

Drapetomania

by

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Drapetomania was a pseudoscience mental illness, which doctors diagnosed black runaway slaves, saying it was the cause of them fleeing slavery in pursuit of freedom.

The only way to prevent this disease was to completely strip slaves of their humanity. Reminding them that they were never humans.

SETTING

This is a fictional time, but it feels like now.

The land is make-believe, but is somehow close to home.

These are made-up characters fighting an imaginary war.

But damn it feels so real. Too real.

CHARACTERS

Cassandra

African-American, medium to dark brown skin, late-40s. She wears a bright armband, which represents her freedom. She is a very manipulative soldier, relying mainly on mind games to keep her safety.

Jackson

White, early to mid-30s. He is eager to be a part of this war. However, He is easily manipulated because he is misinformed of the history of this war, and unsure of how to help end it.

Althea

African-American, medium to dark brown skin, mid to late 20s. She should be the younger looking version of Cassandra. She is full of untapped potential. However, she doesn't know how to live in her instincts. She is a soldier that thinks through all her movements. She frequently lives in her head and doesn't always allow her heart to lead her.

Tali

African-American, light to medium brown skin, mid to late 20s. She only leads by her instincts. She moves with the weight of the world on her back. She is fueled by anger. She is the strongest and best trained soldier of the three soldiers.

The voices and drums

They are the heartbeat of this piece. It is West African styled music with Jun Jun And Agembe drums. They help transition from scene to scene, but also enhance the subtext of characters.

Movement and dance is how they communicate. There is a deep and personal relationship with the music and the characters. However, they may not be aware of the power the music has over them.

She shoots straight up. Although she is awake, she is in a deep trance.

ALTHEA

(Shivering)

The smoke. It was just one huge cloud. I couldn't see my hands in front of my face. I couldn't see my feet dragging through the mud. There was a soft roar in the distance... I thought I died. I was just wandering around in Purgatory. I thought I'd eventually find myself at the gates of Heaven... Or Hell.

(Beat)

I should've stayed in the cloud. Those soft roars behind me came crashing through the smoke and fog. I could feel the chaos beyond that sea of grey. Why did I step out? Flashes of uniforms... The coordinated colors blurred past me. I stood...

(She's reliving the moment)

I stand still. I feel the weight of the flag I carry on my back crushing me. The number of my unit tightening its grip on my arm. My last name stitched across my chest.

(She looks down to see if it's still there)

I always hoped if I died in battle the last thing I would hear is my name. I don't know why I would feel comfort in that. You only hear... I only heard my name to be criticized or praised. I didn't risk enough to receive either. I don't want the last person to see me alive, only see me as the other. The enemy. Reading my name reminds them I'm someone's daughter, sister. They read my name and imagine I'm a wife, a mother. They create a fairytale where I'm someone's favorite person. Then they feel a rush of burning in their stomach that they only have seconds to shake off, for my brother's and sisters in uniform will come running.

(Beat)

But my unit's vengeance means nothing. My name from their tongues will reek of pain for past casualties, cold praises, and dismembered dreams for my future. No I want to hear it from my adversary. I could leave my body feeling satisfied if my name, for even a moment, meant something.

(MORE)

ALTHEA (CONT'D)

If my name was heavy enough to pierce my executioner's lungs.

Althea.

They can stand, kneel, sit next to my body, and with heavy weight my name will fall from their mouth.

Althea.

It will burrow into the ground, and every time they walk past they will hear their own voice rumbling, echoing my name beneath their feet.

Althea.

Althea.

Althea.

The sounds of battle begin to play lightly over the humming voices.

But I have not heard my name. I don't... I didn't get to hear my name.

She looks down at her ratty uniform, she touches her skin to see if it's real.

I could still be dead. But I never found a gate. "Seek and ye shall find; knock and the door shall be opened unto you."

She looks at her bandaged hands.

But the wails and howls of soldiers, men, women, children... They are what led me to the door. "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." I could hear them screaming, but I couldn't tell where the voices were coming from. I couldn't tell if they were war cries, or the sound of... People dying... But it didn't matter... I couldn't find them... And if, I did what could I do? I had no weapon. I wouldn't know if they were enemies until I saw their uniform and if I'm close enough to see the flags on their back, identify the number of their unit, or read their name I'm too close...
(MORE)

ALTHEA (CONT'D)

And if the flag matches mine... Even then... What would it mean? What would it mean to wear the same uniform if doesn't fit me right? What does it mean if my accent slips in and out, if my dialect sways a little? What if the way I walk or carry myself resembles the enemy? Am I an unnatural native or am I native terrorist? Have I lost my rights before ever facing soldiers wearing my rival colors.

She listens for a moment. Then she calls out.

Why are you crying? Who do you cry for? If I stripped myself of this uniform would you accept my help or shoot me on sight.

She yells in pain, holding her side.

Beat.

She knew me.

Althea begins breathing through the pain. The eerie and dark nature of the outside insidiously creeps into the room. As she begins describing the following, we hear feet shuffling through dry branches and leaves along with the heavy breaths of two people underscoring Althea's speech.

She knew me, but she readied her gun.

We hear the click of the gun.

She knew me.

She wore the same flag. She had the same unit number wrapped around her arm. We had different names written across our chest, but...

She knew me.

My uniform fit me differently, but she recognized they were the same. We were the same.

She knew me.

She did not need to read the name across my chest because she recognized my face. She knew me. Even still she pointed the barrel of her gun at me. She aimed, knew I had no weapon. Me? What could I do?

BANG!

Silence.

She falls back to lay down. Her shivering becomes more aggressive.

She knew me.

She knew me.

SHE KNEW ME!

She begins writhing in pain from the wound as she yells.

There is a series of intense small knocks.

Althea begins to relax as if the knocks were rocking her to sleep.

The negro spiritual from before plays as Althea falls back to sleep.

LIGHTS SHIFT

The moonlight stays on Althea as the lights reveal Jason and Cassandra across the stage.

Jackson and Cassandra are laying in bed. Jackson is asleep, but Cassandra is wide awake. The haunting melody and moaning voices sneak into the room, clashing with the hymn across the stage.

Cassandra is curled up afraid of the hands reaching for her and the moaning voices. She looks to Jackson who is peacefully sleeping.

CASSANDRA

(Whispering)

Leave me. Leave me. Leave me.

Cassandra continues whispering the command.

Althea's deep sleep is interrupted by the moans surrounding Cassandra.

ALTHEA

She knew me. She knew me!

Cassandra and Althea's chants begin to battle each other like their music.

Jackson starts to wake up, but his concern is for Althea, not Cassandra. He jumps out of the bed and runs to Althea, leaving Cassandra with the sinister hands and the growing moans.

Cassandra swats and shouts at the hands.

CASSANDRA

Leave me! Leave me now! Jackson!

But he doesn't come. Jackson bursts into Althea's room, and sees her writhing in pain. He immediately jumps into action.

Seeing Jackson isn't coming, Cassandra leaps from the bed and runs out of the room to find him. Out of breath, she stands by the door and watches him trying to calm down Althea.

JACKSON

(Trying to wake her)

What's wrong? Did your stitches burst?

ALTHEA

(Hysterical)

She knew me! She knew me!

JACKSON

Who? Who knew you?

Jackson is fighting to hold her down.

ALTHEA

Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi

JACKSON

Who knew you?

ALTHEA

(Pointing to Cassandra)

Ba-tal-lay

JACKSON

Who?

Jackson turns to see Cassandra standing there out of breath and fire behind her eyes.

ALTHEA
Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi

JACKSON
Cassandra?

What does that mean?

Jackson looks back at Althea.

He looks back at Cassandra, but she's gone.

ALTHEA
(Grabbing Jackson)
What's happening?

JACKSON
I don't know.

There is knocking coming from the floor.

ALTHEA
Make it stop.

JACKSON
I don't know how.

ALTHEA
(Yelling to the door)
Scree-ap-pay ame-tal. Ame-tal!

JACKSON
Who are you talking to?

ALTHEA
Do you hear them?

JACKSON
Who?

ALTHEA
Them. Knocking.

JACKSON
You hear knocking?

ALTHEA
They want me to help them. They want me to free them, but I can't.

JACKSON

You've lost a lot of blood. It's just a
hallucination.

ALTHEA

(Grabbing her side)
Ah! Make it stop.

JACKSON

I'm trying, but I don't know...

ALTHEA

I know who she is.

JACKSON

Who?

ALTHEA

I told them to run. Tell them...

*Althea points to the door, but Jackson
is still confused.*

JACKSON

There's no one there.

ALTHEA

Behind the door.

JACKSON

What door?

*As Althea lifts herself, the door
disappears. When she pushes past
Jackson, she sees there is nothing, but
darkness there.*

ALTHEA

Where did it go? Where did it go? She took
it. Where did she take it? We have to go.

JACKSON

Althea Listen... Althea... It was never
there. Nothing was ever there.

ALTHEA

Please save them from her.

JACKSON

Save who?

He looks back at the door.

Cassandra?

ALTHEA

Don't let her kill them again.

Cassandra walks back into the room with a syringe.

JACKSON

What are you doing?

CASSANDRA

Making it stop.

Cassandra goes to give Althea the shot.

ALTHEA

(Pulling her arm away)

Stop. I don't want it.

CASSANDRA

(To Jackson)

Hold her down.

JACKSON

Is this right? I mean are you sure?

CASSANDRA

You said you didn't know what to do.

JACKSON

I know but still...

CASSANDRA

Are you the doctor?

Jackson is silent and still.

Then this isn't...

ALTHEA

I know you, or someone like you.

CASSANDRA

You know OF me... Maybe...

(To Jackson)

What are you doing? Hold her down.

He obeys Cassandra's command.

JACKSON

She's strong.

CASSANDRA

Be stronger.

ALTHEA

Stop her. The shot won't... Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi.

JACKSON

What does that mean?

CASSANDRA

How should I know?

JACKSON

She keeps saying it and talking to some door.

CASSANDRA

She's hallucinating. This will help.

JACKSON

She doesn't trust us. Maybe if we...

Cassandra pushes Jackson out of the way.

CASSANDRA

Move.

JACKSON

What will it do?

Cassandra climbs on top of Althea to hold her down.

CASSANDRA

Make her heal faster.

ALTHEA

I know you. Di ame li-ay. Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi.

Cassandra stops. She hasn't heard those words in a long time.

I knew it. You will pay for your crimes.

JACKSON

What is she...

CASSANDRA

I committed no crimes.

ALTHEA

Does that help you sleep? Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi.

JACKSON
Cassandra what's hap...

CASSANDRA
Stop calling me that. I earned my pardon.

ALTHEA
Di ame li-ay. Twa ame maleesy.
(She looks to Jackson)
Ayu-twa! Ayu-twa!

JACKSON
What is she saying? Do you know what she's
saying?

ALTHEA
There is blood on your hands.

CASSANDRA
Everyone has blood on their hands.

ALTHEA
Not from their own people! Ba-tal-lay di-
na-chi.

CASSANDRA
That is not my name!

Cassandra goes to inject Althea, but Althea knocks her off the bed. Jackson goes to restrain Althea.

JACKSON
We're trying to help you.

Jackson holds Althea and lays her back on the bed. Cassandra pushes him away.

CASSANDRA
Don't touch her.

JACKSON
What's happening? What is she saying?

Jackson can see this is a moment between the two of them that he will never understand, but he wants to be a part of it.

Everything begins to slow down for Cassandra. Jackson's interjections are now muffled. She can only focus on Althea. They are the only two people in the room.

ALTHEA
Di ame twa.

CASSANDRA
(Leaning into Althea)
Di ameni twa. Ni ayu-de

Things speed up to real time.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)
(Without looking at him)
Get out Jackson.

JACKSON
Cassandra...

CASSANDRA
It doesn't concern you.

ALTHEA
(To Jackson)
She'll kill me. Ayu-twa!

JACKSON
Cassandra I don't think...

CASSANDRA
Cre-aden twa!

Cassandra is no longer the poised intellectual. She is in survival mode.

Although Jackson doesn't speak this language, he knows he's meant to leave. He obeys closing the door behind him. Cassandra injects Althea.

ALTHEA
(After Jackson)
Ayu-twa! Ayu-twa!

Althea is unsteady from the injection.

CASSANDRA
Ba-lay men-ti-ka-fee-na. Mena-tu-ve he-
may.

ALTHEA
(Unsteady)
Di-fa-may len-zi-ta eto-lee ta-ki

CASSANDRA
Mena-tu-ve he-may? Mena-tu-ve he-may? Mena-
tu-ve he-may!

Althea begins to laugh.

ALTHEA

(Fading in and out)
Ba-tal-lay di-na-chi

CASSANDRA

Mena-tu-ve he-may? What did you bring in
my house?

ALTHEA

It was already here. They will never leave
you. Was it worth it?

This stings Cassandra.

Are your hands still stained? Or is their
blood on your boots?

CASSANDRA

This is mine and I will not let you take
this from me.

ALTHEA

Why are you fighting so hard for this safe
house? What do you get from this?

CASSANDRA

You're still a savage. You wouldn't
understand.

*Althea, trying her best to stay awake,
slides her shoulder out of her shirt,
exposing a symbol tattooed on her
shoulder blade.*

ALTHEA

Am I still a savage?

CASSANDRA

(Stunned)
You were born exempt.

ALTHEA

I fight because it's the right thing to
do.

CASSANDRA

Your mother and father got their pardon
the same way I did.

ALTHEA

And yet they are always welcomed in our
territory. Can you say the same?

CASSANDRA

It won't matter soon.

(Beat)

Out of respect for your parents, I'll make you a deal.

ALTHEA

You just want to save your reputation for some foreigner. You don't want me to tell him how you slaughtered your entire unit for his people.

CASSANDRA

I did what anyone of us would have done.

ALTHEA

There was enough of you to take them.

CASSANDRA

They lost.

ALTHEA

I hope they torture you at night. Is it hard to sleep?

CASSANDRA

Sometimes. But I have Jackson to keep company.

ALTHEA

You know, if they get ahold of you in your dreams, you'll never wake.

CASSANDRA

Listen. You can fight me and die here. Or you can rest, heal, and die out there. Your choice.

ALTHEA

There were three choices last time. Have you gone soft?

Althea lays back and lets the medication take over.

CASSANDRA

And don't speak that foul language in my house.

Althea falls asleep.

CASSANDRA (CONT'D)

(Under her breath)

Bri-et