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Opening Extract from...

The Mayan Codex

Written by Mario Reading

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EPIGRAPH

Eat, eat, while you still have bread
Drink, drink, while you still have water
A day will come when dust will possess the earth
And the face of the world will be blighted
On that day a cloud will rise
On that day a mountain will be lifted up
On that day a strong man will seize the land
On that day things will fall to ruin
On that day the tender leaf will be destroyed
On that day dying eyes will close
On that day there will be three signs seen on a tree
On that day three generations of men will hang there
On that day the battle flag will be raised
And the people will be scattered in the forests.

From *The Nine Books Of Chilam Balam*
Translated by the author

PROLOGUE

1

Le Château De Monfaucon,
Montargis, France
25th October 1228

The young King knelt and prayed a little before the hunt – God, after all, was on his side. Then he and his fifty-strong entourage clattered out of the Château de Monfaucon towards the domanial forest.

It was a blustery autumn day, with fine leaves churning in the wind, and a sufficient edge of rain to dampen the cheeks. The twelve mounted Cistercian monks who always accompanied the King were finding it increasingly difficult to adjust their chanting of the hours to the wind's hullabaloo. The King glared back at them from time to time, irritated at their swooping and swelling.

'You can all go home. I've had enough of your caterwauling. I can't make out a word of it.'

The monks, used to their master's whims, peeled off from the hunt procession, secretly relishing the prospect of an early return to cloisters, and to the roaring fire and plentiful breakfast that awaited them there.

Louis turned to his squire, Amauri de Bale. 'What you said about the wild boar. Yesterday. When we were talking. That it, too, is a symbol of Christ. Was this true?'

De Bale felt a sudden rush of exultation. The seed he had so carefully sown had germinated after all. 'Yes, Sire. In Teutonic Germany the boar, *sus scrofa*, is known as *der Eber*. I understand that the word *Eber* may be traced directly back to Ibri, the ancestor of the Hebrews.' Via a peculiarly convenient false etymology, de Bale added silently.

Louis hammered the pommel of his hunting saddle. 'Who were known as the Ibrim. Of course!'

De Bale grinned. He offered up a private prayer of thanks to the phalanx of tutors who had ensured that Louis was even better educated than his effete sodomite of a grandfather, Philip II Augustus.

'As you know, Sire, in ancient Greece the boar was the familiar of the goddesses Demeter and Atalanta. In Rome, of the war god Mars. Here in France, the boar might be said to stand in for you, Sire, in the sense of encapsulating both valiant courage and the refusal to take flight.'

Louis's eyes burned with enthusiasm. His voice rose high above the wind's buffet. 'Today I am going to kill a wild boar with my axe. Just like Heracles on Mount Erymanthus. God spoke to me this morning and told me that if I should do so, the attributes of the boar would transfer themselves to me, and my reign would see the permanent annexation of Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem by the Holy Mother Church.'

De Bale raised his eyebrows. 'By the Holy Roman Emperor, you mean?'

'I mean by me.'

De Bale found himself temporarily at a loss for words. This was getting better by the minute. The King had even made the suggestion himself. He checked out the horsemen surrounding them – yes, they'd heard the

King all right. He could almost hear the surreptitious tightening of sphincters as the King's entourage realized they were to hunt for wild boar – and not deer – that day.

De Bale glanced across at the King. At sixteen, de Bale was a full year older than Louis. Physically, he was already fully formed, whilst the King, at fifteen, was only incipiently pubescent. In terms of height, however, Louis towered over de Bale by more than a head, and he sat his horse with the confidence of unchecked youth.

'*Dente timetur*,' said de Bale.

'*Rex non potest peccare*,' riposted the King.

The King's entourage burst into spontaneous applause. Even de Bale found himself moved by his monarch's elegant *jeu d'esprit*. He bowed low in his saddle. De Bale had simply intended to protect his back – *dente timetur* was a well-known Latin expression for 'you'd better watch out for the teeth'. But the King had countered with *rex non potest peccare* – 'the king cannot sin'. By the most delicate of hesitations, however, between *potest* and *peccare*, Louis had transformed the phrase into 'you cannot sway the king, wild pig'.

The pun had been so magnificent that de Bale was briefly tempted to ignore his orders and spare the King's life – where else but in France could you find a fifteen-year-old king with the wit of a Peter Abélard? But a wise man thought twice before antagonizing a kinsman as powerful as Pierre Mauclerc, Duke of Brittany. De Bale was nicely caught between the Plantagenet rock and the Capetian hard place.

He eased his horse closer to the King's, then darted a look back over his shoulder to see how the other squires were taking his arrogation of the King's attention. 'I know where you can find one, Sire. He's a monster. The biggest tusker this side of Orléans. He's four hundred pounds if he's an ounce.'

'How's that? What did you say?'

The fool's been praying again, thought de Bale – he should have been born a priest and not a king. If he carries on like this they'll have to sanctify him. Either that, or he'll finish up the bloodthirstiest, most vainglorious, most self-acclaiming tyrant since Nero.

As if in echo of his secret fears, de Bale's very own version of a solemn prayer flashed, uncalled for, through his head. 'May it please you God that after what I am about to do, this whoreson doesn't end up as a martyr, and I a disembowelled, disjointed, discombobulated regicide.'

De Bale bowed in belated response to the King's query, a sickly smile plastered across his face. 'I'd actually been reserving him for myself, Sire. My servants . . .'

'How can you reserve him for yourself? All wild boar belong to the King. Who do you think you are?'

De Bale flushed. God protect me from men who are my masters, he mouthed to himself. He was already beholden to Mauclerc, and here he was crossing swords with his other liege lord, Louis IX, whom Mauclerc wanted dead. De Bale could feel his brain spinning on its axis. He groped around for the right approach – the right way to jump.

'The animal is well outside the royal forest, Sire, and therefore legally mine. And I have not killed him yet. I merely instructed my people to build a wicker barricade around his lair, and to keep him in place with a charivari. I know he's in there. I just haven't seen him. I was going to dedicate him to Our Lady and then slaughter him. They say he has twelve-inch tusks.'

'Twelve-inch tusks? Impossible.'

De Bale knew his man. He shrugged, and looked away into the distance.

'Then he's the Devil, not a boar. Four hundred pounds, you say? And twelve-inch tusks? He's an impostor. It's

inconceivable that our Lord Jesus Christ should be reflected in such a monster.'

De Bale edged in for the kill. 'That could be so, Sire. You are doubtless right.' He crossed himself with an extravagant gesture, almost as if he were sprinkling holy water over an invisible assembly. 'What more suitable opponent, then, for a Christian king?'

2

It took the King's party five hours to reach the de Bale manorial forest. Spare horses had been called for, and de Bale had ordered food, and a pavilion to be set up, just outside the monster's bower. He had also sent ahead to excuse his tenantry from their work for the day, ensuring himself the widest possible audience for what he trusted would be an earth-shattering, realm-transforming event.

When the King eventually rode in from the St Benedict marshes, five hundred of his eager subjects fell to their knees in welcome.

'Would you care to rest first, Sire?' De Bale caught his steward's eye. The man bowed, indicating that everything was in place for the King's comfort. 'Or shall we get straight to it?'

The King was staring out over the wicker enclosure. His face was ashen.

He's losing his nerve, thought de Bale. The poor fool's had five hours to think about the thing and he's losing his nerve. 'May I be your champion, Sire, and axe the porker on your behalf?'

Louis threw his leg up and over the pommel of his saddle. A servant skittered around the horse's croup, making a table of his back so that the King would not need to dirty his boots. 'Did God speak to you this morning, too, Amauri?'

'No, Sire. Of course not. God only speaks to kings and to popes and to the Holy Roman Emperor.'

The King grunted. He beckoned to his equerry. 'Bring me an axe. I shall kill this boar, and then we shall eat.'

De Bale offered up a fervent prayer of thanks that none of the King's mature advisors had bothered to attend the hunt. True to form, the whole lot of them were off scheming and plotting with the Queen Mother. He had the field entirely to himself.

He raised his gauntlet, signalling to his venerers that they might begin the drive. They, in turn, motioned to their flaggers, who transmitted the order through to the waiting beaters at the far end of the covert.

'The boar might emerge at any moment, Sire. May I suggest that you take up your position?'

The King stepped through the gap created for him in the wicker barrier. Ahead of him was a deep clump of thorn and withies. A channel had been cut through the mass of vegetation, via which the boar would, in theory, be funnelled.

De Bale raised his chin to one of his men-at-arms. The man threw him a pike. De Bale took his place to the right of the King, and a little behind. 'I will only intervene, Sire, should your first blow be deficient.'

'You will not intervene. My first blow will not be deficient. God has spoken to me. I am his anointed vessel.'

De Bale bowed his head in ostensibly reluctant surrender to the King's wishes. The King would not see the movement, but everybody else would. 'So be it, Sire.' He leaned on his pike and waited.

Soon a clamour could be heard over the peak of the hill. The *battue* had begun. De Bale had ordered the approaching line of beaters to march at no more than one-yard intervals – the last thing he wanted was for the boar to double back and eviscerate one of his own men instead of the King.

'Sire, remember to keep your legs together when you strike.'

'What are you talking about?'

'A boar scythes upwards with his tusks in order to disembowel his victim. If you keep your legs together, Sire, you will be protecting not only yourself but also the future of France.'

Louis burst out laughing.

Good, thought de Bale. Yet more evidence to the surrounding witnesses that all is well between me and the King. And if he keeps his legs together, the fool is that much more likely to botch his stroke.

A crash came from the underbrush, followed by a howl of excitement from the crowd. A boar burst out of the funnel of thicket and made straight for the King.

'Not that one, Sire.'

De Bale sprinted forward and speared the boar with his pike. The animal shrieked and fell on its back, kicking with all four legs. De Bale waved to his venerers, who ran forward, slit the pig's throat, and dragged it away. A pungent scent lingered after the carcase.

'Less than two hundred pounds, Sire. Your boar is more than twice that size.'

Louis's eyes were wide. He seemed transfixed by the still steaming blood-pile left by the slaughtered animal.

Come on, de Bale muttered silently to the King's back. Don't lose your nerve now, man. You'd never live it down. People would make up songs about you. You'd go down in history as Louis the Weak. And fate would

no doubt dictate that you'd live to be a hundred years old.

There was a communal moan. A white hart had emerged from the plantation. The hart fell back a little on its haunches, and then sprang through the line of venerers, cleared the wicker fence in one bound, and galloped off into the surrounding woodland.

De Bale allowed a string of expletives to trickle silently out under his breath. 'It is a white hart, Sire. Its presence signifies that your goal is unattainable. We may as well go home.' The words stuck in de Bale's craw. But the symbol was so specific, and the significance of the white hart so well known to everybody, that it would have been folly for de Bale, given his status as the King's host, not to have acknowledged it.

'*As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God*.' Louis readied his axe. It was clear that he intended to prove both de Bale – and the hart – wrong.

There was a shriek from the back of the approaching line of beaters. Then a hullabaloo of voices. It was clear that someone had been gored.

The King was looking everywhere at once, his face livid in the sudden flare of the sun.

The boar emerged from the extreme flank of the thicket, red streamers hanging from its tusks.

At first the King did not see it. But the enraged boar – the first of the pair to taste blood – now saw the King. It glanced towards the line of venerers. No gaps there. Then back towards the King, who was surrounded by nothing but air.

The boar charged, twitching and flapping its snout to rid itself of the tangle of intestines obscuring its vision.

The King saw the boar and drew himself up. He stretched the axe back and waited.

‘Run at him, Sire! You must run at him!’ De Bale had not the remotest idea why he was trying to help the King. He wanted the man dead, for pity’s sake, not transformed into a legend.

The King began a lumbering trot towards the boar, his axe raised for the kill.

The boar jinked, and swept his tusks sideways at the King.

The King screamed and fell.

The boar twisted, and started on his second pass.

Without stopping to think, de Bale rushed towards the King, slashing downwards in the direction of the boar’s path with his pike. The pike sliced through the boar’s shoulder. Arterial blood jetted in a crimson fountain over the King’s recumbent body.

The blow had shattered the pike’s shaft, leaving de Bale with only a slivered piece of wood in his hands.

The great boar was crawling towards the King, intent on finishing what it had started.

The venerers were approaching, daggers drawn, their mouths agape in shock.

De Bale saw all of this as if in slow motion. It was clear that he had only one choice left.

He threw himself onto the boar, grabbing its razor-sharp tusks with his hands. His last conscious memory was of the knife blows of his venerers raining down beside his head.

3

Amauri de Bale, Count of Hyères, spent the next sixteen years of his life in involuntary exile from the Court.

The Queen Mother, Blanche de Castile, had never forgiven him for what she saw as the encouragement of her son, the King, to commit an act whose folly was only outweighed by its pointlessness. The fact that de Bale had saved the young King's life at considerable risk to his own counted for little in the Queen's estimation – although it had undoubtedly protected de Bale from a regicide's agonizing death by quartering.

The King had been forbidden by his mother ever to communicate with de Bale again, and he had acceded to this request out of duty and affection for his mother, whilst stopping just short of agreeing to the actual administration of a formal oath.

But the King was a profoundly pious man, and renowned throughout Europe for his sense of fair play. Over the years of their enforced separation he had become increasingly convinced that Amauri de Bale had been marked out by God to save him from the machinations of the Devil. And furthermore that the great St Benedict boar, far from assuming the guise of one of the very symbols of Christ, had in fact been Lucifer himself.

In the late summer of 1244, and following a near mortal illness, King Louis, to his mother's horror, had unilaterally declared his intention to take the crusader's vow. After considerable soul-searching, and with the guidance of his confessor, Geoffrey of Beaulieu, and of his chaplain, William of Chartres, it was decided that it would be impossible for the King to take the cross

without first acknowledging God's part in his decision. And this, in turn, could not be done without recognition of some sort for the man who had clearly been chosen by God Himself to protect the King from the Devil.

The problem was further aggravated by the fact that a number of the King's squires – many of whom, sixteen years on, were now holders of important Offices of State – had clearly heard the King, that morning back in 1228, explaining to Count Amauri de Bale that he, Louis, *Rex Francorum* and *Rex Christianissimus*, Lieutenant of God on Earth, Lord High Protector of France (the Eldest Daughter of the Church), had been personally instructed by God that if he ever wished to secure the permanent annexation of Jerusalem, Nazareth, and Bethlehem to the Holy Mother Church, he must first go out and kill a wild boar with his axe.

Thanks to his ever more profound understanding of the scriptures, the King – and via the King, his counsellors – now understood that God had had a further and less obvious motive in mind that day. And that this motive involved the selection of Count Amauri de Bale to be the King's sole champion. To act for him and on behalf of him, in other words, in the gratification of God's wishes.

As a direct consequence of this fact, and in the teeth of the Queen Mother's vigorous disapproval, the King issued a formal summons to de Bale to present himself at the Basilica of St Denis, next to the tombs of the King's father, Louis VIII, and of his grandfather, Philip II Augustus, on the exact day, and at the exact moment, of the sixteen-year anniversary of his God-driven intervention.

4

At first Amauri de Bale had been tempted to avoid what he suspected was a trick invitation by impulsively volunteering to serve in the army of Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor. But he knew that if the Queen Mother truly wanted her revenge on him, she could reach him in Germany just as easily as she could have reached him at any time during the past sixteen years within the tenuous security of his chateau and estates.

That he owed his life – and the non-severance of his extremities – to the King's grace was in little doubt. De Bale shuddered to think what the Queen Mother would have ordered done to him had he not changed his mind at the very last moment and leapt in to save the King's life. His – on the face of it – perverse decision that day had not been prompted by any unlikely eruption of random human charity, however, but rather by a trained warrior's reactive instinct, twinned with the sudden realization – triggered by the King's sublime *jeu d'esprit* – that Louis might yet prove to be a credit to France, rather than merely another Capetian burden on its soul.

The upshot, of course, had been that de Bale had fallen foul of the Duke of Brittany, with all that that entailed in terms of loss of influence, a less advantageous marriage, and a dramatic narrowing of his political ambitions. But he had decided, in the general scheme of things, that this was the lesser of two evils – Mauclerc was bad, but the Queen Mother was awful.

De Bale knelt, therefore, before the King's father's sarcophagus, his head bowed, his forearms resting across his single upraised knee, and waited for the King's

pleasure. His entire life had consisted of a series of often impulsive gambles, and he now felt a fatalistic sense of his own insignificance in the magnificent new *Rayonnant* Gothic setting of the St Denis Basilica.

The King, flanked by his confessor, Geoffrey of Beaulieu, and his chaplain, William of Chartres, watched de Bale from the lee of one of the twenty statue columns adorning the portal of the Basilica's west façade.

'Look,' said the King. 'It is Our Lady.'

The two counsellors fell back, staring at their King. 'We see nothing, Sire.'

The King turned to them. 'You see nothing?'

'No, Sire. We see nothing. What do you see?'

The King turned back in the direction of his father's crypt. 'I see Our Lady, the Mother of God, raising my champion's cloak and laying it tenderly across his back so that he should not take cold.'

The two men covered their faces with their hands. Then they fell to their knees and prostrated themselves on the flagstone flooring of the nave.

The King, after only a brief hesitation, strode towards the kneeling figure of the Count.

De Bale heard the King's approach, but chose not to look up. The King's words had carried to him through the echoing Basilica, and de Bale understood that, at this exact moment, his own and his family's future was being decided forever.

He felt the tip of the King's sword touch him on the back of his right shoulder. 'You saw the Devil, de Bale?'

'I did, Sire.'

'And you protected the King?'

'With my life, Sire.'

'And you will always protect the King?'

'Always, Sire.'

'And this realm of France?'

'I and my family, Sire. Throughout eternity.'

'Then you shall be my Corpus Maleficus.'

Louis turned away. He raised his voice, so that it echoed throughout the Basilica. 'I have the Bishop of Reims to crown me. The Bishop of Laon to anoint me. Langres to bear my sceptre. Beauvais my mantle. Chalons my ring. And Noyons to bear my belt. I have the Duke of Normandy to hold the first square banner, and Guyenne to hold the second. I have Burgundy to bear my crown and fasten my belt. I have the Count of Toulouse to carry my spurs. Flanders my sword. And Champagne my Royal Standard. But who do I have to protect me from the Devil? Who to be my champion?'

De Beaulieu and de Chartres had risen up from their prone positions. Both men recognized a *fait accompli* when they saw one. 'You have the Count of Hyères, Sire.'

Louis nodded. 'The Count of Hyères is now the thirteenth Pair de France. My father's and my grandfather's bones are witnesses to this fact. Bring me the Seal and my crusader's cross.'