



I, Pandora

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Mythology

The roaring, riot of the crowd splintered over the thrumming beat in my head. Scents pulsed sharp and sweet. Blood. Skin. A lash of acid. Bitter. A scent with bite, full of layers, but pungent not putrid.

Obscene jeers splattered my consciousness, expelled from the writhing bodies in the crowd surrounding the stadium's centre. Pain screamed from my left thigh as I lay, breath short, on the sandy floor of the arena.

However, any prolonged pause to what was vicariously viewed as 'entertainment', only secured an extension of my ghoulish nightmare.

I could feel the dread clawing its way in, finding a home to fester and mutate – roping up everything about this, about them. My stomach lurched. Heaving, I fisted my fingers and plunged into bravado with abandon. "Come here", I croaked through cracked lips, "so I can punch you."

The crowd clamoured again as my opponent, dressed in a leather garb identical to mine, eyed me from across the ring. I swerved my gaze across the sand pit, up higher than the heads of the lower gods and civilians. Up, towards the royal box. Zeus. His mouth was gaping wide, bone and carcass all jutting outwards – twisted. He was smiling.

I tore my eyes from the golden box, once again focused. This was important. Well, not this – me, Pandora, fighting hand-to-hand with Ainia. Ainia, who like me, was a top ranking Scythian Amazon. Ainia, who unlike me, had the support of the upper authority for this fight. For what we were fighting for. While this was mostly just entertainment for the high-borns' the victor was still the holder of the prize. The prize being the Guard of Potent and Crucial Objects. A job.

Only problem was...I didn't want it.

Feeling desperation set in, my hysteria built as the screeching and snarling intensified. I levelled my battered body against the significant mass of the imposing figure opposite me.

She swung.

Pain exploded in my jaw. Fragments of torment shivered around my body. Convulsing, my body slapping the concrete as the ceiling tilted. Men morphed into monsters; barbarians with beady eyes and distorted features glared down at me.

Heart stuttering, my head lolled. My eyes rolled over the box at the top of the stadium, locked with Zeus's. Eyes as sharp as flints and just as dark, he was no longer smiling. Feeling relief puff my chest as agony drained it. After this I would no longer be his pawn as my service time was up. Over five centuries, and I would finally return home. My lip curled – I would no longer be his human pet. Lids closed, I lay there happily forgotten in the dirt, my opponent turned from me to scream victory to her crowd. The answering cry was deafening.

But a subtle tension rose in my right arm. My arm, that until this moment, I had forgotten. My hand that still held my short sword. I watched, mesmerised as my arm contracted and my wrist flicked – its object released.

A wet, tearing sound, thick and obscene, out of a nightmare, split the stadium.

A moment of silence, then the clamour of noise rose to deafening heights. This noise usurped broken by Ainia's head as it rolled over the ground to my feet.

“And the Winner,” boomed the commentator;” Pandora of the Amazons!”

I hadn't even needed to move a muscle, I thought as darkness swamped my mind.

Zeus had done it for me.

The towers planted like old men of the hill, the moonlight shone on their craggy faces, tumbling down into barren land. Moss clung in the shade of the ancient walls like a straggly beard. The once proud turrets had crumbled in places giving the impression of a withered mouth. Whirling crimson and chalk pigment flames filled the sky, flown by the wind.

A pitiful keening assaulted my eardrum as I fought against the rise of consciousness.

This, I thought bitterly, is why I didn't want to guard it. To guard that box. Pandora's box they called it now – although that would not last long now, as my name would then be replaced by the next guard's name. The next warrior it would drive to insanity.

I had once hoped to escape this barren land. The scream tore through me like a great shard of glass – bringing my lost mind back from the memories of a hopeful child. Pandora. A warrior. A PAWN!

My muscles convulsed as my jaw locked, gaping in an intense, muted wail, fighting the invasion of a thing as I held it to my chest as I ran. Yet, silence was but a wish... for the voices never stopped. My heart rattled, like a rock in a box.

I paused, dropped the box and gripped the sides of my head, futilely hoping this would halt the dribble of the unwelcome voice.

He's coming, the copper box cackled. Sweat pouring down my face, stung my eyes, as I whimpered. Knees knocking, I pushed my body further down the stone corridor.

"PANDORA!" roared Zeus. He charged round that last corner, expression thunderous. He was followed by a horde of male warriors, all armed to the eye with blades and spears of all variety. Their faces were equally cold and expressionless.

My heart faltered.

I only needed to reach my transport – enchanted emerald fire in the doorway behind me at the end of the corridor. I edged closer, feeling the heat swell. Only five feet more and I would be free.

"Not one more step girl or this spear," he sneered, eyes flashing crimson as he raised a golden hunting weapon, "will hollow you before your body hits the floor."

No! I was so close! My arms tightened as my mind scrambled. Mouth dry, sweat now cold ...there was one thing. My eyes twitched as I fought not to look down. His box. I took it with me originally as they, the sins held inside, overpowered unprepared minds – which came in handy with some of larger guards. They were overtaking mine. But now...

"Child-", he spat, the guards behind him twitching in anticipation of the chase, "you will obey-"

My fingers unlatched the lock on the box. Please let this work, I thought, as I twisted. Ignoring the seven screams in my head, I threw the box and dived. The last thing I saw before I was spirited away in green flames was the box's lid laying agape ...inky shadows slamming and engulfing those guards remaining in the corridor. Through the pitch, two scarlet eyes flared.

"PANDORA!"

Freedom at last.

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