

## Pandora's Box

by Hilary Tam

Hope left Pandora's box on a bleak December day. The enemy had finally broken through the barriers, and everyone that could had evacuated, taking with them the music and birdsong and laughter that once breathed life into the city. Hope had not been in the outside world for many moons, and her appearance was almost unrecognizable; sections of her shimmering gossamer wings had ossified and crumbled into dust, the vibrant ombré shades that she was once shrouded in now a pale, sickly gray, a fading shadow. As she writhed out of the cracked clay container, the fragile pieces broke off from the sudden movement and hit the floor. It echoed almost infinitely in the now desolate chamber; a revered entity and her palace, the epicenter of countless celebrations, now reduced to jagged shards of porcelain left unpicked, unnoticed. Even the attackers did not see anything worthy of pillaging from this room. A forgotten legacy.

A boy watched quietly as she struggled, oblivious to his presence, to climb over the edge of the box. The randomness of the scene was almost comical: A small scrawny boy and a lump of near-nothingness, alone in a dusty, dilapidated room in the middle of nowhere. They didn't know the peeling paint and grime-covered walls that surrounded them was what shielded the two from the world that had abandoned them.

Hope noticed the boy, sunken eyes widening. Curiously, the boy moved towards her, but she recoiled, refusing to meet his gaze.

*What are you?* The boy thought. The voice in his head was bright against the muffled screams outside. *I won't hurt you.*

All was quiet for a while. Suddenly, a barely audible murmur echoed from a dark corner of his mind. It was a conversation that required no verbal communication, their thoughts finding their way to each other and commingling like tendrils of smoke in the air.

*It's not something you would know, boy.* Hope told him. There was no hostility in her tone, but her words were tinted with an unexplainable melancholia. *How did you find me?*

*I don't know where my family is.* The boy responded, frowning. *I don't know what's happening, but they told me to hide. I found this place after a few days. It felt a lot warmer than the outside.*

Surprised, Hope touched her icy skin. In her glory days it would emanate as much warmth as a woodfire, but she didn't think there was any left.

*I'm Hope,* she stated. *I'm leaving. Hope does not exist in a world where men feast on the blood and the bones of their brothers.*

*But why?* The boy immediately replied. *That's not true. People always hope.*

*Look outside, boy. The world is crumbling away, and I am crumbling with it.*

Compliantly, the boy stood on his tiptoes and peered through a hole in the wall. It was a blur of wet crimson and flashing metal—civilians were running towards nowhere in particular, yelling the names of those who could not hear them, desperately seeking sanctuary that they could not find. Iron-clad men blocked their attempts to escape, hateful red eyes staring down at those that bled at their feet. Bullets rained down like stars, bodies crumpling onto the floor with each heart-stopping bang. With a startling ping a stray bullet ricocheted off the wall, inches away from the hole his eye squinted out of. Gasping, the boy stumbled backwards, blocking his ears with trembling hands.

*You see?* Hope whispered softly into his mind, almost apologetically. *The world no longer wants me. There is no place for me here. The men with the guns, the people with their shattered bones—I am afraid of them, and they are afraid of me. You see, boy—hope is deadly to those who cannot risk it. The world outside of these hallowed halls is cruel. It is unforgiving. My brethren that once shared this space have taken over. Their conspiracies with Lucifer, the atrocious fantasies they whispered into my ear—they have become a reality. The Gods have forsaken us, child. One's hopes will no longer come into fruition—when night falls, they will be out there drawing their last breath, using their last exhale to curse me, curse the futility of all things beautiful. When one is not slew by hands, he is killed by his own mind. A mind that foolishly hoped.* The boy stared as Hope's faint grayish glow dimmed even more, almost nonexistent now. *I must go.*

“No.”

Hope paused. The boy said this out loud, his voice clear and bright with an adult-like assertiveness his childlike face did not reflect. He did not understand half the words Hope had told him, but a sense of deep urgency tugged at his gut. “You can’t.”

*What do you mean, child?*

“Hope can’t lose hope. Plus, many people still have hopes. And dreams. It’s not all bad. We need you.”

Hope’s determined grip on the edge of the box loosened. *You don’t know what you’re talking about.*

The boy squeezed his eyes shut. He thought of his parents shoving him away in a panic, the malicious glances of people he met on his torturous journey, their silence when he pleaded for food and shelter, the gunfire and the scarlet and the cries that pierced the sky. Then he remembered how his mother hugged him before he ran, gentle arms wrapped around his head. Scintillations of the sky those unbearable nights out in the open. The warmth of this small space that reminded him so much of a mother’s tender touch—an oasis in the cold and confusion. Like he was finally safe.

“I hope my parents are okay out there.” He finally said, emphatic and sure. “I hope they will come back for me, and I know they hope I will come back to them. I hope the fighting will stop. I hope the people can find this place and share the warmth. I hope,” He clenched his fists.

“I hope there will still be hope for the living and the dying.”

A silence fell upon the scene. The boy did not open his eyes—The crashes and bangs were still discernible, and the wind kept blowing and blowing, the searing cold seeping into his veins, clawing their way into his mind, but still he refused to let go of the hope that his heart stubbornly clung to, weakly but defiantly radiating light and hotness that was fading and fading and—

Slowly, almost gently, a wave of heat spread across the room—it was ever so slight, the temperature only changing minisculely, but it sank deep into the begrimed walls, enveloping the boy in a timid embrace that caressed his face, comforted his heart. The boy opened his eyes. And there Hope was, her frail frame just a little more full, faint but sparkling gold slashing apart the murky gray. They smiled at each other—it was a tacit exchange beyond words and thoughts, but one that they both understood and cherished. And there they stayed, the small boy and his big hopes, a glimmer of light and warmth in this hurt and troubled world.