

Cassie

-- 'Cassandra,' said the Gods. 'To you is given the gift of divine sight. The tragic outcomes of all dire events wrought by humanity's own foolishness will be clear to you. Yet your warnings of them will go forever unheeded.'

-- 'Gods,' said Cassandra.
' . . . We'll just see about that.'

[[REPORT: The date is October 29. The temperature is 99 degrees Farenheit, with intolerable humidity. People are urged to remain indoors and near air conditioning until the evening hours. Record-breaking strong winds are forecast for tomorrow, with high, hot gusts and exceedingly dry conditions likely to continue well into the next few weeks. A statewide burning ban remains in effect.]]

It was fuel, His sweat. His beard and skin glistened with it; the air stank of it. Droplets of it snapped like spattering heated cooking oil when He removed His silver-brilliant steel skull cap. Mighty to behold, He came garbed in a crimson robe fastened by a gold sash that crackled with electricity whenever He adjusted it about His shoulders and waist. His skin was the color of smoke-clouded brass, His mouth a grin like a great broken dagger. He had no eyes, but eye sockets, and deep within both cleanly excavated cavities there pulsed a tiny yellow flame.

Moments ago, halfway through the crowded intersection Cassie Ra had detected the strong, strong smell of gasoline, as though an explosion were imminent. The air might itself felt ready to ignite. The heralding of His arrival.

Reaching the corner, she saw the air roil black and gray around oblivious passersby, and spin like a cyclone up to and above the tallest of these old downtown buildings. The whirlwind dissipated in a shimmer of heat; He remained.

Somehow, not another soul here downtown in the middle of the day, or, for that matter, any place or time, seemed aware of Him. Unlikely and unusual, that. Yet there was Hades. Cassie found it impossible to ignore His presence, though she had tried. At least at first, caring neither for His company nor for His unbidden counsel.

His voice was like iron shavings pounded under granite. "The air hereabout is indeed stifling."

Not replying, Cassie, walking very fast-- more in common these days with stalking, all determination and directed energy, on her way to pay god knew how much for repairs to her car that had conked out in this destructive, this deadly hellish heat-- nevertheless stopped. Rigid, her arms folded tight, she waited for the crosswalk signal to change.

He added: "If one such as Myself finds it uncomfortable. . .well, I shall leave the remainder unsaid."

"Yeah, you should do that. You should leave more things unsaid. And while you're at it, you might make yourself visible to someone else. Anyone else. You come along and it looks like I'm walking along babbling to myself."

"In such an age of strange distractive devices, indeed few, if any, will regard what would seem to be communica with oneself."

"Sure, so you say."

The Immortal never seemed to take offense. Unperturbed, perhaps even amused by her matter-of-fact impudence, always He advised. Now stroking His wedge of a metal-gray beard. Now pushing His massive hand through close-cropped hair the color of both pepper and copper.

"We of Ossa are curious why you hesitate. Why you wait. Are We to gather that you neither welcome, nor perhaps even fully grasp, the magnitude of Our wise gift? We bring these things-- fire, premonition-- to mortals, yet no mortal seems to appreciate them. Or to use them as intended."

The signal changed and she was on the move again. A pair of immense sandaled feet, roughly the length and width of the sewer grates imbedded in the curbs, destroyed the pavement as Hades pounded doggedly alongside her, three steps to her every ten or so, throwing sparks wherever the concrete fractured. Whenever Cassie looked behind, however, no giant gasoline footprint remained to mark His passing, the pavement as smooth as if He'd never trod there.

"Because I still don't get why me. Or why," she went on angrily, "at all. I never asked for it. I don't like it. I don't see why anyone would. Maybe it's way past time the We of Ossa started to rethink being so damn thoughtful. Gift!? How exactly is it a gift? Make a person experience something you can't accomplish for yourselves and then make it so nobody believes them? And wise? Wise. You're so worried about people suffering in the aftermath of disasters, eliminate disaster, remove lethal things. Besides, it's so crucial that this Enlightenment thing happens, then why don't We of Ossa," she waved her hands in fanciful circles, her fingers making quote-marks, "just make it happen their Ossa-m selves?"

The God vanished for a moment. There was only His voice.

"Even such as We do not possess the certainty given unto you. You alone can foretell all destructive, disastrous, Dis Dis Dis, outcomes. We know not its origin. Unlike fire and the other gifts, We were not the firstmakers of precognition. Nor of the light and dark. Such an aspect existed before We of Ossa. Before the Titans." He reappeared. "You are our making. Precognition has been given you, ergo the prophecies are yours. That they go unheeded means you must become the remedy to this widespread ignorance of your kind."

"Nice dodge. You want things to work right, make everything work right. I mean, you're Gods, right? Why do you even need humans at all? Oh wait that's right you don't. It's all in fun, I suppose, then. Anyway, I am doing it. I've been doing it. Becoming it, whatever. "

Looking in a bookshop window as they passed by, "Ossa," Hades said, amused noticing a display of bestselling books with the word OLYMPUS prominent in their titles. "Olympus as kingdom home was mistranslated, then to enter myth. Sadly, Cassandra--"

"I don't like the name Cassandra, I've never liked it. I'm Cassie, not Cassandra."

"--Cassandra, it is by the very reason that we allow mankind to function a certain way that we cannot simply force him to work in still a different way. Always an indirect road must be taken by Us. Most mortals would perish of fear if they saw, as they sense, that the Gods are real. Even if all humanity were informed of that which must needs occur, most, knowing the truth, believing the truth, would never act on it. Mortals cannot be forced to care any more than can the Gods. A few, always and only a precious, precious few," he observed smiling, poking the toe of a baby boy who smiled up at him from his carriage while his mother chattered blithely into a razor-slim phone, "learn."

"Just hoping the learning computers among us are the ones to make it, then? You might have written in an escape clause for them. Doesn't seem like you really gave that part of it much thought, frankly. Better hope those few who are supposed to learn are the ones who survive. And how are they supposed to learn, exactly? By traffic being disrupted for a three-block radius? Or the power grid going down for 24 hours? Or eighteen people getting killed? Or twelve, or two? That's nothing today, that's a bad joke that would disappear from radar in a week. That's why I've been taking so long. It needs to be bigger. It needs to be HUGE. GIGANTIC!"

She stopped. People were looking at her.

Glowing straight ahead, she stormed along again, lowering her voice: "In fact, it seems to me you guys are even a little behind the curve."

Weary now, she stopped again, halfway across the bridge over the Last Run River. Some people continued busily past her. Others leaned over the concrete to marvel at the dust-dry riverbed.

Hades intoned: "Having revealed thus, it is not only you."

Even in this godawful heat, Cassie now felt very cold. Felt both a sense of relief, and of puzzlement. Now what did He mean?

"So there are others like me. A lot?"

"You act as one on this part of Earth. However, at this moment in time, you are far from alone."

"Sure. Because you're here now, right?"

The encounters always ended this same, no matter where they took place or how the conversation had unfolded: some thing the size of an egg yoke appeared just beneath the surface of His skin. It percolated. Squeaked and squealed a circuitous route along His tendons, raced across His anvil-shaped and medicine-ball-sized biceps and near-to-bursting triceps. Loosening His form, disentangling His appearance. The coherence of His limbs and body.

"AM I?"

He became a grotesquely-veined silhouette; a deformed skeleton; a flickering shadow. Gone.

She could never tell if the maniacal laughter that rang all around her after He disappeared came, still, from Him, from herself, or elsewhere:

Cassie heard shouting from the other side of the shimmering heat wave He'd left in His wake. Shouting bordering on screaming.

The woman with the baby and talking on her phone was yelling at her, pulling the carriage with her as she backed away.

"What are you doing?!"

She was hollering into her phone. "This goddamn woman keeps--! Stop it!" She screamed in Cassie's face: "STOP IT!"

A crowd had assembled, Cassie its center. Everyone's attention focused on her. Her actions. She looked down. The baby was crying.

She certainly hadn't intended this. Wasn't even aware until now that she was doing it.

She was poking the infant's foot. Hard.

Drenched in sweat from having to hurry on foot to work now (her overheated car had not yet been repaired, the call she'd received had been in error) Cassie entered the air-conditioned foyer of Atlas Insurance and marched right into the custodian, almost knocking him and herself down.

Mop in hand, the middle-aged ignoramus stood grinning at her, asking-- sure as shit--

'Hot enough for ya?'

Cassie glared at him, then strode past him. In the breakroom she made straight for the water cooler. The first glassful did nothing to quench her thirst. A second went down in a single gulp, as did a third. The fourth finally made a dent. Yanking a handful of paper towels from the dispenser near the sink, she began mopping her dripping brow and the back of her sopping wet neck.

"Oh, no," Ranka Tasker, a young woman about Cassie's age, 28-- prettier than I am, Cassie knew, her long hair a devilish red to Cassie's muddy brown (and short)-- who worked in the front office, moaning to three other women who sat across from her at the same table. "No, no. I don't want it cold, I like the heat. We're flying to Cozumel next week. It'll be nice and hot, I can't wait."

Cassie tried to tamp down an outburst. Tried, tried.

Just to piss her off, it seemed, this tableau was presented every day. Every day. No matter what time she entered the room, Cassie seemed to enter always at this same point in their conversation, as though the little group awaited her arrival. Their ignorant, their inane dialog was identical-- not similar, not 'almost exactly the same'-- one day to the next, the same emphasis and inflection on the same words used at the same points in the same sentences in the same order. There was so little variation in what they said that Cassie had long committed the routine to memory. Could, if she so chose, recite their individual parts. She tried to resist doing exactly that just now, performing their own routine for them. Tried, tried. The never-changing topic was their shared dislike of, and the perils of, cold weather contrasted with the perceived elysian bliss of that atmosphere-destroying, life-claiming heat outside right now.

Ranka and others, so very, very many others, too many, were what Cassie labeled TAC: Typical American Consumers. They were the willingly complacent. The embracers of ignorance. Raised and taught to desire and accept what whatever a more and more self-aggrandizing and rapidly decaying society proffered them, content to not expect real answers to questions they cared not to ask anyway, not because they were afraid of the answers, but because answers didn't matter to them. Answers were for other people. People who thought too much. People who got vaccinated against diseases. Vaccines of course were now thought to be harmful, hadn't she'd heard that, recently, or not so recently, whatever, if she heard it it must be true. People who didn't shop at Wal-Box, or online with Amaton. People who interfered with one's many conveniences by raising concerns about human or animal rights practices, about

safety or ethical concerns, you name it. People like Cassie. Not that Ranka would care. Not that Ranka would even know Cassie's name.

"Anyway, we're flying first class, it's completely worth it. I'm having surgery done first, though."

"Oh, no! What for?"

"Possibly pre-cancerous lesion. Right here." She hugged herself with her left arm to point under her right shoulder blade. "According to my dermatologist it's from too much time in the tanning booth. I guess I don't know about that, I mean, I've been using a tanning booth since I was 13 and this is the first time there's been any problem, so 22 years. My daughters are using them now all the time and they never have any problems."

Cassie pictured a huge man briefly occupying one corner of the room. Grinning at her above Ranka's head, Hades nodded his approval.

Cassie stalked over. She'd long prepared the most effective way to get across to this self-involved, stuck-in-the-box, willfully ignorant sheep what this self-involved, stuck-in-the-box, willfully ignorant sheep needed to be told. Standing firm, she spread her arms wide.

One of the other women indicated Cassie's arrival at their table. Ranka turned her head, looked up at her.

"Go ahead and just conveniently ignore the fact that billions of others have to share this planet and its atmosphere with you. For your information, it isn't devised around your comfort level. These extremes of heat you're so happy about: ever heard of permafrost? If you haven't, and I'm confident that you haven't, it isn't a fucking brand of frozen food, it's the layer below the earth's crust that traps more than 350 billion-- that's billion with a 'b'-- tons of methane. It was supposed to be just what it sounds like: permanent frost. But the heat has thawed it, so we get that manure stench everyone complains about but no one wants to take steps to eliminate.

"Winter is dying, so it will never be cold again, and you still find room to complain. To the degree, pun intended, that you give it any consideration, you admit the atmosphere and the ground are in fact superheating, but then let yourself be convinced that it's actually a good thing just because you don't like the cold. For your information, with winter gone there will occur a fraction of the snow melt needed for water in the spring. Without the gradual lead-in of spring rain, summer will become an instant and protracted heat wave. What water we do get will be from severe thunderstorms, the lightning from which will spark more, larger, and more extreme forest fires, which will throw more heat into an already superheated atmosphere. Huge amounts of breathable air, thousands of kilotons of it, will burn away, and again increase the heat in the process. When we do get rainfall without the accompanying extreme weather it will be, like last summer, for weeks and weeks. It will ultimately overwhelm our infrastructure, which was never designed to withstand historic flooding occurring every fucking year.

"Meanwhile factories and cars and smokers and every damn thing else keeps adding more and more superheated chemical pollutants to an atmosphere already choked with the residue of decades of superheated chemical pollutants! This acts to suspend moisture in the air. So our atmosphere is packed with moisture but water actually becomes more scarce. The moisture is there, but it's prevented from falling as rain. Not that it would matter, since it would fall as acid rain. Polar melt will never be a viable fresh water source because it will dissipate in the larger salt water ocean. Eventually all four seasons will morph into one long drought with more violent weather but less moisture overall.

"The western forests have been in flames for weeks! And it gets worse every summer because every summer gets hotter! Firefighters have lost their lives to these things. They're being killed right now. A forest fire in Canada destroyed an entire string of communities. Thousands of homes. Thousands of people with nowhere to go. Can they come to your house? Will you let them live with you? Will you have the heat turned up for them? Have a fire in the fucking fireplace?" She faltered. "More people will get killed. Made homeless-- Torrential rains. Catastrophic flooding. Fires. It-- methane--"

Ranka asked:

"Yes?"

Cassie had gone to the table. Had been prepared to speak, her arms spread wide for emphasis, but had in fact said nothing.

Ranka waited. Shrugged. "What?"

"You shouldn't. . .you're too. . ."

She waited. The others waited. Expectant expressions.

". . .hot."

"Hot? You think I'm hot? I didn't realize you were so attracted to me, Cassie."

"I didn't. . ."

I didn't realize you knew my name. I assumed you didn't.

"I mean I really am flattered, but I'm taken."

The other women at the table began laughing.

"I'm not. . . I'm. . ." Her fists clenched at her sides. "Nothing."

"You're nothing? Cassie, that joke just tells itself."

Laughter filled the room. Others entering asked what was so funny and were promptly informed. Cassie stomped out.

In the hallway, she again stumbled into the custodian. Who cackled:

"Hot enough for ya?"

To get to her place she usually took the turnoff just prior to the main south exit out of town, where the huge pile of brush collected by the city from the dry ditches and dry woods in this dry, dry summer (except for today, which was very humid) were visible in a wide clearing of sand near the water tower. A controlled burn was scheduled for tomorrow (announced-- foolishly, in her opinion-- in the local newspaper). Also, according to the forecast, high winds were coming. Record-breaking, historic hot gusts in excess of 80 km per hour. Today, careless, she walked the trail behind it to reach her soon-to-be-destroyed home.

She never believed anyone really found this horrifying heat comforting. They were just raised and conditioned to believe that they did. And what did everyone do in the heat, anyway? Run for the air conditioning to cower from the heat!

Cower, she thought. Cower from the power.

Once inside, her heated skin going clammy in the air conditioning, she checked her voicemail. There was one message, two voices. The first voice was resonant as the thrum of a power chord played on electric guitar.

"Cassandra. This is Apollo, God of the Sun and the Sky. Of Intelligence and Creativity. God of Strength and Speed. Of Health and Healing. Of Thieving. Of Flight.

"At this crucial juncture in history I would counsel tolerance, reminding you that a person is only as well-informed as those who influence them are ill-informed.

"Remember that atmospheric overheating by chemical cause was not created by anyone you know and speak with and see every day, or anyone you have ever known. It was set in motion-- unknowingly-- over a century ago, by those who knew no better. And steps, however awkward and reluctant, have been taken to remedy it. You might search for a far less destructive form of protest.

"And you could get caught. In most states a conviction on a charge of Aggravated Arson carries a sentence of incarceration of not fewer than seven years. Should it result in the death of innocent bystanders, manslaughter charges may be sought. If you know beforehand that innocent bystanders could well be harmed by your intentional actions, homicide charges would likely be pursued. In many states a guilty verdict on such charges can carry a sentence of mandatory execution of the individual or individuals responsible--"

The second voice was the angry, powdered-iron laughter of Hades, interrupting:

"Cassandra, pay no attention to that other God behind the speaker."

She considered dashing her phone against the corner of the sink, but decided against it, laughing, thinking cooler heads prevailed.

Sipping an ice water at the kitchen table, she stared off into space, rigid with rage as she remembered an incident from childhood:

She'd been perhaps 10 years old, playing outside with friends and complaining that it was too hot. It almost felt like the heat knew she was there. It had seemed something alive, watching her.

The other kids laughed. Her discomfort amused them. She fled for the indoors. She couldn't recall what toys she'd been playing with, but remembered leaving them behind.

Back indoors, sitting at the kitchen table, staring off into space, rigid with rage over the subject as she was even now, she could hear her mother telling her: "Sweetheart, you just get too angry about these things. You think too much. You think too hard. Look at your knuckles, they're white as bone. Let go, it's okay. Not everything will always go your way in life. We have air conditioning. Sweetheart, let go of the table--"

But her body had remained rigid. She didn't remember for how long. The better part of an hour, certainly. This frightened her mother, who'd begun to wonder if her only daughter was experiencing a seizure.

Ice water. Her mother had at last brought her a glass of ice water. Her awareness of its proximity had finally coaxed her mind and body back to pliancy.

As she grew up it got worse, not better. People deliberately embraced ignorance. They threw lit cigarettes into dry grass along the roadside, not caring. They left the engine running while refueling their cars. Complained about the cold when the temperature dipped below 50 degrees. Actually wishing for the heat instead, for the weather event that killed more people worldwide annually than all other weather events combined. The list went on. The heat had in fact become that monster she'd long suspected it was, way back in her childhood. Everything seemed to be 'the last straw'.

Until, finally, this last summer really was.

There was her neighbor, when the heat had shot past 100 degrees and the sun was cooking them all: "Doesn't get much better than this, does it?"

On every visit to the bank the teller seemed almost to instruct her: "Enjoy that nice weather out there!"

And at Atlas Insurance, Ranka and company, every day.

The gigantic fires out west, again, and now raging in parts of Canada. Record-breaking heat every summer, until it seemed silly to any longer keep track. This dry, dry, air. Every tree was a potential torch, every browned blade of grass a matchstick, every structure even partially constructed of wood a waiting inferno.

It was all set. Her S-DADs

(Self-Devised-Accelerant-Devices, a gasoline-soaked box of kitchen matches wrapped in a torn-up used-looking fast-food wrapper)

were in corners of every other yard for kilometers in all directions. A lit match, and the tinder-dry grass

(and the high, hot, historic winds of tomorrow)

would take it from there.

Of course as the God on her voicemail had correctly pointed out, there had always been, since the Plan's inception, the chance she would be caught. She actually got a real thrill from that. She wasn't pleased with such a realization, yet, like Hades, there it was. An inconvenient fact. But a handful of certain details, about herself and her behavior, made being found out unlikely.

One: She was extraordinarily cautious. She resisted revisiting each site to assure herself. That would be a profound mistake. No, she knew every detail was in place. She would stick to the manifesto.

She'd carefully shredded every document except Prophetess, which would be incinerated in the blazes tomorrow, and had gotten rid of her history gradually over the past year. A new identity awaited. Like the materials needed for it, she'd constructed it piecemeal. Cassandra Penelope Ra was going to be tragically killed in the historic midwest plains and forest fires to come. Cash only from now on.

Two: She was nowhere on record as railing against climate change (or as she thought it should be called, atmospheric superheating or superpolluting) or any history of campaigning on the issue. No public record of any opinion on the subject at all. She'd not so much as raised her voice at a town meeting. Likewise her online presence. She'd not posted her manifesto. She'd forced herself for 20 long years to hold it all inside.

Three: She had no criminal record. All materials necessary for Operation Prophetess had been secured piecemeal.

Four: She just plain did not fit the profile of a domestic terrorist.

She checked the List section of Operation Prophetess. She'd indicated with inverted crosses (which she adorned, using yellow and red colored pencils, with drawings of fire and explosions, of little stick-figure-people running and screaming and being immolated) the various many sites on her self-made map.

It had been her own idea. . .er, that was, her Advisor from the Underworld who'd suggested the name for the project. She'd been unable at first to decide on what to call it. First it was Operation Tinderbox, but that was way, way too unambiguous. Any of her lists or sketches were discovered with that name on them, the show was cancelled before the opener. Then it was the Peshtigo Plan. Then it was The Fiery Prophetess.

At first, no matter how she approached it, it had seemed it would never work. Or at least would have little effect beyond what was normally (how sad that such things could now be considered normal) experienced as a disaster.

Then she'd come across, somewhere, long forgotten now, the idea of the staff-sling, and everything had fallen into place. She had only to plant her S-DADs and the high, hot, historic winds of tomorrow would do the rest.

[[REPORT: Authorities now confirming there appear to have been thousands-- thousands-- of these small makeshift accelerant devices used. Huge sections of the countryside, farmland, entire communities are engulfed in flames. Local fire departments are overwhelmed. Governors have declared a state of emergency in the following three--]]

She'd criss-crossed the county, her beloved woods, tossing S-DADs into the dry, tinderbox underbrush.

Always pretending to be on her phone, ready with the pretense of car trouble if a State Trooper or Deputy Sheriff should happen along, she walked past factories. Churches, hospitals. The chemical plant. Sure to drop the S-DADs under the LP tanks when possible, near them if not. Except for the wrapper they were already in, never really needing to camouflage them; she found it oddly reassuring to her that after all her hatred of pollution, the litter and the general debris in such areas made hiding her devices unnecessary.

The filling stations, each one with a locked cabinet of propane tanks near the front entrance, and their pumps loaded with fuel. The car dealerships. Every charcoal-burning backyard barbecue she could find. The power plants, the power grids, the transformers, the substations. Wedging them into some unobtrusive location in the nook of a brace or a bracket. Wedging them under bridge pillars. Jamming them under railway trestles and rails. She thought the heat might just climb high enough to warp that metal.

Then she'd had the idea of the door to door 'survey' to see who gave either enlightened or unenlightened replies. Homes marked 'Unenlightened Reply' were then marked with a little drawing of a torch, and later received an S-DAD in the grass (some randomly alongside the roads too, though) on her quiet nighttime walks.

At the bank, in the upstairs lobby, in the corner, behind the fern. When it went, that glass partition would shatter or melt. With a little luck, right onto that unfortunate teller below.

Then she would drive into the next county and do the same there. She'd used every last minute of her sick leave, her personal days, her vacation time, her spare time to do the same in the surrounding counties.

This first explosion and resultant blaze would bring the emergency crews, those all-too-prepared first responders. The response crews would be overtaxed in moments, as soon as tomorrow's historic high hellish winds out of the west fanned the flames and spread the conflagration eastward.

[[REPORT: It was initially indicated that the flames were fast approaching the suburbs, but the latest information we have now indicates otherwise, the conflagrations seem to have actually begun in the suburbs and are spreading outward. The temperature in some of these areas now shooting past 235 degrees. Residents are being evacuated, though such an eventuality does not seem to have been prepared for and many are simply grabbing what belongings they can carry in hand and quite literally fleeing for their lives. There appear to be a dwindling number of places to evacuate to--]]

The next morning required absolutely zero preparation. The last thing she'd done before bed was wedge the staff-sling into her electric car along with her supplies: enough food and water until she arrived, in disguise and under an assumed name, at her prearranged safehouse across the border in the forests of Canada.

She stood on her front porch, relishing the wind. It was already strong. Her hair shot entirely to one side, like a red banner. Her body a staff. What had Hades said about her being alone at this point on the planet but not at this point in time?

She scanned the horizon for Hades. The telltale cyclone formation, that broken dagger grin. Why was He not here to witness what he'd been so instrumental in guiding her toward?

She checked her phone. Like yesterday, oddly, there were two callers, one message. The first voice was her own:

"What if it's supposed to happen, though. What if it's a leap forward in evolution. That we're meant to pollute the atmosphere to make it hotter because our bodies are about to evolve into some sort of heat-using creature--"

Her mother's voice, clear as unpolluted water, interrupted:

"Sweetheart, you know you just get too angry about these things? You think too much. You think too hard. Please don't do this, you're not helping anything by doing this, you'll make things worse. You'll be the one doing the damage. There's still time for you to stop. You won't be able to take this back, you won't--"

This time she did smash her phone. Who fucking cared. She'd need to buy a new one to make it more difficult to trace her movements anyway. In a new world, that, thanks to Operation Prophetess, would finally realize steps needed to be taken to cool the Earth's atmosphere. She was confident this would not be ignored, and all efforts would be expended in that direction from now on.

Still, that had been her mother's voice. Of course, her mother had been dead for three years now, so. . .

So now Cassie set fire to her home, and drove off.

She had the List, though she no longer even needed to read Ranka's address, she'd been past it at least 100 times. Next, the Laughing Custodian.

She'd been going to saturate just the area around their yard. But they might see the flames as they burst to life and have just enough warning to escape with their lives. So she'd drenched this entire neighborhood with lighter fluid. A dozen houses, not just this one, would go up in moments.

She arrived, and parked halfway down the block. She walked to the house.

Ranka was outside, talking on the front walk with some man Cassie assumed to be her husband.

Unseen, from next door, over a white picket fence: "Dad? It still smells funny over here. Like somebody spilled lighter fluid."

Ranka saw Cassie and started to smile. The smile froze, then vanished. She looked very confused.

She said, "Cassie. . ."

The wind died down. Just so Cassie could be heard?

She shook her head. "Cassandra."

She dashed back to her car, fired up the S-DAD, removed the staff-sling, and used it to launch the missile. With those high winds in mind, she'd spent much of last night inserting a stone into each box of kitchen matches so they wouldn't fly where she wasn't aiming them.

Behind the wheel, racing away, she glanced back.

And there, at last, rising above the running, screaming, burning people in her rearview mirror, was Hades. His broken dagger of a grin growing beyond the shape and size of His skull, becoming immense, becoming one with the flames. Becoming the conflagration itself. Becoming the mushroom cloud that spread into the early morning sky and blotted out the sun as the fires from yard to yard and house to house caught, and caught, and caught caught caught the other mushrooms clouds rising above adjacent blocks and adjacent neighborhoods. Soon counties merged with adjacent counties, catching catching catching.

[[REPORT: Authorities are confirming the occurrence of fires that first had been set in a seemingly random pattern, but now appear to have been set as part of a coordinated attack. The resultant colossal firestorms are claiming more lives every minute. There are reports not only from the American midwest but from New England. . . parts of Europe. Russia. Asia. Africa. We will soon be forced to evacuate this location, though we have not yet been informed of any safer place.]]