

PROLOGUE

Translated by Clifford E. Landers

THE ALCHEMIST PICKED UP A BOOK THAT SOMEONE IN THE caravan had brought. Leafing through the pages, he found a story about Narcissus.

The alchemist knew the legend of Narcissus, a youth who knelt daily beside a lake to contemplate his own beauty. He was so fascinated by himself that, one morning, he fell into the lake and drowned. At the spot where he fell, a flower was born, which was called the narcissus.

But this was not how the author of the book ended the story.

He said that when Narcissus died, the goddesses of the forest appeared and found the lake, which had been fresh water, transformed into a lake of salty tears.

"Why do you weep?" the goddesses asked.

"I weep for Narcissus," the lake replied.

"Ah, it is no surprise that you weep for Narcissus," they said, "for though we always pursued him in the forest, you alone could contemplate his beauty close at hand."

"But . . . was Narcissus beautiful?" the lake asked.

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“Who better than you to know that?” the goddesses said in wonder. “After all, it was by your banks that he knelt each day to contemplate himself!”

The lake was silent for some time. Finally, it said:

“I weep for Narcissus, but I never noticed that Narcissus was beautiful. I weep because, each time he knelt beside my banks, I could see, in the depths of his eyes, my own beauty reflected.”

“What a lovely story,” the alchemist thought.



"I WANT TO TELL YOU A STORY ABOUT DREAMS," SAID THE alchemist.

The boy brought his horse closer.

"In ancient Rome, at the time of Emperor Tiberius, there lived a good man who had two sons. One was in the military, and had been sent to the most distant regions of the empire. The other son was a poet, and delighted all of Rome with his beautiful verses.

"One night, the father had a dream. An angel appeared to him, and told him that the words of one of his sons would be learned and repeated throughout the world for all generations to come. The father woke from his dream grateful and crying, because life was generous, and had revealed to him something any father would be proud to know.

"Shortly thereafter, the father died as he tried to save a child who was about to be crushed by the wheels of a char-

iot. Since he had lived his entire life in a manner that was correct and fair, he went directly to heaven, where he met the angel that had appeared in his dream.

"'You were always a good man,' the angel said to him. 'You lived your life in a loving way, and died with dignity. I can now grant you any wish you desire.'

"'Life was good to me,' the man said. 'When you appeared in my dream, I felt that all my efforts had been rewarded, because my son's poems will be read by men for generations to come. I don't want anything for myself. But any father would be proud of the fame achieved by one whom he had cared for as a child, and educated as he grew up. Sometime in the distant future, I would like to see my son's words.'

"The angel touched the man's shoulder, and they were both projected far into the future. They were in an immense setting, surrounded by thousands of people speaking a strange language.

"The man wept with happiness.

"'I knew that my son's poems were immortal,' he said to the angel through his tears. 'Can you please tell me which of my son's poems these people are repeating?'

"The angel came closer to the man, and, with tenderness, led him to a bench nearby, where they sat down.

"'The verses of your son who was the poet were very popular in Rome,' the angel said. 'Everyone loved them and

enjoyed them. But when the reign of Tiberius ended, his poems were forgotten. The words you're hearing now are those of your son in the military.'

"The man looked at the angel in surprise.

"Your son went to serve at a distant place, and became a centurion. He was just and good. One afternoon, one of his servants fell ill, and it appeared that he would die. Your son had heard of a rabbi who was able to cure illnesses, and he rode out for days and days in search of this man. Along the way, he learned that the man he was seeking was the Son of God. He met others who had been cured by him, and they instructed your son in the man's teachings. And so, despite the fact that he was a Roman centurion, he converted to their faith. Shortly thereafter, he reached the place where the man he was looking for was visiting.'

"He told the man that one of his servants was gravely ill, and the rabbi made ready to go to his house with him. But the centurion was a man of faith, and, looking into the eyes of the rabbi, he knew that he was surely in the presence of the Son of God.'

"And this is what your son said,' the angel told the man. 'These are the words he said to the rabbi at that point, and they have never been forgotten: "My Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof. But only speak a word and my servant will be healed.'"

The alchemist said, "No matter what he does, every per-

son on earth plays a central role in the history of the world. And normally he doesn't know it."

The boy smiled. He had never imagined that questions about life would be of such importance to a shepherd.

"Good-bye," the alchemist said.

"Good-bye," said the boy.

