

The Fox 191

Chapter 191: Command in the Face of Defeat

A messenger dispatched by Napoleon delivered a letter to General Suvarov. In the letter, Napoleon first praised the indomitable spirit displayed by the Russian army in battle, then he pointed out, "There's really no need for a war to resolve the issues between Russia and France. Young men from both nations are shedding blood needlessly over some technical and negotiable matters, which is truly an incomprehensible tragedy."

Napoleon proposed a ceasefire between the two sides and suggested that minor "misunderstandings" and issues between France and Russia could be left for future negotiations by both governments.

He also proposed that a location be chosen for negotiations on the terms of the ceasefire.

After the French messenger had left, General Suvarov gathered his officers. He showed them Napoleon's letter and asked for their opinions.

"The Archduke of Austria has been claiming that the French are suffering major setbacks in the north and that Napoleon's army will soon receive orders to withdraw. It seems the Austrians might be telling the truth."

"But, in my opinion, the French have a point too. Can we really expect to gain a piece of Italy by fighting them? Even if we fight the French with all our might and seize Italy when they retreat, isn't that just doing a favor to the Austrians? What will we gain? I believe negotiating with the French for terms, like acquiring some technology from them they might be more advanced than the British in certain areas, especially military technology."

"I agree with Antonov's point. The French are likely ahead of the game in military technology, at least on land."

"I think we should send people to France to study systematically. We should"

"Actually, we don't need to fight the French at all. Instead, we should ally with them. This way, the East will be ours, and the West will be theirs. How perfect!"

"But the French have always been allies with the Turks."

"Why would the French side with the Turks? Isn't it to counter the Austrians? We are much stronger than the Turks; to keep the Austrians in check, the French can easily"

The discussion was lively, and while everyone had different views, a common thread was their reluctance to engage in war with the French, particularly in distant Italy.

Suvarov quietly listened, realizing that this sentiment wasn't just held by his generals but was likely shared by most of the soldiers. They didn't want to continue fighting the French.

In theory, chasing the French in their retreat could lead to a major victory, but given the soldiers' morale and the French army's fighting capability, Suvarov believed the Russian army, even in open combat, would probably be outmatched by the French. Perhaps negotiating with the French for gains was a better option.

As for Austria, Suvarov believed the Russians had already spilled enough blood. If the Austrians were dissatisfied with the ceasefire, they could fight the French on their own, and Russia would offer moral support.

With this understanding, negotiations between the two sides went smoothly. Napoleon and Suvarov met in an estate, exchanged gifts, and reached an agreement to temporarily halt hostilities.

Napoleon left a portion of his army behind and headed north with the rest to confront the English.

Upon learning of the French army's retreat, the Archduke John saw an opportunity to chase them and possibly reclaim Italy. Suvarov, however, advised caution, warning that the French might have set traps. The Russian army, already weakened by earlier battles, couldn't afford a reckless pursuit.

Surprisingly, Suvarov's cautious approach received support from the Austrian commanders. They believed it was best not to take risks with the cunning French. "Staying unchanging in response to their changes" became the mantra.

The Austrians marched towards positions they believed the Italians were guarding (Position A), only to face a major defeat. Retreating Austrians reported, "We encountered French soldiers dressed as Italians!"

The Russians, despite having accurate intelligence that the French army had retreated north and that only a small French rearguard and a newly assembled North Italian Federation army remained, remained cautious.

The Austrians, however, grew more active. They felt more confident facing the Italians, having extensive experience with them. Consequently, the Austrians attacked the positions they thought were held by Italians, and things quickly turned south. Defeated Austrians reported to the Russians, "We encountered French soldiers dressed as Italians!"

Napoleon led over sixty thousand elite French troops back across the Alps into France. As soon as he returned, news arrived that the Anglo-Prussian coalition was closing in on Verdun.

French troops who had retreated from Lige had regrouped in Versailles, joining over a hundred thousand fresh troops. They prepared to defend Versailles, and at that moment, an odd error occurred in France's information system.

To transmit information quickly, the French had established a system that used light signals to communicate messages. The system was based on a network of towers situated along major roads leading to Paris, akin to signal towers seen in other countries.

However, this French system could convey more complex messages than mere signal towers, as it utilized varying patterns of light flashes, functioning like a telegraph. The sender would translate messages into long and short flashes, send them at fixed intervals, and the receiving tower would record the flashes and relay them to the next station. This enabled relatively fast transmission of intricate messages over long distances.

In Alexandre Dumas's novel "The Count of Monte Cristo," Edmond Dants manipulated this system by bribing a signalman to disseminate false information, triggering an economic upheaval that led to his enemy Danglars' bankruptcy.

Almost mirroring the novel, a signalman had been bribed by royalist sympathizers to alter the message: "General Bonaparte has achieved a significant victory in Italy and is returning to France"

was altered to "General Napoleon has suffered a major defeat in Italy, and Marshal Suvorov is leading a massive army across the Alps into France."

This false message sent the government in disarray. Some officials even attempted to flee. A few high-ranking officials attempting to escape were recognized by vigilant citizens, brought back, and faced the wrath of the angry crowd.

The attempted exodus severely damaged the prestige of the provisional government. Had a corrected message not arrived shortly afterward, the people of Paris were on the brink of an uprising.

A special edition of "The Truth in Science" newspaper was published, freely distributing news that General Bonaparte had decisively won in Italy and was leading his army back to France. The cry of "Long Live General Bonaparte!" echoed throughout Paris.

While the people of Paris celebrated the joyful news, Joseph was urgently summoned by Carnot.

"Joseph, something has happened," Carnot said with a grave expression as Joseph entered his office.

"What's happened?" Joseph asked, alarmed by Carnot's demeanor.

"General Joubert has been injured again and is currently unconscious" Carnot replied.

In a recent skirmish near Verdun, the commander who always seemed to venture to the front lines, General Joubert, was wounded by a bullet. His injuries were so severe that he couldn't continue to lead the army. His second-in-command, General Moreau, was still at the front lines in Chatillon, and due to the distance and the enemy's situation, he couldn't arrive to take over Joubert's command at Verdun. Thus, the French army in Verdun was temporarily without a commander.

"Good Lord!" Joseph exclaimed. "Carnot, what are we going to do?"

"For now, I need you to take over Joubert's command temporarily as the overall commander of the French forces in Verdun," Carnot said. "We have no better option at the moment."

"But I've been out of military command for a long time."

"Joseph, don't be modest. Your legend lives on in the army, and in recent years, you've been leading the transformation of our army's technology and tactics."

"But I'm just a technician. How can I"

"Don't argue. If there were a better candidate, I wouldn't ask this of you. But right now, there's no one more suitable. Joseph, stop underestimating yourself. The War Department has decided, and you are to take command."

"I've been out of the military for years, Carnot"

"But your legacy lives on in the army. The truth is, you've been leading the changes in our military technology and tactics."

"But you call me a technician, and"

"Stop with the self-doubt. There's no better choice now. Joseph, accept the responsibility; the War Department has already made its decision."

Joseph reluctantly agreed to assume command temporarily.

Chapter 192: The Verdun Meat Grinder (1)

So, Joseph was forcibly given the title of "Commander," and with the Red Army and a batch of supplies donated by the "Military Union," he headed towards Verdun.

When Joseph arrived in Verdun, the garrison there was in a state of panic due to the loss of their commander. Fortunately, the surname "Bonaparte" came to Joseph's rescue, as it was true that, as Carnot had mentioned, Joseph might not have had much contact with combat units for a long time, but his name was legendary throughout the army. The name "Bonaparte" was associated with various weapons used by the military because of him.

Moreover, Joseph Bonaparte was the famous war god Napoleon Bonaparte's elder brother, and it was rumored that he had even been Napoleon's direct superior in the past. If Napoleon was so formidable, his older brother, the founder of the Red Army, the initiator and leader of military reforms, couldn't be any less skilled, right?

Furthermore, Joseph brought a large amount of new weaponry to support them. It was said that these weapons had been donated by the "Military Union" free of charge to defend the homeland, and these weapons were undoubtedly far better than the ones used by the Northern Army before.

"You see these authentic 'Bonaparte melons.' Look at the engraving, how beautiful it is, and it feels so comfortable to touch. And then, look at the Mini rifle, the rifling is so smooth and precise, it's so much better than what we had before" A veteran counted the weapons they received while bragging to the nearby recruits.

"Is that all?" a Red Army soldier passing by happened to hear the old soldier's boasting and said, "What we've brought is even more powerful than these things... Rest assured, with these, we'll give those English and Prussians a tough time."

A general named "Bonaparte," along with a bunch of weapons bearing the same name, immediately lifted the morale of the Verdun garrison. In addition, everyone knew another uplifting piece of news: General Napoleon Bonaparte was on his way with over ten thousand elite troops from the Italian Legion. As long as they held onto the Verdun fortresses for a while, the Italian Legion would arrive, and then... France would be saved.

"Little General Bonaparte will kick the butts of those English and Prussians hard. He'll turn their butts into eight pieces. As long as we hold on for a few days, it'll be enough." For the first time, an optimistic voice rang out among the garrison.

After boosting the garrison's morale, Joseph immediately focused all his efforts on improving Verdun's defenses. Various new innovations such as barbed wire, trenches, shrapnel shells, mines, especially the "broad-sword landmines," and even a flamethrower (the land version of Lavasie's design) and a "melon launcher" (a large slingshot) were rapidly prepared.

Originally, in Joseph's plan, these things were all meant for Napoleon. "The swiftness of the troops" was an ancient military saying, and it was already the rainy season. If Napoleon's army had to march with heavy weapons, their speed would be significantly reduced. Thus, according to Napoleon's request, Joseph had already prepared a large military depot near Paris, allowing Napoleon's soldiers to drop some heavy weapons and supplies and reach Paris as quickly as possible.

However, now Joseph had diverted a significant portion of the arsenal from this depot. There was no other way; after all, life was precious, right? Even though Carnot believed Joseph was capable, even though the Red Army's veterans and the Northern Army's soldiers believed Joseph could certainly fight, and even though the entire population of Paris believed that someone with the surname "Bonaparte" would definitely be a capable military leader, Joseph himself didn't have any faith in his own abilities to fight.

"Does the father swim well, so should the son?," Joseph said to himself, and he made up his mind to make his own "tortoise shell" as tough as possible.

Even though Verdun's defenses had become increasingly formidable in recent days, many experienced officers believed that Verdun was already impregnable. They thought that no army could breach such defenses. Even if the English and Prussians were strong, they would only be able to look at Verdun's walls in despair. Nevertheless, Joseph still didn't feel secure enough.

"It's a pity that our technological level is still lacking," Joseph said to himself. "If we could manufacture armor similar to water droplets, maintained by strong intermolecular forces, then I would truly be at ease."

Of course, Joseph's single-minded attention to fortifying his "tortoise shell" was thanks to the British. Although the British and Prussians had already pursued Verdun, the British artillery was still crawling slowly on the way.

The British army had many powerful cannons, but originally, these cannons were meant for the navy. However, due to the rapid expansion of the army, they were unable to acquire sufficient cannons at the moment, so they requisitioned the reserve cannons of the navy. The problem with the naval cannons was that they were exceedingly heavy. Moreover, it had rained heavily a couple of days ago. The roads of this era were either dusty on sunny days or muddy on rainy days, and as a result, the British cannons' marching speed had plummeted to less than three hundred meters per day.

In previous battles, whether the British or the Prussians, they had become accustomed to having a multitude of powerful cannons on their side. Now, faced with a fortress even more impregnable than Ligny, lacking those powerful cannons, they couldn't charge directly. That's just not how things work.

So, with the joint efforts of the heavens and the British naval cannons, Joseph gained some time to continually strengthen his defenses. His meticulous and thoughtful approach to enhancing the safety of his soldiers earned him widespread admiration.

While Joseph was busy organizing defenses, he urgently sent someone back to request assistance from Napoleon. "Quickly find a few reliable generals and send them here in advance to help me organize the defense!"

Upon receiving this urgent request, Napoleon couldn't help but laugh heartily.

His Chief of Staff, Bertier, asked, "Why are you laughing, General?"

Napoleon chuckled and replied, "I'm laughing at the ineptitude of the Anglo-Prussian coalition and the timidity of my older brother Joseph. My big brother Joseph is now acting as the acting commander of the Northern Army and is responsible for the defense of Verdun. He thinks he lacks

bold individuals in his ranks, so he wrote to me, asking me to urgently send him some advisors. You see, whom should we send?"

"How about sending Davout? He should be a good choice," Bertier suggested.

"No..." Napoleon shook his head. "Davout is very capable; we need to keep him with us... What about sending Marmont?"

"Marmont?" Bertier was quite puzzled. "Marmont is brave, but sending him..."

"Do you really think that Joseph, the coward, needs someone to teach him how to defend? This guy is just a big tortoise. He needs someone to bolster his courage. I'm telling you, if you went there right now, you'd definitely see that this guy has already turned Verdun into a steel fortress bristling with thorns. I bet he doesn't need our help at all; he can hold Verdun until doomsday by himself... By the way, let's change the marching plan..."

"How?" Bertier asked.

"Joseph, that coward, moved all the cannons and various other things we had prepared in Paris to Verdun. Are we going to Paris empty-handed? He misappropriated our cannons; of course, we need to bring our own cannons. Well, let the troops stop and regroup for a bit so that the cannons and other supplies can catch up... We can also take this opportunity to relax. How about a picnic this afternoon?" Napoleon replied.

As a result, Napoleon's marching speed suddenly dropped to barely surpassing that of the British. Only the "most courageous" Marmont was given a vital task, rushing north as quickly as possible to serve as an advisor to Joseph.

Joseph warmly received his "military advisor" sent by his younger brother. He toured the entire Verdun fortress with Marmont, explaining his various defense facilities and ideas. Afterward, they returned to the headquarters and sat down together.

"General Marmont, do you have any suggestions on how to strengthen Verdun's defense? You know, I haven't commanded such a large army before and haven't faced such a large-scale battle. I'm quite lacking in experience in many areas," Joseph asked first.

"Oh, General Bonaparte, you're too kind. The defenses of Verdun's fortresses are actually very good, but in my opinion, there are some issues," Marmont honestly replied.

"What issues?" Joseph asked promptly, thinking to himself, "I've always known that discussing tactics on paper isn't ideal. I thought I'd created an impregnable, virtually flawless defense system, but as soon as a more experienced commander saw it, he immediately spotted problems. Thankfully, I'm smart enough to ask Napoleon for an advisor."

"Well, General Bonaparte, I think too much effort has been invested in Verdun's defenses. The level of defense is excessive. It's possible to reduce some of the defensive forces and use them for counterattacks or even offensive operations. Additionally, some defensive structures, such as here, here, and here... you see, if we counterattack like this, I believe we can achieve greater success. So while these facilities significantly enhance the fortress's defensive capabilities, they also, to some extent, interfere with our counterattacks. I don't think it's necessary, and they should be dismantled, as Verdun's fortress's defense is already somewhat excessive," Marmont pointed to the map.

"But if we're dismantling like this, what if the enemy suddenly flanks us from here? What will we do?" Joseph asked.

"To execute such a flanking maneuver at the right time is very difficult. I think the likelihood of the enemy reacting that quickly or such a situation occurring is quite low. Besides, in war, who doesn't take a few risks?" Marmont replied nonchalantly.

Joseph listened and then smiled, saying, "Alright, General Marmont, I will consider your suggestions."

Meanwhile, he thought to himself, "Counterattack? Why would I counterattack? Just hold out until Napoleon arrives; doesn't that sound great? What is Napoleon thinking, sending over a guy who's all about fierce assaults?"

Chapter 193: The Verdun Meat Grinder (2)

While Joseph verbally said, "I will consider it," he had no intention of weakening the defenses to gain an advantage when the British cannons had yet to arrive. If the British cannons were not yet in place, then it was crucial to strengthen the turtle shell as quickly as possible.

Joseph had also prepared some tricky tactics in his mind, both those that required favorable conditions and those he hoped to create if the situation allowed. After all, there was still time, and without creating some sort of spectacle, he couldn't shake off this uneasy feeling. So why not create a marvel?

Of course, Joseph knew that creating a spectacle could backfire and harm the nation. So, it was better to continue fortifying the fortress. Joseph vigorously created a slew of dummy targets and simultaneously compelled the government to place numerous orders with the "Military-Industrial Complex" to replenish the depleted arsenal.

Apart from this, Joseph also designated someone specifically to send urgent messages to Napoleon every day, urging him to come to the rescue. However, that fellow Napoleon, with his army in tow, was moving at a frustratingly slow pace, while the British cannons were gradually getting into position.

"That rascal is probably thinking of letting the enemy exhaust themselves here in a head-on collision, and then swooping in to take advantage afterward! I'm sure he's thinking just that, absolutely!" Joseph declared after receiving Napoleon's reply, which stated, "The road conditions are too poor, the soldiers are too fatigued from crossing the Alps, the weather is bad, and anyway, they haven't launched a full-scale attack yet... I don't understand why you're so anxious?"

Joseph's judgment was indeed accurate. Napoleon was thinking just that, and if the fortress's commander were still General Joubert, Joseph would likely suggest the same to Napoleon. If he would suggest it, Napoleon would certainly do it!

After the cannons were in position, the British began their attack following the familiar pattern used in the Battle of Lige: bombard, bombard, and bombard again. Yes, infantry was not rushing in; instead, they slowly pounded the defensive structures to reduce their effectiveness before committing the troops.

Joseph watched with satisfaction as the dummy targets he had built crumbled under the British artillery barrage. He calculated how much gunpowder, how many cannon barrels, and how much time the British were consuming.

Nevertheless, the passage of time was the most useless metric because Napoleon ordered his troops to halt once the fortress was attacked. Supposedly, Napoleon complained to his Chief of Staff Berthier, "What are the British doing? They're moving so slowly! We've been stalling time like this, and they're still dawdling!"

The British spent several days gradually clearing the targets Joseph had constructed using artillery fire. Then, the Duke of Brunswick informed Joseph, "The rest is up to you; you have to take this section, and then we'll bombard for a few more days. It won't be long before we capture Verdun."

The Prussian troops confidently prepared to launch their attack. After all, the jagged breastwork in front had already been battered to pieces by the British artillery, making it an easier target.

As the Prussian soldiers approached the fortifications, they were met with gunfire from the French soldiers manning the breastworks. The Prussian infantry advanced, using their ranks to protect the skirmishers moving forward.

At this point, a series of explosions suddenly rang out, causing several Prussian soldiers to clutch their legs and fall to the ground.

"What's this?" the Duke of Brunswick exclaimed.

"These are landmines," answered Major George Cadwallader, the British liaison officer sent to the Duke of Brunswick. "We encounter these frequently in Ireland. However, it seems that the French mines here are much less powerful."

The Duke of Brunswick recalled that the Polish troops had used similar tactics, although they primarily operated in Russian territory to avoid damaging Prussian supply lines. The Prussian forces had only heard about these treacherous devices, but few of them had firsthand experience.

While the landmines caused losses for the Prussians, they couldn't halt their advance. As Prussian troops began to approach the breastworks, the French soldiers who were still holding the fortifications began to retreat.

"It seems the French have lost a lot of their morale," one Prussian officer remarked.

"Well, given their situation, it's still quite impressive that they have any morale left," Major Cadwallader responded. "After a series of defeats, most soldiers in many countries would have very low morale. They're retreating, not being routed. You can see from the paths they're taking; they aren't moving in straight lines."

"Yes, they're retreating, or I should say, withdrawing, but they still know how to dodge bullets. They're not panicking," another Prussian general commented.

"They're not just dodging bullets," Major Cadwallader added. "They're also avoiding stepping on their own mines. I've seen it in Ireland; the Irish rebels run like this when crossing minefields."

"You fought against Irish rebels, you say?" the curious general inquired.

"Yes, General Anderson, I've fought against the Irish rebels," Major Cadwallader replied.

"I heard the Irish rebels are tough," another Prussian officer mentioned.

"Irish rebels are cunning and ruthless. My cousin, Viscount Anderson, fell in battle due to a mine during our engagements with them. In comparison, the French are easier to deal with. However, the situation today reminds me of Ireland," Major Cadwallader said.

Meanwhile, the Prussian skirmishers had crossed the mostly demolished breastworks, paying a high price, and their casualties would be felt in the coming days. Nevertheless, the French had also suffered losses; several soldiers had been killed in the earlier exchange of fire, and during the retreat, around a dozen more were cut down.

The Prussian skirmishers continued their advance, with the first obstacle ahead being a French barbed wire barrier.

The French soldiers who had rushed to the breastwork crouched down, deftly crawling through designated openings. At those points, there was just enough space under the wire for a person to crawl through.

However, the pursuing Prussian skirmishers couldn't replicate this approach. First, they had to cross a mined area, and although they didn't have a good understanding of landmines, the wounded comrades behind them lying on the ground clutching their feet illustrated the danger. So, after taking the breastwork, they stopped and took cover. The higher-ups hadn't given them orders on what to do next, and at this point, they didn't want to rush forward blindly.

Even though they had captured the breastwork, the main Prussian force couldn't immediately follow because a minefield lay between the breastwork and the English-Prussian troops. Major Cadwallader had explained, "Landmines can be identified if you look closely. After all, tripwires are still visible on the surface. We have a special team for mine clearance with highly experienced personnel, and they can quickly open a safe passage in a minefield."

So, the experienced British mine clearance team set to work. However, their clearance progress wasn't as fast as Major Cadwallader had described. Perhaps the major's definition of "fast" was different from theirs. Regardless, the major's servants had already prepared his afternoon tea.

"After having tea, the passage should be cleared," Major Cadwallader predicted.

As Major Cadwallader had expected, by noon, a safe passage had finally been opened. More infantry followed, and their plan was to rely on the remaining French breastwork to rest before continuing the attack.

However, what they didn't anticipate was that the breastwork they had taken was a decoy. The position of this breastwork had been pre-sighted by the French artillerymen positioned behind, and they had even conducted test fires in the area before constructing it.

After the Prussian troops had gathered behind the decoy breastwork, the French soldiers immediately removed the camouflage netting from the nearby 8-pounder cannons and launched a volley. These cannons were partially buried in the trenches, with only their barrels protruding above the ground, making them nearly invisible from a distance. The firepower from this volley wasn't particularly intense (Joseph hadn't allowed all the cannons to fire to save them for later), but their precision was astonishing. Despite only ten cannons firing, all the shells hit their intended targets with devastating accuracy, resulting in dozens of casualties.

Chapter 194: The Verdun Meat Grinder (3)

Not long after the first round of simultaneous fire, these ten large cannons unleashed a second volley. This round of fire once again caused dozens of casualties and threw the Prussian army into chaos. Everyone knew they couldn't stay there and take the cannon fire, but they had no clear plan of action. Some brave souls attempted to charge towards the cannons, only to trigger landmines along the way. Others, more timid, retreated to the rear, trying to find cover, only to trigger more landmines.

Amidst the chaos, an organized assault seemed impossible. The troops could only scramble back as best as they could to save as many lives as possible. During the retreat, they had to painstakingly clear the minefields, a much more efficient job than the British had done to identify these narrow areas.

"General, the enemy has been pushed back after just a few volleys of our cannons. We've had minimal casualties, it's incredible," said an officer from one of the Northern legions excitedly to Joseph, who was observing the battle through binoculars.

There were many officers in the Northern legions who knew Joseph, having been saved by the Bonaparte brothers in the past. While there had been some tension between the Bonaparte family and the Northern legions, their reputation was still positive within the army.

"Who said we had minimal casualties? We just lost several soldiers," Joseph corrected. He raised his binoculars again to survey the situation, sighed, and shook his head. "We lost one of our breastworks, and another minefield is nearly gone. Some of the mines were even removed how can you call that minimal casualties?"

"General, are there any techniques we can use for those mines that are easy to spot?" the officer asked.

"Of course, like reducing the amount of explosive material, decreasing the size, and lowering the cost," Joseph replied, genuinely concerned.

After spending half a day destroying a hastily built breastwork and efficiently dismantling a French minefield, the Anglo-Prussian coalition forces returned to their starting positions.

This was undoubtedly a significant setback, but compared to the two other pieces of bad news they received that evening, it seemed almost inconsequential.

The first piece of bad news was that the Russian Tsar and the French had negotiated peace. After a period of stalemate in Italy, the authorized Russian consul in the Venetian Republic and the French consul, with special powers, reached a peace agreement. According to this agreement, France guaranteed to Russia strict control over arms exports, while Russia agreed to purchase a batch of weapons from France. The two countries also agreed to strengthen cooperation in academia, culture, and various other fields.

"Those blasted Russians! I knew they were unreliable. If they hadn't double-crossed us last time, we would have and now they've double-crossed us again!" the Duke of Brunswick cursed in anger.

"These Russians! Just half a month ago, they extorted a hefty sum from us!" Major George Cavendish was equally infuriated. "I've never seen such audacious people!"

"At this critical moment, when we're about to capture Paris, the Tsar betrays us. I can't fathom his logic. Doesn't he realize we're about to win?" the Duke of Brunswick wondered aloud. "Some say

he's not even Peter III's legitimate son. But after this act, I doubt anyone will believe those baseless rumors!"

Peter III, during the Seven Years' War, had unexpectedly switched sides, leading to France's defeat and saving Prussia at a time when Frederick the Great was on the verge of defeat. Yet, his actions had been so outlandish and contrary to Russia's interests that his wife, Catherine the Great, had orchestrated a coup to remove him from power.

"But regardless of all this, the instability is now on the French side," Lieutenant Cavendish said with a somewhat optimistic tone, and his status, despite his relatively low rank, commanded respect due to his noble lineage.

This news meant that the southern threat from France had effectively dissipated. Now, they needed to expedite the capture of Verdun and seize Paris before Napoleon arrived. Otherwise, the outcome of the war would look grim.

The second piece of bad news was that the continuous rainy weather in southern France had ended. There had been two consecutive days of clear skies, and if this trend continued, the road conditions from the south to the north of France would rapidly improve. This implied that Napoleon's march with the Italian Legion would speed up, and if the British and Prussians couldn't capture Verdun before Napoleon's arrival, it would be nearly impossible to take this fortress.

Faced with this urgency, the British decided, in conjunction with the Prussians, to launch a strong offensive as soon as possible, even at a high cost, to capture Verdun and occupy Paris.

The next morning, both the Prussians and the British sent large forces from multiple directions into their starting positions, preparing for a full-scale assault.

This caught Joseph's attention, and he quickly arrived at the command center to coordinate the fortress defense. Reports from various observation points came in, detailing the enemy's movements.

"What are these people thinking? In warfare, shouldn't they launch probing attacks from various directions first to understand the enemy's defenses and then attack with focus and strategy? What are they doing? Do they understand tactics at all?" Mura commented upon hearing these reports.

If Napoleon were here, he would have likely chuckled and said, "Alas, Murat, you're discussing tactics now?"

However, since Napoleon wasn't there, and Joseph, despite not being known for sharp wit, genuinely considered the situation. He explained, "I believe the enemy is aware of Russia's withdrawal from the war and the improved weather in the south. They are likely concerned that Napoleon's Italian Legion will arrive soon, so they're launching an early assault. As for probing attacks, today's attacks are, in essence, probes from multiple directions they have to save time. According to our calculations, they don't have enough troops to launch a full-scale assault from so many directions. This must be an all-around probe."

After this explanation, Joseph turned his attention back to the map, studying it carefully. Then he issued orders: "We must preserve our defenses for the future. Today, artillery must not use cannons heavier than 12 pounds, and only single-bore cannons are allowed in combat. 'Canister shot' is prohibited. When using 'wide-sword' mines, the simultaneous detonation of more than three is prohibited. Flamethrowers are not allowed, and 'little melon launchers' are also forbidden. In other

areas, we should hold our ground. Zones 1, 7, 12... may slightly retreat but must not fall back beyond the second trench."

Soon, the British and Prussians initiated their attacks from multiple directions. Although, as Joseph had anticipated, these simultaneous attacks were more sound than fury, exerting limited pressure on the defensive positions. Nevertheless, because of Joseph's prohibitions, the troops appeared to be quite active.

After a day of battle, the British and Prussians jointly assessed the results of their attacks and identified several problems on the enemy's side. First, the French had received more support for modern weapons, but their shortage of artillery, especially due to losses on the Northern front, was evident. It seemed that their mines were also in limited supply, with some minefields having a lower density than others. Moreover, the cleared minefields contained a mix of old and new mines, which, in the eyes of the British and Prussians, showed an insufficient number of mines.

However, these issues could potentially improve over time, given the presence of numerous military factories near Paris. Thus, the coalition forces needed to launch their assault quickly, or else the fortress would grow stronger with each passing day.

The Duke of Brunswick, General Blcher, and other British commanders focused their attention on the two weak points that seemed to be traps while considering other segments more suitable for defense. These would become their main targets for tomorrow's attacks.

Chapter 195: The Verdun Meat Grinder (4)

Now that the focal point of the attack was established, it was time to get to work overnight on essential tasks. Demining, for instance, was crucial to ensure a successful assault early the next morning, and that meant demining operations had to be carried out through the night.

Fortunately, the weather in Verdun had been clear for the past couple of days. Even late at night, there was a half-moon providing decent visibility. This moonlight allowed for some work to be done.

At this moment, Joseph had locked his paper on electromagnetic induction inside a safe and then locked that safe inside a larger one. It wasn't because Joseph enjoyed playing Russian dolls, but he believed that the safe containing the paper was valuable enough to be secured in another safe. The larger safe was a creation by a Bourbon-descendant master who had lost his head during the French Revolution.

Without the discovery of electromagnetic induction and the inability to acquire mine detectors in Ireland, the British were left with a rather crude method of demining. They had to crouch on the ground and visually inspect for mines, with their only auxiliary tool being a long steel probe.

This method of demining was slow, inefficient, and highly dangerous. During the day, it might have been manageable, but at night, with no lights allowed (the minefield was well within the range of Mini rifles), they had to rely on moonlight for illumination. This naturally slowed down the demining process, increasing the risk substantially.

As a result, occasional explosions from the British demining teams startled the French. Each explosion pained the hearts of the British because their elite troops, not the hastily mobilized Prussian conscripts, suffered the losses. Moreover, the explosions drew the attention of the French. The bright moonlight on this particular night favored demining but also improved visibility for the

French marksmen. Consequently, the British demining teams suffered not only from accidental detonations but also from more direct hits by French fire. As they advanced deeper into the demining process, they got closer to the French trenches, raising the likelihood of French sightings and shots. Therefore, after dealing with most of the mines at a considerable distance, they had no choice but to wait for daylight when the British and Prussian conscripts would deal with the remaining mines more efficiently.

Demining forces were not evenly distributed; the well-trained deminers were sent to the actual points of attack, while more rookies were dispatched to the feint attacks, some with less than a month of training. These newcomers naturally had a higher probability of setting off explosions. However, this arrangement served a purpose to emphasize that these points were the real targets.

Thus, the night was filled with constant rumbling, and the blood-red dawn finally broke in the east of the Verdun fortress.

The day's assault began, starting with the feint attacks. The previous night's demining efforts were effective, and with the efficient demining by the mobilized troops, both the British and Prussians quickly crossed the first minefield. In front of them was the first line of barbed wire and the first French trench. In these locations, the feinting forces initiated an attack, but they withdrew in the face of the French rifle fire and the shrapnel from cannons.

Of course, complete withdrawal wouldn't serve the purpose of distracting the French. In these areas, the tactics became artillery fire, artillery fire, and then infantry pretending to charge. Once the infantry had pretended to advance, the artillery resumed slow, steady bombardment.

Even so, the main focus of the British and Prussian attacks became evident. They had only managed to break through the first line of barbed wire and trench in these two directions. Between the first line of barbed wire and the first trench was a minefield, which had to be cleared by the mobilized troops. This naturally resulted in casualties, but, as expected, the French didn't have sufficient manpower or firepower in these two areas. So, after sacrificing a significant number of lives, the British and Prussians finally crossed the first line of barbed wire. What next? Then, the British and Prussians experienced an episode reminiscent of their encounter with the Russians in the French trenches in Italy. They were taught a lesson in hand grenades and artillery in the communication trenches and the main trenches.

However, perhaps due to the difference in troop strength and morale, the French did not launch an immediate counterattack. The British and Prussians managed to continue their advance after a brief reorganization. Still, as they advanced, they noticed that the firepower from the French on their front was noticeably increasing. While they didn't possess heavy artillery, the rate of 8-pounder cannons firing at them had risen significantly, and the frequency of enemy hand-thrown "sweet melons" and the use of "broad sword" landmines had also increased.

"The enemy is likely transferring reserve troops or troops from other areas to reinforce their defenses. We must act before them and secure the key objectives," the Duke of Brunswick immediately made this decision.

The so-called "key objective" referred to a hill approximately 200 meters high located behind the five layers of trenches. Capturing this target was like driving a massive steel nail into the heart of the French defense system. It posed a significant threat to the entire French defense structure. Conversely, failing to secure this hill would render the territory they had fought so hard to take

rather ineffective in shaking the overall defense, and it remained vulnerable to potential French counterattacks and encirclement.

The key was to seize this objective as swiftly as possible, before the French could react.

So, the Prussian and British forces intensified their attacks from two directions on this "key objective." Mines were abundant in the enemy's path? There was no time to dawdle. A quick assault was needed; otherwise, the French would catch on. Hadn't they noticed the increasing strength of the French firepower across from them? It was better to press forward, or more lives would be lost. Let's employ the most efficient method have the mobilized troops clear the way!

However, the Prussians were still stopped in front of the third barbed wire. The number of French troops across from them had noticeably increased, bullets were incessantly flying over, and to make matters worse, the "Bonaparte sweet melons" kept raining down. The Prussian army had similar weapons, but the French trenches were at least fifty meters away from the barbed wire, and unless you were a strongman, no one could throw a sweet melon that far.

Yet, the French somehow managed to easily throw the "sweet melons" over. It wasn't just one or two French soldiers tossing the sweet melons fifty or sixty meters away; it was as if they were raining down from the sky.

A barrage of "sweet melons" immediately cleared the Prussian soldiers near the barbed wire. The remaining soldiers were demoralized by this round of bombardment. Following those who hadn't been blown up, many Prussian soldiers, including junior officers, were so frightened by the casualties that they fled. Even some low-ranking officers were petrified and joined the retreat.

On the other hand, the performance of the British forces was somewhat better than the Prussians. They, too, endured a round of "sweet melon" bombardment in front of the third barbed wire. However, they surprisingly had the courage to continue the assault afterward. These "lobsterbacks" threw the bodies of the fallen over the barbed wire and attempted to pass it themselves. At this moment, a long burst of fire erupted from the opposite trenches, accurately reaching the "lobsterbacks" who were trying to climb over the wire. The British soldiers were engulfed in flames.

Those engulfed in flames writhed on the ground, attempting to extinguish the fire on their bodies. However, the flames couldn't be put out no matter how hard they tried. Soon, those British soldiers who had been set ablaze were burned to charcoal, and the rising flames prevented anyone else from advancing. Afterward, another round of "sweet melon" bombardment followed. The British soldiers also discarded their helmets and armor to retreat.

However, all in all, the British performed better than the Prussians. Although both sides retreated, the British stopped once they had retreated to the French trenches they had fought so hard to capture. The Prussians, on the other hand, had retreated all the way to their starting position. To the point where Joseph, who was overseeing the battle, felt some concerns, "Have we been too ruthless? Perhaps we've frightened them away, and if so, our plan to deplete their resources..."

The performance of the Prussian army infuriated both the Duke of Brunswick and General Blow. Fortunately, it seemed the French weren't prepared for the Prussian retreat and failed to seize back the lost ground immediately. By the time the French responded and started deploying troops to reclaim the territory, the Prussians, or at least the higher-ranking officers, had regained their senses.

General Blow personally led a cavalry charge and secured the first trench, but the second trench was lost again to the French.

On the British side, the French reacted more swiftly. They took advantage of the British retreat to recapture the second trench. So, although the British hadn't retreated as far as the Prussians, the final outcome was not substantially different. They had fought the entire day to capture a single trench.

By this time, it was around three or four in the afternoon. Whether it was the Prussians or the British, who had performed better on the battlefield, they had lost the courage to continue their assault. The Anglo-Prussian coalition began to focus on consolidating the ground they had taken. The French, on the other hand, seemed to have exhausted much of their strength in the earlier battle and did not launch a counteroffensive during this period. Thus, this long and bloody day passed in this manner.

Chapter 196: The Verdun Meat Grinder (5)

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the once bustling battlefield gradually fell into an eerie silence. During the first half of the night, the moon was absent, leaving the entire battlefield shrouded in darkness, with only the hushed whispers of the night wind.

Between the French and Prussian trenches lay communication trenches. These passages not only ensured the retreat of the French army but also served as routes for reinforcements. However, during the night, these communication trenches became a critical point heavily guarded by both sides against potential enemy attacks.

Soldiers from both sides periodically tossed torches into these communication trenches to serve as illumination, ensuring that anyone attempting to pass through would be noticed. The ground on both sides of these trenches had been a minefield during the daytime battles. However, thanks to the efficient work of Prussian and British troops in clearing the mines during the day, these minefields had diminished substantially.

In the cover of darkness, French sappers quietly left their trenches, carrying baskets filled with landmines, to plant them in the minefields. Although the Prussian and British soldiers had efficiently cleared the mines during the daytime battles, it was uncertain whether they had missed any. In the pitch-black night, the French sappers could only rely on the faint starlight to see anything, making it impossible to detect undetonated mines. They were at the mercy of fate.

So, for the first half of the night, the battlefield remained eerily quiet, punctuated only by occasional explosions the French sappers accidentally stumbling upon unexploded mines that had survived beneath the iron boots of the Prussian and British forces.

As the moon rose, the French engineers retreated. In the latter half of the night, the battlefield came alive once more.

Some British and Prussian soldiers, including drafted Prussian conscripts, after undergoing a half-hour crash course, were armed with shovels and probes. They were dispatched to the minefields it had become apparent that the crafty French had been up to something devious in the darkness.

Initially, both Prussian and British forces feared that the French might launch a night assault. Though launching an assault in such moonless conditions was challenging and likely a waste of ammunition, the French had always been crafty, and their intentions were unclear. Consequently,

the British and Prussians maintained a vigilant watch for most of the night, but the French did not launch a night attack.

Since the French had not come out for a night assault, they must not be out for a leisurely nighttime stroll and pondering the meaning of life. Therefore, the British and Prussian soldiers concluded, "Those devious French must have planted mines in the minefield!"

If the French could plant mines at night, then naturally, the British and Prussians could dig them up at night. Thus, the British engineers and Prussian conscripts who drew the short straws were hurried out of their trenches to venture into the moonlit minefields.

So, during this night, the sounds of explosions some initiated by the French during the first half of the night and more by the British and Prussians during the latter half continued steadily.

The following day, just as the sun began to rise, the British and Prussian forces initiated a fresh attack. The method remained the same: bombardment with artillery followed by a bayonet charge. However, there was a slight change. When a group of Prussian conscripts rushed forward to clear mines, a group of fully armed soldiers, led by an officer, stood behind them, aiming their guns at their backs.

After a night of contemplation, the Prussians had finally found a way to motivate their soldiers the officer's guns pointed at their backs. Under the threat of rifles, the Prussian conscripts displayed exceptional courage, disregarding the possibility of mines beneath their feet. They charged forward, knowing that the soldiers behind them would indeed open fire.

Amid the rumbling detonations of landmines, the Prussian army charged through the minefields towards the freshly repaired French barbed wire.

As per usual, they endured rifle fire and shrapnel from French artillery. They weathered the explosion of French "little melons" and the sweeping fire from the French "wide swords." What remained of the Prussian conscripts was then systematically killed by the Prussian officers.

Following the breakthrough of the third trench, the Prussian forces stopped their advance and began consolidating their positions, planning to continue gradually.

The British, on the other hand, fought more intensely. The battle for the third trench continued until the sun set. After the British repelled the final French countercharge, the night had fallen.

The British and Prussians both decided to consolidate their positions for the night and planned to continue the next day. In these two days, the casualties on both sides had been alarmingly high, numbering over thirty thousand. Such losses were rarely seen in European history. However, they were now very close to their "key objective." With a little more effort, it seemed that they could secure that high ground. Both the British and the Prussians thought, "We can hold on a bit longer."

What they did not know was that the third trench and the first trench had a significant difference a hidden underground tunnel connecting the two, aside from the communication trenches.

These underground tunnels were originally communication trenches, covered with wooden planks on top and concealed under a thick layer of earth at the exits. The repeated French counterattacks prevented the Prussians from checking these tunnels properly.

The exchange of gunfire between both sides only gradually subsided after the sun had set, and, naturally, the previous night's performance continued: in the first half of the night, the French

planted landmines, followed by thunderous explosions; in the latter half of the night, the British and Prussians came out to dig up mines, resulting in more explosions.

Just as the British and Prussians were triggering their own set of explosions, groups of French soldiers were making their way to the third trench through these underground passages.

As daybreak neared, the "explosions" scenario for the British and Prussians was approaching its climax. However, at this moment, French artillery suddenly opened fire on the third trench, now occupied by the British and Prussians.

While French artillery's impact on trenches was limited, the cannon fire served as a signal. Upon hearing the cannons, French soldiers brandishing bayonets climbed over the iron wire barriers along the communication trenches, then jumped onto the ground and charged towards the enemy trench.

The British and Prussians did not anticipate that the day's battle would commence with a French assault. They scrambled to organize a counterattack, planning to play defensively first, but suddenly, chunks of soil collapsed in their trenches, revealing numerous tunnel entrances. A multitude of French soldiers rushed out, bayonets ready.

With the combination of internal and external pressure, both the British and Prussian forces quickly crumbled. The French took advantage of the situation, even momentarily recapturing the second trench, expending considerable effort on dragging back several cannons intended for supporting today's offensive.

Furthermore, the French artillery had become more formidable, with larger cannons, notably those above twelve pounds, joining their ranks. Shrapnel shells made their debut on the Verdun battlefield. When the British and Prussian forces launched their counterattack, their soldiers were massacred by this type of shell.

After enduring significant casualties, the British regained the third trench they had just lost. However, the Prussians came dangerously close to losing the second trench.

At the end of the day's battle, the British tallied their losses. Over the past three days, the British forces had suffered losses amounting to twenty thousand men. Even considering the recent arrival of thirty thousand non-English-speaking English troops from Hanover, these losses affected their core elite forces, which the drafted troops couldn't replace.

The Prussian losses, in terms of numbers, were even greater, particularly during today's operation, where they lost twenty thousand men. In total, the Prussians had lost forty thousand men over these three days.

Although the "critical objective" didn't seem far away, many began questioning whether it was worth continuing the fight in this manner.

Chapter 197: News of Uncertain Veracity

The military-industrial complex had its unique encryption system, allowing swift information transmission through the national economic signaling network. On a day by the riverside, where Napoleon and a few officers were picnicking and fishing, he received a message from the military-industrial complex, wrapped in their cryptic code.

As he accepted the intelligence with a smile, he turned to Vebitzki, who was busy spreading butter on a piece of bread. "I bet this is Joseph, that timid fellow, urging us to come to his rescue again."

With the intelligence in hand, Napoleon's face turned grim after a quick read. He jumped up from the ground, exclaiming, "Damn Joseph! Stop playing around, everyone, get up; we need to prepare for a forced march!"

Bertier, startled by Napoleon's reaction, asked, "What's going on? Is there trouble on the front lines?" His hands trembled, and the butter-slathered bread slipped onto his pants, leaving a greasy stain.

"Yes, trouble, big trouble!" Napoleon's face contorted with anger. "That idiot Joseph, a complete imbecile! What's wrong with his brain? Has it been eaten by dogs? Look, it's been just three days, and that fool has decimated thousands of British and Prussian soldiers. Now he claims the British and Prussians haven't launched an attack for a whole day! They might be planning to retreat! Damn it, I gave up the honor of annihilating Suvarov in Italy, crossed treacherous mountains, and traveled a thousand miles to come to Paris. And now, what's this? A leisurely stroll? This fool, why can't he be a bit less heavy-handed and give us some room to maneuver? He..."

As Napoleon walked back, he furiously recalled all the derogatory terms Joseph had ever used on him, applying them in turn to Joseph. When he mounted his horse, his temper had cooled slightly, and Bertier ventured to ask, "General, could it be...has Verdun fallen?"

"If that were the case, it might be easier!" Napoleon muttered darkly. "But it's impossible. I told you, Joseph, that fool, can defend Verdun until he dies of old age. It's not Verdun; it's this scoundrel's cunning tactics. In just three days, he's massacred or crippled tens of thousands of British and Prussian soldiers. Now he says the British and Prussians haven't launched an attack for an entire day! They might be considering a retreat! I give up my pursuit of Suvarov's total destruction in Italy, overcome treacherous mountains, and travel a thousand miles to Paris. And what does he do? This fool, he can't be a little less heavy-handed and leave us with some hope? He..."

After a moment of sighing, Napoleon continued, "Send a message to that idiot, no matter what it takes. He must hold off the British and Prussians, at least for another week!"

Joseph knew that something was amiss when the British and Prussians had refrained from attacking for a whole day. What if they decided not to fight anymore and turned to defense? That wouldn't be good at all. Joseph cursed Napoleon with a mix of frustration and panic, wondering why he hadn't arrived yet. He thought, "If we take the initiative and sacrifice some lives to give them hope, would that work? No, it would damage my reputation, and what if things went awry?"

So Joseph quickly dismissed that idea.

What about attacking first to pin down the enemy, preventing their immediate retreat? This required expert control of the timing, method, and force. Achieving this level of control would take at least a Level 8 micro-operation. Joseph evaluated his own skills in a few picoseconds and promptly discarded the plan.

How could he make John and Fritz stay? He had to create a delusion, convincing them that with a little more effort, they could succeed. But how could he guide them to such a misconception?

Joseph put himself in their shoes. "Russia has betrayed us, and a prolonged war isn't promising for either Britain or Prussia. By now, Paris is within reach, and they've invested so much. Abandoning the attack would mean admitting failure, which would be hard to explain. So long as there's any

reason, even a somewhat unconvincing one, for them to continue the attack, they surely will. The problem is how to give them that reason. Richot seems to have some double agents..."

Joseph gathered his officers, and a discussion began.

"In conclusion," one tall, thin middle-aged man said, "Philip, do you think this message is reliable?"

"Count, I dare not confirm the authenticity of this news. The message comes from Viscount Thierry in Paris, and in recent years, Thierry has been quite effective in his work," the young man named Philippe replied, resting his hands on the table. If you observed closely, you would notice a peculiar waxy yellow tint to his skin, much like tanned leather.

"Effective?" The tall, lean middle-aged man scoffed. "So, being effective means letting a few hundred people chase down tens of thousands?"

"Count, I believe your expectations for Viscount Thierry might be too harsh. Whether it's those few hundred or those tens of thousands, essentially, they are our enemies. So, it doesn't matter who is chasing whom; I think that's Viscount Thierry's success. We can't rely on revolution or uprising to reclaim Paris. After all, we can't accept a kingdom where a parliament decides everything," Philippe explained.

Philippe's response, though not particularly polite, aligned perfectly with the Count's political stance and his judgment of the enemy. Thus, the Count didn't get angry. He nodded in agreement and said, "Philippe, you're right. I might indeed be demanding too much from Viscount Thierry. If this news is true, then the day we return to Paris might be nearer than we think..."

This man is the exiled Count of Artois, the king whose head was severed, Louis XVI, and the brother of the self-proclaimed King of France, Louis XVIII. In the original history, after the Bourbon dynasty's restoration, he also served as king for a time under the title "Charles X." Among all the royalists, he was the most conservative and stubborn.

"Count, at this moment, whether this news is true or not, I believe we should treat it as true," Philippe added.

"Mr. Treville, what do you mean?" one of the men by the Count's side asked. At the same time, the Count also turned his puzzled gaze to him.

"Gentlemen, just before, we received news of the setback of the British-Prussian coalition in Verdun," Philippe de Treville continued, surveying everyone, who nodded in agreement.

"Our friends within the British and Prussian armies have also informed us that both the British and Prussians are considering a temporary retreat. The reliability of this news is unquestionable, as you all know. They've temporarily retreated; what will be the consequences? Have you gentlemen considered it?"

Everyone remained silent.

"Very soon, General Napoleon Bonaparte's army will reach Paris. If the British and Prussians can't take Verdun before this army arrives, they won't have a better chance of capturing Verdun or conquering Paris. Gentlemen, what do you think will happen next?"

Still, no one uttered a word.

"There will be a decisive battle. The best-case scenario is both sides losing their capability to continue the attack. Then, everyone will negotiate, the rebels will betray the Irish and Polish, and the British and Prussians will betray us, resulting in a 'peace.' Or General Napoleon Bonaparte will achieve another brilliant victory. Gentlemen, for us, any outcome other than capturing Verdun and conquering Paris is a bitter pill to swallow, isn't it?"

At this point, Philippe de Treville paused, allowing everyone to understand the gravity of the situation. Then he continued, "So, whether this news is true or not, it's good news for us because it can motivate the British and Prussians to continue their attack. If it's true, we'll be the biggest winners. Even if it's false, even a trap, the ones who pay the price won't be us, and it won't even be our most reliable allies. So, gentlemen, I don't understand why we, not being British or Prussian, should hesitate over the veracity of this news."

"Clap, clap, clap..." The Count of Artois led the applause.

Chapter 198: Rebellion and Coup

Before long, the Duke of Brunswick received the latest intelligence: right across from them, there was a formidable defense, like an impregnable fortress, manned by the nightmare with the same name, Joseph Bonaparte. In the previous battle, this dread figure, Joseph Bonaparte, had been struck by a bullet, and his fate hung in the balance.

"Have we struck down another French commander?" the Duke of Brunswick couldn't help but find this news rather absurd. However, on the battlefield, absurdity was a common occurrence. After all, wasn't King Theodoric killed in the decisive Battle of Verona after claiming victory?

Furthermore, neither the British nor Prussian high-ranking officers were keen on returning home with a colossal failure. Achieving glory and returning victorious, even at the cost of many soldiers' lives, was more desirable than failing utterly, and the bones of thousands withering away.

However, blindly charging forward without verifying the information and then getting brutally beaten was something no one's pride could tolerate. So, everyone decided to pause and assess the situation while reinforcing their own defenses.

Simultaneously, in Paris, chaos reigned. Joseph understood that he had to keep this from Paris because the city acted like a sieve. Once any piece of information reached the people of Paris, it spread like wildfire. Businessmen and bankers knew military secrets faster and more accurately than the generals did.

Most businessmen had a foot in various camps. So, if Joseph were to inform the Parisian authorities that he was merely feigning injury, it wouldn't take an afternoon for every person with wealth and status in Paris to learn about his ruse. What would be the point then?

Concealing this information from the government created another problem: the government officials took it seriously. This highly confidential military secret soon became public knowledge in Paris, even appearing in some newspapers.

Of course, The Truth of Science, a prominent newspaper, immediately stepped up to debunk the rumors, stating, "In these trying times, everyone must remain calm and resist believing or spreading unfounded rumors!"

However, The Truth of Science did not provide any concrete evidence to dispel the circulating rumors. On the contrary, another news article in the same newspaper seemed to corroborate the rumor: General Moro had repelled the British attack on the Cateau, rapidly moving to support General Joseph Bonaparte in Verdun.

For most people, this military maneuver almost confirmed the veracity of the story that Joseph was injured. Obviously, if Joseph weren't wounded, why would Moro need to rush to Verdun urgently?

Other actions seemed to reinforce this belief. Recent reports indicated that Mr. Lavasie, who had just returned to Paris and resumed his teaching position at the University of Paris, had abruptly left for Toulon for work-related reasons. Several researchers from the Institute of Military Research, including many "for work-related reasons," were dispatched to Toulon. The Truth of Science made no attempt to refute these claims, merely stating that these were planned and regular transfers.

Moreover, it wasn't just this. The turmoil gave rise to opportunistic crimes within the government itself. One morning, when the Finance Ministry's employees arrived at work, they discovered that Secretary Garcia had not shown up. It was quickly revealed that Garcia had forged signatures to embezzle a significant amount of government funds and had fled with his young wife.

This wasn't an isolated incident, and similar cases were on the rise.

In this chaos, the Royalists rekindled their activities, especially in areas with a concentration of property owners. They once again formed alliances with some of the National Guard. In some places, the Royalists' white flags were boldly displayed.

This situation further escalated the chaos in Paris. On the other hand, the Public Safety Department, which had effectively suppressed Royalist activities, was exceptionally sluggish at this time. There were even rumors that the Minister of Public Safety, Fouch, was in contact with Royalist sympathizers. Paris seemed to be on the brink of upheaval.

Napoleon, of course, received the message sent by Joseph. Meanwhile, his army had already entered a forced march, rapidly advancing towards Paris.

On the night of March 16, 1798, Paris erupted in rebellion. By noon the following day, opportunists who had sided with the Royalists quickly took control of most of Paris and prepared to lay siege to the National Convention once more. But just then, news arrived that General Napoleon had entered Paris with his army.

An interesting scene unfolded. While Napoleon's troops hadn't yet arrived, the National Guard units surrounding the National Convention suddenly began to disperse en masse. When General Oudinot's cavalry appeared on the square outside the Convention, the square and its surroundings were as empty as a setting for the movie "I Am Legend."

In short, at the most critical moment, our General Napoleon Bonaparte once again saved the Republic and the Revolution. What was even more remarkable was that during this suppression of the rebellion, General Napoleon and his troops showed astonishing restraint. Not a single rebel was killed, and the rebellion was resolved peacefully, showcasing the might and civility of the Italian Legion.

After successfully quelling yet another Royalist rebellion and retrieving every available parliamentarian (some had fled even before the outbreak of chaos, and their whereabouts were

unknown), General Napoleon Bonaparte personally addressed the National Convention for the sake of the nation's future.

On his way to deliver the speech, Lucien said to Napoleon, "Napoleon, are you prepared for this speech? I must tell you, in public speaking, you need to"

"Enough, Lucien," Napoleon waved him off, swatting him away like an annoying fly, although he did not intend to strangle Lucien with his intestines, "I've delivered countless speeches in the army. What's public speaking to me? Do you think I need your lessons? Just watch!"

With that, Napoleon entered the parliament hall with his head held high and delivered his speech to the assembly of legislators.

In his speech, Napoleon expressed his disapproval of the current state of the French government. He criticized it as weak, corrupt, and inefficient, plagued by fraudsters, incompetents, and traitors. This, he argued, was a gross mismanagement of the efforts of revolutionary soldiers, and if the situation persisted, the French Revolution would inevitably falter. To salvage the revolution and France itself, he proposed an immediate government overhaul, establishing a powerful, clean, and efficient new administration to vanquish all enemies of the revolution.

Napoleon had anticipated that the legislators would cheer him on, much like his soldiers. However, the legislators instead questioned him:

"General Bonaparte, are you proposing a military government?"

"General Bonaparte, do you intend to become a tyrant?"

"We overthrew one despot, and now you want to become the second tyrant?"

In the end, the cries of "Down with the military despot! Long live democracy!" rang out.

The legislators' response took Napoleon entirely by surprise, and he hadn't prepared for such a contingency. He turned pale, unsure of what to do.

Perhaps inspired by Napoleon's actions, the legislators boldly left their seats and began to converge on him. Napoleon had already begun scouting escape routes.

"Damn it, I walked in without a weapon!" Napoleon thought.

In this dire moment, a squad of soldiers and police, led by Lucien and Fouché, stormed in.

Bang! Lucien fired two shots into the air.

The legislators, brimming with zeal, promptly returned to their seats, resembling schoolchildren who had just seen their principal.

Lucien signaled to Napoleon to leave, and Napoleon quickly exited. Then, Lucien took the lectern and cast a malevolent glance around the room before saying, "I know that among you, some have betrayed the revolution, betrayed France, and become the Bourbons' lapdogs! Now you want to plot against the heroes of the revolution, the saviors of the Republic? Don't be fooled by these individuals; be vigilant!"

There was some murmuring among the legislators, but the presence of heavily armed soldiers kept most of them silent.

"Now I propose we revoke the immunity of those parliamentarians conspiring with the Royalists. All in favor, raise your hand," Lucien said, raising his own hand first.

The legislators followed suit, one by one, raising their hands.

"Very well, motion passed!" Lucien declared.

Then Lucien yielded his place to Fouch. Fouch produced a small notebook and began reciting names. For each name he mentioned, a person was escorted out by the police. Fouch only named five individuals, but they were the ones who had openly challenged Napoleon earlier.

After these individuals had been taken away, Lucien declared, "Now, can we invite Mr. Napoleon Bonaparte to continue his speech?"

So, Napoleon was brought back, and his speech became very concise: "You've all heard my proposal earlier. Now, we vote by raising our hands. Who's in favor, and who's against?"

All 500 legislators present voted unanimously in favor, guided by their sense of responsibility to the revolution, France, and history.

Chapter 199: The Highlands

Emerging from the halls of the National Assembly, Lucien immediately shifted into full oration mode. He began reciting every word that Napoleon had used to berate him back in the day, as if to showcase the grandeur of the French language to Napoleon himself. He continued until Napoleon, somewhat vexed, remarked, "Lucien, I've found that in this world, problems are often resolved through force, don't you think? Like those buzzing flies if you speak to them politely, they become even more insufferable. At that point, you must draw your sword, give them a swift jab, slice open their bellies, pull out their intestines, and then wrap them around their necks before giving a hard tug... and the world instantly becomes quiet. Lucien, don't you agree?"

Lucien fell silent. He knew that while Napoleon might not draw a blade, he was entirely capable of using his formidable fists to make a point.

"I am a man of culture. I must maintain my composure and not stoop to brawling with this savage. I won't lower myself to his level," Lucien reassured himself, basking in the spiritual victory.

Seeing Lucien yield, Napoleon entrusted the affairs of Paris to him and set off with his army toward Verdun.

At the same time, as Paris descended into chaos, the Anglo-Prussian forces at Verdun resumed their tentative attacks. The initial results were intriguing: the French resistance was intense, and any lost ground was quickly contested as they attempted to regain their positions. However, upon retaking the positions, the French defenses appeared weaker when the Anglo-Prussian forces renewed their attacks. This was consistent across all sectors, even in the areas that had become focal points of contention.

"It truly seems like they've lost unified command. Joseph Bonaparte may no longer be able to effectively lead," commented the Duke of Brunswick to the other generals.

The consensus was unanimous. However, at that moment, Major George Cadogan, the liaison officer, cautioned, "Your Grace, I believe we should exercise caution."

"Major, do you have any insights?" inquired the Duke of Brunswick.

"My senior, the Duke of Norfolk, provided me with some intelligence he obtained from captured materials and defectors from the Irish volunteers who have joined our ranks. From these documents, it is evident that Joseph Bonaparte is a master tactician, cunning and ruthless, without a shred of honor. He doesn't hesitate to employ any means necessary to achieve his goals. So, my lord Duke of Norfolk advises extreme vigilance concerning everything related to him. I believe we can organize an attack but must prepare a sufficient reserve and a well-thought-out retreat plan."

"Very well. Major, do you have these tactical manuals with you?" asked the Duke of Brunswick.

"Of course, such valuable resources cannot be concealed," Major Cadogan replied, to the agreement of other generals.

"Alright, we'll send a letter to the Duke of Norfolk. He'll appreciate your vigilance. Now, let's discuss our retreat routes and cover in case of a failed attack tomorrow. Remember, both retreat and cover are critical and require expertise. Who among you is willing to shoulder this responsibility?"

Almost every general except for Brunswick raised their hands eagerly.

The Duke of Brunswick found this enthusiasm somewhat disheartening as it indicated a reluctance to fight. Nonetheless, he concealed his emotions, took a deep breath, and smiled, "You are all willing to bear this responsibility, which is commendable. However, the task will be assigned by me. General Brunswick, you have the duty."

While the generals appeared somewhat disappointed, no one voiced objections. To them, if the task couldn't go to themselves, assigning it to Brunswick seemed a reasonable alternative.

The meeting delved into the timing and logistics of the retreat, emphasizing mutual cover, lasting well into the late hours. Finally, the Duke of Brunswick spoke, "Ah, I hadn't realized how late it had become. Gather your spirits, gentlemen. Let's address one more issue before we conclude: 'How to launch our attack tomorrow.' We must expedite this discussion so that, after completing our preparations, we might even have time for a nap."

So, the preparations for the attack the next day were swiftly made, followed by arrangements for both the retreat and the assault. However, some officers, with their excessive attention to detail, extended the planning, leaving no room for sleep.

The next day, the Anglo-Prussian forces launched another assault on the Verdun fortifications. The initial attack seemed familiar, and the French response was much like the days before, resolute counterattacks but slow in redeployment.

The Anglo-Prussian forces exploited the perceived weakness of the French slow redeployment and concentrated their troops quickly in critical areas. They launched a series of brute-force assaults, breaching not one but four lines of defense that day, with the fifth held by the French. Compared to previous days, this assault was notably successful. The distant highlands were now within sight.

Buoyed by this success, almost everyone believed that divine favor was on their side and that the despicable, evil, and terrifying defensive warlord, Joseph Bonaparte, had been genuinely vanquished by bullets. If it weren't for the moonless night, the spirited Anglo-Prussian officers (spirited, as it pertained only to them) might have considered a night assault. Even the French, albeit slow to react, would surely fortify the highlands overnight.

At the evening meeting, General Brunswick proposed an idea regarding the attack. He believed that the French would reinforce the highlands, focusing all their attention there. Therefore, it was unwise to attack the highlands directly; they should employ a flanking maneuver instead.

"Tomorrow, we'll concentrate our main attack on the flanks of the highlands, while feigning an assault on the highlands themselves. Once the French are preoccupied with the feigned attack, we will swiftly redirect the primary assault to the flanks. We'll cut off the highlands from the rest of the French positions. Achieving this will render the isolated highlands easier to conquer."

Most officers concurred with this suggestion. However, their discussions were interrupted by a nighttime counterattack launched by the French.

The French launched a bold, though poorly coordinated, nighttime counteroffensive. Without the light of the moon, such extensive military operations were unsuitable, and the French attack quickly faltered. The Duke of Brunswick summed up the French effort with a simple phrase: "Our French friends are desperate."

The following morning, the Anglo-Prussian forces initiated their attack on the highlands according to General Brunswick's plan. As expected, the highlands' defenses were solid, and the initial feigned assault encountered well-placed defenders. By 10 a.m., they observed the further reinforcement of French forces on the highlands. It was believed that the feigned attack had served its purpose, and they began the massive flanking attacks as planned.

In order to swiftly cut off the highlands from the rest of the French positions, the Anglo-Prussian forces carried out relentless, wave-after-wave assaults, ignoring casualties. Inspired by the combat encouragement of their leaders, they finally met on both flanks before sundown, successfully severing the connection between the highlands and the other French positions. Now, the only task left was to capture the highlands. Once secured, most of the battlefield would fall under the cover of the British cannons. The gates of Verdun would be open. Considering the significance of this position's fall on French morale, the upcoming battles were likely to become easier.

That evening, the Anglo-Prussian forces dispatched an envoy to persuade the remaining French garrison on the highlands to surrender. After all, attempting a direct assault might result in significant casualties, even with their current advantage.

In his letter, the Duke of Brunswick expressed admiration for the French's valiant defense and advised the French garrison that they had done all they could for France. Surrender was not a dishonor. He guaranteed the safety of their lives, property, and dignity. To preserve their honor, he wouldn't even ask them to surrender their weapons, flags, or command knives. Giving up the position would suffice.

However, the commander on the highlands, Captain Philmar, responded with a single word to the Duke of Brunswick's surrender proposal: "Bah!"

Chapter 200: The Fishhook

Since the offer of surrender had been rejected, the only option left was to launch an attack.

In theory, the safest approach for an attack was to lay siege and wear down the enemy. The high ground was treacherous, and a direct assault would undoubtedly result in significant casualties. However, the high ground wasn't vast, and the defenders within couldn't stockpile many provisions.

If the high ground were surrounded, it would only be a matter of time before the defenders ran out of supplies.

But there was a pressing concern time. Napoleon's Italian Legion was en route, and no one knew when they would arrive. Thus, the British and Prussian forces couldn't afford to wait.

However, an immediate attack was not feasible. The French forces in the vicinity kept launching counterattacks, trying to break through and link up with the high ground. So, the most urgent task for the coalition forces was not an immediate assault on the high ground, but rather securing their positions.

But securing those positions wasn't straightforward. The areas held by the coalition forces were within the firing range of the cannons on the high ground, making it perilous to engage in fortification work. Moreover, the French forces on the high ground had the advantage of high ground, allowing them to observe the various movements of the coalition forces below. Though there were no radios in that era, they could use signal flags and other means to transmit messages, making the coalition forces' defenses all the more precarious.

As a result, the coalition forces spent an entire day consolidating their siege around the high ground. The actual assault would have to wait for the following day.

"Has Napoleon arrived?" Joseph, unscathed, asked the liaison sent by Napoleon. "So, uh... where is the general at the moment?"

"He has reached Sainte-Menehould," the messenger replied.

"Very close," Joseph mused. "I estimate that tomorrow morning, the coalition forces will launch a general assault on the Number One Height. It should hold out for at least three days. You, take this letter back to Napoleon, and let him decide for himself."

Joseph referred to a letter, but in reality, it was a substantial package a weighty dossier. The messenger, accompanied by a cavalry escort, returned to Sainte-Menehould and delivered the package to Napoleon.

Napoleon opened the dossier, which contained detailed plans of the Verdun fortress's defenses and intelligence regarding the coalition forces' current deployments, as far as Joseph knew.

"What did Joseph say?" Napoleon inquired.

"General Joseph Bonaparte said that the British and Prussian coalition forces have taken the bait and are besieging the Number One Height. The Number One Height should be able to hold out for at least a week. As for how to counterattack, he leaves it to your discretion."

Napoleon meticulously examined the defensive maps and the information contained in the dossier. "Joseph had much to say," he commented.

Napoleon then had all of his generals summoned to a meeting to discuss the next steps in their battle plan.

The generals arrived one by one. Napoleon allowed them to study Joseph's defensive maps first. When everyone had finished, Napoleon asked, "What are your thoughts?"

"I believe we might be a bit early for this," Davout spoke up.

"Yes, looking at these defensive plans, I'm getting a bit queasy," Oudinot added. "I don't know about the others, but if it were me, I'd be struggling to muster the courage to launch an attack. It's like assaulting a heavily armored steel tortoise, and..."

"And within this steel tortoise, there are multiple layers of armored shells," Berthier noted. "At present, General Joseph Bonaparte is using the Number One Height as bait to lure the enemy into a siege. According to the information he provided, I believe the Number One Height can hold out for at least a week. If possible, I hope we can make them endure a few more days."

"However, the news of our pacification of the Paris rebellion cannot remain hidden," Napoleon said. "Otherwise, this fellow wouldn't flaunt these maps to us. Given the speed of information dissemination in Paris, we have at most two days. We'll rest here for a day and then, early the day after tomorrow, we'll march during the moonlit half of the night. By noon, we should be near Verdun. That should coincide with the fiercest fighting during the coalition forces' siege of the Number One Height. If we suddenly appear, we can surely shatter the British and Prussian coalition forces. As for the specific arrangements, Berthier, you'll handle it."

Just as Napoleon was preparing to deal a significant blow to the British and Prussian forces, those same forces were gearing up for an all-out assault on the Number One Height.

After spending a day reinforcing their siege around the Number One Height, the Duke of Brunswick sent another emissary to persuade the defenders to surrender. This time, he even sweetened the deal, offering substantial retirement pensions to Colonel Fanny and other officers on top of the previous terms.

However, the persuasion attempt failed once more. Colonel Fanny responded, "We can hold out as long as it takes, even until you all die of old age."

So, just ten minutes after the coalition envoy left the high ground, the coalition forces launched their attack on the Number One Height.

In the previous offensive operations, the coalition soldiers and junior officers had already started to believe in the existence of hell. However, after they launched their assault on Number One Height, they were absolutely certain of one thing: Dante's description of hell, with its multiple layers, was eerily accurate.

Number One Height didn't feature any new-fangled contraptions they hadn't seen before. There were landmines, barbed wire, Mini rifles, grenades, cannons, flamethrowers, and large-padded stick grenades. But the problem was that the density of these deadly implements had significantly increased. It was evident that in recent times, the French, though slow to react, had come to understand that Number One Height was the focal point of the coalition's attack and had taken measures to fortify it.

The topography of Number One Height presented significant challenges for the attackers. While not especially high, it had been deliberately cleared of any obstructions. All trees blocking the line of sight had been cut down, and any natural cover for the attackers had been leveled, leaving the entire high ground exposed and open.

The barbed wire on the high ground had also become denser, with only twenty meters between rows. The increased density meant that soldiers would be exposed to enemy fire for longer periods. Furthermore, the French had positioned a significant number of artillery pieces on the high ground.

These included heavy cannons, ranging from 12 to 24 pounds, as well as medium cannons of 8 and 6 pounds. The French had constructed fortifications to house these cannons, allowing them to effectively deploy canister shot to mow down coalition soldiers trapped behind barbed wire.

Naturally, the areas between the barbed wire were liberally scattered with landmines. Judging by the casualty rate of Prussian mobilized soldiers who had initiated the charge, the density of these mines was at least double what they had encountered in previous minefields.

Coupled with the high vantage point, the defenders on the high ground could effortlessly throw grenades to a distance of fifty meters. In contrast, the attackers would have to climb a significant elevation to match that range. Furthermore, the "grenade launchers" here could send grenades nearly a hundred meters extending beyond the reach of even the largest artillery canister shot.

Even if someone miraculously evaded these terrifying instruments and managed to continue forward, they would immediately confront more intimidating foes the claymore mines and flamethrowers.

Compared to these dangers, the detachments of Provost Guard behind them appeared almost adorable. After all, the Provost Guard was armed with rifles, necessitating the arduous process of reloading after each shot, which consumed precious time.

Consequently, the initial wave of soldiers quickly retreated, and skirmishes even broke out between some soldiers and the Provost Guard. Both sides exchanged gunfire relentlessly.

An entire day of assault resulted in over a thousand casualties, with little progress beyond some damage to the minefields and the barbed wire. That evening, the coalition forces dispatched personnel with explosives for a night raid, aiming to disrupt the enemy's barbed wire defenses. However, as they approached, they were detected by the guard dogs on the high ground and stumbled upon landmines. Chaos ensued, followed by nighttime skirmishes initiated by the outer French forces, which continued until dawn.

With the break of day, the coalition forces finally saw the results of their night raid. Some sections of the barbed wire on the high ground had been damaged, but the valiant French engineers promptly repaired them in the brief lulls between coalition attacks.

The coalition's heavy artillery initially fired solid shot at these engineers, but they remained undeterred, continuing to mend the barbed wire. Although some engineers were killed by artillery fire, the hit rate was too low for solid shot against such agile targets. Attempting to push the cannons closer for canister shot was less effective than having infantry charge.

So, the coalition soldiers were compelled to leave the safety of their trenches and rush at the French engineers. However, they immediately faced a barrage of grape shot from the French, which left many of them wounded. By the time they had reached a position where they could return fire on the French engineers, the cunning French had already ceased their work and retreated.

Subsequent attacks brought no significant changes, and the French resistance remained as fierce as it had been the previous day. It appeared that the high ground still held an abundance of ammunition. However, the time was running out for the coalition forces. They had come too far to turn back now, and the sunk costs were too high. Besides, perhaps another intense day of fighting would deplete the enemy's ammunition entirely after all, conscripts were cheap.

And so, wave after wave of Johns and Friedrichs fell before the barbed wire of Number One Height.

