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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In my book *The Alchemist*, the central thesis lies in a phrase that King Melchizedek says to the shepherd boy Santiago: "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it."

I believe this with all my heart. However, the act of living one's own destiny includes a series of stages that are far beyond our understanding, whose objective is always to take us back to the path of our Personal Legend—or to make us learn the lessons necessary to fulfill our own destiny. I think I can better illustrate what I am saying by relating an episode in my life.

On August 12, 1979, I went to sleep with a single certainty: at the age of thirty I was successfully making my way to the top of my career as a recording executive. I was working as artistic director for CBS in Brazil, and I had just been invited to the United States to talk to the owners of the company, who would surely provide me with every opportunity to achieve all that I desired to do in my area. Of course my great dream—to be a writer—had been set aside, but what did that matter? After all, real life was very different from what I had imagined; there was no way to earn a living from literature in Brazil.

That night I made a decision: to abandon my dream. One had to adapt to circumstances and take advantage of opportunities. If my heart protested, I could deceive it by composing song lyrics whenever I wanted, and by doing some writing now and then for some newspaper. Besides, I was convinced that my life had taken a different path, but one no less exciting: a brilliant future awaited me in the world of the music multinationals.

When I woke up, I received a phone call from the president: I had just been fired, without further explanation. Although I knocked on various doors in the next two years, I never found a position again in that field.

When I finished writing *The Fifth Mountain*, I recalled that episode—and other manifestations of the unavoidable in my life. Whenever I thought myself the absolute master of a situation, something would happen to cast me down. I asked myself: why? Can it be that I'm condemned to always come close but never reach the finish line? Can God be so cruel that He would let me see the palm trees on the horizon only to have me die of thirst in the desert?

It took a long time to understand that it wasn't quite like that. There are things that are brought into our lives to lead us back to the true path of our Personal Legend. Other things arise so we can apply all that we have

learned. And, finally, some things come along to *teach* us.

In my book *The Pilgrimage*, I tried to show that these teachings need not be linked to pain and suffering; discipline and attentiveness alone are enough. Although this understanding has become an important blessing in my life, it still did not equip me to transit certain difficult moments that I experienced, even with total discipline and attentiveness.

One example is the case I have cited; I was a serious professional, made every effort to give the best there was in me, and had ideas that even today I consider worthwhile. But the unavoidable happened, at the very moment when I felt most secure and confident. I believe I am not alone in this experience; the unavoidable has touched the life of every human being on the face of the earth. Some have rebounded, others have given up—but all of us have felt the wings of tragedy brushing against us.

Why? To answer this question, I let Elijah lead me through the days and nights of Akbar.

PROLOGUE

At the beginning of the year 870 B.C., a nation known as Phoenicia, which the Israelites called Lebanon, had marked almost three centuries of peace. Its inhabitants could take pride in their accomplishments; because they were not politically powerful, they had developed an enviable skill at negotiation as the only means of assuring survival in a world beset by constant war. An alliance made around the year 1000 B.C. with King Solomon of Israel had allowed the modernization of its merchant fleet and the expansion of trade. Since that time, Phoenicia had never stopped growing.

Its navigators had traveled to places as distant as Spain and the Atlantic Ocean, and there are theories—as yet unconfirmed—of their having left inscriptions in northeastern and southern Brazil. They carried glass, cedar, weapons, iron, and ivory. The inhabitants of the large cities such as Sidon, Tyre, and Byblos were familiar with numbers, astronomical calculations, the manufacture of wine, and for almost two hundred years had been using a set of characters for writing, which the Greeks knew as *alphabet*.

At the beginning of the year 870 B.C., a council of war was meeting in a distant place called Nineveh. A group of Assyrian generals had decided to send troops to conquer the nations located along the Mediterranean coast. Phoenicia had been selected as the first country to be invaded.

At the beginning of the year 870 B.C., two men hiding in a stable in Gilead, in Israel, expected to die in the next few hours.

PART I

"I HAVE SERVED A LORD WHO NOW ABANDONS ME INTO the hands of my enemies," said Elijah.

"God is God," the Levite replied. "He did not tell Moses whether He was good or evil; He simply said: *I am*. He is everything that exists under the sun—the lightning bolt that destroys a house, and the hand of man that rebuilds it."

Talking was the only way to ward off fear; at any moment, soldiers would open the door to the stable where they were hiding, discover them both, and offer the only choice possible: worship Baal, the Phoenician god, or be executed. They were searching house by house, converting the prophets or executing them.

Perhaps the Levite would convert and escape death. But for Elijah there was no choice: everything was happening through his own fault, and Jezebel wanted his head under all circumstances.

"It was an angel of the Lord who obliged me to speak to King Ahab and warn him that it would not rain so long as Baal was worshiped in Israel," he said, almost in a plea for absolution for having heeded what the angel had told him. "But God acts slowly; when the drought begins to take hold, Princess Jezebel will already have destroyed all who remain loyal to the Lord."

The Levite said nothing. He was reflecting on whether he should convert to Baal or die in the name of the Lord.

"Who is God?" Elijah continued. "Is it He who holds the sword of the soldier, the sword that executes those who will not betray the faith of our patriarchs? Was it He who placed a foreign princess on our country's throne, so that all this misfortune could befall our generation? Does God kill the faithful, the innocent, those who follow the law of Moses?"

The Levite made his decision: he preferred to die. Then he began to laugh, for the idea of death frightened him no longer. He turned to the young prophet beside him and attempted to calm him. "Ask God, since you doubt His decisions," he said. "I have accepted my fate."

"The Lord cannot wish us to be massacred without mercy," insisted Elijah.

"God is all-powerful. If He limited Himself to doing only that which we call good, we could not call Him the Almighty; he would command only

one part of the universe, and there would exist someone more powerful than He, watching and judging His acts. In that case, I would worship that more powerful someone."

"If He is all-powerful, why doesn't He spare the suffering of those who love Him? Why doesn't He save them, instead of giving might and glory to His enemies?"

"I don't know," said the Levite. "But a reason exists, and I hope to learn it soon."

"You have no answer to this question."

"No."

The two men fell silent. Elijah felt a cold sweat.

"You are terrified, but I have already accepted my fate," the Levite said. "I am going out, to bring an end to this agony. Each time I hear a scream out there, I suffer, imagining how it will be when my time comes. Since we've been locked in here, I have died a hundredfold, while I could have died just once. If I am to be beheaded, let it be as quickly as possible."

He was right. Elijah had heard the same screams, and he had suffered beyond his ability to withstand.

"I'm going with you. I weary of fighting for a few more hours of life."

He rose and opened the stable door, allowing the sun to enter and expose the two men hiding there.

THE LEVITE took him by the arm, and they began to walk. If not for one then another scream, it would have seemed a normal day in a city like any other—a sun that barely tingled the skin, the breeze coming from a distant ocean to moderate the temperature, the dusty streets, the houses built of a mixture of clay and straw.

"Our souls are prisoners of the terror of death, and the day is beautiful," said the Levite. "Many times before, when I felt at peace with God and the world, the temperature was horrible, the desert wind filled my eyes with sand and did not permit me to see a hand's span before me. Not always does His plan agree with what we are or what we feel, but be assured that He has a reason for all of this."

"I admire your faith."

The Levite looked at the sky, as if reflecting briefly. Then he turned to Elijah. "Do not admire, and do not believe so much; it was a wager I made with myself. I wagered that God exists."

"You're a prophet," answered Elijah. "You too hear voices and know that there is a world beyond this world."

"It could be my imagination."

"You have seen God's signs," Elijah insisted, beginning to feel anxiety at his companion's words.

"It could be my imagination," was again the answer. "In actuality, the only concrete thing I have is my wager: I have told myself that everything comes from the Most High."

THE STREET was deserted. Inside their houses, the people waited for Ahab's soldiers to complete the task that the foreign princess had demanded: executing the prophets of Israel. Elijah walked beside the Levite, feeling that behind each door and window was someone watching him—and blaming him for what had happened.

"I did not ask to be a prophet. Perhaps everything is merely the fruit of my own imagination," thought Elijah.

But, after what had occurred in the carpenter's shop, he knew it was not.

SINCE CHILDHOOD, he had heard voices and spoken with angels. This was when he had been impelled by his father and mother to seek out a priest of Israel who, after asking many questions, identified Elijah as a *nabi*, a prophet, a "man of the spirit," one who "exalts himself with the word of God."

After speaking with him for many hours, the priest told his father and mother that whatever the boy might utter should be regarded as earnest.

When they left that place, his father and mother demanded that Elijah never tell anyone what he saw and heard; to be a prophet meant having ties to the government, and that was always dangerous.

In any case, Elijah had never heard anything that might interest priests or kings. He spoke only with his guardian angel and heard only advice about his own life; from time to time he had visions he could not understand—distant seas, mountains populated with strange beings,