

The lights of the vast megalopolis glared unceasing through the dark hours of night, surrounding the city with a baleful aura which blocked the sight of the stars above. Despite the endless glow of electric life and the droves of sleepless souls, no one in the skyscraping buildings could spot the airship gracefully flying between the tops of the spires. A submarine-like craft constructed with arcane technologies, the 170 meter vessel held herself aloft with several pairs of magnetodynamic wings. Her hull shimmered and reflected the brightmurk, her engines ran quieter than the sighs of the dead. The *Bluebird* silently approached the queen-widow's compound.

Within a high chamber of the compound's tallest tower, the dauphin stirred restlessly in his bed. Sleep no longer came to him and instead death was the nearer visitor. He suffered greatly with the poison of the world flowing through his veins. Suddenly, a shaft of dazzling, silver light poured in through the chamber's window. The diamond amulet hanging from the prince's neck shone in harmony with the same brilliance and he reached out toward the window with a feeble, trembling hand. Tears coalesced in his eyes at the sight of a familiar figure materializing within the moonbeam. The *Bluebird's* captain and his childhood mentor, she was the beautiful pirate called Night. She descended to the floor, her flowing peplos illuminated as bright as the new day by the sparkling light.

She set her fierce gaze upon the young man, observing his emaciated body and shadowed eyes. His weakness was too advanced for the question in his heart to be loosed from his throat, but she understood and pitied him with a soothing smile. Night knelt by the bedside and gently gathered up the frail prince in her arms. She carried the broken man to the window and together they ascended in the light to the *Bluebird's* bridge.

The ship's wheelhouse contained a dizzying array of fine instruments and myriad lit screens reporting all that the vessel saw and knew. Her captain deposited the dauphin in an ornate chair and began delivering orders to the ship with chirps and whistles. Responding to the language of the birds, the ship glided away from the queen's mansion.

An owl appeared behind the prince's chair and perched above where he lay slumped. The venerable elder peered at the man with its large, penetrating eyes.

"He has suffered more than we feared," said the owl. From the shadows emerged an ink black cat with flashing topaz eyes fixed on the prince.

"This one is already a corpse, Arthur," spoke the cat in a cold hiss. "Better to dump it now rather than taint the pure land with its presence."

"Kybele..." Night called the feline's name in a tone of warning. Arthur hooted loudly.

"Outrageous! Though the flame of life is smothered, embers yet smolder in his heart. It is not too late."

The *Bluebird* left behind the sprawling urban wasteland and flew on beyond plains, deserts, and forests toward distant mountain peaks. Among the windlashed, snow capped giants, the ship descended and entered by a secret opening into the side of the tallest summit. Within was her hidden berth, the rebel's hangar and lair.

Night lifted the dauphin once more and carried him down from the ship, down from the cavern hangar into a passage carved out of the living stone, down into the depths of the mountain. Their way was lit by the necklace worn by the prince, the diamond throwing out starry beams into the dark tunnels. Down she carried him, with the beast attendants following behind. Down they traveled for what seemed to be hours beyond counting.

The young man stirred in the captain's arms, suddenly animated by the inexplicable scent of pine and pollen. He looked up and saw ahead of them a light which grew to sear his eyes as they drew near. Somehow, the tunnel opened into a fantastically huge space beneath the earth. He could see neither a ceiling nor a far wall; above them was a blue sky and below it stretched a green woodland. A blazing star hovered overhead shining warm rays down on them.

"Welcome to undefiled Arcadia, dauphin." Night declared. "This is the heart of the planet where the sun goes to rest at night."

Birds sang and squirrels chattered as if to announce their arrival in the underground realm. Night carried the prince far into the forest until they reached a large lake shrouded in mist. At the water's edge, partially submerged in the shallows, stood the ruins of a temple. The foundation stones and upright pillars were all that remained, so ancient that they were weathered to the point of almost looking like natural stone once more.

"The first shrine ever raised, built by the gods themselves," narrated the captain in a reverent tone as she laid the dauphin upon the bank. She undressed him and then removed her own garment. He was surprised not to feel the chill of the fog-bound lake, then realized that the mist was in fact boiling steam. Even the ground beneath his back was warmed by an unknown geothermal power.

Night lifted the prince and marched into the temple. Carrying him tenderly, she strode along the slanting floor into the lake until the waters rose up to her chest. The young man shuddered as the hot liquid splashed over his body. At once he was assailed by the sensation of dissolving, but the more that the heat of the lake suffused his flesh, the more he could be certain that he remained whole.

His deadened nerves flared once more with vigor; power flowed into his form. After a few moments, he was able to struggle free from Night's grasp. The prince stood up in the water, unsteady at first but with strength returning rapidly. The rebel smiled as she returned to the shore. He followed, questions finally tumbling forth. Foremost among them, he asked why she had left him behind so many years before.

“Dear Dagobert, when the king was slain, you were but a child. Had I asked if you wanted to be taken away, you would have followed me beyond the ends of the earth without hesitation or consideration. Now you are grown and must make the choice for yourself.

“The amulet I left you has revealed the truth of all that has passed before your eyes; you’ve seen the doom toward which man marches. Recognizing the world as it is, you could not avoid its poisonous thorns. In this place, I’ve healed you and you must decide.

“You may return and accept the world as it is, living to the end of your days as another drone untroubled by the poison which so harmed you before. Or, you may persist in seeing the wrongness of the world and truly become its enemy. You will have no place of belonging, you will be hunted and hurt forevermore, your allies will be few and your enemies many.”

Night left him with her words and laid down upon the grass to dry herself in the radiant sunlight. The prince sat beside her, weighing his options. He remembered the injustices done to his family, to his countrymen, and to the planet. Greed and hatred were well fed, honesty and compassion starved. All that had once stood for the glory of humanity had been toppled, denounced, and erased.

To make peace with such a world was a loathsome thought. The dauphin raged against the image of a version of himself who could assimilate into that ruinous society, then he killed that image within himself.

Baring his fangs, he declared in front of that most ancient shrine, “I am an enemy of the world.”

Night regarded him with a proud, yet sad smile, for no one could know better than her what hardships awaited him. She called out to Arthur who had taken up a watchful post atop one of the temple’s pillars. The bird took to his wings, flying to the far side of the lake hidden by curtains of steam. When he returned he had a large pelt clutched in his talons.

He brought the fur cloak to the prince and said, “Take this, the pelt of the bear-mother, and may she protect you as one of her cubs.”

The prince held up the artifact to inspect it with wonder. Her fur was gnarled and matted, orange-brown tangles which seemed more like strands of bronze woven into armored scales. The bear’s head remained intact with her massive skull still giving it such lifelike form that it seemed at any moment she might open her eyes once more. Two long arms hung down from the cloak with fearsome claws still attached. Night helped to wrap him in the vestment, finally placing the heavy head upon his shoulder.

“Kybele,” Night called softly, “Do you not also have a gift for the dauphin?”

The black cat stepped out from the shadows of the ruins, sat defiantly before them, and turned up her nose.

“That bird’s mind may have flown away, but I still remember the actions of the betrayers clearly. Long ago the Lord of Wild Beasts granted the power of the king to man, and what has been the result? They sever the cycles of life, cut down the sacred groves, and make war without end. I shall not give unto another human a sword. This one is no more worthy of our trust than the usurper upon whom he would avenge himself. A weak, pathetic creature crushed merely by witnessing the truth.”

Kybele would say no more and Night knew it to be pointless to argue with the ancient beast. She knew their time in the paradise was limited and so instead began to converse with the prince on personal topics. They spoke of their past, his childhood, the interval of their separation and all that had happened during, and finally they touched upon the kaleidoscope of possible futures.

After some time, Night garbed herself in her bright peplos once more and announced sadly, “We might have enjoyed an eternity together in this refuge, but you have broken a taboo by bringing with you a foreign item.”

The strange underground sun fell toward the horizon with unnatural speed, plunging the forest into glowing twilight. The dauphin suddenly grew weary, barely able to hold his eyes open as he tried to question his mentor. A familiar sound blared from the pile of his clothing: the alarm clock function of his cell phone. The screeching siren grated the ears as it was distinctly out of place in that divine realm.

The young man could keep his eyes open no long and darkness blotted out his sense of the hidden forest, the steam cloaked lake, and the woman dear to him. He drifted through the void of sleep, tormented all the while by the shrill cries of the alarm. When he felt himself waking once more he recognized the soft cushioning of his own bed.

In a daze, the prince removed his phone from his pocket to silence it. He hardly had time to wonder if all that he had experienced had merely been a dream before a heavy blow shook the door of his bedchamber. More impacts followed; instinct told him that the usurper’s soldiers had come for his head at last. The dauphin rose and found confirmation of the reality of the night’s events. Over top of his clothes, he was wrapped in the knotted pelt of a monstrous bear.

With a crash the door toppled inward and soldiers piled into the room. The black and gold uniformed men formed a firing line and trained their rifles on the prince. He could feel their murderous intent wash over him like a wave, to which he responded by drawing forth wrath from his chest and releasing it with a primal shout. But it was not his own throat which loosed the cry, instead the head of the great bear lifted up from his shoulder and let out a deafening roar that shook the soldiers. The pelt sprung to life, bronze fur bristling like thorny armor.

When the soldiers recovered their courage and opened fire, the ancient beast’s arms rose up to encircle the prince in a protective shield. The hail of bullets failed to find him, deflected by the

bear's impenetrable defense. Massive paws swung out and lashed the gunmen, knocking them aside and destroying their weapons.

With no desire to fight his way free and leave a massacre in his wake, the dauphin looked to his escape. Though there appeared to be nothing but the sky beyond the bedchamber's window, he leapt back before the soldiers could regroup and crashed through the glass.

For many years he had thought that he had been abandoned, left to face a malevolent world alone, but he had learned that he was instead watched over closely and could have found his ally easily had he only resolved to look for her instead of waiting to be saved. The prince fell only a slight distance before landing on something solid in mid-air. Below his feet appeared the sleek hull of the *Bluebird*. He had learned that the ship had been at his side always, and he would never again lose sight of her.