

PRELUDE

THE ANGEL OF REVELATION

A mule can go to Mecca, but that doesn't make him a pilgrim.

God didn't put those words in my mouth. He could have; he has a sense of humor. Those are Arabs' words. They are a people of many words, a flood that could float Noah's ark. If you're a stranger, you might not see that. You'd be blinded by the desert sun that bleaches bones and minds alike.

The sun takes on other tasks. Drying up water holes that ran full just last year. Starving the whole crop of spring lambs when the grass became parched and withered. Driving nomads in desperation to seek better pastures. And when they got there, the sun glistened off fresh blood, because other tribes who would die without their pastures lay in wait to kill the nomads.

But the Arabs refuse to give up. "Let's turn it all into a story," they said. "The cure for misery is a song." There are other cures, but no one had the money to buy them.

And so they set out to turn starvation into a heroic adventure. Thirst became a muse, the threat of murder a cause to boast of their bravery. Arabs and God had in common this love of words. So when He heard a man say, in the depth of

his heart, "God loves every people on earth but the Arabs," it was fitting that I should appear with one command.

"Recite!"

That's all that I, Gabriel, was sent to say. One word, one messenger, one message. I was like a hammer knocking the bung out of a wine cask. One stroke, and wine to fill a hundred jugs spills out.

And so they did from Muhammad, but not at first. If an angel could doubt, I would have. I spoke to the one man in Arabia who didn't know how to recite. He sang no songs, much less an epic. He sat on the edge of the crowd when a wandering poet lifted his voice. Can you believe it? Muhammad had begged for God to speak to him, and when God answered, he was struck dumb.

Recite! What's wrong with you? Be filled with joy. The day that was heralded is now at hand.

Not him.

When I appeared, I found Muhammad in a cave on the side of a mountain.

"What makes you go there?" his friends demanded. "A merchant of Mecca should be tending his business."

Muhammad replied that he went up there for solace.

"Solace from what?" they asked. "You think your life is any harder than ours?"

They saw only a man in a purple-trimmed robe walking through the marketplace and sitting in the inns to make trades over tea. They never saw the man with shadows in his mind. Dark thoughts hid behind a smile.

One day Muhammad came home pale as a ghost. His wife, Khadijah, thought she would have to catch him in her arms if he fell.

"Do not go into the street," Muhammad ordered. He was actually trembling.

Khadijah rushed to the window, but all she saw in the street was a maid gathering bundles to carry away. The girl was crouched in the dust packing old rags, scraps of leather, and heaps of charcoal, tying them into bundles to sell in the hill towns around Mecca.

"Come away," Muhammad exclaimed, but it was too late. Khadijah saw what he had seen.

One of the bundles moved.

She closed the shutters with tears in her eyes. It could have been a cat that needed drowning. But Khadijah knew it wasn't. It was one more baby girl who would not grow up. One more forgotten corpse, small enough to hold in your hand, that no one would find on a remote hillside.

Muhammad was forty, and he had seen this abomination all his life. And worse. Slaves beaten to death on a whim. Rival tribesmen bleeding in the gutter, because they spat on someone's slipper. He did business with men who actually committed such acts and who shook their heads when Muhammad spoke of how much he loved his four daughters. Muhammad smiled at his friends and their fine grown sons. Only in his heart did he ask God why his two sons had died in the cradle. Only in his heart did he say the one thing that made a difference.

I will not turn my face from you, Lord, even if you kill everyone I love.

God could have whispered in return, "Why believe in me, if you also blame me for these evils?"

Perhaps he did whisper such a thought. Or Muhammad might have stumbled upon it on his own. He had time to think,

in those long days and nights in a tiny mountain cave. He ate little, drank less. His wife worried that he might not come home again, since bandits infested the hills outside Mecca.

She was almost right. When I appeared before Muhammad, he would not recite the word of God, he would not listen, and he wouldn't even stay put.

Instead he fled the cave, running up the mountain in a frenzy of alarm. The man who wished for God to notice him was terrified once he was noticed. Muhammad stole a glance over his shoulder. The ground was rocky, and he stumbled. The air was filled with strange sounds. Did he hear the mockery of demons following him? Muhammad looked at the sky for answers. He wanted a way out.

He remembered the cliffs at the summit of Mount Hira. Shepherd boys had to be careful to keep lambs from running too close to the edge when a vulture circled overhead and frightened them.

What is circling me now? Muhammad thought with a surge of dread.

With a squeezing pressure in his chest, Muhammad gasped as he ran. He would jump from the cliffs and dash his body against the rocks below. He couldn't even pray for rescue, since the same God who might save him was the God who was torturing him.

I didn't ask for this. Let me go. I am nothing, a man among men.

Panting and stumbling, Muhammad clutched his robe tight against the gathering chill of Ramadan, the ninth month of the calendar. An evil month, a blessed month, a month of omens and signs. Arabs had argued over it as long as he could remember. After a few minutes the glaze of panic decreased. His mind was suddenly very clear. Muhammad

looked down at his feet pounding over the ground as if they belonged to someone else. How curious—he had lost a sandal but didn't feel the jagged stones that cut his foot and caused it to stream blood. The decision to commit suicide brought a kind of comfort.

Muhammad gained the summit of the mountain. He spied Mecca in the distance. Why had he pursued God like a falcon after a desert hare? Mecca had hundreds of gods already. They lined the Kaaba, the sacred place, inside and out. One god for every worshiper; one idol for every sacrifice. What right did he have to meddle? There were countless sacrifices, day after day, that lined the town's pockets. Muhammad could almost smell the smoke from this great height.

Peering down at the rocks below, he trembled. In that moment of his destruction, Muhammad found a prayer that might save him.

Dear God, in your infinite mercy, make me who I was before. Make me ordinary again.

It was the one prayer God could not grant, for in that moment a man's existence was shattered like a wine cup carelessly trampled in a tavern. He would never be ordinary again. The only thing that mattered from now on would be Muhammad's words. The Arabs, as lovers of words, were poised. Would they love God's messenger or revile him?

Muhammad smiled faintly. A Bedouin saying had come to him: "A thousand curses never tore a shirt." *So why should I tear it myself? And my flesh and bones with it?* he thought. The image of his body crumpled and broken on the rocks below repelled him.

Muhammad turned away from the brink. *If I'm your vessel, handle me with care. Balance me lightly. Don't let me crack.*

I whispered yes. Who was I to deny him? I didn't even ask God first.

The merchant of Mecca limped with one sandal back down the slope. His tongue was thick and clumsy. Muhammad would recite as I commanded. He would never stop reciting, even if it meant his death.