

Look and See

by Esther Sorg

“Basically,” Cassandra finally says from her position by the lectern on the stage at the World Leadership Conference, “the planet is on fire, and we all have less than seventy-two hours to live.”

“Dr. Oh!” her scandalized colleague, Dr. Myra Kline exclaims, nervously eyeing the ambassadors, who are all politely watching the slideshow presentation without a pen or a notebook in sight, and who also do not appear to be responding to Cass’s declaration. “You can’t just say things like that!” My hisses anyway, grabbing Cass by the arm and preparing to hustle them both off of the stage.

“It doesn’t matter,” Cass says wearily, pulling her arm away to gather up her notebooks and folders full of graphs and Google weather reports and one slightly desperate drawing of a cartoon sun with a very angry expression glaring at a frightened Earth. “They weren’t listening anyway.” She thanks her slightly bewildered and mostly inattentive audience and steps off of the stage, followed by My, who is anxiously waiting for chaos to rain down upon their heads. *For what?* Cass thinks. *Telling the truth?*

They walk through the halls of the UN Headquarters in silence until they reach the suite of rooms they were given as a temporary office.

“Alright,” Cass says, turning to face her fuming friend. “Say it.”

“Why would you tell them that?” My demands instantly. She’s clutching at her curly black hair, which is held away from her face by a headband that is starting to slide down her forehead. “I get that you were being sarcastic, but we can’t go around saying things like, ‘the planet is on fire’ when it’s not! They already have a hard time swallowing the concept of global warming; the last thing we need is for them to start thinking you were serious about the fire thing and then use the obvious lack of flames as an excuse to discredit our work even further!” She’s shouting by the end of this, and Cass starts to deflate a little.

“I’m sorry,” she says, even though she feels less sorry and more mutinous. Humans have so many rules for things like this. She almost misses the old days, when she could stand on top of a wall and scream out her prophecies for the entire city to hear. Sure, nobody believed her then either, but at least she was allowed to yell at them when they told her she was crazy. Now, everyone expects Cass and the other climatologists who have been studying the catastrophic climate changes taking place for the past few decades to be dignified and polite while informing the world that they only have about a dozen years to continue living on this planet.

Say what you want about Troy, but at least they hadn’t batted an eye at a shrieking woman tearing at her clothes and sprinting up and down the battlements, which is what Cass wishes she could be doing right now.

My sighs and collapses onto the couch. It is a sickly shade of chartreuse that makes even My’s dark skin seem pale, and it does not match the walls at all. “Look,” My says, “you’re my friend, so I haven’t said anything until now, but Cass, come on. You’ve got to stop going around claiming that things are literally on fire. The world is not actually burning. Yet,” she adds, because My might not believe everything Cass says, but she knows better than to outright dismiss the idea that the Earth might catch fire someday soon. She is, after all, a climate scientist. “It makes you seem... untrustworthy,” she concludes, somewhat sheepishly.

Cass rolls her eyes and her shoulders, stripping off her suit jacket and dropping it on the other side of the couch from My. "Yeah," she mutters, kicking off her heels while she's at it. "I get that a lot."

The thing about Cassandra is that she is an oracle, not a goddess, so her general ratio of action to screaming is decidedly skewed in favor of screaming. If there's one thing oracles are great at, it's screaming. That and giving cryptic advice. But nobody has ever asked Cass for advice, not in thousands of years. She's an oracle without a purpose, rendered useless by the petty revenge of a god who just couldn't fathom a woman who didn't give everything he demanded of her. She can scream all she wants; it doesn't mean a damn thing if nobody ever listens.

She tried, for a while, not to look, and when she couldn't help but look, she tried not to care. Tried to keep her mouth shut and her head down, to stay off the battlements and out of the streets, silent and resigned to the fate she had been dealt so many years ago. Wars came and went, massacres and genocides and atrocities and horrors, haunting her sleep and dogging her steps, visions flashing before her eyes every moment of every day and all through the long, aching nights. *Soon*, she would hear the whisper echo in her mind, and then she would know it was coming. *Soon, soon, soon!* Until it was no longer a whisper, but instead was a cry, bawling in her head and ears, a wracking wail that begged for her to tell someone, *anyone*. To make it stop.

She has never been able to make it stop.

Cassandra is not a goddess, but if she were, she would be the patron goddess of lost and hopeless causes. The weeping grew unbearable, and the visions came too quickly, and Cassandra gave in to the hope that this time, maybe *this* time, it would be different. She would be able to save them. They would *listen*. And so, the Oracle of great, ancient, doomed Troy came out of hiding and began once more to prophesy in the streets.

Well, not exactly in the streets. In the lecture halls, mostly. And the UN meetings. And the conference rooms of large corporations whose greenhouse scores are so far off the charts that they had to make new charts to encompass them all. She earned a few degrees, having learned that humans pay more attention to what you say when you have some letters after your name. That's where she met My.

Dr. Myra Kline had been beating her head against the bedrock of willful ignorance from people who would rather maintain their oil subsidiaries than the literal earth where they lived for several years at this point. They met in an elevator after another unsuccessful conference when My suddenly lashed out with her foot and kicked a dent in one of the walls, shouting "I'd tell them to burn in hell, but it looks like we're all gonna be right there with them in a couple of decades, so why bother!" Cassandra, who had never met someone who seemed to suffer from her own affliction until now, was intrigued. A decade later, they are partners in this desperate, yet futile, crusade, and My is glaring at Cass in a UN suite for slightly exaggerating about the amount of time they have left before the global heating of the atmosphere overpowers the rest of the planet and everything goes up in flames.

"Did you know," Cass says, lying across the couch with her knees hanging over the arm, staring at the ceiling, "that they say if someone is trying to rape you, then you should shout 'Fire!' instead of shouting 'Rape!' because people will respond faster to the first one?"

My's face appears in her line of sight, frowning. "This isn't really the same situation," she says.

"Isn't it?" Cass muses. "The rape of the earth, stripped and violated again and again for the treasures contained within. Persephone cries out in anguish! Demeter recoils in horror! The earth weeps, damned and damning, and all of her children weep with her, begging for shelter for safety for comfort for love and she has nothing, nothing, nothing, *nothing* left to give them!" Her voice rises to a shrill as she continues, until My reaches down and shakes her by the shoulder.

"Cass! Cass, stop!"

She stops shouting. Her throat feels warm. If she could see herself, she knows her eyes would be empty.

My's face is stricken. "What was that all about?" she asks, coming around the back of the couch to sit down next to Cass. "Here, sit up." She pushes Cass into a sitting position and scoots closer to lay her hand on Cass's arm. "What was that?" she asks again.

Cass shakes her head, exhausted. Prophecy always tires her out. "I've told you before," she says, because she has.

When Cassandra told Myra, all those years ago, that the world was going to burn, she had done it out of duty, out of habit, out of half-mad spite, knowing that she wouldn't be believed and spitting out her message to the first person to cross her path anyway. Myra had said, "I know, right? And nobody seems to care!" and everything suddenly was very, very quiet.

Cassandra had blinked and said, "You... you believe me?" and Myra had said, "Of course! Global warming, right?"

A rush of relief swept through her, so profound that she nearly burst into tears right there. To be believed! Cassandra looked upon this woman, this scientist, who studied the Earth and all of her terrors and loved her enough to fight for her, and Cassandra felt something stir inside herself that she had not felt since the night a god came down to her and breathed into her lungs. Inspiration.

Myra had asked her name and Cassandra, in the heady rush of belief and hope, had said, automatically, "Cassandra, oracle of the god Apollo."

Myra had laughed and said, "No, really, what's your name?" and Cassandra had scrambled to correct her error. She had a doctorate under a name that humans would accept, for just this reason.

"It really is Cassandra," she said, and then Dr. Cass Oh shook hands with Dr. My Kline, and they told each other that they were going to save the world.

That was then, and now it feels far more likely that they will watch the world die together instead. Cass giggles to herself, a little hysterically.

"Cass," My says, raising her eyebrows, "you looked like you were having a seizure just now. I almost called 911."

Cass sits up and sighs. "Do you want me to tell you the truth?" she asks. She always asks this. Cass has read a lot of books on the subject of communication, and one aspect of healthy communication is asking if the other person is willing and ready to hear what you have to say.

In retrospect, perhaps running naked through the streets of Troy, yelling about a horse, wasn't the best way to broach the news of their impending doom.

"Of course," My answers. "I always want you to tell me the truth."

Well, alright then. "The truth is that my name is Cassandra, and I am the oracle of the god Apollo, and I have seen the future. It's not great," she adds, in case that part had been lost in translation.

My sits for a moment in silence, just staring at Cass. "You're serious," she says, slowly. "Yes."

My appears to be thinking. She glances up at Cass and Cass can see in her eyes that she is trying to think of the best way to ask if Cass has recently stopped taking any medication.

And then the alarms go off. They both grab for their phones and pull up their Google alerts. My's are for things like "global heat wave" and "catastrophic rise in temperature." Cass's are, more practically, in her opinion, for "world on fire" and "planet burning" and "we're all going to die." That last one nets her a lot of hits, usually, but when all three are linked together, the information she gets is all relevant.

"Cass!" My says.

"I know," Cass replies.

This time, the world really *is* on fire.

Long, long ago, Cassandra had awoken in the middle of the night to find a god in her room. He was brilliant, both figuratively and literally, and his glory was so beautiful to look at that Cassandra began to cry.

"Do not weep, my sweet girl," he had said, tenderly lifting her chin. "You have pleased me greatly, and I am here to offer you a gift."

"My god," she had gasped, and he had laughed.

"Yes," he had said, "exactly."

His breath in her mouth was sweet, like honey and sunlight. It filled her throat, her lungs, her stomach, and she cried out as she swelled with it, until she was both heavier and lighter than she had ever been.

"My beautiful girl," the god said, and he kissed her mouth gently, so, so gently. "I shall return. Enjoy my gift." And then he was gone.

That night, Cassandra dreamed.

A year passed, and then almost a second, too, before the god came to Cassandra again. This time, she was ready for him. It had been a while since anything had surprised her.

"My lord Apollo," she said, bowing low. She was dressed in her best peplos, draped in soft linen and bright robes. He smiled when he saw her.

"Sweet girl," he said, and held out his arms to her. She stepped into his embrace. He pressed his lips to her hair and asked, "How do you like my gift?"

"Very much, my lord."

His lips and hands began to wander, and she shifted in his arms, suddenly uncomfortable. "Shhh," he soothed. "What will you give me, sweet girl? In thanks for your gift?"

"I... I..."

"This, I think," he said, and his hands grabbed.

Cassandra pushed him away, tearing herself out of his arms and stumbling across the room. She felt her breath heaving in her chest.

Apollo frowned, holding his hand to his face. Was he bleeding? He pulled his hand away and she saw the four lines of red she had left behind. She hadn't even realized she had clawed him.

"You reject me?" he asked, quietly.

She trembled. "My lord, I..."

"You reject me?" he asked again, but he was not really asking anymore. "This is your thanks for the gift I have bestowed; this is how you show your gratitude?" He was roaring now, stalking toward her. Cassandra pressed herself into the corner, unable to run, with nowhere to hide.

He stopped himself before he touched her, hand outstretched over her head like benediction and condemnation in one. "They will never believe you," he said calmly. "You will speak, and no one will listen. Prophecy, sweet girl. Prophecy."

That night, Cassandra dreamed. And when she awoke, she started screaming.

"What the hell is going on?" My asks, frantically typing on her phone. Cass stands up and goes over to the double windows. She flings them open and steps out onto the balcony of their suite.

The air is hot, hot like it hasn't been yet. Hot like hell. As Cassandra watches, a line of trees catch fire, flames springing up and consuming bark and leaves and branches. A bird takes flight and flails, struggling against too-hot air and smoke-filled air sacs. It falls, landing with a sickening crack on the concrete below, which is starting to bubble and melt.

"You know," Cassandra says aloud, just in case the gods are listening, "when I said that the earth was on fire and we only had seventy-two hours to live, that wasn't actually a suggestion."

"Cass, get in here!" My shouts. Cass goes inside and looks at the phone My is showing in her face. "Look at this," she says. "What does this mean to you?"

Cass looks. "Oh, come on," she says.

"You see it?" My demands.

"Yeah, I see it," she answers. "According to these readings, according to every piece of equipment we have, the Earth's atmosphere just superheated all at once. The planet is literally burning. And..."

"And?" My insists.

"And we only have about seventy-two hours to live," Cass finishes. She does not say, "I told you so," even though she kind of wants to. Cass is mature like that.

"How did you know?" My whispers.

Cass closes her eyes. "I always know," she says wearily. Algorithms and charts and, oddly, stone tablets, rolls through her mind. *What now?* she asks herself. *Nothing*, is the answer. *There isn't anything left.*

My touches her shoulder. "Are you really an oracle?" she asks.

"Yes," says Cass.

"Right," My says. "What do we do?"

"Do?" Cass echoes, opening her eyes to squint at My, who is apparently packing up their briefcases. "What do you mean 'what do we do?' There's nothing we can do. We're all going to die, that's what we do." She closes her eyes again, leaning her head against the wall. She is so, so tired.

"What? No! Cass, come on, there has to be something!"

"There isn't."

"Cass!"

She opens her eyes, because she has heard that tone of voice from My before, but never directed towards herself. My is glaring at her furiously, hands on her hips. Her lips are already starting to crack in the heat. The air conditioning apparently gave up almost immediately. "We," says My, "are not giving up. What about Apollo?"

It's like being burned, the sear and sting and agony. "What about Apollo?" Cass asks quietly.

My gestures. "He can help, can't he? Isn't he the god of the sun or something like that? Surely, he can help with a heating problem! He's your patron god, right?"

"If you know that," Cass says, "then you know why I can't ask him."

My opens her mouth and then shuts it again very quickly. Cass looks out the window. The parking lot below is a soup of melted cars and concrete. Lava is starting to boil up out of the cracks.

"When the Earth weeps, her tears are lava," she mumbles.

"What?" My asks.

"Oracles do not act," Cass explains, turning to face My. "We give advice. Or scream. Prophecy is messy work, but it isn't all that active."

A vision forms in the corner of Cass's eye. She moans, head echoing with the cries of the ones she never can save. *Look here, look here! Soon, soon, soon!* She can see a future, but despair steals away her voice, because what good is seeing the future if no one will listen to you describe it?

"You tried once!" My says. "At least once before, you tried to save everybody!"

"Nobody believed me!" Cass shouts. She throws her hands up and screams, "Nobody ever believes me!"

"I do!" My shouts, darting forward and wrapping her hands around Cass's wrists, tight, so tight. "I do," she says again, quieter, almost whispering. "I believe you, Cassandra."

And everything is suddenly very, very quiet.

It's a physical sensation, being believed. She feels it under her fingernails, dancing across her skin and burrowing into her chest. Like taking a breath for the first time in ages, like seeing the sun after a millennium of darkness. Cassandra's lungs fill with inspiration, and she raises her gaze to meet My's, and she knows that her eyes are angry.

"Hey, My," she says.

"Yeah?"

"I'm about to do something stupid."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to summon a god."

Apollo comes down in a chariot of fire. This would have been more impressive if literally everything around them wasn't also on fire.

Cassandra clenches her fists. Apollo looks around the roof of the UN Headquarters and pretends to be surprised when he sees her. "Sweet girl," he says, smiling. It is not an unkind smile, but it is not exactly friendly either.

"My god," she says, curtly polite. Apollo spreads his hands.

"What have you summoned me for?" he asks. He is not wearing clothing. This is probably on purpose. Gods do not care about human ideas of modesty, but Apollo is certainly aware of them. He wants to upset her.

Well, she is already upset.

"In case you haven't noticed," she says sharply, "the Earth is burning down around us."

He glances around as though he only just now noticed that he isn't home on Mount Olympus. "Ah," he says, "and you want me to save you. *Deus ex machina*, come down to put out all your fires and dispense justice as appropriate. Very well, I—"

"No," Cassandra says.

"No?" Apollo echoes, incredulous.

"No?" My whisper-screams from behind Cassandra.

"I don't want your shitty help," Cassandra says. "The only thing I want from you is to lift this curse."

He stares at her, tilting his head to one side. "And why would I do that?" he asks. "Your curse is the price you pay for your ingratitude."

"Was Troy not enough?" she asks. "Must the whole world burn before your vengeance is satisfied?"

"Humans," he says, casually waving a hand. "They burn their own world and still they cry to the gods that it is unfair, that they do not deserve this! This is a fire of their own making, and they must endure the flames. In the end, they will be gone, and the world will still be here. The gods will rebuild. A few lost humans here and there is a small price to pay."

"I could help them! If you would just lift the curse, then I could stop all of this! I know how! I saw it!"

"You refused a god, sweet girl," he says. "The price could have been so much worse." He steps back into his fiery chariot and turns back to say, "Goodnight, sweet girl. Perhaps we shall meet again in another life."

Cassandra sprays him and his chariot with a fire extinguisher.

Apollo blinks, dripping white foam. His chariot has gone out, flames snuffed by the retardant. "What?" he asks.

"Lift the curse," Cassandra says again.

Apollo snaps his fingers. The flames sputter, but fail to reignite. "What?" he exclaims, rage darkening his face. "What have you done?"

"Humans," Cassandra says, "are very clever. Since Prometheus offered them secrets that they were not yet ready for, since fire first sprung from beneath their sticks, they have been burning. We have lit this fire ourselves, yes. But, my lord Apollo," she hefts the fire extinguisher, "we will also invent a way to *put it out*."

"Look and see, my lord," Cassandra says, gesturing with the fire extinguisher. "The atmosphere is failing fast. The sun will soon consume the Earth. And you, my lord, are currently on Earth."

"I am the god of the sun!" Apollo shouts.

"Her charioteer," Cassandra agrees softly. "Or, you were. Oh, my god, the sun cares no more for gods than she does for humans. She is only doing what the sun always does, and it matters not to her whether you are here to burn with all of us, or above to watch with the other gods."

He tries again to snap his fingers, but the foam covering the chariot smothers the flames before they start. "What have you done to my chariot?" he bellows. "You cannot trap me here!"

"I have," Cassandra counters. "Lift the curse, my lord, or you shall never fly again."

My squeaks when the brightness that Apollo carries everywhere flares, but when the light finally dims, Cassandra knows that something is different. She breathes, and her lungs fill with smoky air and exhale clean, she knows that if she had felt like this all those years ago, Troy would never have fallen.

"My chariot?" Apollo asks impatiently.

Cass hands him a package of Wet Wipes. "Make sure you get all of the white foam off," she advises. "It's flame retardant."

His outraged shout is drowned out by My's whoop of joy. She charges forward and throws her arms around Cass, who staggers under the weight and then buries her face into My's beautiful halo of hair and breathes.

The world is still burning. Cass reluctantly pulls away from My and looks out over the parking lot of the United Nations Headquarters. All of the cars are gone, melted into the pavement. Lava boils and cools and then boils again.

"Cass," My says, "what are we going to do?"

Cass turns to look at her. In the corner of her eye, the vision forms: a halt to factory production, a release of pressure, maybe just a little bit of divine intervention. Solar energy, experimental air cleaning techniques, the atmosphere struggling back to full strength. "We have about seventy hours," she says, pulling out her cell phone. "We're going to have to act fast." Into the phone, she says, "Hello, yes, this is Dr. Oh. I was just speaking at your World Leadership Conference on climate change? Yeah. Listen, I know how we can save the world. Yeah, it'll be tight, but we can do it. How do I know?" She smiles. "Didn't I tell you earlier? I can see the future."

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