

Prophet of Lies

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A long time ago, there was a beautiful princess. Her name was Cassandra. Suitors far and wide coveted her, and asked her father, King Priam, for her hand in marriage. And yet, she refused them all. Her only wish was to be a priestess of the goddess Athena, to worship her in a beautiful temple deep within the walls of Ilium. Like Athena, she refused all marriage proposals, choosing instead to live forever a maiden.

But one day, her beauty was noticed by the god Apollo. The moment he laid his eyes on her, he wanted to ~~fuck her~~ have her as his own. He professed his ~~true~~ love for her, but, like all the other suitors, she refused him. To ~~guilt-trip~~ convince her to ~~fuck~~ love him, he gave her the gift of prophecy. She accepted his gift, but, staying true to her desires, she still refused his advances. Apollo was ~~pissed off~~ broken-hearted. And so, ~~being the entitled asshole he is~~ driven mad with heartbreak, the god cursed her. He allowed her to keep her gift of prophecy, but his curse was that nobody would believe even a single prophetic word she uttered.

When a thousand ships sailed into Troy, when a horse pregnant with swords and soldiers rumbled through the walls of her home, when Ajax raped her as she clung to the thighs of a wooden Athena, she was powerless to stop it.

Dr Pearson's eyebrows are immaculately plucked. They arch with Roman precision atop her brow-bone, not a stray hair to be found. Rimless glasses perch on her small nose, and every six minutes, like clockwork, she pushes them up with two fingers. Time is something you begin to pay attention to when, every time the second-hand does its three hundred and sixty degree dance, it costs you six dollars and twenty-five cents. *Time is money* has never been taken so literally as in this white-walled office, surrounded by qualifications framed in cold metal.

"Cassandra."

That name flutters through the room like Athena's palm-sized Victory. That name glows coldly, like beauty and misery. That name is a prayer – more than that, an incantation – no, an *invocation*. It's not simply my name, it is ours, and I breathe it in like the smoke from dollar-store tea lights, the ashen scent of a lit match, the musk of yellowing paper torn from a fleamarket book. In a foolish midnight ritual, I've summoned her from the pages of second-hand copies of Homer and Aeschylus stashed in the back of bookshelves. They say she's still beautiful, even as she cries, even as she watches her city burn.

"Cassandra."

"Hm?"

"Having trouble concentrating today?" Between her perfect Roman arches, cracks and crevices appear. Crow's feet branch from her almost-black eyes. There's something unnerving about those eyes, encased in glass; from afar, iris and pupil blend into one dark tunnel, and I'm convinced that she can see everything, that the glint of her glasses are a mere façade.

"Yes." I'm not supposed to lie in this room. Regardless, that was an easy truth to tell.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"No." Another easy truth. Dr Pearson's perfect brows congregate in the middle of her forehead, as if they're having a meeting — perhaps an emergency discussion about how bad a patient I am. *What will we do with her?* they must grumble. The wrinkles framing her face seem to grow deeper with every six dollars and twenty-five cents that pass.

Dr Pearson doesn't sigh, but when she speaks you can hear that breath tickling her tongue, ready to escape. She must taste the sour desperation. She leashes it with steely professionalism. "We've been having the same conversation these past three months."

"I'm aware."

"Cassandra, you need to take your recovery seriously. Otherwise, you're simply wasting time and money."

Another thing I was already aware of. Her words were as meaningless as Apollo's lusty love poems, sung to the strum of a lyre. Lyre, *liar*. Serendipity made those words homophones. Red-gold curls and laurel wreaths, white cloth glows like silk in the sunlight; a half-smile dances over ghostly lips, only to fade to a grimace. He holds the instrument in his hands, gilded in gold. *And they say Hermes is the trickster—perhaps, perhaps, but you are the liar.* He raises the glinting lyre to his chest; fingers crawl over the strings, serpentine in their fluid writhing, and exotic words in a beautiful tongue fall to the linoleum floor, then scatter. They settle besides the old scuff-marks and the stench of Dettol.

"Cassandra?"

"Yes?"

"Have we reached the end of our time together?" Dr Pearson asks pointedly. I glance at the steel clockface mounted on her bright, white wall. Those inexorable hands tell me we still have about eighteen dollars left.

"I think we have."

I inhale the refrigerator light, cold and blue. It washes over me, over my skin puckering with prickling goosebumps. It washes me with pure light, cold and clean. It's all bright whiteness in there; clinical, like the inside of a doctor's office. I look for the degrees framed in steel, stamped and signed. They're not here, and Dr Pearson isn't smiling from the other side, tight-lipped in her forced serenity. Frost curls between ribbons of blue light. Intertwined, they creep into the midnight darkness, only to be consumed by it. It's a futile effort. Beauty must be confined. The refrigerator door is a portal into that world of

clean, bright whiteness. Save for half a bottle of Diet Coke and a rotting stick of celery, it's empty in there. I have no offering for the gods.

Refrigerator light is a certain kind of light: it seems to dig itself into the crevices and cracks under my eyes, settle atop my brows, pull them into a knot, tug my lips down, chin down, sit down. I'm on the frosted floor. My shoulders are hunched — they roll towards that light, as if they want to crawl into the cold, become the whiteness. Or perhaps they are protecting my shuddering chest, tight against the fake frost. My knees are my shield, drawn up in defence. I close my eyes and say a prayer: *Refrigerator light, refrigerator light. Pierce the midnight shadows with your bright refrigerator light.*

I hear her snicker, soft as a scurrying mouse in a dirty kitchen. Cassandra knows all about prayer, knows that no matter how hard she squeezed shut her eyes, how rapidly she muttered, or how her voice quivered with fear, Athena's face remained wooden. Some even say the statue turned its head and looked away.

I feel her hovering behind the open door, but I can hardly make her out. The blue light catches on a white fingertip that's wrapped around the refrigerator handle, as if she's about to shut the door and trap me inside. It's a fate I would welcome. *Wash me clean, make me cold and empty, with your bright refrigerator light...*

I awake to rotten celery, a warm fridge, and a sense that my upcoming electricity bill will be fucking massive.

Homer has invoked the Muses, but today only Thalia has arrived. Everything seems funnier in the hazy delirium of hunger. Forty-three hours and counting... today the silver clock is my friend, my metal trophy.

"Cassandra, we need to address this impulse for self-destruction."

"Self-destruction?" I echo. A vague smile lines my lips. "No, no. You've got it all wrong. I'm not destroying. I'm creating."

Dr Pearson plucks her pen from its steel stand. "Oh?"

"Here's the thing — I learnt this in Year Ten. Back when science was mandatory. It's the only thing I remember: there are only a finite number of atoms and molecules in the Universe. So... you can't make

something without unmaking something else. Death, destruction — that's where we find life. Nothing is truly created, and nothing is ever really destroyed. It all just... takes a different form, I guess."

Those Roman arches travel up her forehead. She writes something down in a slick, silky cursive. "All right." She says *all right* every time I say something she thinks is unpalatable — I know from her eyebrows that I've gone too far. I think, perhaps, I just saw her black eyes flicker to the printer, check if it's ready to whip out another neat, blue prescription — pen in hand, she'll scribble her signature and medicate away.

"So, if you are not destroying yourself, what are you doing?" She asks this like you'd ask a toddler building a sandcastle, *What are you doing?* Then the toddler takes their chubby fists and smashes the sandcastle, annihilates it, and then you ask again — *What are you doing?*

I'm creating.

"I dunno." I sigh. "Don't listen to me."

Cassandra's golden hair glints like the metal-rimmed clock, catches sunlight in its strands: those thick waves swell like the wine-drunk ocean. She waxes as I wane. She grows in my periphery, somewhere just beside my cheek; shadowy figures dance across the ripples of her white chiton. There's a red stain, a flower blooming from her core, its centre a slit in the soft fabric housing a dagger forged from bronze, its hilt laden with rubies redder than fire. Fire blazes. It crackles, cackles, laughs. I smell the destruction. It is the smoky scent of crumbling columns that never leaves my nostrils, the oil that burns in its sacrificial pyre; burns and keeps burning. I am the fuel for this fire.

Dr Pearson is smiling. It's a chagrined kind of half-grimace, but there's a wisp of real humour dancing on those lips. "It's my job to listen to you, Cassandra."

I laugh.

Dr Pearson handed me a notebook yesterday. I can tell it was from the hospital, because its name is in the very corner of the cover, written in a blue cursive. Over that hovers Asclepius' Rod — most people think it's Hermes' Caduceus, but I know better. Hermes has two snakes, not one, and anyways, Hermes doesn't care much for your illnesses. None

of the gods do, really. Sometimes I wonder whether Asclepius cares, either, or if we humans simply hijacked his symbol in a feeble attempt to convince ourselves that the god of healing actually cares whether or not we heal. We are all so small, so insignificant. The gods look down from Olympus and laugh at our fragility.

The notebook's cover is an ugly green. Each page is adorned with horizontal lines, as if the doctors don't trust their patients to write straight, to write the proper way. You can't draw in notebooks like this. The lines ruin it. At the top of each page is a day of the week. I flip to a Tuesday — *Tyr's day* — but we won't go into the Norse pantheon just now.

Dr Pearson told me that each day, I have to write down what I've eaten. No calorie counting or otherwise inconspicuous mathematical equations hovering in the margins, either. She said that each line would be one "item" of food, and that I should aim to fill up about ten lines per day. She said she'd check it at our next appointment.

On Tuesday I wrote:

As the war raged on, the beautiful princess was filled with anger sadness. Outside the tall city walls, men fought day after day. They compared dick sizes battled with swords and shields, all for some hot chick glory and honour. The princess of Troy knew their hope lay in her brother, Prince Hector. But, as revenge for killing his lover, the Greek hero Achilles murdered killed Hector in an honourable duel. Cassandra wept for her brother as Achilles slit his heels and strung a girdle through his bloodied flesh mistreated her brother's body. When her father, King Priam, went to beg their enemy for his son's body, Cassandra was the first to see him carry his lifeless son in his arms.

On Wednesday I wrote:

When the ships left the shores of Ilium, the Trojan people thought they had won. They began to feast in celebration, but one of them did not partake. Cassandra could see trouble dancing on time's horizon, edging closer. The Trojan people threw open the gates of their city and dragged the Greek offering inside: a tall horse made of driftwood, its stomach a distended mound. With eyes untinged, Cassandra saw the soldiers stashed inside: their sharp blades and bronze armour, their eyes dripping with death. She begged the people to leave the horse outside the city walls. They called her a crazy bitch/a stupid whore/insane/mad names, and told her to leave. In rage desperation, she

grabbed a lit torch in one hand, and an axe in the other, and ran towards the wooden horse. The crowd slapped her/punched/kicked/bit/scratched until bloody nail marks ran down her arms stopped her, locking her in the palace. She screamed the whole night long, shrieks echoing through the empty streets long after the feasting and dancing had subsided, plagued by visions of fire and blood.

On Thursday I wrote:

Agamemnon chose Cassandra as his concubine because she was the hottest the most beautiful of all the Trojan captives. They set sail to Greece. He raped her and soon she was pregnant with twins who she knew she would never get a chance to love. Each day as the waves of the Aegean lapped against Agamemnon's ship, visions danced before her eyes like the flames that destroyed her home. She saw the knife that was to be plunged into her stomach by the unfaithful Queen Clytemnestra, hell bent on murdering her husband. She saw his death, too, her captive. Her abuser. Her owner. She saw it all, but her warnings fell on deaf ears. She saw that endless cycle, that inexorable wheel of cloth-string fate, that spectre of destruction, and because of Apollo's curse, she could do nothing, nothing at all. This is the shit they won't tell you in school. This is not the story of a tragic heroine. This is the story of a fucking woman.

Friday. I put the notebook in my backpack and go to the hospital. Familiarity greets me: plastic floors and flickering fluorescents and the pervasive stench of disinfectant. Dr Pearson is waiting for me behind a heavy, wooden door, her name etched on the front in silver. She looks tired when I walk in, those perfect eyebrows sitting lower on her face. After our customary "How are you?"/"Good," she asks to see the notebook. I slip it out and hand it over.

Dr Pearson peels open the cover and reads. Perplexity pulls her brows down further. Almost twelve dollars tick past before she speaks.

"What is this?" She says it carefully.

"What I've consumed."

"And your food diary?"

"It's all there."

"What do you mean?" There's a slight quiver in her voice, a repressed anger that's clawing at her throat.

“Everything I’ve eaten since I last saw you is written down, right there.”

The silence is heavy, suffocating. It settles on my chest like a weight, pressing into lyre-string ribs taut against greying skin. The gods play their music in on the ridges of my breastbone.

For a moment, Dr Pearson shuts her eyes.

“You’re dying,” she says.

She sends me down to level three. A steel-eyed nurse sticks a tube up my left nostril and down my throat, and pumps me with sugar-water. They lay me in a metal cot and let Morpheus take me to the banks of the Lethe.

I awake in someone else’s sadness. It’s all blue. The walls are no longer white; they are caressed by cruel cerulean fingers; they are a streaky dye-job, a damaged porcelain sink, a colour cut from wood, a crystal shimmering under craggy, grey rock. Blue: a colour Cassandra had no words for, and yet, it’s her wine-dark melancholy I’ve awoken within.

Sometimes I think in my sleep it’s her who strokes my thinning hair and places two silver drachmas atop my eyelids: payment for Charon. Perhaps that’s why I wake to clumps of matted hair on my pillow, why the skin surrounding my eyes is streaked silver-grey. I only see her in the dead of night, when the hunger won’t let me sleep, when the emptiness morphs into pain. I used to be afraid of her, but not anymore. I let her lull me to sleep, let her healthy fingers slip under my skin and turn my ribs to ice shards: a cold knife sharp against my soft flesh, just like the one that dug her soul from her skin. I want her to get rid of my softness, turn it all to ice and bone.

I want to be like Achilles’ skin: invulnerable. For his bronze-hard skin, Achilles bathed in the Styx. So, every day, I slide into the depths of the Cocytus, and I’m swept downstream to the banks of the Acheron. Lamentation and misery. It gnaws at you.

No matter how bright the sun shines, that dampness never dries. I’m always so cold.

When I open my eyes, Cassandra is there, bathed in that blue. She’s perched on a plastic chair. I jolt when my sleep-crustured eyes behold her:

she is all pink flesh and cascading hair and bright eyes and white cloth. A breath moves through her. She stands and walks towards my metal cot, her chiton swirling around her bare ankles. She kneels down to where I lie, swaddled in my shroud, and reaches out. In her palm are three plump, ruby pomegranate seeds. She takes my hand — her skin is warm, soft — and unfurls my fingers, palm facing up. She drops the seeds in my hand. The moment they touch my skin, the seeds wither, wilting into a yellow mush. She looks at me, and our eyes meet: her gaze is eternally blue.

I begin to cry.

Aeschylus' Cassandra asks: *Am I a prophet of lies?*

To this question I no longer have an answer.

Cassandra is here, now, and I am confined to a world of dreams. I sleep as they slip sugar into my soul and make me sweet. When my eyes slide open, I see her there, stalking my peripheries. She smiles at the nurses and laughs at their quips, her teeth like glittering pearls under the yellow-white fluorescents. They offer her water and she drinks. When the bleary-eyed nurse comes with a tray of food, she eats it: white-bread ham sandwiches and jelly cups and biscuits wrapped in plastic. Then she wipes the crumbs off her lips and grins. I watch her for as long as I can unfurl my heavy eyelids, and then I am whisked back to the lapping lull of the Lethe.

The days slip by like a dripping tap.

I am dying. I can feel the cold in the marrow of my bones.

Cassandra eats three times a day — it almost seems excessive. A blush blooms on her cheeks like springtime roses. I watch her in awe. In order to create, one must also destroy.

With the palms of my hands, I push myself upright. I tip one leg, then the other, over the side of the cot. My bare feet touch the cold linoleum floor. A shiver races through me.

Cassandra watches from the plastic chair, fear in her fiery eyes.

Head light as cotton wool clouds, I stand up. My knees quiver like a newborn foal, and I take a small step, then another, and another — I walk down the too-white hallway. Cassandra follows. We reach a small

desk where a nurse named Sofia is perched on a deskchair, dipping a biscuit into tea. She glances up then sets down her mug. “Cassandra!” she scolds, and I remember, I remember... *That’s my name, too.* “You should be —”

“I need —” A dry cough mangles my words. Sofia stands and starts towards me, but I shake my head. “I need some food,” I manage. “Please.”

Sofia’s expression is half-suspicious, half-congratulatory. She sits me down and grabs me a fruitcup from the staff refrigerator. I peel off the plastic and clutch the metal spoon... and I pop what I suspect is a pear (too soft and too sweet) into my mouth. Chew. Swallow. I fish out another fruit — an apple this time. Chew and swallow.

“Thank you.”

When I am finished, Sofia walks me to my cot. Cassandra takes her place on the plastic chair. She has waned as I have waxed.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. The words flutter between us, winged like Athena’s palm-sized Victory. They settle atop Cassandra’s palm and then turn into those ruby-red pomegranate seeds, bursting with sour juice. She puts the seeds to her lips, and swallows. Smiles.