

## CASSANDRA'S EYES: AN OPEN LOVE LETTER

By Helika S. S. Campbell

Cassandra knew her death was coming years before it did. She saw it in flashes at first— a silver axe, a mother's angry, brazen face, a final swing— but over time, the vision granted to her by Apollo became clear. It was Clytemnestra's axe. It was Agamemnon's folly. It was Cassandra, bleeding out alone.

Our passion makes doomed prophets of us both, my love. Or maybe it's just me, and you couldn't be bothered by prophecies or inevitabilities. Apollo never gifted another with foresight, never cursed another to speak with the tone of the mockingbird. Had he given these burdens to someone else, perhaps Cassandra wouldn't have felt so alone. Perhaps if you loved me back, I wouldn't either.

We had a conversation once about the end of the world. Do you remember? I had been thinking of Cassandra, the things she would and wouldn't have seen, and stupidly over dinner I blurted out:

“If the world was ending, you'd text, right?”

The sushi conveyor belt continued to zip diligently to the left, the consistent metal hum emanating from just beneath the surface not loud enough to overtake the question. Your dark eyes are trailing the plates— red, red, yellow, blue and red again— before finally you looked back to me. I took you in, your wiry black hair spiraling over your shoulders, the soft cut of your lavender tee giving way at the sleeves and neck for the rich brown of your skin. You pursed your lips, waiting for me to elaborate. I swallowed dryly before starting again.

“I mean— if the world was ending, we probably wouldn't be together and there wouldn't be enough time to like, *survive-survive*, but let's say there's just enough time to say goodbye,” I explained, my voice on the precipice of a tell-tale tremble. “You would text. I mean, you'd call if you could, obviously. But it'd be the end of the world and all, so I figure you'd be busy with—” *your friends, your family, your two cats whom you share with a girlfriend of four years, a girlfriend you went to high school with, a girlfriend who I am not, and your life, your life which is so, so much bigger than me* “--everything. So you'd text.”

You pulled a red plate from the belt, delicately removing the plastic lid and surveying the craftsmanship of the rolls beneath as you listened to me finish. You kept your chopsticks poised thoughtfully above as you quirked an eyebrow. “Is that a question or a statement?”

I scowled back at you. “Would you text me if the world was ending?”

You shook your head, snorting lightly. “No, I’d *call*. I’d wanna make sure you were safe.”

“How safe could I be?” I rolled my eyes, grumbling as I pulled a yellow plate from the belt. “It’d be the end of the world, dumbass.”

“Still, I’d wanna hear your voice,” you replied, clicking the ends of your chopsticks together. “I’d want to hear you were alive and okay.”

“How practical,” I sighed.

“So,” you began with a sly smirk, narrowing your eyes at me. “The world is ending. We’re not together, and there’s not enough time to survive-survive, but there’s just enough time to say goodbye. Would you text me?”

I thought about the end of the world very carefully in that moment. I thought about the way the sky would run ablaze with oranges and reds, the final crescendo of the sun before the light is snuffed out forever. I pictured the human race, billions of panicked, scattered specks all trying to choose where to die and who to die with, and amidst all these final thoughts, I thought about you.

I thought about pounding on your front door, gasping for breath and practically doubled over on your porch. I thought about the way you’d fling it open, the emotional movement from confused to relieved to confused again bare upon that all-too honest face of yours. You’d waste five minutes of our final hour lecturing me for how stupid it was to sprint through the streets in the middle of the commotion. I’d remind you that you’re not my mother between breaths. You’d scoff and tell me that *clearly* she’s too busy to lecture me herself, so *someone* needs to take her stead.

And we’d laugh. Cynical and stupid, the way only two people trapped on the cusp of a planetary collapse could. The way only you and I can. We’d laugh, and the world couldn’t end until after we were done.

And before I could finish that thought, before I could understand the weight of what I was feeling, the words had already tumbled out of my mouth—

“I’d come find you.”

I often wonder if Cassandra thought she might be wrong when Ajax set foot in Athena's temple. When he buried his fist in her fiery red curls and rammed his Trojan horse deep into her from behind, I wonder if she thought, *This is it, actually. There is no living after this.*

But Cassandra was brilliant, wasn't she? Wise beyond her years in the most literal sense of the phrase. She must have heard his spear clatter against the ground, and the realization that that's all it was— a *spear* and not an axe— bore the greatest truth; The world never ends when we'd like it to.

"You'd come find me?" You chuckled, eyebrows raised. "With your sense of direction? I doubt it."

"I'd come find you," I repeated. Before you, I never bled my hand. I never spoke more than I needed to. I never wrote more than I wanted to. But since the day we met, I've been stuffing my mouth with daffodil petals and forget-me-nots, struggling desperately to keep these feelings from spilling out.

"What if you're with your family in Washington?"

I shook my head. "There's no version of the end of the world where I'm with my family," I replied. "Not anymore, at least."

"What about your sister?"

Cassandra had a brother. Technically speaking she had sixty-eight brothers, her father Priam no stranger to the ever-giving bodies of his concubines, but Cassandra only had one twin brother. His name was Helenus.

In most versions of the myth, Cassandra pulled Helenus' sword-calloused hands into her own, traced the fault lines running from forearm to wrist to palm, and taught him to see the same worlds she did. And Helenus *saw*. He saw the silver axe Cassandra faced, the throne he would one day inherit, the path carved out in marble for them both. Though he loved her, he knew just as well as she did they would die thousands of miles apart. That was the fate they both knew.

My sister is fifteen years younger than me. The world she lives in is one of playgrounds and scooters, and it has no room for romance, the apocalypse, or you. One day, when she's old enough to have loved and have lost and played the fool on both accounts, I'll tell her everything. But until then, your name is my secret, and it is mine alone.

"Even so. I wouldn't be with her."

"Well," you sighed, "what if I'm in Mexico, with *my* family?"

“Then I’d probably be stuck in an airport while the world is ending– Look, just– just be here when the apocalypse hits, okay? Just be closer. For my sake.”

You smiled then. Te sequor, my love. I follow you.

At the end of that dinner, you conceded. Do you remember? I was reorganizing our plates, four neat piles of red, yellow, green and blue towering a half inch below the empty conveyor belt.

“So, you come find me at the end of the world. What happens after that?”

I didn’t know how to answer you. I floundered for an answer, mumbled something about the check and paid in full. We went home and slept in separate beds that night. While you were kissing her temple goodnight, I pressed thumbtacks into the wings of every butterfly that had once infested my chest. I drafted this piece in four journals, scribbling the same lines over and over again. I’ve written our ending on every page, a thousand worthless metaphors for the same hollow feeling– rotting daffodils, doomed prophets, all to say this:

The world never ends when we’d like it to.