

CALIDA AND PROMETHEUS

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Among the dark remains of lands long dead stood a pale monolith somehow colder than its surroundings. It, a callous and unfeeling building alone on the horizon, pierced the hazy charcoal sky that hung over what remained of that world. A malign tower of white stone, marked unevenly by darkened windows that revealed none of its interior. Reflecting nothing in the pitiful glow of the hidden sun but mounds of barren grey rock and the stunted tar skeletons of what once may have been trees.

Inside, the ageing woman who called herself “Doctor” and “Professor,” although those titles and their professions had long since faded from use, stood hunched over an intricate construct of brass and iron. With a well-used, grease-stained rag, she wiped the sweat from her brow and pushed from her face a mess of wiry, steel-grey coils of hair. The heavy laboratory doors opened with a squeal.

“Doctor,” a steady mechanical voice ventured, “Entity CA-L1D-4 has made an unauthorised breach of gate one. Confirm to sound alarm,”

Its source, a squat box with more wires exposed than visible surface area, trundled into the lab on its rusty treads.

“Negative!” The doctor snapped.

If the box had a face, it would have raised an eyebrow. It retreated the way it came, leaving behind it a trail of dark coolant fluid.

The wrench Dr. Prometheus (a name torn from the pages of a history indiscernible from myth) held fell to the ground with an echoing clatter.

She could not bring herself to believe it. For a moment, all she could do was stand there, jaw clenched, mind whirling.

Calida. Or, as her designation had read, CA-L1D-4. The only true company in this worn out, empty world that Prometheus could ever appreciate. Of her brethren and sistren of steel and wire, Calida might have been considered the most remarkable. She and the doctor would spend false day after cold night together, musing over whichever interesting engineering dilemmas the pair encountered. Their bond stretched as far back as either of them could remember, although always the burnt-out ruins of their world shadowed their memories.



How could she leave? Not only was it upsetting, perhaps on the level of betrayal; the outdoors were far too hostile for even a machine of Calida's strength. With her perpetually cycling gears, her flowing bundles of carefully organised cabling, there was no knowing how long she would be able to last out there.

It was this thought that at last pulled Prometheus from her stupor. Any anger or disapproval she had begun to harbour prior was now being steadily replaced by feelings of creeping fear and disquiet.

She knew what she must do.

Gathering as many provisions as she could carry, Prometheus fled her ivory tower with hardly a glance behind her. She cared not for whether she might return, her mind set only on Calida. In one gloved hand, she carried her heaviest wrench, her worn backpack slung over her shoulders, and her waterskin at her hip. On her face she wore a bulky yet necessary gas mask, a relic of an age gone far before even the events that made the world as it was then.

All Prometheus could do was hope Calida was not so far away as for her to starve or succumb to the elements before she could reach her.

The doctor pursued a trail of clawed footprints leading across the expanse of dead earth. With each stop she made to drink from her waterskin, Prometheus felt her skin boiling and lungs struggling to pull the tainted air through her mask. It would only last so long in this world for which it was not designed. How long, Prometheus thought, how long before one or both of them would finally stop running?

The dark had reached its deepest twice now, marking the third “day” of Prometheus’ pursuit. Each footstep appeared fresher than those of the previous day. Calida was slowing down yet showed still no signs of stopping.

At times, Prometheus felt as though she could hear her. That beautifully familiar clank and whirr of Calida’s steps teased her ears. Oh, what she would give to see her again, even if it was her final sight, Prometheus knew that reaching Calida was the most important goal she would ever have again. And so, on the fourth day, the doctor set off once more under the foul light of an eternal dusk.

The fifth turning of the sky brought the weary doctor to a halt. Her waterskin had run dry. Prometheus did not care, for her love was at last in sight.

What was once a glint on the horizon, then a speck, then a shape not unlike a large rock, she now saw fully. Hunched there, an elegant five-limbed form. Calida.

Prometheus shed her backpack and broke into a run, casting aside her cumbersome gas mask and weighty wrench.



She called out, though her dry throat protested and crackled with pain. She sobbed hoarse tears of relief and joy, drawing the poisoned air into her aching lungs. Upon collision with her mechanical companion, she threw her arms around her and held tight the steel ribcage that was Calida's torso.

Calida turned her plated head. Her face, its single beady camera-eye and white metal jaw bearing as solemn an expression as it could.

"GREETINGS," she said softly, her gravelly voice undertoned with a not unpleasant electrical buzz. "I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT COME LOOKING FOR ME."

Through her tears, Prometheus smiled. She lifted her head from Calida's shoulder.

"I couldn't bear the thought of what might happen to you out here," Prometheus wiped her eyes with the grime-streaked sleeve of her lab coat, either oblivious or uncaring of the way they stung and her vision faded. "Why did you leave? For freedom?"

Calida shook her head, staying silent as she drew herself to her full height. Her form dwarfed that of the doctor, yet her demeanour was hardly imposing. She held Prometheus steady and extended her right hand.

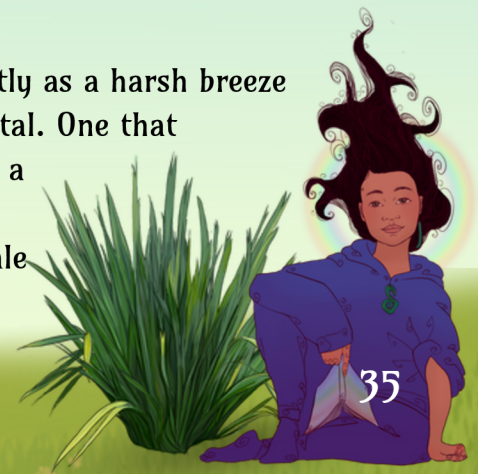
"HERE IS SOMETHING YOU REALLY OUGHT TO SEE."

In her gleaming claw of a hand designed for lethality and destruction, one that had learnt over the many dark years of an eternal winter's night to be gentle and to create, she held an elliptical, paper-thin scrap. It fluttered in the wind, pinched between two of her steel talons. She lowered her head, nodding toward a small pile of the same frail, brownish things.

Prometheus smiled, her lips and throat both as dry as the dust around them, her mouth and cheeks splitting in the malignant air. Warm blood flowed down her chin, splattering her lab coat a sickly red.

Calida focused her lens on Prometheus' clouding eyes. Her environmental sensors, the same which had prompted her to embark on this journey in the first place, told her all she needed to know of her partner's biological condition. Was that not why they were installed? So she could better take care of her? The irony of their current situation did not escape even Calida's angular, artificial mind.

The things, scattered in their scant pile as they were, shifted softly as a harsh breeze swept over them. A dry sound, one of rustling paper or scrap metal. One that Prometheus ought to have remembered, even as her mind fought a steadily encroaching darkness. It seemed that even a memory so mundane in the time before had been swept away by the same gale that had spread darkness over this corner of the world. Calida's memories, more digital instinct than true prior knowledge,



had yet remained.
And they had led her here.

“FALLEN LEAVES,” she whispered. Grating as her voice might have been, it was the most beautiful thing Prometheus had ever heard.

The doctor could not respond. The noxious, tar-black air of the night had worked its way well into her respiratory system, trachea close to collapse, bronchi withering and brittle. She stared up at Calida lovingly, unseeing as her eyes now were.

“THE WORLD IS HEALING, PROMETHEUS. YOU BROUGHT ME HERE, WITH YOUR MIND, YOUR HANDS,” Calida crouched, Prometheus in her arms, “YOUR LOVE, PERHAPS. IF YOU HAD NOT LOVED ME, DOCTOR, I WOULD BE BUT ASHES, LEFT EVERMORE IN THE NIGHT WITHOUT WARMTH.”

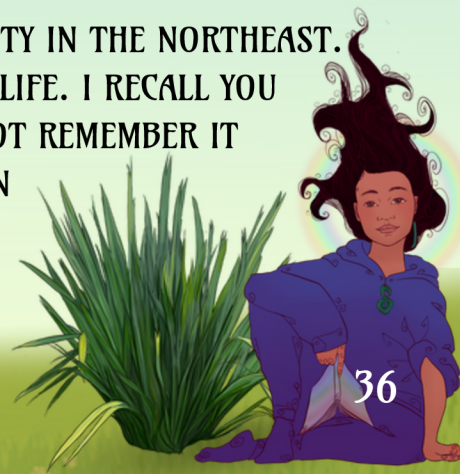
She wiped Prometheus’ dust and dirt-smeared face with the back of her hand. A tear rolled from the corner of one glassy eye, leaving a small damp spot on Calida’s torn skirt.

“YOU HAVE GIVEN ME SO MUCH. YOU HAVE LOVED ME. I COULD EVEN SAY THAT I LOVED YOU, THROUGH THE HARD LOGIC AND ELECTRICAL INPUTS AND OUTPUTS I CALL MY OWN MIND. OUR TIME TOGETHER WAS A LONG ONE, AND I SHALL TAKE THE UTMOST CARE OF EVERY MEMORY I HAVE SHARED WITH YOU.”

Prometheus knew, somewhere in what remained of her conscious mind, what this meant. The sweet sound of Calida’s voice soothed her through muffled ears, seeping in like water over a dry seedbed. Her message no longer felt like one of dread; her words now the final comforts this exhausted world could offer.

“I SHALL WATCH AS OUR PART OF THE WORLD REGAINS HABITABILITY. ALTHOUGH I CANNOT STAY HERE, NOT WITHOUT YOU,” Calida tried her best to smile down at Prometheus with her cold, inflexible face.

“I MUST SEEK THE GREAT CITY. THE STRONGHOLD OF HUMANITY IN THE NORTHEAST. THERE IS LIGHT THERE; IT IS A PLACE OF GREAT BEAUTY AND LIFE. I RECALL YOU MENTIONED IT LONG AGO, SO MUCH THAT I FEAR YOU MAY NOT REMEMBER IT YOURSELF. IF THERE IS LIFE HERE, CLOSER THAN THE EASTERN BOUNDARY OF THE WASTES, THEN MY JOURNEY IS APT TO BEGIN SOON.



“THAT IS WHY I VENTURED OUT INTO THESE LANDS, PROMETHEUS. THE BIOLOGICAL SIGNAL ANALYSIS SYSTEMS AND SENSORS YOU INSTALLED RECENTLY INDICATED TRACES OF LIFE IN THIS DIRECTION. I WAS TO NOTE THESE, RECORD RELEVANT INFORMATION, AND RETURN TO YOU IN HOPES OF BEGINNING A GREATER EXPEDITION. WITH YOU. I KNOW NOW THAT IT WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE, EVEN IF IT WERE NOT FOR THE FACT YOUR LOVE FOR ME OVERRODE THE POSSIBILITY, IN YOUR MIND, THAT I MIGHT BE SAFE ON THIS JOURNEY ALONE. YOUR CARE WAS YOUR UNDOING, PROMETHEUS. THE SAME EMOTION THAT ENABLED ME TO CONTINUE FUNCTIONING.

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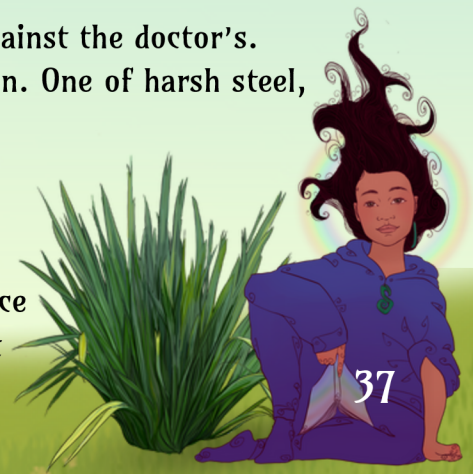
“THE PRICE HUMANS PAY FOR THEIR AFFECTION ASTOUNDS ME. IT IS ILLOGICAL THAT ONE WHO GIVES SO MUCH SHOULD BE MET WITH ONLY SUFFERING IN RETURN.”

With the last of her strength, if not more, Prometheus raised her hand to Calida's face. Calida held it there with her own, her single cold eye still locked on her lover's. She opened her mouth to continue, but hesitated at the look in Prometheus' milky eyes. A single breath escaped the doctor's lips, an attempt at words. Calida, she knew she had tried to say. The way she had said it all that time ago, when the doctor was young and the robot no more than a heap of melted wire and charred metal. When she had rendered her - its - wretched form into something beautiful. Transformed her from kindling and roughly hewn timber into the pulchritudinous, roaring flame she now was.

She lowered her face to Prometheus' and pressed her forehead against the doctor's. In that moment, all there was in the world were those two women. One of harsh steel, one of frail flesh.

Both cold.

Calida stood, cradling Prometheus in her arms. Death's significance to her, a machine before anything else, was defined only by what



she lost. Someone she loved was no longer, her life processes ceased. A Prometheus-shaped mass of lifeless meat was all that remained.

She set it down on the hard ground, dusting away sand and dry silt to clear something of an intentional space for the remains to lay. There could be no burial, no funeral rites, no commemoration, for Calida had neither the knowledge nor need for such things. Grief would come in time, in just as logical and tidy a way as every other emotion a creation such as Calida could feel.

As she set off northeast, Calida detected the resonant calls of those infernal eternal seabirds approaching and beginning to circle the place she had lain what had once been Dr. Prometheus. A sign of her proximity to the coast. A sign of her destination, the capital, the great divided city across its lonely islands.

The unliving one marched on, death behind her, life ahead.

