

Pandora's Box

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Absolute XPress
AN IMPRINT OF HADES PUBLICATIONS, INC.
CALGARY

PROLOGUE

“...and he, heaven’s herald,
gave her a speaking voice
and announced that her name was Pandora,
‘The Gift of All,’ because all the gods who dwell on Olympos
gave a gift to this plague for men who are eaters of bread.”

—Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, lines 79-82

She was dead, so far as the world knew, and fate—the sole mourner at her “funeral”—had buried her in the belly of this beast. Its cracked neotanium walls seemed to compress on her like heavy chinked armor. A dirty flickering light, the only illumination, flooded her prison, smothering her with the taste of copper. She yearned to flip the switch that would throw open the neotanium shutters on the east windows and bathe in sunlight. But she knew that doing so, even for a second, would be inviting the apocalypse. So, the box she precariously carried on her shoulders remained closed.

The *bleeps* and electronic hums of ancient twenty-first century computers idly operating invaded her keen ears, as if trying to drown her in a quiet cacophony. This technology surrounded a twenty-foot long rectangular platform that rose three feet above the cold floor with large, translucent screens displaying a world map that likely no longer displayed an accurate picture of Earth.

She was alone.

She reclined her shell against the rigid steel chair. Instinctively, she stroked her face with her thin fingers. Nothing had changed. She felt every scar, every blemish. She winced as she touched her left eye, which was no longer jade, but black, and through which the world was blurry. Her right eye was dry, burdened, and bloodshot for her joy had bled from it. She ran her fingers through brittle, sullied fibers that had replaced her soft, fiery-red hair. Her voice mirrored her appearance, since she rarely spoke. She buried her face in her hands, wanting to cry in spite of her training. Her tears ran dry.

Suddenly, she felt her laser rifle slide off her lap. It rattled against her desert camouflage cyber-armor as she caught it mid-fall with her left hand. She clutched its stock like a lover's hand. The weapon's sharp edges were covered with dried blood—her blood—yet, its pulse chamber was still clean. She felt naked wearing her broken armor with all her scars, her shame, exposed.

Umquam vigilant. Ever vigilant. It was her code—the code of the Vanguard. Even now, alone in this living death, she adhered to it.

Something—one of the voices?—spoke to her of forgotten happiness, of being the envy of all who knew her.

Then the world changed.

Solitude had corroded her memories, and remembering for her was like grasping vapors. The people she knew had become a fragmented gallery of nameless pictures. Eventually, she would forget herself entirely, just like the world had. *I'm dying, yet I'm not. My soul...it's being eaten away, piece by piece. Soon I'll be hollow and lifeless—like a doll.*

Certain words, a few sentences, had remained with her, as if branded upon her mind, but they offered little solace. They flashed in her head like text on a computer screen: *Project: Pandora's Box... Remain at base... Reinforcements will ASAP... Maintain lockdown... Godspeed... END OF TRANSMISSION.* So she had been left as a lone watchman, the guardian of a coveted "box" filled with the world's dreads. She would have laughed if not for the sick irony.

Her right hand wandered across the tabletop, searching. She was oblivious to this, too blinded by despair to notice, or care. It touched something. Something ragged yet soft, strange yet familiar, something that evoked feelings of pain *and* healing. She turned to see her discovery: two printed books stacked atop each other and surrounded by several dead pens. Such things had become rarities during the last fifty years.

She picked up the one on top. It was green with a tarnished gold-etched title that had been rubbed off by time's cruel fingers. Holding it made her misery waver slightly. She held it against her chest, sighing. A brief peace overtook her. *It was a gift, she thought. A gift from someone who wanted to save me. But who? And from what?*

She laid it aside and picked up the larger second book. It was red, leather-bound, and not as dilapidated, but bore no title. She opened it carefully, and found that its contents were not as plain as its cover. A message penned in red ink was written on the first page in elegant cursive handwriting:

Mi Rosa,

*You are a flower set aflame,
Cast into the pit, consumed by hellfire,
Only to rise from despondency's ashes.
You are the Phoenix Rose,
Trampled, burned, but not destroyed.
I picked you from the bed, beholding your splendor
As Love's white fires consumed you, kissing my hand.
Dust you were and dust you became,
Sifting through my fingers.
Despair devoured my heart, only to quickly fade
For you, my rose, will rise again,
Pure, lovely, undefiled.
And I shall be here, awaiting your rebirth.
Rise again, oh, my Phoenix!
Return to me, oh, my Rose!*

*Your Champion,
Dante*

She found herself reciting the words as she read them, eyes closed, letting them wash over her. She sobbed tearlessly. Something once dead—memories—suddenly danced within her mind: memories of strong hands holding her, of sweet words whispered in her ear, of joy overflowing. But they were shadows, wisps of smoke, intangible. *Are they real? Or are they only dying dreams?*

She turned the page.

"Some say people are the sum of their experiences. If that's true, I feel like my mind's been drenched in boiling bleach. My

memories are fading more with each passing day. Even if I'm rescued, I fear the VG will find only an empty shell. My memories are my last shreds of sanity. *I mustn't forget!*

"Within this book—the last gift I ever received—is my life. I didn't trust it to computers—they could be easily destroyed. I had to write it down, even if it meant using my own blood as ink. I've included the happy and the sad, the triumphs and the failures, everything. *This* is who I am, not the miserable creature I have become.

"But it's not only for me. I wrote this so that someone very special may one day read it and know who I really am.

"Turn the page...and remember."

She did.