



THE
PILGRIMAGE

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Prologue

And now, before the sacred countenance of RAM, you must touch with your hands the Word of Life and acquire such power as you need to become a witness to that Word throughout the World.

The master raised high my new sword, still sheathed in its scabbard. The flames on the bonfire crackled a good omen, indicating that the ritual should continue. I knelt and, with my bare hands, began to dig into the earth.

It was the night of January 2, 1986, and we were in Itatiaia, high on one of the peaks in the Serra do Mar, close to the formation known as the Agulhas Negras (Black Needles) in Brazil. My Master and I were accompanied by my wife, one of my disciples, a local guide, and a representative of the great fraternity that is comprised of esoteric orders from all over the world the fraternity known as The Tradition. The five of us and the guide, who had been told what was to happen were participating in my ordination as a Master of the Order of RAM.

I finished digging a smooth, elongated hole in the dirt. With great solemnity, I placed my hands on the

earth and spoke the ritual words. My wife drew near and handed me the sword I had used for more than ten years; it had been a great help to me during hundreds of magical operations. I placed it in the hole I had dug, covered it with dirt, and smoothed the surface. As I did so, I thought of the many tests I had endured, of all I had learned, and of the strange phenomena I had been able to invoke simply because I had had that ancient and friendly sword with me. Now it was to be devoured by the earth, the iron of its blade and the wood of its hilt returning to nourish the source from which its power had come.

The Master approached me and placed my new sword on the earth that now covered the grave of my ancient one. All of us spread our arms wide, and the Master, invoking his power, created a strange light that surrounded us; it did not illuminate, but it was clearly visible, and it caused the figures of those who were there to take on a color that was

different from the yellowish tinge cast by the fire. Then, drawing his own sword, he touched it to my shoulders and my forehead as he said, By the power and the love of RAM, I anoint you Master and Knight of the Order, now and for all the days of your life. R for rigor, A for adoration, and M for mercy; R for regnum, A for agnus, and M for mundi. Let not your sword remain for long in its scabbard, lest it rust. And when you draw your sword, it must never be replaced without having performed an act of goodness, opened a new path, or tasted the blood of an enemy.

With the point of his sword, he lightly cut my forehead. From then on, I was no longer required to remain silent. No longer did I have to hide my capabilities nor maintain secrecy regarding the marvels I had learned to accomplish on the road of the Tradition. From that moment on, I was a Magus.

I reached out to take my new sword of indestructible steel and wood, with its black and red hilt and black scabbard. But as my hands touched the scabbard and as I prepared to pick it up, the Master came forward and stepped on my fingers with all his might. I screamed and let go of the sword.

I looked at him, astonished. The strange light had disappeared, and his face had taken on a phantasmagoric appearance, heightened by the flames of the bonfire.

He returned my gaze coldly, called to my wife, and gave her the sword, speaking a few words that I could not hear. Turning to me, he said, Take away your hand; it has deceived you. The road of the Tradition is not for the chosen few. It is everyone's road. And the power that you think you have is worthless, because it is a power that is shared by all. You should have refused the sword. If you had done so, it would have been given to you, because you would have shown that your heart was pure. But just as I feared, at the supreme moment you stumbled and fell. Because of your avidity, you will now have to seek again for your sword. And because of your pride, you will have to seek it among simple people.

Because of your fascination with miracles, you will have to struggle to recapture what was about to be given to you so generously.

The world seemed to fall away from me. I knelt there unable to think about anything. Once I had returned my old sword to the earth, I could not retrieve it. And since the new one had not been given to me, I now had to begin my quest for it all over again, powerless and defenceless. On the

day of my Celestial Ordination, my Masters violence had brought me back to earth.

The guide smothered the fire, and my wife helped me up. She had my new sword in her hands, but according to the rules of the Tradition, I could not touch it without permission from my Master. We descended through the forest in silence, following the guides lantern, until we reached the narrow dirt road where the cars were parked.

Nobody said good-bye. My wife put the sword in the trunk of the car and started the engine. We were quiet for a long time as she carefully navigated around the bumps and holes in the road.

Dont worry, she said, trying to encourage me. Im sure youll get it back.

I asked her what the Master had said to her.

He said three things to me. First, that he should have brought along something warm to wear, because it was much colder up there than he had expected. Second, that he wasnt surprised at anything that had happened up there, that this has happened many times

before with others who have reached the same point as you. And third, that your sword would be waiting for you at the right time, on the right day, at some point on the road that you will have to travel. I dont know either the day or the time. He only told me where I should hide it.

And what road was he talking about? I asked nervously.

Ah, well, that he didnt explain very well. He just said that you should look on the map of Spain for a medieval route known as the Strange Road to Santiago.

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Arrival

The customs agent spent more time than usual examining the sword that my wife had brought into the country and then asked what we intended to do with it. I said that a friend of ours was going to assess its value so that we could sell it at auction. This lie worked: the agent gave us a declaration stating that we had entered the country with the sword at the Bajadas airport, and he told us that if we had any problems trying to leave the country with it, we need only show the declaration to the customs officials.

We went to the car rental agency and confirmed our two vehicles. Armed with the rental documents, we had a bite together at the airport restaurant prior to going our separate ways.

We had spent a sleepless night on the plane the result of both a fear of flying and a sense of apprehension about what was going to happen once we arrived but now we were excited and wide awake.

Not to worry, she said for the thousandth time. You're supposed to go to France and, at Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, seek out Mme Lourdes. She is going to put you in touch with someone who will guide you along the Road to Santiago.

And what about you? I asked, also for the thousandth time, knowing what her answer would be.

Im going where I have to go, and there Ill leave what has been entrusted to me. Afterward, Ill spend a few days in Madrid and then return to Brazil. I can take care of things back there as well as you would.

I know you can, I answered, wanting to avoid the subject. I felt an enormous anxiety about the business matters I had left behind in Brazil. I had learned all I needed to know about the Road to Santiago in the fifteen days following the incident in the Agulhas Negras, but I had vacillated for another seven months before deciding to leave everything behind and make the trip. I had put it off until one morning when my wife had said that the time was drawing near and that if I did not make a decision, I might as well forget about the road of the Tradition and the

Order of RAM. I had tried to explain to her that my Master had assigned me an impossible task, that I couldnt simply shrug off my livelihood. She had smiled and said that my excuse was dumb, that during the entire seven months I had done nothing but ask myself night and day whether or not I should go. And with the most casual of gestures, she had held out the two airline tickets, with the flight already scheduled.

Were here because of your decision, I said glumly now in the airport restaurant. I dont know if this will even work, since I let another person make the decision for me to seek out my sword.

My wife said that if we were going to start talking nonsense, we had better say good-bye and go our separate ways.

You have never in your life let another person make an important decision for you. Lets go. Its getting late. She rose, picked up her suitcase, and headed for the parking lot. I didnt stop her. I stayed seated, observing the casual way in which she carried my sword; at any moment it seemed that it could slip from under her arm.

She stopped suddenly, came back to the table, and kissed me desperately. She looked at me for some time without saying a word. This suddenly made me realize that now I was actually in Spain and that there was no going back. In spite of the knowledge that there were many ways in which I could fail, I had taken the first step. I hugged her passionately, trying to convey all the love I felt for her at that moment. And while she was still in my arms, I prayed to everything and everyone I believed in, imploring that I be given the strength to return to her with the sword.

That was a beautiful sword, wasnt it? said a womans voice from the next table, after my wife had left.

Dont worry, a man said. Ill buy one just like it for you. The tourist shops here in Spain have thousands of them.

After I had driven for an hour or so, I began to feel the fatigue accumulated from the night before. The

August heat was so powerful that even on the open highway, the car began to overheat. I decided to stop in a small town identified by the road signs as Monumento Nacional. As I climbed the steep road that led to it, I began to review all that I had learned about the Road to Santiago.

Just as the Muslim tradition requires that all members of the faith, at least once in their life, make the same pilgrimage that Muhammad made from Mecca to Medina, so Christians in the first millennium considered

three routes to be sacred. Each of them offered a series of blessings and indulgences to those who traveled its length. The first led to the tomb of Saint Peter in Rome; its travelers, who were called wanderers, took the cross as their symbol. The second led to the Holy Sepulcher of Christ in Jerusalem; those who took this road were called Palmists, since they had as their symbol the palm branches with which Jesus was greeted when he entered that city. There was a third road, which led to the mortal remains of the apostle, San Tiago Saint James in English, Jacques in French, Giacomo in Italian, Jacob in Latin. He was buried at a place on the Iberian peninsula where, one night, a shepherd had seen a brilliant star above a field. The legend says that not only San Tiago but also the Virgin Mary went there shortly after the death of Christ, carrying the word of the Evangelist and exhorting the people to convert. The site came to be known as Compostela the star field and there a city had arisen that drew travelers from

every part of the Christian world. These travelers were called pilgrims, and their symbol was the scallop shell.

At the height of its fame, during the fourteenth century, the Milky Way another name for the third road, since at night the pilgrims plotted their course using this galaxy was traveled each year by more than a million people from every corner of Europe. Even today, mystics, devotees, and researchers traverse on foot the seven hundred kilometers that separate the French city of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port from the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.*

Thanks to the French priest, Aymeric Picaud, who walked to Compostela in 1123, the route followed by the pilgrims today is exactly the same as the medieval path taken by Charlemagne, Saint Francis of Assisi, Isabella of Castile, and, most recently, by Pope John XXIII.

Picaud wrote five books about his experience. They were presented as the work of Pope Calixtus II a devotee of San Tiago and they were later known as the Codex Calixtinus. In Book Five of the codex, Picaud identified the natural features, fountains, hospitals, shelters, and cities found along the road. A special society Les Amis de Saint-Jacques was formed with the

* The Road to Santiago, on the French side, comprised several routes that joined at a Spanish city called Puente de la Reina. The city of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port is located on one of those three routes; it is neither the

only one nor the most important.

charge of maintaining all of the natural markings on the route and helping to guide the pilgrims, using Picauds annotations.

Also in the twelfth century, Spain began to capitalize on the legend of San Tiago as the country fought against the Moors who had invaded the peninsula. Several militant religious orders were established along the Road to Santiago, and the apostles ashes became a powerful symbol in the fight against the Muslims. The Muslims, in turn, claimed that they had with them one of Muhammads arms and took that as their guiding symbol. By the time Spain had regained control of the country, the militant orders had become so strong that they posed a threat to the nobility, and the Catholic kings had to intervene directly to prevent the orders from mounting an insurgency. As a result, the Road to Santiago was gradually forgotten, and were it not for sporadic artistic manifestations in paintings such as Bu-uels The Milky Way and Juan Manoel Serrats Wanderer no one today would remember that millions of the people who would one day settle the New World had passed along that route.

The town that I reached by car was completely deserted. After searching on foot for quite some time, I finally found a small bar open for business in an old, medieval-style house. The owner, who did not even look up from the television program he was watching, advised me that it was siesta time and suggested that I must be crazy to be out walking in such heat.

I asked for a soft drink and tried to watch the television, but I was unable to concentrate. All I could think of was that in two days I was going to relive, here in the latter part of the twentieth century, something of the great human adventure that had brought Ulysses from Troy, that had been a part of Don Quixotes experience, that had led Dante and Orpheus into hell, and that had directed Columbus to the Americas: the adventure of traveling toward the unknown.

By the time I returned to my car, I was a bit calmer. Even if I were not able to find my sword, the pilgrimage along the Road to Santiago was going to help me to find myself.