

Chapter 4: The Dying Emperor

Napoleon Bonaparte lies in bed, propped against thin pillows that offer little support. Sweat clings to his skin despite the chill. His breathing falters, shallow one moment, strained the next. A handkerchief rests in his grasp, its folds marked with dark stains.

Abbé Vignali²⁴ kneels beside him, moving with practiced care rather than urgency. A crucifix at his chest catches the dim candlelight. A small vial of oil rests at his side.

"In manus tuas, Domine," he murmurs, voice low and steady, *"commendo spiritum meum..."*²⁵

He dips his thumb into the oil and reaches toward Napoleon's forehead.

Napoleon lifts his head weakly. "Enough," he rasps. "Vignali... enough."

The priest does not withdraw. "Accept God's grace, Sire," he says. "The gates of Heaven..."

Napoleon lets out a thin, humorless sound that turns into a cough. It grips him hard, bending his body with it. When it passes, the breath he draws seems barely enough.

"I have already walked through those gates," he says hoarsely. "Notre-Dame. I entered a man. I left an emperor. And that has been taken from me."

"Earthly titles mean nothing before God."

Napoleon curses. "God means nothing to me. Not anymore."

Vignali recoils. "Fear not the end, Sire," he says quietly. "Fear only judgment."

"I have known hell, Abbé," Napoleon continues. "I have seen places worse than anything your scriptures describe."

The priest makes the sign of the cross and lets the silence stand.

Napoleon's eyes drift across the room; the damp walls, the uneven plaster, the shadows gathering where the candle cannot reach. "If there is a God," he says at last, "He abandoned this rock as surely as He abandoned me."

"God's mercy is infinite," Vignali insists. "Repent."

Napoleon shakes his head. "If God were merciful, he would not have taken my empire... my armies... my Joséphine."^{26 27}

"Blasphemy," Vignali murmurs, raising a hand in warning.

Napoleon does not answer. Another cough takes him. When it ends, he faces the wall. "Leave me."

Vignali rises slowly, gathering the oil, his hand lingering on the crucifix. "I will pray for your soul, Sire," he says. "And I will pray you find humility before the end."

He backs toward the door, then slips out.

The candle flickers. Napoleon is alone.

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A knock sounds.

Napoleon does not answer. The door opens anyway. Doctor Francesco Antommarchi²⁸ enters, carrying a small case. "Good evening, Sire."

Napoleon does not return the greeting.

The doctor sets the case down and opens it. A dark bottle catches the light.

"The abbé tells me your pain has worsened."

Napoleon lets out a faint breath. "The abbé concerns himself with my soul."

"I concern myself with your body."

"Neither of you can save me."

Antommarchi pauses, then nods slightly. "The illness is progressing."

Napoleon's lips twitch. "You speak as though it were news."

The doctor pours a measured amount from the bottle into a small glass. "Laudanum,"²⁹ he says. "It will ease the pain." He holds it out.

Napoleon does not reach for it.

"A sufficient quantity..." the doctor adds more quietly, "would end the suffering altogether."

Napoleon understands the implication. "Eternal sleep..."

The phrase hangs between them.

Antommarchi does not dispute it. "Peace."

Napoleon's hand tightens in the sheets. "I crossed the Alps. I endured Egypt. Russia." A cough seizes him again, leaving him gasping when it passes. His voice is rough with bitterness. "And this is your answer? To put me down like an animal?"

Antommarchi places the glass beside the bed, along with the bottle, both within reach. "I offer you dignity."

Napoleon leans forward, gripping the mattress. A dry laugh escapes him. "Dignity would have been dying in France."

The doctor closes his case, the bottle remaining on the nightstand.

"It is there if you choose it. Good night, Sire."

He leaves. The door shuts. The flame burns lower.

Napoleon finds himself staring at the Laudanum.

His hand lifts toward it, then stops, suspended, caught between decision and refusal.

"Eternal sleep..." he whispers.

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"Eternal sleep..." A voice repeats, not his; an echo.

Napoleon's eyes sharpen. "Who's there?"

Silence.

Then a voice, close and calm: "Why choose sleep when you fear oblivion?"

Napoleon stiffens. Slowly, he finds the source of the voice. Baron Lunédi stands beside the bed.

Napoleon studies him. "If you are Death," he says, voice raw but steady, "you are late."

A faint tilt of Lunédi's head. "I am not Death."

He steps closer. "I am what comes when death can still be... bargained with."

Napoleon lets out a breath that might be a laugh. "You dress like the devil."

A cough interrupts him. Dark stains spread across the cloth in his hand.

Lunédi watches without reaction. "They offered you Heaven," he says softly. "Then sleep." His attention shifts to the glass. "You do not fear dying." He leans closer. "You fear being forgotten."

Something shifts in Napoleon's expression, quick, contained, but there.

Lunédi sees it. "You crossed the Alps. You brought kings to their knees. You reshaped the world." He bends closer. "And this is how it ends? A footnote? On a rock no one remembers?"

Napoleon closes his eyes. "What do you want?"

"Consent."

Napoleon opens his eyes. "There is always a price."

"Of course," Lunédi replies. "But what you gain will outweigh it."

Napoleon glances once more at the laudanum, then back at the man beside him. "I will not beg."

"I would not allow it." Lunédi leans closer. "Just say yes."

Napoleon's body trembles. He closes his eyes again.

"Say yes," Lunédi repeats.

"No..." The word is barely there.

For a moment, something sharp breaks through Lunédi's composure. "What?"

It passes quickly. He steadies himself.

"Say yes."

Napoleon doesn't open his eyes. "No."

Lunédi leans in, breath warm against his neck.

"Say yes."

Closer still.

"Say yes."

The light flickers weakly.

A final breath escapes the dying man. "Yes."

Lunédi does not wait any longer.

He bites.

Napoleon's body arches, a silent convulsion running through him. His fingers claw at the sheets.

The candle sputters.

Then goes out.

Darkness takes the room.