

Creation 3: Pandora

Prometheus' children, the first people, didn't know what to do at first. They gnawed roots. They ate grubs and leaves and earth and whatever fruits they could find. Prometheus the grey Titan and Epimetheus showed them how to make spears and bows and swift arrows. They showed them how to hunt, how to plant seeds and harvest them. They showed them how to build shelters out of branches. The creatures were quick to learn and to understand but at nights they would huddle together. Sometimes in winter, they would shiver and shake. Sometimes on bitter nights, one of them would turn as cold as clay and be still. Prometheus would have to bury it in the ground. He knew something was wrong.

His creatures seemed to be suffering from something he'd never known, something he could barely understand. Slowly he began to realise: they were suffering from cold. And if they were cold they would need something he hadn't got. They would need something only the gods possessed. They would need the secret weapon of the gods. His creatures needed fire, and he knew that the gods would never let him have it; it was too precious. It would have to be stolen from them. And he knew that if the thief was discovered he would be punished, and the punishments of the gods are always terrible. But like any father he loved his children. He couldn't bear to see them suffer.

So one night he climbed the steep slopes of Mount Olympus and stole one smouldering piece of charcoal. As soon as they had fire, Prometheus' people prospered. Their little settlements spread across the world. Prometheus taught them how to dig terraces on the sides of hills for vineyards and orchards; how to plant wheat and barley; how to keep sheep, goats, pigs and shambling cattle. He would sit and watch his people, and the longer he watched them, the deeper the tenderness he felt for them. He wanted only good for them. Like any father, he wanted them to be happy.

He gathered together all the things that might bring them harm and put them into a stone jar. He gathered disease, hatred, jealousy, anger, violence, starvation. All of them he pushed into the jar. He fitted a lid tightly to the top of it. He showed the jar to his brother, Epimetheus. 'As long as the lid stays on this jar, all will be well for my children.'

Epimetheus nodded: 'Of course.'

Prometheus leaned the jar against the trunk of a fig tree. And all would have been well with the world had Zeus, the most powerful of the gods, not glanced down and seen the smoke of tens of thousands of fires drifting up into the sky. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. He saw Prometheus' creatures warming their hands, boiling their pots, roasting their meat, lighting up the shadows of their huts with fire: fire, the secret of the gods. Someone must have stolen it. He began to tremble with fury. And then he saw Prometheus. He was squatting on the side of a mountain, watching his children with infinite affection.

'So,' Zeus thought to himself, 'The grey Titan is the thief, and he shall pay for it.'

The sky darkened with the god's anger. There was a rumble of thunder, a flash of lightning; a drop of rain splashed onto Prometheus' face. Once again, Prometheus turned to his brother. 'Epimetheus, I feel Zeus' anger. We must be careful. The gods will try to punish us for the theft of fire. Don't accept any gifts from them, least of all from Zeus.'

Epimetheus nodded: 'Of course.'

Zeus had a plan for vengeance. He made his way to the palace of Hephaestus. He found the crippled god of metal-work working at his forge. 'Hephaestus,' he said, 'you are the master of making. I have seen the broaches and necklaces you have fashioned for your wife Aphrodite, the goddess of love.

They are dazzlingly beautiful. Would you make something beautiful for me?'

Hephaestus was flattered. He bowed to Zeus. 'What do you want me to make?'

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Zeus held out his hand. On it was a lump of clay. 'You have probably looked down at the world and seen the little lumpen creatures the Titan Prometheus has made. Make me something similar. Make me a woman out of this clay but make her as beautiful as Aphrodite.'

Hephaestus was a master craftsman. He took the clay and set to work. In his hands it soon took shape. He made head, shoulders, arms, body, legs. He shaped it to perfection. He baked it in his furnace and gave the little figurine to Zeus. Even though it was no more than a statuette, Zeus was charmed. It was just what he'd been hoping for. He blew life into it. The clay woman's eyes flickered. She smiled, tossed the hair from her forehead; she was like a miniature goddess. Zeus summoned all of the divinities to his palace. 'I want each of you to give a gift to this creature of clay.'

Each of the immortals in turn came forward. When the last gift had been given, the woman was no longer the same. The clear, uncomplicated beauty that Hephaestus had given her had become clouded by contradiction. She was filled with the contrary promptings of the immortal gods and goddesses.

Her thoughts and feelings were not simple or straightforward any longer. Zeus rubbed his hands together with delight.

'We will call her Pandora, bringer of gifts.'

Epimetheus was tending his orchards in the valley at the foot of Mount Hymettus. Prometheus was away, helping his people, somewhere far across the world. Hermes, the messenger of the gods, appeared before Epimetheus. The Titan recognised him by his winged sandals.

'What do you want?'

'I've brought someone to meet you.'

Hermes lifted his fingers to his lips and whistled, and from between two apple trees a woman appeared. She was beautiful, more beautiful by far than any of Prometheus' creatures. She was as beautiful as a goddess.

'Her name is Pandora.'

She came towards Epimetheus, her hands outstretched.

'Bringer of gifts.'

She lifted her face to him and Epimetheus couldn't help himself. He lowered his great grey head and kissed her. Her lips were soft and sweet. He closed his eyes.

'She is a gift from Zeus.'

When the Titan opened his eyes, Hermes had vanished.

Epimetheus loved Pandora. He taught her the skills of farming and she was quick to learn. Soon the valley was prospering. Apples, grapes and grain were swelling just as her own belly was swelling with the child she was carrying in her womb, the child that had been fathered by the grey Titan.

Epimetheus loved to watch her swinging her sickle, waist-deep in barley, singing to herself. He had never been so happy. And then one evening as they were eating their supper, Pandora noticed an old stone jar, leaning against the trunk of a fig tree.

'What's inside the jar?'

She jumped to her feet and ran across to it. She was just about to curl her fingers under its lid when Epimetheus shouted 'No!' She backed away from it, startled. He stood up and walked across to her. He curled his great grey arm tenderly around her shoulders. 'No, my love. We must leave that jar alone. Prometheus told me that the lid must never be lifted.'

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The next day she went and looked at the jar again. It squatted at the foot of the fig tree like a mocking affront. 'I wonder what Prometheus keeps inside it, for himself and his precious people.'

Day followed day. The jar, that she had never noticed before, seemed always to be on the edge of her sight. The thought of it plagued her. And then one day Epimetheus was working at the far end of the valley. Pandora was quite alone. She looked at the jar and suddenly she was full of voices. It was as though all the gifts of the gods and the goddesses were chattering inside her head. There was an Athene voice, whispering, 'It's always better to know.' A Hermes voice was saying, 'Nobody will ever find out.' An Aphrodite voice was saying, 'If he does find out, one kiss and he'll forgive you.' And Ares voice was shouting, 'Now! Now! Now!'

She couldn't help herself. She reached for the lid. She pulled it open. In an instant she was lifted into the air and thrown back. It was as if a tremendous whirlwind had burst out of the jar. When she opened her eyes she saw a spiralling swarm of seething, buzzing, wheezing, screeching, screaming, shrieking things, flying out into the world. She watched them with horror.

When they all seemed to have disappeared, she scrambled to her feet and ran across to the jar. She peered inside. There was something still there. It was a beautiful, shimmering, shining thing quite unlike all the others. She reached down and it climbed onto her fingertip. She lifted it to her lips and blew. It flew away. Prometheus had hidden it in the bottom of the jar in case the lid was ever lifted. It was called 'Hope'; it was the Titan's last gift to his children.

When Prometheus returned and discovered what had happened, his heart was broken. His children would never be the same again. He climbed up the steep slope of the valley, without once looking over his shoulder, but Zeus was watching and waiting. Suddenly Prometheus felt an iron grip on each shoulder; on either side of him stood a one-eyed Cyclops.

'You are to be punished.'

'Why?'

'Because you are a thief, a thief of fire.'

The Cyclops pushed Prometheus to the ground. One held him down while the other bound him with chains of adamant. The chains were fastened to the face of a cliff; there was no escaping. And then the sky darkened. Prometheus looked up. A huge vulture was swooping down towards him. It perched on his chest. With its razor talons it ripped open his belly. It plunged its head into the wound and tore out his liver. With one sickening gulp it lifted its head and swallowed it. Then it opened its wings and flew away. The two Cyclops watched and laughed.

'Every day, thief, your liver will grow back again. And every day the vulture will return, day after day to the end of time.'