

## Bones

Samantha Dornan read aloud the ink-smudged piece of calf-skin vellum she found crumpled in the depths of her shoulder bag.

*...am the Divine Mother; I am Loa, I am Orisha, I am Fatimah, I am Kali, I am Yemeyah. I have been many names, I have been Aset, I have been Isis, I have been the Virgin Mary. But you...*

“... and that’s where the legibility stops. It looks like water damage, but I’m no expert. I’m not sure where to pick up from here, but that’s the gist of it. When you get this message, give me a call back, Hoff. I could use some suggestions. Or advice. Or something. *Anything*, really. If you could miracle up my luggage, that would be fucking stellar.” She hung up.

Sam tucked her cell-phone back in its usual resting place, deep within the yawning mouth of the rough, worn shoulder bag that doubled as her mobile office and threw it onto the vacant bar stool next to her.

“Encore, s’il vous plaît,” she said, holding up her empty bottle like a white flag of surrender. A few classes of poorly remembered basic French wasn’t fluency, but it was passable. The bartender snatched up another frosty brown bottle from the cooler, popped the cap, and placed it in front of her.

“You opening a tab?” he asked.

“Oui, merci,” then she realized, “you speak English. My bad.” She hung her head, low between her arms with the bottle clasped between her hands like an offering to the gods. She thought he probably felt the volcanic heat in her cheeks.

“Just enough,” he replied with a lazy wink and slid her credit card back to his side of the bar top. “This is safe with me until you’re done, oui?”

She nodded in agreement and decided now was a good time for a smoke. The stools swiveled, so she pushed off the bar with her left hand and rotated to face her bag in the next stool over. Its giant maw was folded over and deflated, devoid of two-thirds the usual shit she stored inside. She booked the flight to Haiti at the last minute and the airline severely limited what she was allowed to carry on board. As per her luck, her luggage had been lost and all she had was her essentials: smokes, notes, cards, her phone, and its charger.

Sam had to laugh in despair; here she sat — in a little place called Myabel’s, Croix-des-Bouquets, just outside Port-au-Prince, only a block or so away from her hotel, getting shit-faced. Alone. With nothing and no one familiar around.

She found her cigarette pack with ease and was surprised that the cheap convenience store lighter remained tucked securely inside. She shook the lighter out, stuck a butt into the corner of her mouth and sparked it, then jostled the lighter back down into the pack. She traded the smokes for her notes and lost herself in thought for a while.



A few hours later, she cashed out with the bartender — whose name was Evens — and possessively clutched her bag to her abdomen as she set out to walk the short distance back to the hotel.

The room she was given was small, unremarkable, and stale. Sam lit another cigarette, knowing that it would only make the wet dog dankness of the air feel heavier and thicker. She swung open the room's solitary window and careened her head over the sill, expelling a mixture of chemicals and recycled, beer pungent air from her lungs out into the world. Over the stench of cigarettes and beer, she could smell her own body odor soaking into her clothes. A shower was next on her agenda.

The hotel's shower was claustrophobia inducing. It was no bigger than a coffin, though it served its purpose to cleanse her body of the musky aroma of tar, nicotine, and sweat.

When she was done with her shower, she wrapped a towel around her nakedness and scrubbed the only set of clothing she had with the scant remains of the bar of soap, then hung them in various places around the room to drip dry. Then she fell into the firm, musty mattress and drifted away.



“So you need copies of *all* the research? The Cult of Loa record, the disappearances from 1837 file? The vodoun practitioners list, all that stuff?” Hoffman's voice was small and patchy through the receiver. He sounded as tired as she was; it was 6 a.m in Haiti; it was 3 a.m. in Arizona. She regretted being such a nuisance but she was glad he answered her early call. “You should have put the flash in your bag.”

“No, I know, *I get it*, Hoff — but it's not *my fault* my luggage was lost. My one carry on had the clear majority of my written contact lists, some of my own personal research, and my laptop, external hard drive, and a couple of flash drives. I packed *one carry on* and it's the only one that's missing from that flight. I need you to email me some of the files, specifically my paper trail list — the people I need to network for information. I've got one guy written down and I'm gonna check him out this morning.” There was a mutual silence, born of frustration, that stretched endlessly before she broke it. “I'm desperately clinging onto hope here that you thought to bring your work home with you.”

Sam pressed the phone between her cheek and shoulder as she sat up and pulled the thin hotel blankets over her breasts. Her free hand fished around in her giant bag for her notes and smokes.

“You're lucky I don't hate you, but I don't have anything with me at home” he laughed. “I'll send some copies your way when I get to the office in the morning.”

“You're the best, dude. So, what do you think about the passage I read to your voicemail box? Any ideas on that?”

“... — that. Where did ... get that from?” The connection fizzed and dropped for a fraction of a second between his words.

“Oddly enough, I found it in my bag after I landed. It wasn't there when I cleaned my bag out for the flight, it wasn't there when I boarded. I'm fucking certain it's not mine, not my handwriting, and not my fucking *vellum*, for Christ's sake. *Calf-skin vellum*. Like, animal hide, Hoff.” She drew in a harsh, bulging lungful of smoke from her cigarette, held it tight inside with her eyes closed for a moment, and let it go. Catharsis.

“That's terrifying really, Dornan. Maybe someone's pulling a prank on you. Anybody at the office could have done that, they all knew what we were working on. You're positive it wasn't there before you left?”

“*Fuck* no, Hoff. It wasn’t. You *know* I never clean that bag out. I had to for the flight, and I’m one hundred percent sure it wasn’t. I don’t think it’s from the office. Journalists can’t afford to buy prank-vellum to just throw around. But I also don’t know who else could have done it. So I’m just gonna throw that on the back burner for now. Email me what you have tomorrow and I’ll figure something out. Now go back to sleep. Sorry to bother you, Nick, truly.”

“No worries, honest. I’ll fire off what documents I can when I get to work. You should rest a bit more and try not to worry too much. Be careful out there, Sam,” and he hung up.



Sam was lucky she’d written down the one contact in her notes at the last minute. It was the address of a local vodoun practitioner, a bokor. Someone who sells black magic and spells.

With no inclination as to what she should expect, she dressed in her still damp clothes, tossed everything she had into her bag, and headed out for an early breakfast and a short stakeout. The bokor’s shop was about a mile and a half away from the hotel and it was a refreshing feeling to be out and alive before 8 a.m. for once, so she walked.

An hour and some odd minutes later, her feet stopped short at the sight of a sidewalk cafe and the smell of exotic roasted coffee wiped her mind clear of all substantial thought. The bokor was three shops down and across the street so the cafe was a convenient enough place to conduct surveillance for a little while. She could almost see into the bokor’s window from the awning-shaded table she made into her home base.

Nothing interesting happened; a few people window shopped, two people stepped inside, and maybe one of them made a purchase of some sort. Sam decided she’d wasted enough time. A digital recorder would have been nice to have, but hers was sadly adrift with her luggage, and her phone would have to suffice. She switched the recorder app on, and walked across the street, straight into the bokor’s shop.



A little bell chimed above the door as it opened and closed. She saw the briefest shadow of a person’s head careen around the corner through the beaded veil of a doorway near the back.

“Don’ touch a ting, you break and buy,” an older man’s voice called from the backrooms. His English was broken but surprising; she guessed he noticed her light skin color and assumed she was American. Sharp observer.

The shop was lined with shelves packed with items of the sort you’d find at the Akodessewa Fetish Market in Togo, West Africa, something she had done some light reading on while preparing for her story. Her eyes grazed over the little vials of ingredients — like ground horse skull for stamina and speed, and the skins of various animals hung from the exposed ceiling beams. There were brightly colored, remarkably detailed, beaded robes dressed on skeletal mannequins that hung from little gibbets lining the center of the shop in a long rectangle. They looked like soldiers risen from the dead and dressed in ornamental finery. Sam wondered if the bones were real, and after lingering a moment longer than she intended, she decided they were. Goosebumps rippled down her arms and legs.

After some time, the old man split the beaded curtain and emerged. He was very thin, and dressed in a dark maroon colored tunic-styled shirt with a deep, open neck. The area of his chest

exposed to her view was covered in deep scars and she fought to shift her vision back to the wealth of oddities surrounding her. Sam found him uncanny, surreal, and entirely unsettling. The man tapped his fist twice on the splintered wooden counter-top at his right side.

“You here for something?” he asked as he fist-tapped twice again, then began lightly scratching his fingers against the wood in a circular rhythm.

A haze of disconnect fell over her, as if she were no longer in control of her own body. Separated. Her head lifted to meet his stare. His eyes were yellowed and uncomfortably hostile. Growing unease spread through her, she felt it tumbling around in her stomach. A sudden cloud of confusion blanketed her thoughts and everything in her line of sight became a series of bright smudges. Again, he rapped twice on the wood and took up the swirling, itchy sounding wood scraping as he stared at her. Sam blinked away the blurriness and gave in to a strong, nagging feeling of compulsion.

“I... I need to find someone. I was told Toussaint was the man to speak with,” she replied. She had an inexplicable need to keep speaking. Internally, she heard herself talking, but she couldn’t feel her tongue anymore; it may as well have been lolling around in her mouth for all she could tell.

“I’m a journalist, and I’m conducting some research for a story I intend to submit for publication. I’m looking for a descendant of the Cult of Loa. I’ve confirmed that at least one descendant exists; possibly the last remaining member of the cult. My research turned up a paper trail that ended with a letter that contained the address from this shop. Anything you could tell me would be appreciated.” He tapped his fingers against the wood three times and an eerie stillness blanketed the shop. The muddled cloud of confusion lifted momentarily.

“Toussaint. Hmmm. Him might know something. Might not. Depends of what you do for him,” he said. His malevolent gaze inched its way across her body from head to toe. “Him need some favors. You do favors?” he said, smiling.

His teeth were razor sharp, like the serrated edge of a knife. It was the last thing she remembered.

~~~~

A fog of grainy, floating images hung just outside her reach, like waking from a horrible nightmare. When Sam finally came to, she was covered in dirt with mud filling her shoes, and she was standing in the middle of her hotel room holding the upper portion of a human skull.

Her hands recoiled from the skull, and it dropped to the floor and rolled two or three feet away. The horrific realization spread through her brain in slow motion.

“What the... what the — *fuck*,” she breathed. The palpitations of her heart echoed in her skull, repeating over and over like the old man’s fist, drumming on the wooden counter. It was maddening.

Her boots left black clods of mud on the floor as she scurried backwards until her back slammed against the wall. Her weakening body slid down to the dingy carpet with her hands cast helpless at her sides.

She closed her eyes tight and hard while swallowing a knot of dread that felt like a fatal choke-hold. Panic was beating against her chest but she was vaguely aware that she needed to get control. She attempted to slow her breathing using some yoga relaxation techniques she’d learned from her therapist.

With her eyes shut, Sam tried to remember what had happened after she saw those inhuman, flesh-mangling teeth emerge from the old man's jagged smile. There was nothing in her memory bank but blackness.

The shrill chirping of her phone's message alert cut through the silence of the room as if it were a burglar alarm. The banging of her heart in her chest grew louder as she crawled her way across the room to the bedside table that her dirt-smearred, grimy bag sat upon. She pulled herself up with the table and stood.

The bag was full of bones. Gray, brittle, old bones, some with the cartilage still attached in places. Her bag hit the floor with a sound like hundreds of rolling dice.

Her heart caught in her throat when she saw her phone dead center of the diaspora of skeletal remains. She plucked it fast from the floor and pressed the power button to wake the screen. It was 2 a.m.

She was missing more than eleven hours.

The bright screen registered a total of two missed calls from international numbers with the (+509) country code — local Haiti numbers, and one voicemail message.

Sam checked for a saved file from the voice recorder before she considered anything else. The audio file would tell her what happened at least part of the the hours she had lost. But there was no saved file. Either it was deleted, or it never happened.

She checked the voicemail next, hoping the message would have some information she could use. The flat, music-less pulse only rang twice before connecting to her message box. Her shaking fingers punched in her passcode, and she pressed 7 on the touchscreen to listen. Dead silence, a little white noise, and then the sound of two heavy raps on a wooded surface, followed by the sickening static of fingernails scratching.

Everything went dark.



Voices. Soft and enveloping. A woman's gentle, subdued, whisperings in French drifted through the canals of her ears. Underneath the downy tone of the woman's voice, there was a grinding rhythm, like someone using a mortar and pestle.

Her eyelids were too heavy to open but she could tell by orientation that she was laying down. Her arms and legs were numb, dead weight, and she couldn't even wiggle her fingers. The whole of her body felt oppressively heavy.

A rational person would have long since panicked but Sam was no longer thinking of herself as a rational being. The woman's voice was soothing and it eased her fears and anxieties, erased all the stress from the last two days from her mind. She let herself lay, oblivious to everything, and sank into a deep, dreamless sleep.



When her eyes finally opened, she could still hear the French woman's sighs in her ears. Her body no longer felt like a fleshy prison, instead, she was wrapped in rose petals, soft, and airy.

"Ne vous inquiétez pas, ma jolie petite. Je ne vous ferai pas de mal," she cooed. *I will not hurt you.* Sam believed her.

The first thing she saw when the darkness fell away was the face of the most beautiful umber-skinned woman she had ever seen before. She had a face like a heart, with ochre eyes and full, wonderful lips.

“Est éveillée,” she said to someone Sam couldn’t see. As she turned her head. Sam noticed that her ears were lovely little nautiluses, delicate and exotic.

“Perfect timing,” was the reply. She knew that voice. The French woman’s attention fell back onto Sam’s face, and she placed a hand upon her head and stroked her hair like mother to child.

“Hello Sam,” said Hoffman. His head hovered over her. She wondered why she was still lying down. She wanted to stand up, but none of her muscles would bend to her will. She wanted to speak, but her throat felt constricted and dry; the most she could produce was a dry croak.

“Don’t try to speak. You’ve been unconscious for a week, give or take. I realize this won’t make much sense to you, but hear me out.”

Sam watched him through her peripheral view as he sat down on a short stool next to her. She couldn’t turn her head, but he craned back over her line of sight. The woman continued to stroke her hair in a regular rhythm — a slow, deliberate motion.

“I am the last descendant of Loa. To you, I am Nick Hoffman, but to her, I am Ti Jean Petro — her son. And I need something from you,” the man she once knew as Nick Hoffman said. “It’s not a small favor.” He raked his hair from his face and huffed.

“I need your body for a ritual.”

The gentle hand stroking her hair sloped down to her shoulder and the woman leaned over Sam’s body once again. She was breathtaking. She met Sam’s gaze and smiled. The woman nodded to her, and Sam found herself wanting to nod back.

“The bokor you went to see, Toussaint, he enslaved you for a price. The ritual requires *you personally* to dig up the bones of a long dead Loa priest. We took you out to the Loa graves, and made you dig them out,” he said.

She remembered Toussaint’s sharp-edged teeth.

“Toussaint is not a kind man, he is an aspect of Papa Legba, so he plays tricks. I’m sorry you woke to the bones. If I hadn’t needed his help, I would not have sought it, but we needed his magic and he ground the bones down to dust for us. Then we bathed you in them to cleanse your spirit.” He hung his head low in regret. He shook it off and continued.

“But you, Sam, you have a chance to be a goddess. This woman you see? Her name is Phara on paper. But she’s not Phara. She’s Ezili Danto, the mother of *all mothers*, the goddess of *all goddesses*. A version of her exists in every religion across the world, but the only *true* goddess is Ezili Danto.” There was concern in his eyes and he was seething with nervous energy.

“I’ve lied to you quite a bit, Sam, and I’m sorry for all of the trickery. The story, the flight, your missing luggage, the vellum, visiting the bokor... it all had to happen that way. I came up with the story, remember? We took your luggage from the airport before you were off the plane. Phara is responsible for the vellum, but it was supposed to be perfectly legible. I don’t know what happened with that but it doesn’t matter much.”

“Here’s the point; Phara has housed Ezili Danto for thirty years now, and it’s time she moved on to a newer vessel. Phara has cancer, her body is dying, and I *chose* you for her replacement. You are everything I need to keep Ezili Danto resurrected. We work closely together, you have almost no family, no husband, you live alone, and you’re fit and healthy. If you agree to this, you will be worshipped and revered.” He was pleading with a voice as high

and tight as a little boy begging for toys.

“The ritual cannot be completed if you are not inviting her in. Nothing will change, you’ll go on about your regular life as will I. You will not be immortal or immune to disease, but you will be loved, and *fiercely* protected. You will glow with the magic of Ezili Danto, like Phara.”

The woman named Phara nodded again, and it was the most graceful gesture Sam thought she would ever witness. Sam noticed for the first time two faint scar lines across her right cheek.

Sam thought for a moment. He was right. She was miserable and lonely. She relied on her work to fill the vacant hours while she mourned her solitary lifestyle to her therapist every week. With her grandparents dead, her mother and father both dead, and untethered to her aunts and uncles, she wanted so badly to agree.

A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Oui?” Phara said.

“Oui,” she croaked.

Somewhere in the background, she heard a fist knock three times against the wood.