Who says gods can’t play tricks?

At a feast, the god Prometheus cooked Zeus a meal that looked delicious but was made of nothing but ox bones.

For years, Zeus remembered. He remembered and simmered and stewed and boiled and seethed over Prometheus’ prank. And as punishment for Prometheus’ joke, Zeus refused to give humans the power of fire.

“That’s not fair! It’s not the humans’ fault!” Prometheus protested, but Zeus wouldn’t listen.

Kind-hearted Prometheus cared for humans and did his best to nurture them. He wanted them to succeed—which made Zeus’ unfair punishment even more upsetting. Prometheus knew that it was up to him to right this wrong.

Clever Prometheus, one step ahead of Zeus, stole a spark in the dead of night. He carried the flame down to Earth, coddling it gently, careful to protect it from the wind and the rain. The flame was a tiny heartbeat—it was life. When he reached Earth at last, Prometheus held out his hands.

“Fire,” he said, presenting his gift to a group of humans.

The tiny flame flickered like starlight, and humans crowded around to get a good glimpse. Then they took Prometheus’ gift with endless thanks and shared the fire among themselves.

But all was not well.

From Olympus, Zeus saw a far-off gleam in the night, and he knew it was fire—fire that he had clearly forbidden. Zeus leaned in for a closer look—then he burst with thunderous anger. He clenched his fists; he gnashed his teeth; he scrunched his face into a ball of fury.

“I will make him pay!” Zeus shouted, his eyes bulging. “I will make them all pay for the fire!”

Zeus dealt with the humans first. He sent a clay woman named Pandora down to Earth with a box full of evils and told her never to open it. Of course, she was terribly curious.

Just one tiny peek won’t hurt, she thought. She wiggled the lid of the box open and looked inside . . . WHOOSH!

The box popped open and wisps flooded out. Pandora let out a cry and quickly fastened the lid back on the box—but it was too late. All the evils of the world were already released. Humanity was now cursed with hard work, pain, sickness, and death.

As for poor Prometheus, Zeus chained him to a rock, drove a shaft through his middle, and set loose an eagle that kept gnawing on Prometheus’ undying liver. At the end of each day, whatever the eagle ate through would grow back during the night. Prometheus cried and begged for forgiveness, but Zeus turned his back and walked away. Zeus left Prometheus chained to that rock, where he lived through many, many lifetimes of unimaginable, searing agony before Hercules freed him from his misery.

And Zeus was pleased because he had won in the end.

Meanwhile, on Earth, humans were burning their wood, cooking their food, and staying warm near the flames. Even though they had to suffer with all the evils from Pandora’s box, they were happy because in their hands, they held a strong, powerful fire.

I won, Zeus repeated to himself.

But did he really?