

The Fox 221

Chapter 221: Dispute

Stafford's pupils contracted as he grabbed O'Kiley's collar. "Are you trying to threaten me?"

"Sir, you misunderstand. I... I would never dare," O'Kiley hastily replied, "I only wanted to, to invite you for a meal, sir."

Stafford released his grip on O'Kiley's collar and looked at him for a moment before saying, "Are you trying to use me to intimidate someone?"

"Sir, you're brilliant!" O'Kiley quickly grinned, giving a thumbs-up.

"Sir, you see, there's a pub on Okan Street, which used to be my territory, but then that damn Javert from the detective squad you see, he's a real piece of work. He took over that street with his numerous henchmen. Sir, if you'd be willing to help, allowing me to invite you to that pub, Javert wouldn't dare to compete with me, would he?"

"Hmm," Stafford thought for a moment before continuing, "Captain O'Kiley, you are quite resourceful!"

"Thank you for the praise, sir!" O'Kiley replied quickly.

"In which pub is this?"

"The Amethyst Inn."

"If you collect money on Okan Street, I want half of it," Stafford said.

"But, sir, the money I collect on that street is already yours. How can I take half of it? It all belongs to you. Sir, you have many expenses. I won't hide it, but if we let Javert and his gang know that I'm your man no, your dog they won't dare to mess with me. Not giving me respect is the same as not giving you respect, and not giving you respect means not giving the United Kingdom respect. With this respect, I can hold my head high in front of them."

Stafford smiled and said, "O'Kiley, you're quite something. You have a conscience. But why do you have confiscated goods here? Do you really have dealings with them?"

"Oh, sir, I dare not make such claims. Even if I had ten times the courage, I wouldn't dare. But, sir, think about it. Where do the rebels get their guns? There are only two possibilities: French guns and British guns they've seized."

At this point, O'Kiley paused for a moment and continued, "Sir, you know that British guns come in two types: new and old. New ones, like the rifles your men are equipped with, would be used by the regular elite rebels. The local rebels wouldn't have many of those. The other type is the old-style smoothbore guns used by our constabulary."

"Sir, our constabulary is good for maintaining public order, but in a real fight, we're not up to it, especially against elite rebels. However, those rebels are the worst; they generally avoid confrontations with your men and focus on bullying us. Our constabulary loses guns every day. So, the rebels' most common guns are our constabulary's rifles. Especially the local rebels, most of their guns are either identical or originally ours. So, when it comes to confiscating guns, we just need to have my men turn them in. There should be more."

"This is good, but you don't need to take all their guns. Generally, in battle, even if you win, if you don't wipe out the enemy completely, they tend to grab some weapons as they flee. So, the number of weapons you can confiscate in a battle is far less than the number of enemy casualties. How many rebels did we kill?" Captain Stafford asked.

"Over a hundred!" O'Kiley said, "Men, women, young, and old, we killed them all. Unfortunately, it was in the swamp, so we couldn't bring their bodies back. We couldn't even cut off their heads."

"O'Kiley, we're not barbarians who count heads." Stafford frowned. "So, let's see, around ten guns, right? Any issues with these guns?"

"Of course not. We lost over forty men, and we recovered quite a few of their guns. They can be counted as part of the confiscation."

"Very good," Stafford nodded. "Apart from weapons, there should be other things. Take care of these details for me."

"Sir, I'll handle it. You can rest assured; there won't be any problems."

"Alright, go back and get some rest. Tomorrow, you'll need to disrupt their potato operation," Stafford's mood had significantly improved.

Due to their new "swamp boots," on this day, many British soldiers pursued the rebels into the swamp, just like Stafford's unit. Still, most of them returned empty-handed. Stafford, despite suffering significant losses, was one of the few who captured rebels and confiscated a substantial amount of equipment. In the end, he earned the reputation of being a "swamp warfare expert" and received commendations. But that's a story for another day.

Meanwhile, in France, Joseph, Napoleon, and Lucien, the three brothers, found themselves in a heated dispute, unlike anything they had experienced before.

This conflict had been sparked by Napoleon's plan to reform France's legal system. In the original timeline, Napoleon, who held a deep fascination for Roman law, had collaborated with legal experts like the President of the High Court, Tronchet, the Roman law scholar Malville, the government's Minister of Justice, Portalis, and the prosecutor of the Navy Court, Boulay de la Meurthe, to create the famous "Napoleonic Code."

This legal code held a high status in history, being one of the earliest civil codes of the bourgeois nation. It affirmed the legitimacy of property ownership for the bourgeoisie and farmers, protecting them from feudal encroachments. It negated feudal privileges, established principles of freedom and equality for the bourgeoisie, and ensured that every citizen possessed equal civil rights and legal capacity. The code addressed various aspects of social life, including family, marriage, and inheritance. This code was the earliest civil code in capitalist countries, dismantling feudal legislative principles, and it became the legislative standard for the bourgeoisie in Europe and the Americas, fostering capitalist development.

In later times, two major legal systems dominated the world: the "Anglo-American legal system," also known as the "Common Law system," and the "Continental legal system," represented by Roman law and the "Napoleonic Code." In the context of the "Continental legal system," the term "Civil Law" specifically referred to the "Napoleonic Code."

In the original timeline, Napoleon, after suffering defeat at Waterloo and enduring exile once again, had expressed rather dramatically, "My life's military achievements have flowed away with the waters of the River Ems. But my Code will endure forever."

The authenticity of this quote might be questionable, but the "Napoleonic Code" was indeed a remarkable achievement, hailed for its "innovative, significant, controversial, practical, and enduring" qualities.

When it came to Joseph's support for the "Napoleonic Code," there was no doubt. This code primarily affirmed the principle of private property rights. In the original context, nearly one-third of the articles in the code aimed to safeguard the inviolability of private property from various angles. For Joseph, who had amassed wealth through violent means during the revolution, this was indeed a favorable development.

"Now that we've enriched ourselves through violent means, we should establish rules to prevent others from following the same path to wealth. We cannot allow others to reach a dead-end like us," Joseph firmly believed in this principle. In this regard, Napoleon's legal code elevated the interests of their family to the interests of the state, a perspective Joseph wholeheartedly supported.

However, after discussing the fundamental principles of the "Civil Code," Joseph and Napoleon moved on to discuss political arrangements. It was in this matter that their differences became apparent.

Initially, Napoleon simply mentioned his intention to ease tensions with the Papal States. During the French Revolution, the Papal States had firmly allied themselves with the counter-revolutionaries. The revolutionary government in France, adhering to the tradition of "No money, seize the church's property," led to a complete rupture between France and the Vatican. During the Reign of Robespierre, France even went as far as to abolish the Catholic Church, replacing it with the so-called "Cult of Reason."

However, after Robespierre's fall, the crackdown on the Church diminished. Nevertheless, the government and the Vatican had not reached a reconciliation. Legally, the Catholic Church remained an "illegal organization" in France.

Joseph was supportive of this initiative because religion, in his view, was the opium of the people, much like the people's vice. Without religion, how could the masses endure the pain of their future suffering?

However, during their discussion, Napoleon's words raised a concern for Joseph. "Even Roman emperors knew the importance of using Christianity to secure their status. That's why the Pope placed the crown on their heads. Although the Pope was their servant, it was more convincing to the common people than proclaiming themselves gods."

"Napoleon," Joseph furrowed his brow, "there is something crucial I've wanted to discuss with you for a long time. It pertains to the future political system of France."

Chapter 222: The Rules

Napoleon paused for a moment, then put away his smile and asked, "My brother, what do you have to say about this?"

"Napoleon," Joseph hesitated for a moment and continued, "I want to know, in your vision for the future, will France be a republic or an empire?"

"Joseph, you, too, doubt me?" Napoleon hadn't spoken yet, but Lucien, with an annoyed tone, interrupted.

"Shut up!" Joseph didn't even spare a glance for Lucien and continued to fix his gaze on Napoleon. Lucien, as a result, sat there with a sullen expression, not saying a word.

"What's wrong with an empire? What about a republic?" Napoleon had originally planned to say, "Of course, I want to be an emperor." But for some reason, a sentence with a scent of weakness that even he himself detested came out of his mouth.

"Hahaha," Joseph laughed, but there was no humor in his eyes. "My brother, have you become someone who always lets 'I dare not' follow 'I want'? However, disguising your goals is a sign of maturity. Moreover, Napoleon, you've raised a very valuable and not-so-stupid question. What do you think the differences are between an empire and a republic, and what are their respective advantages and disadvantages?"

It was a broad question, but for Napoleon, it was one he couldn't avoid answering. With his head full of adolescent fantasies, Napoleon certainly wanted to become an emperor. But he also knew that without Joseph's support, the throne of the emperor would not be easy to attain. Even if he couldn't win Joseph's support, he should at least prevent Joseph from opposing him.

Napoleon knew that his elder brother was a mathematical genius. By that, I don't mean Joseph's XX Theorem or anything like that; I mean that when it came to making judgments, this guy was like he was solving a math problem. Fancy words, passion, and such held zero value with him. He only recognized real power and interests. If you wanted to persuade him, you had to rely on those.

"Let's start with the benefits of an empire for the family," Napoleon began, knowing that this angle was the most likely to persuade Joseph.

"If France becomes an empire, and I become the emperor, our family will go from being a minor noble family to the most prestigious royal family in all of Europe. Some members of our family, like you and Lucien, could become kings of various European countries, and our family would prosper continuously. Joseph, do you think that's right?"

Joseph replied noncommittally, "What about the risks? Do you not believe that there is a balance between benefits and harms in any action?"

"Of course, there are risks," Napoleon said. "Short-term risks, like if we were to fail on the battlefield. Everything we have built is based on continued victories in battle. If we were to fail in battle, we might be brought back to square one. But, I don't think the short-term risk is that great. With your coordination of internal affairs and my command on the battlefield, I don't see the risk being significant."

"What about long-term risks?" Joseph asked.

"Long-term risks?" Napoleon smiled. "Joseph, in the long term, we're all going to die. That's the biggest long-term risk. Of course, besides that, in the long term, there's the risk of revolution. I know what you're worried about, Joseph. You're concerned that one day, the French people might become dissatisfied with us, even overthrow our family, just as they did with the Bourbons, or

perhaps even put one of our descendants on the guillotine, just like they did with Louis XVI, that weak fool. But Joseph, even with that in mind, when you compare costs and benefits, have we really lost? Or has our family lost?"

"Go on," Joseph said.

"Alright, let's take the Bourbons as an example. If the Bourbon family hadn't become the French royalty, would their current situation be better than it is now?" Napoleon asked.

Without waiting for anyone else's answer, Napoleon shook his head and continued, "If the Bourbons were still just dukes, they wouldn't have escaped the French Revolution. Maybe the Duke of Bourbon, the Duchess of Bourbon, or even the whole Bourbon family would have ended up on the guillotine or hanging from a lamppost, just like many others did in the Year of '93. Even today, the Bourbons can still lay claim to the Spanish crown."

"So, Joseph, becoming the King of France, as opposed to remaining the Duke of Bourbon, is safer for the family. And if the Bourbon family didn't even remain dukes, but instead became common, impoverished farmers in France, they would have faced countless famines, plagues, wars, and the inability to marry due to lack of money. All of these hardships could have wiped out the entire family of common peasants from 1584 until now."

"Joseph, have you ever noticed that if you trace the ancestry of any commoner, it won't take long before you can find a link to nobility? Their ancestors may well have been fallen nobles, lowly knights, or even illegitimate offspring of the aristocracy.

Joseph, do you know why? Why is it so rare to find a family where, after several generations, they are all commoners? The reason is quite simple. Such families can't sustain their lineage for long. Within a few generations, they may die out due to the reasons I mentioned earlier. Inheritance is challenging for impoverished families, and their lowly status is the greatest danger to a family. Joseph, do you agree with what I'm saying?"

Clap, clap, clap, Joseph applauded. But the applause did not bring joy to Napoleon because Joseph's face remained devoid of any happiness.

"Napoleon, you've thought deeply, and what you've said has some merit," Joseph said. "However, have you considered the differences between our family and the Bourbons? The reason the Bourbon family could become royalty is that they already had royal blood. But our family, at least within the range we can trace, does not. Of course, if we trace back to ancient Rome or even to Troy, there might be a possibility. It's not difficult to invent a powerful ancestor even if we don't have one. However, even so, based on the fundamental rules of inheritance, the crown would not come to our family. Napoleon, don't be hasty with your rebuttal. Hear me out.

The feudal royalties will never accept us. Of course, the power our family now possesses is enough to break these so-called rules and establish a new one in this world. We can easily make ourselves into a royal family and oppress them, making them bow to us. This isn't difficult, especially with the 'Zeus Plan' already succeeding and the 'Hephaestus Plan' on its way to success.

But, Napoleon, if we do it this way, tell me, what kind of rules are we writing? Just as you said, almost anyone alive today can be reasonably sure they have noble ancestors, perhaps even tracing back to Greek heroes, Trojan princes, or even Egyptian pharaohs. If our family members can become emperors, then everyone can become emperors. Becoming an emperor is solely about

power, with nothing else. So, we would write a new rule: 'Why have kings and nobles when everyone can be emperor?' Or, to put it more plainly, 'Is an emperor born a noble, or is he simply the one with the most powerful army?'

In this way, our family becomes everyone's target. On the commoner's side, anyone with talent and ability will ambitiously covet our crown and throne. On the nobles' side, every one of them would despise us. Napoleon, don't you think this situation is terrifying? In our generation, with me here, and you here, even though Lucien is a fool, he can be somewhat useful. With the three of us, things should be fine for now. But what about the future? Our rule cannot possibly be as stable as the Bourbons.

Furthermore, to ensure our rule's stability, we must gain more people's support. And the only reason these people would support us is that we bring them benefits. In other words, to secure our political power, we must appease these individuals. Napoleon, right now, you can demand sacrifices from the soldiers and the people for the sake of France because they believe that France is theirs. But if France becomes an empire, you'll no longer have the moral high ground to appeal to the soldiers and the people to sacrifice for France. That's because France would become yours, not theirs. Why should they sacrifice for you? At that point, the entire France, both the military and the people, would become mercenaries. The issue with mercenaries, you, who are familiar with Roman history, can't possibly be unaware of it.

Of course, even so, becoming the new royal family of Rome, for the family, is a good thing with benefits far outweighing the risks. However, the opportunity to write an entirely new set of rules, an opportunity that comes once every few thousand years, a chance to ascend Olympus and become new gods, has almost fallen into our hands. Are we going to use it recklessly?"

Chapter 223: The Ultimate Solution

After listening to Joseph's words, Napoleon fell into silence. He felt like he had grasped Joseph's intentions, and if he were to become emperor, Joseph probably wouldn't strongly oppose it. Yet, he didn't seem overly supportive either. In Joseph's characteristic style, he might say something like, "This is an approximate solution to the problem, but it's only approximate. It's not entirely wrong, but it falls far short of the optimal solution by miles."

"Of course," Napoleon thought to himself, "Joseph would probably add something like, 'But, Napoleon, given your intellectual abilities, coming up with an approximate solution that deviates only a few hundred kilometers from the correct one already satisfies me, even pleasantly surprises me,' in what appears to be a compliment but is actually a backhanded comment."

At this moment, Napoleon's focus shifted from persuading his older brother to accept an empire to understanding what Joseph's optimal solution truly was. He wracked his brain for a while, but he had to admit he had no idea what Joseph's optimal solution entailed.

"Having a brother like Joseph is both a blessing and a curse," Napoleon mused.

As the older brother, Joseph played the role of a father figure for everyone, including Napoleon, who received education and care from him. Despite Napoleon's frequent, almost habitual teasing and mockery of Joseph whenever he had the chance, he still had to acknowledge that without Joseph's help, he would not have achieved his current status and accomplishments. In a large family like theirs, having such a brother was indeed a blessing.

However, having such a brother was also quite an ego bruise. Napoleon always considered himself a clever person, at least smarter than Lucien, Louis, Gaston, and... well, almost everyone except Joseph. In many situations, he found it challenging to keep up with Joseph's thinking, and this intellectual gap was disheartening. The sensation of being intellectually outclassed was truly painful. Therefore, many times, Napoleon felt that some not-so-bright individuals, whom he could easily look down upon, like Muraash, were actually quite endearing.

However, with time, Napoleon got used to it. Not being able to solve Joseph's riddles perfectly was a normal occurrence. What was the big deal? If necessary, they could go out hunting together at Versailles and ensure that every round would be a crushing victory for Napoleon, just to let Joseph save some face.

"After we're done with this matter today, we'll go hunting in Versailles as a family, and let Joseph make a fool of himself," Napoleon silently resolved.

"Alright, Joseph, stop beating around the bush and tell us about your 'new rule,'" Napoleon decided to tactically concede.

"Before we determine this new rule, let's go back to the fundamental question," Joseph said. "Why do we create rules? Well, Lucien, don't just sit there; this question is relatively simple. You can answer it."

Lucien, feeling slightly annoyed, responded, "What do you mean by 'relatively simple'? You answer it yourself. Am I a fool?"

However, he kept that thought to himself because if he said it aloud, Joseph would immediately come up with a question that was somewhat challenging but which Napoleon could answer in a heartbeat, thus making fun of him along with that heartless Napoleon.

"Who can seduce a young lady to bed the fastest?" Lucien muttered to himself.

So, Lucien obediently replied, "Of course, it's to ensure the interests of our family."

"Very good, well said," Joseph said. "Napoleon, remember this: it's our true constitution. In terms of priority, your Civil Code seems to have taken a back seat somewhere. Whatever we do, we must not violate this principle."

Napoleon had no objections to this statement. He nodded and said, "It's such a simple truth."

"Now, the next major question is: What are our interests, and what can our power attain?" Joseph continued, emphasizing, "I want to stress here that we shouldn't overestimate our power, especially you, Napoleon."

Joseph looked at Napoleon and added, "You are the most heroic figure in our family, and you embody many qualities of ancient Greek heroes. This is excellent; our family needs a hero like you. But, like many Greek heroes, you tend to overestimate yourself and underestimate your enemies."

"Don't worry, as long as you're here, you can always spot difficulties, even if they're as small as a bean," Napoleon retorted, somewhat defensively.

"It's not like I'd be unable to do that without you. Do you really think of me as a coward?" Joseph responded.

Napoleon fell silent. He genuinely believed Joseph was no coward. After all, during the hail of bullets and chaos of the battlefield, Joseph had caught up with him and stood side by side, proving his courage. Napoleon believed that Joseph's cautious nature was due to the fact that the family had its fair share of daredevils and misfits. As the older brother, Joseph bore the heavy burden of the family, and a degree of prudence was necessary. But, with so many troublemakers in the family, didn't you have a responsibility too, Joseph?

Of course, Napoleon didn't dare say this out loud.

Since Napoleon didn't continue, Joseph pressed on. "Furthermore, we must consider the ebb of our family's power. Sir Isaac Newton was one of the smartest individuals in the world, but what about his son? Have any of you heard about him? A hero's son doesn't necessarily become a hero. I don't think my son will surpass me in mathematics and science. Similarly, Napoleon, I don't think your son will match your military prowess, not even with a single toe."

"But I believe, when it comes to deceiving young ladies, Lucien's son might have a chance," Napoleon quickly interjected, breaking the silence, to save Lucien from a gloomy mood.

Lucien smirked but didn't attempt to retaliate. There was no reasoning with Napoleon, that mischief-maker.

"Napoleon, stay on topic," Joseph admonished. "Our family is fortunate to have so many talented individuals in our generation, even Lucien's abilities alone could support a decent family. But we can't expect divine favor indefinitely. We must prepare for a future generation that may not be as outstanding."

"Of course, appropriate education can enhance their abilities, but the role of talent is undeniable, even irreplaceable. So, when we consider what our capabilities can obtain, we must also think about what our descendants can hold onto and prepare for their retreat and defense. Napoleon, you know, the most dangerous and difficult thing in the military is a retreat. When the inevitable tide of power recedes - a time that can be foreseen, only when you and I are long gone and even Lucien has grown senile - we must ensure that our descendants can preserve as much as possible."

Napoleon remained silent for a while before saying, "Joseph, I understand your point. If the rules we write down determine that the emperor is the one with the mightiest fist, then after our power recedes, when our fists aren't enough to subdue everyone, as long as any family suddenly produces someone like you, or like me, or even just someone like Lucien, our family could be in great danger, potentially losing a lot. So, you want us to essentially rely on violence to gain everything but establish a rule that prohibits the use of violent means to seize advantages?"

"Well, your idea is great, but this requirement itself is contradictory, isn't it? The new rule won't be what we say; it will be determined by what we do. We gained everything through violence, so the rule will inevitably involve using violence. Others, especially those capable of competing, are heroes. Even if we try to disguise or deceive, they won't be blind to it."

"You're right. But whether they can see it or not is not crucial; what's important is that most people don't see it. You must consider what interests the future hero, the one who will end our family's rule, has in common with us."

"Common interests?" Napoleon began with a puzzled look, but he quickly had an epiphany and broke into a knowing smile. "Joseph, you're right. We do share common interests. They are the

same as our present interests. Their first duty is to protect their own family's interests. Unless that hero is not only a hero but a true saint, and the chances of that are quite low. So, even if they see what's beneath our facade, they'll still need to maintain that facade for their family's sake. To uphold that facade, they can't use excessively violent means against our descendants. A republic is the facade, right? But to use this facade and still keep the power in our hands, it requires a very intricate design. Joseph, don't keep us in suspense; what's your idea? Just tell us!"

As Napoleon uttered, "The chances of that are quite low," Joseph was suddenly reminded of someone from a different time and space. Such a person, who was both a hero and a saint, did exist, but as Napoleon rightly put it, the probability of encountering such an individual was exceedingly low. Not every era or nation was blessed with such luck.

"Very well," Joseph said, "In a distant eastern land, there is a philosopher named Lao Dan. He once said, 'The most brilliant rulers in the world are those whose subjects don't even realize they exist.'"

Chapter 224: The Rule of the Old Coin

"Could someone rule without anyone even realizing their presence? How's that possible?" Napoleon was taken aback. "In that case, how can they issue commands and govern a country?"

Joseph, with a knowing smile, responded, "Let's make a hypothetical scenario. Imagine if we replaced Lucien with Fouch and you with Barras. Could our family still exert influence over the politics of France?"

"Of course, the army is under my command, and you control the money and factories. Even though we might not be directly in the spotlight, we still have the capability to influence the overall political landscape of France," Napoleon contemplated before answering.

"In this scenario, in the eyes of the common people, we would effectively disappear. Many at the grassroots level might not even be aware of our existence, just like a hidden treasure," Joseph replied with a smile.

"But this approach could weaken our control over the government, making it susceptible to unforeseen circumstances," Napoleon raised an eyebrow.

Joseph smiled knowingly, understanding his younger brother's desire to bask in the adulation of the people and take center stage, which he wouldn't enjoy hidden in the shadows.

"Indeed, there are drawbacks to this method, but there's an advantage as well: public resentment won't be directed solely at us. The people, they're always insatiable. They toil and toil, and even when they finally get a crust of bread, they're content for a while. But it won't be long before they want more, like a full loaf of bread, then white bread, then bread with butter, and soon they'll ask for foie gras. And once we can't satisfy their demands, they'll turn to bitterness.

But this is human nature. In fact, we are just as demanding, even more so. So when they grow dissatisfied, we can simply replace the figurehead at the forefront or the acting leader, and the people will be content again, feeling that their votes have made a difference, even if their desires remain unfulfilled. At that point, the government on the stage serves as a pressure release valve, just like a safety valve on a steam engine.

Of course, our foundation is not yet stable, and we are all still present, especially since the people now admire you, Napoleon. So, for now, there's no need to hide in the background, as it would

indeed reduce efficiency. We need efficiency during this rapid expansion phase. We can't afford any disruptions. And such rapid expansion itself will address many problems, making general resentment less likely. So, for now, we don't need to hide in the shadows.

But in anything we do, preparation is key to success. Without proper preparation, responding hastily when the time comes would be a recipe for failure. Even in times of rapid expansion, we must be ready for a strategic withdrawal."

"That's your style, Joseph," Napoleon couldn't resist interjecting.

"It's not about style; it's how things should be done," Joseph replied. "So, where was I?"

"You were talking about preparing in advance," Lucien reminded him.

"Good. I'll continue," Joseph said. "We need to prepare for how to control things from the shadows. For instance, government officials and lawmakers should come from elections. We need to find ways to increase the cost of elections, making it a game for the wealthy, even the super-rich.

We'll establish laws stating that political power cannot be inherited, to protect democracy. Yet, we'll also establish laws protecting private property as sacred, which means wealth can be inherited. Then, we'll find ways to allow wealth to control political power. The key to elections isn't the final vote but the initial rules. For instance, in the election for the First Consul, if the total number of voters falls below seventy percent of the citizen population, it's invalid. The interim government will maintain order until the next election with a sufficient turnout.

This makes the votes of French peasants crucial. Do you know what this implies, Napoleon?"

"It means candidates must appeal to the peasants," Napoleon hesitated before answering.

"You fool!" Lucien couldn't resist bursting out. "Napoleon, you really are a fool! It means the destitute won't even stand a chance to get votes. They can't possibly appeal to the peasants. Think about it France is vast, and peasants are scattered. To campaign village by village, even just to make their name known, would require a significant effort. How can these paupers manage that?"

Evidently, Lucien relished the opportunity to mock Napoleon openly.

Napoleon glared at Lucien but eventually decided not to engage in an argument with the conniving man. What Lucien had said was, surprisingly, something he hadn't considered before, and it made sense.

"Lucien, you've honed your skills in the parliament and the Ministry of Truth, where top-tier lying is essential. You've made quite the progress!" Napoleon sincerely praised at last.

"Napoleon, the organization you've set up for retired soldiers is a fantastic one. We can use it to extend our reach into the countryside. If we raise the level of elections in rural areas, perhaps even introduce smaller constituencies for the lowest tiers, where each village forms a constituency, it would dilute the impact of political opinions on election results. People who hold influence in the villages will almost certainly secure the entire village's votes. Your veterans' organization could perfectly control the grassroots votes, ensuring they vote for whomever we desire."

"You're right; even if we wanted a donkey to run for First Consul, we could make it a successful candidate," Lucien seized the opportunity to mock Napoleon once more.

"Heh," Napoleon chuckled. At the same time, he was already plotting to find a way to get rid of Joseph and give Lucien a piece of his mind.

"Lucien, be mindful of your words," Joseph finally spoke up.

Lucien fell silent.

"Right now, we may not need such tactics. But, Napoleon, you must pay attention to the development of such an organization," Joseph continued.

"I know," Napoleon responded succinctly.

"Furthermore, are the funds for the veterans' organization currently allocated directly from the national military budget?" Joseph inquired. "It's not ideal, Napoleon. It's best not to have the state provide this money. Instead, let our 'military-industrial complex' handle it. Transform it into a 'civilian organization.' In the long term, whoever controls an organization's finances holds sway over that organization. This way, our descendants won't be commanding the army, and you won't retain that level of influence in the military. The soldiers may not even know your name, but you can still use this system to control rural votes."

"But if we fund it ourselves, it will be a substantial expense," Napoleon remarked, contemplating whether it was time to display his expertise and find a generous benefactor.

"This is a simple matter. You can encourage charitable acts through legislation and offer tax incentives for corporate donations. Isn't that enough?" Joseph replied dismissively.

"Oh, there are such methods too? Shameful, I can't believe I didn't think of that!" Napoleon started to doubt his own mental acuity today.

"Lucien, we've invested so much in propaganda, controlling numerous newspapers," Joseph turned to Lucien. "This is essential to ensure that the next generation can maintain a firm grip on power behind the scenes. You need to figure out how to outcompete other newspapers. Do you know how to do that?"

"I do," Lucien responded. "Just find some excuses to shut them down, right? Simple!"

"Foolish! Why be so crude?" Joseph shook his head. "First of all, our newspapers have an inherent advantage in terms of news reporting. Use your resources to make sure our rivals keep producing real deviations in their news coverage. Instead of shutting them down, don't be so blunt. Lower their credibility. On the other hand, our newspapers can help our businesses advertise and even accept ads from other companies. This is the real source of revenue for newspapers. With this, we can sell our newspapers at a much lower price than the production cost and still make a profit. Our newspapers will have larger layouts, more reliable content, deeper reporting, sharper news, and a lower price. With this in place, why resort to crude and potentially damaging actions? If you do that, you'd be foolish!"

"I understand," Lucien nodded.

"This is indeed a clever scheme. Sigh..." Napoleon sighed. "I have to admit, Joseph, your approach benefits our family more than mine. Unfortunately..."

"Unfortunately what?" Joseph asked. "I never said you couldn't be Emperor."

Chapter 225: The Emperor of the Romans

Napoleon was taken aback, but he knew that when his big brother spoke, it was almost certain that something significant was about to happen. He had just been forced to abandon his dream of Augustus, and now Joseph had thrown this at him. Napoleon felt the blood rush to his face and stammered, "Joseph... What do you mean? What were you saying just now?"

"France must be a republic, and you must be the First Consul of the French Republic. But that doesn't necessarily conflict with being an emperor," Joseph replied with a smile. "I have a few proposals we can discuss."

"Tell me your proposals," Napoleon said, trying to contain his excitement.

"Are you perhaps considering snatching the title of the Holy Roman Emperor?" Lucien chimed in. "That seems like a viable option to me."

"That's one of the proposals," Joseph continued. "In the first proposal, we can use the title of 'Emperor' as an honorable designation, almost like a badge of honor, just like your set of medals. The highest rank in this set of medals would be 'Emperor,' exclusively awarded to the First Consul of France. It would require a separate national referendum, and a First Consul with exceptional achievements would be granted the title 'Emperor' along with various ceremonial honors. Similarly, the Second Consul could be titled 'Caesar.'"

Napoleon frowned. "What's the next proposal?"

Joseph smiled, knowing that Napoleon might not favor this one. "We could form an alliance between France, the Northern Italian Federation, and the Rhineland regions. We would name this alliance 'Rome,' with the governing body called the 'Senate.' The leader of this alliance would hold the title of 'Emperor.'"

"This 'Emperor' title is more substantial than the previous one and comes with additional benefits," Joseph explained. "It would enhance national pride, unite the free world, making French liberty and democracy symbols of civilization while subtly degrading other feudal nations. However, this glory would have its limits, and it won't create a royal family."

Napoleon inquired about the final proposal. Joseph continued, "In the last proposal, we would compel Austria to relinquish the title of the 'Holy Roman Empire' or pressure the Pope to renounce the 'Holy Roman Empire' title and crown. Then, we'd announce the establishment of an 'Orthodox' Roman Empire, with the Pope crowning you as the 'Emperor of the Romans.' France would also declare an alliance with the 'Roman Empire' and cede a small piece of land – Versailles might work – to the 'Roman Empire.' This way, we would establish an empire with territory, sovereignty, and an inheritance system."

Napoleon asked about the financing of this 'Roman Empire.' Lucien interjected, "Citizens of the 'Roman Empire'? Who would they be?"

Joseph responded, "People who have made significant contributions in various fields, advanced human progress, and pushed forward the cause of humanity. As long as they apply to the 'Senate of the Empire' and pass their evaluation, they would gain Roman citizenship. We would include various non-governmental organizations, those under the 'charitable' banner, within the borders of the 'Roman Empire,' turning it into a beacon of civilization. Caesar and Augustus built a great Roman Empire through military conquest, and today, we're building another Roman Empire,

dedicated to civilization, and love for humanity! See how great this is? Moreover, the crown of the 'Roman Empire' can be passed down within families."

Joseph then cautioned, "Lucien, use your brain. Napoleon might not be so naive as to overlook such a simple solution. Do you think only we will benefit from France? Today, the people of France are grateful and admire Napoleon, so they might not mind these small matters. But what about the future? All passions in the world are like tides, they rise quickly and fall just as fast. Whether it's gratitude or admiration, they may not last. In the future, especially when we are no longer here, our opponents may use this to accuse us of taking advantage of the French people."

"I'm not saying we shouldn't take advantage of the French people. This kind of opportunity is too good to pass up. However, we can't do it so blatantly, without any finesse. There are many ways to make money. For example, we could establish an organization dedicated to humanitarian aid, accepting donations from all parties for various charitable causes. Naturally, this cash can be deposited in the banks of our Roman Empire, where we can make a substantial profit. To encourage acts of kindness, we could stipulate that those who donate a certain amount would be granted the honorary title of 'Roman Citizen.' Those who donate more could become 'Roman Cavalry' or even 'Roman Nobility.' I believe that with these methods alone, we won't have to worry about financing the 'Roman Empire.'"

Lucien exclaimed, "Is this even possible? With this, even our future generations might have a comfortable life just by selling Roman citizenship and noble titles!"

This kind of operation had become quite standard in the future. For instance, there was a 'pseudo-nation,' the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, that didn't even have its own territory but thrived by wholesaling 'Knight' titles worldwide. If they were lucky and encountered a 'leader' on an island in East Asia, established diplomatic ties, and periodically generated news about breaking off diplomatic relations to make those 'leaders' maintain diplomatic relations, they could live very comfortably.

"I think the third proposal sounds good," Napoleon concluded. "It seems we need to send someone to establish contact with our Pope."

Of course, this matter couldn't be rushed. Many preparations were still required, and it might lead to conflicts with Austria. Although Prussia was already crippled, Austria might not have the audacity to start a war at present. Nevertheless, proper preparations were essential.

Apart from this, they had to ensure that the French people sufficiently supported the Bonaparte family, and they needed to find ways to improve the common people's living standards. Although the 'Zeus Plan' had already succeeded, it would take time to transform it into a productivity advantage.

The recent war had brought various indemnities, which seemed like a good thing. However, the influx of money into France, especially the generous war allowances to Napoleon, had also caused some inflation issues.

Furthermore, there was the issue of the sea route to Ireland. Among these concerns, achieving the title of Emperor seemed to take precedence for now.

Shortly after, Napoleon sent an envoy to the Vatican. However, the envoy's purpose was not to discuss the emperorship but to continue negotiations about the status of the Catholic Church in France.

Both parties were enthusiastic about the prospect of restoring the French dioceses. Despite occasional disrespectful acts towards the Pope and the Vatican in France, there was no other country among those supportive of the Catholic faith that could be compared to France.

The dispute revolved around certain conditions that France demanded to grant privileges to the French Catholic Church:

First, the financial independence of the French Church, with no obligation to contribute to the Vatican. Religious taxes, like the tithe, would no longer be in effect in France.

Second, the French Church would have independent authority over personnel decisions. Whether it was cardinal, archbishop, bishop, or even parish priests, all appointments would be made by the French themselves, with the Vatican being notified (note: not seeking approval). The Vatican would not have any reason to interfere in the personnel decisions of the French Church. In other words, who became a cardinal, archbishop, or bishop in France would be determined solely by the French (Napoleon). The Pope should find a comfortable place to relax.

Third, any decision by the Vatican would only take effect in the French dioceses if it received the recognition and signature of the currently serving French cardinal. Even if the decision had already been implemented in the French dioceses, its validity would still be inferior to decisions passed democratically within the French dioceses. This meant that if the French felt that a particular decision was no longer in their favor, they could directly suspend its execution within the dioceses.

"Is this... is this still Catholicism? Isn't this essentially a French version of the Anglican Church?" It was reported that when the Pope saw these French conditions, he couldn't help but sigh.

The French envoy responded, "Holy See, our country initially intended to establish a constitutional monarchy in terms of politics, rather than a republic. However, some were unwilling, and as a result, France became a republic. Now, under the republican system, France is willing to accept a constitutional church. I personally believe that this already shows a great deal of sincerity."

Chapter 226: The French Diocese

On the Vatican's side, there was a willingness to make some concessions to regain the French dioceses. However, they were also concerned that these concessions might set a bad precedent for other dioceses. Everyone might start saying, "If France can do this, why can't we?" It would become a model of how to deal with the French, and that wasn't something they were eager to promote.

The Holy See even proposed that these French conditions could be negotiable but kept as a confidential part of the agreement to avoid damaging the Vatican's reputation.

However, the French argued that they were a democratic nation, and their people had the right to be informed and oversee their government's actions. So, these requirements went against the principles of French legislation and were entirely impossible.

Everyone knew this was pure nonsense because both the treaties France had signed with Spain and the ones with Austria and even Prussia contained numerous secret clauses, some so secretive that their existence was a secret itself.

Of course, there were reasons for this, as it was all in the name of "national security," to protect the people. Anyway, as long as you learned how to plot two coordinates on a graph, many things in this world could be justified.

The French delegation's point was straightforward. Making these conditions public would damage the dignity of the Holy See, but it would significantly enhance France's, especially their first consul's, prestige. So, it was simply a matter of choosing between sacrificing French interests and the Vatican's face. The answer seemed quite clear.

So, the French representative did not hesitate to speak up.

As soon as this statement left his lips, the negotiators on the Vatican's side turned pale. This sentence carried a heavy threat.

The statement "Our country initially intended to implement a constitutional monarchy in politics and did not intend to become a republic. But some people were unwilling, and France became a republic" referred to Louis XVI's refusal to accept constitutional monarchy, relinquish some of his powers, and his subsequent downfall, leading to his execution.

The part about "Now, the republican France is willing to accept a constitutional church. Personally, I think this shows a lot of sincerity" was drawing a parallel between the Vatican and Louis XVI. If the Vatican refused to accept a diocese largely independent of the Church, it was akin to Louis XVI's unwillingness to be a constitutional king and his insistence on restoring absolute rule. Louis XVI's refusal to accept the goodwill of the French people had dire consequences, and now, the Vatican was risking the same fate. The question was not just about bringing the Pope back to Avignon; it was about violently reforming the structure of the Church itself.

So, the Vatican requested a temporary recess to consult with the Pope.

Then, later that evening, a bishop secretly visited the French envoy. After bribing the envoy with twenty thousand francs, he finally got a hint. A few days later, an agreement was reached between France and the Vatican.

In this agreement, most of the French demands were met, and the Vatican also saved face. The French agreed to keep the privileges of the French Church confidential, not to be disclosed. However, the agreement also made it public that the French Church had gained some privileges related to national security, but the specifics remained confidential.

With this agreement in place, the Catholic Church was finally able to return to France. However, the priests who had been expelled from France in 1793 found that the most important positions in the French Church no longer belonged to them. They had to go through a new period of study and exams to regain their positions.

During a break in their training, two middle-aged students complained to each other. They had already held mid-level positions in the Church in France, and now they had fallen to the bottom. They couldn't help but express their grievances.

"I heard that all these changes were orchestrated by our new head of the Religious Bureau. I heard he had a mediocre performance at the seminary and didn't even get an official priest's title. But now he's our boss. This is..."

"Honestly, it would have been better to let Talleyrand become the head of the Religious Bureau. Despite being a Church traitor, he was at least an archbishop and a noble. Our new cardinal doesn't even have..."

"Are you trying to get yourself killed?" A voice interrupted them from behind. They turned to see another student who had returned from abroad for training, Reynald, a prospective priest.

"Do you forget the fame of our new bureau chief? Do you not know how he climbed to the top? How dare you... Don't forget that being able to return to our country is a rare opportunity for us. In other places, we are outsiders, but in France, even though we are at the bottom now, the French Church desperately lacks trained clergy. The higher you go, the truer this is."

"So, as long as we show enough loyalty to the new regime, our promotion will be very fast. But the premise for all of this is loyalty," Priest Reynald emphasized, "Don't bring your bad habits from abroad back to France - we returned together. If you can't get rid of those bad habits you picked up overseas, it will not only harm yourselves but also implicate me..."

Reynald's face took on a cruel smile as he continued, "I will not allow such a thing to affect me, understand? This is your first and last warning."

With that, Priest Reynald turned and left, leaving the two dumbfounded guys standing there.

The man who headed the newly established Religious Bureau was none other than Joseph Fouché.

To Fouché, the Church was incredibly useful when it came to gathering intelligence. Priests' significant job was hearing confessions, during which they could acquire a vast amount of secrets. However, since the Church had many propaganda functions, direct control over the Church was in the hands of Lucien's "Ministry of Truth." Fouché had to settle for influencing the Church through the Religious Bureau and using it as a source of information.

In a way, Fouché's introduction of such a training program had an important purpose: to develop his network of spies among these trainees.

Of course, according to the Church's rules, priests were not allowed to share the information they heard in the confession chamber. But, if you thought priests kept their mouths sealed, you were mistaken. Otherwise, how would people know about the romantic escapades of Madame Reynaud and Yulian? Utilizing this information at the right moment was one of the techniques that helped the Church grow. So, most of the smarter students in these training programs didn't mind Fouché's recruitment efforts.

As for the newly appointed cardinal, he was a high-achieving seminary student named Oborlan. Of course, that was the official version verified by the Ministry of Truth. Prior rumors claimed that Oborlan never graduated at all. This man had managed to secure a position as a priest by swearing allegiance to the revolutionary government when the French Revolution began. Later, in 1793, he transformed himself into a Rationalist priest, even working as a spy for Robespierre.

After Robespierre's fall, Oborlan naturally fell out of favor. However, he quickly reestablished his connections through his former spy colleagues and gained the favor of Lucien. Consequently, he was promoted continuously. Before becoming a cardinal, he had already become the head of the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth.

Both Joseph and Napoleon knew how important it was to have control over the Church, and the master of intelligence and propaganda, Lucien, wasn't about to let it slip through his fingers. Nevertheless, Catholic clerics were required to be celibate, meaning they couldn't be married and couldn't have legitimate children. This wasn't good for the balance of family heritage. So, the three Bonaparte siblings with the last name Bonaparte couldn't take on this position themselves. Thus, Oborlan was recommended by Lucien due to his prior experience in religious organizations and appointed as the cardinal of the French diocese.

Apart from the cardinal, most of the bishops in various regions fell under Lucien's control. However, most of the heads of religious bureaus in different regions were Fouché's people. After all, when it came to gathering intelligence, investigating conspiracies, and the like, Fouché's skills were leagues above Lucien's. Additionally, Lucien had to handle too many matters personally, and even Joseph and Napoleon felt that Fouché was more efficient in dealing with these issues.

Of course, although Fouché was highly capable, both Joseph and Napoleon didn't fully trust him. So, the Church was still largely under the control of Lucien - the Bonaparte family needed its own intelligence network to balance Fouché.

Chapter 227: Soft Power and Steamboats

Napoleon was preoccupied with his civil code, which now included the additional task of preparing his family to control affairs from behind the scenes in the future. Meanwhile, Lucien was busy with the affairs of the Church and various forms of entertainment beloved by the masses. The provisional government had just passed the "French Cultural Advancement Plan." According to this plan, many properties and buildings that once belonged to the monarchy were to be transformed into various public entertainment facilities to meet the growing cultural and spiritual needs of the people.

"The importance of entertainment cannot be overemphasized," Lucien stressed to his subordinates at the Ministry of Truth. "There are always many things in this world that don't go as planned. Even those who seem to be living well have their share of dissatisfaction. This accumulates like floodwaters, and simply suppressing it with force can only hold it back temporarily. Once it breaks free, disaster strikes. So, one of our responsibilities is to prevent the accumulation of such emotions. We need to provide a harmless outlet for them, and that's where art and entertainment come in. We must view our work not merely as a facade for maintaining peace but from a political perspective that ensures the long-term stability of our nation."

The creators of the Roman Empire understood this well, Lucien explained. That's why you can find numerous such facilities, like theaters and amphitheaters, among the ruins of Rome. They performed tragedies and comedies in theaters, and battles in the amphitheaters, effectively guiding and releasing the emotions of the people. As a result, people were satisfied, wore more smiles, became more united, and the Roman Empire grew stronger. Therefore, we need to construct more stadiums and opera houses! It is a national and people's need, an ordained mandate inherited from the Roman Empire.

In addition, our propaganda should not only target domestic audiences but also the international community. This propaganda must be intelligent, not mindlessly chanting, 'France is great, France is great,' but portraying the beauty of France, its thoughts, and its art in a more refined manner.

We want the people of the entire Europe to admire France, speak French, savor French cuisine, watch French theater, and take pride in French goods. We want people across Europe to believe that

France is the Rome of civilization. Beyond Rome lies the land of barbarians. We want people throughout Europe to feel that only by aligning with France, learning from France, and following the path of France, can they achieve civilization. Anyone who opposes France is embracing barbarism. France must not only dominate with its invincible military power but also influence Europe with our culture and soft power.

Ladies and gentlemen, our military power is immensely strong, and it can force our enemies to obey our will. However, if we rely solely on hard power, it is not enough. In the history of the world, in terms of military achievements alone, no one surpasses the formidable Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan and his descendants. But their empire was short-lived because it was a cripple that had nothing but brute force.

We must not follow the Mongol path. Our hard power should make them dare not disobey us, and our soft power should make all of Europe willingly submit to us, recognizing our interests as the highest. Therefore, we must become messengers of civilization, cooperate with the great universities of Europe, and, ultimately, we must nurture many French-minded individuals in Europe. We must nurture a revolutionary party that is willing to lead the European people on the path of France—of course, by 'the path of France,' I mean the path we make them believe is the path of France."

To achieve these goals, Lucien was incredibly busy. In fact, some journalists noted that Mr. Lucien Bonaparte had slowed down in terms of changing his girlfriends, as he was overwhelmed with his responsibilities.

As for Joseph, there wasn't much going on at the moment. Most of the research projects were on track, and he didn't need to oversee them personally anymore. Joseph had appointed himself a professor at the University of Paris and managed to recruit over twenty doctoral students. He handed over many of the practical aspects of the projects he was responsible for to them. Later, Monsieur Ampère, a dual academician of the French Academy of Sciences and the Roman Empire's Academy of Sciences, recalled his time as Joseph's student:

"Professor Bonaparte is an extraordinary man, and what is most admirable about him is his keen insight and peculiar intuition. Back then, we, his students, spent day and night by the experimental apparatus, recording a plethora of chaotic data without knowing what it meant. But Professor Bonaparte's wife, his secretary, would come in, take our data, and often within a day or even less, Professor Bonaparte would identify issues and promptly set new research directions. Sometimes, during our research, we would encounter various disagreements and crossroads, unsure of which path to follow. In these moments, the professor's intuition would swiftly guide us in a particular direction, and his intuition's accuracy was astonishing.

However, perhaps due to the numerous tasks he was responsible for, we rarely saw him in person. We usually only met him during monthly progress reports. Even so, in a month, we'd accumulate a multitude of challenging problems. Many times, Professor Bonaparte would resolve them all in just a few minutes."

Since he delegated most of these responsibilities to his students, Joseph had found himself with plenty of leisure time. This period of respite continued for almost half a month until he was notified by Fulton, the American engineer he had recruited, that the new steamboat was ready for its maiden voyage.

In the original historical timeline, Fulton was considered a key figure in the development of steamboats. Just as in history, Fulton had come to Paris in 1793 with the intention of finding someone to sponsor his steamboat research. However, his luck wasn't favorable, and the steamboat he was constructing hadn't been completed when it sank in the Seine River due to strong winds. This unfortunate incident not only resulted in the loss of the ship but also led to a hefty fine imposed on him by the revolutionary government.

Eventually, the destitute Fulton was brought into the fold by Joseph at a modest cost. He was initially appointed at the Military Technical Research Institute and later relocated to Toulon, where he joined the Naval Research Institute.

In both the Military Technical Research Institute and the Naval Research Institute in Toulon, Fulton didn't stand out much due to the limited investment in projects related to his expertise. However, when the military-industrial complex initiated a research project on steamboats, this American, initially considered more suited to be a technical worker than an engineer due to his weak theoretical knowledge, demonstrated his hands-on capability, strong initiative, and excellent decision-making skills. He became the deputy head of the steamboat project. The official head of the project? Well, it was Joseph, who held the title but wasn't deeply involved in the practical aspects.

Since they were ready for the "official maiden voyage," it implied that the ship had essentially passed all the "unofficial trial runs" and was a success.

The location for this trial run was on the Seine River. Early in the morning, Joseph arrived at a shipyard belonging to the military-industrial complex on the western edge of Paris. He was accompanied by his female secretary, who also happened to be his wife, and the female secretary's own secretary.

As they approached the shipyard's dock, they could see a ship billowing with smoke from a distance.

"Joseph, is this the British ship you've been trying to replicate?" Pauline, the female secretary's secretary, asked. The British steamboat, captured by the French, had been brought to Paris for further research and then displayed to showcase the French victory. For this purpose, Lucien had even arranged for Morel and others' story to be dramatized and performed in Paris.

Pauline had already seen the partially restored British steamboat. Unlike most people, who considered it outrageously ugly, she believed that the steamboat, with its two large wheels and tall black smokestack, possessed a "unique beauty, a sense of power lurking within its awkwardness." She even compared it to the fire god standing by the goddess of beauty. So, Pauline was genuinely hoping the French could successfully replicate this ship.

"How is that possible? How could we build something so outdated?" Pauline's words immediately reminded Joseph of the 50,000 francs he had bet with his brother, Lucien.

The carriage came to a halt directly at the dock. Several people disembarked, and a ship with an elongated shape, featuring two masts, two chimneys, stood before them.

Fulton had been waiting for Joseph and the others here. As they got off the carriage, he quickly approached.

"Professor, everything is ready, and we're just waiting for you to board," Fulton said.

"Very well. Are the lifeboats in place on this ship?" Joseph asked.

"They're all in place," Fulton assured.

"And are the life jackets ready as well? You must understand that every person on this ship is an invaluable asset to the consortium, and we must ensure their safety. Safety is of utmost importance."

"Professor, you can rest assured. We take safety precautions very seriously. There are enough lifeboats on board, double the number of crew members. Lifebuoys and life jackets are within easy reach. See, there's a row of them right over there."

Joseph looked in that direction and indeed saw a row of lifebuoys. He nodded and then turned to the others. "Alright, let's board the ship."

Chapter 228: Dawn

"Where's the ship's paddlewheel?" Polina looked around and asked.

"Paddlewheel? What a backward design! Why would we use one?" Joseph replied with disdain.

"No paddlewheel? How do you propel the ship then? Do you use a reciprocating lever to row?" Polina inquired. "If so, it seems quite artistic."

"Polina, perhaps you should consider some education in mathematics and physics," Joseph shook his head. "Our ship uses a screw propeller. It's an underwater propulsion device, much more efficient than a paddlewheel. It doesn't get disrupted by normal waves, and even enemy cannon fire can't hit it. The British are stuck with their outdated paddlewheels."

"Professor Bonaparte's screw propeller is indeed a magnificent invention," Fulton sincerely stated. "I never thought such a propulsion method existed, and it's significantly more efficient than a paddlewheel."

"In fact, coming up with this idea is rather straightforward," Joseph began to boast. "This design was originally derived from the hydraulic turbine used in the Zeus project. And the hydraulic turbine design was an evolution of the windmill. You see, many processes in physics are reversible. If a windmill can be turned by the wind, then turning the windmill in reverse can generate wind. Similarly, a hydraulic turbine can rotate due to the force of water, so if you reverse its rotation, it can propel water. So, you see, it's not a particularly difficult design. The tricky part is solving the water leakage issue around the propeller shaft."

Fulton had a proud smile on his face. This problem had been addressed with the combined effort of him and several other engineers. While they hadn't completely solved it, they had managed to control the leakage rate to some extent, along with the addition of a small bilge pump to completely address the issue.

Fulton led a group of people to the ship's forward deck, where seats and sunshades were set up, and champagne was ready.

"Professor, whenever you give the word, we can start the trial voyage," Fulton said.

"Alright," Joseph stood confidently at the bow and waved his hand. "Forward! Forward! Our destination is the Starry Sea!"

The ship gently trembled and slowly departed from the dock. It initially followed the current, heading west for a while, quickly overtaking several other ships on the way. Then, it turned around, sailing east against the current.

"How fast can this ship go?" Polina asked.

"The 'Ridiculous' theoretically can reach around thirteen knots," Fulton replied.

"What? How did the ship get such a peculiar name?" Polina was taken aback.

Fulton glanced at Joseph, who remained expressionless. He certainly wasn't going to admit that he came up with this odd name. He named the ship 'Ridiculous' because in his previous life, he had read about Fulton's steamboat, which was referred to as "Fulton's Folly" but turned out to be a tremendous success.

Considering some traditional beliefs he had encountered in the Eastern Empire where it was said that giving a child a humble name would bring them good fortune, and the fact that 'Fulton's Folly' wasn't the first steamboat but was the first to achieve great success, Joseph thought this traditional superstition might actually have some merit. So, he decided to name the ship 'Ridiculous.'

However, Joseph would never admit to naming the ship. Therefore, when Polina asked the question, he remained silent.

"Oh, about that, it's... it's like this... when we were deciding on the name, we had quite a heated debate. In the end... well, we decided to let a dictionary decide. And that's how we came up with this word. But everyone had agreed beforehand that we would use whatever word the dictionary gave us. A man must keep his word, you know, so we're sticking with this name. That's how it happened," Fulton improvised an explanation, stuttering at first, but as he continued, it sounded more and more plausible. In the end, he almost believed it himself.

By this time, the ship had turned around and was accelerating against the current. In reverse flow, the ship's advantages became even more apparent. It spewed thick smoke and quickly left one sailboat after another far behind, returning to its starting point in no time.

"This ship is so fast! Is this its top speed?" Polina inquired once more.

"No, today is the official trial voyage. High-speed experiments aren't part of the plan for today," Joseph explained.

In fact, during the "informal trial voyage," high-speed tests had already been conducted. However, increasing the boiler pressure for high-speed testing also increased the risk of boiler explosions. So, such experiments were not carried out on this day, for safety's sake.

This successful trial came at a crucial time as Ireland faced a pivotal moment. The Irish independence army had recently repelled a new wave of British raids and achieved significant victories. In this counter-raid, the Irish independence army demonstrated impressive siege capabilities for the first time. They utilized a special explosive launcher that rendered most of the previously fortified British defensive structures useless.

This so-called "explosive launcher" was essentially a "flying thunder cannon," much like the one used by an Eastern army in a future era. It consisted of a large metal tube filled with propellant and a similarly sized explosive package. Igniting it could project the explosive nearly two hundred meters.

The ten-kilogram explosive projectiles wreaked havoc on the walls and defenses of British military posts, rendering them almost powerless. During daylight, defending soldiers could counteract the "explosive launchers" by concentrating rifle fire on the launch sites, which required digging a pit to set up the firing tube at the right angle.

However, crafty Irish rebels utilized the cover of darkness, secretly placing the "explosive launchers" near British military post walls and camouflaging them. When dawn broke, they simulated an attack, luring British troops to the walls. Then, they ignited the "explosive launchers," causing both the hastily arriving British soldiers and the fortifications to be launched into the air.

Thanks to this device, the Irish rebels, rising from the trenches, swiftly captured several strategically vital military posts, even momentarily closing in on Dublin. However, the British maintained significant mobile forces in the rear, promptly launching counterattacks.

The First Division of the Irish independence army clashed with a thousand British soldiers near a military post about sixty kilometers from Dublin. The battle concluded with the withdrawal of the Irish independence army, numbering around a thousand, but both sides suffered nearly equal casualties. The British lost more than two hundred men, while the Irish casualties were slightly higher but didn't exceed four hundred. Such results left the British astonished.

Although most of the British soldiers in this battle were new recruits, they still constituted regular forces with better equipment suited for conventional warfare. Additionally, they possessed cavalry, which should have caused significant harm to the Irish during their withdrawal. However, even with these advantages, they failed to gain a significant upper hand in the close encounter, particularly due to the cavalry walking into a hidden ambush of Irish sword mines and losing nearly a hundred soldiers.

The British realized the growing power of the Irish rebels. In their safe zones, the Irish independence army, with the cooperation of the local guerrillas, continuously harassed "policing forces" and British troops who carelessly strayed from their allies. They made use of guerrilla tactics, using firearms for bait, luring British troops into pursuing them, and then ambushing them with sword mines.

If it were in the past, the British might have considered a retreat at this point. However, this time, they gritted their teeth and persisted. They found that the Irish rebels were gradually running short on weapons and ammunition. Particularly in recent days, there were fewer reports of raids involving sword mines. This indicated that their supply of French-made equipment was dwindling.

"I understand that we're facing losses, both inside and outside the secure zones. But this is a critical time, and we must endure. The enemy is weakening, and if we hold on a little longer, they'll be done for. It's a matter of who can persevere the most. The side that endures will win all of Ireland," the Duke of Norfolk addressed his subordinates in the lavishly decorated meeting room of the Governor's Palace.

"Currently, our struggle has reached a crucial moment. We must hold on, for holding on is victory. We're facing difficulties with our supplies, especially weapons and ammunition. It's undoubtedly a problem, but should we not fight our enemies, protect our base, and the people without the new weapons our French comrades have sent us? We must conserve our ammunition while increasing its efficiency, ensuring each bullet eliminates an enemy. Moreover, we must utilize captured weapons and our homemade ones to strike back at the enemy.

We're going through tough times, but the enemy faces similar hardships. If we endure, we'll see the first light of victory..." In the swamp camp, Lazarus rolled up his trousers, barefooted, addressing the independent army soldiers gathered around him.

Chapter 229: The Black Ships

The sweeping and counter-sweeping operations in Ireland had entered their most critical and challenging phase. In order to support the Irish independence forces and keep a bleeding wound for the British, the French government had increased the shipping fees for vessels heading to Ireland by fifty percent.

As a wise mentor from a later era once said, "With suitable profit, capital becomes bold. With 10 percent, it takes risks, with 20 percent, it expects a return, with 50 percent, it is ready to trample all human laws, and if 300 percent, there is no crime it will not commit, even at the risk of the gallows."

Originally, running missions to Ireland promised substantial profits, and with the surging shipping fees, although it hadn't reached the point of "committing any crime, even at the risk of the gallows," it had certainly reached the stage where people were willing to take significant risks. Consequently, during this period, more individuals ordered clipper ships to embark on the adventurous journey to Ireland, and the number of clipper ships heading to Ireland was rapidly increasing.

However, the British had already taken precautions. A month earlier, the Duke of Norfolk had written a letter to the British Prime Minister, pointing out potential issues and offering suggestions:

"Large squadrons of clipper ships are hovering in the vicinity of Ireland, waiting for the arrival of storms. Once the winds blow at sea, they will pounce on Ireland like hungry sharks. As far as I know, the number of French clipper ships is increasing rapidly, and soon, when their numbers are sufficiently large, they may even communicate ways to saturate our interception capabilities and break through our defenses.

On the other hand, the Royal Navy has a shortage of steamships, and these ships have a glaring weakness that has become apparent today, which is their low reliability. After a period of high-intensity use, this problem has become even more pronounced. The commander of the Irish coastal defense's First Fleet reported to me, 'Our ships are either in need of repairs or waiting for repairs. The entire First Fleet, with a total of five steam frigates, can now only send one to sea.'

The lack of standardization in the production of steam frigates has made maintenance more complex. Among the five steam frigates in the First Fleet, five different steam engine models were used, along with other components, including paddlewheels and transmission devices, hardly a single part was the same. This means that each ship requires unique maintenance, and when two ships are out of commission, we can't even use the spare parts from one to quickly repair the other - I can't understand how such a foolish situation came about! Why can't we produce identical steam frigates using the same standards?

I suggest that the British Royal Navy should purchase more steam frigates and adopt entirely uniform construction standards for them. Even if it means slightly lowering their performance, we must ensure their maintainability. Let's not allow these warships to become monsters on dry docks."

The British were well aware that losing Ireland would have a devastating impact on their interests. As the French accelerated the production of clipper ships, the British, too, started speeding up the production of steam frigates in shipyards across the country.

In terms of shipbuilding capacity, the British had a considerable advantage over the French. However, this advantage was with regards to producing conventional vessels. Steamships required more complex machinery installation, making their production distinctly different from other ships. In contrast, the differences between clipper ships and traditional vessels were minimal. So, French shipyards produced clipper ships faster than the British could produce steam frigates.

Furthermore, the British steamships, while increasing in number, continued to face low reliability issues. It was undeniable that the Duke of Norfolk's idea of interchangeable parts was ingenious, but it exceeded the capabilities of the British in this era, at least beyond what this era's Britain could achieve. You see, in another timeline, at least until the 1980s, the most advanced fighter jets produced by a certain Eastern power couldn't even have interchangeable parts.

So, while the British captured or sank more clipper ships, the resupplied Irish forces increased their resistance. They launched another offensive, capturing another supply depot.

Within their stronghold, due to logistical challenges and the ineffectiveness of the "security forces," British losses were noticeably increasing. The efficiency of their efforts to disrupt the stronghold was decreasing due to the security forces' apathy. But why were the security forces so unwilling to work, even on a simple task like "destroying potato fields"?

According to the British, it was because, "The Irish are all lazy, always looking for opportunities to slack off; even when there's no chance, they'll create one to slack off."

But if you were to ask Captain Javert, he would tell you that there was a reason for this behavior. It was mainly because the Irish were too malicious. Those who ravaged the crops with the utmost enthusiasm were their primary targets, and the Irish would strike hard and mercilessly. Unfortunately, the chaps from our "security forces" were simply too dim-witted. Every time they sought help from the British, it was either too late or they naively led the British forces into rebel ambushes.

As a result, for the sake of protecting British soldiers, it made sense to refrain from damaging the crops. So, the "security forces" couldn't do anything right, not even when it came to ruining crops; they couldn't even compete with donkeys.

Since they couldn't rely on the "security forces," the British had tried to ruin the crops themselves. However, they soon found themselves caught in a vicious cycle. If they concentrated their troops to carry out this task, the efficiency was too low, lower even than that of donkeys. But if they dispersed to damage the crops, they were consistently ambushed by the rebels. In these attacks, even the authentic British soldiers suffered heavy casualties.

As a result, even the Duke of Norfolk, who had been shouting "persist," had to admit that continuing these sweeps in non-security areas no longer made sense. His actions had indeed caused significant losses to the stronghold and depleted too many resources. If the British could effectively block the Irish from obtaining sufficient supplies before the potato harvest season, within two to three months, the Irish independence forces would struggle to recover their strength. At that point, if the British launched another massive sweep, they might cause a major famine within the Irish independence forces' stronghold.

Of course, this primarily depended on two factors. First, whether the British could more effectively cut off French supplies to Ireland, and second, whether the United Irishmen could quickly achieve self-sufficiency in production. After all, while weapons and ammunition could be procured through overseas support, solving the food problem via overseas logistics was nearly impossible. If overseas logistics could genuinely resolve the food problem, then either Britain had already collapsed, or the stronghold had shrunk to the point of almost nothing left.

In the following days, a new phenomenon emerged at sea: clipper ships departing from France faced attacks from British clipper ships. This time, British clipper ships were also armed with "Greek fire." Due to the element of surprise and the lack of survivors, these attacks were initially not discovered; people just noticed that the number of ships returning to the harbor had significantly decreased.

Naturally, this situation made the crew members wary. Soon, someone brought back the exact news: the British also had Greek fire.

This news came from a Danish captain named Oleg, who, on his way back from Ireland, rescued an Italian sailor floating on a plank in the sea. The Italian sailor told everyone that their ship had been attacked by British clipper ships disguised as French vessels. The British had ignited their ship with Greek fire and then shot the sailors who jumped into the sea. He had survived by hiding under a large plank to evade the British gunfire.

Before long, the situation deteriorated further. The British had more and more clipper ships, and they began intercepting ships bound for Ireland in a fleet formation. In a series of battles, both sides suffered losses, but with stronger shipbuilding capabilities, closer proximity to their base, lighter cargo loads, faster speed, and the advantage of seizing the windward position (as wind significantly affected the range of Greek fire, the side with the windward position could launch attacks from a greater distance), the British gradually gained the upper hand in these battles.

Because the bootleg clipper ships performed exceptionally well, the British converted those expensive and unwieldy steamships into general cargo ships and continued to increase orders for the bootleg clipper ships.

"In a month, at most, we will eliminate all French clipper ships in the waters near Ireland. Once we cut off this supply line, we will quickly suppress the Irish rebellion," Prime Minister Addington confidently declared during questioning in the House of Commons.

It was on the very day that Prime Minister Addington made this promise to the members of the House of Commons that an unusual warship with an elongated black hull was launched at the Torun shipyard.

Chapter 230: The Flying Clipper "Crusher"

This was a patrol frigate with two masts and a foremast at the front, with two towering smokestacks further back - clearly a steam-powered ship. Its name was the "Equality."

Because it didn't require the installation of paddlewheels, this ship still had a complete gun deck, but compared to fully rigged sailing warships of the same tonnage, it had one less gun deck due to the space occupied by the engine and coal bunkers. Additionally, the displaced gun deck was typically the lower deck for considerations of stability, and heavy cannons were usually placed on

the lower deck for that reason. So, in terms of firepower alone, this type of warship was much weaker than a similar fully rigged patrol frigate.

This frigate only carried 16 12-pound cannons, eight on each side. This level of firepower was equivalent to arming a merchant ship.

However, when compared to the British steam corvettes, its firepower was quite formidable. British steam corvettes only had a total of five guns: a 24-pounder in the bow, and two 12-pounders on each side. Combined with the added speed and enhanced seaworthiness due to the screw propeller, this ship could be considered a nemesis to British steam corvettes.

At its top speed, although this ship wasn't faster than the flying clipper, it could maintain its maximum speed at any time, unlike the clipper. Therefore, most of the time, this ship could outpace the flying clipper.

The crew on this black ship was transferred from the "Ridiculous" on the River Seine. The reason for this was to quickly make it combat-ready and immediately deploy it in the waters near Ireland to change the maritime situation.

A month later, after various training exercises, this ship had essentially become combat-ready. Under the command of Captain Marthon, it left the Mediterranean, broke through the interception by the British navy at Gibraltar, and entered the Atlantic. After a brief rest in Le Havre, the ship set sail into the vast sea on a stormy night.

To conserve fuel, the "Equality" mostly relied on its sails for propulsion, only using its steam engine to escape from British warships when necessary. After a few days of sailing, the "Equality" approached the waters near Ireland.

"Reef the sails," Captain Marthon ordered.

The ship was already quite fast at this point, and the sails were no longer providing much assistance; in fact, they were creating drag. The "Equality" continued to accelerate, reaching speeds exceeding ten knots. Before long, the ship that the lookout had spotted while suspended from a kite appeared in Captain Marthon's view.

At this moment, the British crew aboard the flying clipper "Resolute" had already noticed the "Equality." It was natural because the thick black smoke billowing from the "Equality" had risen so high, how could they not see it? The British crew aboard the "Resolute" took only a glance with their naked eyes and thought it was a British steamship. After all, they had no idea that countries other than Britain possessed steamships, and they couldn't have imagined encountering a non-British steamship in these waters. So, even though they noticed the ship approaching them at high speed, they didn't make any defensive preparations. They assumed it was a simple mistake, thinking the lookout on the approaching ship had not seen their British flag clearly. They expected that as they got closer, the mistake would become apparent.

However, as the black steamship approached, they realized that this steamship was entirely different from the ones they were familiar with - it didn't have paddlewheels on the sides. What's more, they discovered something that left them dumbfounded - a tricolored flag was hoisting up the mast of that ship.

"Is this...is this a French ship? How is that even possible?" Captain William was almost dumbfounded. "Quick, unfurl all the sails!"

William shouted as he rushed to seize the helm to change their course.

But it was too late; the two ships were already very close. Even though the wind at sea was favorable, the "Resolute" needed time to accelerate, while the steamship had already completed its acceleration and had come quite close.

The "Equality" swiftly approached the "Resolute" until they were only about a hundred meters apart, sailing alongside, while simultaneously firing chain shot at the "Resolute."

Chain shot was a commonly used weapon in naval warfare of this era, primarily designed to damage the opponent's rigging and render them immobile.

Due to the ship's rocking, even at a distance of over a hundred meters, the accuracy of cannonballs fired from guns without stabilizing equipment was often problematic. Fortunately, the sails presented a relatively large target, making them easy to hit. Every chain shot that hit the sails tore off a significant portion of the canvas. Soon, the sails of the "Resolute" were riddled with holes.

The power of sails, especially those of a flying clipper, relied primarily on the Bernoulli principle created by the pressure difference between the airflow on both sides. When the sails were riddled with holes, these breaches disrupted the pressure difference on both sides, significantly reducing the power the sails could generate.

After several rounds of cannon fire, the speed of the "Resolute" began to slow down, and Captain William knew that his ship could no longer escape.

"Reef the sails, we surrender," Captain William ordered.

The flying clipper had no cannons, and Greek fire's range couldn't reach the enemy. The enemy outpaced them in both speed and firepower. Besides surrender, there was no other option.

"Resolute" raised a flag indicating surrender, furled its tattered sails, and dropped anchor. The ship floated on the sea like a dead fish.

"Send a small boat over and order their crew into lifeboats," Lieutenant Marthon commanded.

Several French sailors then boarded a small boat, headed to the "Resolute," and conveyed the orders to the ship's captain.

"Our ship has no space to accommodate prisoners, and we have no provisions for you. So, you must board your own lifeboats and bring as much water and food as you can. Then, we will scuttle this ship. You have twenty minutes; make good use of your time and pray to God," a leading French ensign told William.

Lifeboats could carry only limited supplies of water and food. Moreover, they had no means to return, so the British crew could only drift at sea, hoping to encounter another ship that could rescue them. Whether or not they would be rescued depended on the grace of God.

But the British crew on the "Resolute" dared not defy the French's orders. At this moment, the French behaved more gentlemanly toward them than they did to French ships.

Within the specified time, all the British crew had boarded the lifeboats and made their best effort to row away from the "Resolute." A group of French soldiers then entered the "Resolute's" hold, removed some supplies that might be useful to the French, and set a timed explosive charge in the ship's lower hold. They also rowed away from the "Resolute."

Ten minutes later, with a deafening explosion, a large hole was blasted in the ship's hull, and the vessel slowly sank beneath the sea.

This was just the first prey of the "Equality." In the following week, the "Equality" systematically sent fourteen British ships to the depths of the sea. On its most frenzied day, it sank four British flying clippers.

A week later, due to dwindling supplies, the "Equality" concluded its slaughter of British flying clippers in the waters near Ireland and returned to Le Havre. Two days after its departure, a British flying clipper discovered a lifeboat filled with British sailors. It was only then that the British realized why several of their ships had failed to return to port as planned during that time—they had encountered this black hunter.

The British gave the black "Equality" the nickname "Leviathan" and immediately formulated a plan to trap it, code-named "Leviathan Hunt." They prepared to concentrate multiple "steam corvettes" to encircle this French warship.

Meanwhile, the "Equality" spent a week in Le Havre, conducting maintenance on its steam engine and other systems, replenishing supplies and weapons. It set sail from the harbor once again, heading toward the waters near Ireland. Before its departure, Captain Marthon received a precious Legion of Honor knighthood. However, ahead of him lay more than a dozen hastily mobilized British steam corvettes, poised to encircle and hunt down this French warship.