

Empty Prophetess

By Sabrina Worth

Cassandra was a daughter of Priam- last king of Troy. Among her siblings was Paris, a man who took Helen from her husband and caused the beginning of the decades long war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Her oldest brother Hector was known as the greatest fighter, equal only to the indestructible Achilles. On the opposing side, Achilles fights under Agamemnon, brother to the king who had been married to Helen. Troy was under the protection of several Gods, one of which was Apollo, the God of music, light, healing and prophecy.

Empty Prophetess takes place from Cassandra's interaction with Apollo and through the Trojan siege and its eventual fall. Troy's walls were indestructible and both sides suffered greatly through the war. Hector fell in a fight against Achilles, who was driven into a rage by the death of his lover, taunting the city with the fall of their heir, keeping the body hostage for several days instead of giving it back to his family to bury properly. Troy fell when they were tricked into allowing a giant wooden horse filled with Greeks into the city, thinking the Greeks had left it as a gift.

That night, Troy was destroyed. Cassandra would be attacked in Athena's temple, clinging to her statue for help. Paris killed Achilles with a poisoned arrow through his heel, only to later die from his own wounds. Agamemnon would die at the hands of his scorned wife. And Ajax, the man I do not mention in this story, Cassandra's attacker, would be drowned by Athena and her father- not for attacking Cassandra, but for defiling Athena's temple.

This is not a happy story. Please don't read it if you want something happy. Cassandra's story is a Greek tragedy, a mere mention in a huge text. Yet her silencing, her treatment, and disbelief in spite of her truth, these are all things familiar to women all over the world.

Part 1: Apollo

Tendrils of smoke singe my nostrils, clawing at my throat with malice. Yet, nothing burns. No smoke, no flames. The smell of it is clear as day but I can't hear the crackle of flame or see anything that even could burn.

Instead I stand alone in the marble temple, the coolness of the stone a blessing from the hot sun outside. My robes are dusty and damp from sweat but my skin is the hottest thing in here. I shake my head, trying to dislodge the phantom smell from my senses.

It has been following me for a week now, since I last paid my respects to Apollo in this very temple. I've checked the entire palace for its source. Yet, nothing, *nothing* burns. Then... as fast as it arrives, it's gone.

I turn before I realise what I'm looking for, behind me the setting sun sends a magical glow into the temple entrance, the lamps I came to light the only company. Yet, I know I'm not alone. My feet carry me to a corner, my brow furrowed as I squint into the shadow.

"Have you come again?" I ask the corner, doing nothing to abate my fears of my own mental stability.

Of course, the corner stays silent, and the flickering firelight shows only the join of the wall. Whatever it was I felt there is gone or moved. The cold of the stone burns the pads of my feet as I walk tentatively through the space. I'm not alone, I know that as clearly as I know the pillars through the space. My eyes hunt, darting from corner to crevice for the being I can feel but not see.

"Why do you hide yourself from me?" I should not be talking to the creature. It's probably a Fury or a daimon to whisper terror in my ear. "Apollo will be angered if he finds you in his temple taunting a priestess." I tell it, my voice steady and clear, in spite of the fear creeping into my muscles. "You should go before he finds out."

A deep, rolling laugh makes me freeze. My foot pauses in mid air, my heart fluttering. I know that laugh, I hear it in my dreams. My lips part, and he appears, walking around the temple ahead of me. Young, my age, his face is clear of both wrinkles and beard. He could be any man, but I know he is not. His golden curls give him away. There's not a man in Troy with hair like him.

"Would I, Priestess? You invoke me to protect you from myself?" His voice is deeper than it should be, betraying the centuries of life he's lived. The sound of it feels like a ray of warmth on my skin. I feel rather than see his yellow-tinged eyes rake over my body, as though he's appraising my worth. "Speak, girl."

"You are—"

"I am Apollo," he finishes and without a breath or movement, he is somehow close enough to take my hand and bring it to his lips. The heat of his touch runs warmer than the average man's and, for the first time I understand why he is compared to the sun we thank Helios for. "And you, are Cassandra. Princess of Troy and Priestess of mine."

I am too stunned, too shocked to behave properly. My knees feel weak but it isn't to fall to my knees to supplicate myself. I should, by rights be on my knees, to worship the God I have given my life to. He doesn't seem to care, he just rumbles the laugh again and straightens, his hand tightening around my fingers possessively.

"How are you enjoying my gift?" His thumb traces hot trails across the back of my hand, making the rest of my body feel comparatively cold. The robes slip slightly, revealing his muscular form underneath.

"Your gift?"

His lips lift in a smile designed to make gods and mortals swoon. "Your gift now." He leads me forward, to the altar. When I had arrived, I had poured my offering of honey onto the altar, yet now there is no sign of the sticky mess I made. The laurels are still there, which I note with a jumping heart that he looks on with fondness. "Sit, Princess."

I obey without thinking, grateful for the reprieve of energy. Apollo. Here. In front of me.

"You have served me loyally, Cassandra." I nod, thankfully with enough personal awareness to close my gaping mouth first. "And I have rewarded you." His fingers sweep a lock of my hair, curling it around.

"Rewarded me?"

The smell of burning rises once more, a familiar jolt of shock running through my body in response but I now know better than to look for it. Yellow-tinged eyes glitter in amusement as he watches my face. I inhale sharply as I realise. "This is you? You did this? The smell of burning, it was you?"

An eyebrow quirks on his beautiful face. "Burning? No, Priestess, I didn't send you burning. I sent you a gift." Hot fingers trail down my face, cupping my chin and lifting to see me. He's so close, my heart realises, flipping in my chest. His lips are so close to mine. "A most valuable gift that will set you high in honour, above even that given to your brother."

Hector is revered: the greatest fighter in the world, they say. A prince. A good man who married for love. Who will one day rule with grace, kindness and strength. Only the love for Achilles could rival that shown to my brother.

"You don't believe me." The God sits back, far from being annoyed at my skepticism, he seems amused. "You will soon. I have made you the most powerful prophet on the planet. You see more accurately than even The Sibyls."

I blanch, it couldn't be the case, could it? "Is that what the smell is?" My blood runs cold at the realisation. Burning. Intense burning. All over the city.

Apollo just shrugs. "Most probably." His hands gather mine, and I force my gaze to him. "My beautiful, powerful priestess." Kisses litter my fingers, lips trailing across the skin of my hands. "I will make you the most revered, respected woman in my care."

"Why?" My voice is hushed, respectful, although I feel like I'm about to choke on my own throat. "Why would Apollo bless me so?"

He smirks, and crouches before me, the palms of his hands on my knees. "Because a woman of mine deserves all that and more." His hands start to raise, pressing the linen of my robe up my thighs, the chill of the cooling temple kissing my now bare calves.

He wants me, to own me. To be a woman of Apollo, son of Zeus, the very protector of Troy. Giving myself to him, bearing his children, would be an honour and he looks at me with such desire I have never seen on the face of any man.

"Will you be mine, Cassandra?" He asks, his voice deeper with longing as my skirts raise higher and higher. My thighs twitch to part for him.

His eyes leave my legs to look up at me. And I see it change with a jolt of lightning through my body:

Dark. So dark. His beautiful boyish face, contorted and twisted. A snarl upon his lips, nostrils flaring as he stares at me. I am not loved. I am abhorred. I do not evoke longing. I evoke disgust.

I gasp in the cold air in shock and the look is replaced in a blink with that of longing.

"What is wrong, my love?" he purrs, leaning closer, the backs of his fingers trailing across the side of my throat. "I understand it is an honour for you-"

"No"

The word escapes, taking us both by surprise. Our bodies freeze up, eyes widening on each other; His, in question, and mine, in fear.

"I beg your pardon?"

My throat has suddenly gone dry. I don't know what I'm doing or why I am denying a God in his own temple. The expression on his face, I can't shake it from my thoughts. It didn't happen. Perhaps not yet. But the memory of it scalds me.

"I-"

"You deny me?" He pulls back, his hands leaving my body but- the feel of them remains on my legs. "You deny me in my own temple? *After I have blessed you with a gift many would kill for?*" The sun has gone behind the mountains outside the temple, leaving the room at the mercy of the flickering lamps on the walls.

Still, I feel hands upon the skin of my legs. But they are not gentle like him; they are rougher, more insistent. More... punishing. Is he doing this to me?

He rises and walks furious steps through the temple. "Perhaps you do not realise, *Princess*. That I am above you? That you are my servant. You wear the robes of *mine*. You bring *me* gifts. Your city is iron safe from the pitiful attacks of the Greeks because of *me!*"

He rounds on me, and there it is: dark, contorted, snarling disgust. The expression I foretold only moments ago. An image so exact it surpasses all recognition of memory. His face, the darkness and the hatred. I foretold it. And so it happened.

The phantom hands on my body raise higher, almost clawlike in their intensity. Up my sides, my chest, pulling at clothes I am not wearing. I pull at them, yet the feeling continues up my body, tugging, gripping possessiveness. "No-" I yelp, looking up at the God to save me, my

eyes brimming with terrified tears. "If this is you- please- please stop this." I wipe at my body desperate for this feeling to stop.

The hands are back on my thighs, pulling, tugging, forcing themselves-

But Apollo just laughs bitterly, leaning forwards. "I don't know what you see now, Princess, but whatever it is, it pales in comparison to the pain I will give you." Fear chokes me, the hands wrenching at my body and yet I can't see them. Bruisingly intense as they force me- "Cassandra, I curse you. You *will* foresee. And you will do so more accurately than any who have ever come before you." My hands push, pressing futilely against the pressure between my thighs. "And yet, they will fall upon deaf ears."

And he is gone. With him, the hands.

My chest aches in panic, my head thumping as the room sways. Pain erupts through my body as the ground rushes up to meet me. My eyes close but my ears hear something too close to be real. Chariot wheels grinding over rock and a soft unholy hush of something heavy dragged behind.

Part 2: Paris

Hector steadies me, gentle circles on my back, trying to stop the shaking. I look up at the man who has shared a life with me, feeling the tears I will shed for him roll down my ashen face. No ash, because nothing burns; not yet. He smiles as he looks at me, and the ache of coming grief intensifies in my head.

My chambers are unfamiliar these days. Comforts of silks and softness nothing to the terror boiling through my body. Every few hours, I may relax only to find the room filling with a dry smoke. Or I may close my eyes to sleep only to hear overwhelming screams of pain blasting through the unrecognisable silence. The room is foreign to my senses. Just as my brother is.

"Why do you look at me so?" he asks soothingly. It's the same voice they've all used these past few years: soft, soothing, gentle. They worry about me, my mind. I wish I could worry for them too, but I know it is futile. Their ears are closed to my warnings. Worse: I am pitied for them.

"You are dead, brother," I whisper and lean my aching head upon his shoulder. His chest heaves a sigh in response to my continued insistence, even as the stench of his days old corpse fills my nose. I close my eyes from the sight I know awaits me. Olive oil mixes with the desert dust, days of rot as my senses take me to his pyre. "You deserved better."

His hand wraps around my shoulder. "I am not dead. I am right here, sister." He gives me a shake. "Look at me, Cass. Look at me."

I shake my head, panic roiling through my body. My throat begins to rip, to tear in agony as though I've been keening, screaming, lamenting. "Don't. Please don't." My eyes squeeze

shut as the cloying putrid smell of death chokes me. My heart breaks- how long will life allow me to be held by him? How long until I stand beside the corpse of my brother?

"Look at me!" His voice is higher, lighter pitched than I've heard from him before. My eyes fly open to the man at the end of my bed. It is not Hector. "Cass."

"Paris." I choke on the words. Memories mix with curses, wrapping around me. Sweet whispers of promises I don't want to hear. Paris stands before me, I don't remember him being here. Does he know? Does he know what his love has done? Or is that yet to come? "What have you done to us?"

He has the decency to look ashamed, and, as he bows his head I see the red rings around his eyes. Tears. Current or future? It's so hard to tell.

"I know, Cass. I know. The loss was greater than I ever expected..." His voice cracks, sounding more boyish than he has in a decade. "I'm sorry. *We're* sorry... It was selfish. Hector-"

My head snaps to my side, to where my oldest brother is. Or... was? Perhaps will be? The seat is empty, the cushion cold beneath my exploring touch. Outside, pregnant silence from the city below. The wondering starts, a confusion that makes me rub circles on my temples. How close to the ending am I?

"Where is he?" My voice is weak, rasping through a scream-cleaned throat. "Where is Hector?"

Paris' face pales even further, and he steps towards me like he can't help himself. But he wars with the fear of touching his mad sister. "Achilles... he killed him."

It is perhaps evidence of how mad I really am that the declaration of my oldest brother's passing has almost no physical response in my body. No sickness, no lurching stomach or horrified screams... no. Instead I feel a relief that I will never have to live the moment of his death again. The memory of his soothing hand upon my back so much weaker than the looming death once was.

Paris continues as though insulted by the wash of serenity that floods my face, "Achilles tied him to the back of his chariot and pulled him around and around the city walls. For days. He will not give him back." His upper lip curls as he looks at me, a snarl upon his usually handsome features.

"Father will fetch him," I whisper before I can think, causing Paris to scoff something under his breath about the *old fool*.

I tear my gaze from the expression on his face, the same that I have come to know well since my curse began. Shoulders slumped, lips tight, a small shaking head. Instead I look to the empty hearth, cold, used, dirty and useless without someone to tend to it. It hasn't held a flame in years. I cannot bear the smell of it lit.

"Are you listening to me, Cass?" Paris continues. In truth, I am not but I don't dare tell him so. I pull my eyes to him, as the phantom hands I know so well fist in my hair making me wince in pain. "Agamemnon is weak, the war has taken more toll on the Greeks than on Troy..."

A shadow flickers on the wall behind him as he speaks, drawing my attention. An arching blackness against the silhouette of the city below my window. A long face, curved nose. It is such a beautiful warhorse. The gift we didn't... don't... won't... deserve.

"Don't let it in." I whisper.

"What?"

I look up at my brother. I know this is futile, my thundering heart tells me so, but he must, *must* know. "Don't let it in." The hands wrap threateningly around my throat, pain unlike any other stabs through the very core of me. I lurch to my feet. "Don't let it in! If- If you do..." The smell, the burning smell that surrounds the city chokes the end of the sentence, stealing it from my mouth.

Paris' sigh is half angry, half pitying as he gathers my trembling body in his arms, holding me to his chest in a way that only Hector ever did. "I won't let it in, sister. I won't."

The lie hangs in the air, a pretty laurel to press on the head of a snake.

Time slips. Perhaps hours or days. Time spins in my head like fibres on a spinning wheel, blending and breaking, twirling and indistinguishable from one moment to the next. All that happens, will happen and has happened and I live the nightmare I promised.

The hands stop haunting me once he has had me. They were no longer phantom for minutes only. Minutes, then no more. They become only memory. My body quakes from fighting, from fear and pain yet the tears that clean tracks down my ashen cheeks are thankful: I will never feel his hands on me again.

I lie here at the marble feet of Athena where he left me. Cold floor on my back, a baking heat on my face. My legs tremble, sliding down the blood covered floor too weak to support themselves even now. Outside the screams are dying. My people fight no longer; whether dead or defeated, it is the same. Perhaps they, too, lie like discarded toys upon temple floors. Abandoned even by the Gods we loved. Embers drift leisurely through the temple entrance, dancing together in the orange air. Beyond the pillars, raucous laughter overtakes the sound of whimpers as a massacre becomes a celebration.

Tonight Troy burns.

Paris didn't believe. So now Troy burns.

Part 3: Agamemnon

It takes several minutes of the sensation of the ropes around my wrists to register as the truth. I have felt them so long that seeing them is disjuncting. My reality changes with the smallest symbol. A princess, bound and captive to be laid at the feet of the enemy.

The surviving women of Troy - and that is what we are, women only, men dead, children slain for the sins of their lineage - walk with me. We are solid in our shaky steps, a front line of misery ripped from the beds of lovers to be thrust into the beds of the enemy who slaughtered them.

Whispers drift through our midst, stories of the night that the infallible city fell. Who could have foreseen the destruction of our impenetrable walls?

Achilles, they say, is dead. Of that, I am grateful. I would not want to be the prize of the man who had tormented a city with the corpse of their hero. It is not much better to be the prize of the man in charge of the army who destroyed my city. Although, I know that is what's coming.

A princess is a prize like no other, I know. The man who will claim me is a brute. Victorious today perhaps, a callous cruel man whose pride led him to sacrifice his own daughter to a God who turned his back on him. Gods are cruel and fickle creatures, toying with mortal lives like figures in a play.

The man whose feet I land in front of does not look any more brutish than the last. He is tall, yes, thick, also. His face is ragged, scratched and dusty from a night of sins I cannot fathom. His hair is wild around his head, plastered to sweaty skin. But his eyes... they are not cruel.

My muscles ache, trembling and weak, heaviness keeps my eyes from looking at him, yet he lifts my chin. His touch is gentle, calluses the only roughness about him. Even his gaze is pillowy soft. Are the stories of him false as they are of me?

"They say you are raving, Princess." Agamemnon's voice may be the deepest I've ever heard, no wonder he commands the largest army the world has ever seen. It sounds like a drum, even though he hushes to crouch before me. "They say you are cursed with insanity for defying Apollo himself."

I search the senses gifted- cursed to me, sending a tentative reach into a realm I've never dared explore. I wonder what future awaits me with this man. A war-prize, daughter of his enemy, sister of his nemesis. Or perhaps just another woman in his bed.

"Apollo swore to keep his beloved Troy safe. He swore to keep me from it. And now it is ruined." A muddy, bloody thumb caresses my jaw. He touches me decadently, luxuriating in me as though I am more than a prize. His smile tilts more to one side than the other. It's a charming smile, as though he has seen my barriers lower. "I would say, Princess, that we share a common enemy. Do you also spit upon the Gods that broke you?"

I search still, senses exploring. Yet, I feel only pleasure at his touch. His face never changes. Soft, amused, calm. Disbelieving perhaps sometimes, but I am used to that. Never cruel, never malicious, not taunting or degrading. No, Agamemnon, the man who has reduced my home to the ruins it shall not recover from, will never hate me.

So, I nod- the movement so soft and small none behind me should see. The crouching king however looks as if I have declared undying love. The smile spreads across his face in delight, cracked teeth displaying in crooked humour. He pulls back and hacks at his throat, pulling up saliva with a repulsive noise I've never heard anyone dare to make within my presence. Then he spits a ball of waste to one side.

"Like that," he prompts, eyes twinkling as they dance upon my shocked features. "Right, Princess?"

My eyes blink heavily, stunned by his humour and oddly charmed by his desire to find commonality with a woman he could own without question. My silence pushes the edges of his lips wider, and he tips his head towards his wad of spit upon the dusty path.

So... I spit too. Smaller, perhaps more gracefully than his, if the act could be described in such a way, but the act itself makes him tilt back his head to laugh at the sky. It is the laugh that could reach Olympus to taunt Apollo in his own chambers. But, I have no doubt he is watching closer than that.

When Agamemnon laughs, it is a catching kind of joy. It spreads like flames through a wooden city. The men around us guffawing their amusement at our shared blasphemy. Even my own lips beg to laugh with him.

"Come, Princess." Amusement sneaks into the thunderous voice even when he has finished. "Let us clean you up, you survived the Styx itself tonight." And, without thought or care or worry, he sweeps me off the ground and into his arms.

The curse evades me as he takes me into his tent. He does not touch me save for when he carries me inside and lays me upon furs. He talks to me, expecting nothing back. He shows me prizes, possessions and treasures. He offers me wine, yet drinks none himself.

I see no others, watching only the King of Mycenae, the Conqueror of Troy, pour a hot bath and serve me fruits as though I am a treasured guest. I wait for prophecy, an omen of a horror to befall us, yet nothing comes still, even as he offers me his hand. The skin of his palms is rough, unlike the hands of some of my brothers. A warrior king, in practice as well as myth.

"Come, Cassandra." Now, his voice is reverent, a whisper to a lover not a slave. "The memories will last a lifetime, but the marks don't have to."

I follow his gaze to my robes that hang in rags from my shoulders. My skin ripped and rumpled, the unnatural colours like an early sunrise on my flesh. Encrusted crimson flakes my thighs and chest, the pain of it a dull memory. At last: confined to the past.

Gentle hands guide me to the bath, fragrant oils curling sweet tendrils in the air beckoning me closer. I take a single step, forgetting the place I find myself but my hesitation makes the thunder rumble in amusement. "Go on. Bathe."

The first feel of warm water upon my skin is a blanket against the cold. And I sink into the small copper tub with a gentle moan of pleasure. For years I have been haunted by the horrors of the war. I intend to enjoy my quiet mind for every moment that I can.

My cotton robes drift lazily in the water. The heat seeps into weary bones pulling out an exhaustion I hadn't anticipated.

Agamemnon moves a quiet stool to my side, wetting his hand in the water, careful not to touch before he gently, carefully thumbs away a smudge of mud from my exposed arm. I don't watch him, but I don't stiffen under his touch and this makes him bolder. Soon, he scoops water in his palms to wash my skin. Silence breaks only for the lapping of water.

I relax for the king who conquered me, eyes closed, body limp and pliant, but he makes no move to control it. Save only for a whispered command, he remains in my service and demands none in return.

"Head back."

Head tilts, and a warm gush of water is guided through my hair. Rough hands in my scalp coax more and more submission. The scent of the floral oil intensifies in my hair as he guides the water through the strands with care. Floral, yes. A hint of metallic also. Metallic, like a hatred so profound it surpasses what is human.

My eyes fly open, muscles tensing, breathing halting. Blood. I sit in a pool of blood. It laps my skin, drips from my fingertips like rain. Trapped. Caught. Helpless. A net of panic tightens around my chest. The noise that leaves me is enough for the king to pause.

"Cassandra?" Concern tinges the depth of his voice, it takes me by surprise. A blink and the vision is gone. Water is water once more, leaving only my pounding heart as evidence to the crime.

Agamemnon's hands still, waiting for me to relax completely before he continues his act of loving temptation. He will never hate me or take anything I am not willing to give, I know that. But he is also a victim of my curse. He will never respect me and believe my warnings to be true. The God we both spit upon waits for the final chapter.

So, I remain silenced. I let him care for me, taking kindness for myself for every moment that I can. I surrender to fate.

