

The Fox 131

Chapter 131: Fanny

Having convinced Lavoisier, Joseph was ready to return to Touraine, but before that, he wanted to visit Amant's house. Amant was the only son in the family, and losing him must have been devastating. As Amant's good friend, Joseph felt that it was only right to pay a visit, especially since he was in Paris.

So, the day after signing the contract with Lavoisier, Joseph, accompanied by two attendants, made his way to Amant's neighborhood. It was an affluent area with good security, so taking two companions and a four-wheeled carriage made the journey quite safe.

The carriage came to a stop near Amant's house. Joseph got out and gestured for his attendants to stay in the carriage. He held a bouquet of white lilies and made his way towards Amant's home. He knocked on the door lightly, and after a while, he heard hurried footsteps approaching. The door opened slightly, revealing a green eye peering through the crack. Then, the door opened wider, revealing Fanny's face.

"Is it Mr. Bonaparte? Are you here..." Fanny began to say, and she noticed the bouquet in Joseph's hand.

"My parents don't know about my brother yet..." Fanny whispered.

"Oh," Joseph said, looking at the bouquet in his hand, unsure whether to place it on the ground or behind his back.

"Give it to me," Fanny whispered. She took the bouquet from Joseph and hid it behind a table with a broken leg in the hallway. Joseph noticed that Fanny had slimmed down since their last meeting, but it made her figure even more striking.

"Later, you can say you came to visit your brother, as if you didn't know what happened. Please," Fanny said, "My mother is not feeling well."

"I understand," Joseph quickly agreed.

At that moment, a middle-aged man's voice came from inside the house, "Fanny, is there a guest? Who is it?"

Fanny turned and called into the house, "Dad, there's a guest, it's Mr. Bonaparte, my brother's friend."

Then she turned back to Joseph and said, "Mr. Bonaparte, please come inside."

Joseph followed Fanny into the Rococo-style building. Perhaps due to neglect, the house appeared even more rundown than the last time Joseph had visited. With some renovations, it could easily be transformed into a haunted house in the future.

Inside the hall, Joseph was surprised to find it neat and spacious. The marble floor, though worn, was clean, and the curtains, although old and faded, had been meticulously cleaned. However, the space felt empty as many of the furnishings had been removed.

Fanny seemed to notice Joseph taking in the surroundings and explained, "These days, bread is too expensive, so we had to sell some things to make ends meet."

"Indeed," Joseph replied, "These are difficult times for everyone. After the revolution, even though I wasn't hungry, I couldn't sleep, fearing the guillotine."

"My father is in the small sitting room. His legs are not in good shape; he has severe rheumatism and can barely walk. So, he's waiting for you there. Please understand; it's not because we're being arrogant," Fanny explained as she led Joseph toward the small sitting room.

Joseph nodded and said, "I understand. My father also had health issues in the past."

At the same time, Joseph noticed that there seemed to be no servants in the entire house.

Fanny led Joseph into the small sitting room. Charles Lavoisier was sitting in an old elm rocking chair, looking much older than the last time Joseph had seen him. His hair had turned mostly white, and his beard was sparse. An old, moth-eaten blanket covered his knees, and over time, the wool had become sparse, with visible holes where insects had bitten through.

"Welcome, Mr. Bonaparte. Please forgive me for not being able to stand and greet you. You are the first friend to visit us in the past six months. Please have a seat," Viscount Charles greeted Joseph with a smile.

Joseph took a seat in a high-backed chair next to him.

"Mr. Bonaparte, I heard you now hold a high position in the War Department," Viscount Charles said, looking at Joseph.

"Yes, I work in the War Department," Joseph replied.

"Ah, that's good. That rascal Amant has gone to join the Northern Army, in the Fourth Corps, under General Joubert. They recently repelled the Austrians," Viscount Charles said, a hint of embarrassment on his face. "Mr. Bonaparte, you're Amant's friend. When Amant first left for the North, I didn't oppose it. Men must make their own decisions. At that time, I thought that despite the dangers in the Northern front, there was no safer place in the world than Paris. Wouldn't you agree?"

To be honest, Viscount Charles's support for his son's decision wasn't entirely wrong. At that time, Paris was indeed very dangerous, especially for those with noble status deeply involved in politics.

"You're right," Joseph replied.

"Well, Paris is safe now. Robespierre has finally met his end. Speaking of which, Robespierre did do some good things. If it weren't for him getting rid of those Jews, I might not have a single piece of furniture left in this house. Now, my creditors are all gone, so I should cheer for Robespierre," Viscount Charles chuckled and then erupted into a fit of coughing. Fanny quickly went to fetch him a glass of water.

"Oh, Fanny, do you see? You are..." Viscount Charles started to say but was interrupted by Fanny.

"You're talking nonsense again! Aren't you afraid of people making fun of you?" Fanny scolded her father.

"Talking about dreams and all. Aren't you afraid people will laugh at you?" Fanny continued. "I told you before, dreams are all fake. Besides, a few days ago, didn't you receive a letter from your brother, along with the money he sent back? He's doing well in the North. Why do you want to bring him back?"

As Joseph took the teacup, he noticed calluses on Fanny's hands. Clearly, she was the one carrying the weight of the entire family on her shoulders.

"Sigh, I can't understand the thoughts of you young people," Viscount Charles sighed. "One is reckless and does whatever is dangerous, while the other is getting older but still acts like a maiden. They don't make it easy for me."

"Dad!" Fanny said, handing Joseph his tea. She stood upright and had a stern expression on her face.

"Alright, alright, my dear Fanny is upset. I'll stop," Viscount Charles shook his head. "Sigh, Mr. Bonaparte, forgive me for embarrassing you. Since the revolution, my house has been a mess. The only good thing is that we don't have to worry about nobility anymore. It's just... Well, Mr. Bonaparte, you're quite an important person now. Could you talk to Amant and convince him..."

"If I can, I will," Joseph said. "But you know, Amant can be quite stubborn at times. He's also very romantic, and I'm afraid my persuasion may not be effective. Even my own brother, who is a general, still likes to rush into battle. I can't control him either."

"Young people, they never listen," Viscount Charles lamented. "Amant is getting older too. When we were his age, he was already crawling around. But this rascal is still causing trouble. Because of him, some of our friends no longer associate with us. Many of my old friends no longer visit, and they can't visit anymore because they're no longer alive. If they were really here, even with my rheumatism, I could jump up and run quickly."

Viscount Charles suddenly laughed.

"Dad, you're becoming improper," Fanny said, raising her eyebrows.

"Fanny, my dear, it's been half a year since I've seen anyone other than you and your mother," Viscount Charles said. "I rarely get to be happy. More than a decade ago, when you couldn't walk, and Charles couldn't even count, our house was never this quiet. Back then, your mother's salon was the talk of all Paris..."

"Come on, Dad, no more bragging. If you keep going, you'll start saying it's Madame Dubarry's salon," Fanny teased.

"Alright, Fanny. I didn't mean that, but it was indeed a time worth remembering," Viscount Charles said. "Mr. Bonaparte, look at our home now; it's so empty, and our friends are gone. Amant's friends, except for you, don't visit anymore. You see, it's so lonely here that even my Fanny is becoming a spinster."

"Dad..."

"Fanny, let me speak. When your mother was your age, Charles already called her 'mama'..."

Viscount Charles rambled on for quite some time, and Joseph listened patiently. It was almost noon when Viscount Charles showed signs of fatigue. Joseph took this opportunity to bid farewell. Fanny walked him out, and as they left the small sitting room, they heard Viscount Charles's voice from behind, "Mr. Bonaparte, do you think Fanny is a good girl..."

Chapter 132: The One Whom Your Parents Raised

Old Charles' words caught Fanny off guard, nearly causing her to stumble over her own feet.

"Don't mind him; my father's mind has been a bit muddled since the revolution. He tends to talk nonsense. Please don't take it to heart," Fanny blushed as she reassured Joseph.

"I understand," Joseph replied, though he wasn't entirely sure what his own words meant. Did he understand it as, "I know your father's eccentric," or as, "I know he wants me to pursue you and get you married off quickly"?

Joseph couldn't help but steal a glance at Fanny with a sense of curiosity. Fanny noticed Joseph's gaze and felt a slight shyness, but she didn't turn away, nor did she resort to the techniques some high society women employed such as fainting.

During this era, many noblewomen were accustomed to wearing corsets. It was a peculiar practice, akin to foot binding in the Far East, and it was equally harmful to the body. Foot binding led to foot deformities and impaired mobility, but corsets were far more dangerous, with the potential to be fatal when tightened too much.

Just as foot binding in the East was rumored to originate from the imperial court (attributed to Emperor Li Houzhu), the habit of wearing corsets in Europe was also said to have royal origins, possibly traced back to the French court.

The extreme tight-lacing of corsets intensified during the reign of Louis XV. It was believed that cinching the waist made the bust appear larger, and a slim waist was a symbol of beauty. Even today, people engage in games like trying to touch their belly buttons from behind.

However, the waists that could touch the belly button with ease in modern times would be considered excessively wide in this era's Europe. What was the standard waist size for European beauties during that time? Well, according to the French court, it was fourteen inches, which is approximately 35.56 centimeters. If we simplify it, envision the cross-section of a woman's waist during that period as a standard circle, and the diameter of that circle would be just over 11 centimeters.

It's easy to imagine that when the waist was constricted to such an extreme extent, the internal organs couldn't fit within this tiny 11-centimeter diameter space. This led to various health problems, from dizziness and fainting to death. Many classical European plays depicted young ladies fainting at the slightest excitement, and this was not an exaggeration but a common occurrence. Of course, intentional fainting in the arms of a loved one was a tactic employed by some young ladies.

Fanny's waist, however, did not conform to the standard, not even close. Perhaps her parents' excessive indulgence during her childhood had made them reluctant to cinch her waist tightly. As a result, her waist likely exceeded twenty inches, a slender figure by contemporary standards but a significant deviation from the norms of her time. Fanny had not yet found a suitable match, which might be partly attributed to this. Although her brother Armand often praised her beauty, in this era, Fanny couldn't be considered beautiful. Furthermore, her slightly thicker waist had deprived her of the ability to faint when necessary, a trait admired by some men of this era.

Joseph, coming from a future time, could not appreciate such a peculiar beauty. Whenever he encountered high-society women, he was baffled by their excessively slim waists, finding them aesthetically unpleasing and even disturbing. This might be one of the reasons why Joseph, despite numerous opportunities, remained single.

"Ah Miss Fanny, I mean" Joseph hesitated, "Oh, by the way, are you planning..."

Joseph stopped abruptly, fearing that Old Charles might overhear the rest of his words. So, the two continued walking in silence until they reached the entrance hall. Only then did Joseph finally ask, "Miss Fanny, did you forge Armand's letter?"

Fanny replied, "Yes. I used to help my brother with his writing, so I'm familiar with his handwriting and choice of words. My parents' health is not great. You saw my father earlier. My mother is even worse; she can't even get out of bed anymore, and she can't receive visitors. Ever since she learned about our uncle's execution, she's been like this. I can't let them know about my brother's fate."

Perhaps Fanny had been suppressing too much grief while concealing her brother's death and had been putting on a happy face in front of her family after receiving her brother's letter. This girl was holding back an overwhelming sorrow in her heart. Now, she had someone with whom she could discuss the unspeakable, and her tears began to flow.

Fanny didn't dare cry aloud, only silently weeping. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and her shoulders trembled, much like a young sapling in a storm.

"Such a girl, if she were in modern times..." Joseph found himself inexplicably compassionate and tried to console her, "Miss Fanny, you shouldn't be too sad... There are some things..."

"Goodness, I have no idea what to say," Joseph thought. He reached into his pocket, but he didn't carry a handkerchief, so he found nothing. Helplessly, he watched Fanny cry. But when he saw Fanny crying so deeply, he couldn't help but extend a hand to stroke her flaxen hair.

Fanny quivered slightly but didn't push Joseph away or throw herself into his arms. She stood silently, weeping.

After some time, she managed to stop crying and, feeling embarrassed, said, "Sir, I'm sorry I couldn't control myself..."

Joseph awkwardly tried to console her, "It's alright. I'm a friend of Armand's; you can think of me as a brother..."

As soon as he said it, Joseph regretted it; it seemed like he had touched upon her grief. So, he quickly adopted another common approach changing the subject.

"Miss Fanny, um... You can write and create, right? Have you read many books?"

"Well, I haven't read many books," Fanny replied.

"In that case, there's a job I'd like to entrust to you," Joseph said, while he wracked his brain to come up with something suitable for her. "Ah... I have some documents at my place that need reliable sorting. It's not too difficult, but it's quite tedious. Uneducated people can't handle it, and educated people aren't willing to do it. I don't have the time to do it myself. Ah, could you help me with this kind of work? I can pay you 300 livres per month. How does that sound?"

"Well, sir, I know that this salary is rather high," Fanny said, "but... I won't hide it from you. Due to my parents' illnesses, I really need money right now. I'll work hard, but I can't leave home."

"No problem. I'll have someone deliver the materials you need to sort. I'm leaving Paris in a few days and heading to London. Can I write to you?"

"Oh, of course. That's perfectly fine, sir."

"Also, um, Fanny, I don't want to bring up painful subjects, but do you know where Armand's grave is? If you have some free time in the next few days, could you take me to visit him?"

Chapter 133: A Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

Back at his residence, Joseph pondered a question. What documents could he entrust to Fanny for handling? Classified files were out of the question; they could endanger her. But as for non-classified documents, Joseph realized that he didn't have many on hand.

After thinking for a while, Joseph had an idea. He remembered the set of exercise books he had prepared for Napoleon, Lucien, and Louis. These exercises, tailored for kids of different ages and abilities, had an excellent educational impact and could serve as a powerful tool. If he organized them well, he could publish a "Joseph's Mathematics Exercise Book" for the benefit of society. It sounded like a good idea.

So, Joseph decided to leave Lucien and Louis in Paris and gather the math exercises he had done before. Coupled with any materials he had left in Carnot's place, it should be sufficient. Besides, he thought, when Napoleon, Lucien, and Louis joined him in the future, he could provide further training. That settled it; he would focus on nurturing these young "rascals."

Joseph and Fanny had made plans to visit Armand's grave in a suburban cemetery two days later. In 1786, due to health concerns, Paris had banned burials within the city, leading to the proliferation of small cemeteries on its outskirts, which later combined to form the three major cemeteries of Paris.

Armand's remains had been returned and buried in one of these suburban cemeteries near Montmartre. It took quite some time to reach the spot, even back when Fanny had attended Armand's funeral. Joseph, however, didn't think it wise to bring a stack of exercises to such a place. He decided to entrust them to Fanny later, perhaps on the day they were about to depart. In the meantime, he'd take a day to rest.

Yet, Joseph didn't get to rest as he wished. Just as he was contemplating this, there was a knock on the door.

"Who is it?" Joseph inquired.

"Mr. Bonaparte, it's me, Fouch," came Fouch's voice from outside.

Joseph opened the door and saw Fouch standing there, holding a package. He looked sweaty from the heat during his journey.

"Please, come in, Mr. Fouch," Joseph welcomed him and poured a large glass of water.

"Thank you, I was quite thirsty," Fouch said as he accepted the glass and downed it in one gulp. He extended the empty glass to Joseph and asked for more.

Joseph poured another glass of water and handed it to him. "Mr. Fouch, why have you come to see me now?"

After finishing the second glass, Fouch replied, "I've resolved the two tasks you entrusted to me."

As he spoke, Fouch took a stack of papers from the black leather bag he had brought with him.

"Here are the people I found on the lists. Apart from a few exceptions, most have accepted the terms you offered."

Joseph furrowed his brow slightly. "Why did they agree?"

"Several, like Gaston and Dominique, have health issues. Edmond, on the other hand, has amassed wealth and doesn't wish to continue with strenuous work. The ones to really watch are Franois, Henri, and Otto; they've left Paris, and though their whereabouts are unknown, it appears they had contact with royalists before their departure."

"Heh, even the royalists seem more forward-thinking than some folks in our government," Joseph commented sarcastically.

"For the remaining individuals, I've made contact and, with your authorization, renegotiated their contracts," Fouch continued.

"Mr. Fouch, I appreciate your assistance," Joseph said.

"Furthermore, concerning the privatization of the Naval Research Institute, that's no longer an issue. Well" Fouch handed over a document, "if you sign here, the Naval Research Institute will be sold to you."

"So fast?" Joseph was surprised. He accepted the document and examined it briefly. "Why is the total price 200,000 livres? You won't earn a single livre from this."

"The price in the document is to be paid with bonds," Fouch explained with a smile.

Since the downfall of the guillotine tyrant, bonds had spiraled out of control. Now, one livre in silver was worth at least twenty in bonds.

"Selling it so cheaply?" Joseph was taken aback.

"For this, Mr. Barras took an extra 120,000 livres from me. Of course, that money doesn't belong to him alone," Fouch replied. Without Fouch needing to explain, Joseph knew that the 120,000 livres Barras received were not in bonds.

"Very well, thank you for your help. That leaves us with one final matter," Joseph looked at Fouch. "Now, can you tell me, have you made your decision?"

"Mr. Bonaparte, as per our previous agreement, I should be entitled to 70,000 livres in silver, plus my commission of 2,000 livres, and the amount I saved from negotiations with the others is 1,215 livres. In total, I should receive 73,215 livres from you. If I use 73,000 livres as an investment in your enterprise, how much equity can I obtain?"

The two of them began discussing the details of the partnership. Fouch proved to be more agreeable than Barras in this matter. They quickly reached a broad consensus. Joseph felt that they were on the verge of forming a comprehensive strategic partnership, but at that moment, Fouch asked, "Mr. Bonaparte, how do you perceive the current political situation?"

Joseph knew that Fouch was different from Barras; he valued political standing over wealth. Even so, he asked, "Mr. Fouch, why do you ask me this question?"

"In recent days, while handling these matters for you, I took the opportunity to study your various actions in recent years," Fouch replied. "Your actions have been quite cautious over the years, but now, they've become bolder. That's why I'd like to understand your thoughts."

"Mr. Fouch, it's quite evident that the current government's governance has led to chaos in France," Joseph began. "A regime can only persist if it has support. Who supports this government today?"

"Who?" Fouch inquired.

"Those who are making a fortune and wish to make even more. But do they truly believe in those who once cheered for the Jacobins and hailed Robespierre?" Joseph chuckled. "So, to secure their support, the government must not only guarantee their interests in policy but also ensure that those truly trusted by these people hold key positions in the government. Whom do these people trust the most?"

"The followers of Brissot," Fouch answered.

"Not just Brissot's followers, but also those of Fayou and, as a backlash against the Jacobins, anyone who fundamentally distrusts a strong government. This will inevitably lead to the resurgence of the royalists. These respectable folks, the Brissotists, the Fayouists, they don't trust the current giants at all. Moreover, due to the liberalization of the market and the rejection of the Jacobins, it's bound to have adverse effects on the military's combat capability. So, in the future, France is likely to face continuous military failures, even if there are occasional flickers of hope. Politically, the country will be restless, with frequent uprisings."

Here, Joseph paused and looked at Fouch. Then he continued, "During this time, the respectable folks will realize that the weak government of today cannot secure their interests. They will need a strong government that can genuinely protect and even expand their interests. That's when the real opportunity arises."

Fouch smiled and said, "Back then, Robespierre was deeply concerned that prolonged wars would lead to the emergence of military dictators. But now, it seems this trend is irreversible, isn't it? Your brother is a remarkable general, and you, sir, are an outstanding figure. With financial difficulties and the military beginning to starve, isn't this the perfect moment to privatize the national army? Well, I hope we have a fruitful partnership from now on."

Thus, the two of them smoothly formed a comprehensive strategic partnership.

"Mr. Bonaparte, I recall you wanted me to assist with security and confidentiality matters," Fouch said. "I reviewed the security regulations of the 'Military Research Institute' from the past, and those rules were already quite comprehensive. However, they were costly to implement. I've made some simplifications based on the existing system. If you follow these, it should be sufficient. You also tasked me with keeping an eye on other manufacturers. For that, I need to remain in Paris. Furthermore, our real business needs someone in Paris. General Carnot can handle some military matters, but I believe there are aspects that I can manage better."

"You make a valid point," Joseph agreed. "Alright, you can stay in Paris, overseeing intelligence matters. If you need anything, feel free to reach out to me. When I'm away, you can write to me or approach General Carnot directly."

"Very well, that's the plan," Fouch said as he prepared to take his leave.

"Ah, Mr. Fouch, when I'm not around, there's someone else I'd like you to look after," Joseph added.

"Who would that be?" Fouch inquired.

"Armand's sister, Miss Fanny," Joseph replied.

Chapter 134: The Date

Upon hearing Joseph's request, Fouch paused for a moment and then smiled, "I understand. But Mr. Bonaparte, you'll be returning to Toulon soon, and this seems a bit far for a meeting, doesn't it?"

Joseph also smiled and replied, "It's a bit far, but there's not much we can do about it."

"Mr. Bonaparte, I saw that girl at Armand's funeral, and she seemed like a good person. To maintain composure in such a situation, she'd make a good wife. But, Mr. Bonaparte, why don't you find a way to bring her back to Toulon?"

"She still has her parents in Paris, and they are ill," Joseph shook his head. "We'll figure something out later."

"Oh, by the way, I need something from you," Fouch said.

"What do you need?"

"I need some 'sweet melons'," Fouch said. "Don't look at me like that; I don't plan to cause trouble in Paris. You know, the work I'm doing now often involves dealing with some gangsters, people who can do things that ordinary folks can't. But many times, you have to let them know that you have the ability to cause trouble. Otherwise, they won't take you seriously, and sometimes they might even want to eliminate you."

"I see," Joseph said. "Come to my place the day after tomorrow, and I can provide you with some. But Mr. Fouch, you need to be careful when dealing with these people."

"I need 'sweet melons' mainly for intimidation. The best form of intimidation is to do nothing," Fouch chuckled.

"You're an expert in that regard. Oh, by the way, does Miss Fanny know you?"

"I saw her at Armand's funeral, but I doubt she noticed me."

"I have something for her the day after tomorrow, and I'd appreciate it if you could give it to Miss Fanny. You'll have a chance to meet her, and I'll rely on you to take care of her in the future," Joseph said with a smile.

After bidding farewell to Fouch, Joseph's business in Paris was almost complete, with only the date the following day remaining. For Joseph, going on a date with a girl was not an unfamiliar experience, but meeting a girl in a cemetery, whether in this life or the last, was indeed a first. In the previous life, if he had asked a girl out and sent her a message saying, "Are you free? If not, would you like to take a stroll in the park?" he would have probably been blocked immediately.

The next morning, Joseph brought a bouquet of flowers and arrived at Fanny's home in a light carriage. He parked the carriage and knocked on Fanny's door.

It wasn't difficult to take Fanny out of her home, and in fact, the Marquis was pleased that someone was interested in dating his daughter. Though by modern standards, Fanny was still quite young, in this era, she could already be considered a spinster.

As Joseph led Fanny, they quickly found Armand's grave under Fanny's guidance. The grave was still relatively new, with a gravestone that read: "Playwright, Republican Soldier, Author of Spartacus, Armand Lavasie."

Joseph removed his hat, placed the bouquet of flowers in front of the gravestone, and stood by Fanny, who was silently shedding tears.

"Armand, I'm sorry it took me so long to visit you," Joseph said. "The situation in France right now, to be honest, isn't very good. Everyone's struggling, but rest assured, I'll take care of your family for you."

As he spoke, he reached out and held Fanny's hand.

Fanny didn't say anything but continued to cry silently. Joseph didn't know how to comfort her, so he offered her a handkerchief.

Fanny took the handkerchief but suddenly burst into tears.

Joseph understood that she had been holding back for too long, and this outpouring of emotions was likely a relief for her. He reached out and gently stroked her hair. Unexpectedly, Fanny hugged him tightly, burying her head in his chest and sobbing uncontrollably.

Joseph felt a bit awkward, but he looked at Armand's gravestone and reached out to embrace Fanny. After crying for a while, Fanny gradually stopped and raised her tear-stained face from Joseph's chest.

"Sir, I'm sorry, I..." she began.

"It's okay; you can think of me as your family, as a brother," Joseph said sincerely. However, when a man tells a woman to think of him as a brother, it usually means there are no ulterior motives. But if he says he hopes she thinks of him as a brother, that's a different story. He might be harboring less-than-noble intentions.

Joseph likely had some of these less-than-noble intentions, so he continued to stroke her hair and said, "Look at your tear-streaked face. You cried like a little kitten. When we go back, your father might think I've been mistreating you."

While saying this, Joseph took the handkerchief from her and wiped away her tears. Then he hugged her again.

Fanny cried for a while before gradually stopping. She pulled away from Joseph's embrace, and Joseph knew she needed that release. She had leaned her head on his broad shoulder, a safe place to lean on.

After a while, they heard some commotion nearby. It seemed that someone was approaching. Fanny was startled, and she quickly pulled away from Joseph. They both looked in the direction of the noise and saw a few people heading elsewhere.

"It's probably others here to pay their respects, like us," Joseph said.

"Not like us... we've been here for a while already," Fanny whispered. "We should go back."

"Alright," Joseph said. He turned back to Armand's grave and said, "Armand, we're leaving now. We'll visit you again in the future."

Then he took Fanny's hand and turned to leave the cemetery.

Joseph thought, "If Armand, this overprotective brother, could see someone hugging and comforting his sister by his grave, he would probably be furious enough to crawl out of the grave." He couldn't help but glance back, but of course, he didn't see anything out of the ordinary. After all, we're writing a historical novel, not "From Dusk Till Dawn."

The two of them left the cemetery and got back into the carriage. The midday sun was strong, so Joseph raised the carriage's canopy and drove back.

Perhaps tired from crying, Fanny fell asleep quickly on the swaying carriage. She rested her head on Joseph's shoulder and held onto his arm.

After a while, the carriage reached the city hall area, where it became more crowded and slowed down. The noisy surroundings woke Fanny, and she quickly sat up, adjusting her appearance. They were close to her home.

At that moment, a newsboy ran past the carriage, holding a stack of newspapers and shouting, "News, news! Victory on the Belgian front, our forces win, General Joubert wounded."

Joseph saw that it was crowded up ahead, so he stopped the carriage and called the newsboy to buy a newspaper from him.

"What's happened on the front?" Fanny asked.

"I'll check... Ah... the news is not very clear, but it seems our forces have defeated the Austrians again, though General Joubert was wounded in the battle. It doesn't specify the extent of his injuries. Let's hope it's not too serious," Joseph said.

The news in the newspaper was accurate, but the details about Joubert's injury were indeed not clear. In reality, Joubert had been wounded by a "sweet melon" thrown by one of his own men.

After the Thermidorian coup, the production of military supplies had been severely disrupted and damaged. Joubert's army was increasingly short of "sweet melons." On the other hand, the Austrians always had plenty of "sweet melons" to throw. So, Joubert had suffered a series of defeats.

However, more recently, new munitions factories had started operating, and new "sweet melons" with various brand names began to flow into the army. With a sufficient supply of "sweet melons," Joubert launched a counteroffensive and once again defeated the Austrians, forcing them to retreat. However, it was in this battle that a French soldier, not surnamed Bonaparte, threw a "sweet melon" toward the enemy. Unfortunately, the fuse of this particular "sweet melon" seemed faulty, and it exploded in his hand as he pulled the fuse, killing him instantly. Even General Joubert was injured, as a piece of shrapnel hit him.

Of course, Joseph learned these details from Fouch after the events.

Chapter 135: Difficulties

Joseph escorted Fanny back home, and the old Marquis couldn't help but wonder why they had returned so early.

Then Joseph informed them that he would leave Paris the next day and go back to Toulon temporarily.

"Oh? Monsieur Bonaparte, why go to the countryside like Toulon? Paris isn't what it used to be," the old Marquis exclaimed in surprise.

Joseph was well aware that regional prejudice was a universal phenomenon, present throughout the world and throughout history. Just as in the future, the citizens of the imperial capital of East Big Eat Nation saw all other regions as "backwater," and for the city dwellers of all great cities, every other place was considered the countryside. To most Parisians, except Paris itself, everywhere else

in France, whether Lyon or Marseille, was both "backwater" and the countryside. The common people there were all country bumpkins, and even the nobility was no exception. A viscount living in Paris was considered nobler than a count living in the provinces. Some people would rather die of poverty in Paris than go to the "provincial countryside."

"It's work-related. After all, I am still a soldier," Joseph replied.

"Ah, there's no helping it then," the old Marquis sighed. "I wonder when peace will come. So, do you plan to come back to Paris often?"

"Yes, I will come to Paris regularly," Joseph replied, casting a glance at Fanny.

"That's good. Young people always want to venture out. It's nice that you remember to come back, unlike that scoundrel, Armand, who only writes letters but never returns."

After a few more words, Joseph bid farewell and left. Fanny accompanied him to the door, and when Joseph saw there was no one around, he embraced Fanny and planted a kiss on her cheek.

"What are you doing? Father might see us..." Fanny blushed and weakly protested, her voice as soft as a mosquito's buzz.

"Your voice is too low; your father won't hear," Joseph said, kissing her again. Fanny made feeble attempts to resist, but she couldn't use too much force. She wanted to say something but was silenced by his lips. She reluctantly allowed him to take some liberties.

After a while, they separated.

"It's your fault; my father could have seen us," Fanny said.

Joseph just smiled.

"Promise to write to me often and don't forget about me..."

"Mm..."

"And visit often..."

"All right."

"By the way, you mentioned some documents you wanted to give me?"

"Tomorrow morning, I'll send them over with someone. He's a well-connected person; if you have any difficult matters, you can seek his assistance."

Fanny sensed Joseph's hesitation when he mentioned this person and asked, "Who is he? Is he your friend?"

"Friend? No, he and I aren't friends; we're just partners. His name is Fouch, and he's quite powerful, even dangerous. But don't worry; his danger is related to politics and has nothing to do with you."

"But, isn't he a danger to you? How can you say it has nothing to do with me?"

"Ah, at least for now, he and we are on the same side, and his danger doesn't target me," Joseph said, reaching out to touch Fanny's cheek. "I'll give you things that aren't very important. Take your time; there's no rush. We won't need these things for quite a few years, at least in the short term."

"Mm..."

Joseph kissed Fanny again and then boarded the carriage.

Fanny watched the carriage disappear at the street corner, closed the door, and returned to the living room. She heard the old Marquis calling her, "Fanny, come over..."

Early the next morning, Joseph met up with Fouch as planned at his residence. Joseph handed a small bag to Fouch, and it felt quite heavy.

"Genuine 'Bonaparte Melons,' a total of twenty pieces," Joseph said. "Do you want to count them?"

"No need," Fouch replied.

"Alright, let's go visit Fanny together, so you can meet her. When I'm not in Paris, I'll need you to take care of many things," Joseph said.

The two of them got into a carriage and soon arrived at their destination. Joseph and Fouch both got out, and Joseph knocked on the door, which was promptly answered. Fanny appeared before Joseph.

With an outsider present, both Fanny and Joseph maintained the utmost politeness. Joseph introduced Fouch to Fanny and handed her a handbag, saying, "Take your time with this; there's no rush."

After a few more words, Joseph bid his farewell and left. However, he didn't leave Paris immediately; he first visited the War Department.

Inside the War Department, Carnot was troubled by the issue of military pay. France had conscripted nearly a million troops, resulting in substantial expenses. While Robespierre was still around, they managed to ensure the army's supplies, by any means necessary. Now, with the newly established Consulate, even that guarantee was becoming challenging. Although, on paper, they allocated several times more funds to the military, the disbursements were all in promissory notes.

Carnot had to make do, reallocating resources. The troops that weren't engaged in battle had to endure and the ones on less critical fronts had to be patient, with the priority given to the armies fighting in the north.

Even so, the military supply situation remained challenging.

Without military representatives, the quality of military supplies became uncontrollable, leading to widespread complaints among the soldiers. For instance, some bayonets produced in certain arsenals had skipped essential heat treatment processes to cut costs, and the materials used were subpar. Some bayonets could be bent by hand, but at least they could be straightened with a foot. Others, while not as easily bent, broke after just a few thrusts in training. However, some even had a positive side: they couldn't be bent at all, but during training, they broke so easily that one could assume they didn't need any maintenance.

Then there were muskets that exploded due to poor craftsmanship and "little melons" that exploded unpredictably due to fuse issues. Apart from General Jourdan's encounter with the one that exploded instantly, there were cases where "little melons" thrown from French positions to Austrian positions lay on the ground smoking but didn't detonate. They continued to emit smoke until French troops charged across and they exploded.

However, considering the technology behind items like "little melons" was no longer a well-kept secret, with so many knowledgeable people, sooner or later, the French would be the only ones using counterfeit and inferior products. That was a worrisome prospect.

So, when Joseph arrived, Carnot said, "Joseph, why are you still in Paris? You need to return to Toulon and establish a reliable weapons factory for me. At the very least, produce a batch of dependable 'little melons'! It's unbelievable! We need to act quickly, or the north might not hold much longer!"

"Is it that serious?" Joseph asked. "We have a much larger number of troops than they do."

"That's only on paper," Carnot replied. "Right now, we're short on funds, and we have even fewer troops we can use!"

"What's more, tell Napoleon that starting next month, his troops' pay will be reduced," Carnot added.

"Good Lord, how much are you cutting it by?" Joseph hurriedly asked.

"One-third of the current amount," Carnot said.

"Are you trying to starve our troops? Lazar, this tiny amount won't even feed a bird! With this little money, not to mention training, we won't even have enough for meals! Other armies might endure hardship, but we can't undermine the foundation of our own troops, can we?" Joseph argued.

"Other armies that are not on the front lines are being cut to a quarter of the previous amount or even lower," Carnot explained. "We're running out of money."

"Lazar, this will destroy our troops' morale. High morale is one of our army's most crucial advantages. If we lose that, a single nation like France won't be able to stand against almost all of Europe," Joseph said, frowning.

"You're right, you're right; you make a valid point. But I'm not God. I can't just say, 'Let there be money,' and suddenly we have money. Keeping one-third of the pay is the best I can do," Carnot said.

Joseph sighed and said, "Lazar, if that's the case, we'll have to figure it out ourselves. Remember, the army is an institution of force with weapons in hand. They aren't like regular people; they won't endure hunger quietly. If it comes to that, and we don't act appropriately, our troops might turn into marauders."

"That's absolutely unacceptable," Carnot said.

"Lazar, what if we launch an attack on Italy from the south?" Joseph suddenly suggested. "Even if the troops go mad, let them do so on someone else's territory."

"Do you want our army to become like Genghis Khan's nomads?" Carnot asked.

"No, no, we won't become nomads. We'll go to Italy to fight the oppressors and distribute the land," Joseph clarified.

Chapter 136: Patience and Little Toys

Cano paused for a moment, pondering the weight of the matter. "This is a significant decision, and it shouldn't be made by just the two of us."

He continued, "I will seriously consider this. If it proves feasible, I'll write to you about it. However, it wouldn't hurt to be prepared in advance."

Joseph nodded. "I understand. But for this, I need your assurance of priority purchases for the weapons we produce. Besides, you know that genuine quality comes at a higher cost, and, in turn, a higher price. You must ensure that our products won't lose the market to cheap imitations."

Cano replied, "I'll do my best."

"Very well," Joseph said. "If there's no other way, I'll handle it myself."

"Please, don't be reckless," Cano sensed an odd tone in Joseph's voice and cautioned him.

Joseph chuckled, "You don't know me well, do you?"

...

Leaving Cano's place, Joseph gathered his guards and boarded a four-wheeled carriage, departing from Paris.

The researchers who had signed contracts with him had already left Paris, heading for Toulon, a day before Joseph's departure. They were traveling with a slower postal carriage, so Joseph's cavalry caught up with them three days after leaving Paris.

A few days later, they arrived in Toulon. By this time, word had already reached them that Napoleon had expanded the "Naval Research Institute" - correction, it should now be called the Bonaparte Research Institute - just outside Toulon, awaiting their arrival.

The newly expanded Bonaparte Research Institute had a layout quite similar to the old "Army Technology Research Institute." It was surrounded by high walls with drawbridges over moats. The basic layout closely mirrored the Army Technology Research Institute, so the researchers quickly found their places and settled in.

That day, Napoleon had prepared dinner for them. They gathered for a meal and then retired to their quarters.

Joseph took Napoleon aside and they walked along the beach. Joseph began to explain the situation in Paris to Napoleon.

"Are you planning to march with us to Italy?" Napoleon asked. "Why not head straight to Paris? What are those idiots doing over there?"

"Napoleon, it's not the right time to return to Paris just yet," Joseph replied. "You've had some victories, but has your standing among the French people risen significantly? Have you become a household name? Will the people think, 'If only General Napoleon were here' in times of crisis? If not, how can you maintain a stable government even if you overthrow the current one by force? If you can't, you'll only be clearing the path for someone else."

Napoleon listened and smiled wryly, "I know, but watching those fools jumping around is frustrating. It's like watching amateurs play chess."

"You might see them as amateurs, but others may not. It's like watching a game of chess; you may think someone is making a losing move, but bystanders with lower skill levels may think it's a good move. What we need to do now is elevate your prestige among the French people. When they hear about war, they should think, 'If General Napoleon were commanding, things would be better.'"

Additionally, with the government providing less funding and lower-quality equipment, we should take the opportunity to win over the army, making it truly ours," Joseph explained.

"So, you're suggesting I go to Italy, use the wealth we seize to support the army, and then use a series of victories to highlight the incompetence of the Parisian leaders?" Napoleon quickly grasped Joseph's plan.

"Yes, but not now. We must make the army feel the pain of an inept government first. They must grow to despise or even hate this government. Only then can you use the spoils of war to win them over and make them truly ours. Until then, we must be patient. In the meantime, I'll be preparing some little toys for you," Joseph said cryptically.

"What kind of toys?" Napoleon eagerly asked, remembering how effective the "little musketeers" Joseph had provided were. His expectations were already high.

"It's a secret," Joseph replied.

From that day on, Joseph immersed himself in the research institute. Some of the things he had informed Napoleon about began to take shape in reality.

First, the military pay was reduced, and though the nominal numbers seemed to increase, the soldiers received payment in the form of certificates whose value depreciated rapidly. Refusing these certificates became common, leading to further depreciation. Although the government restrained the printing of certificates to appease the upper class, their value continued to plummet. The soldiers' daily bread rations decreased in both quantity and quality.

Napoleon reduced the frequency and intensity of training and stayed in the camp, eating the same food as the soldiers. He spent his days chatting with them, assuring them that the hardships were temporary, and led them in singing, "Things will get better, things will get better," with the added line, "We'll have buttered bread."

Despite grumbling about their reduced living standards, the soldiers grew fonder of Napoleon.

A decline in living standards alone wouldn't have eroded the image of the government so quickly, but the government's provision of weapons and ammunition added fuel to the fire. The "little musketeers" that the soldiers had once loved were now a cause of concern, as this batch was not marked with the Bonaparte name.

In the northern frontlines, a situation emerged similar to the one between the opposing armies' equipment.

During a live ammunition exercise, one musketeer's shot remained silent for an extended period, leading the curious soldier to approach the "musketball." However, as he got closer, the musketball suddenly exploded.

Luckily, this substandard "musketball" had omitted even the pre-made shrapnel, and the explosion only cracked it in two. The soldier was thrown off by the blast but miraculously escaped unhurt.

Several other "musketballs" failed to fire during the exercise, and lessons from the earlier incident prevented soldiers from approaching them. Napoleon even had the affected area cordoned off with ropes, forbidding anyone from getting near. Still, these "musketballs" remained silent.

The other equipment was similarly subpar. The cannon's gunpowder had absorbed moisture, the sulfur had not been properly crushed, and small stones used for weight measurements had slipped inside. The swords were in terrible condition, prone to notches and rolled edges. The soldiers even joked that they were afraid to use them for fear of cutting bread, but it was partly due to the bread's excessive additives.

Uniforms also deteriorated; the fabric became thinner, and buttons were loosely sewn, easily pulled off.

With such issues, the soldiers' grievances became hard to contain. Lower-ranking officers and their fellow soldiers in the northern frontlines corresponded through letters, vividly recounting dark tales of the situation. The story of the unfortunate General Joubert quickly spread.

Napoleon tried to defend the government as much as possible, shifting the blame onto unscrupulous merchants. He argued that the current government officials weren't necessarily bad people; they were just young and naive, susceptible to manipulation by cunning businessmen.

However, this narrative lacked persuasiveness. The soldiers were not naive; they did not believe that a group of naive young men had risen to such positions.

"They could only be fools if they got fooled by a few unscrupulous merchants," one soldier said.

"They're either foolish or corrupt!" someone concurred.

"They've climbed to those positions; they can't be foolish. Their positions aren't inherited. If we're talking about dirty dealings, I won't deny being a Mitterrand!" another soldier cursed.

"Maybe some merchant offered them pretty women," one began to speculate.

"How do you know those 'women' are indeed beautiful? Maybe they just washed their own sons and delivered them to those people. You know, some of them have a taste for that" the conversation took an even stranger turn.

"Well, either way, the ones dying on the battlefield aren't them. They're not foolish; they're corrupt!" someone concluded.

Chapter 137: Poland Shall Not Perish

On a September morning, a man arrived at the gates of the "Bonaparte Institute" and presented a letter signed by Fouch and Carnot, requesting a meeting with Joseph.

The letter was promptly delivered, and the man waited outside.

"Vibitsky? Sounds like a Slavic name," Joseph mused as he examined the introductory letter. Although the letter contained almost no information apart from the bearer's name, Joseph had a rough idea of the visitor's purpose.

"Very well, take him to the meeting room, and I'll be there shortly," Joseph instructed.

A while later, Joseph met a man named Joseph, with the surname Vibitsky, in the meeting room.

"Hello, General Bonaparte, I am a representative of General Kociuszko, and we hope to purchase some weapons from you for the just cause of the Polish people," the man explained in somewhat broken French.

Joseph recognized the name Kociusko. He knew that Kociusko was a Polish military officer, and after the second partition of Poland in 1793, Poland was on the brink of annihilation. In March 1794, General Kociusko, seizing the opportunity presented by the French victory over the Austrians and Russians, initiated an uprising in Krakow to reclaim Polish territory and establish a new Poland. With the chaos in France after the Thermidorian Reaction, there was relatively little military pressure from the north, and much of it was attributed to General Kociusko.

To suppress his uprising and to prevent Russia from taking the rest of Poland, Prussia and Austria, despite British opposition, transferred troops from Belgium to Poland. General Kociusko had hoped that France would divert enemy forces, but instead, he ended up drawing them to support France.

"What kind of weapons are you looking to purchase?" Joseph inquired directly, as the visitor had been.

"Bonaparte muskets, the authentic ones," Vibitsky replied.

"Well, we've just resumed the production of those weapons," Joseph said. "So, how many do you need, and how will you pay for them? Regarding transportation, will you handle it yourself, or would you like us to deliver the goods?"

Vibitsky provided a number and added, "If the price is right, we may place additional orders."

Joseph shook his head internally at the mention of "additional orders." Given the precarious situation in Poland, it was unclear how long they could sustain themselves.

After considering, Joseph quoted a price. "Is this price too high?" Vibitsky seemed surprised. "Other manufacturers offer much lower prices."

Joseph was prepared for this question. He smiled and replied, "Mr. Vibitsky, to be candid, our products are indeed priced higher than those of other manufacturers, but there's a reason for it. Our production costs are significantly higher."

He gestured to a nearby guard and said, "Fetch a sample of the 'Bonaparte musket,' and bring a few samples of the cheaper 'muskets' too."

The guard left to retrieve the samples. Joseph continued, "I noticed that you emphasized the need for authentic 'Bonaparte muskets' when making your purchase request. You must be aware of the issues with the 'muskets' produced by manufacturers near Paris. You might also know about the injury to General Joubert. Furthermore, in the Prussian army, the use of cheaper firearms has caused problems."

Joseph explained the differences between the weapons, comparing the authentic "Bonaparte musket" to the cheaper alternatives. He emphasized the importance of the deep grooves on the authentic musket, which allowed it to fragment into deadly projectiles when it exploded. In contrast, the cheaper versions lacked these grooves, resulting in less lethal shrapnel.

However, Vibitsky still seemed hesitant. "Mr. Joseph, isn't this price a bit too high?" he asked.

Joseph had an answer ready. "Mr. Vibitsky, it is true that our products are more expensive because they are of higher quality. Our manufacturing process is more refined, and the performance is superior, but that also comes with higher costs. To be frank, we don't make much more profit from these high-quality weapons compared to the cheaper alternatives."

At this point, the guard returned with samples of both types of muskets. Joseph presented them to Vibitsky, highlighting the differences.

Vibitsky examined the samples but struggled to discern the distinctions.

"Mr. Vibitsky, the authentic 'Bonaparte musket' has deep grooves on its surface. These grooves serve two purposes: they provide a better grip, making it less likely to slip in the hands of nervous soldiers on the battlefield, and they prevent accidents like dropping the musket on one's foot. The grooves are crucial for ensuring the weapon's effectiveness and safety," Joseph explained while demonstrating with the samples.

Vibitsky had a better understanding now. Joseph continued, "Besides, the authentic 'Bonaparte musket' explodes into numerous deadly fragments when it detonates, creating a wide killing radius. Even one of these muskets landing in the enemy ranks can take down a line of soldiers."

Joseph then turned to the cheaper musket, highlighting its lack of grooves and less effective explosion. He explained that the cheaper musket's grooves were shallow and created using etching, which made them less effective in preventing slippage. He also mentioned that the cheaper musket's materials and manufacturing were inferior.

Vibitsky seemed more convinced, though he was still hesitant about the price.

Joseph smiled and said, "Mr. Vibitsky, if you increase your order quantity, we can arrange to deliver the goods for you."

This offer immediately piqued Vibitsky's interest. "Can you deliver to Poland?" he asked.

Joseph shook his head, "Unfortunately, we can't do that directly due to the scrutiny of overland routes from France to Poland. However, we can have the goods delivered to Denmark. You can then transport them by sea to Gdask, and from there, cross into Poland through Prussia. This route is less closely monitored and should be easier for you."

Vibitsky corrected Joseph, "There is no 'Gdask,' only 'Gdynia' (the Polish name for Gdask)."

Vibitsky inquired about the order quantity required for this service. Joseph responded, "If you double your order quantity, we can deliver the goods to Denmark for free. But I must be honest, your enemies are formidable, and while I admire your courage, your struggle may not have a favorable outcome."

Vibitsky's face changed, and he seemed ready to challenge Joseph to a duel. "Bonaparte, what do you mean?" he asked, his eyes burning with anger.

Joseph reassured him, "Mr. Vibitsky, please, do not be upset. I have no ill intentions. I merely wish to offer advice as a friend and as a friend of the Polish people in the current situation. You should know that in all of Europe, there is no more reliable friend for the Polish people than France."

This statement calmed Vibitsky, who apologized for his emotional outburst. He asked Joseph whether he genuinely believed their struggle had a bleak future.

Joseph confirmed his belief, attributing it to the internal issues in France that were diverting its attention from Poland's plight. He said, "Even if this uprising does not immediately reclaim your territory, it can inspire national spirit. With such spirit, even if Poland faces temporary setbacks, it will not truly perish."

"Thank you for your encouragement," Vibitsky replied.

Joseph then recommended that they prepare for the future. He advised against direct confrontation if the enemy was too powerful, suggesting a guerrilla warfare strategy. Joseph explained that if the resistance remained strong and united, Poland could prevail. He encouraged Vibitsky to organize a resistance and to undermine the invaders' efforts by making their costs exceed their gains.

Vibitsky stood up, excited by Joseph's words, and declared, "Poland shall not perish as long as the flame of resistance burns."

Joseph proposed another weapon called "Bonaparte's Mousetrap," which was essentially a landmine with a fuse. Vibitsky eagerly accepted the offer to see it.

Joseph explained that they were selling only the fuse, as Vibitsky's forces could easily create the body of the landmine using stones and black powder. He assured Vibitsky that, even though they would have to assemble it themselves, the cost would be much lower.

Vibitsky was delighted and declared that he would acquire the fuses.

"Mr. Vibitsky, for this sacred cause, we must work together," Joseph emphasized. "And remember, as long as the flame of resistance burns, Poland shall not perish."

Vibitsky was now invigorated and determined to return to Poland and lead the resistance. He thanked Joseph for his support and advice.

Joseph concluded the meeting by saying, "Remember, we are friends of the Polish people, and as long as we stand together, Poland's spirit will endure, and Poland shall not perish."

Chapter 138: The Smuggling Ship

Under Joseph's persuasive talk, Vebitzki emptied his pockets of all the money he had within his authority. Vebitzki also complained about how remote Toulon was, making it nearly impossible to find a Jewish moneylender who would lend money at high interest rates. (In reality, there were some in Toulon, but they had been purged by Kudon and harvested by Fouch, and were yet to regrow.)

Joseph then introduced Vebitzki to the guerrilla warfare training they offered at their institute. He suggested that if the Poles were willing to pay, they could provide military training services. Vebitzki was very interested in this idea. They signed a contract, with Vebitzki paying half of the deposit. They agreed on the approximate time and location of delivery and left their contact information. Then, Vebitzki took his leave.

Joseph went on to arrange production and sent for Napoleon.

After Napoleon arrived, Joseph explained the situation in detail to him. Napoleon responded, "Sending the goods to Denmark won't be difficult. Although your 'black pearls' might experience some turbulence at sea, our people have sailed to Norway a few times (to purchase caustic soda). The North Sea can be rough, but it's not impossible to traverse. But about providing military training, do we have such a project?"

"We don't," Joseph admitted, "but, Napoleon, when you see an opportunity to make money, shouldn't we seize it? Besides, we really need the money right now, don't we?"

"Are you suggesting that we assemble a team now?" Napoleon asked. "But time might not be on our side. I have my doubts about those Poles. Even if you cram their heads with all that knowledge, I don't believe they have what it takes to achieve these things. What you're talking about might sound simple, but we both know that it takes a high level of organization to make it happen. Can we count on these Poles? I don't think they can rival Suvorov."

Napoleon shook his head as he spoke.

"I know that," Joseph acknowledged. "Maybe in a few more months, at most until next year, they will collapse militarily. But if we can start guerrilla warfare, even if it's not successful, it will distract our enemies and create more wealth for us. As for training the personnel..."

Joseph thought for a moment and continued, "After the Red Army is disbanded, do you still have contacts with your former comrades?"

"We do, they're our old subordinates. How can we not have contact?" Napoleon replied.

"Their lives must be quite difficult now, and Carnot doesn't have the budget to let them hone their skills through actual combat exercises. He can't afford to send them into battle either. So, we can propose to him that we provide the funds to hire some Red Army soldiers to carry out this task. See, that way, the problem is solved, isn't it?"

"Well, Joseph, that's indeed a good idea!" Napoleon's eyes lit up, and he quickly agreed.

According to the contract they had signed, over a month later, Vebitzki returned to the "Bonaparte Institute." He would accompany the smuggling ship to Denmark to deliver the goods.

This was the first significant foreign customer for the "Bonaparte Institute," so both Joseph and Bonaparte attached great importance to this operation. They arranged the best smuggling ship and the most skilled sailors for the task.

"Mr. Vebitzki, this is our best captain, Captain Van der Deken. He's Dutch and doesn't speak much French, only Low German and English. But he's our best captain, always, when it comes to sailing, the Dutch are the best in the world," Joseph introduced Captain Van der Deken to Vebitzki, showing him the "Flying" ship.

"Hello, Captain Deken," Vebitzki greeted the Dutchman in English, noting that the captain had only one eye.

"Nice to meet you, sir. On behalf of all the sailors, welcome aboard," the one-eyed captain said with a friendly smile, and he laughed heartily, the sunlight gleaming on his large golden teeth.

Vebitzki knew that many of the French smuggling ships were formerly pirate ships. From the captain to the sailors, they were all ruthless pirates. Later, the revolutionary government needed to engage in smuggling activities and pardoned them. Now, looking at Captain Deken's one eye and the sailors next to him, who didn't seem like the most righteous of men, Vebitzki couldn't help but label them as "pirates" in his mind.

With Vebitzki's witness, the cargo was loaded onto the ship. He followed Captain Deken aboard the ship. This ship was a typical clipper ship. It was slightly larger than the original "Black Pearl" but still had a tonnage of only about five to six hundred. The ship was not large, so Captain Deken took Vebitzki around the full ship in less than ten minutes.

Finally, Captain Deken led Vebitzki to his cabin.

"Mr. Vebitzki, this is your room," Captain Deken said as he opened the door. "Our ship is small, and space is limited, so it's cramped. You'll have to bear with it."

To lower the ship's center of gravity, almost all the cabins were below the deck. It was especially dark inside. With the help of a lantern, Vebitzki saw that the so-called room was as small as a pigeon cage. There was only a bed about a meter wide, and if someone sat on it, the door couldn't be closed.

There were also two conspicuous red straps on the bed.

"Our ship can be quite turbulent at sea. Sometimes it can toss people up. So when you sleep, you need to tie yourself to the bed with these two straps for safety," Captain Deken explained.

"Will the little cantaloupes be okay then?" Vebitzki asked, thinking of the little cantaloupes on the ship.

"Oh, those little cantaloupes are securely fastened; after all, we're afraid of death too," Captain Deken laughed.

Seeing that Captain Deken was in a good mood, Vebitzki asked, "Why haven't I seen any cannons on the ship?"

In this era, nearly all ocean-going ships were equipped with a certain number of cannons. Because it was a time when pirates roamed freely. Although there were laws and order on land, the vast sea was still a dark forest. Even ordinary merchant ships, when encountering obviously weaker ships, would sometimes play pirates just for fun.

So any cargo ship sailing on the open sea had to carry several cannons to protect themselves.

"We don't need cannons on our ship. And we can't install them even if we wanted to. After we set sail shortly, you'll understand," Captain Deken replied.

"Can I go see how the ship operates later?" Vebitzki asked.

"You can. You can go to the deck now. But if we pass through the Strait of Gibraltar, you'd better not go up to the deck casually," Captain Deken warned.

"Then, please show me the way."

...

That afternoon, the "Flying" ship left the dock and headed out to sea. Vebitzki stood on the deck and looked at the countless seagulls flying over his head.

He had brought Joseph to Toulon last year and left a bit early, so this was the first time he had boarded a ship. And it was still a smuggling ship at that. Vebitzki stood there watching the flying seagulls, and the other sailors were at a loss, as they had never seen a person entranced by seagulls in this way.

This ship, from its name to its sailors, was all very strange. Captain Deken was just the beginning. He could barely speak French, and the way he laughed was even stranger. Vebitzki had never met such a character before.

And the ship was no ordinary cargo ship, it was actually called the "Flying" ship.

Vebitzki then saw Captain Deken and a few other sailors carrying large bags of wine to the deck. Then they broke the bottles of wine and sprinkled the wine on the deck.

As the wine was poured, Vebitzki saw the clear sky become darker and darker.

"Is it going to rain?" Vebitzki asked. It was all wine on the deck now, and it looked like the dark clouds that announced the arrival of rain.

"No, Mr. Vebitzki," Captain Deken said with a chuckle. "It's just that we're soon going to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar. And after the passage, there will be no seagulls. So we invite the seagulls to stay with us for a little longer. Let them accompany us on this short journey. This wine is a gift from us to them."

Looking at the now dark and somewhat confused sky, Vebitzki had a premonition.

As he watched the dark clouds receding, Vebitzki had a more intense feeling.

This was the first time he had ever heard of people sprinkling wine on a ship's deck to say goodbye to seagulls.

"Sir, have you decided?" Captain Deken turned to Vebitzki, still chuckling.

Vebitzki sighed as he thought of the place he had come from, and then of Joseph, Napoleon, the preparations for this voyage, and finally, the soldiers. Then he said to Captain Deken, "I've decided, Captain. I'll accompany the black pearls on the trip to Denmark."

This voyage was the first voyage for both Joseph's "Bonaparte Institute" and Vebitzki. A new force had appeared in the world's arms trade, which would shake the world later.

Chapter 139: The Grand Order from North America (1)

Orders for weapons, especially those related to the French army, were few and far between. Despite Carnot's efforts to direct orders towards Joseph and his associates, Carnot's influence had dwindled. He no longer held sway even in military matters.

On the other hand, the Naval Research Institute, located far from Paris and seized quickly by Joseph's team, retained some critical technologies. As a result, they were the sole producers of flying clipper ships in all of Europe.

During this time, the advantage of flying clippers in smuggling had become evident. Since their introduction, not a single flying clipper had been caught in illicit activities.

Though the cargo capacity of flying clippers was not ideal, after accounting for the shorter round-trip times due to higher speeds, it was concluded that these vessels were more efficient in transporting goods compared to conventional cargo ships of similar size. Consequently, more orders for flying clippers came pouring into Joseph's hands.

Joseph realized that the shipyard attached to the research institute was struggling to keep up with the increasing demand. Expanding the shipyard became necessary, but it was a large project that required substantial funds, and Joseph's resources were not sufficient.

However, the economic situation of the Bonaparte family remained healthy, with almost all of their businesses turning a profit, and Joseph's wealth was steadily growing. To most people accustomed to building a family business over generations, his rate of earnings was remarkable. Yet, from Joseph's perspective as a modern-day individual, the pace of expansion was frustratingly slow.

"This era is sorely lacking reliable financial instruments," Joseph muttered to himself. The banks of this time provided limited funds at shockingly high interest rates, with 20% annual interest rates considered friendly. Given the meager economic growth typical of the era, even in peacetime, a 1% growth rate was a rarity. Most businesses could not support such interest rates. Despite the impressive profitability of Joseph's enterprises, he found it exasperating to borrow loans at 20% interest rates.

If borrowing was not an option, the alternative was to attract more investors. However, this would result in the dilution of equity, something Joseph was reluctant to do. Thus, expanding production became a vexing issue.

"It seems I'll have to pressure the customers," Joseph thought, as he was left with no other option.

Initially, to attract customers and facilitate sales, Joseph offered installment payments for the flying clippers. However, he had come to realize that he could change this approach and require full prepayment.

High-quality customers could still receive some discounts. Joseph even considered establishing the "Bonaparte Shipping Bank" specifically for providing favorable-rate loans to customers purchasing ships.

However, the profitability of flying clippers couldn't be sustained for long since their technology was primarily based on their appearance, making long-term secrecy nearly impossible. In a short time, other countries, particularly the British, would likely master the manufacturing technology of flying clippers.

At the end of December, the flying clipper "Black Pearl" completed a round trip from Marseille to New York in just over a month, with an average speed exceeding ten knots. This speed was twice that of ordinary cargo ships, turning the ship into a legend.

Accompanying the "Black Pearl" from America to France were not only the much-needed French goods but also a few American visitors.

As soon as they arrived in Marseille, these Americans made their way to the Bonaparte Research Institute's recruitment office.

The recruitment office of the Bonaparte Research Institute differed from others. It was a curiously shaped counter in the street, displaying various short firearms and related accessories, as well as models of cannons and ships. The counter had one or two attractive female attendants and a few burly men behind it.

Most of the time, when a smuggling ship docked, merchants from the ship would casually approach the counter, order a few crates of "small melons," and other items, exchange a few jokes with the female attendants, pay promptly, and have their goods loaded onto their ship.

If a wealthy shipowner came to buy a ship, a female attendant would escort them to an upstairs meeting room, serve freshly brewed Turkish coffee, and then have the manager come over to discuss matters.

The group of Americans entered the recruitment office and approached the counter.

"I've heard that you can order ships here," said the middle-aged man in his forties or fifties, using a Bordeaux dialect. His hair was slightly graying, perhaps due to frequent travels at sea, which had left his face weathered and tanned.

As soon as they mentioned ordering ships, both female attendants stood up.

"Sir, we do indeed accept ship orders here, and we can manufacture various ships, including the fastest vessels in the world. If you have such a need, you've come to the right place. Please follow us upstairs for a detailed discussion."

The two female attendants led the Americans upstairs to the meeting room. One of them poured coffee for them, while the other found the manager responsible for this type of business, Du Thierry.

Du Thierry, accompanied by a young clerk, arrived in the meeting room. They sat down on the sofa in front of the Americans.

"Gentlemen, how can I assist you? I'm Du Thierry, the manager of the Bonaparte Research Institute's recruitment office," Du Thierry introduced himself.

The graying man, Stephen Girard, looked at the young clerk next to Du Thierry. He noticed that when the clerk interjected during their conversation, Du Thierry did not react at all.

"Normally, managers don't appreciate a clerk interjecting during negotiations. However, in this case, the manager seems unfazed by the clerk's interruption. This young clerk must have a significant role."

"Sir, we've heard about the stories of your brother," Stephen Girard said with enthusiasm, "and we've come all the way from America to purchase flying clipper ships. I'm particularly interested in these high-speed merchant vessels. If you can meet my requirements, I might buy seven or eight of them in one go. However, I'm not looking for flying clippers the size of the 'Black Pearl.' Ships of that size have limited usability and high operating costs. I need larger flying clippers, ones that can transport ordinary goods. Do you have flying clippers of a larger size, or can you build them?"

Du Thierry asked, "Currently, we manufacture flying clippers that are slightly larger than the 'Black Pearl,' such as the 'Skyborne' class, which has nearly double the cargo capacity. Does that meet your needs?"

"Only twice the size of the 'Black Pearl'?" Stephen Girard shook his head, "That's still too small. Are there no larger options, or is it impossible for you to build larger flying clippers?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not certain about this, but I believe" Du Thierry was about to find a way to persuade the Americans when the young clerk by his side suddenly interjected, "We can build larger flying clippers, even ones as large as battleships. It shouldn't be a problem."

Stephen Girard looked at the young clerk with great interest. He noticed that when the clerk interjected, Du Thierry, the manager, had no reaction at all.

"Sir, you mentioned that you can build much larger flying clippers?" Stephen Girard asked.

"In theory, it should be possible. At least, that's what my brother said. Of course, he's never built such large flying clippers before, so there may be some technical details that need to be worked out. But major issues should not exist. My brother, Joseph Bonaparte, said that the primary problem would be funding," the young clerk replied.

"Ah, may I ask who your brother is?" Stephen Girard inquired.

"Oh, my brother is Joseph Bonaparte, the owner and controller of the Bonaparte Research Institute, the measurer of lightspeed, and the inventor of flying clippers and small melons. I'm his younger brother, Lucien. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Lucien had been assigned some social practice tasks by Joseph during this period, one of which was to assist at the recruitment office and serve as a clerk to gain more social experience. It just so happened that he met Stephen Girard and his group, who were interested in purchasing large flying clippers.

"I see, you're Mr. Bonaparte," Stephen Girard said quickly. "I've heard various stories about your brother back in America. Could you arrange a meeting for us? I hope to discuss the construction of large flying clippers with you and your brother."

Lucien considered this and thought it should be acceptable since building larger flying clippers was not a significant secret. Additionally, if this American could genuinely buy seven or eight ships at once, it would mean substantial profits for Joseph.

"Of course, you can. However, you might not be aware that my brother has been occupied with something lately, spending most of his time in the laboratory. I'm not sure when you'll be able to meet him. It might take a day or two," Lucien replied.

"Thank you. I believe 'Black Pearl' has already saved us a lot of time, and we have other purchases to make as well. Waiting for a day or two won't be a problem for us."

Chapter 140: The Grand Order from North America (2)

Joseph was deeply engrossed in his laboratory, working on a new creation. It was a gift he intended to present to Napoleon, a new toy for the Italian campaign: a Mini ball rifle.

During this era, rifled muskets already existed, but their slow reloading speed made them nearly useless outside of hunting. The early rifled musket bullets were slightly larger than the barrel, requiring the shooter to hammer and ram the bullet down the barrel, a laborious and time-consuming process. In contrast, smoothbore muskets could fire seven or eight rounds in the time it took to load a single shot with rifled muskets.

However, the Mini ball changed everything. In the original history, this bullet was jointly invented around 1849 by French captains Claude-tienne Mini and Henri-Gustave Delvigne. The Mini ball had a slightly smaller caliber, eliminating the awkwardness of loading due to oversized bullets.

The bullet had threads around the body to engage the rifling, with animal fat lubricated in the grooves. This innovation was later adopted by the British, who unknowingly used bullets lubricated with pig or cow fat, leading to the Indian Rebellion.

At the base of the bullet, a soft material was used. When fired, the pressure of the gunpowder gas expanded the soft material, creating a tight seal in the barrel. This solved the problem of gas leakage in old-style muzzleloading rifles, enhancing their speed, range, and safety.

Although the Mini ball was invented decades later, its implementation was relatively simple at this time. The advantages it brought in terms of tactics were immense.

Firstly, it allowed rifled muskets to match smoothbore muskets in terms of reloading speed, rendering smoothbore muskets almost obsolete. A typical smoothbore musket had an effective range of less than one hundred yards, but a rifled musket using Mini balls could accurately engage targets up to five hundred yards away.

Before the Mini ball, both the British and the Russians believed that "bullets are for fools, bayonets for heroes," often advancing to close quarters combat on the battlefield. However, if their enemies were equipped with rifles capable of effectively firing at five hundred yards, the valor of the British and Russian armies would become a joke. Hand-to-hand combat would no longer hold its esteemed place.

In the age of smoothbore muskets, infantry had to form tight formations on the battlefield to counter the threat of cavalry. However, with the introduction of the Mini ball, cavalry charging infantry was practically suicidal. The cavalry's role diminished significantly.

In addition, artillery tactics were heavily impacted. In the smoothbore musket era, cannon fire with canister or grape shot had an effective range that exceeded infantry muskets. Therefore, cannons could be positioned at the front of formations for offensive purposes.

But with the arrival of Mini balls, the effective range of infantry weapons surpassed that of cannons firing canister or grape shot. While solid shot fired from cannons had a longer range than Mini balls, it was inefficient for firing at dispersed infantry due to accuracy issues. Placing cannons at the frontlines for attacks was impractical, as it made the gunners vulnerable to enemy infantry. Thus, artillery had to be positioned further back and mainly used for support.

Even the game-changer of history, who altered the course of events, would see his role shift from a primary weapon to a secondary one due to the limitation in throwing distance.

This type of weapon had a significant flaw, though. Its technological barrier was so low that anyone who looked at it could easily understand how it worked. Once it was used, the relevant technology would undoubtedly be obtained by others, be they France's enemies or business rivals of the Bonaparte family.

So, the use of this innovation would have to wait until Napoleon entered Italy. The Bonaparte family would seize victory and ascend to political power with the help of this weapon, using that position to suppress and defeat their business rivals.

Of course, as a time traveler, Joseph knew that eventually, this weapon would be replaced by breech-loading bolt-action rifles. He wasn't trying to delay progress deliberately, but the technology for these bolt-action rifles was difficult to achieve at this time. For instance, these rifles required steel, not wrought iron, but the most advanced steel-making technique in this era was crucible steel, which couldn't meet the requirements in terms of production and efficiency.

Bullet development had already achieved success early on, but the design of the rifle lagged behind. Mini balls required faster-burning gunpowder, leading to two problems: rapidly rising and falling chamber pressure. To avoid chamber ruptures, the barrel had to be made thicker, resulting in a heavier rifle and increased production costs.

Joseph designed the rifle barrel to be thicker towards the rear and thinner towards the front in a conical shape, but determining the exact thickness of the barrel at various points required time and

experimentation. So, these seemingly simple principles occupied a considerable portion of Joseph's time, causing him to send letters with fewer words to Fanny.

Nevertheless, even during busy times, one must maintain a work-life balance, especially for those engaged in intellectual pursuits. Joseph established that researchers would have one day of rest every ten days, and their daily work hours wouldn't exceed twelve. For himself and advanced researchers like Lavasie, they would enjoy two days of rest every ten days, with a maximum of six hours of work per day. As for laborers, they were abundant in the streets, and unless their skills were exceptionally advanced and irreplaceable, Joseph didn't have time to attend to them.

Today was not a resting day, but Joseph received a letter from Lucien, stating that a millionaire wanted to discuss a substantial business deal. Consequently, Joseph entrusted Lavasie with the affairs of the research institute and hurried back to Marseille. There, in his estate, he met with Stephen Girard.

Joseph had only a vague understanding of history and was unaware of the legendary figure in American history before this time. The man before him, a French-speaking American with a distinct Bordeaux accent, was none other than Stephen Girard, who would go on to become North America's shipping magnate and the first individual in American history to accumulate wealth exceeding one million dollars. But, these accomplishments lay in the future, and at this moment, he was just starting his impressive career.

Stephen Girard had a sailor's background and had a particular fascination with various types of ships. When he first saw the "Black Pearl" in New York's harbor and learned about its performance, he immediately realized that if the ship's cargo capacity could reach five hundred tons, it would be far more efficient than the average sailboat. With his sharp instincts, this French-American returned to France to study this vessel further.

Over the next two days, Joseph and Stephen Girard engaged in grueling negotiations, with both sides pretending to be impoverished, trying to motivate each other, and professing that the discussions had deepened their mutual understanding. Finally, they reached an agreement on a strategic partnership.

According to the agreement they signed, Stephen Girard would place a one-time order for seven five-hundred-ton clipper ships at the Bonaparte Research Institute's affiliated shipyard. He would prepay the full purchase price for five of these ships, with the remaining amount to be paid upon delivery.

The Bonaparte Research Institute committed to transferring the complete technology required for constructing these clipper ships to Stephen Girard. They also pledged to send technical advisors to Stephen Girard's shipyard in New York, guaranteeing that these advisors would be paid a salary at least 1.5 times the wages of their French counterparts. The Bonaparte Research Institute also vowed to ensure that the Girard Shipyard in New York would master the technology for clipper ship construction within two years.

Stephen Girard promised that for the next fifteen years, for each clipper ship produced by Girard Shipyard, he would pay a technology usage fee to the Bonaparte Research Institute, at a rate of one dollar per ton of cargo capacity.

The Bonaparte Research Institute pledged not to sell this technology to other manufacturers during this period. However, if they did sell clipper ships to other North American companies, they would be compensated by Stephen Girard at a rate of 1.5 dollars per ton of cargo capacity.