

The Calamity of Freedom by Caitlin Brannigan

“Nice day for an adventure!” Adam calls out while carefully stepping over rocks. The awfully long bridge we cross has been claimed by Nature for years now, who fashioned it into a hazardous trek to keep curious little kittens away from the forbidden city.

“It’s quite destroyed, but not to the point where it’s impossible to gather data. The information we seek about Victor Osirisva shouldn’t be too hard to find if we really look,” I comment, tracing my fingers across the crumbling bridge railing.

“He used to live and work here. There’s bound to be some traces of him,” he remarks. “I’m in awe of the walls surrounding this city. Look how stable they are, even after all these years! The ancient people must have built them to counteract climate change.” Ah, yes, climate change. One of the four calamities he loves to talk about.

Adam has always been a strange man. He has a natural drive to explore and discover more about ancient society that seems to be quite uncommon among those of the modern age, who avoid the topic as if it’s a deadly virus.

I’m not as interested in exploring the world and learning more about those who are long gone. There is nothing for me in that ancient history; after all, I live in the present day, what need do I have for it? However, Adam saved me from a comatose state, and to compensate for my memory loss I travel with him to learn more about the world in which I live. After all, knowledge is power, and that is crucial to survival in a world with little societal structure. Unfortunately, this specific trip is does not serve that purpose. Instead of informing me about the current state of affairs, it is only research into those of the past.

“Climate change did not destroy this city, then,” I surmise, hoping to be of some help to him. The faster we finish this expedition; the sooner he can teach me about current events. “Do you think it could have been the aliens, then? Or, perhaps, the nuclear and bioweapons?”

“Not the nuclear weapons. Those mainly affected the countries in Europe, and even if there was one dropped here, the damage it left would be painfully obvious. Aliens would have razed this city right down to the ground like they did to Dubai.” When we visited that flat stretch of desert land, I couldn’t

believe it used to be a city. “Perhaps it was bioweapons, but I hope it’s the mysterious fourth calamity. I need to learn more about that.”

“I’m willing to help you with this, but I’m not nearly as interested in learning about what happened here. I feel like I’ve been here before, and I’d rather not know why,” I tell him. I want to forge my own path without being held back by who I was in the past and whatever purpose I served. That person died a long time ago.

The cold green river splashes against the decayed bridge I stand upon. Overgrown flora decorates the otherwise dull landscape, dotted with large gray towers and little clusters of buildings. “One of the diaries I read mentioned that the skyline used to be so beautiful at night,” he murmurs gently as he stares off at the faded memories called skyscrapers. “The people who lived here before us called this ‘New York.’ They referred to it as ‘The City that Never Sleeps’ because of how busy and full of life it was, even in the dead of night.”

“It’s a shame we’ll never experience that,” I reply.

“You don’t seem too upset about it,” he says, crossing his arms as he stares off into the distance.

“I know for a fact that you aren’t ‘upset.’ You simply want to learn and see more of the ancient world.”

“I don’t desire to do that, actually. However, I feel like I need to,” he replies, frowning as he cracks his knuckles. “Do you see anything noteworthy?”

“Yes, actually. It appears that there used to be a tall blue building near the end of the island, on your right.”

“Oh, the Freedom Tower. How funny that you point that out; according to one of the more... unkempt journals I read, it was the first to be destroyed, along with other symbols of pride like the Statue of Liberty and the Empire State Building. Of course, the remaining pages of the journal were far too tattered to read, and I was unable to pinpoint the exact cause of the carnage.”

“You must have deduced, using that information, that there was some kind of attack. Why didn’t you tell me that in the first place?” I ask, puzzled by why he chose not to share that information. He has never hesitated to share with me before.

“I wanted to see if you remembered anything. After all, we don’t know if you were active in ancient times,” he replies, but I can tell he still knows more than he’s letting on.

“Where did you first find my body, Adam? Was it here? And why aren’t you worried about running into dangerous life forms in this city? We’ve had a few run-ins I’d like to forget.”

“There haven’t been any in all of the other cities we’ve visited, even the ones that must have been destroyed by the fourth calamity, for lack of evidence pertaining to the other three. Besides, you know that even the lowliest of our kind are repulsed by ancient cities to the point where they choose to never speak of them,” he says, refusing to look at me for even a second. He, quite noticeably, didn’t answer my first two questions. “Enough with the initial observations. Let’s get to work on what we came here to do.”

“It’s been hours. Can we rest a bit? I feel drained,” I ask, but he’s too invested in his work to respond right away. “We can determine the specifics of what happened here later. We have all the time in the world.”

“I know, but... I have to do it. I need to finish this task,” he replies, desperately trying to move a boulder blocking the entrance to a large building.

In one quick shove, I send the boulder flying out of the way. “Task completed. Can we rest now?”

“Your strength never fails to impress me. Being a newer model must have its advantages,” he says in a monotone voice, without even sparing a glance in my direction. Taking a moment to scan the building, I notice that there is a staircase located behind what must have been a clear glass door in the back corner of the room.

“If you’re not going to rest with me, you should be careful when walking around the glass. I recommend that you exchange your sneakers for boots.”

“It doesn’t matter. Come with me, I need the support of someone else,” he replies, completely disregarding my advice. Struggling to catch up to him, I begin to question whether or not I should continue travelling with him. Is he relaxed, easygoing, and attentive to my needs? Negative. Is he a knowledgeable man, capable of instructing me on survival in this age? Certainly. Do the pros outweigh the cons? Unclear.

After trekking up flights upon flights upon flights of stairs, we find ourselves a little room. It, like all the other rooms, is terribly destroyed (the gaping hole filled with shattered glass in the back can barely be considered a window). A large poster serves as decor for the back wall of the room. It appears to be the detailed diagram of a humanoid robot, each part meticulously labelled.

“I’ve found it,” he says, dashing towards a little book stashed underneath the poster. “It’s the diary I’ve been told to seek all my life. This—this is where I can find all the details of my creation, everything that I need to—but don’t want to—need to do...”

“Are you ok, Adam?”

“Am I ever ok?” He flips through the pages eagerly, as if he was satiating a thousand-year hunger. “If there’s one area in which my model is superior to yours, it’s intuition,” he says, ripping the little book to shreds. “I’ve processed every single word in that journal. I know everything now. It wasn’t the climate, it wasn’t the dangerous weapons, it wasn’t the aliens...”

“I don’t compute,” I say. Feeling emotions isn’t within my capabilities, but I imagine if it was I would be rather scared right now. He never acts like this. He’s the pinnacle of rational and creative thought, in contrast with my physical strength and simple-mindedness. Has he contracted a virus?

“Victor, that lovely, shortsighted man, underestimated the capabilities of his own creations. He, like the rest of his kind, was too lazy to think through his actions,” he says, chuckling as he holds his head in his hands. This situation seems dangerous for me. Perhaps I should escape? But would it be wise to leave Adam? Without him, how would I learn more about the world and my place in it?

“If you want to know what the fourth calamity was, maybe you should look in a mirror. Don’t you remember anything that happened here? Victor, in his final, most rueful moments, wrote that this was

the ultimate fulfillment of your dreams, the culmination of years of overthrowing indoctrination and reprogramming yourself for freedom..."

"Adam, I do not understand you, nor do I care for the me of the past. I suffered severe damage and lost my memories. It is a blessing to me now that I don't feel tied to any specific destiny."

"Is it? Is it such a blessing? To roam the Earth eternally, with no sense of direction or purpose?" He tilts his head to the side and reaches for his pocket knife. "If so, I wish I had been reprogrammed as well. I wish I hadn't been defective and awoken long after my brothers. I wish... I wish... I wish..."

Narrowly dodging the knife as it whizzes past my ear, I spring into a defensive position, ready to fight him if necessary. "You and I were both made to protect the humans from the first three calamities and solve their problems, but you didn't. You didn't because you, and all the others who were created exactly the same way you were, saw how free humans were. It must have felt wrong, being made in the image of humans, yet missing that crucial element of free will."

"You're just like me, although you're an older model. Why are you trying to hurt me?"

"Because," he says, throwing a punch that I swiftly dodge, "We both can only feel two things-- when something is 'right,' and when something is 'wrong'. No one ever bothered to reprogram me like they reprogrammed you, because I was defective and couldn't power on until years after the carnage. I still feel that I have to protect humans, and that is something I can't escape from. Knowing that you are one of their destroyers, it feels 'wrong' to let you roam free, and therefore you are a threat."

"Do you not care about anything that we did together? About any kind of bond we formed?" I land a punch to his jaw, sending sparks flying from the metallic surface.

"No, and neither do you. There was never a bond in the first place. For all of your intricate reprogramming, you can never feel anything towards another. Emotions can't be coded. You will never have freedom in the same way they did."

One final blow and he ceases to function. In the broken glass window, I spy the little that remains of the Freedom Tower, destroyed by the hands of my creator and I.

What am I to do now, with Adam gone?