque of the Prophet in Medina. It had not changed from the austere chamber which Omar, and Abu Bakr before him, used as their primary place of business. Othman had spent lavishly on his cronies and his personal acquisitions, but was frugal in his spending on the old mosque. Ali sat behind Abu Bakr's short-legged table, its top marred by a quarter century of use. Only the cushions were new. To his right, at the end of the table, sat Talha and Az-Zubeir. Through the open window, the afternoon's muted light fell upon an unopened letter which Ali held in his hand. Across the table stood a young man, slender and sullen, wearing a black robe covered with dust.

Ali tore the official seal off the correspondence, hastily unfolded it, and viewed the contents.

"What is this?" he said, as he stared at the blank parchment. He looked up at the envoy. "What does this mean?"

The envoy swallowed hard. "By the time I left Damascus, Mu'awiya had incited tens of thousands in the population to the revenge of Othman's blood." He stopped.

"Yes, go on."

"He's directing their hostility at you."

Ali's jaw dropped. "By what logic or reason does he justify that? I had no part in Othman's tragic end. Can't he see the difficulty I have in bringing those who did to justice? I would be next!"

"No matter," the envoy replied. "The Syrians are being told that you allowed it to happen by not coming to Othman's aid when he needed it. They therefore draw the conclusion that you were involved with the insurgents."

Ali threw the letter aside. "That's preposterous."

"My sentiment exactly, Khalifah, but the die is cast." The envoy lowered his eyes, scanning the worn camel hides which covered the ground. "You had better prepare for the worst."

"Well if it's a confrontation Mu'awiya wants, he'll get one." Ali turned to Talha and Az-Zubeir. "Issue a proclamation, a call to arms throughout the land. We'll need to raise an army more than forty thousand strong to march on Damascus."

The Companions looked at each other warily and began to speak at the same time. "We haven't the men," Az-Zubeir said. "With troops fighting border wars in Persia and Egypt, those maintaining the peace in areas we've already conquered, and a reserve to guard the Hijaz, there are none left to conscript for a siege of Damascus."

"Enlist the support of the southern tribes, from Hadramaut and Yemen. They've always avoided rendering their fair share," Ali recalled. "Beni Kinda caravans regularly work the trade route along the coast. Send word back with them. Tell them it's the Khalifah's command – they've not the option to refuse."

Az-Zubeir began to speak, but Talha stopped him. "We will travel to Mecca to raise a levy of troops," Talha said. "From there we can intercept all the caravans."

Ali hesitated, shifting his eyes between the two men. "Very well. I'll have Al-Hasan recruit a force from the people of Medina. May Allah be with you." With a wave of his hand, he dismissed them.

Talha and Az-Zubeir arose and left, never again to be seen by Ali as compatriots.

Night had fallen in Damascus. The air was heavy with the scent of yasmin, as it often is in the summer. I peered from my window onto the souq and watched the merchants perform the daily ritual of closing their stalls. Half empty baskets waited on the beds of half empty carts while a donkey, harnessed to the front of one, relieved himself. A large crescent moon hung low in the deep blue sky, partially obscured by a minaret, with the brightest of the wandering stars racing the moon to the horizon. It had been fifty-nine days since I sent my request for help to Amr. I finally received his reply.

It appeared non-committal at first, with Amr bemoaning the unjust treatment he received from Othman. As I read on, though, I realized that not only was he declining to enter into an alliance with me, but that he intended to support Ali instead. I could feel my face flush and my stomach churn. I began to sweat. And so it was, in the month of Rabi in the year 36 AH, that I found myself alone, preparing to face Ali and Amr across the field of battle in the land that had become my adopted home.

Chapter 21
AH 36/ AD 657

The initial conflict occurred during Dhul Hijja, 36 AH, at Siffin in northern Syria, not far from the Euphrates river. Al-Ashtar commanded fifty thousand of Ali's men, conscripts from Al-Iraq – Farouk was his adjutant. Al-Ashtar had convinced the Caliph to direct the battle from the sidelines, arguing that Ali was too important to put himself in harm's way. The army from Al-Iraq was outnumbered only slightly by the Syrian force, but even aside from the numerical odds, Ali was still at a decided disadvantage. At his new seat of power, Al-Kufa, the population was divided and restless, while in Syria the local populace staunchly backed their leader. Nevertheless, Ali, with the help of Al-Ashtar, was thrust into the position of defending his title and authority against all who would challenge it.

On the day of first contact, little of consequence occurred as each side sized up the opposition, launching trial forays to measure the enemy's response and to observe tactics. The sun shone brightly on a verdant landscape grown lush from the numerous seasonal steams of winter. A prominent horizon pitted the tide of cloudless blue against a shore of deep green as earth and sky deadlocked. In between forays, a silence prevailed, broken only by the piercing, irregular song of the meadowlarks courting and signaling each other. This tranquility in the fields of Siffin would prove deceptive however. Birds and butterflies went

about their business as usual, not sensing the carnage which was about to occur.

Ali's charger stopped just short of Farouk at the head of the main column. The Caliph looked around frantically.

"Where's Al-Ashtar?" he demanded. "Why is he not here?"

"He is ...," Farouk began. Before he could finish, the absent amir appeared, riding toward them out of the chaotic host of Bedouin and Quraysh.

"He is here. He comes now." Farouk pointed in the direction of Al-Ashtar's galloping mare. Al-Ashtar brought the graceful steed to a halt and dismounted nimbly.

He looked up at Ali and made a salutary gesture, touching his hand to his heart, lips, and forehead in succession.

"You risk your well being coming onto the field of battle," Al-Ashtar said.

Ali remained on his horse and looked down upon his second. "I am the Commander of the Faithful, this is where I should be. How do we fare?"

Al-Ashtar responded promptly. "I've divided our men into five columns – a vanguard, a rearguard, and a central force with two flanks. I ordered the vanguard to advance so as to afford a sizable buffer between the battlefield and the river. The remainder will follow up the rear as the forward column progresses."

Ali straightened his posture and peered ahead from atop his stallion. A sea of bows slung on backs and lances pointing skyward, bobbed up and down as the vanguard made its way forward, some mounted but most on foot wearing chain mail or leather cuirasses. This was *his* army, the embodiment of the authority he now held, an authority that had eluded him for so long.

"And what of Mu'awiya's forces?"

"They're taking up formations opposite ours, as expected, and they outnumber us but that does not overly concern me. Every one of our soldiers is worth ten of their best. Allah is with us."

"Allah is indeed with us but I've seen some of these men you call soldiers and they leave much to be desired."

"Do not think ill of them, Khalifah. They will prove worthy, you'll see."

"I fear not, Al-Ashtar, because I have something for which the enemy would sell their souls." Ali unsheathed his sword and clenching his fist around the hilt, shook it in front of his face.

"The sword of Kosai!"

The sword radiated a silver-blue aura that was not of man's making. Ali effortlessly carved the air with the blade and brought it to rest again before his face. He smiled. "No one who has possessed this weapon has ever been defeated in battle."

Al-Ashtar's eyes widened. "Magnificent! Where may I get one?"

Ali's smile vanished, being instantly replaced by a frown. "You can't. This is one of a kind. It's been in my family for hundreds of years. No other in the world can compare with this!"

"Of course, Khalifah, I didn't mean to..."

"Silence," Ali commanded. "I hear the din of battle nearby."

From a low rise overlooking the plain of Siffin, a short ride away, I watched while troops from both sides took up positions on the field below – Ali's in the east facing mine in the west. The armies looked closely matched, so the outcome of the battle was far from certain. Single combat began as the best fighters from both sides paired off against one another in the sultry midday heat, swords glinting in the sun. I contemplated my fate should we lose and I be captured. I held little doubt that I'd

meet my end, considering that Al-Ashtar had tried to do away with me once before. I should have dispatched that snake long ago. Off to the south another contingent appeared, probably Amr's forces. I cursed Othman's stupidity in his treatment of my former mentor. The column stopped. A small band separated from it and rode in my direction. Amr would likely propose to mediate a surrender, but it was past time for that now, I was not about to back down.

In a short while the party arrived and to my surprise Amr had come himself. I remained silent. My anger and fear rose in sympathy with each other as Amr halted his party and rode forward alone. I twirled a tuft of beard between my fingers. Amr stared into my eyes for a moment and then dismounted. He approached to within an arm's length of where I stood and looked me over.

"You've changed much," Amr said. "Your beard belies your age. Is the hair under your turban gray also?"

"Mostly. I'm more than fifty years now, no longer the young man you once knew. The hair under *your* turban, is it white?"

"Mostly," Amr replied, after a slight hesitation. He gazed at my ample stomach. "You appear to be eating well. Damascus always did have the best food in the world." Amr clasped his hands together, as if praying, and shook them gently.

I folded my arms across my chest. "Certainly you didn't come up here to discuss my eating habits."

Amr nodded. "I've thought much about this during the last several months – about Othman, Ali, and our dealings in the past. As events have unfolded, I've come to the inescapable conclusion that I have wronged you."

I was stunned. Amr never reversed himself once he made a decision. I unfolded my arms. "I don't understand. What prompts you to come to me like this?"

"Othman was Khalifah, and even in my displeasure with him I owed the Khalifah allegiance. You asked me to provide

assistance to our rightful ruler and I failed to do so. When you sought my help against Ali, I was still of a mind that prevented me from aiding the house of Omia, on account of my ire with your cousin."

I stood speechless. We embraced and exchanged the kiss on the cheeks – first the right, then the left, then the right again.

Amr clasped his hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eyes, until his head twitched hard to the right. His eyes drifted back to mine. "What convinced me that I had made a mistake in siding with Ali," he said, "was the doom which befell Talha and Az-Zubeir."

I nodded. "I heard they were both killed, but I don't know the details."

"Ali had commanded them to raise a levy of troops to support him against you, and they did raise an army but they marched it to Al-Iraq, to occupy Basra, where Talha had sufficient support for his own claim to be Khalifah. Ali responded to Talha's move with a force of ten thousand, many provided by the traitor, Al-Ashtar, on the promise that Ali would make Kufa his capital."

"And has he done this?"

"Yes, just this past moon, and he made Al-Ashtar his second in command." Amr shook his head. "The confrontation could have ended peaceably if it weren't for the meddling of Al-Ashtar, that swine. He inflamed the situation and precipitated a battle while Ali attempted to negotiate a surrender. Both Talha and Az-Zubeir fell in the attack. Now Ali is inextricably tied to Al-Ashtar and his insurgents." Amr chopped the air with the edge of his hand. "I will not fall into the same trap."

"I'm pleased and honored that you've come to me, Amr." From our lookout on the rise, I showed him the formations and the location where further strength was needed. "Order your troops to take up a position over there."

Amr gazed upon the panorama below – flat straight ahead, in the direction of the glistening ribbon formed by the Euphrates,

with clusters of rolling hills breaking the monotony of the terrain to the left and right. Unlike the desert, the green fields of Siffin created no dust, so all was plainly visible. Ali's army was arranged in a cross, a central force protected by formations on all four sides. Mine consisted of three columns of three, each containing a large force flanked by two smaller ones.

"So, at last it's come to this," Amr said, his eyes fixed on the fields. "Cousin against cousin, Believer against Believer. I knew this would happen eventually."

"It came to this long ago," I said, "when they elected Othman as Khalifah, I just refused to see it. But the battle lines were forming then – the two houses confronting each other, just as it had been for generations before. I'm surprised it took so long to come out into the open."

I slowed my speech, eyeing the opposition as they began to gather along the river at the far reaches of my vision. "Now I must avenge the murder of Othman, the duly selected Khalifah, and assert my claim as his rightful successor."

Amr cocked an eyebrow. He reached into his robe to produce a leather pouch, hung by a drawstring about his neck. "Ali has the same blood claim to that position as you, even more so since he is kin to the Prophet, and he presently holds the position."

"He may hold the position, but he does so tenuously. His following is split and he's led around by that Bedouin dog Al-Ashtar, who's no more a Believer than...", I threw my arms up in the air. "And furthermore, his claim is tainted by the assassination of his predecessor. Even setting all that aside, he has to contend with our army, and against us he will not win."

Amr removed two khat leaves from the pouch and handed one to me. "His side may not win, but we'll suffer uncountable losses to attain our victory. Besides, do you really believe he was directly involved in Othman's murder?" He inserted the leaf into his mouth.

I chewed on the stimulating herb and swallowed its bitter juice. "No, of course not, but he did nothing to prevent it, and that's inexcusable. Othman was one of the Prophet's closest friends, and how much longer would he have lived? He was eighty-two! Ali would have legitimately been next in line were it not for his inability to commit himself to the side of Right."

"Whatever his prior shortcomings, he has abandoned indecision and committed today on this field of battle to a confrontation which will cost a great many lives on both sides." Amr pointed to the field below and drew a line along it with his finger. "Look, his army has assembled on this side of the river thinking they've cut us off from water. Instead they have only limited their ability to retreat."

I craned my neck to follow his finger. The gathering of Ali's forces I'd noticed earlier had become a long line of black paralleling the Euphrates. "Plan for a quick offensive so that they're still close enough to the river for us to take advantage of that."

"It will be done," Amr replied. "I must go now to counsel with my amirs, my sons. May Allah be with us, but I'll take no joy in this victory. It's a sad day for friend and foe alike."

With the battle lines drawn, our opposing armies commenced hostilities. At first, the fighting was haphazard with a column from one side pitted against one from the other as the rest of the forces looked on. This manner of battle lasted for several days with neither side gaining the advantage. A truce was called during which we tried to negotiate an end to the conflict, but to no avail. Within the week, fighting resumed on a grander scale – the slaughter was horrendous.

Our armies met upon the field in full force, with all columns from both sides engaged concurrently. For half a day arrows rained over the vanguards, to and from the rear echelons, while soldiers on the front lines parried and hacked at their opponents. Those in the rearguard with shields fared well under the hail of projectiles; those without perished, for there was no

natural cover. I visited the battlefield to urge my men on and was greeted with choruses of "To the end", but I was whisked away prematurely by my bodyguard when a cadre of Ali's mounted archers broke through our defenses. Their bowstrings twanged and blurred as the riders released a torrent of death, felling many of my brave warriors who crumpled like puppets cut from their cords. The hole in my front ranks was sealed by a wall of foot-soldiers before I was out of eyesight, with my own archers quickly dispatching the enemy horsemen. The clangor of swords and screams of agony filled the air as I was ushered back to what should have been a safer vantage point.

Both Ali and I were exposed to immediate danger. In Ali's case, Amr broke through the Al-Kufa column with a tremendous charge on horse, forcing Ali to engage directly in the combat. Similarly, four of the five ranks of my rear echelon were decimated by Al-Ashtar and his legion in a sweeping end-around attack which took us by surprise. It occurred in the afternoon of the second day when what I thought to be reinforcements delivered a crippling blow to the first of the doomed columns. Riders armed with swords, bows, and lances converged upon the outermost of my rearguard, thrusting and slashing – impaling and decapitating well over half of my infantry before pressing on to the second line of defense. There, my archers thinned the ranks of Al-Ashtar's force, but not enough to weaken their momentum. The opposition was getting too close. My third and fourth columns met the enemy mounted with a great ringing of sword against sword. Rivers of red ran freely, staining man, beast, and earth. These columns also suffered heavy losses and could not prevent a large band, with Al-Ashtar at its head, from getting through to my final line of defense.

I was ready. Mounted, but armed with only a sword, I met Al-Ashtar head-on in my attempt to escape. Above the neighing and snorting of horses, shouts of men, and the singing of scimitars, I heard my adversary claim me for himself. At this point, I could see my reserves rally, halting the enemy's progress.

Al-Ashtar and I galloped toward an uncertain destiny, raising our weapons, preparing for the all important first thrust. My heart raced as fast as my horse, my skin felt cold and damp. The impact unseated us, taking both me and Al-Ashtar to the ground. We recovered slowly, each scrambling for the nearest sword. Few blows were exchanged before our blades locked at the hilt. A test of strength ensued. As I looked into the blackness of his eyes, Al-Ashtar shifted his gaze momentarily. I heard the cries of my men approaching.

"We will meet again," the Bedouin sheikh promised, his teeth barred.

He pushed back from me and made for a riderless horse which trotted aimlessly nearby. Al-Ashtar mounted from a running start and, in an instant, was gone.

The battle continued through the nights as well as during the daylight hours and, eventually, Ali's side began to gain ground despite its lesser numbers. This was most disconcerting, since I had counted on a short and decisive conflict, albeit one with substantial casualties, to end in my favor.

On the night of the thirteenth day of Safar, 37 AH, after three days of intense fighting, I convened a council of my amirs in the commander's tent, pitched precariously on the luxuriant field of Siffin. My quarters lay at the center of a small city of tents, its guard severely reduced through the casualties incurred during Al-Ashtar's attack. The amirs sat, bleary-eyed, their torsos cloaked in soiled body armor made from thick layers of camel hide, while I paced and pulled at my beard. All was silent, except for the popping and crackling of the council fire which burned brightly, shedding its pulsating light on the surrounding faces.

"To what should I attribute this?" I asked.

"The death of Ammar," one stated.

"Yes, the prophecy," added another.

I stopped pacing and nodded ever so slightly.

"Muhammad said that Ammar would die at the hands of a godless

and rebellious people. Our own men feel that *we* are those people?"

"They did," Amr replied. "However, I made it known to them that our Bedouin enemy were the ones who, in actual fact, were responsible for his death by bringing him here."

"And that has satisfied them?"

"It seems to have, but we've yet to recover fully from the confusion that split our ranks."

I pulled a hair from my chin, giving it a quick glance before dropping it. It was another gray one. "Are we still losing ground?"

"Some," Amr said.

"Somehow we must stay the battle, to afford us time to regroup. We can't call a truce, it would signal weakness on our part." I shook my head. "But I don't see how else we can suspend these hostilities short of an intervention by Allah."

I started pacing again, the fire casting my varying shadow on the pallid tent wall. I felt paralyzed as the pressure to make a decision built. My stomach knotted. I could see the white flag in my hand, and then thousands of white flags as all of my men rushed to surrender, lest they be butchered.

Amr sat in silence, wearing a troubled look. His head moved from side to side as he instinctively followed my movement.

I watched the ground pass under foot, step by step, and my own words echoed in my mind. Suddenly, I saw with certainty what must be done. I swung about and caught Amr's eyes.

"I have an idea."

Early the next morning, Ali and Al-Ashtar overlooked the progress on the northern battlefield from atop their mounts. The sun, at their backs, cast a soft orange light onto the field of Siffin. It illuminated the green meadows with contrasting color, creating

a paradoxically serene illusion that pitted nature's beauty against the specter of corpses and body parts which littered the countryside. With the enemy in disarray, it seemed as though Allah had surely smiled upon them.

"I loved Ammar greatly," Ali said as he watched his forces steadily advancing against the Syrians, "but his death may have been his greatest contribution to our effort. Spreading word of it into the opposition's ranks was brilliant."

Al-Ashtar wore a grin wider than the crescent moon. He made no hesitation in accepting full credit for the positive turn of events. His expression turned solemn as he spoke. "It is my duty to further the cause of Allah and his earthly representative. I will continue to so serve to ensure that we are always united as one people under Islam."

At this point, any misgivings which Ali had held for Al-Ashtar vanished. Ali knew, regardless of the past, that he would have to rely heavily on his chief-in-command and place his trust in him for all matters. Without Amr, there was no comparable counsel to whom he could turn. Just then, as Ali was about to speak, Farouk galloped into their midst, stopping so abruptly that he was almost thrown head first from his mare.

"Come," he said excitedly. "You must come and see what's happening on the southern flank."

"It must be something truly exquisite," Ali said to Al-Ashtar as they followed Farouk's lead. "I can't wait to see it."

The three rode a short distance to the top of a nearby hill from which the whole of the battlefield was visible.

"Over there." Farouk pointed in a southwesterly direction. "Look!"

Ali's jaw dropped. Four of the nine columns of Ali's troops, opposed by a like number on the Syrian side, were halted in their tracks with the phenomena spreading persistently to the other columns on the north side of the battlefront. Squares of white sat atop the Syrian lances, mounted not like flags but with the points piercing the sheets, which were held high in the air.

"What's the meaning of this?" Ali demanded.

"They're chanting on the field of battle, 'Let the word of Allah decide our fate'," Farouk said. "The parchments on those lances are pages from the Quran."

Ali's face first blanched, then turned crimson. "We were winning!" he bellowed. "Are these men of ours mad? Can't they see this is nothing more than a ruse foisted on them by a losing army?" Ali dropped his head into his hands and began to shake it, then he snapped it erect again. "We must rally our soldiers and press on, *now*. Al-Ashtar, ride to the nearest point to which this has not yet spread and work backwards to contain it. You, Farouk, come with me."

Ali and Farouk rode to an area where the fighting had ceased, whereupon Ali urged his troops to resume their assault.

A spokesman for the contingent, a Reciter, one who knew the Quran by heart, stepped forward. "We cannot do that. We cannot continue to shed the blood of our brothers when we are offered peace through Allah."

"The peace you speak of is not real, it's simply an illusion," Ali replied indignantly. "It's an artifice offered by the enemy to buy time in the name of God. Al-Ashtar is right now undoing this thing further to the north. Don't be caught unprepared when the fighting resumes. Take faith, and remember, I command the sword of Kosai."

With an outstretched arm, the Reciter pointed his finger menacingly at Ali. "We will not fight as long as there is an alternative that is blessed by the Lord. You, as Khalifah, should be leading us so, not admonishing us for making a truce. Recall Al-Ashtar now, before it is too late."

Many others had gathered around to listen to the escalating exchange. Ali's horse became nervous, taking one step this way, one step that way, always being brought back in line by Ali's firm tug on the reins.

"I, as Khalifah, am to lead you all in the defeat of a power hungry usurper, and I'll do so as I see fit. I will not recall Al-Ashtar!"

"You *will* recall him unless you wish to meet the same fate as your predecessor." The eyes of the Reciter were as cold as a scimitar's blade.

Ali clenched his teeth and responded with a reciprocal penetrating gaze. "Your words are treason! You would do such a thing to a blood kin of the Prophet?"

"Yes," the Reciter said, in a low yet serious voice, his eyes looking through the Caliph.

Ali lowered his head.

"Farouk... send a messenger... bid Al-Ashtar to cease his activities and return."

Farouk acknowledged, and did so.

Al-Ashtar, intent on re-igniting the conflict, at first refused to return. It took a second attempt, by Farouk in person, to convey the gravity of the situation and to convince him to end his efforts and retire to the sidelines. As Al-Ashtar approached the Reciters, a great commotion arose and charges and insults flew back and forth whereupon Ali intervened to defuse the confrontation.

"Stay your tongues, all of you!" Ali ordered. His mind reeled from the collage of events and gut-wrenching emotions he had experienced that morning. "We shall send Farouk as emissary to our opponent's camp to hear what they offer."

The ever swelling crowd cheered in response.

Farouk went, and returned later that day just as the sun was setting. A multitude of amirs from Al-Kufa, Al-Basra, representatives of the Reciters, and Companions from Medina assembled at the rear of Ali's camp, nearest the Euphrates, to hear his report. A waning sunlight of muted orange, like that which had blanketed the early morning landscape, turned the verdant

meadows black and reflected placidly at bends in the course of the great river. Farouk stood atop a flat outcrop of rocks, silhouetted against the reddening sky, and recounted the terms of the proposed peace to the accompaniment of the larks' evening song.

"Both sides shall select an arbiter," he began, waving the parchment scroll which set forth the provisions of the agreement. "They, through the writings of the Quran, will determine who should be the rightful Khalifah. Furthermore, the choices will not be limited to only Ali and Mu'awiya. Amr ibn al-As will represent the Syrians. Each side must agree to accept the word of the arbiters as final. A decision is to be rendered in six months and, during the interim, all fighting will cease."

Before Ali could say anything, his men, in thunderous acclaim, called out for him to accept the proposal and further to select as his representative Abu Musa, the popular and well loved governor of Al-Kufa. Ali knew that Abu Musa was at best a halfhearted supporter and an inferior match to the likes of Amr. Ali offered up alternatives but at each instance was shouted down. In the end he gave in to all the demands of his army and signed the truce. It was acknowledged by the preeminent amirs from both sides, except one. Al-Ashtar was alone in his refusal to sign.

Chapter 22
AH 37/ AD 658

Amr met Abu Musa for the last time during the month of Shaban, 37 AH, at Duma, an oasis equidistant from Damascus, Al-Kufa, and Medina. Duma lay on the northern edge of the Nafud, a waterless expanse of desert enclosed by rusty sandstone ridges that had weathered into grotesquely shaped pinnacles and crags which the Bedouin believed to be the abode of evil jinns. Serpentine ripples, driven by transient and often violent winds, flowed across the mountainous undulating dunes that covered the landscape with an infinity of randomly aligned crescents. Any trace of intrusion, by man or beast, was quickly eradicated. In this wasteland, Duma shone like an emerald in a sea of red sand. It was here that the masses converged from all parts of the empire to hear the result of the arbitration.

Within the seething mob, husbands, fathers, and sons jostled past other husbands, fathers, and sons to forge a crooked path toward the pavilion where the arbiters conferred. Turbaned heads swayed, searching for strayed family members, while anxious voices called out the names of the lost. The initial surge of pilgrims soon dwindled to a trickle of latecomers. Amr and Abu Musa were engaged in negotiations even as the last of the on-lookers arrived.

Amr paced back and forth inside the guarded tent while Abu Musa watched the assemblage outside through the entryway. The intense mid-morning light flooded the tent's interior,

reflecting brightly off the gold and silver chains which adorned the ambassadors' camel saddles. The previous night's fire smoldered in the center, imparting the scent of tamarisk to the air within. The two had been confined together for three days after spending several months journeying between Damascus and Al-Kufa in an effort to resolve the dispute. They studied the writings of the Quran for any passages which might guide them in the search for a new Caliph. Amr knew they would find none. They considered numerous noted individuals to assume the post but, in the end, no candidate was acceptable to both. It was at this point that Amr made a proposal to break the deadlock.

"Abu Musa, it has become clear to me that this method cannot work. I believe the best we can do is to publicly withdraw our respective leaders' claims and ask for a council of the remaining Companions to decide." Amr prepared himself for an unpleasant response. He had succeeded in extricating his master from certain defeat at Siffin and in buying sufficient time to recover from their losses, but now it was time to disengage.

Abu Musa grimaced. "It grieves me to admit so, but I think you speak the truth. I will accept your proposal, even though it means that we will have accomplished nothing over the past six moons. I suggest, however, that rather than a council of the Companions, a vote of the people should determine the new Khalifah, since they must tender their allegiance to the one selected."

"Agreed," Amr replied, smiling an expression of relief. "Let's go forth and announce our plan."

They left the confines of the tent and appeared before the expectant throng of Bedouin and Quraysh – travelers from Arabia, Syria, and Al-Iraq – an uncountable collection of heads reminiscent of the endless dunes of the Nafud. Silence spread over the crowd faster than the wind. Streams of perspiration trickled down tiring faces as the sun crept toward its zenith and the masses pressed closer to the pavilion. A breath of cool air

brought a collective sigh of relief, albeit short-lived, from the assembled.

Amr motioned Abu Musa to a natural platform of sandstone, an elevated vantage point from which to address the multitude. "You first," he said, the white stubble of his beard glistening in the sunlight. "Tell them we've come to an agreement, then we shall withdraw our respective masters from consideration before announcing our decision."

Abu Musa climbed onto the outcrop, a roughly hewn reddish block as tall as he and several times as long and wide. The brittle pebbles that covered the surface of the ledge crunched as they fractured under foot. Amr followed, using the same abrasive handholds and footholds as did Ali's representative.

Abu Musa looked into the inquiring eyes of the spectators and seeing Farouk among them, gave him a confident nod. Neither Ali nor Mu'awiya was present. Amr, a full head shorter, stood at his counterpart's side.

"Hear me, children of Islam!" Abu Musa began. "After much thought and debate we have arrived at a mutually acceptable solution. As part of that solution I do hereby withdraw Ali ibn Abi Talib from consideration as successor to Othman."

A deep murmur rumbled through the crowd as the expression on Farouk's face turned from anticipation to dread.

Amr raised his hands into the air and gently waved to quiet the onlookers. His head yearned to twitch, but he stifled it. "I too agree with this settlement and further confirm the removal of Ali from this competition. In light of the facts, and in accordance with the teachings of the Quran, it is therefore our decision to name Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan, the most fit choice for this esteemed position, as Khalifah and Commander of the Faithful."

Abu Musa froze, his eyes widening to rival the size of his open mouth. He looked towards Amr who was already descending from the rock platform.

"Hold, hold!" he cried, waving his arms frantically – but the din of the crowd drowned out his objections.

Amr was quickly drawn into the assemblage, accepting congratulations on his accomplishment with no one being the wiser as to what he had done. Amr gloated. As he passed from one well-wisher to another, Bedouin to Quraysh, kaffiyah to turban, the scowl of an embittered Farouk greeted him from behind several rows of admirers. For a momentary eternity, Amr's ears deadened to the shouts and clamor of the mob as his eyes locked onto Farouk's, the contact lasting only until Amr's head swung sharply and involuntarily to the right. Both Farouk and Abu Musa pursued Amr, battling their way through a frenzied wall of flesh, but gave up when the savior of the west was absorbed into mayhem and lost from sight.

Ali slouched in the oversized wooden armchair at his residence in Al-Kufa, the Palace of Sa'd, which the governor had been forced to vacate for less grandiose accommodations. The Caliph faced the terrace, watching a pair of lizards court in a sunny spot on the carved stone railing, a passing shadow prompting them to scurry down its short pillars to the ground. Behind him, the same wooden table across which the scheme to eliminate Omar had been debated, and on the table a sword, its blade partly unsheathed, reflecting an unmistakable bluish tinge. Ali wore a sour expression accentuated by the disheveled fringe of white hair surrounding his bare crown and wiry gray eyebrows that perched above his intense eyes. He was silent and focused, his arms stretched along the arms of the chair, his nails digging into the wood. Al-Ashtar stood halfway between the table and the room's entrance, likewise as silent as the moon.

Ali raised his hands off the chair and slammed them back down on the arms, pushing himself to his feet. "That imbecile Abu Musa!" He picked up a nearby urn and threw it at the wall.

The ceramic vessel shattered into a hundred turquoise and white pieces, littering the room in all directions. "I didn't want him to represent me in the first place! I didn't ask for an arbitration!"

Al-Ashtar remained unmoved. "I told you we should've kept on fighting."

Ali, his eyes wild, clenched his teeth and swung around to view Al-Ashtar. Words echoed in Ali's head, but he remained silent... So you did, you heap of camel dung, or maybe you forgot that my life was on the line there.

Of late, Ali had become more than disenchanted with Al-Ashtar, blaming him for many of the region's problems and finally understanding his complicity in the barbarous slaying of Othman.

"Yes, we should have," Ali answered. A sudden, transitory breeze from the terrace behind him ruffled his chest-length beard. "In retrospect, Al-Ashtar, it has become clear to me that you have exceptionally keen insight into complex matters."

"It's a natural ability," Al-Ashtar brazenly admitted.

Ali continued talking as he turned the chair around and lowered his substantial weight back into it. "That's why I'm sending you to Egypt."

The Bedouin sheikh's tar-pool eyes bulged. He placed his fingertips on his breast and leaned forward. "Me? Egypt? For what purpose?"

"To bring order, and to control an increasingly rebellious faction in the population. The son of Abu Bakr has had no luck in this regard – you're just the one who'll know how best to deal with the situation. I'm making you governor."

For once, Al-Ashtar was speechless. Certainly, the position was one of prestige but the problems there were so intractable, and Egypt was so far away and foreign. He hesitated in his acceptance. Al-Ashtar dropped his arms to his sides and spread them to expose his torso, as a dog bares his belly in submission.

"I... I don't know what to say."

Ali fingered a shard from the decimated urn, purposely looking away from Al-Ashtar.

"Say nothing, for it's not a matter of choice. I have no other that I can send in whom I have confidence. Prepare yourself at once for the long journey."

"I am honored by your faith in me but surely there must be others more deserving – "

"None!" Ali forcefully interrupted. He looked up at his amir with loathing. "Believe me, there are none more deserving of this post than you. As for this other matter, I will not accept the outcome at Duma. I'll continue to rule as Khalifah and we will once again take to the field of battle to assert control over the whole of the empire."

Ali rose, looked Al-Ashtar in the eye, and bid him good fortune. He then left to think on his own for a while, leaving the Bedouin sheik to contemplate his future in the land of the Pharaohs.

Al-Ashtar stood motionless, gazing at the broken pieces of pottery on the floor, then to the outside at the clear blue of the desert sky. He glanced at the wall hanging, with its birds and gardens, and finally at the table, the sword still upon it – the sword of Kosai. Al-Ashtar stared intently at the weapon for some time. He looked toward the doorway and listened breathlessly, then picked up the sword and departed.

Upon his return to Damascus, I received Amr with a well deserved hero's welcome for the coup he achieved at Duma. As a result of his cunning, I was acknowledged as the undisputed Khalifah throughout all of Syria and Palestine. The remainder of the realm, however, was still split in its allegiance, with the exception of Al-Iraq which by and large tendered its loyalty to Ali. Elsewhere, many perceived that my competitor had not only violated the arbitration pact to which he had submitted, but the

Quran itself, upon which the final decision had supposedly been based. Yet even in Al-Iraq there were those who opposed Ali, and indeed the office of the Khalifah itself, and they were increasingly becoming a threat to all. My best hope for survival lay in consolidating support in the west, so I looked toward Egypt and placed Amr in charge of re-acquiring his former territory.

I sat with Amr in a room on the upper level of my home where eighteen moons earlier I'd agonized over his reply to my plea for help against Ali. Amr had more than made up for his transgression. Behind him, the doors to the balcony lay fully open, revealing a cool and bright day blowing two billowing white clouds with leaden undersides across an otherwise clear sky. The lazy klip klop of mules negotiating the streets below, perhaps on their way to the souq, soothed my spirit.

I got up from my cushion and walked over to a basket of fruit, offering my guest a succulent orange. He declined. I peeled one for myself, watching the acrid mist from the rind spray into a ray of sunlight, my throat tightening as I accidentally breathed in the vapor.

"Egypt is ready for the taking, Amr. Ali's influence there wanes daily."

Amr nodded and gave a grunt of acknowledgement.

I continued. "The people are dissatisfied with their government, and Ali's problems at home will make it difficult for him to respond to our advance."

Amr held up a cupped hand to indicate that he had reconsidered the orange. "He has sent Al-Ashtar to re-establish his authority there. Many, both here and in Egypt, fear Al-Ashtar. His powers of persuasion can turn one's own people against oneself."

"Surely *you* don't fear him?"

"I do not," Amr stated, his posture becoming erect.

I dug my thumbs into the top of the orange and split it in two, tossing half to Amr and depositing a section of the fruit in

my mouth. As I bit down, the sweet flavorful juice gushed over my teeth and tongue. One word came to mind – delicious.

"Our spies have kept me well informed of his movements," I replied. "I'll see to Al-Ashtar. In the meantime, prepare your forces and make for Alexandria. We have popular support there and I fear if we wait much longer our greatest opportunity may pass."

"I'll need more men than are currently under my command. I must leave some behind in each town we take on the way, to solidify our hold on the area and provide warning should trouble come from the rear."

"Very well. I'll have my son Yezid raise additional troops and follow in your path to secure our conquests, but you must make haste."

Amr gave me a skeptical look which told me he was apprehensive at the prospect of having my son lead such an effort.

As we concluded our discussion, Meisun entered the room announced by one of the new household slaves who had been captured during a recent foray with the Greeks in Asia Minor.

Amr excused himself to go about the business of preparing his army. Meisun dismissed the servant but before he left I ordered that Yezid be summoned.

"Did I hear you say that you plan to send our son on an expedition?" Meisun asked.

"He'll follow up Amr's advance into Egypt. It's a simple task – one well within his capabilities." I split the last two sections of the orange apart and offered one to my wife. She shook her head.

"He is but fourteen years and not of a disposition to carry out such a duty. You are asking him to do something which is not of his nature and risk going up against a very dangerous adversary."

"It's time he learned that, as my son, this will be a way of life for him. As for the risk, I have something you must do to help reduce it."

Meisun cocked her head, her camel eyes, large and dark with sweeping lashes, looked deep within me. A tone of caution crept into her voice. "What is that?"

"Our foe Al-Ashtar travels to Egypt, and by necessity will first pass through the land of your people. He must be disposed of, he must not reach his destination."

"How many accompany him?"

"Several hundred."

"Why not just attack his party?" Meisun asked.

"Because he may obtain advance warning of such an attack and escape, or escape during the attack even if I surprise him."

"Oh...of course." She shifted her stance. "When will he arrive at Duma?"

"I would think within seven days, and I expect he'll remain there for maybe two days. Beyond that, he will likely make for Ayla before crossing the Sinai."

"And if he were to reach Egypt?"

"That would make Amr's job much more difficult. It would be best if he didn't."

Meisun bowed her head. "I will see to it. It will give me a chance to free my soul to the desert once again after being a prisoner of this walled city you have made my home for so long now."

I let her comment pass, knowing that the unbridled wanderlust of a Bedouin upbringing would never leave her. We talked for a while longer, about Yezid and other matters, and at length Meisun left so that I could be alone. I walked out onto the balcony which overhung the front of my home and stood with my hands gripping the low wooden railing. The rooftops had not yet begun to eclipse the sun, but they would, shortly. A cool, refreshing breeze descended from the cloudless sky. Some passers-by, kinsmen from Medina, waved and called out a greeting which I returned. I was, however, preoccupied. I knew that I must win decisively in Egypt in order to gain the confidence

of the remaining Companions and the people of Mecca and Medina. Without that, I would have only a fragment of an empire, and even that could come into peril. But if Egypt fell... then I could concentrate on Al-Iraq, and with that would come Persia, and then all would be mine. But Ali was kin to the Prophet and many would still follow him based on that alone.

My thoughts were interrupted by two pairs of swallows fighting over a nest in a nearby tree. I watched them for a while, noting the similarities to human battles – one drawing off the two defenders while another moves in to occupy the nest, the return of the owners and the ensuing struggle against them from nest and sky, all the while the commotion and cries of anger filling the air. Yes, not so different from us.

In the distance, I saw Amr on horseback leading a group of men, also mounted, out the west gate, towards the camp which housed his retinue. It was there that they would stage the army for the march to Egypt.

A call emanating from within the house captured my attention.

"Khalifah, your son has arrived."

It was near dark when Al-Ashtar and his entourage entered Duma. Many of the Bedouin faithful who had come to hear the resolution of the succession dispute remained, their tents resting like giant black caterpillars upon the life-giving earth of the oasis. Those travelers who lived in permanent settlements had long since returned to their homes.

Al-Ashtar placed his hands on his hips and looked about, surveying the prospective camp site. He ordered that water be drawn for both man and animal to quench parched palates and to replenish their supply for the next leg of the journey. The evening sky had turned from blue to black before this task was finished and that of erecting shelter begun. Fortunately, Al-Ashtar's men

had the cool glow of a quarter moon under which to assemble the tents they needed to keep safe from nocturnal pests. While camp fires gathered storytellers and listeners elsewhere at Duma, those within Al-Ashtar's enclave served as lonely sentinels casting light for the guards who watched over the weary travelers.

By daybreak, word had spread throughout Duma as to the identity of the transients from the north. Most knew of Al-Ashtar. Many reacted by avoiding contact with Ali's second in command while others curried favor with him. Accordingly, throughout the day, Al-Ashtar welcomed numerous gifts of food and offers of service tendered by clan leaders hoping to gain stature with him or within their own tribe. Al-Ashtar stayed at Duma only until dusk of that day but before sunset a great feast was given in his honor with an abundance of freshly slaughtered meat, bread, and dried fruits. For the rank and file, camel provided the bulk of the repast – roasted, sliced, and piled high on a cleaned hide with the heads, split down the middle, encircling the heap in decorative fashion. Goats and sheep were cooked up in various ways and served to the amirs.

Two middle aged women of Duma, dressed in black and veiled so that only their provocative eyes showed, tended to the food for Al-Ashtar and his inner circle. Even though Sajah was present by his side, Al-Ashtar could not conceal his interest in these captivating beauties who appeared to be the most enticing of all the women he had seen at the oasis settlement.

"Ummm, lamb, my favorite," Al-Ashtar said, "and prepared just as I like it, roasted crisp over an open fire with plenty of garlic and herbs."

The sheikh's eyes met those of the elder, and more attractive, of the two women. The veil intrigued him, imparting a sense of mystery to the deep brown discs and long sultry lashes. The woman cut into the lamb and observed that no blood issued forth.

"Is it done?" he asked, a rare smile appearing on his face.

"It is done," she replied, her eyes revealing no emotion. She bowed and backed away, glancing at Sajah briefly before departing.

Al-Ashtar's gaze remained riveted on the woman until a sharp blow to the chest dislodged his interest.

"I know what you're thinking," Sajah said in a stern voice. "I don't need to be a prophetess to read *your* mind."

"Let me be, woman," Al-Ashtar railed. "Why must you always meddle with me."

He bent over the roast and inhaled deeply. The sweet aroma of garlic and charred flesh filled his lungs. "Ah." His mouth watered. Juices dripped from the spit-impaled carcass into the dwindling fire and made the dull orange flames waver and hiss before spurting to new heights. Al-Ashtar drew two knives. He stuck one into the meat and carved out a large piece for himself with the other, making sure it had a goodly portion of the darkened exterior of the roast. A hand grasped his wrist.

"Al-Ashtar, eat not of this meat," Sajah warned. "An uneasy feeling has come over me."

"Unhand me," Al-Ashtar said, raising his voice. "It's the presence of another woman that makes you feel uneasy. I'll eat it and so too will you!"

Al-Ashtar proceeded to consume the lamb, looking up, smiling, and chewing slowly with his eyes closed. The oil from an undercooked clove of garlic burned Al-Ashtar's tongue, but he relished the bite. He made for a second piece, but noticed those around him not partaking.

"Eat!" he commanded, waving his dagger. "It's fine." And they did.

After all had eaten their fill, the caravan departed for Ayla, the next stop on the way to their still distant destination. In the coolness of the summer night, they navigated by the brightest stars, those which were not overpowered by the setting moon. Duma was now far behind them. Ahead, days of the Nafud's

dunes to cross, the sand blowing off their crests in luminous trails that scattered the light of al-qamar.

Al-Ashtar rode uneasily, his stomach roiling with every step the camel took. He belched thunder, but it was not a satisfying belch. Others belched too, causing the camels to roar in response. Suddenly, Al-Ashtar became flushed and lightheaded. He doubled up and disgorged, hunching so far over his beast that he rolled off onto the sand below, landing in his vomit with a thud.

"The pain, the pain, arrrrrhhh ..." Al-Ashtar winced and snapped into a fetal position, clutching his stomach. The caravan stopped.

"Give him air, make way," Sajah shouted as she pushed through the crowd, peeling the men away like layers of an onion. She knelt beside her husband who still reeked of garlic from the feast and was spitting, trying to rid his mouth of the sharp metallic taste of arsenic.

Al-Ashtar cursed, groaned, then howled. "The lamb – poisoned!" He quivered and vomited, again and again, until the vomitus turned red. His body convulsed, twisting this way and that, until paralysis overcame the involuntary spasms. He lay motionless. By his side, half fallen from its scabbard, the blade of a sword like no other gleamed blue in the last vestiges of the night's moonlight.

All looked on, helplessly. Sajah, horror stricken, moved her face closer to Al-Ashtar's. She cocked her head and placed her ear beside his mouth. The prophetess shrieked a piercing note and began to cry uncontrollably.

She looked up at the bystanders, tears flooding her contorted face. "He is dead!" she sobbed, "he is dead."

Sajah had eaten none of the lamb, but others had, and they were similarly afflicted. Among these were the principal guides who were to lead the troop through the desert. With their leader and navigators gone, confusion and panic mounted within the remaining ranks in the unfamiliar territory. The desert sand,

blown by an increasingly strong north wind, obscured the trails and the sky. No agreement could be reached on what course of action to take. Some, including Sajah, tried to return to Duma and some continued toward Ayla, while others just stayed in place and prayed to the ancient gods to deliver them to safety.

The storm raged for days as the wind howled and whirling sand erased visibility for all. The daytime was suffocating and the nights, bone-chilling. Faces burned and hands stung as the fine red sand blasted the travelers and penetrated eyelids, ears, noses, and the slightest gap in clothing. It was impossible to locate exactly where the sun was during the dark daylight hours and night plunged the desperate parties into a hellish blackness. Tongues swelled and throats became parched beyond dryness so that it was intolerable to breath or swallow without water, which had been completely consumed well before the storm's end. None survived.

With Al-Ashtar removed as an opposing factor, Amr had no trouble in re-conquering Egypt for me. I, forthwith, bestowed upon my friend the title of governor for the second time and righted the wrong which Othman had committed years earlier.

My spies told me that Ali was devastated by the loss of Egypt, which was further compounded by the poor response of Al-Kufa's populace to his call to arms, to resume the fight against me. The restive factions in Al-Iraq were thus even more encouraged to disregard Ali's authority.

Ali's fortunes worsened throughout the empire over the next two years with defections to my side of his key commanders, some of whom were his own relatives, and incursions by my forces into the holy cities of Arabia, as well as into Al-Iraq itself. His sons, Al-Hasan and Al-Hosein, both of thirty years or more, were advanced to command positions to fill the sudden vacancies. At Ali's behest, I entered into a treaty with him in which we

agreed to respect each other's boundaries and live in peace. This changed, however, when in the month of Safar, 40 AH, I formally declared myself Khalifah of the entire Muslim world. Amr visited Damascus that month, just prior to my announcement.

We walked within our mosque, the former cathedral of Saint John, which we still shared as a place of worship with the Christians. The cavernous interior with its pillared shrines, great dome-shaped windows of colored glass, and vaulted ceiling dwarfed us. Our voices reverberated off the smooth stone walls, giving the words a majestic quality befitting what I was about to convey to Amr.

"I see no reason to sit idly by and watch the realm decay for want of direction."

"And no one is saying that you should," Amr replied, "only that you consider the legitimacy of claiming spiritual leadership over all Believers."

I worked the string of worry beads that Meisun had given me as a present, small dark green polished spheres strung between knots on a thin leather cord, an alternative to pulling out my beard.

"Few have ever unquestionably recognized Ali's claim to be Commander of the Faithful. It grew out of the assassination of Othman and nomination by the very persons who caused that crime to be committed. Many of his supporters are so only because they fear reprisals from these zealots. They must be liberated from that fear."

Amr paced back and forth, the muffled sound of his footsteps echoing back to us. "Remember, there are other forces at work in the empire – the Khawarij, for instance. They'll not sit idly by while you try to build here what they've been trying to destroy in Al-Iraq."

"They're a splinter group which can be easily subdued. Ali simply never had the fortitude to do it. He was too soft." I started pacing alongside Amr. "I intend to assume the position of sole Khalifah and administer and expand the empire from

Damascus. Both Mecca and Medina are with us – now is the time to act. Ali's alliances are in disarray, his subjects indifferent, his power to command weak. Furthermore, my relationship to the last duly appointed Khalifah makes my action justifiable."

"I hope you're right," Amr said. "I know how Ali will react to this. You shouldn't forget so quickly our encounter with him at Siffin."

We stopped. I turned to my governor and placed a hand on his shoulder. Amr looked fully the sixty-nine years that had turned his hair white and left his face a sagging sack of flesh. It conveyed a weariness which his spirit constantly fought.

"I take this measure having fully weighed the potential risks involved," I said. "I may call on you to assist me in this endeavor and nominate you as my alternate, to lead in my absence."

Amr sighed, then nodded. "You may count on my loyalty."

Ali responded to my declaration by conscripting an army to march on Syria once again. I heard that he succeeded in assembling a force of some thirty-five thousand from the cities of Al-Iraq but, as fate would have it, other events interceded to delay its departure.

One week after Amr's return to Egypt, I sat with Meisun in a dimly lit room used for receiving visitors within our home. She wore a look of grave concern. We awaited the arrival of Ibn Muljam, a member of the Khawarij, religious fanatics from Al-Iraq. They were particularly opposed to Ali who had recently decimated their numbers in well executed responses to Khawariji uprisings. This was the same group, I was told, which had fought alongside Ali at the Battle of Siffin and had then coerced him into arbitration, only to realize later that it did not address their fundamental concerns.

Meisun, seated on a cushion which insulated her from the cold stone floor, adjusted her position several times before finally speaking.

"Husband," she said, "it is not wise for you to deal with these people. They are crazed, they cannot be trusted."

"They're a means to an end, a temporary measure to assist me in solidifying my position throughout the realm. I will use them as they will use me to achieve a common objective."

"The elimination of Ali?" Meisun's words had the sound of a challenge. "That will be perceived in the same light as Othman's slaying, and may well come back upon you!"

I shook my head and reached for my worry beads, but they were not to be found. "The Prophet himself said: 'Believers, retaliation is decreed for you in bloodshed; a free man for a free man, a slave for a slave. If a man is slain unjustly, his heir shall be entitled to satisfaction.' Is this not so?"

"Yes, but he also said 'Let him not carry his vengeance too far, for his victim will in turn be assisted and avenged'. And this man is blood kin to the Prophet, remember."

I was surprised that Meisun could recite so from the Quran. I began to tug at my beard. "He did say that too, but there are so many who sympathize with Othman and hold Ali at fault. Besides, it won't show my involvement."

"You hope."

"Wife! Who commands here? Maybe I've been mistaken in thinking that I rule."

Meisun turned her head away. "Maybe you have," she mumbled under her breath, almost beyond the reach of my hearing.

A slave called out from the front of the house in a loud and resounding voice. "Ibn Muljam!"

I gave Meisun the look. "Bring him," I replied to the servant, in an equally loud voice.

The slave ushered in a young Bedouin clad in Mesopotamian style dress who appeared ill at ease but trying not

to show it. He was thin and smelled of urine. An unkempt overgrowth of brown and red facial hair gave him the appearance of an animal.

"Sit," I commanded. I extended my arm, palm upwards, directing him to his place.

"I will stand," Ibn Muljam answered.

There was a brief silence. "Very well then," I replied. I stood up. "We shall stand."

We talked across a distance of several paces, neither of us caring to approach the other too closely. Meisun remained seated quietly by my side. I talked with Ibn Muljam for some time regarding the state of affairs in Al-Iraq and the events which needed to occur in order to subvert it, including the removal of Ali.

"There is no disagreement on that point," Ibn Muljam assured me.

I gestured to Meisun who left the room and returned shortly with the slave carrying two brown leather bags, his arms stretched and flush at his sides. He deposited his burden on the floor near Ibn Muljam.

"There are two thousand gold pieces in each of these bags," I said. "That should be more than enough to accomplish this task. Take these and do as I have bid."

Ibn Muljam opened the closest of the bags and removed a handful of the glittering Byzantine coins, each about the length of an olive across but with no two exactly alike. He picked one up and bit into it, examining the impression and nodding in approval.

"Fear not. Your wishes will be carried out."

Ibn Muljam dispensed with the formality of thanking me, and departed.

Ibn Muljam returned to Medina. There, the chief of the Khawarij, exiled from Iraq by Ali, called a nighttime council in

the shadows of a rocky outcrop well removed from the Bedouin tents pitched outside the city wall.

"Look what my cousin has brought us," their chief said. He held the two bags aloft, straining under their weight. "Enough gold to last a lifetime! Let us put this to good use."

"The first order of business," Ibn Muljam said, "is to rid ourselves of Ali and the Quraysh yoke which he has placed upon us."

"And you shall have that honor, my cousin," the chief added. "But that alone will not accomplish our aim. We must ensure that no other takes his place." The chief, barring his teeth and narrowing his eyes, shook a clenched fist. "Mu'awiya ibn Abi Sufyan and Amr ibn al-As must also die."

Chapter 23
AH 40/ AD 661

The plot was hatched. Three separate Khawariji teams of two men each would travel to Alexandria, Damascus, and Al-Kufa and on the same day strike down Amr, Mu'awiya, and Ali at morning prayer. Special swords, high quality ceremonial scimitars from Yemen, were procured for the occasion. Each man carried a strong poison to place upon his blade in order to make even the slightest wound a mortal one, and also to provide the ultimate escape should any one of them be apprehended for his crime. The time chosen coincided with the new moon of Ramadhan in the year 40 AH. On that day, all were in place awaiting their opportunity to make a mark in history.

As morning services began, the assassins made their move. Amr's deputy, being mistaken for his master, was killed in error. Amr was lucky, he was ill on that fateful day and avoided what would surely have been his end. Mu'awiya and Ali were not so fortunate.

I could see, although my vision was hazy, but I couldn't speak and I could barely move, and then only my fingers, toes, and head. Most importantly, I could hear, but what I heard scared me. Meisun paced nervously in my room, wringing her hands, her cheeks drenched with tears. My physician was in the room

with her, as were several others whom I could not make out for they lingered menacingly in the shadows. Later, when I had recovered, Meisun told me that there were no others in the room.

I was bleeding heavily from a gash near my shoulder that an assailant had inflicted at the mosque. Thankfully, his accomplice never got a chance to strike a blow. Both were killed in the ensuing struggle with my guards.

I felt extremely weak. When the bleeding was finally stopped, I could see that I had torn the wound such that it formed a carmine red canyon of exposed flesh the length of my hand, across my breast. Meisun tended my bedside, talking to me as I faded in and out of an unsettling sleep in which I could still make out words, hollow and dreamlike. Of these times I recall little, except that Meisun's voice seemed to become louder and more distressed whenever my eyes closed.

In my waking periods, I could feel beads of sweat forming on my face, the occasional one trickling down my temple and into my ear as I lay helplessly on the pile of sheep hides that served as my bed. A shaft of light burst through the crack between the shutters of my window and fell on the wall opposite, creating a luminous streak that was so bright I had to look away. Dust floated through the beams, making them appear to flow like rivers across my field of view. Near the room's open doorway sat a small table, and on it what appeared to be a water basin and implements that shined of silver. Surrounding the doorway, a dim, colorless halo of reflected light and beyond it, blackness.

"I fear," the physician said, "that the lesion has led to a disease that is spreading throughout his body."

Meisun placed her fingers on my forehead. "He is burning."

The physician's face grew stern and his eyes narrowed. A turbaned head hovered close to my face, the healer's gray beard, a forearm in length, brushing through my wound, making it sting unbearably. My eyes widened and I bellowed like a camel. He recoiled, startled.

"The best hope for saving him now lies in administering a powerful potion and cauterizing the wound," he said.

"Do it!" Meisun replied from the opposite side of my bed.

"The potion itself is very dangerous. *If* it works your husband will never be able to father another child."

My view shifted from the physician to Meisun and back again. If I could've seen my own face I'm sure that it would have conveyed the fear I felt inside.

"There is no decision to be made here. Proceed, quickly."

Once again, my eyes widened.

The physician prepared the draught and administered it while Meisun brought a dagger to red heat over a cooking fire that burned in the hearth. A penetrating odor from the hot metal permeated the air. The healer propped up my head and poured the medicine into my mouth, a little at a time. It tasted putrid, like horse urine that had been filtered through camel dung, or so I imagined. I was barely able to swallow it. Streams of the warm liquid dribbled from the corners of my mouth, into my beard. I tossed my head first to one side, then the other, and tried to speak.

"What did he say?" the physician asked. Meisun shrugged and shook her head. He held out his hand. "The knife."

Meisun removed the dagger from the fire and held it up to reveal its dull red glow.

"I hope the shock of this isn't too much for him," the physician said.

"Is there nothing that will lessen the pain?"

"Wine, but it is forbidden."

Meisun opened her mouth but was interrupted before she could speak.

"It is *forbidden*," the physician repeated, looking her in the eyes. He waved his hand for Meisun to hurry with the instrument. "This will be quick and he'll undoubtedly faint. Stay with him and summon me when he wakes."

"What if he doesn't wake?" Meisun asked, her eyes fixed on those of the healer.

"Then the house of Hashim will have triumphed, and Ali will reign as the undisputed Khalifah."

Meisun passed the dagger to him, carefully, by the carved bone handle. The physician motioned for her to help hold me down. "Maybe in his present state of delirium the pain will be more bearable," he said in a hopeful tone.

My breathing quickened dramatically and I began to grunt.

Meisun looked away while he pressed the scalding blade against me. The stench of charred meat drifted to my nostrils as the dagger hissed at my flesh. Pain coursed through every part of my body. I released a blood-curdling scream and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Ibn Muljam and his accomplice lurked in the shadows of the great mosque of Al-Kufa before sunrise, preparing to carry out their mission. The pre-dawn winter chill numbed the assassins' fingers and condensed their breath into thin white clouds as it left their mouths. Ibn Muljam rubbed his hands together. A nearby torch cast its flickering yellow light on the iron lock of the mosque's huge wooden doors. Ibn Muljam examined the lock carefully. He shook his head. "The rope," he demanded, reaching out to his partner.

The accomplice handed him a long knotted rope with a three-pronged hook tied to one end and both men scurried around to the side of the building. Ibn Muljam metered out an arm's length of the rope and twirled the hook several times before releasing it. The claw engaged the castellated summit of the mosque's wall with a soft clink, scraping the mud-brick as the rope was pulled taut.

Ibn Muljam motioned to his cohort. "You go first."

Hand over fist, the pair scrambled up and over the wall, swords strapped across their backs. Once on the other side, they

made for a wide portico supported by columns four rows deep which flanked the main entrance of the mosque.

Ibn Muljam removed a small deep-blue glass vial from his urine-scented robe and held it in front of his face. "Cobra venom!" He grinned an evil smile at his assistant. "It's expensive and difficult to obtain, but very effective. Put it on your sword, as I do, and be careful not to get it on your skin. Place some on the tip down to about here, and some all along the cutting edge – not too fast! It will run off and be wasted. Slowly, so that the air has time to make it sticky. That's right."

The master assassin watched his apprentice intermittently as they both applied the poison to their weapons, a few drops at a time. Ibn Muljam bit lightly on his tongue which protruded through a scraggly disarray of beard and mustache hair. His eyes crossed as he tried to focus on the sword's edge in the emergent morning light.

"How quickly will the venom act?" the accomplice asked, head directed downward to the task at hand, his kaffiyah falling around his face.

"For a man, a day or two. You see, it's not that it's quick that we choose this but rather that it is certain. Have you ever been bitten by a cobra?"

"I don't think so."

"Of course you haven't. If you had, you wouldn't be here talking to me." Ibn Muljam stopped abruptly and cocked an ear. "What's that?" The distant sound of footsteps and voices approached. Ibn Muljam looked up at the sky and saw that daylight had come.

"Take your position," he whispered to his partner.

They stationed themselves by the entry way, one on either side, hidden in the recesses formed by the supporting columns. The footsteps stopped outside the mosque but the voices continued. The assassins waited. The noise of Ibn Muljam's own breathing was the loudest of the sounds he could hear. He waited

for what seemed an eternity, his heart pounding feverishly as if to escape from his chest. Suddenly, the beckoning cry of the muezzin shattered the morning calm.

"Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar
La ilaha illa Allah
La ilaha illa Allah
Muhammad rasul Allah
Muhammad rasul Allah
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar."

Shortly, another voice, deeper yet less commanding, gradually drew nearer accompanied by an ever increasing din of background chatter.

"Come to prayer, come to prayer." It was the voice of Ali calling the congregation to follow him to the mosque.

Ibn Muljam's stomach tightened as the calls stopped and the large wooden doors of the entrance swung open. With sword at the ready, he craned his neck around the pillar to see Ali enter at the head of the crowd. Dark rings encircled the Caliph's eyes.

Ibn Muljam called to signal his cohort. "Allahu Akbar!"

Ali looked to his right, toward the source of the sound, and saw his demise. The eyes of predator and prey met momentarily.

"Assassin!" Ali cried out. He turned to escape, but too late. Ibn Muljam's curved blade came down across the back of Ali's neck, opening a long and deep wound. From the other side, his partner delivered the point of his sword into Ali's stomach. The Caliph fell to the ground. Ali's bodyguards pounced on Ibn Muljam before he could strike another blow and slew his accomplice on the spot.

Al-Hasan and Al-Hosein rushed to their father's side.

"Bring a litter! Take the Khalifah to our residence!" Al-Hasan ordered. He turned to one of the mulazims and pointed at

Ibn Muljam. "Place him in irons and hold him here until we return."

Ibn Muljam struggled intensely to break loose, silently at first, then growling like a rabid dog. His eyes were possessed – those of a madman. As he lay pinned to the earth, Ibn Muljam contemplated the slow and painful death that lay in store for him. He hoped it would not be in vain. Ali's guards shackled Ibn Muljam, binding his arms behind his back, and suspended him by his wrists from the mosque wall using his own rope and hook.

Once at his home, Ali's condition deteriorated rapidly. The combination of the venom and his corpulent physique caused Ali's breathing to become strained. Al-Hasan, stone faced with protruding jaw, paced at the foot of a bed of cushions in his father's sleeping chamber at the Palace of Sa'd where Ali lay wheezing and groaning. Al-Hasan's eyes remained focused on the Caliph as he walked his station. He desperately wanted to return to the mosque and deal justice to the assassin, but dared not leave his father's side lest Ali expire during his absence.

As the day wore on, Ali's hands began to shake and he developed a facial tic. He called his sons to come close. Al-Hasan looked at Al-Hosein with trepidation as they stood over their father. Al-Hosein's face reflected his brother's anxiety. The Caliph was pale, except for the black circles beneath his eyes which appeared even blacker in his failing state. A steady stream of drool seeped from his mouth, saturating the chin of his beard. Ali gazed mournfully at his sons.

"Question this betrayer, ascertain his motives," he instructed, his speech slurred. "Determine if he is of the Khawarij, which is what I suspect. If I should die, take his life for mine, but promise that you won't torture or mutilate him. The Quran prohibits it."

Al-Hasan took his father's hand. "As much as he deserves to suffer... I promise."

"I too," Al-Hosein said, kneeling down to touch the Caliph's face.

By the next day, Ali couldn't swallow food or water and his vision had become weak. He died that afternoon. His sons buried him secretly, two days later, at a location known only to them.

On the third day, Al-Hasan had Ibn Muljam brought to the central square of Al-Kufa. There, he ordered the assassin impaled lengthwise with a lance and roasted, with the little bit of life which then remained in him, over a blazing fire.

"When word of the other assassination attempts reached me," Amr said, "I set out at once for Damascus."

I rested, half sitting, half lying, on my bed of sheep skins in the same room to which I had been taken after the attack. Amr sat on a wooden stool by my side. Two weeks had passed since the attempt on my life.

"You see this." I pointed at the crevasse which ran from my right shoulder down to my breast. The vivid pink scar formed a broad channel of twists and lumps. "This is what they did to me. From what I have learned, all the assailants were working together. They used poisons to ensure their success, except for my attackers who rubbed their swords with shit. That's why my wound became septic. Apparently they lost their toxin."

Amr clasped his hands together and leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. "Surely, Allah intervened to save us," he said. "That's the only way we could have so narrowly escaped such a well planned attack. Do you know who's behind this?"

I plucked a long hair from the side of my beard and repeatedly drew it through my fingers, my eyes focusing on it. "Yes, and they are being dealt with as we speak. At first, I thought it was Ali's doing, but as the details emerged concerning

Ali's own death I realized that one group was responsible for all these acts."

"The fanatics?"

I looked up at Amr. "Absolutely. However, let the rumor circulate that it was an attempt by Ali to do away with us and it just miscarried to include himself."

"I have taught you well, my friend!"

"Indeed you have," I replied, smiling. Amr knew nothing of my pact with the Khawarij.

"I understand that Al-Hasan has now declared himself Khalifah," Amr said.

"That will be short lived. He has the demeanor of my son, spoiled and far too preoccupied with the delights of his harem to devote any serious attention to matters requiring the exercise of responsibility. I intend to change Yezid, but it will take time. As for Al-Hasan, I shall march on Al-Kufa and I predict that before we arrive he'll capitulate."

"I should like to see the eastern provinces," Amr said, arms crossed and nodding his head.

"Very well," I replied. "It'll be like old times."

"When do we leave?"

"Soon. I'm awaiting a troop count so I can finalize my strategy." I paused for a moment as a muezzin's call announced the time for midday prayer. "You know Amr, it's strange the way things work out. Many years ago, almost thirty years now, I had a dream that I was a person of high stature. I didn't know where that was to lead, if anywhere, nor when. I certainly never imagined myself as the leader of all our people, and I owe much to you for that. Yet it's been difficult. So many friends and relations have been struck down by one calamity or another. My good friend Shurahbil taken by the plague as was my brother, Omar and Othman felled by assassins, and the thousands upon thousands who have died fighting for the Cause. It was twenty-two years ago that Omar appointed me governor of Syria, do you realize that? Twenty-two years! I was thirty-three then. How the

time passes, and how the lifetimes pass. It feels like only yesterday that we converged on this fair city to conquer it. I remember the first time I gazed on the green fields surrounding Damascus. It seemed so peaceful, just the opposite of what was to come, and it took so long. Yet here we be, survivors through it all, our recent near encounters notwithstanding, pressing ever onward." I paused again, staring off into the distance through the open window, caressing my latest scar. "Now we are off once more, on another mission of conquest to secure the last of the empire." I turned to my mentor. "It will never stop, will it, Amr?"

He shook his head. "No. After this you must turn your attention to the homeland of the Byzantines, and after that the kingdoms beyond, and just when you feel content ... some threat to a part of the empire will emerge." Amr waved a finger at me. "You must choose your governors carefully so that they are both loyal to you and at the same time capable of maintaining stability in their precincts. Don't make the same mistakes Othman did."

"I won't," I replied, "but first, I must bring Al-Hasan under control."

Al-Hasan waited in the old Persian capital of Iraq, the city of Al-Medain, for his opponent's first move. There he retained the better part of the thirty-five thousand troops which Ali had summoned to fight in Syria only six months earlier, but Al-Hasan had not the will to lead them into battle.

The rush of the river Tigris at the sharp meander across which Al-Medain was built, lulled Ali's son as he sat in the palace that had been home to the king of Persia over twenty years earlier. The city's former splendor was still evident, even though most of the treasure had been removed and doled out to its Muslim conquerors at the time of Al-Medain's fall. The hewn stone palace rested amid luxuriant gardens of deep green shrubs and

flowers of blues, yellows, and reds whose perfume, strengthened by the day's summer heat, made the would-be Caliph sneeze. From his seat inside the audience hall, on a simple wooden throne which had replaced the ornate gem-studded original, Al-Hasan could see through the window one of two remaining priceless works of art. A life-sized horse of solid gold, with emeralds for teeth and rubies for eyes, and a rider made of pure silver, now blackened, stood watch in the garden. The other work lay in the floor, between him and the spot upon which Farouk stood – a mural of gold hills, silver walkways, animals of pearl, and plants of precious stones. Al-Hasan leaned back in the throne, crossing his legs, his elbow on the arm of the chair, his chin propped up on his fist.

"Where exactly *are* Mu'awiya's forces?" he asked impatiently.

"About tens days up river from here," Farouk replied, "at Kirlasiyah, on the Euphrates." The sheikh swayed as he stood, a dark face wrapped in a white kaffiyah which obscured the limit of his like-colored beard.

"They're getting too close. I want you to take half of my army and stop them."

"I'm too old for that," Farouk protested. "I'll soon be five and sixty. I've not led men in battle for many years and these undisciplined troops of yours will not be easy to lead."

Al-Hasan brushed his hand over the short dark beard which bordered his pale face, youthful in comparison to Farouk, yet now beginning to show signs of middle age.

"I've never done it," Al-Hasan said. "Would you have the Khalifah risk his life, and those of his men, due to inexperience? That would be folly. I've commanded that you do it, so do it."

Farouk scowled. "I'll comply, but not because you order it. Rather, I do it in memory of your father since it's what he would have done were he alive today."

"Any more of this talk and *your* life will be at risk!" Al-Hasan replied, raising his voice and rising from his seat. He pointed to the doorway. "Go now, and do as I bid."

Farouk said no more. He left the Caliph and prepared to set out with twenty thousand men, over half on foot, and enough provisions to last for thirty days.

Farouk departed from Al-Medain in the month of Safar, 41 AH, and followed the Euphrates westward until his scouts reported that enemy forces lay directly ahead, not more than a day's march. Farouk pitched his camp and waited.

Despite the presence of the great river, the land surrounding Farouk's garrison was, while not desert, rugged and inhospitable for most of the year, lacking the rich alluvial plains of the east. Some evergreens grew here and there in the gorge cut by the river while, nearby, seasonal pasturelands sprawled to the north, attracting Bedouin in the summer months. This summer, however, the Bedouin were few. Beyond the fields, the country became a desolate patchwork of colorless plains and low lying hills.

Farouk knew his opponent from the early days when they had fought on the same side, but the only recent contact had been at Siffin, when Farouk served as envoy to hear the terms of the truce. He reflected on that day, now four years past, realizing the outcome would have been very different had Ali been allowed to continue his offensive.

This time it was up to him. The best he could hope to do was to hold back the invaders and preserve the territory, but preserve it for whom? For Al-Hasan to live off in luxury; for its ungrateful inhabitants; ...for himself? Why not? A victory here would assure him high stature. He could return to Medain, depose Al-Hasan, and install himself as ruler of these lands. But that would be a betrayal of his oath of allegiance to Ali and he would then be responsible for breaking the blood line from the Prophet. But if that line is weak, it would only be a matter of

time until it failed of its own accord. The real question was, did he have enough men to withstand a full scale offensive by the Syrian forces? He would think about this further.

Four days passed with no movement by either side, then, on the fifth day, a messenger arrived with orders from Al-Hasan.

"Turn *back*!" Farouk ripped the kaffiyah off his head.

"Yes, that's what he said," the messenger replied.

Farouk fumed. "I don't understand. Does this man know not what he wants?"

"There is trouble in Al-Medain, a revolt," the messenger said. "Al-Hasan intends to flee from there and abdicate to Mu'awiya, with conditions."

"Has Mu'awiya been informed of this?"

"No, I am to do that next."

Farouk thought quickly through his strategy and how this could best play into it. If the enemy could be lured into letting their guard down as they traveled toward Al-Medain, he could cross up river not far from his camp and attack from the rear. That element of surprise might give him the advantage he needed to even up the odds. He could send word back to Al-Medain calling the remainder of the army to his aid, and force the Syrians to fight on two fronts.

Farouk pointed to the northwest, kaffiyah in hand.

"Mu'awiya is camped on the other side of the river a day away from here. You would do best to backtrack down river and cross near Firad, then move back up the opposite bank. I shall send a small party to augment yours if you so wish."

The messenger nodded. "I accept your offer."

Farouk stroked his unruly beard. He would need an accurate report as to what transpired at that meeting. "Very well then. I will summon five good men to accompany your party. You must not delay in conveying this urgent dispatch, for every instant wasted is one in which calamity draws ever more near."

I walked with Amr through our camp near the bank of the Euphrates when what I had predicted came to pass. The air was clear and cool but, nevertheless, the sun was hot. My garrison covered a great expanse a short distance from the river, leaving the green grassland strip in between for the horses and camels to graze on. The animals were pastured at the downstream end of the camp, where the winds could spirit the smell of musk and dung away from us. As was Amr's longtime practice, we pitched the black tents of the Bedouin for shelter, five thousand of them, to house an army of thirty thousand. Over the distant crashing of rapids in the river, I heard one of my men call out.

"Someone approaches!"

I could see several men on horseback riding toward our bivouac from the southeast. Their number, and the manner in which they rode, indicated they were not a threat. Amr and I stopped and watched as the sentry intercepted the party, talked with their leader, then motioned for some others to stand guard while he conveyed their message to us.

"Khalifah," he said, as he neared me. "There are men of Al-Hasan's who have come to talk peace. Do you wish to see them?"

"What sort of peace?" I asked.

"Al-Hasan tenders his submission."

I looked at Amr. "I told you... didn't I?"

"We shall see," Amr replied, waving me to be patient. He wore an unimpressed look on his face.

I turned to the sentry. "By all means, bring them."

The sentry gave a curt bow and hurried off. He returned with the emissaries moments later. Only two were permitted to approach me, while a heavy guard was maintained on the rest. A gray cloud, small and dark, passed overhead, blotting out the sun and increasing the chill of the air.

"Speak your piece," I commanded.

The messenger bowed and touched his hand to his heart, lips, and forehead. "I come from Al-Medain," he said. "My master, Al-Hasan, has instructed me to convey his wishes that our peoples might make amends and live in peace."

"What's he prepared to offer that this might be so?" I rubbed my hands together with a glee which I hoped didn't show.

"He will forego any claims to the leadership of our people and surrender Al-Iraq and the Persian provinces in exchange for three concessions. First, that he be allowed to keep the current accumulation of the treasury of Al-Kufa as well as the income from the Persian district of Fars. Second, that he and his household be allowed to return to Medina and live out of harm's way, and lastly that all insult and condemnation of his father be removed from your public prayers."

I pondered the conditions.

"Is Al-Hasan in Medain now?" Amr asked.

The messenger hesitated, his expression conveying discomfort. "I cannot say. His whereabouts are closely guarded."

Amr whispered to me. I nodded and then returned my attention to the envoy.

"Tell your master these terms are not acceptable. He can keep only half of the treasury of Al-Kufa and no revenues from Persia. The second demand we will grant, and the last I will agree to only in part, to the extent that no such utterances shall be made within his hearing. We will proceed on our present course and meet with him in Ain at-Tamr to receive his answer."

The sun began to peek out from behind the clouds, their shadows racing away from us as the light and heat returned.

"I can tell you now that he will not accept less than what he has offered," the messenger replied, his voice shaking. He averted his eyes from mine.

"Put my terms before Al-Hasan – let him decide. We'll expect to meet him as I have said. Should he refuse, I will guarantee slow and painful deaths for you all. Now be gone." I tapped Amr on the arm and we walked away.

The messenger and his party were escorted back to their horses. They mounted and rode off as I watched over my shoulder.

"Amr, how long until my son Yezid arrives with the balance of our forces?"

"I would expect no more than two days."

"Send word to him of this meeting. Tell him we're resuming our march to be in Ain at-Tamr within six days. He shall accelerate his pace to meet us one day out from there. We'll embark tomorrow lest we allow the enemy too much time to react."

"It will be done," Amr responded.

Farouk paced outside his tent, before the cooking fire which burned less and less brightly as the sun crept over the horizon. He had sent Al-Hasan's messenger back to Medain that very morning, one day after the meeting with the Syrians. What the messenger did not volunteer to tell him, Farouk's own man conveyed. The enemy's immanent movement eastward would afford him the opportunity to enact his plan soon enough. Farouk ordered that his army prepare to break camp and mobilize. He summoned his amirs to lay out the tactics which they would follow.

Farouk pointed to the north, the gray arm of his robe looping low from his wrist. "We'll travel further from the river, under cover of those hills, and continue westward to Kirlasiyah – to the crossing point. It should take us no more than a day to reach it. Mu'awiya will have started his march by that time. Once we've crossed, we'll pursue the enemy and engage them from behind. You!" Farouk said, pointing to one of the amirs. "You must get word to Al-Medain and Al-Kufa and rally our remaining forces to attack from the east, so that we can trap the Syrians and cut off their escape. We'll need all of the remaining fifteen

thousand. Al-Hasan must be convinced that he has no alternative but to fight, or be butchered like a goat at the slaughter. As for the rest of us, we must move swiftly and silently. Be ready to leave by sunset today."

Farouk and his amirs parted company, each going off to prepare for their departure, which did occur precisely at sunset. The bulk of the army, all Bedouin, kaffiyah flowing in the evening breeze, traveled northwest on camels and horses and by foot, paralleling the great river until they reached the village of Kirlasiyah. There, a bridge spanned a narrow part of the Euphrates. They crossed and backtracked, tracing the Syrians' path. The remainder of Farouk's army, a handful of men, headed east toward Al-Medain to secure additional troops for the frontal attack. They never reached their destination.

Early in the month of Rabi, 41 AH, shortly after my meeting with Al-Hasan's emissary, a hostile army attacked from the rear. We took heavy losses at the outset, since I mistook the advance for the reinforcements that my son was to bring. The fighting lasted for several days with first one side, then the other, gaining ground then losing it. I learned, from prisoners we had taken, that Farouk was the leader of this army and that he awaited for a second front to open up in the east to provide relief. I felt certain no such assistance would come. We had recently received a band of enemy horsemen who were intercepted on their way down river by migrating Bedouin friendly to my cause. Upon the threat of having their tongues cut out, the enemy divulged their destination and purpose. What followed must have come as a great surprise to Farouk. My forces under Yezid happened onto the battle and forced *Farouk* to fight on two fronts. Farouk was contained by my troops on the east and west, and by the river on the north. His only possible route of escape was to the south, toward the desert, and I was ready for him.

Eleven of us pursued a like number who fled on horseback with Farouk into the wasteland. When we caught up with them, some distance from the main battle, a skirmish ensued. I engaged one of his younger soldiers briefly and was barely holding my own defense when an errant arrow made its mark in his stomach, passing almost all the way through him. His eyes widened as he stared into mine with a look of disbelief that this had happened. He doubled over and fell from his mount. As he lay twisted and motionless, his mare unwittingly trampled him, leaving a pomegranate sized depression in his skull. Another arrow whizzed by my head, just missing me, and landed far off in the sand. The clangor of swords came from all directions and, every now and then, the sound of one scraping along the entire length of another. One of my men rode towards me, slowly, his mouth closed and his eyes bulging, but he didn't look my way. As I neared him, he coughed and a great quantity of blood issued forth from his mouth. He slumped down on his horse and wrapped his arms around its neck before sliding off, onto the ground.

From the corner of my eye I spied something coming quickly my way. It was Farouk riding at me furiously, sword in hand, digging his heels repeatedly into his mare, his face filled with rage, his kaffiyah flapping in the wind. I spurred my mount to loop around him at the last moment. Farouk flew past. He turned sharply and came at me again, his weapon at the ready. Our horses circled each other as we traded blows, scimitar against scimitar, the constant singing of the blades masking all other sounds. We thrust at each other simultaneously. The swords engaged and slid down their lengths until they locked at the hilt. With my relative youth, and heavier weight, I was able to push Farouk back. The scimitars rang as they parted. My adversary's eyes welled with hatred and unspeakable intent. As our horses shifted position, Farouk slashed his blade across my mount's hind quarter. It reared and threw me to the ground. I never moved so fast as I did to recover my weapon in that instant. Before I knew it, Farouk was bearing down on me once again. I looked for my

horse, but it was nowhere in sight. Farouk rapidly closed the distance between us. I froze, my arms dangling helplessly at my sides. Running was futile, he was almost on top of me. I tightened my grip on the handle of my weapon. As he swung his sword, I dived for the ground, rolled, and brought my scimitar slicing into his horse's rear fetlock as it passed. Down came the mare, sideways, like a rock wall falling, with Farouk pinned underneath it. I got up and ran over to the sheikh to send him to his final judgement before he could escape. His neck was stretched, allowing his head to rest perfectly sideways on his shoulder and his eyes had almost left their sockets. He was dead.

I stood there, panting, my heart racing. I looked about. Twenty or more bodies lay on the earth, deformed and bloodied. Only I and two of my men remained.

It was late after mid-day when I rejoined Amr on the main field of battle. We had annihilated Farouk's army. I dismounted and strode toward my counselor amid the plaintive, desperate cries of the wounded. My head itched from the sweat trapped beneath my turban. I pulled back on it to remove the headcovering intact and threw it on the ground violently as I walked. An arrow remained stuck in its thickest part.

"Send word to that... Al-Hasan. He's to capitulate unconditionally and open the gates to all the cities of Al-Iraq or we'll exterminate every living soul we encounter on our way to him. How dare he attack when proposing peace!"

Amr nodded an acknowledgment.

"And move the meeting place to the mosque at Anbar, it's closer to Al-Medain. I don't want him to have any excuse for a delay in meeting us." I turned to walk back to my horse.

"I was to propose that myself," Amr replied, calling after me. "I'll send two of his own from those taken captive down river yesterday."

I stomped off, kicking my turban into flight as I passed it.

The messengers were sent on their way with great haste. My army followed, paralleling the lush river valley, and in a few days we arrived at the town of Hit. There, we found the gates open and weapons of war heaped in a large pile in the central square of the town. The inhabitants went nervously about their daily business. We harmed none. After replenishing our supplies with sacks of cornmeal, dates, and roots, we pressed on to Anbar, arriving there the next day. As at Hit, the gates were wide open with swords, lances, bows, and quivers of arrows prominently displayed in a palm-fringed court at the end of the short, dusty main street. Amr and I entered the town under a heavy guard and a blazing sun. The street was lined with onlookers, some Bedouin but mostly local peasant farmers, Fellahin, whose inquiring faces displayed apprehension about their fate. We proceeded to the mosque where Al-Hasan waited in the company of his advisors and approached him to within a camel's length. He sat cross-legged on the ground, in the shade of a sanctuary at the threshold of the mihrab, protected on three sides by supporting columns. His sword lay unthreateningly before him. He gazed up at us with a look of exhaustion carved into his face and the emptiness of defeat in his eyes.

Al-Hasan placed his hands on his knees. "We have met before," he said to me, "in more peaceful times, when I was a boy."

"I remember. Those times have been long gone but will soon be restored. First, however, I demand to know why you attacked us after offering your submission."

"I didn't attack you!" Al-Hasan looked to his council. They all shook their heads.

"Your man, Farouk, led an army against me and caused us many losses. You claim to know nothing of this?"

Al-Hasan's eyes widened and his expression changed to one of panic. "Nothing!" he replied.

The relentless sun burned down on me. I motioned to one of my mulazims who handed me a woven sack as long as my arm and a foot's length wide. It was weighted at the bottom and encrusted with blood.

I tossed the sack in Al-Hasan's direction. It hit the sword, kicking up a small cloud of dust, and rolled, stopping just short of him. He stared at the sack, but did not touch or open it.

He looked up. "What do you require of me?"

I had won, at last. I discretely let out a deep breath and savored the moment. "You must make written proclamation to the people of Al-Iraq, as well as to those in all other parts of the realm. In it you will abdicate your position in my favor and relinquish any claims to wealth and property other than that which has been handed down to you by your clan. And you must do it now. You will make one to be promulgated here, another to send back to our homeland, and a third which I will take to Damascus. Then you may retire to Medina with your family."

Al-Hasan called his scribe to bring parchment and a writing implement and began to dictate to him the words of his abdication. After the first declaration was finished, the scribe produced two more. Al-Hasan put his hand to them all and impressed his seal on each with his signet ring. He handed me the documents and I, in turn, gave them to Amr who read the wording carefully and then returned them to me.

Amr and I climbed onto the pulpit, which was nothing more than a raised platform in this austere mosque, and faced a crowd of thousands who had assembled to witness this event. Some wore expressions of sadness while others appeared relieved. Those who had accompanied me from Syria beamed pride and confidence. I moved to the front of the platform and raised the proclamations high into the air.

"By his own hand, Al-Hasan has foregone the responsibilities and authority of governing this land and its people. That same act has vindicated the blood of Othman and has put an end to the struggle for succession, a struggle which has

needlessly cost the lives of so many. To prevent such a tragedy from ever occurring again, I declare here and now that my son, Yezid, shall lead in my place when I am no longer of this earth."

I lowered my arm and held the documents out to my side as I continued to face the assembly. Amr stepped forward and took them from me. He then addressed the masses.

"Acknowledge you all, Mu'awiya, as your leader and leader of all the peoples from Egypt to Persia, and from Asia Minor to the furthest extremities of Arabia. Furthermore, pay homage to him as the rightful Khalifah, the successor to Othman, and to Omar before him, and Abu Bakr before him." Amr drew his scimitar. "Take now the oath of allegiance to your Commander, or perish by the sword."

None resisted.

The proclamation was circulated throughout Al-Iraq and Arabia, where significant support for Ali had existed, and pledges of loyalty to me as Khalifah were obtained. Al-Hasan went back to Medina with his family and his sizable harem. Eight years later, he was poisoned by one of his wives. In my absence, during the campaign against Al-Hasan, Meisun left Damascus to live with her people in the desert, and never returned. Amr resumed his post as governor of Egypt and remained in that position until his death in 43 AH, at the age of seventy three.

As for myself, I have governed from Damascus as sole Khalifah and Commander of the Faithful for eighteen years now. Peace and prosperity reign and, as Amr had foreseen, the frontiers of my empire continue to expand. But I fear for my son, and his sons, for I know that the family and followers of Ali await revenge and will one day have their way, after I am gone.

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