



QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR



WRITTEN BY REX MCGREGOR
DIRECTED BY MARGARETA MOIR

Synopsis

After defeating Prussia, Napoleon is imposing a harsh treaty that will halve the size of the kingdom. Queen Louise must exert all her charm to plead for clemency.

Background

Based on the extraordinary 1807 meeting between Queen Louise of Prussia and French Emperor Napoleon I at Tilsit. Queen Louise met with the Emperor to plead (unsuccessfully) for favourable terms after Prussia's disastrous losses in the Napoleonic Wars. She was already well loved by her subjects, but her meeting with Napoleon led Louise to become revered as "the soul of national virtue". Her early death at the age of thirty-four "preserved her youth in the memory of posterity", and caused Napoleon to reportedly remark that the king "has lost his best minister".

Characters

LOUISE, Queen of Prussia, 31
NAPOLEON, Emperor of the French, 37

Place

Prussian headquarters in Tilsit, East Prussia

Time

July 6, 1807



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(Louise summons up her courage as she waits. She is wearing an elegant gown and a tiara.)

(Offstage: The sound of someone hurrying up a staircase.)

(Napoleon enters in uniform and catches his breath.)

NAPOLEON
Majesty.

LOUISE
Sire.

Louise holds out her hand. Napoleon kisses it.

NAPOLEON
We meet at last.

LOUISE
I must apologise.

NAPOLEON
Already?

LOUISE
For the narrow staircase.

NAPOLEON
Are you calling me fat?

LOUISE
I found it a tight squeeze. Is my gown presentable?

NAPOLEON
Stunning.

LOUISE
I doubt I do it justice. In my condition I must forgo straitlacing.



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NAPOLEON
Another on the way. You churn 'em out.

LOUISE
We have been blessed.

NAPOLEON
With—so far—three?

LOUISE
Five.

NAPOLEON
Children. But three sons?

LOUISE
Yes.

NAPOLEON
I envy you.

LOUISE
I hear you became a father recently. A boy.

NAPOLEON
Hm. Pleasing news.

LOUISE
Indeed.

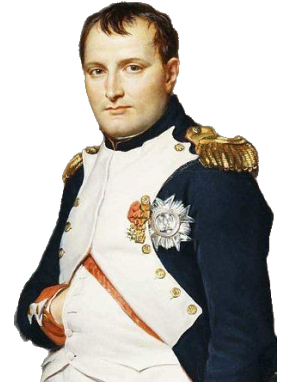
NAPOLEON
A relief to know I'm not firing blank cartridges. One day I'll have a legitimate heir.

LOUISE
Try spending more time at home.

NAPOLEON
Ha!



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LOUISE

Forgive my indelicacy.

NAPOLEON

No, no. I like plain talk.

LOUISE

Then, for pity's sake, do not mutilate Prussia!

(Pause.)

NAPOLEON

Your gown really is beautiful. Is this Parisian style?

LOUISE

Berlin style. I wear my patriotism on my sleeve.

NAPOLEON

And the fabric? Woven locally?

LOUISE

Sire. I did not request this meeting to discuss fashion.

NAPOLEON

You mentioned your gown first.

LOUISE

I was reconnoitering. Now I am ready to engage.

NAPOLEON

Spoken like a soldier.

LOUISE

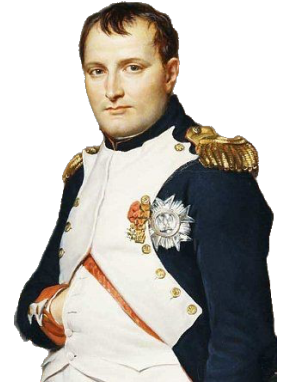
I trust I shall prove a worthy adversary.

NAPOLEON

You should have worn your dragoon's uniform.



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LOUISE

I fear my belly would burst the trouser buttons.

NAPOLEON

You're not the only one.

LOUISE

I am glad we have something in common.

NAPOLEON

Other than our mutual scorn?

LOUISE

I think we are both to be commended for suppressing that.

NAPOLEON

True. You haven't called me "monster" to my face.

LOUISE

And you have refrained from uttering the word "whore."

NAPOLEON

Ignore rumours, Madame. I do.

LOUISE

Including the ones you start?

NAPOLEON

Touché. Now, to your business. I hope they've swept the floor. Or you'll smudge your gown.

LOUISE

I am afraid I must disappoint you.

NAPOLEON

What? You mean you're not going to throw yourself at my feet?

LOUISE

Never.



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NAPOLEON

It's standard procedure when begging for mercy.

LOUISE

Not in refined circles.

NAPOLEON

Damn! I was thinking of—you know—Alexander.

LOUISE

Oh! So that is how he won you over.

NAPOLEON

Sorry?

LOUISE

I warrant you enjoyed seeing the Tsar of Russia on his knees before you.

NAPOLEON

Madame—

LOUISE

His humility earns him a generous treaty. But proud Prussia must be humiliated!

NAPOLEON

Madame, you're mistaken.

LOUISE

I dearly hope so. I pray common decency will prevail.

NAPOLEON

When I said "Alexander" I didn't mean the Tsar. I meant Alexander the Great.

LOUISE

What does he have to do with anything?

NAPOLEON

I was thinking of those paintings. You know.



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LOUISE
Paintings?

NAPOLEON
“The Magnanimity of Alexander.” “Alexander Shows Compassion for the
Queen of Persia.”

LOUISE
Good. If they make you show compassion for the Queen of Prussia.

NAPOLEON
Alexander was impeccably courteous. But he didn’t yield an inch of territory.

LOUISE
Outdo your idol. In kindness.

NAPOLEON
This skirmish is futile. The terms of the treaty have been set.

LOUISE
But not signed.

NAPOLEON
The treaty with Russia has priority. That’s tomorrow. Prussia must wait in
line.

LOUISE
So. You will have a light dinner. Then gorge yourself on dessert.

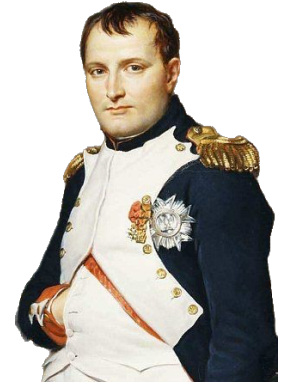
NAPOLEON
Wish me bon appétit.

LOUISE
You are chopping up our kingdom. Stripping us of half our land. Half our
people.

NAPOLEON
A fair summary.



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LOUISE

An unfair settlement. Your own minister Talleyrand calls it brutal.

NAPOLEON

Thank you for reminding me. I must replace him.

LOUISE

You are heartless.

NAPOLEON

He'll survive. He always does.

LOUISE

I am talking about your treatment of Prussia.

NAPOLEON

Prussia is getting what she deserves.

LOUISE

For what? Resisting an invasion?

NAPOLEON

I sought peace. You refused. You, personally! I could have handled your weakling husband.

LOUISE

Let us leave Frederick out of this.

NAPOLEON

No chance of mistaking him for Frederick the Great.

LOUISE

I ask you as a mother. Would you have us bequeath our son a dismembered inheritance?

NAPOLEON

Save your breath, Madame.



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LOUISE

At least leave us our western provinces.

NAPOLEON

No.

LOUISE

At least Magdeburg.

NAPOLEON

With the strongest fortifications around? Do you take me for a fool?

LOUISE

The city means the world to our royal family. I thought you valued family.

NAPOLEON

I do. I've promised to create a kingdom for my brother Jerome.

LOUISE

Out of our land?

NAPOLEON

Everything west of the Elbe.

LOUISE

Such an amputation is unheard of!

NAPOLEON

Have you forgotten Poland? Huh? Austria, Russia and your lot carved it up till it vanished.

LOUISE

That was before our reign.

NAPOLEON

The Poles still remember.

LOUISE

Your current mistress is Polish, is she not?



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NAPOLEON

If one can have a nationality without a nation.

LOUISE

No doubt you also gave her a promise.

NAPOLEON

I may have.

LOUISE

Fine. Take Warsaw. Take Poznań. But leave us Magdeburg!

NAPOLEON

This is no bargaining. I'm already taking Warsaw and Poznań. And a great deal more.

LOUISE

A great deal too much.

NAPOLEON

Count yourself lucky. I'm leaving you Berlin.

LOUISE

You would not dare touch our capital.

NAPOLEON

Wouldn't I? Ha! Ask your friend the Tsar.

LOUISE

What do you mean? (Pause.) Sire? What do you mean?

Pause. Napoleon paces.

NAPOLEON

When my army marched through your Brandenburg Gate, I admired the chariot statue on top.

LOUISE

So you took it.



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NAPOLEON
Sent it to Paris.

LOUISE
This is stale news.

NAPOLEON
Proving I can do what I like with Berlin.

LOUISE
You stole a pile of metal. You could never take our soul.

NAPOLEON
Couldn't I? Couldn't I? Ask your friend the Tsar.

LOUISE
Speak plainly.

NAPOLEON
If you must know, my original plan was to wipe Prussia off the map
altogether.

LOUISE
Oh, dear Lord!

NAPOLEON
Be grateful your friend dissuaded me.

LOUISE
On his knees?

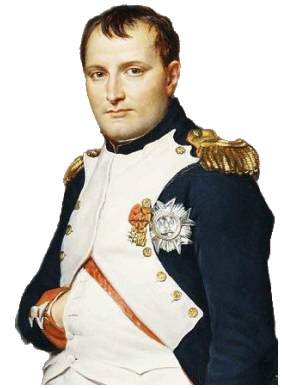
NAPOLEON
He didn't need to beg. He simply agreed to my demand.

LOUISE
Namely?

NAPOLEON
An alliance. To put the whole of Europe under our control.



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LOUISE

So. With this treachery Alexander gains your favour. And loses my respect.

NAPOLEON

Negotiating peace is no different from waging war. It's all tactics.

LOUISE

God spare me such cynicism.

NAPOLEON

Acknowledge your difficulty, Madame. You have nothing to offer me.

LOUISE

Alas.

NAPOLEON

Not even a daughter of marriageable age.

LOUISE

I beg your pardon?

NAPOLEON

I'm on the hunt for a royal bride.

LOUISE

For whom?

NAPOLEON

Myself, of course.

LOUISE

Does your wife know about this?

NAPOLEON

She understands the rules of dynastic succession.

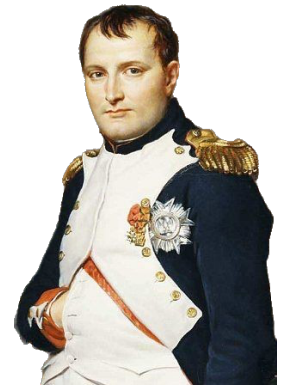
LOUISE

Hardly the same thing.



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NAPOLEON

Since she can't provide me with a son, she must grant me access to an alternative womb.

LOUISE

I thought a Catholic union is for life.

NAPOLEON

I have the Pope in my pocket.

LOUISE

Poor Empress Josephine.

NAPOLEON

Don't fret. I won't abandon her. She'll be well provided for.

LOUISE

I do not pity her for her divorce. I pity her for her marriage.

NAPOLEON

I consider myself a good husband.

LOUISE

Bad ones always do.

NAPOLEON

You parry with a thrust. I hope my bride has a dash of your spirit.

LOUISE

If she has a dash of sense, she will not be your bride.

NAPOLEON

I've made a list.

LOUISE

Of potential victims?

NAPOLEON

Eligible princesses.



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LOUISE

You amaze me, Sire. I believed you were a revolutionary.

NAPOLEON

I was. I used the revolution to seize power.

LOUISE

Then why seek a wife among the old regimes?

NAPOLEON

To keep power. A successful radical soon turns conservative.

LOUISE

You must always be watching your back.

NAPOLEON

The price of glory.

LOUISE

Not for those of us with a genuine crown. We worry about our heads.

NAPOLEON

With your royal connections, perhaps you can advise me on a suitable spouse.

LOUISE

In exchange for Magdeburg?

NAPOLEON

No, Madame. Out of pure charity.

LOUISE

Very well. If it will save an innocent girl from your bed.

NAPOLEON

Top candidate is the Tsar's sister.

LOUISE

Catherine?



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NAPOLEON

Granddaughter of Catherine the Great.

LOUISE

Steer clear of the Romanovs. They are all a little mad.

NAPOLEON

All of them?

LOUISE

Except Alexander. He is completely barking.

NAPOLEON

What about Maria Luisa, the Spanish infanta?

LOUISE

A weepy widow. It would begin in tears. Who else?

NAPOLEON

Marie Louise, the Austrian archduchess.

LOUISE

The Habsburgs are inbred. They have deformed jaws.

NAPOLEON

She looks pretty in her portrait.

LOUISE

You barely notice her disfigurement front on. But from the side, there is a distinct jut.

NAPOLEON

Oh dear.

LOUISE

Next.

NAPOLEON

Er... Maria Amalia. Formerly Princess of Naples and Sicily.



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LOUISE

Until you deposed her father.

NAPOLEON

She's still a blueblood.

LOUISE

A Habsburg.

NAPOLEON

Ah. I should have checked a silhouette profile.

LOUISE

What happens when two Habsburgs try to kiss each other?

NAPOLEON

Er?

LOUISE

Their chins collide.

NAPOLEON

Bam.

LOUISE

Did you hear about Marie Antoinette? Her jaw was so big they couldn't get her neck to lie flat on the guillotine block. They had to flip her over and chop her head off, face up.

NAPOLEON

Haha! Madame, you're most entertaining.

LOUISE

Enough to keep Magdeburg?

NAPOLEON

Not quite. But you'll definitely make me tear up my list.



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LOUISE
Good.

NAPOLEON
In all the courts of Europe I'll never find a woman with half your brilliance.

LOUISE
You flatter me, Sire.

NAPOLEON
I deal in facts. You're clever and charming. And demonstrably fecund. I should marry you.

LOUISE
Very funny.

NAPOLEON
You're almost ideal.

LOUISE
Almost?

NAPOLEON
You have one flaw.

LOUISE
Do tell.

NAPOLEON
If only you weren't so...

LOUISE
Married?

NAPOLEON
That's a minor obstacle. I'm referring to a greater one. Your—er...

LOUISE
Taste?



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NAPOLEON

No. Damn it all to blazes! There's no polite way to put this.

LOUISE

You have my permission to be blunt.

NAPOLEON

Well...There's the matter of your age.

LOUISE

My age?

NAPOLEON

You look youthful. But—expecting your sixth child—you're probably... mid-thirties?

LOUISE

Excuse me! I have only just turned thirty-one.

NAPOLEON

Hurrah! You've got many years of childbearing to go. You're perfect. I will marry you.

LOUISE

A fitting riposte, Sire. I mocked your list. Now you mock me.

NAPOLEON

With a vengeance.

LOUISE

My heart was set on Magdeburg. I let my tongue run away with me.

NAPOLEON

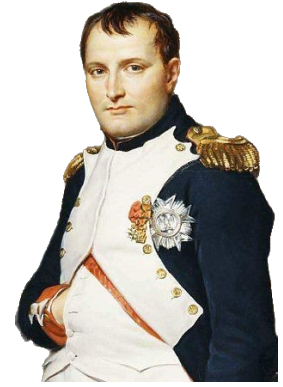
No harm done.

LOUISE

I behaved abominably. Those Habsburg girls. They're actually adorable.



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NAPOLEON
Even with their chins?

LOUISE
Delightful little pouts. Please forget my slander.

NAPOLEON
You didn't fool me for a second. I trust portrait painters. Their lives depend on accuracy.

LOUISE
Ohhh! What I said about Marie Antoinette. That was unforgivable.

NAPOLEON
It was a joke.

LOUISE
A vicious one.

NAPOLEON
Exaggeration is allowed in a joke.

LOUISE
I shall regret my cruelty all my days. And strive to redeem myself with acts of kindness.

NAPOLEON
By thunder! You're magnificent!

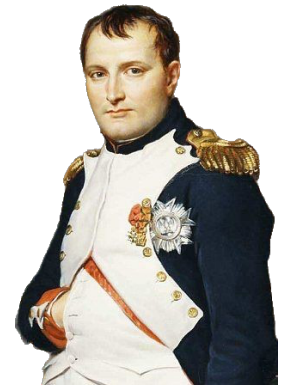
LOUISE
What?

NAPOLEON
I resisted your flirtatiousness. But you dignify it with a conscience. And integrity.

LOUISE
Enough jesting, Sire.



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NAPOLEON

I'm deadly serious. You and I are above the common herd. We should be man and wife.

LOUISE

Are you mad?

NAPOLEON

No more than Alexander.

LOUISE

Which one?

NAPOLEON

Your friend the Tsar. I finally understand why he's infatuated with you.

LOUISE

He is a sensible married man.

NAPOLEON

You called him "barking."

LOUISE

He provoked my anger. By allying himself with you.

NAPOLEON

Guess his motive for that. Protecting your crown. And as much of your kingdom as he could.

LOUISE

You underestimate his ambition.

NAPOLEON

You underestimate your spell. Over him. And me.

LOUISE

A pity my witchcraft cannot restore Magdeburg.



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NAPOLEON

Marry me and you'll be the Empress of Europe. With hundreds of cities!

LOUISE

I only want Magdeburg.

NAPOLEON

Unfortunately, all territory on the west bank of the Elbe is allocated to my brother Jerome.

LOUISE

By your gift.

NAPOLEON

I gave my word. Which is as binding as a solemn oath.

LOUISE

Then, as you said before, this conversation is futile. Good day, Sire.

(Louise turns to leave.)

NAPOLEON

Wait. Wait! There's a way.

LOUISE

A way?

NAPOLEON

For me to give you your precious Magdeburg. And still keep my promise.

LOUISE

Praise be.

NAPOLEON

It will take thousands of men years of work. But Magdeburg will end up on the east bank.

LOUISE

You plan to shift the city across? Brick by brick?



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NAPOLEON

No. I'll divert the course of the river.

LOUISE

This is insane.

NAPOLEON

A practical solution. I have skilled engineers. And an army twiddling their thumbs.

LOUISE

Such a scheme would devastate the countryside. Destroy farms and livelihoods!

NAPOLEON

Like in the wars. My soldiers will feel right at home.

LOUISE

Would it not be simpler to have a quiet word with your brother? Make him a better offer.

NAPOLEON

It's a matter of honour. A few years ago, Jerome defied me. Ran off and married an American.

LOUISE

Horrors. "A commoner." Like you.

NAPOLEON

He soon came crawling back. Agreed to dump the floozy and wed the princess I chose for him.

LOUISE

Reward: one kingdom.

NAPOLEON

He's keeping his part of the bargain. I must keep mine.



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LOUISE

You have a strange morality. Pleading honour, but dictating a marriage.

NAPOLEON

I hope you don't think I'm dictating ours. I consider this a romantic courtship.

LOUISE

How can a man be so delusional?

NAPOLEON

You've leapt into discussing your wedding present.

LOUISE

We have been discussing how you can return Magdeburg. Not on what terms.

NAPOLEON

One step at a time, Madame. That's how courtship works.

LOUISE

Abandon this farce. My husband is downstairs.

NAPOLEON

As if I fear him.

LOUISE

I do not ask you to fear him. I ask you to respect him.

NAPOLEON

Equally impossible.

LOUISE

He is moving up in your estimation. Until now, you insulted him by ignoring him.

NAPOLEON

Face the truth, Madame. Your current husband is unworthy of you.



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LOUISE

You insult us both. Without knowing either of us.

NAPOLEON

I've got the measure of your Frederick. Your friend the Tsar told me all about the statue.

LOUISE

The what?

NAPOLEON

You know the one. You and your sister. In the diaphanous gowns.

LOUISE

That was the fashion ten years ago.

NAPOLEON

You needn't make excuses. It's a beautiful sculpture. A neoclassical masterpiece.

LOUISE

Where did you see it?

NAPOLEON

Alexander showed me a miniature copy. He takes it on all his travels. You may guess why.

LOUISE

Oh.

NAPOLEON

I'd love to view the life size original. But your Frederick keeps it locked away. In storage.

LOUISE

He found the pose too casual for royalty.

NAPOLEON

Poppycock! The man's a pompous prude.



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LOUISE

Is this your romantic courtship, Sire? Obliging me to defend the man I love?

NAPOLEON

Ah. A clumsy manoeuvre. I'll redeploy.

LOUISE

Retreat.

NAPOLEON

To be honest, I have nothing against the fellow. He seems harmless.

LOUISE

He will be thrilled.

NAPOLEON

He's welcome to your sixth child. I'll be happy with your seventh, eighth, ninth, et cetera.

LOUISE

I would snort with derision, Sire. But Frederick disapproves of unregal displays.

NAPOLEON

You'll be luckier with your second husband. I'll let you laugh all you like.

LOUISE

Can we please resume negotiating territorial claims?

NAPOLEON

Absolutely. As compensation for surrendering you, Frederick can keep his Polish lands.

LOUISE

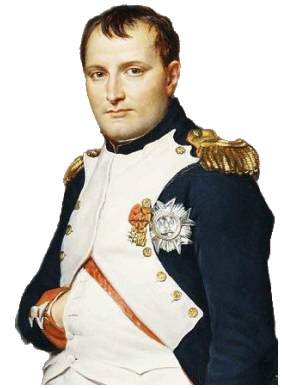
Are you forgetting your promise to your mistress?

NAPOLEON

I told Marie I'd restore Poland. And I will. It will be a separate country again.



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LOUISE

But still ruled by Frederick?

NAPOLEON

Exactly. He'll be King of two countries instead of one.

LOUISE

Do you imagine your mistress would be happy with such an arrangement?

NAPOLEON

She won't be my mistress anymore. I intend to be faithful to you.

LOUISE

Everything you say is utterly preposterous.

NAPOLEON

This is our destiny, Madame. Embrace it.

LOUISE

Is your memory so short? We have loathed each other for years.

NAPOLEON

Hatred. Love. They're both passion.

LOUISE

"Red. Green. They're both colours." Such a statement has neither sense, truth, logic, nor wit.

NAPOLEON

From your mouth it has all these. And more.

LOUISE

You are determined to make me hoot.

NAPOLEON

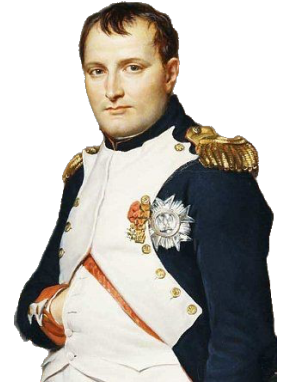
Please do. I'll relish your joy.

LOUISE

Thank you for ensuring my restraint.



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NAPOLEON

You've fascinated me ever since I heard about this warrior queen. In a hussar's uniform.

LOUISE

I merely inspected the troops.

NAPOLEON

In my imagination you rode into battle like Joan of Arc.

LOUISE

Heavens!

NAPOLEON

I was so jealous. I imagined you were having an affair with Alexander.

LOUISE

The Great?

NAPOLEON

The Tsar.

LOUISE

Why limit your fantasy?

NAPOLEON

Why limit your reality? With an inferior husband.

LOUISE

Sire!

NAPOLEON

Share my empire! Think what wonders you can achieve.

LOUISE

Enough of this nonsense.



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NAPOLEON

Start by liberating the statue of you and your sister. Give it pride of place in front of the Brandenburg Gate.

LOUISE

Did you know? The same sculptor made the chariot that used to be on top.

NAPOLEON

Fetch it back from Paris. You have the power.

LOUISE

Tut. I am not in the least tempted.

NAPOLEON

Honour and Jerome be damned! Magdeburg is yours! Now. As soon as you say yes.

LOUISE

I half believe you are in earnest. And half think you are still toying with me.

NAPOLEON

How can you doubt my sincerity?

LOUISE

I know you for a military genius. Adept in feints and stratagems.

NAPOLEON

You have disarmed me quite.

LOUISE

Have I? Or is this just a subtler mask of bluff and bluster?

NAPOLEON

Shall I bare my soul to you? Confess I'm bone weary? Tired of battles and war. This has been the longest campaign of my life. I haven't slept in my bed at home for a year. My soldiers are at the end of their tether. My brothers are incompetent. I make them kings and they fail me every time. I suspect the Tsar will be a fickle ally. All he cares about is you. And the sad fact is I don't blame him. I'm fast becoming just as enslaved.



QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR



WRITTEN BY REX MCGREGOR
DIRECTED BY MARGARETA MOIR

LOUISE
I see.

NAPOLEON
Can the fire in my heart melt the ice in yours?

LOUISE
You misjudge me. There is no ice there.

NAPOLEON
This is progress.

LOUISE
I scarcely know what to think.

NAPOLEON
Take your time.

LOUISE
It is not as if you have made an official proposal.

NAPOLEON
I thought I had.

LOUISE
Not in the expected form. In the Germanic world we like formality. Tradition.

NAPOLEON
Ah.

LOUISE
You must think us terribly stuffy.

NAPOLEON
Not at all. I'm no commoner. My ancestors were Tuscan nobility.

LOUISE
Then...



QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR



WRITTEN BY REX MCGREGOR
DIRECTED BY MARGARETA MOIR

(Napoleon gets down on one knee.)

NAPOLEON
Your Majesty, Queen Louise of Prussia.

LOUISE
Teutonic style is both knees. We are the most awful stick-in-the-muds.

(Napoleon kneels on both knees.)

NAPOLEON
Will you take me, Napoleon Bonaparte, Emperor of the French and King of Italy, as your lawfully wedded husband?

(Sustained pause. Then Louise lets out a huge guffaw.)

LOUISE
No. Oh no. Frederick would have a fit if he caught me spluttering saliva.

(Napoleon stands up, barely suppressing his fury.)

NAPOLEON
Madame. This was not well done.

LOUISE
I outflanked you.

NAPOLEON
Say goodbye to Magdeburg.

LOUISE
Take it. For the time being. I realise now you will not keep it long.

NAPOLEON
If you breathe one word of what happened here, I'll annihilate your kingdom.

LOUISE
I feel no need to tell anyone. Savouring this victory is enough.



QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR



WRITTEN BY REX MCGREGOR
DIRECTED BY MARGARETA MOIR

NAPOLEON

I'll say you clung to my boots. Weeping your eyes out.

LOUISE

Very well. Let that be our story.

NAPOLEON

With no subversive embellishments.

LOUISE

As you wish. Like the paintings.

NAPOLEON

I'll commission a new one. "The Emperor Napoleon with the Queen of Prussia at His Feet."

LOUISE

As long as I do not have to pose for it.

NAPOLEON

I shall use my mistress, Marie. She knows how to turn on the waterworks.

LOUISE

Farewell, Sire.

NAPOLEON

May we never meet again.

LOUISE

Do not say that. I look forward to seeing your face. When Prussian troops march into Paris.

(End of play)