**A Practical Guide to Conquest**

**Prologue**

The Watcher was angry.

For countless iteration, she had been ordered to influence the stellar system around it and guide the primitive species living on the lands of the sole inhabitable planet to their ascension in the stars.

For many, many iterations she had failed.

At first the local intelligent species had appeared promising. These ‘humans’ were evidently capable of love, and powerful positive feelings. The Watcher had been thrilled by the discovery. Alas, it had not lasted long for the negative to outweigh the positive.

She was forced to end the first timeline-iteration when some ‘genius’ achieved the incredible feat of engineering a metal-transformation plague and unleashing it worldwide.

The second iteration had been no better. The Watcher had tried to give a hint or two in the dreams of some mad scientists against plague and epidemics in general. The direct result had been a nuclear war and most of the planet plunged into a radioactive winter, the last survivors dying as their world became ashes and poison.

The Watcher had become more and more annoyed.

Obviously, time was not a concern for her. Practically, the era had not changed. Each time the iteration was stopped, it was a fresh start for this star and everything living around it.

But after each attempt was tried, more and more unfavourable outcomes were manifesting themselves. Slight changes in weather patterns often produced more large-scale wars, not less. Diverting a comet once had resulted in the creation of a fanatical religion so insane and cruel that the Watcher had almost stopped the iterations then and there.

But the Watcher had received orders, and failure would not be accepted by beings far, far mightier than she.

It did nothing to lessen her anger at the species she was supposed to help ascending, naturally.

The Watcher did not frown, for she had not the facial ability to do so, but reminiscing the last thought had given her an idea.

It was...extreme.

It was also considerably stretching the directives she was supposed to uphold in every circumstance.

But it was not a breach of the rules It was not a direct intervention, assuming you didn’t consider the soul as fundamentally part of the flesh shell of a living being.

The Watcher didn’t.

More problematic was the issue of the replacement-soul. To avoid religious shenanigans, no soul born in the new iteration was acceptable. And this meant the Watcher had to use those of previous –and failed – iterations.

Given how spectacularly and disastrously humanity had failed every time in these iterations, the Watcher was really, really not eager at the idea of searching for a model of virtue and tolerance among millions of bloodthirsty individuals.

Unless...

Unless appealing to the goodness of humanity was the wrong way to ensure the species as a whole began to learn from its mistakes.

Thousands of iterations ago, the very idea would have appealed her. Now? It said very bad things she didn’t think the blood spilled in this endeavour would make things worse.

In the end, the Watcher could always stop the iteration...like it had done for thousands of timelines.

There was no order given. There was, however, a grand flash of light.

The Watcher sighed and prepared to watch the consequences of her actions.

**27 August 1715, Versailles, Kingdom of France**

The King was dying.

The thought would have been unthinkable mere months ago. The King had resisted everything: plague and wars, family deaths, poisons and wounds which had led to their deaths many men and women.

And yet the King was dying.

René would have preferred being a thousand leagues away from here. His sire had given him plenty of goodness and confidence while he was in his service, and he wished at this moment he would be able to repay this generosity.

But he couldn’t. The King was dying, and the hands and the voice of a recently promoted *chef d’escadre* were nothing when God called back a soul to him.

The former corsair descended the stairs, deliberately walking in direction of the gardens and away from the castle. He needed fresh air, and above all he needed to be away from the dark mood which had seized Versailles and its inhabitants.

Some servants often whispered it was worse than when the Grand Dauphin had died four years ago. The heir to the throne, after all, had already been old and his skills and talents were constantly mocked by the court. The Grand Dauphin, the Duke of Bourgogne, the Duke of Berry...this place had not belonged to them. But the life about to end was the one who had dreamt, commanded and summoned everyone to Versailles.

It was said that, seventy years ago, these lands were mosquito-ridden, swamps-filled holes with nothing but the forest to save the reputation of the nearby village. It was difficult to imagine this now. The stairs were large, the castle was immense, and the galleries were like a golden dream. The gardens, the statues, the fountains, and the water canals could be seen continuing as far as his sailor eyes could see.

It was beautiful.

René Duguay-Trouin wondered what would happen to Versailles now. There were many traditions in the Kingdom of France, and one particularly important was to never sleep in a dead man’s castle or house. Since it was completely unconscionable for the King of France to die away from the castle where he had spent so many years, it was likely the court was going to disperse. It wasn’t like his successor was going to appreciate the finest details of etiquette and the subtleties of lace clothes anytime soon. The poor Dauphin was only five years old, by the seas and tides!

Yes, Versailles was certainly going to be abandoned. The Dukes and the other peers of the realm were going to return to Paris and their nights of debauchery.

It was change. Change the court was not used to anymore. But no King of France had died in the last fifty years. René supposed that all changes in the salons, the councils and the hotels were going to look like quite unconventional.

Change. His heart hoped those were going to be good, but it was hope against reason. As he marched on the right side of the Grand Canal and saw the lamentable state of the small boats once used for festivities, he wasn’t able to avoid grimacing.

Like the fleets of Toulon, Brest and Rochefort, these embarkations were rotting where they had been abandoned, souvenirs of the Age of Glories when the fleur-de-lys had gone from glory to glory and seemed unbeatable. Now the boats’ paints had not been done in years, and many of them had been outright stolen or discarded to be burned when the winters grew too cold.

René wasn’t going to complain. Out of hundreds of thousands, he was perhaps one of the rare people to have survived and won a lot before peace was signed at Utrecht. But he could not help but wonder what sort of peace awaited him...he was a man of action, and now there were no more skirmishes and adventure to be found on the seas. The corsairs had been disarmed. The English had the control of the seas.

It was peace. Maybe it was what the kingdom truly needed, after so many years of war.

As he continued his walk, the alleys between the trees and the gardens were abandoned like the Canal was. And the gardeners and the other servants who were supposed to be working were more preoccupied exchanging the latest rumours than working to earn one or two cents.

And unlike him, it was evident they weren’t fond of the King.

“He reigned too long,” a young man with an insolent expression said. “He won’t be missed at Paris.”

“Nobody is missed at Paris,” a much older gardener replied before spitting on the grass.

“He said he wanted no more wars,” an apprentice with long brown hairs argued. “I heard two Counts repeat it. The King said it to the Dauphin.”

Three gardeners chuckled.

“Don’t want more wars! Hey, he’s losing them!”

“There is only one sin: defeat.”

All heads turned towards the young man who had spoken. Duguay-Trouin himself, half-hidden by the trees wondered what sort of sentence it was. This wasn’t something a noble would say...especially after the rather large number of defeats the armies of the King of France had been on the receiving end of during the last decades.

“Don’t let the bishops hear that...”

“I swear, they said it was something the Dauphin answered...”

“The Dauphin is five! Now stop this and find me a spade, we need to...”

René Duguay-Trouin continued his long walk, wondering on the sense of the words. Surely the sins of someone couldn’t be limited to defeat? There was so much more at war...and the seas were capricious at the best of times. No one could promise victory when the wind was against you. Many times his audacity could have given him a cold grave in the embrace of the waves, and he had seen dozens of good captains perish while they had taken the correct decisions of manoeuvre and gunnery.

No, it was too absolute, too sinful...and if there was only one sin, what was valuable in the end?

But as the thought was in his mind, he realised there could be only one answer.

“Victory.”

**Author’s note**:

Just an idea I had in my head and I wanted to write before beginning a chapter of the Dance is not Over. I, of course, do not own Versailles, France or A Practical Guide to Evil.

I’m not sure it will ever become a full story, but who knows what is in store for the future...