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## Jordan's Crossing

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Jordan's Crossing

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
In  
English  
American Literature

By

Delano Lomas

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*I am, was, called Malachi. My previous name is not worth knowing. That person was weak and selfish. His spiritual self was killed off soon after reaching Africa, an act of mercy really. All that was him, the negative sense of self, his disgusting need to please others for no better reason than to be well thought of, died on the plains of West Africa where Malachi came alive.*

*Malachi wandered those forests and streams, stalked the crowded urban streets, a warrior, home with a question for Mother Africa. Why did you not come for me? We waited in America, abandoned, alone, almost all knowledge of you erased over generations. I did receive an answer eventually. It came in the form of my Goddess, and with it came true understanding of the reason for my being. It served her will.*

*That was years ago. Now, I occupy a shallow grave. Crude and hastily made, it is roughly three or so feet deep. That is, of course, an estimate. My skin has long since sloughed off the bones of my once strong skeleton. It is soft now, courtesy of the moisture so prevalent in this cursed Louisiana soil. Bugs crawl in and out of my skull. The urge to scratch at them remains and is maddening. Occasionally my thoughts drift back over my life, a gift from my Goddess, or curse. I am somewhere in New Orleans, the city of my birth. I like to think that*

*lovely park on the West Bank. Jordan would at least have allowed me that. I always felt closer to Africa there.*

*I had not wanted to return to New Orleans. Its blacks were a boorish people, hobbled with a limited desire to achieve even the basic things that made life worth living. I lived among them for seven dreadful years, their weakness slowly seeping into my being with each passing day. My business concluded, I should have boarded a plane back to Africa; instead, I allowed myself to become hostage. My weakness? It was my love for my Goddess; the desire to please her. I was held firm by her wishes. Her wish was for one Jordan Newman.*

*Four years ago, while in Midtown for a trim, I noticed a young man looking around the barbershop. His eyes settled on a man in the chair across from me. The boy's hand moved from the back to the front of his jacket a few times, clearly trying to decide on pulling his weapon or not. The subject of the boy's attention seemed nonplussed. I confess I too had dismissed him. He was nothing more than a rabbit on his hind legs, trying to scare a mongoose. It was the man, Jordan, I found out later his name was, that I thought interesting. Careful not to look the boy in the eye, he proceeded to calm the offended youth down. His voice stayed soothing, always maintained a level tone. So, a simple man on the*

*surface; still, there had to be more. I reached out a little and I felt it. Inside him burned a tiny spark of being; the Goddess, privy to my thoughts, felt it too. It was the beginning of my downfall. But I am ahead of myself. Even now the Goddess forces me back along my timeline. I see the arrogant thoughts and selfish deeds. I see those who failed me.*

Jordan

The smoke from the small fire irritated him. Nostrils drained, and eyes burned, as the sweat leaked from him. Again Jordan thought about how silly it all must look, but Malachi modified things as needed. He was in a Lotus position. Not African in the truest sense, but workable. He was listening to a recording of tribal music the bass thumping so loud he was surprised there wasn't a crowd. Waldenberg Park was a tiny green paradise in an otherwise rundown, section on the West Bank of New Orleans. He felt stupid. As a rule, he left the house as little as possible in summer. A refugee from Ohio, he'd yet to adapt to the low boil this city maintained. Honestly, how had people lived here for hundreds of years without air-conditioning?

A stranger stumbling on the scene would likely think some Voodoo ritual was happening. They would not be too far off. This was an ancient African ritual, but not as bastardized as Vudun. It was more for connecting with the earth than for material gain. It was older than this city of shadows. It was one he was failing miserably at.

"Concentrate," Malachi said behind him. The words brought his mind back to the task. The summer heat felt like a hand slowly forming a fist determined to squeeze the remaining

moisture from his coal black body. He was certain now. Malachi was conspiring with this place to turn it into a steaming, personal hell. Jordan's thoughts wandered despite efforts to the contrary. He must be able to capture and hold the image of the Goddess. Malachi had shown him her once, years ago. The memory haunts him to this day. Part of the problem was the herbs Malachi had placed in the fire earlier. They made focusing, an already difficult task, worse. He should've been able to control his thoughts, despite their influence. It was no use, like grabbing a cloud. Jordan had pointed out on several occasions how confusing the concept was. Malachi's response was usually along the lines of, "Likened it to doing pushups; the more you do the stronger you become." Or, "If you wish to move mountains tomorrow, you must start by lifting stones today." Jordan was focusing on the urge to swat a fly when the blow came. It rocked his head. "Motherfucker!" he said, jumping to his feet. He grabbed at Malachi's shirtfront. Malachi, in turn, gripped that hand firmly, pulling him forward. The move shifted Jordan off balance, overextending his arm. It ended with Jordan face down in the grass, arm locked in a twisted grip.

"Need I remind you? The ritual you are currently failing so pathetically at pre dates documented history. It has been passed from N'ganga to N'ganga, by word and works only." Malachi kicked him in the ribs. "After all I've invested in you..." He continued speaking, his words calm and indifferent, in a sweet, mellow tone. "I feel I have not made myself clear enough!" Malachi increased the pressure. Jordan felt the ligaments in his right shoulder give. "If your concentration is off by the slightest bit, you will experience Demons instead of the voice of the Mother. If you are not focused, said demons will whisper sweet lies to you, lies that sound like her voice." He spat on the ground near Jordan's face. "They will rub their full bellies, laughing at the wandering warrior made useless! You, young man, are a microcosm of the

problems confronting Blacks in America these days.” He lifted the arm a few inches higher before releasing it.

Jordan swung his legs under him. He took his arm through a series of rotations in an effort to get circulation started again. Seriously, I’m going to have to kick that old man’s ass someday, he thought.

Malachi removed a bright red, black, and green cap from his dreadlocked head. He wiped at some sweat. “In Africa your training would have started from birth. There, they would have said you were too old to start the training. I would have agreed. The Goddess, may her wisdom last forever, says different.” Malachi shook his head. “An occasional lapse in discipline can be forgiven, but you continue to callously ignore this gift. You would do well not to test me, young Jordan.”

Jordan focused on slowing his breathing. He felt his initial rage subsiding. He tried reaching out with his mind this time instead of inward. It was a little easier. He could hear the horn of a tug boat out on the industrial canal pushing its charge, probably some overloaded barge, slowly down river. The rhythmic thrum of the engines would be combining with the heat forming an almost siren song for its weary crew. But its promise of sleep would be a false one. He could see the waters part before the heavy raft. Malachi’s hand was then on his shoulder.

“Breathe,” he said simply.

For the next few minutes, each exhalation brought more calm. The sun became less torturous and a sudden breeze caressed his face. Malachi’s words floated somewhere behind him, espousing the tired, and all too familiar, concepts of the connectedness of all things. There is no



them. There was no him, only pieces of the Goddess thinking themselves separate. She is the one seeking, the earth mother using human flesh to do her bidding. Jordan sometimes thought he could see her, just on the edge of his consciousness.

Malachi grunted, “Where is your head today? It is certainly not on the mother where it should be.”

Jordan started gathering up his things. There was only one thing on his mind today and it wasn't the Goddess. Training was done as far as he was concerned. His thoughts were on another piece of divinity, a severely married woman across town named Megan. She was probably thinking about her husband right now, or her kids. And if Malachi's Goddess, soon to be his Goddess, was real, he prayed to her Megan's thoughts fell on him too. He kept pictures of her on his phone. They flashed to life with his alarm each morning. Her smile would greet him before his affirmations. Not as good as the real thing, but it was all he had. Anything more real would be disastrous according to her, lives in the balance and all that. Those beautiful images, the one with the impish grin, her head tilted as she came in to hug him, and a few others were all that sustained him during the week. She occupied space in his real world despite her lack of a physical presence. If he read an interesting passage, he would imagine her response. He would then file it away for their discussion next lunch. Watching anything political, seeing the liars, he would hear her sweet voice defending them, the good behind some corrupt career politician, clear only to her. She was the reason he still believed in people. She was all the real he needed life to be.

“Okay,” Malachi said, “all bullshit aside, what is it, and please don't say Megan.”

“My thoughts are all her,” Jordan said.

“Silly man, no woman is worth what you’re about to achieve,” Malachi said gathering his own things.

“Bullshit aside, remember? You know what it’s like to love someone.”

“Yes, that’s why I tell you forget it,” Malachi said, pouring the rest of his water on the fire. “You are not some school boy, Jordan, all starry eyed and sixteen. You are a man on the brink of a great revelation. A year from now you will not remember her name.”

An image of Megan formed perfectly in Jordan’s mind as they walked to the car. She was smiling again. The one that said, “I see right through your bullshit.” It seemed to dare him to challenge her on it.

“Must I strike you again?” Malachi asked.

“You don’t control my thoughts. I’m still me.”

“Control no, but I can feel them. It’s a benefit of the herbs, something that will grow stronger over time. Eventually, you as a separate thing will no longer exist. You will be a vessel of the Goddess’ will.”

“You mean tool.”

“Another way to look at it, yes,” Malachi said nodding. “But that is the “you” talking, the false sense of self afraid of ceasing to be. You will never hear her voice if you are not clear of external distractions. This is the foundation, the very rock of your training. Once we carve away...”

Jordan got in on the passenger side. He closed the door on the rest. He looked up at the disintegrating roof panels in Malachi's old Nissan. Flaking brown material was covered over with a map of Africa. The glove box had a decal of the flag of Libya. Jordan shook his head. Africa was too far away for him. It felt foreign and unreal. Of course he was aware of the history and culture. He just never gave the place much thought, unlike Malachi. He seemed convinced it was the answer to all the problems plaguing modern man. Malachi got in the driver's side. He fumbled around in the glove box for a second before coming out with a cd. "No more training talk," he said, shoving the disc in. He put the old car in gear.

Jordan watched as vibrant green grudgingly gave way to Mexican restaurants, Vietnamese markets, and strip malls. He was glad to be leaving the park. He'd never been much of an outdoors type. Nature had always felt like a lie to him, a mask of pretty plants and soft things on the outside. When you looked close you saw wild animals, biting bugs, and dirt. He was too modern for that retro bullshit Malachi went on and on about. He felt secure in the city. He felt grounded by its hardness. "I don't think I'm ever going to be a Shaman."

"Not with that attitude," Malachi said turning up War's "Slippin in to Darkness". "But do not despair. I was the same before my awakening. You have the gift. More importantly, the Goddess has decreed it."

"I forget sometimes why I listen to you," said Jordan. Malachi touched Jordan's arm. Jordan felt a shift, like his body had moved, and he was there again. She was in the same position, skin blue, and glowing like the summer sky. The love she radiated was so strong it felt like a physical force. She was smiling. The words "You are welcome." kept repeating softly in his head. She was the center of a space that seemed to extend forever. Other beings were there,

kneeling and chanting. He didn't understand the words. But the feeling of love from her was overwhelming.

"You want to see the Goddess again," Malachi said removing his finger.

Jordan shook off the effects of the vision. Would he ever be able to do that? Connect mentally with her? Since Malachi had gifted him with the vision of the Goddess he was driven to get to that place, nothing else had mattered.

"In your heart you know my way to be the true one, admit it. You were adrift, no purpose in the present, no interest in the future. You were relieved when the Goddess chose you."

"Until Megan," Jordan said.

Malachi's head dropped, "Fair Megan now plays a part, tis true. You must forget her. You see, Old Malachi is right."

Jordan looked at his friend and mentor. A man so obsessed with all things African should know technically, dreadlocks did not fit the theme. His skinny form was leaning forward concentrating on the road. Not skinny to the point of emaciation Jordan thought, more a lean racing form, his bony arms extending through a camouflaged, sleeveless T- shirt.

"You should stop bashing black folks. Don't you know that shit is divisive? Especially since you no more African than the rest of us.

"I am not born in Africa, but Africa is born in me," Malachi said. "It's not one of mine, but it's a good one nonetheless. I merely..."

“Hate African *Americans* on a daily basis,” Jordan finished.

“Use it as an example, I was going to say.”

Jordan smiled at his friend. “Why, one would think,” in a fair imitation of Malachi’s own voice, “you were born in the nourishing soil of the Mother land herself, and as such, in possession of some priceless gift you’ve only just now decided to share with the rest of us.”

“You flatter me,” Malachi said nonplussed. “It was not my intention, but it is always good to inspire. It is true I like to think of myself as an example, living proof of what they can become freed of their pettiness.”

Jordan laughed. “Please, that moral high ground you claim is built on a false foundation. You only show how little you think of yourself, and it’s not a good look.”

Malachi shook his head. “My comments about *your* people are to motivate you to be less like them. You are meant for better things, Jordan.”

“You espousing propaganda will not make me a better Shaman. It will only piss me off.”

“On the contrary, it forces you to look at the separation those thoughts make clear. Eventually you will realize the vast difference between them, and you, and move on. Not only is it inevitable, it is a requirement.”

“Negatory, brother man. What I am comes from them,” Jordan said defensively. “I am possible because of them.”

“What you are is foolish,” Malachi said.

“Oh really, well if you so wise, why haven’t you done something?” Jordan asked.

“Why aren’t they doing something themselves?”

“Seriously, you could make a difference,” Jordan said, refusing to be dissuaded.

“Too bad, that,” Malachi said. “I have little regard for people in general. I am just a disinterested outsider who sees American blacks for the lost cause they are.”

“You don’t really believe that,” Jordan said looking away. “You found me here after all.”

“A diamond among rocks, walked over by natives ignorant of its true value. Your fellow Americans, and I paraphrase here, are like ‘A man without culture,’ or more accurately, a zebra without stripes.’ Their only hope lies in mirroring their brothers in Africa, in finding a way to emulate their past successes. This is clear as an oasis in the desert. They must but choose to see.”

Jordan looked at him again, those eyes shining with a light he could not define. It was the eyes, he remembered now. They were the reason he’d listened in the first place. He didn’t see the outside world. It was beneath consideration. Jordan had wanted to see what those eyes saw. “God, you’re a cynical old fuck.”

“Just too old for foolish ideations,” Malachi said stretching out his arms. “That is a luxury reserved for the young and uninitiated. People like you, who think the world is in need of saving, and that they’re the ones to do it. Remember there is-”

“Nothing to save, from the Goddess’ perspective, there is only pieces of her,” Jordan said finishing the speech.

“Precisely,”

“I hear your words, Malachi.”

*I should have killed him on the spot. As you can see, the man was hopelessly besotted, in the grip of a love the Goddess herself could not break. The conundrum before me, that disturbs what should be my eternal rest, is she must have seen it too. No other conclusion makes sense. But if she knew I was destined to fail ...NO, the Goddess is right in all things. This must be the result of my own shortcomings.*

*My movements that day continue to unfold before my mind's eye. A plan had presented itself for Jordan, materialized in full following our conversation. It was something that once done would please both my Goddess and, in the long run, Jordan himself. Now I see Megan...*

Megan

Megan stared at the cold, brown, remains of her coffee. The caffeine churned eagerly away at her insides. It was keeping bad company with too much Jim Beam, and worry. She was still waiting for Nathan to come home. Dragging one hand through her short graying afro brought a twinge of pain. She'd fallen asleep with the television on. The damn shoulder would hurt the rest of the day.

That made seven nights in a row. He never packed anything, like he expected her to just take it. That made it worse. Maybe he was just unsure about leaving for good. Stop that, she

scolded herself; that's just you hoping. After a quick shower and change of clothes, he would just leave. Usually to the Starlight Inn, at least the times she'd followed. She had no idea who the woman was. She never got further than the parking lot. Something else to think about might improve her spirits, but what kept coming up was this is what it feels like waking up after twenty- three years of marriage. Resting a sagging arm across her too soft belly, she unmuted the television.

“...makes the fifth murder in three weeks. The suspect is described only as an older black male and seems to be targeting tourists visiting the French Quarter. The police are asking for your help. Please contact NOPD or crimestoppers at...”

The handsome, young, black, newscaster looked tired, too tired to bother faking concern. He was talking about the killings again across the river. That made what, five now? She rolled her eyes. Somebody got a bone to pick with white folks, she sighed. Black people were killed on the West Bank every day, she thought. It rarely made the news. Wrong side of the river? The wrong skin color? Let that shit happen in Lakeview, the Garden District, or the Quarter. That fat assed Mayor would be out himself patrolling. The newscaster finished his story. The camera panned to his petite, blonde co-anchor.

“In other news, the Krewe of Gypsy will roll tonight along the traditional...”

Megan turned it off. She's probably never even been to the West Bank. Taking her anger out on a poor white news lady was petty, she realized. She'd refused to see it coming, was trapped by the belief her marriage still meant something to both of them. But that wasn't it, not really. The truth was she was not nearly as pissed as she should be.



She was angry and hurt, all of that. But keeping things one hundred percent real, she was relieved that he was gone. And if she extended that concept further, her thoughts weren't on Nathan at all. They were on Jordan.

That bit of reality brought a smile to her face and a tingle in her private space. She saw his kind face, with that patchy gray beard he refused to shave off; those tired, blood shot eyes, so shy yet full of love, hanging on her every word. They seemed to always say "I understand." This thing with Nathan being gone could be like finding money in the wall of a crumbling house.

She'd met Jordan a year ago. The connection was instant. It felt like she'd been just biding time, not really living, until he showed up. She'd told Nathan about him from the beginning. There were few secrets between them, and she was happy to have someone to discuss the things she was interested in, instead of just his topics. Nathan had barely acknowledged the revelation, offering only a "trying to make me jealous huh," comment. But then why should he worry? She'd been a good wife for twenty-three years now. Cleaned his clothes, cooked his meals, put up with him. Besides, Jordan was just a fry cook at Appleby's.

Jordan noticed her issue of *"Their Eyes Were Watching God,"* first. He'd walked right up and started talking to her. He'd arranged all his lunch breaks for when she came in after that. Wearing an over stretched tee shirt, covered by a stained white apron, he'd told her a week later he loved her. "I'm too old and too tired for games," he'd said. And she loved him too. Had known it right off, just like him. But that was not her way. Quick things always led to bad endings. Hers was a path of caution. What if he was the car you really wanted but got tired of after a while? He was wonderful when it came to dealing with her dark spells, bringing a lighthearted balance she couldn't alone. Sometimes she even pictured the two of them in some tiny

apartment, hot sun on their naked, exhausted bodies. She would be laughing from their last session while they sat on the bed eating waffle fries and chicken. They'd be watching British Television on Netflix. He would be teasing her about the sounds she made during sex. They would wrestle some before making love again.

That was the fantasy all right, but with it came the guilt. She didn't want the failure of her marriage to be her fault. Jordan filled a void Nathan never bothered to touch. Jordan's love and attention was an adrenalin rush. Her insides were on fire when he was near. It was hard sometimes, trusting herself around that. But how could a love like that sustain itself? No high lasts forever. Jordan's response, when she'd asked him the same was, "It's simple. It can, but you won't allow it. You can't let yourself really love me. You'd have to question your whole life up to this point." She'd denied it of course. He dismissed that with a wave. "I'm the shot of whiskey the reformed alcoholic swirls around in her mouth. You savor the taste, the heat, but ultimately, you spit me out. You enjoy the burn but fear the buzz."

Movement from upstairs pulled her away from those thoughts. Marcelle came stumbling down rubbing at his eyes. His little arms reached out blindly. She lifted her son to her lap where he curled up cat like. She gave him a tight hug before kissing his forehead.

"How about some strawberry pancakes for my little one? The boy nodded yes. She cooked those, along with some bacon and a few eggs, on the off chance her appetite came back, or Miss Tracy actually decided to eat breakfast. She could hear her on the phone, so loud you'd think she was deaf, on her way down the stairs.

“I know this Kathy, do I not know this? So I told him go on, take that bitch to the prom! Do it! Hell, the same place I found you I can find another! So he starts saying...”

“Language, Miss Tracy,” Megan said. “Momma’s got a headache this morning. Now, please take a seat at the table.” She sat a glass of orange juice in front of her daughter.

Tracy, seated next to her brother, grabbed up some bacon strips. “I know! Girl I can’t believe she puts up with...”

It went on like that for several minutes. Megan tried to eat, but ended up just pushing the food around her plate. Marcelle’s pancakes hit the floor with a crash.

“Tracy Lynn! Would you please get off that goddamn phone and look after your brother? You see what he’s doing! I swear to Christ, sometimes you don’t have a brain in your head!”

She regretted the outburst as soon as it passed her lips. They didn’t know, and it was certainly not their fault. Marcelle was laughing joyously, syrup smeared over his face and hands. Tracy did an eye roll, but put down the phone to tend to her brother. Megan got the mop from the closet.

Traffic was stop and go along avenue D. It was Carnival season, almost Mardi Gras day, so things were moving even slower than usual. The sun cast gold beams off the standing water catching abandoned, crushed, bead strings, in just the right light. It made the drive feel like tiny rainbows were saying welcome. The West Bank was shining like a new penny. The air crackled with excitement as the clock ticked down on the final week of parades. She rarely did them

anymore, but the season was always a thrill. When they'd lived in Maple Leaf, the West bank parades would form up on the street in front of their apartment. She would walk the length of the forming parade. It made her feel like a child, wandering up and down the line of colorful floats. The riders, excited themselves, were more than willing to hand out throws before everything started proper. Her phone buzzed deep in her bag. She ignored it. It buzzed again as she was pulling up to drop the kids off. She checked this time. It was a text was from Nathan.

**"I'll see you tonight. We need to talk. I love you."**

And just like that, the light is gone, she thought. "I'll be here when you get done," Megan said. The guilt sounded clear to her as she watched Tracy leave.

"I know Mom, God!" Tracy moved off not bothering to look back. Megan watched her meld with the other children drifting towards the school doors. She dropped Marcelle off at day care and then started the slow journey back.

She passed by Chubbie's Chicken. The red and white rooster, bucket of chicken in hand, was still out front standing proud. It was the first place they'd eaten in the city.

Nathan had been playing bass on the side with a group of friends before that. They had a regular gig at the Navy base club called the Rattskeller when she met him. Their specialty was doing horrible covers of seventies bands. Their victims included Jethro Tull, Reo Speed Wagon, and the occasional sprinkling of Hendrix. He was skinny back then, and cute. He wore a tight, black T- shirt that said, "Superstar" in bold red, white, and blue letters. He smiled, and three months later he was in the living room with her Momma. She took one look and grunted, "He worthless." It must have been like when Pilot condemned Jesus, not caring one whit Nathan was

right there in front of her. “There’s slipperiness behind that smile child,” she’d said, “Can’t you see it? Look close, ain’t nothing back there.”

But that smile had melted her heart so quick she thought she was sick at first. In all the time since then, its power had never faltered. It stayed warm, snuggly, and as welcoming as a deep screw. But Momma’s criticism hurt him.

Ten years of traipsing around the country followed. Shitty pickup bands, and living in hotel parking lots, or under highway overpasses came with it. They even parked in the front yards, or crashed on the floors of fans. “This is the life honey,” Nathan would say when she cried. “It might take some time to make it through,” his smile working overtime. Then he’d boot up a bowl and lie back. It took the birth of Tracy for him to finally smarten up. They settled on New Orleans because it was a big music town he reasoned. Failing there, he’d get a real job. She should probably pick up some chicken for dinner, for old times’ sake. Fucking Nathan, damn him to hell.

Jerry Springer was on when she got home. He was doing a good job of showing concern for some poor girl whose boyfriend just confessed to being gay. The now ex-boyfriend was kissing a young man, who just happened to be her brother. The audience was pissing themselves with laughter. Selective blindness Megan thought, sinking again into the worn, familiar hole in the sofa. We see what we choose to see.

Today was the day she usually saw Jordan. And looking around the empty house, she realized just how much she needed it. When had her life become this? When did she become a

brain dead idiot looking at idiots? Somewhere along the line she'd sacrificed her true self, but when, and for what?

They had a standing lunch date at Appleby's. Jordan had a master's degree in American Literature and yet he worked a grill. That said something, either about the man, or America. She fought against saying, "White America," an addition that naturally followed, for black folks of her generation. She'd asked Jordan but he'd dodged the question, saying, "It frees me to do other things." She had love for him, but had to admit, his occasional bouts of either stupidity, or innocence, were annoying. Still, it was a minor complaint. She was a stay-at-home mom who no longer dreamed. Maybe it was the fact he got to choose.

She was feeling the Long Island Iced Tea. Its calm goodness rested easy in the bottom of her stomach. It soothed some of the butterflies, though she wasn't sure why they were there. They'd met plenty of times before. The lunch crowd was vocal. A group of college students hurried towards the exit, laughing among themselves. They were headed back to papers, studies, finals, or some other shit she'd never experience. A white couple was walking in the same direction, his hand lightly gripping her ass. The woman made to brush it away. The move seemed halfhearted. She was secretly proud. To her left, a table of seniors looked lost, straining to find a connection in this younger world. Megan, too, wondered when she'd left this version of humanity.

"Huh, drinking and it ain't even twelve o'clock yet. Damn woman, you working on something." Sonya said.

Megan laughed. It was the first real one in days. “You going to get fired standing around on the job like that,” she said, giving her friend a hug.

Sonya leaned back, a huge smile on her face. “Hell, Eddie won’t fire me,” she said doing a sexy turn. She ran a hand down the side of her body. Her eyelids closed slightly. “He knows it’ll kill any chance of him ever any of getting this.” They both laughed again.

She was seventy five years old, but don’t tell her that. Their waitress from the beginning, she was due to retire in a couple of months. They’d grown close over the past year. She took a quick glance around before taking a seat next to Megan. “You look plumb maxed out girl,” she said, wrinkled brown face turning serious. “It can’t be those lovely children of yours. So, Nathan?” Megan looked away. The old woman was still sharp.

Sonya snorted. “I’d tell you to leave his no good ass, but I might as well tell the wall.”

“Now you sound like my momma.”

“Then she must be one smart woman. You must’ve got your brains from your father.”

“Sonya!”

“I said it before; waiting for an asshole to turn into a prince is stupid. Only two things you can do with him: kill him or leave him. Personally, I lean more towards killing.” She paused, as if considering the option. “His type of rot will infest the whole house if you let it, start eating holes in you. Why put it off, I say.”

“Kill him? You are not serious, Sonya. We both know what a romantic you are. You cried for *days* when Whitney and Bobby broke up.”

“She never really gave that boy a chance. You know she the one got him on drugs right?”

“Killing Nathan seems extreme. There’s other ways,” Megan said taking another drink.

Sonya looked hard at her friend. “That better not mean what it sounded like, because killing yourself is not an option.” Sonya squinted at her through tired eyes. “No ma’am, fuck that. I’ll shoot him myself first. Hell, long as I’m shootin, I’ll add a few more on my list.”

“Damn, Sonya, maybe I ought to be comforting you.”

“Jordan be here soon,” Sonya said, changing the subject. “You always smile when he’s around.”

That was true. She couldn’t help it. From the first they’d finished each other’s sentences. Nothing was ever off the table. She talked about period cramps and menopause as easily as the emptiness in her life. She didn’t just want him, she needed him.

“I knew you’d be here,” Nathan said taking a seat.

Megan looked up, surprised.

”What?” Nathan said, sitting down. “You come here Tuesdays and Thursdays.” The smile was there. Megan felt anger and resentment behind it. “Honest and open right?” he continued, “Just friends having the occasional lunch, just friends. So I can’t hang out? Where’s he at anyway? Hello, you Sonya? I’m Nathan.”



Sonya stood up. She looked at Megan. “Call me later if you of a mind to.” With that, she was gone.

Nathan reached for Megan’s drink. “Talking bad about me, huh. You mind, I don’t suppose she’ll be bringing me one.” He took a long pull.

He wasn’t in his work clothes, but a nice, dark blue sweater with a crisp white shirt underneath. He’d gone home to change. Probably waited till he saw them leave; the goddamn coward. “You’re taking a real chance Nathan,” she said. “You think this is what? Cute or some shit? Let me tell you something, Sonya says I should kill you. I got to tell you. I’m giving it some real thought.”

Nathan shifted nervously, and then gathered up his courage. “You see? That’s part of the problem, I never get to finish a thought before you done analyzed, deduced my answer, and give it to me. After twenty five years-”

“Twenty- three, ass.”

Nathan rolled his eyes, the same way Tracie did. “My point exactly; you don’t know everything.”

“I never...”

“And even if you do, the polite thing would be to let somebody else be right some time.” He exhaled sharply then leaned back as if relieved to have finally gotten it off his chest.

Megan noticed he was waiting for a response. She let him. So, she created this? Forced him to go fucking around? She was temporarily struck speechless. “You know what, Nathan? You want to be out there, be out there.”

“I don’t need your permission. I needed time to think, is all.”

“Seems to me, seven days is enough. The good lord built the world in the same amount of time.”

Nathan shook his head. “You in the same relationship I am. Don’t act like you Saint Megan. You felt the disconnect too.”

Sonya was hovering near another table across the room. Jordan with her. He nodded at Megan when they made eye contact. A question clear in that look: should I come over?

“Feeling disconnected shouldn’t matter,” Megan said, a little too loud. “Staying is what people do! You think I don’t have the same thoughts? I do, and they’re just as intense. But I don’t do shit. I don’t act on it because I’m your wife!”

“And I appreciate, wait...its Thursday. Jordan’s here huh?” Megan’s look in the direction of Sonya confirmed it. “So that’s him huh, the famous Jordan,” He dragged the last syllable out, a look on his face like he wanted to spit. “So you two just friends huh.”

“We are. It’s always just lunch, with us,” she said. “Why the hell you care anyway? You got that twenty year old waiting up for you!”

“We haven’t finished with Jordan yet!”

Megan went silent.

“All right, all right!” Nathan said, throwing his hands up. “I fucked up.”

“You goddamn right you fucked up!”

Quiet descended after for a moment. Nathan sipped at the remains of her drink while Megan wanted to be anywhere but here now. Jordan was talking with Sonya, but she saw his eyes shift frequently back to their table.

“She made me feel alive again,” Nathan said, breaking the silence. “Like I wasn’t sleepwalking through things, for a change.”

Megan hoped she hid her surprise. She always thought she’d done everything she could to be perfect, the best wife any man could want.

“Come on,” Nathan continued. “Things have been dead for years between us. You knew it.”

“I, I knew it, but I thought that was a normal part of marriage. You don’t bail; you ride it out, you...”

“You were interested in other things.” He looked over at Jordan. “I had to do something. I was sick of the walls you put up, sick of all the sameness.”

Megan looked at Jordan, confusion plain on his face. She mouthed the word no. Sonya was staring daggers at Nathan.

“You going to invite him over? It seems like the normal thing to do.”

Megan stared at Nathan, her anger almost palpable.

“You’re right,” Nathan said. “That was out of line. Look, I’m here because I want to work things out. I understand it’s going to take a while, but know I’m determined to make it up to you, to fix things.”

“What the hell makes you think I-,”

“Let me finish. All the while I was with her; all I thought about was you. The thousand little things you do she’ll never do. The stuff we shared over the years kept coming up.” Nathan reached across placing his hand on hers. “I’m going to pick up the kids and find a sitter. What say we go out tonight? You, me, dinner, and a movie; just like the old days. In between, we talk this all out. What do you say?”

*If I’d known how boring her life was I’d have taken action sooner. Grounded, I again try again to physically see beyond the darkness. But there is only that. I am reduced to this playback loop the Goddess insists upon. As I only ever executed her will in this mater, such an act seems unusually cruel. What is the lesson here I ask? Her answer plunges me again into the past...*

Jordan

Jordan continued watching. Megan kept shaking her head no. Nathan kept trying to grab her hand. He would’ve paid good money to hear the conversation. Nathan wasn’t particularly impressive. He’d expected more of a three piece suit type of brother. One determined to maintain

the front, despite having limited funds. He was pretty sure he could take him. He felt small for thinking it.

Megan looked beautiful, even with her anger on full display. God he loved her. She was petite; her small frame was big in just the right places. Her angular face and smooth, brown skin had gone a shade darker in her fury. How could he not love that? He marveled at the emotions her eyes carried. There were things lurking under there she'd never give voice to. He remembered how she tilted her head making a point, or finishing off some well-planned defense he'd presented. He hadn't cared he'd lost. He only wanted her to keep looking at him, keep sharing her perplexing smile. It revealed a familiarity that crept past all his guards. She was aware of his secrets, but not in a "don't try conning me" way, more, let's cease with the bullshit. He'd confessed his love for her their first week. Even now, it was all he could do not to drag his chair next to her, take her in his arms, and never let go.

"Don't do it, girl," Sonya grumbled under her breath.

"Do what?" Jordan asked.

"Take that asshole back," she said absently.

Rising now, Megan was leaning against Nathan. They swayed towards the exit, his arm around her waist in some prehistoric display of ownership. Nathan was saying loud and clear, this is my property. Worse than that, her behavior saying she was okay with it. He was stunned for a moment. How could the rest of the world keep right on moving when everything had just stopped for him? But then why would it? It hadn't just seen the love of its life leave with her

husband. Sonya was still beside him, waiting. What for, some clever line on how his guts hadn't just been ripped out? Probably for him to run after her; and that's exactly what he did.

They were at a van, Nathan was pulling her close. The two of them were kissing like a couple of kids before Nathan closed her door. Megan never looked back, but he could swear he saw Nathan smile in his direction.

"People going to do what they feel they need to," Sonya said, walking up behind him. "Sometimes, it's not just about them."

There was wisdom in her words but no comfort. "That was literally, no help at all." He could hear her suck air quickly through her teeth, preparing a response. The van merged tentatively into traffic on General De Gaulle.

"Fuck you, Jordan," she said. "How you going to take cheap shots at the one person on your side? You should be trying to fix things with her."

The van was out of sight now, only the thought of what they might be up to left behind. "Now that's advice I can use. You should've said that before."

Sonya nudged him playfully. "Stop standing there all sad eyed like this is beyond your control. What God done decreed for all eternity you two don't get to be together?"

What God indeed, Jordan thought kissing her lightly on the cheek.

Jordan strolled up General De Gaulle, earbuds blasting away to Tom Wait's "Rain Dogs." It was a good choice; its chaos there mirrored his own thoughts. It was hot out, but not

hot, hot, just enough to get him sweating. He found himself in front of Spur's minimart. It was one of many bustling Arab concerns in this mostly African American neighborhood. Its named begged the question why. Some weirdly misplaced love for American cowboys? He liked how welcoming his people were of other cultures. Black folks in general didn't care if you were white, brown, red, or fuchsia. Maybe being oppressed taught tolerance. Oh, they still got robbed. Kindness only goes so far. But black folks robbed black folks too, equal opportunity and all that. He dashed inside for some liquid comfort.

Taking a seat at the bus stop in front of the store, he noticed the older lady on the bench next to him. She was wearing purple scrubs, probably on her way to work, and already looking tired. She offered a smile but no words. That was unusual for New Orleans. Southern people, in general, are always eager to greet you; it was kind of the law. Not that it mattered, he wasn't much for talking today either. He took in a hot, wet, breath of air, made it seek the deep passages to his lungs. He imagined all the pain and frustration of the past hour or so as a ball getting smaller, and more compact. He visualized its release with his outward exhalation. He watched the whole thing sail off slowly into a powder blue sky.

It was useless. She dominated his thoughts even more. Sonya implied he was passive, waiting for God to take a hand. Maybe the Goddess didn't want this thing with Megan to come about. Was she not aware of how important Megan was?

He'd tried convincing her to leave numerous times. He'd pleaded his case all last summer. She'd just give him that hot, sleepy look and go home, to him. The fact Nathan seemed like a pretty decent guy made it worse. The greatest summer of his life and he was still going to lose. If there was an upside, connecting with the Goddess might be easier now. The old woman's

bus came and she departed. Two high school kids assumed her space. They started throwing rhymes back and forth as Malachi pulled up.

“Air Jordan,” he said unlocking the passenger door. Jordan got in. Malachi adjusted his hair in the mirror. The dude must’ve been seventy when he met him, and that was what, five years ago! He still looked youngish, working that whole gaunt, sunken jawed, Gill Scott Heron thing. He twisted the various ends, making sure each strand stuck out just so. Horns started up, clear in their disapproval of his timing, but Malachi Shepard bowed to no man. Jordan was again, amazed at his apparent indifference to his fellow man. Shouldn’t the Goddess expect compassion in her representative?

“You should stop that too,” Jordan said.

Malachi leaned a little to the right at an angle, one hand casually steering the rattling car through traffic. “And “that” would be?”

“That whole ghetto speak thing you do sometimes. You have two masters’ degrees that I know of.”

“Why Jordan, I’m wounded,” he said, hand over his heart. “My speech pattern is a sort of homage, a kind of keeping touch with my roots, and my enemies. The warrior who forgets the ways of the villagers, or the path to clean water, that warrior-”

“It’s hard to believe the Goddess picked you,” Jordan said.

“You mean that I should be more Gandhi like?”

“Yeah, you’re more Blaxploitation movie, something from *Shaft* or *Superfly*.”



“I must confess, I too was surprised, but make no mistake, I am the one chosen.” He gave Jordan a stare. He felt like an insect Malachi was thinking about stepping on. “For the record, I was always cool, even in the seventies. And, it’s not for you. It says to the people I am one of them. Lots of black folks tend to think an educated black man is not these days. To them he is some imaginary thing, seen only on television or in movies, much like a leprechaun, or unicorn.” Switching back to his ghetto voice, he said, “Some shit read about but not to be believed, ya feel me?”

“Un huh.”

“My display of accepted tropes reestablishes my authenticity, and thus my status within the tribe.”

Jordan looked around the rusting little car, its floor littered with burger wrappers and Styrofoam coffee cups. “Would a status conscious man drive a piece of shit like this?”

It was Malachi’s turn to laugh. “Life is not about the material, Young Jordan. I carry my wealth in my being! I admit to some recent setbacks. The lifestyle one at my level deserves is often difficult to achieve is it not?”

“Assuredly,” Jordan said.

“The answer is acceptance of where one is now. But enough of me, there is a more interesting subject here. It’s four o’clock in the afternoon and you have a six pack. One is already gone and the other is between your legs.”

“Grown ass man here,” Jordan said, looking out the window. “You should stop that too.”

“”The that, this time is?”

“The whole Sherlock Holmes thing you do.”

“I see what I see. I’ve told you on numerous occasions, alcohol interferes with your training. Muscle movement, hand eye coordination, the list is nearly endless. A mind cannot focus if...”

The speech rolled on, and Jordan let it as Malachi turned on to Lapalco Blvd. Eventually, blessed quiet set in, leaving him alone in his thoughts, or as alone as he could be. Something Malachi said the other day was still disturbing, if it was true. He was pretty sure he didn’t want him roaming around in his thoughts.

They passed the Webley Fields golf course; it’s greens once well-manicured, now wildly overgrown. He leaned back, feeling the beers start to take hold. He lazily watched the strip malls, and fast food joints slip pass and started laying the foundation for his wall. He saw the bricks out front, waiting for the hands to put them in place. Megan was on the other side, hand and hand with Nathan.

“Let’s go to the place,” he said to Malachi. They were silent the rest of the way.

Megan

The usual herds of shoppers were absent. Only a few locals wandered the walkways of the Oakwood mall. Megan felt conflicted, even ashamed on some level, for giving in to Nathan

so easily. Why had she not taken her chance? But she knew the answer to that. Jordan might be the one she was meant to be with, but he was just a dream. Nathan, the one she had, that has to count for something right? If it didn't, her life was nothing more than a lie.

Megan had ended up at Macy's, a bad thing. She couldn't afford anything in here. She sat on the bench in the changing room fighting back tears, looking hard at the old woman staring back from the mirror. That person was fat in all the wrong places. It pushed its way out till her body looked like a black umbrella with volleyball inside. It was mostly hips and belly. Too fat and old, Megan thought, for another run, even if she was up for it. God, but Jordan looked luscious didn't he? She looked at the yellow top and black pencil skirt on the bench next to her. Nathan always said she had pretty legs.

Jordan

Smilin Joe's was warm inside, but it was atmosphere, not heat. Here was just what Jordan needed. A soft, yellow glow from little jukeboxes scattered itself about the tables. The boxes carried memories of old, if not better, times. They had a varied, rather rigid, set of tunes, between the eighties and nineties. Cheap Trick was playing "Surrender." Robin Zander was doing a poor imitation of Iggy Pop.

"I'm guessing fair Megan played some small role in this drama you insist upon this day," Malachi said.

"Well, I did see her."

Malachi waved to the bartender. “Braxton, do you not see us here?”

“Just wait, old man,” Braxton said limping their way. “A bar full of regulars come here every day, as decent as can be. You the only pain in the ass, every time.”

“Not every time,” Malachi said, pouting. “Besides, there’s a reason for my impertinence. Friend Jordan here is in dire need of refreshment. Your lack of attention only adds to his current state of suffering.”

“God Malachi, give it a rest. It feels like you’ve been talking for hours,” Jordan said. Pointing a finger at the bar, he mouthed the word please to his friend. Braxton nodded, and then limped off to fill his order. The left leg was plastic from the knee down. Everyone thought it was a war injury. Braxton let them. He got a lot of mileage out of it with the ladies. The leg was actually sliced off by a train when he was twelve. He was playing on the tracks with some friends, each daring the other to stand closer as the train passed.

Braxton brought the order. “You a lucky man,” he said, placing two Red Stripes on the bar in front of Jordan while looking hard at Malachi. “You wasn’t Jordan’s friend, I might be tempted to make a call on your ass.” Braxton popped the cap on one beer and took a long drink, immediately followed by an exaggerated ah. “Cortez is looking for you.”

Malachi raised his hands palms out. “Now, now, friend Braxton, while I’ve had some slight dealings with the aforementioned individual, I assure you, it is both on the level, and up to date.”

“Word is you owe him money, something about imports you didn’t pay for...”

“Lies, filthy lies, all of it.”

“Fair enough,” Braxton said reaching for the phone.

“There’s no need for rash acts. We are all brothers, are we not?”

“Leave him be,” Jordan said. “You know how he gets.” Steely Dan’s “Josie” was playing now. The place was starting to fill. Jordan found the drone of the crowd comforting. He felt part of a tribe without having to prove it. He drank three beers bringing Braxton up to date.

“I got to say I’m with Malachi on this one.” Braxton said. “Believe me, nothing hurts more than that. One woman, one of millions, you used to say.”

“Yeah,” Jordan sighed, “from *Chasing Amy*, best line in the whole damn movie. But that was before her.

“By the Goddess, this is just ridiculous,” Malachi said. “I refuse to sit by and watch you make this an issue! You stand upon the precipice of a true awakening! You will see the world as it truly is, its real face! Only a handful of people have experienced this, yet you sit here crying in your beer over a woman. One, as you say, of literally millions.”

Braxton silenced Malachi with a gesture. “You did this before, what ten years ago?”

“I did.” Jordan said.

“I know you did. I was being sarcastic. Susan right?”

“Yes,” Jordan said, knowing where this was going.

“And correct me if i’m wrong, her response was?”

“You know damn well what it was.”

“My point exactly,” Braxton said, hands up in surrender. “You can’t make her love you, my friend. You can only plead your case, which I’m sure you did.”

Jordan made tiny circles in the condensation on the bar, ignoring both of them.

“Again, I plead my case.” Malachi said. “You are currently focused only on yourself. Such behavior always leads to disappointment and failure. You grapple with the fact your dreams and desires mean nothing to the big picture,” he finished, with a dismissive sweep of his hand.

Jordan could hear the rest of the speech in his head. He’d heard it many times over the last couple of years.

“Vivian!” Braxton said. “Tell Calvin I have to leave. There’s a family emergency.”

“What happened?” Jordan asked.

“My brother done lost his mind,” Braxton said.

It was six o’clock, but a partially clouded sun still managed to paint the skyline a pastel pink with streaks of gold. Malachi was again behind the wheel. It was cooler out as they made their way up Belle Chase highway. Malachi had found a small bag containing a brown, bark like substance in his ever resourceful glovebox. Breaking off a piece, he shoved it into his mouth.

Braxton shook his head. “Eating that shit and driving, not a good thing man.”

“I have no fear of the veil or what lies beyond. I am master of my fate.”

“Un huh, that devil root done warped your mind. You might be good with death, but I still have things to do.”

“Another lesson for you, Jordan,” Malachi said, lazy smile on his face. “Always be alert to cowardice in your presence. Some of it may rub off.”

“You old, broken down, wanna be Black Panther thinking asshole,” Braxton said. “I’m gonna shove my foot so far up...”

It continued like that for a while. Jordan left them to it, choosing instead to stare out the window at the slow moving traffic. His subconscious was still busy working on the wall. The bricks were becoming more solid all the time. Megan was standing next to Nathan, looking sad. She was waving hesitantly, unsure why the wall was there.

“...it exists only to suit the growing Goddess’s purpose. You mistake the image for the real thing. But I don’t expect you to understand. You are as stupid as a fist full of clay.”

“Don’t go getting too deep, Mael,” Braxton said, dropping an empty at his feet. “I’m the only one listening. Besides, can’t you see he don’t need no more of your Dark Continent mumbo jumbo? Just let him be.”

“You imply my life’s path is one of delusion, friend, Braxton,” Malachi said, putting another pinch of bark in his mouth. “But it is you who are deceived. Africa was the center of culture before there was culture. It’s the birthplace of...”

“Look at him,” Braxton said, lifting his chin in Jordan’s direction. “I mean really look. Stop with your psychic distance, or master from on high stance. His pain is real! Shit, I know you remember what that feels like, old man.”

“He doesn’t. I already asked,” Jordan said.

Braxton looked hard at Malachi. “So, your African Voodoo crap got no room for that kind of realness?”

“Not Voodoo,” said Jordan. “*Bwiti*”

“Indeed. And thank you for returning to us, young Jordan,” said Malachi. “Voodoo is but a pale imitation, an amalgamation of various religions, copied and corrupted. But the Babongo people were using *Bwiti* to communicate with the Goddess when western man was still praying to the sun.”

Braxton lit up a joint. “All that time, and they never figured out how to mend a broken heart? Then, who needs them; where the fuck we going?”

Malachi looked at Jordan, shaking his head no.

“Just do it,” Jordan said.

Malachi parked the Nissan in the lot of Alice Walker elementary. There were still enough cars present to not look conspicuous. Jordan stared at Megan’s house.

“This is a terrible idea,” Braxton mumbled from the back seat. “It feels a little stalkerish,”



“She loves me,” Jordan, said. “Why won’t she let herself? We connect. We love the same books; laugh at the same people, see the same things. She admits our souls are one.”

“The Goddess gives what she needs, not what we want,” Malachi said, bored with the whole thing.

“Malachi...,” Braxton said.

“Yeah, yeah,” Malachi said, adopting a softer tone. “Bottom line, she does love you. In a perfect world she would be with you right now, smiling all silly and shit. But it’s not a perfect world, at least not yet. Megan is the victim of a societal construct that limits the shape love can take. In her society, a person can only love one person. Them’s the rules. Not only that, they have to be with that one person for the rest of their life. See? Hearing it out loud, it’s clear how stupid it is. She loves you. That will never give her permission to be with you.”

The wall was nearly complete. He could barely make out Megan and Nathan on the other side. Her beautiful face would probably look sad; sorry things had come to this. He was sad too, but it was time. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

One six pack, and a pint of Crown Royal later, Braxton and Malachi were doing what they could to get Jordan up the stairs to his apartment.

“You think he’ll be alright?” Braxton asked.

“Once he’s free of this last earthly attachment, yes,” Malachi said.

“I never understood why he listens to you,” Braxton said, removing Jordan’s shoes. “I mean, the shit you spew when we sitting around high? It’s interesting, but really believing it is a whole nother level.”

Malachi touched Braxton’s hand. He fell limp before him. Malachi waited five or so minutes, then brought Braxton back around.

“That shit was not real!” Braxton said, visibly shaking.

“It was real. You were just unable to connect completely. That’s because you’re too much of this world,” Malachi said, helping him to his feet. “There’s no opening left in your conscious for the Goddess to speak through. You’re very skepticism blocks your reception.”

“But, I saw, I mean I think...”

“A reflection, a shadow of what Jordan will experience, once he gets his head straight.”

They were back in the Sentra. Braxton was working another six pack, while Malachi was lost in thought. “Well I don’t question you anymore,” Braxton said. “By the way, never do that again!”

“Stop your whining. The Goddess has no interest in you. It was merely to show you it’s not all talk. Think about it. All you call life is a movie, an illusion to keep you from seeing the real world. True freedom, real freedom is found in the realization that this life is no realer than Scooby Doo or falling in love. Attachment of any kind is a trap.”

“Yeah, well fuck that,” Braxton said, lighting another joint. “I like my attachments, even the being in love part.”

“Of course you do. People love their illusions. It is their greatest hurdle.”

“You lost me.”

“I speak now of that sense of self, the idea that you, as an individual, actually matter.”

“Fuck you man, I matter. And this is real. If it isn’t, then what’s the purpose of life?”

Malachi shook his head. “What has always been here?”

“Man,” Braxton said. “He was the strongest crawler, the smartest, and top of the food chain.”

“No, the earth,” Malachi said. “All life was formed here. Always it was Mother Earth. Over the countless centuries we’ve thought the whole thing about us. Really it was her realizing herself. As all life grows she grows, becomes more self-aware, more...Goddess with each passing age. We are making her Braxton.”

“You are making her. I’m tired,” Braxton said. “I still say I’m real. I feel real. Losing my leg was real. Take me back to Smilin Joe’s.”

“Sure thing,” Malachi said.

Malachi

Two days later Malachi was again parked in the Alice Walker Elementary parking lot. He sipped at the special brew while he waited. It was from the bark of the iboga tree. The bitter concoction’s sharpness was smothered by some honey, a habit the natives picked up from British

invaders over four hundred years ago. The root was at saturation levels now, producing halos of color around the little house. Malachi stared, imagining Megan and her husband inside. Taj Mahal broke into “She Caught the Katie.” He turned it up. He loved fucking Taj Mahal. He sang along, “Crazy about that, hardheaded woman of mine.” Rubbing a palm against tired eyes, he thought again about how Jordan was ruining everything. His love for the Goddess was absolute, but Jordan seemed too distracted to achieve completeness. Well, he would help him; show him how to properly love the Goddess.

Plenty of people were still about. The heat had descended with the sun, allowing them to turn off the air conditioners, and open their doors to the breeze. It was still too early. It would be foolish trying to get in now. It would have to be later, through the back door. The neighbors on both sides are elderly and more likely to be asleep then. He’d go in, do what was needed, and be gone in an hour. The why is a quiet little voice in the background, wanting attention. The will of the Earth Mother is stronger. Why else would she allow him to continue? Some folks, having little to do with the big picture, can be removed from the process with negligible effect.

Megan and Nathan came out giggling at some secret between them. They hustled into the van and pulled away. Taj was gone. The opening chords for “Night Moves” rang out clean and pure. Such a simple thing, he thought. Three damn chords, but they are enough. Easing the Sentra into gear, he followed the van.

*I am plunged back into the present. More time for me to contemplate the coming actions. The Goddess hopes I feel some form of*

*regret. She shall find me free of guilt. I make no apologies. At the time I was convinced it was the best thing for Jordan, her main concern, and thus mine. I feel the bugs gnawing on my bloated flesh, my entire body a horrid combination of pain, itching, and burning. She does not like this train of thought. I am overwhelmed for what could be moments or years. Between waves of pain I wonder why she does this to her most loyal servant. Have I been a fool, a simple pawn?*

Megan

“It’s going to be off the chain boo, believe that!” Nathan said, flashing his smile. It was happening way too much, and making her uncomfortable. He’d been like this the last couple days. Nobody grinned that hard except on first dates, or when making up for some foul shit they’d done. He was trying too hard. He was keeping his promise though, taking her to dinner across the river. They were on the Crescent City Connection, just outside of New Orleans proper. She felt the setting sun on her neck as it made its way down, all orange and pastel, its streaks painting the sky. The central business district loomed just off to the right, but they were headed deeper into the city. Allow yourself a good time, she thought. You deserve it. Plenty of time to be mean later.

“*Gambit Weekly* says Willie Mae’s is the best chicken in the city. You know how I loves my chicken, challenge accepted!” She said nothing. The lingering silence was doing its job. She felt his growing irritation as he sifted through stations trying to find something she liked. A part of her insisted on feeling sorry for him. She hated that part. It made it clear she still loved the whoring bastard.

The van made its way down Canal, Nathan cursing as he negotiated the narrow streets. It had been the first place they’d hit in the city. It was the end of a twelve- hour Texas run, and everyone was exhausted. But Nathan had to see the city proper. That meant Bourbon Street. So they’d done the long drive from Covington. Upon arrival, Nathan took one look around, and with an exaggerated southern drawl said, “These people here? They’s a soulless lot. They needs Jesus!” They’d laughed, but it was a bad decision. It had hurt him to move to a music city, facing daily reminders of what he’d almost had. He was a good bass player, but playing bass didn’t meet the demands of a growing family. UPS drivers didn’t have late night jam sessions, or breakfast at the Bluebird Café. They did have steady hours, and decent pay.

There was no parking at Willie Mae’s Scotch House. Nathan had to drive around the neighborhood a bit before finding a spot relatively safe from towing. The doorway of the restaurant, formerly an old house, was crowded with young whites and a sprinkling of blacks making light conversation while waiting. Nathan looked ready to complain. She placed a calming hand on his arm. The experienced staff soon had things moving quickly and efficiently.

The inside was warm and brightly lit. A large dining area was dotted with posters of Miles Davis, Louis Prima, and Louis Armstrong, all highlighted with baby spotlights. The story was, it had been a real home once that got converted into a restaurant. The chicken Willie made

upstairs sold better than the Scotch downstairs. Megan imagined little black kids playing second line out front until it got too hot, and then going up the street for ices. They would suck them down listening to all the jazz music around. She'd always romanticized New Orleans. Like most magical cities, no matter how magic, the need to work for a living tends to diminish its shine, made that living more sleepwalking. All magical places become invisible to its residents, their miracles seen only in the eyes of outsiders. They'd been here more than ten years and rarely crossed the river.

The young whites now loitered around the bar chatting in groups. They seemed at ease, the rewards of being the chosen. No attention was given to the tired black waitresses, maneuvering deftly past, their plates of steaming chicken, supported only by plastic smiles and over-the-top southern charm.

"Did I not tell you?" Nathan asked smiling.

She had to admit, the fried chicken was a good: Moist, succulent, and steaming hot. She found herself sucking the bones, not caring how it looked. Nathan, she noticed, was beaming. He was still handsome at forty, with his close cut hair, and a dapper little mustache. Time seemed determined not to touch his coffee colored skin. He glowed as bright as the place itself. Then she hated him all over again, because the other woman was here too, at their table, refusing to be talked about. Megan created some idealized representation to focus all her hurt on. Something young, trim and pretty, of course, and probably white. She had the perfect job, and a lust satisfied only by him. "Yeah, you were right, about the chicken."

Nathan raised his Coke, brown eyes locking on her over the glass. “You still mad. I get that. All I’m asking for is a chance.”

Megan sneered. “Why would I be mad?”

“Go on, get it out.”

“Oh, I’m gonna get it out alright. You ain’t no man. You a sneaky little boy, playing at adult.” Nervous glances at her now from around the room, but she was too wound up to stop. “You didn’t even have the decency, the respect, to tell me outright, to give me an explanation!”

Nathan, signaled the waitress for a real drink. They sat, listening to the bits of conversation around them, eyes on anything but each other. “Come to you,” Nathan said. “Tell you. Tell you what? Listen Megan, I love you, but I’m going to die if I spend one more day doing this? What do you think your reaction would’ve been? No, fuck that. How heartless do you think I am? You think I would just sit down with the woman who’s dedicated her life to me, treated me like a King for twenty-three years, and just tell her thanks, but no thanks, I’m leaving? It was a shitty thing to do, yes. But don’t act like you haven’t been thinking about it.”

“Jordan I are friends, that’s all!” she said.

“You keep telling yourself that shit if it helps you sleep nights. We both know you’re way more into him than us.”

“No uh uh, don’t you turn my friendship into an excuse for your inability to keep your dick in your pants! You the one fucked up here!”



Nathan swallowed the last of his drink. “You right. I wasn’t thinking about you, not then anyway. I was thinking about having sex, about how good it would feel. And it did. Then I started thinking about everything else, all I stood to lose. You right to give me shit; I just want some understanding on the back side. I’m not the only one at fault. You have the same thoughts about your precious Jordan. I was wrong, I admit it. The bottom line though, you know I love you. I wouldn’t be here now if I didn’t.”

He deserved all the shit she could bring; Megan thought as she entered the mouth of the bridge. But deep down she wondered, again, about her own motivations. Yes, she saw Jordan once a week. She knew it would be more if she could manage it.

Megan allowed thoughts of the other woman to float off over the side of the Crescent City Connection. They were headed for home. Love Jordan or not, she’d made a choice. Loving him wasn’t more important than keeping her marriage together. Mind tired, she’d let the negative stuff rest for tonight. The drinks were doing their job. Besides, she still had Jordan. She felt at ease for the first time in days.

She was confused when Nathan turned on to Woodland Ave. It was the street their old apartment complex was on. The front was still nice, with neatly shuttered buildings, covered by a simulated, brown wood façade. Deeper in, the complex was showing some wear and tear. Nathan pulled into a darkened parking space. His hand was now massaging her inner thigh. When had that started? Her first thought was this is silly, but she had to admit, thanks to the alcohol, she was a bit turned on now.

“We are not kids,” she said, voice gone all husky. “We get caught, you’ll lose your job, and we’ll both go to jail.” That said she leaned back, allowing his hand to probe deeper. He was roaming around her sacred parts now.

“Damn that, people fuck outside all the time,” Nathan said, breath coming in short gasps. “Cops have better things to do. Besides, it’s the hood. They never come around here.”

Ten minutes later, he was on his back, Megan, astride him. He was struggling to get air back into his lungs. “Jesus woman, I’m fifty five years old! You can’t fuck me like that anymore!” he laughed.

Megan leaned back, Nathan still inside her. The black pencil skirt was still up around her waist. “You forgot how good things can be between us,” she said, dragging a nail down his shirt front. “Can’t nobody do you like me.”

“I forgot a lot of things,” he said, rubbing his hand across her belly.

“No.” She pushed it away. “I’m old, and fat, and gross.”

“No,” Nathan said, hands persisting, “You are beautiful, so beautiful.”

The car had been still for about an hour now, if you didn’t count the rocking. He took another look around, but there was little need. It was a pretty secure spot, just a series of empty apartments at the back of the complex. The nearest street light was a block away. The parking lot was lit by sporadic pools of light, but he’d already allowed for that. The three or four other

apartments had lights burning, not enough to be an issue. They had done all the heavy lifting for him, show time.

He slowly walked towards the car, just some guy, out for a smoke this hot summer night. The iboga root was coursing its way through his system. His heart was beating in synch with the rhythms of Mother Earth herself. What little light present, danced with colors, living, moving bubbles that threatened to stretch to the very edge of reality. He gripped the gun tighter. It was a move that always anchored him to the now in these situations.

Megan heard the blast, and then felt something punch her in the back. She tried taking a breath but nothing came in, instead she coughed out blood. The bullet had torn through both the driver's side glass and her back. It continued its lethal journey out her chest, shoving her forward onto Nathan. His dying scream was drowned out by the remaining four shots.

Malachi stood outside the SUV allowing himself a moment. Taking a deep breath, he savored their passage, much like a man accessing a fine Bourbon. He dropped the gun inside the driver's window and started walking towards the light. He peeled off the rubber gloves and shoved them into a nearby dumpster as he passed. Doors were opening now. Even in a complex this empty the shots would have been heard. He removed a pack of sanitary wipes and started cleaning his hands. Lights were coming on now, people drifting out of apartments. He grabbed a man coming towards him. "You hear that shit?" making his voice sound panicked. 'I think

somebody got shot!” The newcomer spared him only a cursory glance, more concerned with the entertainment to be found further on. No fear this weeded out cretin would remember him.

Malachi resumed his walk, singing quietly under his breath.

*Woke last night to the sound of thunder*

*How far off I sat and wondered...*

He passed the bus stop at the corner turning right. He crossed the street into the university parking lot.

*Funny how the night moves*

*When you just don't seem to have as much to lose.*

*Funny how the night moves*

*With autumn closing in...*

Jordan

Jordan pulled himself awake, mind still a little boggy. The ringing phone had managed to knife through last night's drinking. He rubbed at a piercing pain just behind his left eye, and answered.

“You heard right?” Sonya's voice sounded far away.

“Heard...heard what?”

“About Megan, you heard right?” she asked again.

“Sonya, I have no idea what you’re...”

“She’s dead.” Sonya sighed. “Her and Nathan got shot last night over in Maple Leaf.”

“What?” He felt his heart speed up, the feeling of panic overwhelming.

“Shot Jordan, the both of them, it’s terrible.”

He looked around for his shoes and then wondered what for. Where was he going? It felt like he couldn’t catch his breath, like there was a weight in the pit of his stomach that would never leave. He’d just seen her what, three days ago? “I’ll, I’ll be over in a few, Sonya,” he managed to get out before hanging up.

No, he kept saying in his head, just no. His breathing refused to slow down, kept looking around, wanting to focus on anything but what was going on in his head. He heard Malachi's voice cutting through the panic, repeating the words of the calming ritual. “Panic, fear, these things are natural reactions. But allowing them control is a waste of time. Take the thing, however large and imagine it in your hand. Make it small, because it is. Once seen for what it is, you can control it.”

He felt like he couldn’t sober up. The pain was dulled some by the ritual but he still felt like collapsing into a pool of tears. He made a call to Malachi, who said he’d be there soon. By the time he heard the horn, he’d squeezed his grief down enough to function. It was now behind the wall of indifference he’d built. She’d made her choice, and it wasn’t me, no matter how much I wanted it to be. The lie would hold, for now.

The Sentra rattled its way up the West Bank expressway, its tinny speakers blasting out NWA's "Straight outta Compton" at an ear-shattering level. Jordan rubbed at his temples, trying to figure out his next move.

"I told you, alcohol is no good for you," Malachi said. He took a quick hit from his joint then dropped his hand back below his waist.

Jordan ignored him. He needed his head clear, not a lecture. "I don't need Ice Cube yelling at me this early. Turn it down, please."

"It's the root," Malachi said, complying. "I told you. The consumption of alcohol clashes with its chemical structure causing an adverse reaction."

"Malachi, please..."

"You have started the root. It is the last leg of our journey together. Your system is purging itself, preparing you for what you will become. Once you hear the Goddess speak, you will understand. You will no longer need these worldly attachments you are so fond of."

"MALACHI!" Jordan said,

"Now, now," Malachi said. "It is truly a terrible thing that has happened to fair Megan. Such a sweet girl deserved better."

"I'm going to find out who did this, and no need to pretend you actually gave a shit," Jordan said.

"You misunderstand me. I bore no malice for the woman, may she rest easy with the Goddess. I simply saw her as a distraction, a roadblock to any real progress on your part. I

always liked her. It is entirely possible she served her purpose. The Goddess has just brought her home."

"She got shot in a parking lot. Her last moments were probably filled with terror and confusion. You think that's the Goddess gently calling her home?"

"You are thinking small again, about yourself."

Jordan stopped listening. Malachi was beyond attachments, he realized, so caught up in *Bwiti*, he was isolated. It was impossible for him to be close to someone anymore, or love anything as much as he had Megan.

Malachi drove the Sentra through the entrance for the Savanna housing projects. The solid brown brick buildings seemed to go on for miles. People were out in front of their apartments despite the heat of the day. It reminded Jordan of images from the BBC show *Planet Earth*, of some watering hole in Africa, passive animals needing the safety of numbers to risk a drink. Where did that thought come from?

Jordan approached the peeling brown painted door, the numbers 4135 nailed to its side. He rang the bell. Somewhere in back a weak ring sounded. Sonya answered the door in a blue terrycloth bathrobe. She wore pink fluffy slippers and her hair was hidden under a black rag. She pulled him in for a long hug.

"Sonya, as lovely as ever," Malachi said reaching for her hand.

Sonya speared him with a brief glance before rolling her eyes.

"What you bring him for?"

“I needed a ride.”

“That bad?” she asked, looking Malachi up and down.

“Sonya!” Malachi said. “You too?”

“How are you holding up?” Jordan asked, pushing past the potential conflict.

“I’m alright,” Sonya said. “I wasn’t the one got shot. Lord, why anyone would want to do that to a sweet girl like Megan is beyond me,” she said, leading them inside to a worn, brown couch.

“Why indeed sweet, Sonya,” Malachi said, looking around, his distaste obvious. “She was a delicate soul, taken far too early from this plane. I lament her loss for both you, and friend Jordan here. Now is the time we must come together, to...”

Sonya raised a hand stopping him. She looked at Jordan. “I will shoot him in his condescending mouth. I will make his soul scream for a return to his mother land. The pain I will inflict...”

“Mal, go outside please,” Jordan said softly.

“Sonya, why?” Malachi asked, shaking his head. “All right, I should have called. But I intend...”

“Come on, Mal,” Jordan said.

Malachi nodded to Jordan, bowed to Sonya, and then backed out of the room.

“Now, tell me what happened,” Jordan said.



“Nothing to tell really,” Sonya said. “I only know what I saw on the news, that, and word on the street. Both saying pretty much the same. They was parked back there by those empty apartments and somebody just came up and shot them.”

“For no reason?”

“Oh, I’m sure there was a reason,” she said. A crash came from somewhere in back followed by a child’s cry. “Goddamn it Elequan, if you’ve hit your brother again I swear I’m gonna. I’m sorry, Jordan, my daughter’s kids.” Getting up, she headed towards the back.

It was a stupid question. The police would probably write it off as some drug deal gone bad, or make it look that way. He ran a hand over his head trying to organize his thoughts. A loud smack came from somewhere in back and was promptly followed by another cry. Sonya was then before him, King Cobra in hand. He declined the beer“ There was no beef I knew about, and they weren’t no drug dealers. That pretty much covers all the stereotypes unless it was that dude been killing all over New Orleans lately. One thing for sure, it was in the Maple Leaf, so.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jordan said.

Jordan walked into the NOPD Eighth District building still unsure of what he was doing. It was a courthouse about two hundred years ago. Now it was a decrepit heritage landmark smelling of decayed wood and mildew. The floorboards creaked with his every step. There was no air conditioning. Ceiling fans, strategically placed, struggled to keep the heat at bay. He passed through the body scanner mostly ignored by an overweight attendant, more concerned

with her phone than his threat level. He stepped up to a neatly attired white, desk sergeant who smiled.

“What can I do you for?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am. I’d like to speak with the detective in charge of the shooting in the Maple Leaf last night.”

She punched some keys on the computer then mumbled something into her headset. Soon a heavy set man came lumbering up.

“Detective Sargent Vale,” he announced, extending a beefy hand. His skin was light, almost caramel colored, and he had a receding gray hairline, and quick eyes. They gave Jordan an assessment, ending with a slight squint, all in the time it took to finish the shake.

“I’m here about the killings that happened last night,” Jordan said.

“Which ones?” asked Vale.

“Over in the Maple Leaf.”

“Okay,” Vale said, after another quick sweep. “We should have a seat in my office. Got a small AC unit in there. Believe me, it makes a difference Mister-”

“Newman,” Jordan said. “Jordan Newman.”

Detective Vale led him through a set of double doors to the back offices. His space turned out to be a cubicle, part of a much larger room. Jordan counted eight such setups in all, each occupied with officers besieged by people in varying states of distress. Also present was also the

occasional handcuffed suspect. Vale parked himself at a gray metal relic and grabbed a folder off the top of a swaying pile. He gave it a glance then looked again at Jordan.

“Nathan and Megan friends of yours?” he asked offhandedly.

“Her yes, I never met him. Can you tell me anything, any progress in finding out who did this shit?”

“Afraid not,” Vale said closing the folder. “Unfortunately, it’s an open investigation at this point. We’d be doing both the deceased and the public a disservice if false information were to get out. I can tell you we’re doing what we can Mr. Newman. But as you see, we’re a bit overwhelmed.” He leaned back. “How well did you know the deceased?”

He knew she liked to mix her Coke with Orange soda sometimes, that she wore pants because she thought her legs looked bad, that once she loved you, that love never stopped. He said, “She was a friend is all,”

“You know, Mr. Newman anything you can tell me would help. Any threats against her or problems you know of? Was she having an affair?” The eyes had stopped their roaming. They were now squarely on him.

“Not that I’m aware of, detective. She was a sweet girl, loved all around. I just want to make sure she doesn’t get lost in all this.” He focused on the stack for emphasis.

“I resent the implication, Mr. Newman. I’ve got your couple here, and three other homicides. That’s in the last twenty- four hours alone. There’s also, maybe you’ve heard, a

psycho dipshit shooting couples up on the East Bank. All of them are fighting for a seat at the same table, Mr. Newman. You understand? Now, how do you come to know the victim?"

"She used to come in where I worked."

"And that's where exactly?"

"Appleby's here on the West Bank."

"And what do you do there?"

"I worked in the kitchen."

"Really, so what, you and she just strike up a conversation one day over the Potato Skins?"

"Something like that," Jordan said, feeling worse about this idea. "I'll let you get back to things, detective. I'm sorry if I implied you were giving less than your best effort. I'm sure you're doing the best you can under the circumstances. Thank you for your time."

"Sure thing, Mr. Newman. Uh, leave your number at the desk. I find anything, I'll let you know."

Jordan left the room, Vale's reflection staring at his back from the Plexiglas barrier. Braxton was waiting when he got out. It was just after noon.

"Malachi said something about Police Stations making him nervous."

Braxton drove slowly past the Algiers's ferry landing towards the point's myriad of one way streets. Jordan used the time to organize his thoughts. It was dumb going to the police. Vale

had at least eight active cases going. There was little chance of him giving Megan's the time it needed. He'd been thinking like a black citizen on some television show. Cops always helped black folks there and had genuine concern for the victims. In real life all he'd done was make himself a suspect.

The sun was lighting up the decaying waterfront in splashes of orange and gold. The river was sliding along as lazy as ever. He let the quiet beauty wash over him knowing, on some level, it would be the last peace he'd have for a while.

### Malachi

Malachi heard tribal drums thundering in his head as he sweated in the alley. The Goddess was silent tonight. Her absence was unsettling. Had he lost her favor? His eyes rolled back again, too tired to look forward. The root combined with the Marijuana, limited their effort to focus. No matter. He was after prey. He was the ultimate warrior. Plenty of time to rest after the hunt.

He'd been tracking them since their arrival, when not tied down with Jordan. The lakefront, Magazine Street, Commander's Palace; tonight it was Preservation Hall for a little traditional, Jazz. He was back on the savannah now, the couple two old lions too long in the tooth, lions threatening the tribe's cattle.

Elizabeth and Alexander White were from Kenosha, Wisconsin. Alexander owned several Dominos Pizzas there. They'd come to New Orleans for the Carnival season. But that was the lie. Yeah, Malachi thought, his usual precision with words slipping as the root continued its journey through his blood stream. The Goddess, his love, had shown him the truth. They'd come to see all the local niggas, dancin and clownin for the white folk's entertainment. None of that shit up North. Well, he'd give them a real show, somethin they'd be takin about back in Kenosha for years to come.

The Goddess had revealed their dark, lustful desires. They were vermin who needed to be removed. Their equally corrupt friends had come before. Abigail Crenshaw had told Elizabeth about the time she'd fucked a room full of men. "Just talk between us girls," she'd said, "something to keep from the men folk." It had stayed in Elizabeth's head. Alex had heard of a secret club that hunted black little kids. For a few thousand dollars he'd be able to participate. "Would you like to go?" he heard Alex asking. "Why yes, New Orleans sounds lovely," Elizabeth responded. Aberrations all, on his Goddess' earth, they would be stamped out. He was her weapon, her blade. He would show his love again, soon.

*Why show me this? To remind me of my madness, of course; I loved, literally loved, killing. There was so much anger and nowhere to put it. Boiling, threatening to explode, until my first kill. It was easier after the Goddess's acceptance, the experience enhanced. I feel genuine regret for the people I harmed. My mind was corrupt, muddied from years of root*

*saturation. Cruel indeed, to be made to realize just how vile a being you are by one you love so dearly. No word better describes it, cruel. Jordan may have been right. No loving Goddess would do this.*

Jordan

Maple Leaf apartments looked different touched by twilight. The peeling paint and falling aluminum siding made the old girl look almost stylized. He'd lived here ten years ago. Then it was an up and coming black complex in the cutoff, about a mile before the bridge to English Turn. The Turn was where the money folks lived on the West Bank. He'd never met anyone black who lived in English Turn.

Kids were throwing up shots at a bent hoop as he and Braxton entered the complex. Its base was held down by a couple old tires. It could just be some kids playing a little ball. But he saw a symptom of the problem. He wondered if he was being negative. No, their focus had been shifted from finding their true sense of blackness by a society vested in keeping them occupied with less provocative pursuits. If his people developed a true sense of self as African Americans, what would their world look like? He sounded like Malachi now. The thought was disturbing. One kid looked at them and held up a phone, back pointed first at Braxton, then Jordan. He spoke into it, nodded to himself, and gestured for them to follow.

They went deeper in, past clusters of hard- eyed people leery of outsiders. The uniform of the day was saggy shorts, waistband down around their thighs, and oversized New Orleans Hornet jerseys. Mommas and baby mommas sat out front of doorways fanning themselves and at the occasional fly. Jordan and Braxton stopped at a large white building near the center of the complex. A combination office/ gym/show model, it was cold inside, air conditioning blowing hard through the all-white interior. It was tastefully staged with a lived- in look for potential customers. It was the perfect example of a community center in a cutting edge complex, once upon a time. Now it was headquarters for one Calvin “Cortez” Ferguson.

If there was anyone that fit the well-worn cliché of black, drug dealing, gang bangin, fill in the blank, person, it was Cortez. In fact, he seemed to feel it his duty to comply. He’d stopped dropping bodies personally by the time Jordan met him, having accumulated enough of a reputation. He managed the day- to- day from this space now, issuing orders to runners like the kid. They flowed in and out continuously, nothing happening on the street, or in his complex he did not know about, or sometimes cause.

A handful of men, guns on display, sat around a card table well into a game of Dominoes. Another two were yelling loudly at the television playing Grand Theft Auto. A weight bench was setup in one corner with discs of varying sizes on the floor nearby. The kid passed through a glass door where the sauna should be. He returned, followed by a mountain of a man.

“Wizard,” Cortez said, seating himself at the weight bench. “Long time no see.” The two stopped playing GTA, placing themselves on each side of the bench.



“Not Wizard anymore.” Jordan smiled. “That verbal magic guy was put to rest years ago. Hello, Calvin.” Cortez looked at him, and he felt like time stopped for a few seconds. His look carried weight, like someone used to making judgements, and said judgments being final.

Cortez smiled. “You still Wizard to me. Never anyone better at getting folks to come through with the money; it was magic watching you work. You know, you one of the few people I let call me by that slave name anymore.”

“What, Calvin? Cortez is not much better. You know he probably had slaves too right?”

“Fuck you, coming in here pissin on a man’s dreams. He was a conqueror, a businessman, a role model.”

The two men hugged. Jordan looked at his former employer. His body resembled a black, over muscled, cartoon Hercules. His bald head, buffed to a high gloss, seemed attached directly to a chest as wide as two men side by side. Turning his head must be impossible, Jordan thought.

“What up, Braxton,” Cortez said with a slight lift of his chin.

“Sup, Calvin,” Braxton said. “How you been?”

Cortez’s smile disappeared. “Mother fucker, are you not in this room? Did you not hear what I just said?”

Braxton squirmed under the stare. “Come on now, Calvin, you known me longer than you known him.”

Cortez hesitated some, and then smiled. He looked at Jordan. “I got enough muscle these days, as you can see, and I use lawyers for the stuff you used to do.” He lay down on the weight bench.

“That’s cool,” Jordan said, “I’m not looking for work.”

“No?” Cortez asked, lifting two hundred pounds with a grunt. He took himself through five reps before dropping them again on the rack.

“You heard about the couple shot here, last night.”

“What about them?” Cortez asked.

“You know anything about it? Why it happened, who did it?”

Cortez started lifting again. “Why?” he grunted out between lifts.

“Why, what?” Jordan asked.

“Why you give a shit?”

Jordan felt a sinking feeling in his stomach, here again amongst fawning sycophants and hard- eyed types. This whole scene had always been too dark for him. But he was out of options. The cops won’t find anything. Detective Vale was dedicated, but it could take months, years even. Fuck that. He wasn’t waiting that long. Cortez had to be the most ruthless men he’d ever associated with. He’d seen him beat men to a bloody mess, face empty of feeling. Fuck playing the waiting game.

“Megan,” he started, “she was a friend, more than a friend. I’m asking you to look into it.”

Cortez continued pushing the weights up and down. He used the exact same rhythm with a pause at the top and bottom of each press. He did this ten times before getting up and grabbing a waiting towel. “Somebody seen, somebody always sees. I let you know if I find anything.” He placed a hand on Jordan’s shoulder. “I see the look on your face.”

Jordan looked away. “She was special.”

Cortez nodded, understanding. “You mean to do something about it. I can handle it if you want. Call it a favor for a friend. The deed gets done, and your soul is clear.”

“I can handle it. I need to. I don’t want your soul on the line for me.”

“Mine got sold a long time ago, for these people.” He gestured around the room. “It’s not out of the way.”

“I want it to be me.”

Cortez shrugged. “Good enough.” Shifting position he prepared for his next set of reps. “When you see Malachi, tell him he still owes me for that last shipment of root. Shit ain’t easy to come by.”

Jordan sat in his room with the television on, the sound down. Braxton was in the kitchen making more drinks. Malachi had eyes on Jordan but remained silent. It was the day of the funeral, one week since Megan had been killed. The funeral was a somber affair. Megan and

Nathan's children looked lost standing before the matching coffins. They were pressed between, Jordan assumed, family from out of town. He'd watched from the street, not even sure why he'd gone. His Megan wasn't there. There was nothing up in that box but a rotting corpse. Back home now he was doing what he'd been doing the past week, drinking, and diving ever deeper into his supply of root. He was determined to make a connection, some form of communication with the Goddess. He wanted, needed, an explanation for her taking Megan from him. Malachi's teachings were proving less than helpful, his training no match for real emotion. Meditating wouldn't work, only time, and revenge.

"Really, Jordan, this is pathetic!" Malachi said. "I have told you about alcohol and the root."

"And I told you, leave off him," Braxton said, coming back from the kitchen.

"You do him no service supporting him in this state," Malachi said. "He is little more than a vegetable, wandering around constantly drunk..."

"He's lost his love, you heartless fuck," Braxton said.

"Bah! He is a fool, a fool I have wasted years on. A pathetic weakling who..."

"Why did the Goddess do this to me?" Jordan asked, focusing finally on Malachi.

"The working of a Goddess' mind is impossible to..."

"No," Jordan cried. "I listened to you. Did what you asked, what she wanted me to do, you said. I've trained for years, until my mind is mush! And you know what? Other than the vision you provided, she has failed to show her presence at all!"

“You are thinking...”

Jordan held up a hand. He started pacing the small room. He stared at his iPad containing the hundreds of pictures of Megan. It remained closed. Looking at that brought only more pain.

“I ask you again. Why has the Goddess done this to me? Why to Megan?”

“All beings die Jordan. Better to ask why I was born,” Malachi said.

Jordan grabbed one of the drinks Braxton had placed on the table. “If she doesn’t speak to me, I am done with all of this. You got a direct line to her, you better tell her.”

“Jordan...”

Well, bitch? Jordan thought. As hard as he could he concentrated on pure rage, trying again to break the wall between him and the Goddess.

“You are acting like a child,” Malachi said. She is a GODDESS!” The very fact she allowed me to gift you with a vision should...”

Malachi did not get to finish. The phone rang. It was Cortez.

“Out with it,” Jordan said.

“You not going to like it,” Cortez said.

“You my friend, right?”

“I’m your friend. It was Malachi.”

“You full of shit,” Jordan said, looking at Malachi. “That’s a lie.”

“Oh it’s the truth.”

Jordan felt his well-constructed world failing.

Cortez continued, “It’s a hard thing finding out your heroes aren’t real.”

“It’s not true,” he said again, unable to think of anything better.

“Little man saw the whole thing, the same kid brought you and Braxton in. He sells him that African root you two so fond of. His mom lives back there.”

“He talk to the police?” Jordan asked, watching Malachi perking up.

“Don’t go getting stupid on me now, Wizard.”

“Don’t call me that.” Jordan said.

“I’ll consider it. Anyway, he testifies it looks like I approved it. I can’t have that, bad for business in the Kingdom. I done my part, even offered to take it off your hands. It’s on you now.”

“You believe it?” Jordan had told Braxton everything. The drive up Lapalco had been quiet since then.

Braxton concentrated on the road. “It sounds like the truth. You know Calvin. He’s not above slanting things to his advantage, but he wouldn’t lie about something like this.”

“What happened after you two after you dropped me off?”

Braxton was silent for a beat. “We took you upstairs, put you to bed. I had another joint.”

“Nothing else?”

He paused a beat more. “He touched me, Jordan. And I swear to Jesus I saw...”

“I can guess, The Goddess,”

“I thought I’d shit my pants, honest to God. Then we left. Mal started in again on that shit he’s always talking to you about. Hell, without you in the middle and just having seen his Goddess and all, I couldn’t handle it. I told him to drop me off.”

“What was he saying exactly?”

“Like I said, same shit as always, the Goddess shapes our destiny. Braxton, in a passable imitation of Malachi said, ‘such tiny minded beings trapped here, wandering the mother with no clue, no inkling of their true purpose,’ “Shit like that. My head was tired. He took me home.”

I can relate, Jordan thought. He remembered when he’d first met Malachi, “Wait, I have a gift for you, something, magical.” were the first words he’d said to him. Jordan remembered Tevin, wrestling with the decision to kill or not, heard the kid’s voice go higher in pitch like people get when struggling with fear.

“Is it true?” Tevin asked again. Jordan said nothing. He may have been sixteen but only a fool dismissed kids now a days. They were born thinking themselves on borrowed time; your life meant even less to them.

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Jordan, said.

“I mean, Lil Nick said you sneaking around on Clarissa with some white girl.”

Tevin may have been a drug dealer, but he loved his older sister, worshipped the ground she walked on. He remembered seeing the determination there, feeling the moment Tevin decided to shoot. Jordan was proud of him on some level. Then Malachi touched Tevin on the sleeve. “Calm, little brother, your message has been received I think.” Tevin, looking confused, had glanced at him again and then just walked out. He’d thrown a twenty down and followed. Malachi followed him. Then the words, “I have a gift for you, something, magical.”

For years he’d followed the man, sweated, and even bled in some cases. Malachi had known things, shown him sights he’d never imagined possible. His love for the old mage was great despite his complaining. As with Megan, or any of his other friends, the loss would be just as horrific, and just as in need of correction. He didn’t know the reasons for Malachi’s actions but he could guess, now that Megan was part of the equation. Calvin was telling him the truth.

Malachi

*Ah, trying to predict the path a human mind may take is tricky, even without the input of drugs. I’d shaped things to the best of my ability. Young Jordan should have been distressed yes, but following an acceptable period of mourning, should have been back to training, with*



*only a minimum of down time. I had taken control of things, dared to shape Jordan's fate in the manner I felt my Goddess would have.*

*I feel the bugs again. I scream in silent agony, able to only imagine scraping them from my bones. There is the problem I realize at last. The manner my Mistress would have. I presumed to know her will and to imitate her action, to imitate her.*

Malachi leaned casually against the wall. He was outside a Bourbon storefront called Decadent Dreams. Patience itself, he sipped on a hand grenade, spitting the noxious concoction back into its container. Grover Washington Jr's "Mister Magic" floated, well, magically on the muggy night air. He bobbed his head in time to the music, just another tourist without a care in the world. Elizabeth and Alexander White, from Kenosha, Wisconsin were inside. They'd left Snug Harbor at ten p.m. He'd been following them for two hours now. A brief shower had thinned out the crowds some, making for an easy stroll. They left Decadent Dreams, drinks in hand, and crossed the street giggling, leaning on each other for support. Sweet, he thought. Slow and snake-like he followed a few yards back, moving with the crowd as they drifted towards Bourbon. They were clueless to his presence, something he savored, dumb animals unaware of the lion among them. The look on their faces when they finally knew, when the reality hit that there was nothing they could do, and they were about to die? That moment was always too brief.

Jordan

“Well I still don’t believe it,” Braxton said. Jordan noticed him constantly shifting his weight on the chafing prosthetic leg. “I mean, this is Malachi we talking about. My guess is he’s probably capable, yes. Hell, we all are. But this is a lot.” He laughed nervously. “You know Malachi, he’s all talk. He wouldn’t hurt a flea!”

I don’t want to believe it either, Jordan thought, wiping at his shaved skull. Malachi was still leaning against the wall. He looked as passive as a cat, and as unpredictable.

“Why are we here?” Braxton asked, looking more and more nervous. “If it’s true, what you think we’re gonna do?” But Jordan’s mind was on Megan and her final moments. He believed he was in there somewhere at the end. Her last thought, her essence, reaching out to say, Bye Jordan, don’t grieve. “I’ll kill him,”

Malachi followed. The couple did not notice. Why concern themselves with the docile descendant of slaves? He felt disgust and anger moving through the crowd. No, the master race had no need to fear his people. Yes, he finally had to admit they were his people, broken, milling about this neon lit stretch. Stealing wallets and killing each other by the hundreds, no thought given to their actual history or legacy, they were his people, and he hated them.

Jordan followed, alone. Braxton, weary from standing, had gone to get the car. Besides, Jordan knew where they were going. He’d been almost step-to-step with Malachi for days now.

The motel was some distance off Bourbon and though cheap, it was clean. The doors opened right on to the street. Elizabeth and Alexander leaned against each other laughing as he fumbled for the room key. Malachi stepped into the light. Elizabeth noticed him first. He held up a finger for silence, and then pointed to the gun. Malachi, watched her face go pale in the light.

Jordan hit him as hard as he could on his right side, just under the floating rib. Malachi dropped to one knee. The gun fired, sinking two rounds into the door.

“Inside!” Jordan yelled, stepping on Malachi’s gun hand. He yanked the weapon free and tossed it clear.

A laugh rose from Malachi. He sat where he’d landed, spitting blood on the sidewalk. “Jordan,” he said, clearing his mouth. “Is that you?”

“Megan says, hello.” Jordan grabbed Malachi’s collar, then slammed his face to the street. There came a muffled groan and more spitting in response. Malachi seemed unconscious after. Jordan did it three more times to be sure. He said nothing when Braxton returned, just shoved Malachi in the backseat of the car.

He awoke hands behind his back, pain in both wrists. He was on his side, something wet around him. Not blood, he realized, he would’ve been weak and confused. He felt relatively whole. What he did feel was bugs crawling, along his skin, under his clothes. And he smelled wet dirt. A pale, pink moon provided the only light source. It was blocked some by a silhouetted form. He recognized the shape.

“Jordan, my friend,” Malachi managed, through dry cracked lips.

“Why?” Jordan asked, his face invisible, but his voice cold, accusing. He knelt down casually in front of the hole. Malachi’s gun was in his hand, not pointed in any particular direction.

Malachi felt like something was missing. A sudden chill ran down his spine when he realized what. The voice of his Goddess was gone. “Let me out of this hole and I’ll explain everything,” he managed through his mangled mouth. Malachi saw Braxton now, next to Jordan. The weakling was shuffling from foot to foot, eyes anywhere but on what was unfolding before him. Jordan on the other hand, seemed made of stone. Malachi struggled to his feet, smile back in place. “You have come a long way my, pupil.”

“Why?” Jordan asked again. He removed the clip from Malachi’s gun, made a show of counting the rounds remaining then slammed the clip back into place.

“She was holding you back,” Malachi said. “If I’d found you sooner, started the training earlier, things would have been far easier. Too much of the world and her were already in you. To get an edge, bring you to the Goddess, you needed to be freed.”

“You heartless piece of shit, she was a Goddess! My great love, don’t you get it?”

“Great love?” Malachi laughed. “Was it you she remained married to? You she curled up with every night to watch television, discuss the children, and plan for the future with? She was never yours. You were never her choice. You were simply a placeholder. A filler, a box her husband couldn’t or wouldn’t fill. You were nothing to her. The Goddess truly loves you. I have

told you Jordan, nothing matters but the Goddess and her realization. She must know the universe and her place in it.”

“You took Megan away from me,” Jordan said. “Any chance your Goddess had ended there.”

“I am afraid it is not that easy, my student,” Malachi said, smiling. “You have been under my influence long enough. She will speak and you shall hear.”

“And that couple tonight, or the who knows how many others before them, if I hadn’t stopped you...”

“They are sheep!” Malachi said. “No, prey, at least sheep provide a service. They are simply sport, provided for the Lion lest he grow weak and fat like them! They don’t matter, they never mattered. Yes I killed, so many-”

“You’re a monster.” Jordan said.

“A title both useless and inaccurate. In either case, I cannot be judged by you or your laws. I am a vessel of the Goddess, her lightening rod. I don’t pretend to comprehend why. She has not granted me that gift.”

“You’re going to be meeting her face to face soon. I’m sure she’ll explain things.”

“Blessed Mother,” Malachi cried out. “Why have you abandoned me? Observe the horrible state I find myself in. Have I not done your will, completed the actions you dictated?”

Jordan looked at Braxton, not really sure why. Malachi was leaving this earth tonight. Nothing he could say would change that. Shit like that must be accounted for. Maybe hoping for

some kind of argument against it, for some words on the sheer madness of what he was about to do. “Anything?” he asked his friend.

“He’s not even ashamed he did it,” Braxton said. “I don’t think he sees us as people at all, only means to an end. You’d be doing the world a favor.”

Malachi, continued pleading his case to Jordan, who remained stone faced. “...one child looks upon the other with nothing but hatred. Where is the understanding you promised?” There was still no reaction. “The hatred radiates from him, Mother. It is not for a vessel as base as I to question your will but...

“Bye, Malachi,” Braxton said.

Jordan looked at Malachi. The round took him in the chest, flinging his body back into the hole.

*I have relived this countless times it seems. As to the purpose of it all, I can only assume my mistress is less Goddess, more unforgiving Cunt! I have done nothing but her will. At the very least I am owed peace in the afterlife. The edges of what I call reality fall away again. I move with it. I am over New Orleans. Night is upon her. The city shines there, defiant, at the mouth of the river. For a moment I fear I will stay but before that thought can take hold, I am moving. Slow, then quickly, I find myself over my beloved Africa. I fall...*

“It’s not something I see every day is all,” Braxton said. It was his first words since Malachi. They were driving along South Peters road with the windows down, feeling the cooling breeze, hoping it wiped the memory away. Jordan ignored the rotting vegetation stink and concentrated on letting the thing go. He’d tossed the gun out some miles back.

“Fuck him. He killed Megan.”

“I know, bro,” Braxton said. “I just never seen, never had nothing to do with no killing before. I guess he deserved it, what with what he did to all those people.”

“I didn’t do it for them. I didn’t know them.”

Braxton dropped him off at home. Jordan assumed his usual place on the couch. The screen saver on the desktop shifted through pictures of Megan while he drank. He watched as they flickered in, then out, of existence. He remembered them all, those moments. The conference they’d attended at her insistence. He’d never given a thought to the speaker, he was so caught up in Megan and her beauty, how focused she was on hearing the words. There flashed the two of them with the reverend, he of the deep voice and earnest desire to just help. Then, Professor Mbuke, still obsessed with post-colonial Africa. He’d trade all the moments he had left for just a few more with her. Seven beers later he was out.

He dreamed. One moment he was playing on a swing and then everything was crystal, brought into sharp focus. The swing was gone and the Goddess before him. Blue skinned, black eyes shining, inviting him in. Hand extended, the feeling of welcome was clear. Behind her were images of Africa. He recognized the terrain as South Cameroon, from pictures Malachi had

shown him so many times. She nodded, as if she knew he understood, and he did. Jordan was suddenly awake. He laid there thinking. It was clear he still had things to do. He thought of Megan the last time he'd seen her. "They will pay my love, all of them," he said.



## VITA

Delano Lomas was born in Toledo, Ohio. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in liberal arts from the University of New Orleans in 2015. He joined the University of New Orleans graduate program for a Master's Degree of Art in American Literature in 2016.