

THE GEOMANCER
Book I

PRIMA MATERIA

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An *Occult Noir* Novel
By Lewis L Mason

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Cover design by Darren L Rose.
www.lewislmason.co.uk
Website design by Garry Jenner.

A copy of this text has been deposited at the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9955828-0-4

Made in Great Britain.
Published by Lewis L Mason Publishing.
An Occult Noir Novel.

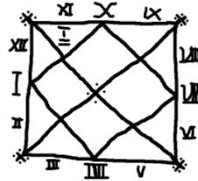
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Author would like to thank Mr. Garry Jenner for his invaluable assistance and unshakeable moral support. Thanks are also due to certain Lodge members and other concealed persons without whose encouraging suggestions this work of fiction would not have been attempted. Thanks also to the faithful reader, and to all the other unseen companions on this dark journey...

PROLOGUE

Or

Rubeus in the Eleventh House



"Gives no true nor faithful friends; shows men to be of wicked lives and conversations; causes a man to be rejected and cast out from all society and conversation with good and noble persons..." - Rubeus, the Eleventh House

Charring poppy seed crackles in the blackening incense. It sputters harsh echoes against the black marble walls. Coiling smoke vaults unseen into the shadows. They raise their faces.

"He falls."

"He falls to *thee*, my Lord."

"Open the orifices of the Depths."

"And receive him."

The two men stand shrouded and shapeless in heavy black silk, concealed in the ambient darkness. Each now raises a gloved hand, placing them in unison upon the tremulous shoulders of the naked man who sits between them on a black leaden throne, bound, gagged and hoodwinked with oily black silk. Their hard pale masks hide all visible emotion as the heavy torso of the man writhes in shock, his harsh voice bellowing in muffled agony. Were it not for the tensile strength of the heavy leather bands holding him fast, he would have torn himself free in a frenzy of torment. Even then, he would be completely unaware of his own actions. His mind, his senses, everything that makes him conscious, is absent.

For the bound man, everything that defines him is hurtling downwards, headfirst, through sightless abysses yawning with an approaching Terror to which he falls blind.

The two veiled men remain still, speaking their alternating verses with the precision of perfect recall.

"UO. Amaimon, receive his bowels and vitals."

"His eyes are lidless and sightless."

"OU. Azaemon opens his orifice to receive him."

"Truly Frater, is he fallen."

The naked man feels the skin flayed from his imaginary body by the razor spite of the wind, all sense of form and dimension shattered. Voice after voice is torn from his raw throat, scream after scream. He is out of his body - out of his *meat suit* - hurtling through a black Plane. Out of his mind.

"Ah, Fratrum meum, plangite!"

"For Eram hath received him into his rapine bed."

"For the fingers of infants hath plucked out his eyes."

All around him are distorted shards of fracturing explosive noise, stuttered screams at impossible volumes, cutting through him from within, felt as strongly as heard – extreme howls emitting from the foetid mouths of gigantic and unspeakable infant horrors, all clutching greedily for him across great damp expanses befouled by rank vapours.

Grey-black. Magenta. Ultramarine.

He is a coursing arrow with a keen head of flint, aiming not for Height, but Depth. A burning missile quenched in the slough of the Lower Abyss.

“Ecce Desolatus!”

The two men bark simultaneously, as they raise their free hands, each one holding a black iron rod over the bound man’s flailing bust. The piriform heads of the two rods, strongly magnetised, snap together with a dull click.

The man lands suddenly and violently, his limbs gravitating, and finds himself clinging hand and foot to the sheer wall of an immense pitted rock face. Hot searing winds batter him, the porous blackened rock crumbling beneath his fingers and toes, so that every tiny movement of his body threatens to dislodge his hold. He blinks in pain through acid tears to see that the rock face is the vertical wall of an immeasurably vast pit, curving off at a dizzying perspective into smoky darkness. His respiration is assaulted by a potent blend of foul odours so exquisite that his senses struggle not to identify them as the exotic scent of some alien flora.

It takes him some moments to realise that he is not alone in this place - that there is *Something* beneath him. Something massive.

It fills the impenetrable shadow choking the bottom of the chasm, thousands of miles below his straining feet.

His throat seizes tight with fear, an emotion he has not felt since he was a young boy in Poznan. He thought he had beaten the fear out, with every face broken beneath his fists.

But it is upon him at last.

He knows that he must turn and look below.

And he knows that his tiny living presence has awakened that vast *Something* from its slumber down there, as *It* rumbles and flails languidly in its broken somnolence.

Fear forces his face to the rock, with a grip fiercer than the angry hand of his father. He *dare* not move - but he came - to *see*. And see he must.

With great strain, the man turns shaking to look beneath him.

And the Something beneath him looks right back...

“We return thee to the sweet cold earth of home. Arise and return.”

“We compel thy return from the Heaven that awaiteth the unclean.”

The black magnetic rods are pulled sharply apart, producing a spasm in the still, tense body of the man beneath them.

The man nearest the tripod sprinkles a ruddy powder on the coals, which spits and sparks in red and green.

“Obey and return. The High Inquisitors command thee.”

“The Voice of Saul commandeth thee, by the Hexagram of Saturn. Return thou!”

“The Voice of Iago commandeth thee, by the Hexagram of Mars. Return thou!”

There is a pause, the atmosphere of the dark space shifting, as if a disembodied tremor has passed silently through the air. The bound man jerks twice, and then holds a taut shivering tension that flickers every muscle in his body.

In unison, the men chant in disaffected tones.

“He is returned.”

The hooded man on the left walks around to stand before the bound man, pulls the oiled hood off from his head, and studies him closely. The bound man’s head, nearly hairless with a short immaculate cut, is beading with sweat and ruddy from the burning astringency of the heavily scented oil. His heavy-set hairless body steams and glistens, his densely tattooed skin exuding the smell of blood and of a vaguer foulness. His large knotted hands, the knuckles tattooed intricately with the snarling faces of dogs, clench tightly in stricture, his semi-erect penis emitting a steady stream of urine that trickles on to the stone floor. His gagged face, the

thick lips and square chin smeared with blood, is shivering with the tension of a rictus caused by an incalculable extremity of shock.

“Camphor,” The man says coolly to his companion, without looking up. The companion passes him a small silver vial, which he uncorks and passes smartly under the nostrils of the bound man. The cold medicinal scent seems to act upon him like a pail of ice water.

He jerks and begins screaming through his gag, his moss green eyes flickering with wildness and widened to capacity, his mouth working furiously as his chest compacts against the strain of his wailing.

The man hands the vial back to his companion and punches the screaming man hard across the face. When this doesn't stop the screaming he strikes him again and again, which brings the man to a whimpering silence. Then he removes the gag from the mouth of the bound man.

“What did you see?” The hooded man asks calmly, his clipped and piquant near-eastern accent adding steel to his words.

The bound man looks at him vaguely, as if he has forgotten his ability to speak.

The hooded man slaps him again, the palm of his hand smacking wetly against the blood smearing the bound man's thick-skinned cheeks. He then repeats his question, his tone showing no more emotion than before.

“Filius Nija, what did you see?”

“I-I saw Him! The one w-we seek Outside! *I s-saw Him! Oh, my Go-*”

The hooded man smacks his mouth again, showing a sudden spike of fury.

“Shut UP! Are you MAD? You *dare* to speak the Name of our greatest *Enemy* even *in extremis*? Oh, I cannot *tolerate* this *imbecile* -”

The companion steps in as the other man turns away brusquely, bristling with irritation. The companion brings his blandly smiling mask up close to the sweating man, and holds his gaze as he unfastens the black leather straps from around the man's hands and arms. He speaks to him in a quiet patronising tone, saying each word separately as if speaking to a mental defective.

“Did-you-get-His-Sigil?”

The bound man pauses with uncertainty, his flickering eyes searching his recollection, disordered from shock. His thick Polish accent blurs through his hoarse straining bass-baritone voice.

“I-I think I may have had it r-revealed to me, Inquisitor Iago.”

The man's bland smile broadens.

“You *may* have? You *may* have had it revealed to you?”

“Oh, this moron is *insufferable* -”

The smiling face is almost touching that of the shaking man. The smiling mouth breathes each word harshly into the man's flinching face, the estuarine English accent like a piercing scalpel of contempt.

“Did. You. See. The. Sigil. *Imbecile*.”

“I believe I did, Inquisitor Iago. Yes, I definitely did.”

“Then record the fucking thing, or do we have to wipe your arse for you as well?”

The two Inquisitors step back and stand watching the shaking man coldly as he takes a quill pen and parchment from the black altar stretching out before him. He dips the quill absent-mindedly, into the bloody open cavity yawning in the torso of the tiny disembowelled corpse lying on the surface, and with a shaky hand, he draws the Sigil in the still warm blood.

Inquisitor Iago sneers a laugh and turns towards his companion, his mocking gaze watching the heavy fist scrawl the complex sigil on the parchment.

“His Lodge and followers call him *Pater Nija*, you know,” Iago mumbles drily, “*Pater Nija*, the *Destroyer*. What a tragic irony. I can barely bring myself to call him *Filius*, he is so inept. He drinks a whole *pint* of innocent blood and tells us he *may* have gotten the Sigil. The

dumb brute. But ah, how he *scrawls* perchance to write. You see, Inquisitor Saul? Miracles are everywhere. It seems we have found the evasive *one hundredth monkey*.”

The other hums in contempt, rolling his ebony staff between his fingers in boredom.

“Hmm, how fortunate we are. Judging from his poor Diving skills and ham-fisted quill action, this *particular* simian is unlikely to scrawl beyond the word ‘Alas’. And I would second the lament, Frater.”

“Indeed, Frater. The word ‘Alas’ would show at least *some* measure of self-awareness. We need only to consider whether such impressive intellect is an advantage to such a creature, or simply a faculty allowing them to throw faeces with a more pinpointed accuracy.”

“I suspect the answer is revealed by the question. Shall we depart?”

“Yes, Inquisitor Saul. I believe it is now closing time for this *particular* zoological exhibition.”

The two Inquisitors turn to leave, one turning back cursorily towards the cowering naked man at the altar.

“Oh *mighty* Filius Nija, we command thee. Store the Sigil correctly and safely – let us hope that your epithet of *Destroyer* does not presage your effect upon our good works. Clean up *that mess* upon our Regent’s Altar. Then close the Inner Sanctum *immediately*, using the usual Formulae. And contact us *immediately* once you have confirmed the Sigil’s accuracy. *Tu intelligis* Filius?”

“Y-yes Inquisitor Iago. *Intelligo, Patrum meum. Valete* Inquisitor Iago *et* Inquisitor Saul. I salute thee as the dust beneath thy heels.”

“Yes indeed,” The man spits out over his shoulder as they disappear into the shadows, the trains of their voluminous cowls whispering along the stone floor.

“That very dust thou *art*.”

Pater Nija now sits alone in the silence of the black crypt, his harsh breathing rasping in reverberant echoes against the cold marble, until it seems to him that a thousand breaths scrape lungless and mouthless from every corner of the dark – a thousand disembodied titters smirking faceless at his abasement and terror. A familiar and murderous rage wells up from his gut, only to be cut short by a vivid flashback of the great Chasm in the Depths, and that *Face* that gazed so briefly upon his own.

For another ten minutes until he lost consciousness in a merciful faint, Pater Nija grasped his temples until his nails drew blood, and screamed wide-eyed like a child.

*

Doug Burr pulled up his collar against the damp draught of the dusk, and looked up at the deepening blue sky through the grizzled trees, which were already beginning to show touches of brown and yellow. It had been an oppressively hot summer and it seemed to be falling into the earliest onset of autumn that Doug could remember. It’s never the same, thought Doug with a melancholy sigh, it’s never the same from one year to the next, from one decade to the next – we always look back to a golden and eternal England, but it never even bloody existed. Doug shook his head at the sky and the desiccating trees as if they had conspired against him personally, until Max and Corby pulled him sharply off his stride and out of his reverie.

“Steady on! You bloody maniacs.”

The two brindled Jack Russell terriers were snuffling furiously along the road, pulling on their extensible crimson leads as if they could snap them, and scrabbling along invisible and circuitous paths of scent that were becoming increasingly divergent. They were having doggy fun, and didn’t give a muck what Doug thought about it.

“Come on, lads. No, *not there* Corby! Come on now!”

Doug had wandered out of the small close where he lived, turning left on to Hungry Hill Lane to take a stroll and look out over the fields. He loved being out at this time of the evening, when there were very few cars if any; the dogs were getting some exercise which would ensure him a quiet evening of undisturbed reading, and the low umber-green ridges of the North Downs were settling into a calm slumber under the remote evening sky.

He had been alone for seven years since his wife Millie died of lymphoma, and during the worst times towards the end he found that the very remoteness of those evening skies were the only form of comfort he could find. They gave him a bower of rest in some empyrean guard, far away from the incessant sadness, the strain and the odours, which they both silently, and with such guilt, wanted to be over. When she did finally go, after the funeral, Doug sat outside under that remote sky for a very long time, until a kind neighbour brought him in under a warm blanket. And somehow, when he came back to his empty house, a part of him had never returned.

“Look at that *sky*, lads,” Doug sighed aloud, his chest lifting with the knowledge of sorrow and the expectancy of joy, “Look at that beautiful blue! It’s all ours, lads. All *ours*.”

Carried along by the familiar tugging of Max and Corby looking furtively for things of doggy interest, he turned the corner of the empty road by the edge of what was left of Loveland’s Copse. Millie always loved it here, Doug remembered. Never satisfied with any holiday we ever spent money on during our entire thirty-six years of marriage, but so content to be sitting on our little put-up director’s chairs on a quiet Sunday evening, eating a salmon and dill sandwich under the mossy boughs of these old Surrey oaks. So happy and so simple. Honest and beautiful.

“Dear God,” Doug said aloud, “We miss the old girl. Don’t we boys?”

Doug and the two dogs rounded the corner and faced the long stretch of road passing between a shady avenue of young ash and oak trees. Through his watering eyes, Doug could make out the white smear of a figure right down the end of the road, just coming into sight. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and peered ahead. Instinctively he slowed his pace of walking and, uncharacteristically, so did the two dogs. They stopped and became alert, their agile noses lifted into the air and sniffing warily in the direction of the distant figure.

The white clothing of the figure seemed to take on a strange luminosity as the dusk steadily deepened. Doug began to notice greying shadows creeping in under the trees as the light began to retreat westwards, and then felt awkward about his noticing. Doug was unaccustomed to unknown feelings and irrational reactions - things he always attributed to women and gay men - and he felt confused and mildly resentful at the sense of the *eerie* that seemed to be filtering into his familiar environment.

Surely, it’s not because of this stranger coming up, he thought. There’s always the odd jogger, the odd tourist or archaeology student walking up from West Clandon – it’s probably one of that lot.

He steeled himself quietly and continued to walk towards the figure, whose pace was steady and unhurried. He’s not local, definitely not, thought Doug; it’s strange for someone who isn’t local to be walking all the way out here, and at such a leisurely pace, especially when it’s about to get dark. Maybe he’s staying locally. Joan on the corner seems to run her house like a bloody Travelodge - perhaps he’s staying there.

The stranger was a tall man, with long hair as white as his clothing. From a distance, the man appeared to be wearing a long grey-white cassock and hooded robe, and carrying a tall white staff of hazel. Doug laughed to himself, all his tension dispersing.

“Blow me, it’s *Gandalf*, on Hungry Hill Lane.”

As the man neared, it was still bright enough for Doug to see that the man was staring just as intently at Doug. Doug noticed how quiet Max and Corby had become; very odd, because

by now they should be barking up a storm and threatening to tear the throats out of any oncoming strangers. But no sound, not even a sniff.

Doug tried to hide his confusion when the white-haired man turned out to be wearing a grey-white sports jacket and expensive white jogging suit, with a grey rucksack on his back. But he noticed that he was right about the tall white staff - of polished hazel wood.

“Good evening, mate.” Doug said, surprised at the sharp amiability that had entered his voice. He really was making an effort, and had no time to figure out why.

The white-haired man slowed and stopped. He had a strong and hardened face, the face of a soldier perhaps, a man who had seen too much of life and had a certain steeliness to his nature. The appearance made Doug wary, but only for an instant. The man gave a broad and disarming smile, and Doug couldn't help but return it.

“Good evening, my friend.” The man looked down with a grin to Max and Corby, who were standing in silence staring up at him.

“Good evening, lads!”

The dogs gave a single quiet whine, and bowed down to the man on their front legs, almost as if in obeisance. Then they sat on their haunches in calm silence. Doug looked down at them, and felt himself swallowing consciously.

“Golly, I've never in all my days seen these two so well-behaved with a stranger before. It's usually bark-bark-bark!”

The white-haired man chuckled quietly, his whole attitude mild and affable. But he didn't respond.

“Are you a druid or something? Or a dog-whisperer, maybe?”

Doug hoped that his question sounded enough like a light-hearted quip. He felt himself swallowing again, and holding the leads very tightly.

“Well,” answered the man smiling, “I've been called worse. They're lovely lads, aren't they? I always think dogs make the best company.”

“They're great,” Doug smiled, “They're my *boys!* So are you here for the archaeology? There's plenty of stuff around here from the Mediaeval period and back. You know, chalybeate Holy Wells, a Roman settlement and tile factory, an Iron Age ring fort, all that sort of thing. Are you staying at Joan Furness's place just up yonder?”

“No. I'm not here for that, I'm afraid,” said the man, “I'm a Journeyman. I'm just passing through on my way to London.”

“Oh,” said Doug, finding the conversation somehow refreshing, “I thought you *might* be staying locally when I saw you walking along here, as it's getting on for evening. You must be parked up on Ockham Road then, I suppose? Bit of a walk, but you should make it there before dark.”

The man smiled again with warmth, pausing as he looked briefly at Doug. Doug felt that the look was more penetrating and perceptive than the affable exterior would suggest. He felt as if he could never keep anything hidden from the man. Could never *lie* to him.

“I am heading up that way, actually.” The man began to move off. “You are welcome to join me for the stroll, if I am not taking you out of your way...”

“Thanks,” said Doug, oddly relieved, “Why not?”

“*Nil volentibus arduum.*”

“Ah,” said Doug, “That's Latin, in a *great* accent actually – something like ‘nothing is hard for those willing’, right?” The man nodded in confirmation. “So you *are* interested in the old days, then!”

“Yes my friend,” the man responded mildly, “I remember them well.”

The two men chuckled, but Doug suddenly felt that the man laughed in a subtly different way. It made his head swim a little.

They turned back the way Doug had come and walked abreast at a gentle, even pace. It was very pleasant, even though the unnaturally good behaviour of Max and Corby was playing somewhat on Doug's nerves. In spite of this, it felt like the most natural thing to do in the world, as if he were taking a walk in the garden with a favourite uncle, rather than along a darkening country lane with an oddly dressed stranger carrying a potentially offensive weapon. Funny that I should think *uncle*, thought Doug, the man can't be that much older than me, if at all.

"You have always lived here." The man stated, with no trace of a question.

"Yes indeed, Surrey born and bred," Doug answered proudly, "Never lived in London and never will. Can't *stand* the bloody place."

"Cities are not places where every man may prosper," Responded the man, "But still, I have to make my way there nonetheless."

"Is it a family affair, or business? Sorry, that is if you don't mind my asking..."

"I don't mind at all. You might say it's a family *and* a business matter. I have to go into the city and clear up a few problems for some friends of mine, try to limit some damage. It will be difficult. London is not going through a good season."

"No kidding! It's a mess up there! Seems to me it's all ghettos, as much for the rich as for the poor, crime overkill, rocketing prices, kids runnin' riot, air pollution - God! When I think of how much Surrey countryside has been lost to that *sprawl*..."

"Yes."

"I tell you, Journeyman," Doug continued with quiet passion, "I look at the old daguerreotypes of my great-grandfather's family, proper early rural Surrey life just as it was dying out - well - I think of my ancestors, all country folk mind, walking out expecting to see the fields that were tilled by *their* ancestors, only to find a rash of horrible new builds, the Ripley bypass and Heathrow flight paths racing the *nouveaux riches* in and out of the Eagle. They'd die of sorrow."

"Well now," Laughed the white-haired man gently, "I'm sure the good people of Surrey are made of tougher stuff than that."

Doug smiled and shook his head, looking at Max and Corby trotting quietly beside them and giving occasional looks of rapt interest at their new friend.

"I suppose you're right, Journeyman. I suppose you're right. Still, there you have it."

They came over the brow of a rise in the road and stopped short, where the sudden appearance of the matted urban accretion of London on the far north-western horizon felt like the intrusion of an unwelcome eavesdropper, stumbling in with feigned ignorance upon an unflattering conversation. Doug had pulled up sharply with instinctive wariness.

The obscure sky above London, hazy and jaundiced with polluting light, brooded over its mewling litter of architecture and progress. A distant swarm of lights flickered over the office buildings in the centre of the city, with a callous disdain for the well-earned rest of the green belt commuter and the inviolate sanctity of evening. A horrid *pulsation* seemed to swell silently from the place, a vague and unsettling *hum of dissonance* - a *din*, which seemed to be more than the subsonic roar of distant traffic congestion. It was a sensation of sound that increased anxiety, which caressed the taut nerves gently with cold wire wool, and made a person glance over their shoulder at shadows. Doug felt a shiver run through him, a reactive Luddite dread of cities, the horror of severance from the landscape.

The man stood quietly, glancing sideways at Doug with a faint smile.

"You can feel it?"

Doug paused, finding the words, his eyes glazing in the twilight.

"It's like a...a *disease*... a malady of unrestrained avarice. But it seems... even worse tonight. Like there's something..."

"Like something bad has seeped into it?"

Doug swallowed hard again and turned to look the man directly in the eyes, this time with no trace of self-consciousness. He gave a barely perceptible nod.

“What *is* it, Journeyman?”

For the very first time, Doug felt as if he was standing outside of his own life, performing the prewritten lines of a script. He was a side character in a weird tale, an epic spanning uncounted ages across the surface of the land. A story swallowing up every little minutia of detail - the movement of every leaf that had ever grown on every tree, the vapour of every human breath ever exhaled, the collective gleaming of every reflection of sunlight, from the first day to the end of all things.

The Journeyman stared back calmly, as if with such understanding, he was pleased to be, in some small way, understood.

“It is the beginning of a *war*, my friend.”

“Is there anything *I* can do?”

The Journeyman touched his shoulder with a genial hand, a contact for which Doug felt a sense of gratitude. The Journeyman had an amazing *atmosphere* around him, a gentle intensity, what Doug would call *soul*. Genuine warmth. Unmistakable.

“Keep to your part of this land. Stay faithful, to your neighbours, your kin and your ancestors, and to their dreams of the natural life - it is a *good* faith, which gives life to the thing it loves. Avoid the city. Especially during these next months.”

Doug kept silence, feeling that there was nothing with which he could respond to such a clear command, one that he felt so pleased to obey without question.

The Journeyman turned and looked down at the dogs with a beaming smile. He passed his hand gently over them, and they whined softly in response, bowing once again on their front legs and trotting back behind their master. The Journeyman turned and strode off alone down the open road, leaving Doug standing quietly, watching him leave. The walk had come to a natural end.

“Take care Journeyman.”

“I will,” The man said clearly over his shoulder, “*Aut viam inveniam, aut faciam*. And we will speak again soon, Douglas.”

Doug half-turned to head back to his house, but then froze in revelation. He hadn’t once told the Journeyman his name.

He had not *once* mentioned his own name.

Doug turned back swiftly.

“Here, how did you -”

The open stretch of road was empty. The Journeyman was gone with such suddenness that Doug felt his head become tight around the temples. He had his eye on the man not two seconds before. There was not even the sound of his steady footfall in the stillness of the dying twilight. *Aut viam inveniam, aut faciam* he said, thought Doug in awe. He’ll either find a way, or *make* one.

“Yes, I can well believe it.” He muttered under his breath.

Doug stood alone in the near darkness with snuffling Max and Corby pulling randomly on the leads again, just as they always did.

“Come on lads,” Doug said a little too loudly. “Home time now. *Home time!*”

PRIMA MATERIA, or The First Matter

“Hermes hath manifestly demonstrated the operation of this Prime Key in such words: In the caverns of metals there is concealed the Stone, which is venerable, bright in hue, a mind sublime, and an open sea.”

The Six Keys of Eudoxus (date unknown)

“XCV. The constant and essential Colors, that appeareth in the Digestion of the Matter, and before it cometh to Perfection, they are three, viz. Black, which signifieth the Putrefaction and Conjunction of Elements; White, which demonstrateth its Purification; and Red, which demonstrateth its Maturation. The remaining Colors, that appear and disappear in the Progress of the Work, are accidental only, and unconstant.”

Aphorisms of Urbigerus, 1690

“Shows noble friends and noble men, and such as shall much frequent the Courts of Princes, and follow after warfare; causes many to adhere to cruel men; but nonetheless causes much esteem with Princes - but their favour is to be suspected...”

- Puer, Eleventh House

MICHAEL AND ERIC I
Or
Birth of a Crusade

AUGUST 29TH – SEPTEMBER 3RD

MONDAY 29TH AUGUST, a half moon, waning

“Where the fuck *is* she?”

Michael Evans spat the words out a little too loudly, turning quickly with some embarrassment to glance around the interior of the coffee bar. Two sharp-suited executives, both in deep conversation, sat ignoring him at the far end of the seating area. The two members of staff on duty that morning behind the serving counter had their backs to him, too busy making as much sibilant noise as possible from every part of the espresso machine to care about his expletives. Michael grimaced to himself, then shrugged and turned back to gaze out of the rain-flecked glass and watch for his expected guest to come walking in, from the river of people passing by on upper Tottenham Court Road. Sometimes I think *this* is the actual Thames, thought Michael - the populus always in flood, full of garbage and effluvia, clawing at every dirty bank and carrying along a load of crap to deposit elsewhere.

“How frigging poetic,” Michael muttered quietly under his breath, “Now I know the caffeine’s working.”

Michael swung distractedly on the swivelled seat of his window-side stool, his digital tablet pitched upright on its magnetic stand showing various pictures from the website he had been studying.

He was an easy six foot, thin and wiry, with a somewhat malnourished Thatcher-era look that suggested a man who lived permanently on his nerves. But his body was lean and muscular, with strong shoulders set slightly back and a smooth face with high cheekbones, straight black hair fashionably tousled, and just the right amount of dark stubble to look modish. He was half-Italian by his mother and half-Welsh by his father, so he always believed that his dark looks were inevitable. His female friends described him as a down-and-out Jared Leto mixed with a young Bobby De Niro gone to seed. Apart from disagreeing with them strenuously, reminding them of his Masters in Journalism and Political Media and his dislike of actors, Michael wondered why he even continued speaking to those particular female friends. After all, he was never going to sleep with any of them, or *any* woman, and they never seemed to set him up with any man who was his type.

Michael grinned and ran a knotty hand through his hair, pulling the fringe off his face. Shit, the gel’s washed off, he sighed to himself in dismay, fricking rain... now I look like Natalie Imbruglia.

He wore his favourite red-orange Comme Des Garçon jersey under a large well-worn sepia combat waistcoat from the 1990s with a million pockets, which he could never bring himself to throw away. His heavy beige River Island jeans barely matched the jersey, and he had slipped on a pair of white pumps in his hurry to make the appointment. A shapeless Hessian cloth satchel sagged across his shoulders and hung at his waist, bulging with papers. Around his neck, a small black resin crucifix hung on a black beaded chain. He hadn’t been a practising Catholic since the age of eight when he buried his father just a year after his mother, never walking into a church again. In fact, Michael wouldn’t even describe himself as a *lapsed* Catholic.

Michael was a sworn-in, die-hard, Dawkinsian vocal atheist, and had no problem sharing that fact with the world. He called himself a warrior, in the Crusade for Reason. In fact, he made both of his most successful media creations to date for that very reason. *Red Zone* was his popular electronic magazine for vocal atheists and religious sceptics around the country, streaming live interviews, pod-casts and journalistic exposés for the past four years. *Finding Faith* was his other creation, the increasingly popular Radio Two spin-off programme occupying the late afternoon-early evening spot every first and third Sunday of the month. Michael played the pithy yet genial host for the engaging and light-hearted magazine show -

more liberal and less aggressive than *Red Zone* - that questioned traditional religion and beliefs of the New Age on behalf of the discerning graduate agnostic and homemaker. It was humorous belief-system travelogue, with the odd Paxman-style hard-line interview with an Anglican vicar or New Age Ascension guru thrown in.

“It has all the Christmas wrapping of a polite and non-committal ‘special interest’ discussion of religion at an awkward Putney dinner party,” Michael had once mewled. “Pitched perfectly to engage the vain pseudo-interest of the conscientious middle-class shut-in with too much time on their hands - too much education to *ignore* the subject of a Radio Two programme, but too little to realise their own intellectual vulnerability when swallowing the class-conscious tropes of high-end media...”

Michael explained his opinion of the programme boldly to a fellow media graduate one night, over one glass of Pinot too many.

“Which *always* makes me giggle, because Finding Faith *actually* endeavours, *every* time, with *every* guest and *every* item, to hammer home the futility, inanity and social *irrelevance...*”

Here Michael swung his arm in a flourish, accidentally hitting the base of his glass against the carafe with a dramatic *clink* and dribbling wine on the tablecloth - ignoring the embarrassed fussing of his friend’s napkin dabbing, he warbled on.

“...the utter *banality* of religion and faith as a whole - thus convincing that *very* conscientious shut-in that religion, faith, alternative medicine, astrology, aromatherapy, Mass and Eucharist, bell, book and candle - it’s actually *all bollocks...*needy, delusional, unscientific *bollocks!* This is why we still need to fight in the *Crusade for Reason! Vive l’evolution!*”

His friend smiled tightly, his small gimlet eyes scanning the tables around them for understated signs of disapproval. Sniffing. Coughing. Quiet mutters of ‘Oh dear’ barely concealed beneath the gentle armisonant of busy cutlery.

Michael was in full rant, his friend’s attention encouraging him almost as much as the Pinot.

He counted off his belief hit-list on every finger.

“So what’s the social poison offered by our honoured guest this week, then? Healing? Prediction? ‘Spiritual’ ‘Energies’? Clairvoyance? Paranormal phenomena? The Virtue in Holy Relics? Transubstantiation? The Illuminati conspiracy? Papal infallibility? Aliens? *GOD?* No physical evidence? Can’t prove it? Just unverifiable subjective experience and hysterical anecdotes? Well, *great!* Thank you and goodnight, you *nutter*. Sceptics and atheists can all sleep safely in their beds. If it doesn’t have a *battery*, or a *brain*, it won’t work! *Duh!*”

His friend had smiled politely, and quietly rejoined with an example of a time when his girlfriend took a series of acupuncture and homoeopathic treatments that cured her of chronic back pain. But by then Michael had cut him, smoothly avoiding having to give his familiar deconstructive responses - statistical case studies, clinical definitions of medicinal effect, the psychology of the placebo effect, faulty generalisation, special pleading, or schizotypal delusions of the ‘special cure for special people’ kind. He had gotten up somewhat clumsily to go to the gent’s with a bladder full of vino and a gutful of self-satisfaction.

He managed to drain off the vino, but he recalls the self-satisfaction reaching staggering proportions by closing time.

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