

I am King.

Bertrand took a knee, then stood back again. The heat assailed him, pushing against his instincts to flee the burning hell around him. The flaming wreck of a Renault tank smoldered to his right while human soldiers shot and died against the fae's onslaught. But fight they did and so Bertrand would stand.

I am King.

Reality clashed against the lord's vision. This was a world of volcanic rock and bloody dust. Cracked stones and spontaneous fires dotted the infernal landscape. This was no more his kingdom than the depth of the ocean was.

"Yes, it is."

Once again, Bertrand's conviction crashed against the truth around him and once again, his adamant will prevailed. Bertrand was a scion of Roland. He could not be tamed. This was France, despite the fire and fury and the bones of the invaders. France was under his dominion. It would be so until he died and he. Was. Still. Alive.

Red armor regrew while his golden mask reformed, the death mask of Agammemnon.

I am King.

Bertrand was not defeated yet.

He dodged to the side. A moment later, another tank smashed on the ground where he used to be.

The fae lord spoke and the air shook, forcing Bertrand to take a step back. Even though he could not understand the words, they made sense, sending images in his psyche despite his best efforts to ignore them. No one could deny the tongue of the fae, it seemed.

Shell. Thick. Annoying. Trick of metal. Still. Weak.

He turned around on his monstrous mount to smash another flank of the Triple Entente's advance. Maybe the brits. Bertrand charged ahead before more tanks perished to fae warriors. More vampires fought around him, 'delousing' the heavy war machines so they could act as anchors for their formation. The air was heavy with the sound of cannons. The fae lord was stalling. He knew that with every second, new warriors crossed the threshold to join the melee while he was weakening with every loss. It thought it was winning.

Bertrand knew better.

I am King.

The Roland lord moved forward and bisected one of their leaders. He charged and broke the tide with every swing of his mighty axe. Carnage followed. The humans rallied and reformed

with the strength of those who are ready to fight to the death. Bertrand knew he was setting himself as a target but that was fine. It was his duty.

I am King.

Blood dripped on his crimson armor as he kept going, and going. Quilled heads rolled before the onslaught. Giant, boar like beasts died to well-placed tank shells. Humanity took another step forward. They followed in his wake, as it should be. Then the inevitable happened.

A horn announced the return of the fae lord. Fires intensified, choking men and sending a wave of terror down the spine of the stoutest vampires. Bertrand stood, for he was king.

The fae lord crested a nearby ridge.

He was as tall as three men, covered in scales that could be armor or could be natural, Bertrand could not be sure. Quills covered his massive head and fell down his back like a waterfall of hair, delicate if it did not adorn such a monstrous being. Beautifully cruel traits sneered at Bertrand under scarlet eyes that burnt with an inner fire. He wielded a fiery whip, and flickering embers rose all around him like a cape. The body of a titan and legs like oak trunks completed the picture, though the fae lord was not walking now. Instead, he moved from atop a beast like a komodo dragon if those were the size of a large sloop. The beast itself was so resilient that even cannon shots failed to pierce its thick hide. Bertrand stood to face it though he knew he could not win. Victory was not the point. The point was standing.

Once more, the fae lord hissed at him.

Cold ones. Slow. Amusing. Satisfactory. Distraction.

It charged, and so Bertrand charged as well.

Bertrand fought through the terror washing over him through sheer grit. Fire licked at his form long before the fae lord reached him. Incandescent motes gnawed at his armor, his mask, the flesh underneath. He persisted through all of that with all his speed and towards the forest of fangs and the fire whip of the fae lord and the death that could take him at any moment. But he would not falter.

I am a King.

The whip carved the land as Bertrand dodged to the side, as before. Even with his roll he could not escape the searing heat and the pain that came with it. Smoke ravaged his lungs, made his nose bleed pink foam but he held on. His armor further melted despite his efforts but this time he intercepted the tip of the whip on the flat of his axe blade. The impact made his bones creak. He was airborne. A roll, and his foot found a stone just in time to dodge again, just in time not to die.

Bertrand roared and threw his axe. The fae lord deftly dodged, beast and rider moving as one. He dematerialized it and made it reappear in his hand. More precious life force wasted, more essence drained. He could not keep going, but he had to try.

You, Persistent. Insignificant. Try. Harder.

The fae's voice drilled in Bertrand's mind. He used the rage and importance to fuel his regeneration, to rebuild his armor and mask again for what felt like the thousandth time that night. Behind, in the clouds, a new trail of fire appeared next to the sooty clouds. A form raced across the sky like a falling star. He recognized it. It was the HMS Zephyr, and it would crash land at the foot of the breach.

The fae lord turned to watch and Bertrand didn't attack. It would be useless. Instead, he finished healing. The hellish mount still glared with its beady eyes.

Even. Mightiest. Machines. Faillible. Vulnerable. We. Endless. Tide.

He turned back to Bertrand, his attention now focused on the battle lord. The air seemed to shift, turning more oppressive.

World. Joins. Natural. Order. Lost. Reborn. Glorious. Inevitable.

"That will not happen."

Bark. Strange. Tongue. Wind. Pointless.

"We shall see."

The two combatants charged at each other again, and this time the lord's whip dug a painful groove through the armor and into Bertrand's chest. Too hot. Too much pressure. Just had to hold on a little longer. A tail coming at his face.

Bertrand flew through the air, but the pain never came.

"Took you long enough," he croaked.

The ghastly form of Jean-Baptiste smiled grimly. In his Magna Arqa, the expert duelist looked like death as seen by artists, complete with cowl, a scythe, and a skeletal mask. The fae lord turned on himself to stop a blow from Dominique's oversized cleaver. The androgynous leader of Mask in France exchanged a few quick blow with their foes using their peerless speed but they had to retreat before the heat.

"Quelle chaleur," they commented drily.

Finally. Fun. Contest.

The three vampires stood apart from each other. They were foes on the political chessboard but here, those considerations melted like snow under the sun. There was only one earth to play with.

"Gentlemen," Dominique said.

They charged first.

Jean-Baptiste and Bertrand followed, letting them take point. Bertrand tolerated this because he was wounded. Like that, the three and the two danced on the dead expanse of land with the humans at their back and the portal in front, backlit by the flaming trail of the Zephyr. Mask vampires had waged war for centuries and they knew each other well, but this one a type of foe they had never meant to face. Quickly, their coordination collapsed. Dominique was meant to deliver the finishing blows but she could not get close enough, so this time it fell to the other two. Bertrand was already slowing down. Jean-Baptiste was a peerless duelist, but this time he was facing a pair. He was the first to fall. The fae lord moved gracefully across the battlefield atop his accursed beasts and kept a perfect engagement distance. It took a single mistake. A wrong angle on a crater and Bertrand's wounds prevented him from covering his favorite rival in time. The fire whip tore through the image of death and dispelled it, a nightmare replacing another.

Bertrand smothered the guilt and rage he felt at the loss of such a rival by his own failure. He could not stop now. He would probably join him soon anyway.

I am King.

Until the end.

Dominique collapsed without legs soon after, then it was just Bertrand. The lord watched him charge with a frustrating sneer. The two warriors charged each other for the final blow, and only one had a chance of being a winner.

Bertrand roared and threw his axe. It missed, but not because the fae dodged.

THONK.

The terrible noise came with an impact and a plume of dust the likes of which only artillery could produce. The fae lord jumped and rolled a few times, landing nimbly on his feet with the first hint of concern Bertrand had ever seen on his face. When the dust cleared, his mount was left on the ground.

It was very, very dead. A projectile had gone through its head clean. It resembled a massive quarrel if quarrels were launched by ballistae the size of a coastal battery gun. Enchantments covered the entire surface in thin, delicately engraved scriptures that shimmered a pleasant blue in the choking darkness, A inscription could be read on the metal fletching. To add insult to injury, it was written in English.

'Extra large game hunter, mark IV. Property of IGL. Do not touch.'

And below, in Akkad.

That means you.

- Ariane.

Bertrand first thought was that if the shot had been made only a few minutes before, if the fae lord had been delayed by another attack, if the Verdun High Command had waited a little more to launch their assault as he had requested, Jean-Baptiste would still be alive.

His second thought was surprise that the thing had not exploded yet.

NO!

The fae lord rushed to the side of its deceased companion with a cry of rage and despair. Bertrand was left standing by himself, alive. In the distance, the Zephyr finally touched ground.

If he had not seen the puff of dust a little farther, he would have been quite surprised to see a bed of roots and white flowers bloom with incredible speed, embracing the full length of the massive warship. Branches grabbed then let go, replaced by others as the wreck slowed down. It came to rest on its flanks without a sound.

One by one, in the distance, the fires died out. Darkness expanded in a sphere and the screaming warriors were abruptly silenced. A cold wind blew from the east, chasing away the acrid smoke and the stench of old blood that saturated the air. The mortals' breath in the distance puffed as the temperature dropped precipitously and in the distance, more impacts announced the arrive of reinforcements. A curtain of green light parted the clouds to show the combined fleet take position around the Zephyr, the frigates being first to land. Completéments of elite marines landed and joined the fray.

You DARE.

Bertrand winced but he didn't bend and he didn't flee when the fae's whip flared. He thought he was dead but another voice came, this one a woman's. It was cold and just like the fae lord's, he could understand the words.

Princes. Always. Babble.

The 'prince' roared incoherently.

Man children.

The voice was cold and uncaring. In the distance, radiant blue lines shone, expanding from a blue sapphire to form the shape of a woman in heavy armor.

This, more than Jean Baptiste's loss, chilled Bertrand's heart.

For centuries, he had kept the most fae as resources among all Mask lords. He had traded their blood for favor and power. This had been the proper way of things and this... this upstart had used the fae to carve a path to their world and reaped untold benefits. She had taken what could have been his by seeing what he had not and it hurt. It hurt... to be left

behind. It hurt to be made irrelevant. He was a King, but he no longer had a hope of being... *the King*.

The armored shape disappeared, reappearing next to Bertrand almost instantly, arm extended. An extended soul blade dug into the prince's armor, shearing parts of the metal shell but failing to draw blood. This time. The whip retracted immediately. A counter was easily dodged.

"My, what a hot lad. Bertrand, it appears I need to tenderize our guest before he is ready for consumption. May I ask that you bring Dominique to safety?"

"I consent to it. After that I shall join the mortals."

She nodded. Bertrand left.

In the distance, a mantis-like creature skewered one of the cold ones but retreated before it could eat it. Frustrating. They covered each other but she was patient. Nibble here, nibble there, and then feast. So it had been and so it would be. She found an isolated cold one and moved through the shadows. It did not turn. Of course, it did not turn. She was a duchess and they were so very slow.

The duchess bit down on nothing.

The duchess moved back, a blade cutting into one of her pincers. The cold one stood there, blade drawn.

"Greetings," it said in Likaeen.

Hated language! Hated foes! How did the cold one speak it? It was weak and cut off! It should not know the tongue.

"My name is Cadiz. I wanted to test the prince but... I guess... You'll do."

The duchess streaked through the shadows and struck at an angle. Her scythes cut through air. A voice whispered by her ear.

"Magna Arqa."

I should have let Bertrand die. He is not just a prick, but he also swore to join Nirari in his next battle. That means we will be on opposite end of the final conflict. I should have let him fall, yet after I helplessly saw Jean-Baptiste return to the Watcher, the instinctual part of me felt revolted at the thought of losing an elder to a glorified raiders. Blood Court twats have no right to take what remains ours, the curs, and so I saved him despite my misgivings.

Sometimes, I hate those instincts.

Maybe I could kill him in a duel later? I am sure it would be acceptable.

“You will pay for this!” the prince roars in his guttural dialect.

Scions of the Court of Blood do not speak true Likaeen but a twisted version of it that does not allow for concepts such as peace and tranquility. In fact, those words do not exist for them. They cannot conceptualize them. The broad gamut of Likaeen words associated with truce and harmony all translate to apathy and weakness, a most curious fact that bridges nature and language. Pah, whatever. I am no linguistics scholar to consider those details.

“Die!”

I dodge under the prince’s whip attack and follow with a riposte. It is the first time I fight a proficient whip user who could give me a challenge. A good opportunity to practice a little. I pour more power into the Aurora to combat the prince’s fire and close the distance so we are both fighting with our whip.

What follows is slightly disappointing. The deadly part of the whip is the tail end which can move at speeds even I cannot follow, but knowing where the end will be is just a matter of seeing how the whip moves. The fight devolves into a dodging game of not being where the whip lands. At some point, our whips meet and the fight turns into a brief contest of strength, but the heat on Rose hurts me and the prince disengages before I can drag him. His whip is also too hard to be destroyed. In fact, it consists of strangely flexible, meshed metal scales that move in a snake-like motion. Quite frustrating. Eventually, I get bored and start peeling off the prince’s impressive armor chip by chip. Or perhaps it is his hide? In any case, he gets angry at the treatment.

“You puny thing, burn to cinders!”

In an overly dramatic fashion, the prince lifts his whip above his head where it thickens and lengthens. Soon, a massive fire snake slithers towards me, fangs bared. It is larger than me. I dodge it as the body appears to be quite hot, but the head turns quickly and gives chase. I start racing across the scorched battlefield. The technique’s weakness is apparent. I assume the snake has a limited length and it appears the prince has to remain stationary. I could escape for a moment but I refuse to do so unless compelled, so instead I charge him and stab him in the leg for a change. Another blow to his head rips off his quills. It appears he can move it after all. I veer left just as the snake bites down and dodge. The massive body of the snake goes through the prince who does not seem to be any worse for the wear.

“Fool, did you think I would be hurt by my own tools?”

Well, yes. It would have amused me.

But since I cannot have it and he does not seem inclined to move, I take out my newest gun from a back holsted and point at him. The first enchanted bullet digs through the already damaged chestplate. Blood like lava drips from the wound, falling to the ground with a

terrible hiss. It smelled scrumptious. The best blood since I left the fae spheres. I feel my fangs grow.

But no, he needs to simmer down a bit first.

The second bullet cuts a dozen quills and the third catches him in the biceps, taking flesh with it. Perhaps some bone as well? In any case, the prince is not happy. He lifts both hands. A moment later, his aura explodes.

Waves of fires roar out from his form and roll over the ravaged landscape in a tide of fire.

“Winter shield.”

I pour a lot of energy into the Aurora until a bubble of icy cold appears around me. It parts the flaming wave in two. The prince persists but his attacks is inherently indiscriminate while my shield is small and compact. Time and stamina are on my side.

Rather than giving up, the prince spreads his arms and the whip turns into two whips. Convenient, I guess? Should he not have done that from the start?

“Burn!”

He turns like a dervish and a storm forms around him, then a twister that swallows flying corpses and scorched debris. Annoying.

“Enough of this,” I tell him in Likaeon. “Polar midnight.”

The hurricane is snuffed before it can fully form and I watch with some delight the prince’s expression turn flabbergasted. For the first time, real fire twists his cruel traits. A thorny root whips him in the back, making him stumble. I use the window to plant Rose in his exposed shoulder.

He screams in pain and retreats. Meanwhile, I admit to being stunned for a moment here.

“*Oh my, you taste absolutely **DELICIOUS.***”

“Foul thing! Get away from me with your coarse tongue!”

“*COME BACK, WE ARE NOT DONE YET.*”

Oh, he runs. A chase! How exciting. I call Metis with a whistle and wait.

And wait a few more seconds.

A vague sense of annoyance reaches me through the ether. Oops. I form a small forest of thorny trees and white flower. The world’s best pony gallops out a moment later.

“Sorry, I forgot there were no forests here.”

Metis snorts in a way that conveys condescending disbelief. I grumble as I mount her and we gallop after the fleeing form of the prince. Once again, I resist the urge to ask her if the Aurora bothers her — it does not. Instead, I focus on our quarry and its flight towards the portal.

The prince blow a horn. I dare not contemplate where he was keeping it. A wave of warriors moves away from the fight to attack me. Unfortunately for them, they now form a nice, compact group of combatants well clear from the humans soldiers. Distant cannon fire sounds and soon, the earth explodes under them. The distant forms of the flying ships provide covering fire to our side. The prince hisses and runs. We are losing ground. I call more forest around us and suddenly, we are gaining ground instead.

Nightmares really work in a peculiar way. Ah well.

Metis snorts, sniffing the air. The scent of fae blood is intoxicating.

“You can have his heart after I’m done with him.”

A neigh.

“After.”

Another neigh.

“If you want first dibs, kill him yourself.”

An annoyed neigh, but she gallops faster. The portal is almost in view. The lead tanks have stopped in front of it and keep unloading round after round into the aperture. Ranks of infantrymen and marines have joined and keep a rolling fire in to kill reinforcements as they pour through. They will be out of ammunition very soon, I can tell.

“Ou sont nos mages?” a sergeant complains.

Why, excuse me. I was busy whipping a demigod. The gall of those people.

The prince sprints back to his world. Oh no, that will not do at all.

“Wounded land and clenching jaws

Bloody ash and closing jaws

Close the gash that carnage wrought.

Ban the scourge that slaughter brought.”

A titanic wave of power courses through my wave coming from deep under my feet. Such a rush is not mine alone. I feel like a conduit to something greater as the nascent soul of the

planet revolts against the intrusion. The land is becalmed. Spells fail. Even enchantments dull, suppressed for now.

All the warriors of the Blood Court collapse and how, affording the humans some breathing room and prone targets. The prince is no exception. More importantly, however, the wound in the world snaps shut with a resounding thunderclap. I step up next to the kneeling prince. His burning aura has reduced to a reddish shadow of its former self.

"It looks like you are almost done," I tell him.

He jumps, he runs, as I hoped. Metis neighs in outrage.

"Come on old girl, did you not want to build an appetite?"

She bites me.

"Alright alright, let us go."

The pursuit is unfortunately short, with the prince fading quickly between the fallen portal and his own defeat. I jump on him and fight him, the cold of the Aurora smothering the last embers of his aura. I have to peel off the skin armor with my bare claws while he resists which I admit I find a little arousing. His blood is warm and thick like hot honey. It speaks of blood and the endless conflict, singing a discording song as the essence merges with mine. I receive a shock of confusing images, of carnage under a scarlet, sunless sky. Blood emerges from the land and returns to it in an endless cycle of senseless violence without end. It is less hunt and more frenzy. It also lacks succor. Calm or contemplation do not exist. There is a race forward that only ends in death. A pity for them, but I know where to go in a couple thousand years if I need a restful holiday away from political considerations. Provided I live, of course.

I do give Metis her heart and since I am feeling generous, the tongue as well. As to why she asked for that specifically, I do not know.

Perhaps she just finds the taste interesting.

I hunt a little more and find a noble trying to rally his warriors on a distant hill.

"You!" he roars when he spots me. "Grant a warrior's death."

"Very well, supplicant. Heartseeker."

My blood sings, denser somehow. More aggressive. The spell tears through ranks and leaves behind desiccated husks clinging to cracked weapons. Essence rushes through me, feeding me as the last of them dies.

Ah, as expected.

I believe that I am getting closer to matching Nirari toe to toe. We shall see.

“Although I regret your loss, I must ask what possessed you to attack the fae,” I asked Bertrand as he rests against the wreck of a Renault tank.

Other vampires give us some privacy as they revel with the human soldiers. Entente and Alliance soldiers do not mingle but they have decided on a truce, and two teams even play a football match on the site of the portal.

“Attacks across the frontline intensified during the last twenty-four hours, leading the Verdun High Command to believe they would do better on the attack. The plan was to use the brand new Renault tanks as anchor for a formation that would take down warriors as they emerged. Trucks would carry ammunition. Of course, they did not account for... the prince, was it?”

“Correct. And a Duchess.”

“I understand Gabriel and Hastings kept her at bay. One of your own killed her. We found her head on a spike.”

“Cadiz is not mine but he does prove reliable when a good fight can be found.”

“If the nobles had been left unchecked, they could have smashed through the human ranks and spread deeper with unknown consequences. We could not let them go alone. The Republican mages prevented us from altering the final decision. We...”

He looks at me with deep-set eyes. Once upon a time, I hated him. No, once upon a time, I feared him. Now, he is no longer a real danger to me or my allies. He is merely someone who will be against me at a turning point, then who will serve the winner as a powerful lieutenant.

I should really consider having him assassinated, and yet... it would be dishonorable, for we are in the middle of a truce.

In the aftermath of the battle, victory of what newspapers and scholars have come to call the Great War belongs to the Entente, yet this victory is not complete. The German Empire did not unconditionally surrender and so the victor's conditions are not all applied. Their attempts to dismantle the Habsburg Empire are flatly refused, but they console themselves by some respectable territory gains. The French regain control of Alsace and Lorraine thus erasing the painful humiliation of 1871 while Italy gains control of pieces of the Tyrol, Dalmatia, and the city of Fiume. Both alliance return more or less to their starting positions with war reparations and map colors balanced towards the 'Triple Entente', with one notable

exception. Under the stupefied eyes of the whole of Europe, a terrifying ideology rises from the flames of the war. A red flag flies of Saint Petersburg.

I should have known that Karl Marx would be problematic.

This is of little concern, however. Soon, deadland activities spark again over Europe. I know what my next target is. And this one will be more than problematic.

I fear we need a larger bomb.