

I dip my paintbrush into the smoky gray paste as I finish off the last stroke of a wide, round curve. I stand back to look at my work- a silvery jar sits on my canvas, its lid half open, with a woman wearing a cobalt blue dress standing next to it, frantically trying to close the lid as formless red wisps fly out into the blue sky, turning it a lifeless gray. A little aquamarine spark is at the bottom of the jar. Even though it's small, it's one of the first things to notice on the painting.

Applause bursts behind me and I turn around to see my art teacher, Ms. Jacobson, clapping rapidly. No one else is joining her, however.

Ms. Jacobson doesn't care about that. "Brilliant!" She beams. "Now, may I ask, what is this drawing depicting?"

I roll my eyes. It's obvious, and the whole class knows that, except for Ms. Jacobson. But I dutifully respond, "This drawing represents the myth of Pandora and her jar-"

A loud, nasally voice breaks my intro. "Isn't it a box? Like, Pandora's box?" I turn around, annoyed as I see Gavin Wadley, my enemy since third grade, his small face grinning naughtily, framed by an ugly umbrella cut.

"That's a misinterpretation." I reply as calmly as I can. "It's actually a jar."

Gavin is about to speak again, but Ms. Jacobson stops him. "Please, continue, Aela."

"Um, Ms. Jacobson, my name is pronounced 'A-ella', not 'E-ella'." I correct Ms. Jacobson quickly. She doesn't usually call on me, but almost every time, she makes this mistake. She frowns. "Well, can I call you Ella for short?"

*No. Only Aura calls me that.* I think to myself, but of course I don't say it out loud. "Yes, of course, Ms. Jacobson." I lie.

Ms. Jacobson smiles, that seemingly friendly smile that all teachers must have learnt in college because all of them can do it. "Well, Ella, can you continue explaining your drawing?"

I nod and turn back to my canvas. "In Greek mythology, the gods created a girl named Pandora." I gesture towards the woman clad in a dark blue dress standing next to the jar.

"The ruler of the gods, Zeus, then gave Pandora a *jar*," I put special emphasis on the word *jar* and glare as hard as I can at Gavin, who sticks his tongue out at me, "and told her to never open it." I trace the silvery gray jar in front of Pandora.

"Sadly, curiosity eventually got the better of her and Pandora opened it. Inside were all the terrible spirits of mankind- hunger, disease, depression, etc." I point towards the formless red wisps rising into the sky, which turns gray around them.

"Panicking, Pandora finally managed to close the lid just as all the spirits had escaped. But, one had yet to go. Placed at the very bottom, Hope sat beneath the evils." I gesture towards the small blue spark at the bottom of the jar.

I look at Ms. Jacobson, who gives me another one of her teacher smiles. "Lovely story! May I ask, what inspired you to choose this legend to display?"

I shrug, pretending to think. *I chose it because it was Aura's favorite legend. And it reminds me of what happened when she left.* But that's not what I say.

"Um, I've always liked that legend, but I've never done any project regarding it, so I decided this would be my first one." I choose the brightest tone I can muster, summoning a wide grin as I point at the canvas, attempting to cover up my obvious lie.

Ms. Jacobson nods, beaming. Clearly, she's as clueless about lying as she is about what my drawing is about. "Wonderful and creative. Anyone else have any paintings they'd like to share?"

A couple people raise their hands, and Ms. Jacobson moves off to praise some other kid on their art.

Behind me, I hear Gavin whispering to his gang of friends. I catch a few snips of the conversation- *silly, useless, a ridiculous piece of art*. One of them points at me. Then a burst of giggles.

Ms. Jacobson turns around towards them from talking with Tatum Pullis, who's proudly displaying her work of the 12 deeds Hercules performed. Gavin and his friends immediately stop and disperse back to their own canvases, and Ms. Jacobson ignores them.

Well, let her ignore them all she wants. I don't care about Gavin. I used to, but that was before Aura came. And after she left...well, let's just say I cared even less.

Looking back at my drawing of Pandora and her jar, I find myself tracing the vibrant red shapes darting into the sky, imagining each of them containing a sentence.

*"Aela, my mom said we'd give it a year. It's been more than a year, and I don't like this place."*

*"But, Aura, you like me, don't you? What about this place do you hate?"*

*"I can't say exactly. There's just this feeling- this feeling of wrongness, this feeling of dislike."*

*"So...you'd just leave me here? Without a good reason, even?"*

*"I knew you wouldn't understand. I don't want to- no, I do, but I don't at the same time..."*

*"I don't know what you're saying, Aura."*

*"Of course you wouldn't! Why would you?! You've never moved from one place to another, you've lived here your whole life!"*

*"Aura-"*

*"No! I don't want to hear it! You don't understand. I'm leaving, and that's final."*

Back in the present, I blink back tears as I look at the red shapes. They are vibrant, contrasting against the more muted colors of the portrait. Red, the symbol of anger and frustration, rash behavior and irritability.

Something hits my shoulder. I turn to find a crumpled ball of paper on the ground, then look up to see Gavin laughing behind his hand.

Emotionless, I pick up the paper and unfold it. It's written in Gavin's messy handwriting. *What a piece of trash you made. Of course, you're probably only capable of that because you are that. Just like your old friend. What was her name? Aarau? She was useless as well.*

My breath catches in my throat. *How could he insult Aura?! Anger gets the better of me, and I grab a pen, hurriedly scribbling a note back- Oh, really? I read once that the name "Gavin" means stupidity. Fits, since I doubt you even know what trash means.*

Then, I throw the crumpled paper as hard as I can towards Gavin.

Huffing as I turn back towards my canvas, I sit there for a moment, staring at the alternating strokes of gray framing the jar.

I don't see Ms. Jacobson leaving the room to hang up Tatum's drawing outside.

I don't see Gavin picking up the paper and reading it.

I don't see it when he and his friends each pick up a freshly sharpened pencil and run towards my portrait.

It's only when the pencils fly through the still wet and fragile canvas do I turn around.

It's too late- the sharp lead pierces through the canvas easily, piercing through the red spirits, the jar, Pandora, even Hope itself.

“*Gavin Wadley!*” Ms. Jacobson re-enters the room and drops the papers that she’s holding. Gavin turns, trying to look innocent, but everyone in the class saw what happened.

I don’t care, though. Gavin might get into trouble, or he might not. What matters is the broken canvas.

I touch the broken spots gently, the still-wet paint coating my fingers. Overall, the damage could be worse; the pencils hadn’t pierced most of the best parts.

But my fingers find their way down to the bottom of the portrait, where, at the bottom of the jar, the illuminating light of Hope was.

It’s gone. Pierced through, stabbed and broken. Hope, lost in the endless gray world.

I’m only vaguely aware of Ms. Jacobson kneeling in front of me, asking if I’m okay.

I’m only vaguely aware of Ms. Jacobson writing Gavin and his friends a pink pass, the ones that signal that a teacher sent a student to the Office.

I’m only vaguely aware of my classmates picking up the paint-covered pencils and cleaning up the classroom.

It’s only when the school bell rings, that obnoxious *ding-ding-ding-ding* do I finally look up from my drawing.

Ms. Jacobson smiles warmly at me, trying to encourage me to talk. “Sweetie, the bell just rang. You have five minutes to get to your next class. Do you want me to hold on to your painting for you? You might still be able to salvage it...”

I shake my head. “No. I’ll throw it away or something.” I stand, picking up the drawing, and march towards the blue plastic garbage can in the corner.

Just as I am about to drop it in, a sudden thought occurs to me. *No. I can’t...I can’t just throw Hope away. Even broken and stabbed as it is. Hope isn’t something I can throw away.*

And although the thought is silly and irrational- Hope isn’t even a real thing, after all, just something that I represented with a blue spark- the thought stays with me, and I cling to it like a drowning person does to a lifeboat.

Then, I let my arm relax. The painting swings at my side, my hand holding onto it carefully.

*I’ll fix it. Hope. I’ll find a way to make Hope keep going, give it a chance to find its way out of the jar it’s trapped in.*

The rest of the day passes in a blur, and when I finally get home, I dash into my room. I cover the holes where Hope and the other images used to be with some canvas paper and tape. Then, gathering together all my acrylic paint tubes, I squeeze out a bit of red, gray, blue. Dipping my small wooden brush into each of the paints, I use them to mix and swirl, covering the holes.

It takes a while to make the painting seem real again, and I struggle with re-drawing Hope. But I don’t give up.

When I finally look up, I’m surprised to see that the sky is growing dark.

Smiling, I look back down, dip my paintbrush in light blue, and finish off the last stroke of Hope.

I turn the painting over to the other side, where white paper stretches on. Grabbing a pen and placing it on the paper, neat letters seem to form almost immediately in light blue ink, the same color as Hope.

*Dear Aura,*

*I’m sorry for everything I said and did when you left...*

I continue writing, late into the night, and my letter takes up the whole back side of the painting.

Finally, at the very bottom of the letter, I sign my name. *With Hope, Aela.*

The next day, I slide the folded canvas into our mailbox and tilt the little red flag up. From my window, I watch the mailman park at our house and pick up the crisp white envelope, placing it into his truck.

As the mailman drives away, I smile to myself. *Whatever happens next, whether Aura receives it or not, whether she decides to write back or not, none of that is up to me. My part is done. I did what I could to free Hope into the world, into our lives.*

*I am hopeful because Hope is there, surrounding us, helping us. I am hopeful because sometimes, you just have to take action to realize what Hope can do for you.*