

Fire and Sword

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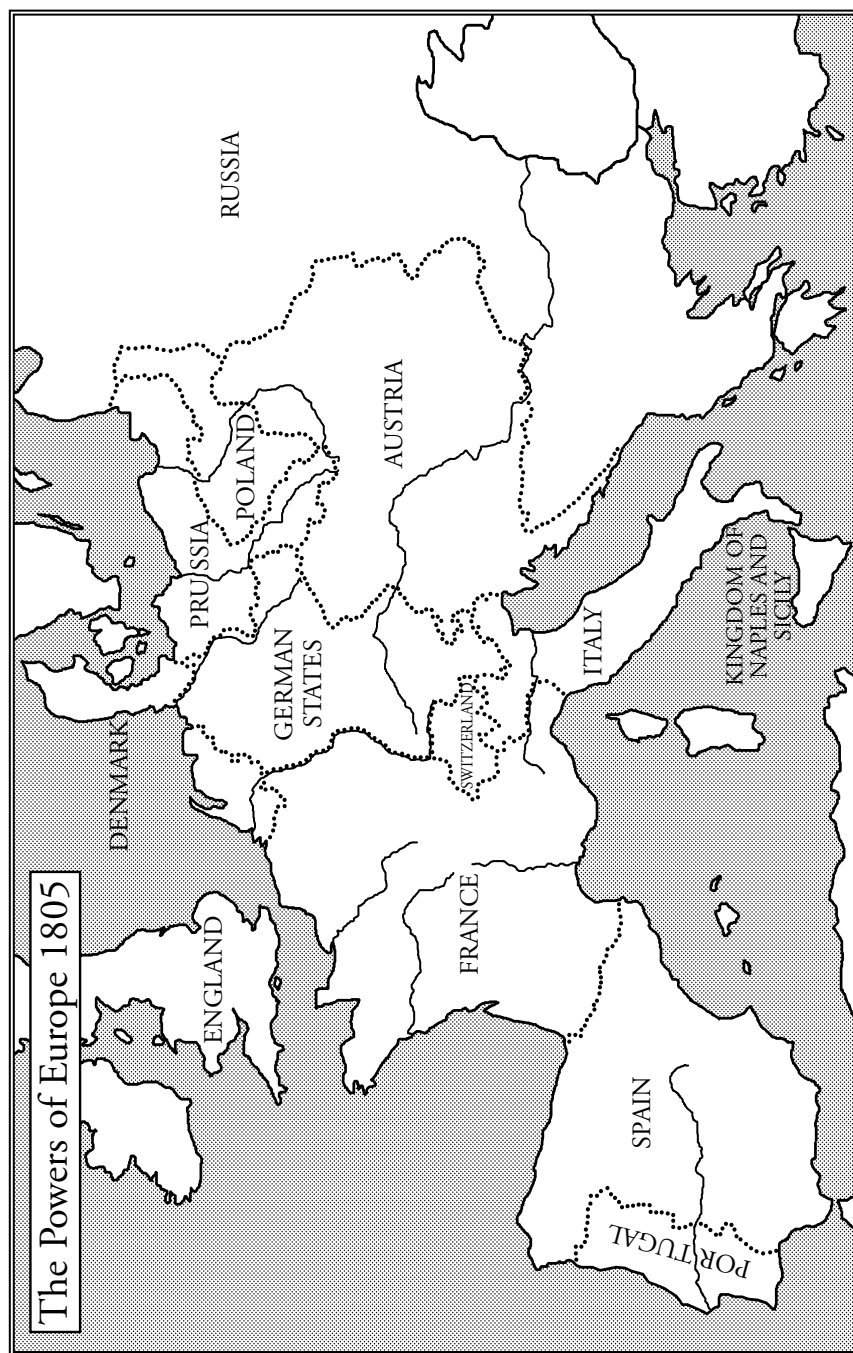
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Chapter 1

Napoleon

Paris, December 1804

As Napoleon's carriage pulled up in front of Notre-Dame, the vast crowd that had been waiting in the chill air let out a cheer that echoed off the massive grey walls. The buildings that had once surrounded the great cathedral had been cleared to make space for the coronation procession, and the citizens of Paris had pressed tightly into the area cordoned off by the Emperor's grenadiers. The soldiers stood, two ranks deep, along the entire route, and their tall bearskins obscured much of the view, leaving those behind them to snatch glimpses of the ornately decorated carriages and their robed passengers as they trundled past. In between the carriages trotted squadrons of cuirassiers, their breastplates so carefully polished that they captured the surrounding scene in distorted reflections on their gleaming surfaces. The Emperor, his Empress, the imperial family and the marshals and ministers occupied over forty carriages that had been constructed specially for the coronation. Paris had never seen a sight like it, and at one stroke Napoleon had eclipsed the pomp and grandeur of his Bourbon predecessors.

He smiled with satisfaction at the thought. While the kings of France owed their crowns to an accident of birth, Napoleon had won his through ability, courage, and the love of the French people. It was the people who had given him the imperial crown, in a popular vote where only a few thousand souls in the whole of France had denied him their support. In return for the crown Napoleon had given them victory and glory, and already his mind was filled with plans to extend that glory even further.

There was a brief delay as a pair of elaborately dressed footmen scurried over to the carriage with a small flight of steps and then pulled the handle down and opened the door. Napoleon, sitting on the silk-covered seat in splendid isolation, took a deep breath and rose up,

emerging into view of the crowd. His grey eyes swept across the sea of adoring faces and his lips parted in a grin. Another great cheer rent the air and beyond the ranks of the grenadiers a sea of waving arms and plumed hats flickered in a confused storm of colours and motion.

Glancing round, Napoleon saw Talleyrand, his foreign minister, frown with disapproval as he stood with the other ministers on the approach to the cathedral. Napoleon could not help a slight chuckle at the sight of the aristocrat's discomfort over the Emperor's lack of decorum. Well, let him disapprove, Napoleon reflected. The old regime was gone, swept away by the revolution, and a new order had risen in its place. An order based upon the will of the people. Napoleon was grateful enough, and astute enough, to return their greeting as he turned to each side and waved back to the delighted crowd before he descended from the carriage. At once the footmen took up the train of his gold-embroidered red robes and followed him at a steady pace as he strode across the carpet towards the entrance of the cathedral.

Most of the guests, and his family, had already made their way inside and been ushered to their appointed seats. The ministers, as the senior servants of the state, would follow the Emperor and take up the most prestigious places close to the heart of the ceremony. Originally Napoleon had intended to lead his generals into the cathedral, but his brother, Joseph, and Talleyrand had urged him to present the coronation as a primarily civilian celebration. Even though the army had been the means by which Napoleon had assumed power over France, it was important that he present himself to the world as a political and not a military leader. Talleyrand still held out hope that a lasting peace might be achieved in Europe, as long as the other powers could be persuaded that the new Emperor was a statesman first, and a soldier second.

After so many years of war the short-lived Treaty of Amiens had given the people an appetite for peace and stability. Stability above all, and that meant the establishment of a new, permanent form of government. Napoleon had prepared the ground skilfully, proceeding from consul to First Consul, then First Consul for life, before he presented the people with the opportunity to approve his assumption of a new throne. Of course the senators had dressed it up as a necessary expedient to protect the Republic from its foreign and domestic enemies, but the Republic was no more. It had died in the birth throes of the empire. Already Napoleon had surrounded himself with the gaudy panoply of royalty and whittled down the powers of the senators, tribunes and representatives of the people. And there were plans to introduce a host of new aristocratic titles and awards to bolster the new

regime. In time, Napoleon hoped, the empire would be accepted by the other European powers and there would be an end to the attempts on his life by Frenchmen in the pay of foreign nations.

As he neared the entrance Napoleon paused and turned, then raised his hands and gestured towards the crowd, with a brilliant smile beneath the dark hair that framed his face. They let out a roar of joy and affection for their Emperor and surged forward so that the line of grenadiers bowed under the pressure and their boots scrabbled on the cobbles as they braced themselves against the surge and thrust back at the crowd with the lengths of their muskets.

Napoleon turned away and resumed his progress towards the high arched door. As he passed Talleyrand he inclined his head towards the foreign minister.

‘It would appear that the people approve.’

‘Yes, sire,’ Talleyrand nodded.

‘So, are you still concerned over my decision to accept this honour?’

Talleyrand shrugged faintly. ‘No, sire. You have their trust, and I am sure that they will see that you honour it.’

Napoleon’s smile froze as he nodded slowly. ‘Today, I am France, and France is me. How can there be any dissent?’

‘As you say, sire.’ Talleyrand bowed his head and gestured faintly towards the entrance. ‘Your crown awaits you.’

Napoleon straightened up, so that he rose to his full height, determined to look as regal as his slight frame permitted. It had been over four years since he had last been on campaign and the fine living he had enjoyed since then had added a slight paunch to his frame. Josephine had been tactless enough to point it out on more than one occasion, gently poking him in the side as they lay in each other’s arms. He felt a lightness in his heart at the thought and glanced through the door, down the length of the cathedral to where he knew she would be sitting. It was nine years since they had met, when he had first emerged from obscurity. She could never have guessed that the slim, lank-haired young brigadier would one day become the ruler of France, nor that she would sit beside him as Empress. Napoleon felt his heart quicken with pride at his achievement. At first he had feared that she was too good for him, and would realise it all too quickly. But his rise to fame and fortune had killed that fear, and now, even as he loved Josephine as he had never loved another woman, he had begun to wonder if she was worthy of him.

With a last deep intake of the cold air, Napoleon paced forward, into Notre-Dame. The instant he crossed the threshold a choir began to sing

from the far end of the cathedral and with a rustle of robes and gowns and scraping of chairs the audience rose to their feet. A length of dark green carpet stretched out before him towards the dais where the Pope stood waiting before the altar. The Emperor's smile withered at the sight of the Holy Father. Despite his efforts to reduce the role of the Catholic church in France, the common people were stubbornly attached to their religion, and Napoleon had needed the Pope's blessing to give his coronation the appearance of divine sanction.

Both dais and altar were new. Two old altars and an intricately carved choir screen had been demolished to create a more imposing space at the heart of Notre-Dame. On either side, statesmen, ambassadors, military officers and scions of Paris society bowed their heads as the Emperor passed by. His hand slipped to the pommel of the sword of Charlemagne that had been fetched from a monastery at Aix-la-Chapelle to swell Napoleon's regalia. Another part of the effort to lend the coronation the authority of royal traditions stretching back across the centuries. A new Charlemagne for a new age, Napoleon mused as he emerged from the avenue of silk and ermine picked out with the glittering jewellery of the ladies and the gold braid and gleaming decorations of the generals and marshals of France. At their head stood Murat, the flamboyant cavalry officer who had fought with Napoleon at Marengo, and later married his general's sister, Caroline. They exchanged a quick smile as the Emperor passed by.

Pope Pius VII sat on a throne in front of the altar. Beside and behind him were his retinue of cardinals and bishops, brightly illuminated by the shafts of light that angled down from the windows piercing the great stone walls high above. Napoleon stepped towards the three steps leading up to the dais. Glancing to his left he saw his brothers and sisters. Young Louis could not suppress a smile but Joseph nodded gravely as his brother passed. It was a shame that not all the family could be present, Napoleon reflected. Jérôme and Lucien were still in disgrace, having refused Napoleon's demand that they abandon their wives in favour of women he considered more suitable to be included in the imperial household. Napoleon's mother, Letizia, was also absent, protesting that she was too ill to leave Italy and attend the coronation. Napoleon had not been taken in by her excuses. She had made her dislike of Josephine quite clear from the outset and there was little doubt in her son's mind that Letizia would be damned rather than witness the crowning of Josephine alongside Napoleon. If only his father had lived long enough to see this day. Carlos Buona Parte would have talked some sense into his prickly wife.

A flicker of movement drew his eye to the other side of the cathedral and he saw the artist, Jean-Louis David, shuffle a fresh sheet of thick paper on to his draughting board as he prepared to start another sketch of the event. A monumental painting had been commissioned by Napoleon to record the coronation and David had told him that he would require as long as three years to complete the work. Truly, Napoleon thought, the spectacle of this day would shine down the years for centuries to come.

The Pope rose from his throne and extended a hand towards Napoleon as the Emperor went down on one knee, resting his white-stockinged leg on a heavily embroidered cushion that had been set in front of the pontiff. As the sound of the choir died away and stillness settled over the audience and participants the Pope began his blessing in a thin, high-pitched voice, the Latin words carrying down the length of the cathedral and echoing dully off the walls.

As the Holy Father continued with his incantations Napoleon stared fixedly at the carpet in front of him, seized by a sudden urge to laugh. In spite of all the pageantry, the gaudy costumes, the elaborate set-dressing, the months of preparations and weeks of rehearsals, it was this moment of religious ceremony that struck him as the most ridiculous aspect of it all. The notion that he, of all men, required divine sanction was not only laughable, but insulting. Almost all that he had achieved had been the result of his own efforts. The rest was down to blind chance. The idea that God was directing the trajectory of every bullet and cannonball on the battlefield was absurd. Religion was the affliction of the weak-minded, the credulous and the desperate, Napoleon decided. It was a shame that the vast majority of mankind held to such superstitions. But it was also to his advantage. As long as he paid lip-service to religious sensibilities he could use the church as yet another means of dominating the minds of those he ruled. The only difficulty lay in reconciling his needs with those of the papacy.

For the present Napoleon was content to be seen to have reached an accommodation with the church, and he knelt with bowed head while the words of an outdated language washed over his head. He shut out the noise as he once again concentrated on the part he had to play in the ceremony, once the Pope had finished his blessing. There would be no mass; Napoleon had been adamant about that. All that remained would issue from his personal authority. None but Napoleon was fit to crown Napoleon. And Josephine, for that matter. She too would receive her crown from his hand.

For a moment his mind turned to the other crowned heads of

Europe. He despised them for possessing such power merely on the basis of birth. Just like all those aristocrats who had made Napoleon's school years so miserable. But there was the paradox, he thought, gently chewing his lip. It was only through the hereditary principle that states enjoyed any kind of stability. The ferocious blood-letting of the French Revolution had proved the need for such stability and it was only when Napoleon had seized power and begun to rule with an iron grip that order had started to reappear in France. Without Napoleon there would be a return to chaos and that was why the people had been only too pleased to approve him as Emperor. In time there must be an heir. He shifted his head a fraction to stare briefly at Josephine. She caught his eye and winked.

Napoleon smiled, though he felt a heavy sadness in his heart. He had sired no children so far and the years were catching up on Josephine. Soon she would be too old to bear children. The sudden fear that he might be impotent struck him. If that turned out to be true then the dynasty that was being founded on this day would perish with him. It was a chilling thought and Napoleon hurriedly diverted his mind from it, fixing instead on the more immediate difficulties that threatened his position. Even though there was an uneasy peace on the continent France was still at war with her most implacable enemy.

Across the Channel the British still opposed him, protected from his wrath by the thin wooden screen of her warships, constantly patrolling the sea lanes and denying Napoleon the triumph that would complete his mastery over Europe. Already his mind had turned to the prospect of invasion and plans were being made for the construction of a vast number of barges in the ports and naval bases stretching along the French coast opposite Britain. When the time came, Napoleon would assemble a great battle fleet and sweep the British navy aside from the path of the invasion barges.

Once Britain was humbled, no other nation would dare to defy him, Napoleon reasoned. Until then, he would have to watch Austria and Russia closely, as his spies reported that they were arming for war even now.

He was suddenly aware that the Pope had stopped speaking and all was silent. Napoleon hurriedly mumbled an amen and crossed himself before he raised his head with a questioning look. The Pope was retiring gracefully to his ornate seat, right hand raised in a gesture of blessing. He caught the Emperor's expression and nodded faintly. Napoleon began to straighten up and nearly stumbled forward as part of his train was caught under his foot. Just in time he recovered his balance, and

with a faint curse he rose to his feet and ascended the last step on to the dais. To one side of the Pope was a small golden stand on which rested the two cushions bearing the crowns fashioned for the Emperor and his Empress.

Napoleon approached the stand and hesitated for an instant to convey the due sense of awe demanded by the occasion. Then he reached forward with both hands and took the gold wreath of the imperial crown, designed to evoke those of the Caesars, and turned slowly as he held it aloft for all to see. He drew a deep breath, and even though he knew exactly what he was going to say he felt his heart pounding with nervous excitement.

‘By the authority vested in me by the people I take this crown and assume the imperial throne of France. I pledge my honour to all present that I will defend the nation against all enemies, and that, by God’s will, I shall govern in accordance with the wishes of the people, and in their interests. Let this moment signify to the world the greatness of France. Let this greatness act as a beacon to other nations so that they may join us in the glory of the age to come.’

He paused and then raised the crown directly above his head and slowly lowered it. The gold wreath was heavier than he anticipated and he was careful to ensure that it was firmly seated before he withdrew his hands. At once the choir struck up again from the balcony behind the altar and sang a piece composed to celebrate the moment. Napoleon tilted his head back a fraction and gazed out over the ranks of the guests stretching out before him. There were mixed expressions there. Some smiled. Some looked on with grave faces and others dabbed at the tears on their cheeks as the emotion of the great occasion overwhelmed them. He looked towards Joseph again and saw that his older brother’s lips were quivering awkwardly as he struggled to restrain the pride and love he felt for Napoleon. The same pride and love that he had always felt, ever since they had shared the same nursery in the modest home in Ajaccio all those years ago when the proud Corsican family had struggled to find the money to ensure the boys had a decent education in a good French school.

Napoleon permitted himself to exchange a quick smile with his brother before his gaze passed on, over the ranks of his marshals and generals, many of whom had shared his perils and adventures from the earliest days of his military career. Brave soldiers like Junot, Marmont, Lannes and Victor. Men he would lead to yet more victories in the years to come, if the other powers of Europe dared to defy the new order in France.

As the choir came to the end of their piece and fell silent the Emperor turned to Josephine and she stepped forward, her train held by the two friends she had selected for the honour after Napoleon's sisters had refused the task. Like her husband she wore a heavy scarlet robe richly decorated with gold motifs, and even though her face remained composed her eyes glittered like priceless gems as she advanced gracefully towards the steps and took her place on the cushion, kneeling at Napoleon's feet. She inclined her head and was still.

There was a pause as Napoleon cleared his throat and addressed the audience. 'It is our great pleasure to confer the crown of the Empress of France on Josephine, whom we love as dearly as life itself.' He took the remaining crown and approached his wife. He held the gold circlet over her head and then slowly lowered it over the neatly coiled tresses of her brown hair. The moment he stepped back from her the choir began the piece that had been composed in her honour, their melodious voices carrying the length of the cathedral. Napoleon bent forward and took Josephine's hands, raising her up to her full height as she stepped on to the dais and turned to stand at his side to face their subjects.

The ceremony ended with a prayer from the Pope and then Napoleon led his Empress down the steps and back towards the entrance of Notre-Dame. As he passed his older brother he leaned towards him and muttered, 'Ah, Joseph, if only our father could see us now!'

Chapter 2

April 1805

Napoleon stood in front of the window, staring down into the neatly regimented gardens of the Tuileries palace. The first buds of spring had sprouted from the branches and the sky was bright and clear, following a brief outburst of rain and wind that had swept away the grimy shroud of smoke that habitually covered Paris. Such a fine morning would usually lift his soul, but today the Emperor regarded the scene with a blank expression. His mind was clouded with a succession of worrying thoughts over the report Talleyrand had just outlined to him. No man in Europe doubted that France was the greatest power on the continent. Her influence stretched from the shores of the Baltic sea to the Mediterranean. But there, at the water's edge, Napoleon's power failed. Out to sea, the warships of the British navy mocked his ambition and the defiance of Britain nourished the simmering hostility of Prussia, Austria and Russia.

With a weary sigh Napoleon turned away from the tall window and stared at his foreign minister. 'Our agents are certain of this?'

'Yes, sire.' Talleyrand nodded. 'The orders have been given to the Austrian generals to begin concentrating their forces outside Vienna from the end of June. The supply wagons are already gathering at depots along the Danube. Agents of Emperor Francis have been travelling the length and breadth of the continent buying up remounts for their cavalry. The fortresses that guard the passes from Italy have been strengthened and fresh outworks erected around their perimeters. Our ambassador has questioned the Austrian court about these issues and demanded an explanation.'

'And?' Napoleon cut in tersely.

'The Austrians are claiming it is no more than a long overdue adjustment of their defences. They deny that there is anything sinister about these developments.'

'They would.' Napoleon smiled grimly. 'Nevertheless, there is no mistaking it: these are preparations for war.'

‘It appears so, sire.’

‘What of the intelligence from our ambassador to Russia? Much as the Austrians might boast of their military prowess, I sincerely doubt that they would risk war with France without an alliance with at least one other European power. The question is, will Russia fight alongside Austria, or will Prussia?’ Napoleon paused briefly. ‘Or all three? All subsidised and cajoled into action by their British paymasters, of course.’

‘Yes, sire.’ Talleyrand nodded again. ‘I imagine the British will be extending their usual lines of credit to our enemies, together with supplies of arms and equipment and a steady flow of gold and silver.’

‘Of course.’ Napoleon sniffed with derision. ‘As ever, the British spend their riches, and save their lives, leaving the shedding of blood to their allies. So, what of Russia?’

Talleyrand briefly consulted a note on the sheet of paper he held in one hand, then glanced up at his Emperor. ‘Ambassador Caulaincourt reports that the Tsar seems to be reluctant to enter into a war against us on his own. None the less there has been a degree of mobilisation of Russian forces that cannot simply be attributed to a defensive posture. If Austria does declare war on us, then I imagine that Russia might well be persuaded to join the cause.’

Napoleon folded his hands together and rested his chin on the ends of his fingers. As ever, his rivals seemed intent on the destruction of France. Almost for the sake of it. If only they would accept that France had changed. There would be no return to Bourbon tyranny. France offered a model of a better society, Napoleon reflected, and that was what they feared above all. If their own people began to realise that there was an alternative to the parasitical aristocracy of birth, then their governments would collapse like a line of dominoes. Given time, they would follow France down the road of revolution, and emerge at the far end more enlightened, more liberated, and inevitably drawn into a family of nations under the influence of France, and her Emperor. Napoleon frowned. That day was still a long way off. For the present his enemies were gathering, like wolves, and the first step to defeating them must be to find some means of dividing them. He looked up at Talleyrand. ‘What do you make of the new Tsar?’

Talleyrand pursed his lips for a moment and composed his reply. ‘Judging from Caulaincourt’s reports and my conversations with the Russian ambassador here in Paris, it would seem that Tsar Alexander is an impressionable young man. And something of an idealist. He desires to improve the lot of his people, perhaps to the extent of abolishing serfdom. However, he is no fool. He knows well enough that his

ambition is opposed by the landowners, and he knows how dangerous that can be.'

There was a flicker of a smile on Napoleon's face. 'Indeed, it is a rare thing for a tsar to die of natural causes.'

Talleyrand nodded. 'Quite, sire.'

Napoleon sat down at his desk and clasped his hands together. 'We are dealing with something of a radical, then. That is good. We might yet bend such a man to our point of view.'

'Especially as the Tsar has plans to extend the influence of Russia into the Mediterranean and the east.'

Napoleon glanced up. 'Where he will run foul of British ambitions.' 'Precisely, sire.'

'Good. Well then, see to it that Caulaincourt feeds the Tsar a steady diet of information about Britain's insatiable appetite for empire. As for Prussia,' he smiled briefly, 'let's dangle the prospect of a little reward in front of them. We'll offer the Prussians Hanover in exchange for neutrality. King Frederick William is no war hero. The man is weak and easily influenced. A bribe should be enough to buy his peace. The Tsar is our real problem. Especially as we are at war with Britain and are likely to be at war with Austria as well in the near future.'

'Yes, sire,' Talleyrand assented.

There was something in his manner that caught Napoleon's attention and he looked closely at his foreign minister for a moment before he spoke again.

'You have something to say.'

It was a statement of fact and not an enquiry, as the foreign minister recognised at once. He nodded.

'Then speak.'

'Yes, sire. It occurs to me that we might yet avoid a war with Austria, and perhaps even achieve a lasting peace with Britain.'

'Peace with Britain? That treacherous nest of vipers? I think you are deluded, Talleyrand. There is no taste for peace amongst the rulers of that island. You have read what their newspapers have said about me.' Napoleon stabbed a finger at his breast. 'Monster, tyrant and dictator. That's what they call me.'

Talleyrand waved a hand dismissively. 'A mere foible of their press, sire. British newspapers are renowned for their partiality. As are those of Paris,' he added with gentle emphasis. 'It does not make them the mouthpiece of their government. And there are men in high places who would be willing to entertain the prospect of peace with France.'

'Then why have they not announced their desire more vocally?'

Talleyrand shrugged. 'It is not always easy to speak up for peace in time of war. Yet the subjects of Britain must be as weary of war as the citizens of France. There must surely be scope for our nations to live in peace, sire. We must break the cycle of hostility, before it ruins us all. We must negotiate.'

'Why? What is the point?' Napoleon snapped impatiently. 'Britain has made it clear that she will be satisfied with nothing less than my destruction, the restoration of the Bourbons and the humbling of France. And then Britain will dominate the continent.'

'Sire, with respect, I disagree. Britain is at heart a nation of traders, a nation of businessmen. If we could show them that they may trade as freely with Europe as they wish, then we might convince them that this war is unprofitable, in every way. If we could only find some measure of compromise, there could be peace with Britain, and peace across Europe.' Talleyrand paused and looked keenly at his Emperor. 'Sire, if you would permit me to open negotiations with the British, then—'

'Then nothing!' Napoleon slapped his hand down on the table. 'Nothing would come of it. I will not compromise. I will not be dictated to by that nation of shopkeepers! There is room for only one power at the heart of Europe. Do you not see, Talleyrand? If you truly want peace, then Europe must be mastered. If we trust to compromise and talk to our neighbours as equals, there will always be differences, enmities and conflict.'

There was a brief silence as Talleyrand stared at Napoleon and then shook his head. 'That is the council of despair, sire. Surely it is better to negotiate to win others round than to rely on war?'

'Perhaps, but at least war has the virtue of granting the victor the right to dictate the terms of the peace. Then there is no need for compromise.'

'At what cost, sire? How much gold would be wasted? How many lives destroyed? War is simply the failure of diplomacy, sire.'

'You are wrong, Talleyrand. War is the continuation of diplomacy, in extremis. It is also the most powerful force for unity in a nation. It brooks no compromise and if it results in victory then a nation is rich in glory and self-regard and can remould the surrounding world in its own best interests. Negotiation is the first recourse of the weak. War is the preserve of the powerful. If France has an aptitude for war, then war becomes the most efficient means by which she can exercise her influence.' Napoleon leaned back in his chair and smiled. 'And have we not demonstrated a peculiar talent for war in recent years?'

'A talent for war?' Talleyrand's brow rose in surprise. 'War is a terrible

thing, sire. One would think that such a talent, as you call it, would be an embarrassment rather than a virtue.'

'You do not know war as I do,' Napoleon countered. 'I have been a soldier for most of my life. I have been at war for the best part of twelve years. I have campaigned across the nations of Europe to the deserts of Arabia. I have fought in scores of battles and have stood my ground amidst storms of musket and cannon fire. I have been wounded and I have seen friends killed. I have seen the dead and the dying, Talleyrand. Vast fields of them. I have also seen men at their best. I have seen them master their fears and terrors and attack against overwhelming odds. I have seen them march, barefoot and hungry, for days at a time, and fight a battle at the end of it, and win. I have seen all this.' He smiled. 'You see, Talleyrand, I understand war well enough. But you? What do you know of it? An aristocrat by birth. A creature of the salons of Paris and the palaces of princes and kings. What do you know of danger? At the height of the revolution you were not even here in Paris. So before you presume to lecture me on the evils of war, please do me the courtesy of restricting your comments to the field of your own expertise. You deal with the diplomacy. You achieve what you can for France with your silver tongue and your intrigues. But remember this. You are a servant of France. A servant of the Emperor. You are a means to the end, and I, I alone, decide the nature of that end. Understand?'

'Yes, sire,' Talleyrand replied softly, through clenched teeth. 'I understand perfectly.'

Napoleon stared intently at his foreign minister for a moment and then suddenly smiled and waved his hands dismissively. 'Come now! That is that. Let us not talk of philosophies any longer, but of practicalities. At the present I no more desire war than you do. But one must guard against eventualities.'

'Of course, sire.'

'Then we must induce our friends, the Austrians, to believe that there is no advantage to be gained from waging war against us. We have driven them from Italy's domains. Now is the time to let them know that France is the new and permanent master of the kingdoms of Italy.'

'Sire?'

'I want you to make arrangements for another coronation.' Napoleon tilted his head back. 'No later than the end of spring, I shall be crowned King of Italy. And we shall extend all the benefits of our civil code and governance to the natives of that land. In short, we shall make Frenchmen of them as soon as possible, so that they will never again have to endure being ruled by Austria.'

‘King of Italy?’ Talleyrand mused. ‘That is your will, sire?’

‘It is. See to it that preparations are begun at once.’

‘Yes, sire.’

‘You may go now, Talleyrand. I have finished my business in Paris for a few days. If you need me, I shall be at Malmaison with the Empress and my family.’

‘Yes, sire.’ Talleyrand paused. ‘And the other matter, sire?’

‘Other matter?’

‘The question of opening negotiations with Britain?’

‘There will be no negotiations. Britain wants war, and war she shall have.’

Talleyrand nodded sadly and left the room, limping on his deformed leg. Once the door had closed behind the foreign minister, Napoleon’s expression hardened. Much as he valued his diplomatic skills, he did not trust Talleyrand. The smooth charm and faintly mocking tone of his voice left Napoleon feeling bitter and angry, a sentiment the Emperor was obliged to conceal as much as possible in order to retain the foreign minister’s services. All the same, he decided that he would have the man watched more closely by Fouché’s spies. While Napoleon had little doubt that Talleyrand was a patriot, that sense of patriotism was tied to a very particular notion of France’s best interests, one that did not conform to Napoleon’s plans for the empire.

One thing was certain, however. Britain must be destroyed. Thanks to the improvident twenty miles of sea that separated France from the cliffs of Dover, there was only one way to crush the enemy: the British navy must be swept from the Channel so that Napoleon could lead the Grand Army in an invasion of Britain and dictate peace terms in London itself.