

The Fox 231

Chapter 231: The Hunter and the Prey

From the surviving crew members, the British had already gathered some information about their target, the "Leviathan."

"The 'Leviathan' is a warship about the size of a frigate, with two masts and an angled prow. The crew unanimously claims they haven't seen any visible wheels on the 'Leviathan,' but its speed and smokestacks suggest it's a steamship. Based on the information we've gathered, the ship only has one gun deck with a total of sixteen cannons, which means eight on each side. According to the sailors, these cannons are likely 12-pounders. That means their broadside firepower is about four times that of our steam frigates.

However, based on what the survivors reported, the enemy vessel never fired from its bow. Additionally, we've deduced from the survivors' sketches of the 'Leviathan's' angled prow that it may not have bow chasers. Moreover, they didn't find any stern chasers either. If used correctly, this could be a significant weakness of the enemy ship.

For this operation, we have three third-rate ships of the line, eighteen steam frigates, and six cruisers. Each group consists of six steam frigates and one third-rate ship of the line. This means that any of our naval groups will have superior overall firepower compared to the enemy. Each group will be responsible for a designated area. Furthermore, we have twenty clipper ships that will participate in the operation. They will act as decoys and serve as messengers.

To aid in this, we've prepared signal rockets for all our ships that can be launched to a height of about 500 feet. During the day, we'll fire rockets that produce reddish-brown smoke in the air, while at night, the flares from the rockets can be seen from even greater distances.

In addition, all three third-rate ships of the line are equipped with hot air balloons that can ascend to over a thousand feet, providing us with extensive aerial surveillance. While these third-rate ships may not be able to match the 'Leviathan's' speed, they will greatly expand our field of vision.

Furthermore, just over a week ago, one of our cruisers encountered the 'Leviathan' in the waters near France. At that time, it was sailing under sail power, not steam, and its speed wasn't particularly high. The smokestacks only started emitting smoke after it spotted our cruiser.

This suggests that most of the time, the 'Leviathan' cruises at low speed. So, including the third-rate ships of the line, our sub-fleets should be able to keep up with their pace. Additionally, the 'Leviathan's' steam engine might not handle long periods of high stress. Our cruisers will patrol the area individually, with their mission being to force the enemy to frequently use steam power, thus undermining the reliability of their equipment."

In the preparations for the "Leviathan Hunt" operation, General Hood's adjutant, Major Carter, was briefing the commanders of the participating forces about these details.

After Major Carter had finished presenting this information, General Hood began assigning the tasks for the operation.

Meanwhile, just a few nautical miles off the coast of Le Havre, the frigate "Equality" encountered its first British warship since setting sail – the cruiser "Zephyr."

The "Zephyr" was a sailing cruiser armed with thirty-five large cannons, far outgunning the "Equality." Therefore, the "Equality" immediately stoked its boilers, activated its steam power, and turned upwind to quickly distance itself from the "Zephyr." While the "Zephyr" pursued, it also released a carrier pigeon, sending word back to England about the sighting of the "Leviathan."

This triggered a state of alert along the entire British coast. Three hunting teams were swiftly notified and set sail to intercept the "Leviathan."

At this point, Lieutenant Marten began to feel that something was amiss. He had already encountered British cruisers multiple times on this journey.

Of course, the British cruisers posed no significant threat to his ship. Once the smoke started billowing from the smokestacks, the "Equality" could easily outmaneuver any British cruiser. However, the problem was that the "Equality" was missing one of its masts. If they used the boilers, they couldn't outrun the British. And using steam power consumed coal and caused wear and tear to the machinery.

Yet, the wear and tear didn't seem significant, and the "Equality" had enough resources to complete its mission. However, a night encounter two days later almost turned disastrous. A sudden fog had risen on the sea, and an approaching British cruiser closed the distance dangerously. If it weren't for the lookout on the "Equality" spotting the threat first, they might have fallen victim to that British cruiser.

Clearly, the number of British warships in these waters had increased significantly. But, ironically, this only steeled Lieutenant Marten's resolve.

"At this point, there's no ship in the world that can catch up to the 'Equality.' What do we have to worry about?"

Two days later, they spotted a British clipper ship. Marten ordered the boilers fired up and the "Equality" steamed toward it. However, this time, he faced more problems. The British were more alert than before. Upon seeing the "Equality" emitting thick black smoke, the British clipper ship immediately increased its speed and continuously fired signal rockets into the sky, possibly seeking help from other British warships.

Marten knew that at this point, merely changing their course would leave the British warships attempting to hunt him empty-handed. But considering his ship's overwhelming speed advantage, he believed it was still possible to decide whether to fight or evade after seeing the British vessels.

So, he continued the pursuit.

The sea was calm at this moment, and though the British clipper ship had been accelerating as much as possible, its speed never surpassed ten knots. The "Equality" was already maintaining a speed of around eleven knots, and Marten estimated that by two or three o'clock in the afternoon, he'd catch up to the British ship.

The British clipper ship kept fleeing, launching signal rockets into the sky all along the way. Marten paid no heed and continued the chase. By one o'clock in the afternoon, the distance between the two vessels had become very short. However, on the horizon, several columns of smoke were now visible—clearly, these were British steamships.

Marten was somewhat familiar with British steamships, and he had even taken rides on the captured British steamship after its repairs. He knew that by increasing the pressure in the boilers to the maximum allowed, the "Equality" could easily gain almost three knots more than the British ships. So, these columns of smoke didn't intimidate him. After all, with the vast sea at their disposal, they could easily outmaneuver any pursuers.

So Marten gave the order without hesitation: "Continue the pursuit."

"Captain, should we increase the power a bit more?" First Officer Edgar asked.

At present, the "Equality" was cruising at just eleven knots, although it was capable of safely reaching close to fifteen knots. If they continued accelerating, they would have already overtaken the British clipper ship.

"No need," Marten shook his head. "Unless we can eliminate all the sailors on that ship, I don't want to reveal our top speed. Let's give the British a false impression that our top speed is roughly on par with theirs."

They continued the chase for a while. By around two o'clock, the "Equality" had caught up with the clipper ship, and at this point, multiple columns of smoke were much closer, revealing the British steamship beneath, along with its paddlewheels spinning on both sides.

"Before they catch up, we can sink this ship," Lieutenant Marten put down his binoculars, sneering as he ordered the attack.

This time, the "Equality" didn't opt for disabling the enemy's sails with chain shot and forcing them to surrender. Instead, they seized the weather gauge first and then sprayed the British clipper ship's deck with grape shot. They particularly targeted the two flamethrowers mounted at the bow and stern.

Grape shot, much like canister shot used by land forces, consisted of fewer but larger pellets than standard shot, which provided a longer range and more powerful impact.

After a few rounds of fire, there were no longer any men on the British clipper ship's deck. The flamethrowers at the bow and stern were destroyed. The "Equality" continued to close in and set the enemy ship ablaze. Many of the British sailors jumped overboard, some still on fire.

"Equality" paid no attention to these British sailors and put some distance between themselves and the burning clipper ship. They then turned away, seemingly preparing to elude the approaching British steam frigates.

By now, the British steam frigates had closed the gap considerably. However, during the "Equality's" attack on the British clipper ship, they had reduced their speed. Now, with the ship turning, their speed was further lowered. When the "Equality" had completed its turn, the British steam frigates had drawn even closer.

"Equality" began to accelerate.

"Accelerate slowly, don't exceed eleven knots, let them believe that with effort, they can catch us before sunset. Do they really think they're the hunters and we're the prey?" Marten chuckled.

In the eyes of the British, the "Leviathan" had been in hot pursuit of a fast-clipper for nearly half a day. Throughout this chase, the steam engine of the "Leviathan" must have been running under a heavy load. The British were unsure about the capabilities of the French steam engine, but they figured it couldn't be much better than the British ones. After all, Britain was the birthplace of steam engines.

If a steam engine on a British ship continued to operate under such a high load for so long, there was a good chance it might malfunction. So, the British were convinced that if they accelerated their chase, they would catch up and eliminate the French steam frigate.

"It would be great if we could capture this warship. After all, it's even more potent than us, worth learning from, like the fact that it doesn't have paddlewheels, one less significant weakness," thought Commander Nevill, a lieutenant colonel, on board the "Tremor," the steam escort ship leading the pursuit.

After making a turn, the "Leviathan" began to accelerate, but its acceleration wasn't swift. The distance between the two ships continued to decrease.

Indeed, regarding the level of steam engines, the one on the "Equality" was not more advanced or powerful than those on British ships. But in terms of propulsion, the screw propeller significantly exceeded the paddlewheel in efficiency. Furthermore, another hidden feature, the submerged, normally invisible bulbous bow, made the "Equality" face significantly less resistance when reaching considerable speeds. These two factors combined meant that the "Equality" could reach a speed of around eleven knots without needing to run the steam engine at full capacity.

Therefore, whether it was a short sprint or a long race, the "Equality" was far superior to the British steamships it faced. In fact, if the goal was merely to escape the British pursuers, Lieutenant Marthen only needed to continue accelerating. Before long, he would leave the British far behind.

However, Marthen didn't want to do that. He knew that, following his first successful sortie, several shipyards under the Military Industrial Consortium were preparing to produce similar warships. Perhaps it wouldn't be long before the second and third ships of this kind were launched.

Marthen knew that when that time came, achieving more victories would be much harder. At that point, there would be too many wolves and too little meat. When would he ever become a general? After all, General Napoleon Bonaparte was only a year younger than him and had already become the First Consul!

So, Marthen quietly made up his mind to play a big game, one that the British would never forget.

However, Marthen didn't dare to directly engage the British in combat. The British had more ships and more cannons. But the British ships had a glaring weakness: their paddlewheels were so large, so crucial, and so vulnerable. Hitting the paddlewheel with a few cannonballs during battle could render the ship immobile. If Marthen were British, he might have gone straight for the attack. But he was French.

For years, the French Navy had a history of being defeated by the British Navy when they lacked overwhelming superiority in numbers. So, the French Navy was always cautious when facing the British. In essence, without a dominant force, they couldn't afford to take the initiative.

For example, in the original historical account, the French and Spanish joint fleet had a relative numerical advantage over Nelson's fleet. Yet, when they encountered the British, their first thought

was, "Let's get out of here!" Their second thought was, "We must escape faster than the Spanish (or the French)!"

Marthen wanted to defeat the British ships to make a name for himself, but he also feared the Royal Navy. Therefore, he chose a sneaky approach: to lead the British in a chase.

Marthen had been on British steamships before and knew that about eleven knots was their limit. At that speed, they could last until the evening at most. Afterward, they would either have to reduce the steam engine's pressure to prevent malfunctions, or, more likely, come to a complete stop. That's when he could seize the opportunity.

But Marthen soon realized he didn't need to wait until evening. Around four o'clock in the afternoon, a dark cloud drifted in from the west, and the wind and waves intensified. The British steam escort ships couldn't keep up with him on the rocking sea. Their paddlewheels were dipping into the water or rising above it, significantly reducing their propulsion efficiency. Their speed rapidly dropped, even falling behind regular sailboats.

"Damn it! The French are escaping again! Curse this wind!" Lieutenant Colonel Nevill cursed and slammed his fist against the ship's rail. Just before, they had been closing in on the enemy, and a little more, they could have fired their 24-pounders at the target. But now, it was evident that they couldn't catch up with the "Leviathan."

"Colonel, the enemy ship is changing course!" At that moment, a lookout's shout reached his ears.

Nevill quickly looked ahead and saw the French steamship making a swift turn amidst the storm. The maneuver was so rapid, and it seemed unaffected by the storm's power.

"What do they intend to do?" Nevill was surprised. According to logic, the French should take advantage of the storm to escape. Why were they changing course?

But Nevill quickly grasped the "Leviathan's" intent.

"The one commanding the 'Leviathan' is an extremely brave and cunning opponent. They've noticed our predicament in the storm and want to take this opportunity to divide and conquer us."

"The storm has made our paddlewheels nearly unusable, greatly reducing our maneuverability. He must be hoping to use this opportunity, leveraging his speed advantage, to get alongside us, pass us from our stern, and use his broadside cannons to strike at our rear!"

Realizing this, Colonel Nevill immediately ordered, "All ships, hoist the sails immediately, prepare for battle."

With the paddlewheels no longer functioning efficiently, they unfurled the sails, relying on the more reliable wind power to control the ships and counter the French.

The six British steam escort ships set sail again, turning back into sailboats.

However, these steam escort ships had fewer sails than normal escort ships due to the space occupied by the chimneys. Additionally, if they allowed the paddlewheels to continue providing power, they would have difficulty turning, as the power kept shifting from one side to the other in the rough seas.

But if they stopped the paddlewheels, they were essentially adding more resistance. These steam escort ships, already less efficient due to their incomplete sails when relying solely on wind power, became even more sluggish with the added resistance, which compounded their problems.

On the other hand, the "Equality" began increasing the boiler pressure, and despite the storm, its speed not only didn't decrease but actually continued to rise.

With its enhanced power, the "Equality" passed the British from the starboard side, beyond the reach of their cannons, then began to turn, preparing to insert itself at the rear of the British fleet. The British fleet, in turn, started to turn, attempting to keep their broadsides facing the "Equality," and both sides danced in the midst of the storm.

This maneuver, known as "cutting the T," was common in naval warfare during this era. Typically, ships of this time had their cannons mounted on their broadsides, so they could only unleash the most firepower when they faced the enemy. If their bows or sterns were directed at the enemy, they had very few cannons capable of firing.

In naval battles, once one side gained the advantageous position of having their broadside or stern facing the enemy, they had an overwhelming firepower advantage. Therefore, naval engagements always involved trying to gain this position of advantage through maneuver. This principle remained significant in naval battles for many years to come.

For instance, in another era of a different timeline, Admiral Togo's combined fleet employed the daring maneuver of "crossing the enemy's T" to seize this advantageous position during the Battle of Tsushima; and in the ultimate battle of battleship gunnery, the Battle of Tsushima Strait, the United States Navy, with the T advantage, effortlessly defeated the Japanese fleet at the cost of almost nothing, all due to this strategic advantage.

Sailing and turning were significantly impacted by the wind's force. However, the "Equality" remained unaffected by these forces. With its greater speed and more agile turning capabilities, the "Equality" effortlessly gained the upper hand in this game of "cutting the T" against the British's clumsy steam escort ships.

The "Equality" first approached the "Serene," the last of the British ships, from the starboard side, swiftly turning from behind the "Serene" and using its eight right-sided cannons to fire a broadside.

In this broadside, the "Equality" used chain shot ammunition, aiming to damage the "Serene's" sails and further diminish its maneuverability.

Due to the relatively high relative velocity, the rocky sea, and the fact that Marthen was experimenting with these tactics for the first time, he acted conservatively, leaving a bit more distance when lining up the broadsides with the enemy's stern. The accuracy of this broadside was abysmal - not a single shot hit.

But Marthen was undeterred. He held the initiative now, and the enemy had no effective means of retaliation. If one round missed, no problem; he could try again. As long as the storm continued, he had the confidence that, slowly but surely, he would send these British ships one by one to the ocean floor. Now, these British ships were the prey, and he was the true hunter.

Over the next two hours, Captain Martain's operations became increasingly skillful, the efficiency of the battle improved, and his boldness grew. Relying on his superior power and maneuvering, he continuously seized advantageous positions, leaving three British steamships powerless. Not only did their paddle wheels shatter, but even their masts were broken by the close-range chain shot. Captain Martain, driven by greed, left these immobilized British escort vessels behind and headed towards the remaining operational warships, intending to capture all of the British ships in one fell swoop.

However, it turned out that not knowing when to quit was not a good habit. Just as Captain Martain was planning a grand victory, a massive ship appeared on the horizon - it was the third-rate battleship that had been lagging behind.

With the appearance of this large ship, the demoralized British sailors suddenly rallied, fighting tooth and nail to protect their injured ships against Captain Martain's assault. Captain Martain took a quick look at the distance between the two sides and realized that it was unlikely they could deal with the British ships before the third-rate battleship closed in. He muttered, "What I hate the most is when the young ones bring in the old ones."

After this complaint, Captain Martain cast a glance at the approaching British warship and added in his mind, "Even more infuriating is that we might not be able to handle this old one."

A battleship, even a lowly third-rate battleship, was armed with sixty to seventy heavy cannons, with over thirty cannons on each side, each firing heavier and more powerful shots than Captain Martain's guns, with longer range. Considering the battleship's stability, each shot was more accurate than his. Moreover, the battleship's robust defense was impervious to the 12-pounder shots.

Captain Martain estimated that before the battleship arrived, he might have a chance to sink one of the British warships with a daring maneuver. However, it could also lead to damage to his own vessel, and if crucial areas were hit, he might end up stranded here due to his haste.

Therefore, Captain Martain immediately realized that he couldn't afford to waste more ammunition on the British ships. Why not save the ammo for the fast clippers that were harder to deal with?

"Retreat, we won't play with them anymore!" Captain Martain ordered.

After passing by the British escort vessel for the last time, the Equality sped away without looking back, disappearing quickly into the vast sea.

In this battle, the British only lost their decoys and didn't lose more warships. Of course, half of the steam escorts were heavily damaged, and the remaining three were not in good shape. These ships would have to be towed back by the third-rate battleship.

However, this battle also proved fruitful for the British. They expended a significant amount of cannonballs and gunpowder from Captain Martain. After finally breaking free from the British warships, Lieutenant Martain checked his cargo hold and discovered that he had consumed nearly two-thirds of the chain shot, half of the regular cannonballs, and one-third of the grape shot. Considering the necessary reserves for the return journey, there wasn't enough ammunition left for hunting!

"If these cannonballs were used against those flying clippers, how many could we have taken down? This is..." Captain Martain couldn't help but let out a sigh of regret.

In the following days, the British showed remarkable efficiency. They had realized that their "steamships" were almost a generation behind the French counterparts. Even in the outnumbered battle, they couldn't gain the upper hand. In unfavorable weather conditions, catastrophic consequences were possible.

Moreover, during the last stage of the battle, the Equality had demonstrated a speed far exceeding the British steamships, meaning that even in the most difficult situations, the French had time to retreat.

This meant that the "whale hunting plan" fundamentally had no chance of success. On the contrary, the released decoys might become free meals for the enemy.

So the British swiftly called back their hunting teams and decoys, and the Equality only managed to capture one flying clipper that hadn't received the notification in time and fled hastily.

Since they couldn't deal with the French steamships, it meant that the blockade of Ireland had failed completely. So the British ordered their troops in Ireland to go into full alert, while reconsidering negotiations with the French.

This time, the British's peace terms were much more practical. They used the Dutch as intermediaries to propose peace to the French.

The British proposed: an immediate restoration of peace between England and France. England would abandon the blockade of the French coast and recognize French special interests in the Netherlands, the Rhine, and other areas. In return, France would acknowledge British rule in Ireland and cease support for Irish rebels. Additionally, France would recognize British special interests in Hanover.

This demand was much more reasonable compared to the previous ones, and it was clear there was room for negotiation. After consulting with his two brothers, Napoleon also believed that France needed a period of peace for the time being.

"We need peace now to shift more resources towards production and improve people's living standards," Joseph said. "Furthermore, achieving a more favorable peace for France will boost your support among the people and serve our 'Roman Plan.' However, there are a few principles that must be upheld."

"First, regarding the issue of Ireland, we cannot abandon it. It's our most potent leverage against the British. Besides, the Irish are resilient and valuable allies. A peace that can be torn up at any moment versus a small brother who can fight, the difference in value is immense."

"Secondly, there's Hanover, which must also be under our control."

"Why even mention this?" Napoleon shook his head disdainfully. "We are the victors, or at least the ones in an advantageous position. Why should we make concessions on all these fronts? Cut the nonsense!"

Joseph ignored him and continued, "In addition, we should insist on certain rights, and it should be a mutual give-and-take. We should demand mutual 'open-door' policies with Britain. They and their territories should open their markets to us, and our markets should open 'equally' to them. This market includes ordinary goods, literature, art, and news."

"Mutual market opening? Are you sure we'll gain an advantage?" Napoleon asked.

"Of course," Joseph said without hesitation, "their steam power and water-powered textiles—what do they have against our electric-powered textile production? Of course, they don't know this. I imagine they might resist when it comes to news and art markets, especially with how well Lucien has been handling things at the Ministry of Truth, dismantling those reactionary feudal remnants. The British might have some concerns. Let's propose mutual market opening for news and art first and then use mutual opening of the ordinary goods market as a trade-off."

"Well, with Lucien in charge, the British newspapers and such are decent. Given their level, as long as they don't use violent means to counter our propaganda, any Minister of Truth, with the support of all of Europe, shouldn't have trouble dealing with those blockheaded British newspapers. Otherwise, they ought to be promptly loaded into a large cannon and launched toward the sun at the speed of light!" Lucien chimed in.

And so, the French delegation, led by Foreign Minister Talleyrand, engaged in negotiations in the Amsterdam City Hall in the Netherlands.

The negotiations were difficult, with two major roadblocks. These issues threatened to bring the discussions to an impasse multiple times.

The first roadblock was the issue of Ireland. The British vehemently accused France of brutally trampling on their internal affairs and demanded that France immediately cease all connections with Irish rebel organizations.

The French countered by arguing that the core of the Irish issue was the shameless exploitation of the wealth of the Irish people by the British and the cruel persecution of Irish Catholics. Talleyrand adopted a humanitarian stance and presented himself as a devout Catholic:

"Respect for sovereignty is the cornerstone of international relations. However, based on the fundamental principles of our nation and the ideals in the 'Declaration of Human Rights,' we believe that human rights are a higher standard than sovereignty and form its foundation. When human rights are wantonly trampled upon, we do not believe that any just-minded nation should remain silent due to the restrictions of sovereignty. If the British genuinely wish to address the Irish issue, there is only one solution, and that is to sincerely respect the inalienable human rights of the Irish people, their property, and religious freedom. In other words, the legislative principles of France, the foundations of our state, do not allow us to remain indifferent to this humanitarian catastrophe, especially one that affects Catholics."

The British, of course, also understood that hollow "peace" would not make the French relinquish their most critical leverage. Negotiations were a bargaining process. Therefore, the British raised the issue of Hanover, which immediately became another roadblock.

Chapter 234: Business Dealings

"Britain's presence in Hanover poses a threat to the security of France," Talleyrand replied without hesitation.

"Hanover is also the sacred domain of our King," Sir Humphrey, Britain's new Foreign Minister, countered, "According to your nation's principles, you should recognize that private property is inviolable. Hanover is, indeed, the inviolable private property of our King."

"Ah, Sir, our legal code states that we must protect the legitimate private property of the French people. I dare say your King is not a citizen of France."

"But didn't you just say that the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man are universal, and that you, the French, care about the human rights of foreigners as well?"

"Yes, we do have such principles, but, Sir, you must understand that matters have priorities. We ensure the human rights of the French people first, then the human rights of Catholics on the European continent, then the human rights of other Europeans and Catholics in other regions, and then... well, you can see, your esteemed King's interests are rather low on the list. At least, I think it would be challenging to protect your King's private property before the basic human rights of the Irish people are guaranteed."

"Mr. Talleyrand, can I understand from your words that if we are willing to ensure the human rights of the Irish people, then your country would be willing to protect my King's private property, or, to be more explicit, if we make concessions in Ireland, can we exchange that for concessions in Hanover?"

"Ah, Sir, I didn't say that, but... we find your proposal to be very peaceable..."

In reality, neither Talleyrand nor Sir Humphrey had any genuine interest in peace. Everyone knew that this negotiation was fundamentally just a formal ceasefire. However, both sides had sincere reasons for needing this ceasefire, albeit for different motivations. They all believed that these issues would ultimately be resolved through war, and thus, it was more straightforward to set aside disputes for now. After all, having a few more traps to spring in the future wouldn't hurt; they could always use them as an excuse to go to war later.

So, they earnestly discussed this exchange.

In the end, the French and the British reached a consensus on these terms:

Regarding Ireland, both parties believed that they should try to resolve the matter through peaceful means.

The British committed to ensuring the inalienable human rights of the Irish people, their right to choose their faith, and granting the Irish people a degree of autonomy (though they wouldn't openly admit the latter).

The French, for their part, expressed understanding of the British perspective on Irish sovereignty and pledged not to encourage Ireland to secede from the United Kingdom. However, they emphasized the traditional friendship between the French and the Irish people and the need to preserve free trade.

France assured Britain that it would not sell large-scale weapons to Ireland (France: After all, what we sell are civilian items, can't you believe us? For example, rifles are for hunting; hand grenades are for fishing; and various landmines are solely for defending the Irish people's radishes in their gardens from those alien invaders trying to steal them.)

As for the issue of Hanover, France respected the private property owned by the King of England as the Duke of Hanover and the income derived from it. They also respected his right to participate in political activities in Hanover. However, the final status of Hanover would depend on the choice of the Hanoverian people. To ensure that the Hanoverians could freely express their will, France could not accept the presence of any British military forces in Hanover.

Additionally, to secure Hanover's safety, at the invitation of the Hanoverian people, France would maintain a limited military presence in Hanover.

Britain expressed its support for the King's legitimate interests in Hanover and pledged to do everything in its power to promote the restoration of these rights through peaceful means.

Having temporarily acknowledged the current situation, Talleyrand immediately raised a new matter.

"All right, Sir Humphrey, I believe we can finally set aside those annoying matters and discuss something that can truly benefit us all."

"Are you implying...?"

"Sir, you see, in recent years, Britain has blockaded the French coast, preventing us from engaging in profitable trade. We, too, have hindered your country from acquiring raw materials and selling goods on the European continent. This is not a good situation because it hinders the prosperity of both our nations. So, you may be aware that France has signed trade agreements with many European countries based on mutual open markets. To promote friendship between our nations and ensure lasting peace, I suggest that we can reach an equitable agreement on trade between our two countries as well."

Sir Humphrey was very interested in this proposal. In fact, since France defeated Prussia, nearly the entire European market had closed its doors to the British.

As much as the French were engaged in smuggling activities when they were under blockade initially, the British, too, were continuously involved in smuggling with the Dutch and cooperating to bring goods into Europe. Truth be told, in the Rhenish League, though there was a legal blockade against Britain, it wasn't enforced very diligently. Nevertheless, even this relatively lenient blockade had caused significant trouble for the British economy.

Added to this was the economic strain resulting from their recent military failures and the drain on resources in the Irish quagmire. Britain's recent economic situation was far from ideal. Opening up the European markets to Britain at this time would be a beautiful prospect. In fact, this was a crucial objective in the ongoing peace negotiations – Britain had to quickly regain its strength before the next decisive war.

However, no matter how you looked at it, this was more advantageous for Britain, and the fact that the French had brought it up voluntarily made Sir Humphrey somewhat hesitant.

"Of course, free trade encompasses many aspects, not just limited to goods," Talleyrand continued, "It should also include culture, arts, and the reasonable flow of talent. For instance, I have some friends in the Bordeaux region who might become the new ambassador to England. You know, this friend of mine is a supporter of ours, and he has many vineyards in Bordeaux, producing some outstanding wines. I've heard that in your country, the wine business is quite lucrative. Well, he's a young man but quite generous... If possible, I hope he could receive your attention during his time in your country."

Sir Humphrey immediately understood what was being implied. Buying an ambassadorship and then using that position to conduct business and make money was a practice the British had invented, and in an alternate dimension, they continued this fine tradition even into the 21st century.

Whether you were an illiterate who could claim the American army liberated Auschwitz, as long as you paid, you could buy yourself an ambassadorship.

So, if we translate the underlying meaning of this statement, it would be something like: "There's a guy who sells wine, and he gave me a lot of money to secure an ambassador position in your country. He paid for this position, and of course, he intends to do business and make money, as he's heard that French wine is popular in England. If you help him make money, he's a good guy willing to offer bribes."

"That's not a problem," Sir Humphrey said, "I have a friend here who will also require your assistance..."

This diplomatic negotiation, like many others in history, involved a delicate dance between national interests, diplomatic politeness, and personal ambitions, all set against the backdrop of a tumultuous era in European history.

Chapter 235: Self-Rescue through Innovation

With a consensus reached, France and Britain forged a peace agreement in Amsterdam.

"I know our French friends made a deal with the British, which has left some of our comrades feeling uneasy. They're worried that we might have been betrayed by the French. The British claim that under this agreement, the French can no longer sell military weapons to us. But, my friends, today's newly arrived ships and the cargo they've brought with them will prove this to be nothing but a rumor. Come and see our new acquisitions."

Soldiers gathered around Joyce, gazing at the wooden crates by his side. The crates remained unopened, and their contents were hidden beneath layers of oil-soaked paper labeled "Agricultural Supplies."

Beneath these words was a smaller, bold-printed line: "Highly Effective Bird Deterrent."

"A 'Highly Effective Bird Deterrent'? What in the world is this?" one soldier asked.

Joyce gestured with a sweep of his hand. "The pry bar is over there; why don't you open it and find out?"

One soldier, taking the pry bar, popped open the wooden crate. Inside lay layers of carefully wrapped oiled paper, concealed beneath which were wood shavings used for padding. As they pushed aside the shavings, a long, cloth-wrapped object was revealed. This item was so familiar to them that even before unwrapping the oiled cloth, they knew what it was.

"Is this thing really a 'Highly Effective Bird Deterrent'?" The soldier had already skillfully removed the rifle from its oiled casing, aiming it briefly.

"This thing is meant to deter birds, and it does so effectively," another soldier chuckled. "John, if there were ten birds on a tree, and you fired at one, how many would be left on the tree?"

"Come on! I'm not a fool," John replied, returning the rifle to its oilcloth bag.

"And what's this? What is this thing?" another soldier pointed to another box, which read, "Highly Effective Wild Boar Deterrent."

"Open it up!" someone suggested.

"Let's not rush. Let's make a bet, and the prize will be a pack of captured English tobacco. I bet there are broadswords inside. Anyone object?" Sergeant O'Hara started the commotion.

"O'Hara, do you really have those? How many goodies have you squirreled away?" someone asked mockingly.

"Speak up if you have any, or else get lost, you paupers!" O'Hara retorted with disdain.

"O'Hara, how many do you have left? I'll bet with you. I'll wager my stash of French brandy," Joyce suddenly chimed in.

"What? Sir... Sir, you can't cheat me! I've painstakingly accumulated these...," O'Hara realized his mistake and hastily said.

"Sir, don't trust him. Just yesterday, this scoundrel, under the pretext of sharing, distributed my last bit of tobacco. And now he miraculously has some again," another soldier chimed in.

Amid the laughter, Joyce generously produced the bottle of brandy, and O'Hara had no choice but to retrieve his pack of tobacco.

"Sir, what exactly is this 'Highly Effective Wild Boar Deterrent'? Finally, someone circled back to the original question.

"I have no idea. I've never opened one myself," Joyce said. "But I suppose it's probably just a regular landmine. There are two more boxes over there that look quite similar, and they're also labeled 'Wild Boar Deterrent.' The only difference is that the one over there uses 'Wild Boar' in the plural. I'd guess that one should contain broadsword mines."

"Open it, open it," the crowd eagerly urged.

So, the box labeled in the singular form "Wild Boar" was opened, and indeed, it contained common landmines that could only blow off a pig's hoof. The box labeled in the plural form "Wild Boar" was opened, and it was filled with broadsword mines. However...

"Sergeant, look, the writing on these is different," a soldier picked up a broadsword mine and called out to Joyce.

"Let me see..." Joyce examined the broadsword mine and saw the following words imprinted on the front: "This Side Facing Pigs!"

"Comrades, you've all seen it! Any notion that the French have betrayed us is nothing but a rumor. Believing in such tales would be as absurd as being blown up by one of these things," Joyce laughed heartily.

"Sergeant, if that's the case, why did our French comrades make peace with the British and even suggest that we temporarily cease hostilities with the British?" someone asked.

"Because, whether it's the British, the French comrades, or us, we all need some time to recuperate. You should know that the French comrades overthrew the tyrant in their homeland and established a republic. As a result, under the leadership of the British, all the feudal despots in Europe united to wage war against our French comrades. Their goal was to turn France back into a kingdom ruled by a tyrant.

However, our French comrades defeated them. Over the years, through several wars, those feudal monarchs who initially declared war on France were one by one defeated. But in France, the scale

of the war is much larger than here, and the losses on the French side are substantial. You see, this year, we've been continuously fending off counter-sweeps for months, and we're running out of time to plant potatoes. The French comrades have been resisting encirclement for years, and none of us are invincible; we all need a breather."

Everyone nodded in agreement, imagining how difficult it must have been for the French comrades during their years of resistance. They all understood that it was time for them to catch their breath.

"Furthermore, let's talk about us. The British are ruthless. In recent years, they've either swept in just when it was time to plant potatoes or right before harvest. What's their goal? To prevent us from planting potatoes properly and starve us? This year, when we were planting potatoes, the British pulled another stunt. Although we've driven them out of our base, it still delayed us. If, during the harvest, the British come back to cause trouble, our lives won't be easy.

And then there are the British themselves. During this major sweep, we've killed more British than in any previous campaign. They fear death as well. The reason they keep sweeping us is that they believe they can blockade our sea routes and starve us. Some time ago, our French comrades fought a battle at sea against the British and broke their blockade. They know they can't block us anymore, and they've suffered defeats in other places. They can't catch their breath either, so they're also taking a break."

"Comrades, this is why we, the French comrades, and those damned British all need a ceasefire. This ceasefire isn't an end, but just a break in between. Everyone is using this break to get a head start on catching their breath and to eliminate those who haven't caught their breath yet."

"So, comrades, this ceasefire isn't for resting. We can't let our guard down because of it and go to sleep. President Lazare said we need to use this time to resume production, make our potato crop bountiful, and pile our warehouses high with potatoes. Even if the British catch their breath and return for a major sweep, we won't be afraid of them."

"But comrades, many of the potatoes we planted this year have been destroyed by the British and those black dogs. Even if we replant them now, it will still affect our harvest. If we proceed as we have in the past, we won't be able to harvest as many potatoes as usual this year. We need to catch our breath properly. Comrades, we need to come up with a way to breathe easy. We not only need to recoup the losses inflicted by the British and those black dogs but also strive for a bumper harvest. This way, we can catch our breath ahead of others, grow stronger, and eventually defeat the British, achieving our nation's independence."

"Sergeant, what should we do?"

"Yes, yes, Sergeant, tell us what to do."

The soldiers chimed in one by one.

Seeing their enthusiasm, Joyce climbed onto a crate labeled in the plural form "Highly Effective Agricultural Wild Boar Deterrent" and said to everyone, "Our comrades from the Union are mobilizing the locals in every village to replant crops and try to recover the losses as much as possible. They are also expanding farmland, increasing cultivation areas, working in the fields more diligently, weeding often, and keeping watch. We mustn't let rats, rabbits, or wild boars damage our potatoes. We need to recover the losses."

"Comrades, the local comrades are working very hard, and our fellow countrymen are putting in a lot of effort. They are now sleeping in the potato fields day and night, working hard in agriculture. Shouldn't we join them? So, President Lazare asked me, 'Do our division's soldiers still have the strength, after military training, to plant some potatoes themselves and alleviate the burden for the local comrades and our fellow countrymen?' How do you think I replied?"

"Sergeant, what did you say?" the soldiers asked one by one.

"What did I say? At a time like this, should I be hesitant? Of course, I said, 'President, me and our soldiers, we used to be potato farmers. Planting potatoes is our expertise. If it weren't for those bloody British, who the hell would want to fight all the time and not plant potatoes? There's no problem with this. Because our division's lads were originally the best farmers in the world when it came to planting potatoes. Just wait and see, not only can we grow enough potatoes to feed ourselves, but we can also support the Second Division!'"

"The president said, 'The Second Division thinks they're better at farming than us. They're even willing to support us when the time comes.' What do you think, can we let the Second Division support us? We need to let them know why we're the First Division, and they're the Second Division. What do you say!"

The soldiers cheered in agreement.

Chapter 236: The Thief

After the peace agreement, it seemed like a golden age for British merchants. Their ships were laden with various goods, including woolens and cotton fabrics. While they had engaged in smuggling to access European markets before, it was a clandestine affair. But now, they could operate openly.

After defeating Prussia in France, the economic conditions in Britain, which had suffered due to the loss of European markets, began to improve. Many factories that had been shut down reopened, and the air in the streets of London grew more polluted.

Young Oliver, coughing and observing the hurried crowds on the streets, searched for potential targets.

This was Oliver's first mission. He needed to muster his courage and choose the right target. The voice of the gang leader, Fagin, echoed in his mind.

"Oliver, don't believe those tales you heard in the orphanage. Yes, 'thou shalt not steal' is one of the commandments, but taking back what's rightfully yours isn't theft. Look at those factories, look at the workers, women, and children toiling away. They work tirelessly, often sixteen to twenty hours a day. They go hungry, poorly clad, and if they fall ill and can't work, they starve. Most of them, men, women, and children, won't live long. They'll die in poverty and despair.

Oliver, are these people not hardworking? Are they not laboring from morning till night, never resting? Why do they have such a fate? The priest would tell you it's because of original sin, that their suffering is God's will, right? But did the priest ever tell you what happened when Adam defied God's will and was expelled from the Garden of Eden?

God said, 'In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground.' Even in punishment, God offered our forefather a promise: that if one worked hard, sweated, they could make a living and sustain themselves.

But, my dear Oliver, tell me, those who labor, sweat, but can't make a living, can't feed themselves, why is it? Does God not keep His promise? Is God deceiving us?

No, God doesn't deceive us. So, why, when a person labors and sweats, can't they make a living, only to die in misery? Oliver, my child, take a closer look at this world. Is it true that every man sweats for his daily bread? No, it's not. Look at the 'respectable people,' those who dine on delicacies and drink wine smuggled from France. Do they break a sweat? Can they barely make a living?

Why is that? God says one must labor and sweat to make a living. Then why do some people, who work tirelessly, still can't make ends meet? Some live in ease while others starve. Why, Oliver, why?"

"I don't know," Oliver whispered to himself, standing alone on the street corner.

"It's because these 'respectable people' have stolen everything from us! According to God's will, every man should toil but also be able to eat. But these 'respectable people,' these real thieves, have stolen everything from us!"

Fagin's voice rang in Oliver's mind again.

"Oliver, they call me a thief, and my brothers are thieves too. Look at Jim, do you know how he lost his hand? It was in the factory, caught in a machine. Was it his fault? No, it was because he was overworked. He toiled in the factory, nonstop, for eighteen hours every day! Oliver, a man is not a machine; even machines need rest.

Oliver, God created day and night, allowing night to take up half of a day. Why is that? Because God believes that a person should have at least half a day to rest. Forcing someone to work for eighteen hours straight is an un-Christian sin.

Oliver, these factory owners, businessmen, noble 'respectable people,' they're all thieves, including the King of England—he's a thief too! They live well because they've stolen what should have been ours!

Oliver, they say I'm a thief. They hunt me down, offering a reward of fifty pounds for my head—let me boast a bit, that's even more than the reward they offered for Judas to betray Jesus (according to the Bible, Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver). But, you see, Oliver, I've committed so many big crimes, stolen so much money, do I eat well, dress well, and have as much money as a 'respectable person'? Where has my money gone?

Oliver, that's not my money; it belongs to all the poor. I've taken every penny back from those thieves and returned it to its rightful owners. That's why they can't get rid of me."

"Oliver, in the past few decades, they've hanged five Fagins, and maybe tomorrow, I'll be the sixth to dangle from the gallows. But as long as the true thieves who defy God's will are still around, Fagin will never die. Oliver, do you know what I like most about you? I love your honesty and kindness. I believe that one day, your name might become synonymous with Fagin.

Oliver, remember, we're not thieves; we're only helping people reclaim what's rightfully theirs. Our hands only reach out to the 'respectable people,' never to those who truly toil and can barely, or cannot, make ends meet."

"I'm not a thief. I'm just following God's will, helping those people retrieve what's rightfully theirs," Oliver whispered to himself. Then he spotted the finest grapes, silk, and genuine luxuries entering a bookstore across the street.

The clientele of the bookstore consisted of well-to-do individuals, and the fellow he had his eye on seemed foolish, as if he had no defenses.

Oliver, with worn but relatively clean attire, ventured closer, although his shoes were far from respectable, one of them sporting a hole through which his toes could enjoy the fresh air, like a blade of grass emerging from the earth in spring.

As long as he could enter the bookstore, he could swiftly approach the seemingly foolish "respectable person." The fellow was standing at the counter, eyeing the books on the shelves.

Perhaps due to his poor eyesight, the "respectable person" stretched his neck like a duck, his head seemingly held by an invisible hand, raised high. His pocket bulged like a wallet.

Oliver touched the small blade hidden in his pocket, then nonchalantly strolled into the bookstore. As long as the fellow at the door didn't notice his conspicuously toe-ventilated shoe, he could proceed. He soon found himself inside the store, his target well within sight.

The seemingly foolish "respectable person" appeared to hear something, glanced in Oliver's direction, and then continued his conversation with the bookstore owner. "Sir, do you have a copy of 'Spartacus' in English?"

"Only a few left. Would you like one too?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Yes, my friend mentioned it. He said the French version is even better. Is this book selling well?" the "respectable person" inquired.

"It is. You see, the French are excellent storytellers. The story is quite fascinating," the bookstore owner replied. "But if you're interested, you should get one soon. They might run out soon."

"If it's selling well, they'll probably print more, won't they?" the "respectable person" asked.

"Of course, but, you see, some are still accusing it of blasphemy. Ah, may God bless us." The bookstore owner made the sign of the cross over his chest. "So, who knows if there'll be a second edition."

"Ah, I see. In that case, this book is likely to become a collector's item. All the more reason to buy it," the "respectable person" said as he reached into his wallet.

"How much is the book?" asked the "respectable person."

The bookstore owner quoted a price, and the "respectable person" opened his wallet. Oliver saw the wallet was filled with colorful bills.

The "respectable person" paid, nonchalantly stuffed the wallet back into his pocket—not very discreetly, as a corner of the wallet stuck out—and picked up the book. He began reading as he strolled out of the bookstore. Oliver quietly followed.

Unaware of Oliver, the "respectable person" kept his head down, reading, and hummed softly to himself. Oliver cautiously approached, extended his hand to snatch the wallet. But just as his hand closed around it, the "respectable person's" hand reached out from nowhere and seized Oliver's wrist.

Chapter 237: Petticoat Lane

Oliver was taken aback and struggled vigorously, pulling out a small knife with his free hand and thrusting it towards the "gentleman" who had a grip on his wrist. However, the "gentleman" displayed surprising agility, and his other hand shot out to catch Oliver's hand holding the knife. The two of them held each other's hands, and from a distance, it almost resembled an older brother teaching his younger brother to waltz.

Oliver swiftly applied the techniques that Fagin had taught him, raising his knee to strike at the vulnerable area of the "gentleman." The "gentleman" seemed to have anticipated this move and slightly dodged, avoiding the blow. But Oliver's true intention was not the knee strike; it was a ruse. His foot came down hard on the "gentleman's" toes.

The "gentleman" clearly didn't expect such an attack. He let out a loud cry and used both hands to forcefully throw Oliver aside. Oliver crashed onto the cobblestone road, writhing in pain. He struggled to prop himself up with his hands, much like a carpenter unfolding a folding ruler, inch by inch.

The "gentleman" was far from composed at this point. He hopped on one foot, clutching the other, while his mouth emitted a cacophony of unintelligible sounds, much like a wounded pig.

Oliver, though in pain, managed to crawl to his feet while the "gentleman" was still vociferating. He used this opportunity to run. He took a few steps and collided head-on with a black-clad police officer, sending the officer stumbling.

"You rascal!" the portly police officer exclaimed, swiftly drawing his baton and raining blows upon Oliver, who had been seated on the ground following their collision.

Through years of experience, Oliver knew that begging, crying, or resisting would be in vain at this point. The only way was to shield the vulnerable and easily injured parts of his body, tuck himself into a protective ball, and wait for the rain of baton blows to subside.

Oddly, the baton blows didn't continue. A hand had gripped the police officer's arm, and a voice sounded in his ear, but Oliver couldn't understand what was being said.

Opening his eyes, Oliver saw the "gentleman" standing in front of him. The "gentleman" pointed a finger toward the police officer, berating him in a language that Oliver couldn't comprehend.

The police officer, unable to comprehend the foreign language, saw the "gentleman's" luxurious attire and high-quality silk shirt. Even though he couldn't make out what the man was saying, he realized this foreigner was wealthy. Any wealthy person, whether from England or abroad, deserved a small police officer's respect. After all, a wealthy foreigner was likely acquainted with numerous wealthy Englishmen. And who didn't respect English wealth?

"Sir," the portly police officer stammered, "I... I'm sorry... I may have offended you... But I didn't understand... what you were saying..."

Only then did the "gentleman" realize he was no longer in France, but in England.

"Sir," he continued in English, "bullying a child, I must say I'm ashamed of you." He then turned around and found that Oliver had disappeared. Seizing the opportunity while the "gentleman" was scolding the officer, Oliver had made a quick escape.

"Sir, that boy, you can tell he's a little thief at first glance. Truly, I assure you, only someone as kind-hearted as you could be fooled by his appearance. I guarantee you, that lad is nothing but a little thief," the portly officer hastily explained.

During the "gentleman's" reprimand, Oliver had managed to rise to his feet. He turned and dashed back into the alley he had just fled from. Running a few steps along the alley, he abruptly stopped. There, right where he had viciously stamped on the "gentleman's" foot, lay a book—the very book the "gentleman" had been reading, which had fallen during their struggle.

Oliver picked up the book. He knew that books could be quite valuable, and Mr. Fagin himself enjoyed reading. It wasn't uncommon to see Mr. Fagin reading alone during his spare moments or teaching others to recognize simple words.

Oliver tucked the book into his clothing and continued running to the other end of the alley.

After Oliver had left, the "gentleman," Mr. Jacques Golan, the Second Secretary of the French Embassy in England, concluded his altercation with the English police. He assumed an air of superiority, reflecting that, apart from France and Rome, all other nations were barbarians, and he condescended to cast a disdainful look upon the police officer. Then, he retraced his steps to the alley where he had lost his book during the struggle.

The book was nowhere to be found.

However, Mr. Jacques Golan didn't feel too disheartened. The book was expensive, but compared to his salary from the Ministry of Truth, it wasn't much. Furthermore, this book could be reimbursed as a part of official expenses. The reimbursement process might be somewhat lengthy, and often you had to wait quite a while, but in most cases, by Christmas at the latest, you could be sure to receive the reimbursement. (In matters of reimbursement, the accountants often preferred to clear them all at the end of the year.)

Oliver continued down the alley, emerging onto another street and walking for a while until he reached Petticoat Lane. This was one of London's oldest and liveliest streets. During the Tudor era, it had been a place for slaughtering and selling meat. Later, with the rise of the textile industry, it became a market for various textile products, giving the lane its name.

However, the narrow street couldn't accommodate the numerous shops, and its proximity to the workers' residential areas led to a lack of good law and order. After all, most of the workers were poor, and when impoverished people engaged in unlawful activities, they rarely followed proper protocols.

Here, a young girl could become a prime target for the London police for not paying the taxes to His Majesty's government just for half a loaf of bread. Men might similarly stab someone for a potato. Children in this area were often considered young thieves from a very early age.

In this place, the three problems of the century—poverty causing men to despair, hunger leading women to vice, and darkness making children frail—were all present.

The kind-hearted merchants who conducted business with wealth were never pleased to see the suffering of the poor. So, they moved their markets to places where they wouldn't have to witness the destitute. They left behind only the name "Petticoat Lane."

Today, Petticoat Lane had become one of the dirtiest, most chaotic, and lawless places in London, a region where even the police didn't dare to enter lightly. If they had to come, they came in large numbers, armed to the teeth. However, this wasn't a place of complete anarchy; it had its own order, much like Gotham had its order.

Fagin was the order in Petticoat Lane. If you inquired about Fagin's situation from the officials at the London police station and from the residents of Petticoat Lane, you'd think you were hearing about two entirely different individuals.

According to the police station's descriptions, Fagin was a sort of monster straight out of horror stories parents used to scare children with. He would silently infiltrate people's homes, tie up the kindly homeowners, and then threaten them with a knife, demanding the combination to their safes. Or he'd stuff those righteous police officers and reformed ex-thieves into sacks and toss them into the Thames.

However, in the words of Petticoat Lane residents, Fagin was the kindest of all. He was like the embodiment of Santa Claus. Even better than Santa Claus because Santa only served for one night, but he was always there to lend a helping hand during everyone's most difficult times.

But even among the residents of Petticoat Lane, very few knew where to find Fagin.

Oliver was one of the rare few who knew where to locate Fagin.

Chapter 238: The Prophet

In a humble, run-down cottage in "Petticoat Lane," Oliver met with the leader, Fagin.

"Oliver, you're back... Hmm, what happened to your hand?" Fagin asked, setting aside a well-worn Bible with its pages turned.

"Ran into a blasted bobby, got a beating," Oliver nonchalantly replied.

"Let me have a look," Fagin said.

Oliver extended his injured hand, and Fagin examined it, gently moving a few of his fingers.

"Oliver, your hand's hurt, but it's nothing serious. It should be better by tomorrow. That copper was surprisingly lenient if he only gave you a thrashing. Also, I've told you before not to call the police 'bobbies.' Get used to it; they'll notice you as soon as you speak like that."

"Boss, I know," Oliver replied, then proceeded to recount the day's events.

"Boss, I also found this book. I thought you might want to read it, so I brought it with me," after narrating the day's events, Oliver took out the book and handed it to Fagin.

"'Spartacus'?" Fagin received the book and started flipping through its pages.

"Boss, what's in this book?" Oliver asked.

Fagin had many children around him, and during their free time, he would tell them stories to pass the time.

"Ah, this is a script, telling the story of ancient Rome, thousands of years ago," Fagin replied.

Fagin initially thought it was just an ordinary hero's tale. However, the further he read, the more his heart raced, and the more excited he became.

"No wonder, no wonder..." Fagin couldn't help but say.

"Boss, what are you talking about? What do you mean, 'no wonder'?" Oliver asked.

"I mean, no wonder the British government wants to go to war with the French. If the French all share the ideas in this book, those lords must be scared out of their wits. But from what I see here, the French have many misunderstandings about God and religion. It's normal because both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church have long since forsaken God."

"Oliver, do you remember when I told you about Jesus being tempted by the devil in the desert?" Fagin inquired.

"Of course, I remember," Oliver replied.

"Do you remember what the devil used to tempt Jesus?" Fagin asked.

"I remember. The first one was something like, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread.' The second was taking Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and telling Him to throw Himself down because the angels would protect Him. The third was showing Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory, offering to give them to Him if He would worship the devil."

Fagin nodded. "Oliver, you're the cleverest among my children. You remember it quite well. Now, do you know what those three temptations signify?"

Oliver shook his head.

"These three temptations represent the most powerful things in the world, which are miracles, secrets, and authority. My child, why didn't Jesus turn the stones into bread? Wasn't God almighty? Could He not turn stones into bread?"

"No, the issue isn't that. If Jesus had turned stones into bread, people from all over the world would have followed Him, but would it be because they admired His teachings? No, it would be because of the miracles. People would follow not out of love but because of the miracles. So, Jesus said, 'How faithless and perverse is this generation! For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father.' Oliver, do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Boss, I'm not sure," Oliver replied.

"These three temptations represent the things that appear most powerful in the world: miracles, secrets, and authority. My child, do you know why Jesus didn't turn stones into bread? The issue isn't whether the all-powerful God can do it. No, the problem is that if Jesus had performed miracles, the whole world would follow Him. However, they wouldn't be following out of love for His teachings but for the miracles. So, Jesus said, 'How faithless and perverse is this generation! For the Son of Man is going to come with His angels in the glory of His Father.'"

"Boss, I still don't quite get it," Oliver admitted.

"Ah, Oliver, you're still young, and it's normal not to understand all of this. Just remember to believe in God and His redemption, but don't put your faith in the clergy. As for the rest, you'll come to understand it in time."

At that moment, applause echoed from outside, and a voice said, "Colia, you're starting to sound like a prophet."

Oliver jumped, quickly grabbing a knife.

"Dear friend outside, please come in and talk," Fagin replied calmly, not showing any panic.

The door swung open, and the respectable man entered.

"Colia, my brother, we finally meet again. And where's Mr. Fagin? It's been a long time since I saw him," Jacques Golan unfolded his arms and walked over to Fagin, giving him a bear hug.

"Now I go by Fagin," Fagin patted Jacques Golan's back. "I've been Fagin for the past two years."

"Oh..." Jacques Golan released Fagin, his expression somewhat dimmed. "Now you're Fagin, but what about Fabio and Rembrandt? How are they doing?"

"If they are still alive, I would still be called Colia," Fagin said.

The two men faced each other in silence for a while, and then Fagin spoke, "Jacques, are you the respectable man Oliver encountered? Hmm... How have you been all these years?"

"It's a long story," Jacques Golan found himself a small stool and sat down, unceremoniously. "In '88, I ran to France, the same trip you helped me with. I ended up in Paris and got a job in a theater, mostly doing minor roles. Sometimes, I still dabbled in our old profession. It was the same theater that staged the play you just saw."

"Later in that theater, I met many people who would become prominent figures. For example, the man who played Spartacus in that play you just watched. You might have heard of him."

"Yes, I've heard of him," Fagin nodded. "They describe those gentlemen as monsters who've escaped from hell."

"Many French people describe him the same way. But I'm his friend, even now," Jacques Golan said.

"Our friends, including ourselves, have all been labeled as such monsters," Fagin also laughed, feeling that this brother he hadn't seen in over a decade was still his kin.

"Afterward, the revolution in France began, and I joined in," Jacques Golan continued. "I watched those gentlemen panic, and I saw nobles, merchants, and the elites, one after another, led to the guillotine. Those were memorable times."

"But, later, the revolution faced setbacks. Well, Pastor Fagin once said, most struggles in the world end with the heroic and sincere people sacrificing themselves, while the sneaky ones steal their achievements. France's situation was somewhat similar. Though the three Bonaparte brothers aren't entirely sneaky—they are all capable individuals—they weren't the type willing to sacrifice for their ideals. They are heroes, but not saints."

"So, Jacques, what are you up to now?" Fagin asked.

"I'm quite prosperous now," Jacques Golan smiled, standing up and twirling before Fagin. "Do I look like a nobleman who deserves to be hanged? I'm currently the Second Secretary at the French Embassy in England. This position is enough for me to fraternize with those 'noblemen' whom we never used to be able to touch."

"Oh, a few days ago, I encountered that old dog O'Connor. He was the one who chased me so relentlessly that I had to escape to France. Now that old dog is even older, but his nose is still sharp. I recognized him at first sight, and he recognized me too. However, I was there to inquire about something, accompanied by a 'gentleman' they have to call a 'bigwig.' So, while he recognized me, he had to wag his tail humbly. It's truly... hahaha..."

"Since you've become such a big shot, what brings you to me?" Fagin asked.

"Of course, it's for the revolution," Jacques Golan answered without hesitation. "Fagin, you know that France and England have recently reached peace. But let me tell you, this peace is ultimately just a ceasefire. They're resting because they've fought themselves weary, but as long as those English nobles have a breath left, they'll want to kill us all. You've just seen 'Spartacus'; you should understand why."

Fagin nodded.

"Free people and despotic tyrants cannot coexist in the same world. One of them must fall. It's up to us to push the tide of revolution in England. When England's revolution needs a rest, we move on to other countries and incite more revolutions. Like waves, one country after another, from France to England, Italy, Austria, Germany, Poland, Russia, even Turkey, and back to France. We want the fire of revolution to burn worldwide, destroying both cathedrals and prisons. Each revolution breaks a bit of the chains on the people, until, in the end, we win complete freedom for the people."

Chapter 239: Copper and the Troublesome Polina

In Joseph's office, Napoleon and Joseph were having a heated argument. The reason for their dispute was rather simple: Joseph had suggested replacing all the copper cannons of the French army with iron ones.

"If you had cheap steel ready right now, I might consider it, but your steel-making is still in the laboratory! You're proposing to replace our copper cannons with blasted cast iron cannons. No, absolutely not! I, Napoleon, will never compromise our military strength for the sake of convenience!" Napoleon, rarely raising his voice to his older brother, retorted.

"Napoleon, iron cannons may be a bit heavier, but they are not entirely unusable. We won't be embarking on any large-scale campaigns in the near future, will we?" Joseph argued. "And, Napoleon, we are in dire need of copper. Very, very dire need."

"Then find a way to buy it," Napoleon said firmly.

"Devil take it! If buying it were an option, I wouldn't be in such a hurry. Napoleon, do you have any idea that in the past few months, copper prices all over Europe have nearly doubled? Our neighboring countries have already started using paper currency because their citizens are selling copper coins directly to us. From Tsarist Russia to England, we've been buying up every ounce of copper available in the market. The British have begun restricting copper exports, the Spaniards and Austrians are increasing their prices at a rapid pace. As for France, the common folk have already sold all their copper items, even church bells have been replaced with iron. But it's still not enough!"

"Then you need to figure it out, there's no other way," Napoleon retorted.

"Come on! Right now, your precious copper cannons are already worth much more than before. If you agree to return those copper cannons to us for smelting, I... I will give you two, no, two and a half iron cannons of equivalent specifications for each copper one. How does that sound?"

"Even during normal times, one copper cannon could fetch two iron ones," Napoleon coldly replied. "No deal! You have to add more. I must make the army feel like I am strengthening them, not weakening. It's four iron cannons for one copper, and you have to ensure the quality, not those shoddy ones you're sending to Prussia to deceive our army!"

"Come on, Napoleon, why do you tarnish our exported iron cannons like that? Due to the use of new technology, our exported iron cannons may not match copper cannons in performance, but compared to British iron cannons, they already have the edge. The Prussians recently replaced all their copper cannons with iron ones because they needed to pay their debts. After comparing our iron cannons to the British ones, they concluded that our iron cannons are no worse than copper cannons, and they're even better than the British ones. How can you say our iron cannons are bad?"

"You're deceiving yourself! The Prussians are only dealing with those incapable Poles. They can use iron cannons because the Poles have no cannons to speak of. Are they really satisfied with the performance? What kind of performance are they asking for? Their only requirement for performance is that it should be cheap, right?"

"Oh, Napoleon, why are you so stubborn? These iron cannons are excessive products. In a little while, when cheap steel from Krakow comes into play, these things will be completely useless. We can make their performance better, of course. For instance, by using a combination of cast iron and wrought iron for the gun barrels, it won't be much worse than copper cannons, albeit a bit heavier. But the price... well, it won't be that much cheaper than the old copper cannons. Also, the production won't ramp up immediately, unlike the regular iron cannons we're exporting to Prussia. Napoleon, don't be so obstinate. Soon, I promise, you'll have steel cannons."

"Forget it. You've promised me that many times recently," Napoleon sighed. "I don't understand why. The Copper Union's copper mine in Prussia will start production soon, that's what you said. The copper mine is enormous. With that and our new technology, we could drastically increase copper production. And..." Napoleon's spit was almost reaching Joseph's face.

"Goodness, I need an N95 mask," Joseph thought to himself.

Then he tried to explain, "But Napoleon, this takes time, and we can't afford to wait right now."

"Why can't we wait? It's just your power plants. Let them wait," Napoleon said.

"Listen, Napoleon, have you forgotten that it's almost time to water the wheat fields? We promised the farmers all over the country, especially those veterans serving as village heads, that we would make their lives comfortable. How can we achieve that comfort? By increasing wheat yields. How can we increase wheat yields? By having more irrigation. How can we expand the area of irrigated land?"

Veterans, with the support of the army, have been digging more irrigation ditches. It's made some difference, but it's not enough. The water in the ditches can't reach the wheat fields by itself. Relying on human or animal power is also limited. To significantly expand the irrigated land, we need electric pumps. And electric pumps rely on the electricity supplied from power plants. And, as you know, generators, electric motors, and wires all need copper. If we want an unprecedentedly

bountiful harvest this year, we must quickly build as many electric pumps as possible before the extensive watering of the wheat fields. Furthermore, more than half of our soldiers are farmers from the countryside. If they see the changes that electric pumps bring to their hometowns, to their loved ones, their support for us will only grow stronger."

"Yes, you led them into battles and helped them earn a lot of money, making them landowners. That's already something for them to be grateful for. If you can ensure their crops thrive and their descendants are well-fed, it's not just a crown they'd offer you; they might even build a temple in your honor."

This last sentence piqued Napoleon's interest. He thought for a moment and asked, "How many electric pump stations can we set up right now?"

Joseph had been waiting for this question. As soon as Napoleon said that, he knew that Napoleon was interested. So he said, "Hold on, let me have my wife bring the irrigation plan map. We can look at it together."

Joseph then went outside and saw Fanny playing chess with Polina, who was dressed in men's clothing. Polina was in a difficult position in the game, on the verge of having one of her pawns promoted to a queen. (By the way, I've always wondered why in chess pawns can become queens so early, did they have Mulan back then?) When Joseph and Napoleon came out, Polina quickly stood up and said, "Is there something I can help with? I'm done with the game, work is calling."

"Oh, Polina, we need to find that hydraulic plan map," Joseph said.

Polina turned around, rummaged through a filing cabinet for a while, and then pulled out a file and handed it over. "It should all be in here; you can take a look."

Fanny walked over at this moment, took the file, and spread out the map on the massive table in Joseph's office. Once that was done, she smiled and escorted Polina out of the room.

Napoleon watched Polina as she left and furrowed his brow slightly. "Joseph, you really should rein in Polina. Look at her; she always dresses like a man – what's that about?"

"What's wrong with that? Men's clothing is far more practical, isn't it? Look at me; I can get dressed, ready in five minutes, but Fanny, I swear, it takes her an hour just to put on clothes. It's really... a waste of time."

Napoleon knew what Joseph meant by "wasting time." Joseph had once told him when teaching him, "Life is made up of time, wasting time is wasting life." Napoleon often used this phrase with his generals and government officials, to the point that if someone were to compile a book of famous quotes, this one would likely be attributed to Napoleon.

However, at this moment, Napoleon had a different view of Joseph's philosophy. "Women, they should cherish time? They have plenty of time, and that can lead to all sorts of chaos. Damn it, there's something I need to tell you, but you mustn't get too worked up— a few days ago, Fouché told me he saw Polina dressed as a man, exploring Paris's entertainment industry, um, you know, that kind of entertainment."

"What?" Joseph exclaimed, instantly getting to his feet. "When did this happen? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Just a few days ago, while you were at the Saar coal mine," Napoleon said. "I questioned Lucien about it, and he confirmed that it was true. But Lucien said they didn't do much, just conducted on-site research. Because Polina is writing a novel and needs to understand such situations."

"He said what, and you believe him? That scoundrel, he's just itching for trouble..." Joseph muttered.

"I don't believe it, but Polina really is writing a novel, and it's quite good. I've read it, and many scenes are described with a very lifelike quality, for instance... no, wait, I suspect that Lucien, that rascal, probably took Polina to a gambling house."

Chapter 240: Paulina's Path

I was indignant and argued with him, telling him he hadn't written anything, so what did he know? Lucien, as the Minister of Truth, claimed that writing novels fell within his purview and he had to understand it. Moreover, he said that if he couldn't even comprehend art, it would be inconvenient for him to lead the Salon.

He then said to me, "You once said, "Without research, you have no right to speak," and also, "To know the taste of an apple, the best way is to take a bite yourself." So, I went with him to see..."

"Did it end well?" Joseph asked with a stern face.

"No, Lucien wouldn't let me," Paulina surprisingly spoke in Lucien's favor.

"He said, 'This apple is not for eating; it's a poisoned apple that would kill you if you took a bite. We just need to watch how others die after eating it.' Besides, even if I went down there, there's no way I'd get to taste it. Everyone at the gambling house knows him, and I was brought there by him. They wouldn't dare to win my money; on the contrary, they'd find ways to lose to me, treating it as a bribe for him.'"

Lucien said that accepting such bribes would harm the family's image, so we could only observe without participating."

While Joseph's anger had slightly subsided upon hearing the first part, he flared up again upon hearing Lucien's concern about the family's image.

"That scoundrel even cares about the family's image?" Joseph exclaimed. "Where is that scoundrel? Today, I must..."

"He left for Lyon a few days ago," Napoleon interjected, "but he should be back early tomorrow."

"Wait until he returns," Joseph said through clenched teeth, "Napoleon, you'd better discipline your brother."

"Don't worry; these days, I've been keeping a close eye on him," Napoleon said with determination.

Napoleon was telling the truth. He and Joseph were exhausted every day, while their younger brother led a life of debauchery. Although Napoleon aspired to be an Augustus rather than a Nero, the Nero-like lifestyle he was leading was truly abhorrent.

Currently, Napoleon's mindset could be summed up with a quote from a famous philosopher: "It's probably rooted in jealousy; that's for sure."

But Lucien, as the Minister of Truth, wasn't a mere figurehead. How did he know about this classified information and rush back to Paris immediately?

"You still dare to meet me?" Joseph asked.

"Why wouldn't I? I haven't done anything wrong," Lucien replied.

"Haven't done anything wrong? Do you want to claim that you've achieved something?" Joseph retorted with a bitter smile.

"Of course," Lucien said.

"Then go ahead and explain yourself," Joseph said through gritted teeth.

"Joseph, who do you think is the most respected woman in France?" Lucien asked.

"In France, the most respected woman? Well, that would be the Virgin Mary," Joseph replied.

"The Virgin Mary... darn it!" Lucien said. "Alright, let me rephrase it. Besides the Virgin Mary, who is the most respected female figure among the French people?"

"Why not just say it's Joan of Arc and save us the detour? Do you think I have as much time as you do?" Joseph retorted.

"Joseph, Joan of Arc was just a simple shepherd girl. How did she achieve the status she has today? Was it solely due to her piety? Of course, Joan of Arc was pious, but did her status come solely from her piety?"

If the one answering this question were Joan of Arc herself, she would undoubtedly answer without hesitation, "Of course." In her view, her accomplishments stemmed from God's grace.

But Joseph, although he occasionally uttered "Hallelujah" or "Amen," was well-known among his brothers as someone who didn't truly believe in God. Despite his occasional talk of God, they all knew that Joseph's notion of God was likely just a euphemism for natural laws. So Joseph wouldn't attribute Joan of Arc's status solely to her piety.

"It's because of her contributions to saving France," Joseph replied as expected.

"Joseph, what's the reputation of our family? Do people think we're all saints with impeccable morals?" Lucien asked.

"Wait a moment," Joseph said, "I'm starting to understand your point. You mean that our Bonaparte family isn't renowned for our morals; we're known for exceptional talent. So, instead of a conventional reputation, what we need is a reputation for outstanding skills, is that it?"

"Yes, that's it," Lucien agreed. "I think Paulina's own writing shows potential, and Joseph, you also know that people are often more lenient towards women than men. For example, Paulina's works, if they were written by a male author, would honestly be average. But if it's a female author, and she's not just any female but a beautiful and esteemed one, and she also has some eccentricity, it's more likely to make her famous."

"I see," Joseph nodded. "You want to turn Paulina into a renowned female author."

"Not only that," Lucien said, "these days, there are more and more people who consider us 'poisonous weeds.' The revolutionary and democratic spirit that once defined us is dwindling. We

need to add a dash of revolution, a taste of liberation to show the world. Imagine being a role model for women's liberation in our family; wouldn't that be great?"

"Your ideas are intriguing, but is it truly in Paulina's best interest with such a reputation?" Joseph asked with a stern expression. "With this kind of notoriety, her future path might not be easy."

"Joseph, Paulina's path was never going to be easy to begin with. She understands that very well. Don't underestimate your crazy sister," Lucien replied.