

# The Admiral's Pursuit

Lyle Garford

## Dedication

This one is for all the people making sacrifices to help others and defend us every day.

Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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Lyle Garford  
Vancouver, Canada  
Contact: [lyle@lylegarford.com](mailto:lyle@lylegarford.com)

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Book Design by Lyle Garford  
[www.lylegarford.com](http://www.lylegarford.com)

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Chapter One  
December 1804 to February 1805

“And this is all you have for me to consider? These are your final thoughts on the matter?”

To make certain the unspoken message behind the words was received he added a hint of frost to his voice and a steel glare from his blue-grey eyes, making it abundantly clear he was not hearing an answer he wanted. The two senior French Admirals and the French Minister of Marine standing before him all stiffened as the words sunk in, showing they knew their master was displeased. The Minister nervously licked his lips before nodding in response, for it was never good to make the newly crowned Emperor of France unhappy.

“My Emperor, it is, and we do apologize. We need more time and resources. The fleet simply isn’t ready for the kind of major action I believe you have in mind.”

Napoleon Bonaparte remained silent in response, continuing to stare at the three men before him. As the seconds passed, the long silence was enough to make one of them unable to keep from betraying how nervous he was by biting his lip. Napoleon let them stew a few moments longer before turning and making his way over to a huge nearby window with an enormous vista beyond. He stopped and stared outside in silence for a few moments longer, before finally speaking without turning around.

“You may all leave now.”

Napoleon was certain the three men left with fear gnawing at their bellies and was pleased at the thought. He remained standing with his hands together behind his back, staring out the window in silence. Fewer people than normal were going about their business outside, but he paid them little attention as he stood there lost in thought for the next half hour.

The massive room he was in was warm from the blazing fire in the huge hearth, despite the size of the space it had to heat. The fire needed to be large, for the frost and chill outside on this December day in Paris was harsher than it normally might be, meaning those who ventured outside did so only because they had little choice. But the Emperor of France had other, far weightier matters than the temperature that day on his mind.

Napoleon allowed himself the small luxury of contemplating the past as he stood at the window, acknowledging the last decade was in all respects a good one for him. A string of significant military victories made him a badly needed hero to the French people, who were desperate for stability after the years of turmoil from the revolution which began in 1789 and the subsequent reign of terror where thousands of victims lost their heads on the guillotine.

He remembered feeling he had reached the pinnacle of power on being made First Consul of France in 1799, but he soon realized how tenuous such power could be. This was solved by having himself granted the post for life in 1802, with the advent of a new French constitution he designed with that express purpose in mind. The next challenge was realizing that while being First Consul for life solidified his power within France itself, it failed to address the issue of how he was perceived by other sovereigns in Europe or answer the question of what would happen once he was gone.

Crowning himself Emperor of France only days before, with all the pomp and ceremony which could be mustered and with the blessing of the Pope himself in attendance to add

legitimacy was the solution. Secure in the knowledge he had established a dynasty his heirs would carry on and with the full strength of France behind him, Napoleon felt justified in believing he was now the most powerful man on the planet. The only stain on the sense of accomplishment he felt was the annoying obstacle to the growth of French power posed by the British and, in particular, their Navy.

Napoleon clenched his fists in frustration as his gaze settled on the winding river Seine a short distance from where he stood in the massive mansion belonging to his brother in law, Joachim Murat. He had offered Napoleon the mansion as a gift in honor of being crowned Emperor. Murat had served him well both as a member of his family and more recently as a Marshal of France in the Army. Napoleon had every confidence he would continue to do so, but he wished he could say the same for his own Navy.

Although the river was not frozen over as yet, Napoleon knew it could happen and for a wild moment he wished the Channel separating England and France would do so, too. Napoleon was certain the Army and his beloved artillery would crush the English if only he could get it all across the Channel safely.

Time and again, however, the French Navy failed to best their British counterparts at sea. The real issue was crossing the Channel which, even at the best of times, could be a perilous affair because of the unpredictable weather and sea conditions. The wolves of the British Navy were long used to it all and would make short work of vulnerable troop ships if a stout defence couldn't be mounted to keep them at bay.

Finding a way to one day create such a defence was occupying most of Napoleon's thoughts this day and he clenched his fists in anger once again at the simple fact he was the one having to do it. The two senior Admirals and their Minister of Marine offered him nothing but excuses for why they could not act and seemed completely bereft of vision, when Napoleon very much wanted to hear what they could in fact do with what they had.

Napoleon sighed to himself, for from his perspective this kind of thinking was permeating the French Navy ever since their crushing defeat at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 at the hands of Lord Horatio Nelson and the Royal Navy. The British Admiral had caught a large fleet of the French Navy in Aboukir Bay, off the coast of Egypt. Several thousand French casualties and wounded along with the complete destruction of two French ships of the line and the capture of many more by the British instantly changed the entire naval balance of power in the Mediterranean.

Even worse from his perspective, the defeat had isolated Napoleon and the Army with him in Egypt, deflating the morale of his men. Only a short time before his Army was brimming with confidence and an unspoken sense of invincibility because of their capture of Cairo.

Napoleon laid siege to the city of Acre in response as a desperate attempt on his part to expand their holdings and rebuild morale. To his dismay the cannons of Royal Navy ships close offshore provided support to the defenders and took a huge toll, making it madness to continue the siege. The retreat was galling, but Napoleon put it all behind him as word came of yet more political upheaval at home. Sensing opportunity, he returned to France in 1799 to successfully engineer a coup and seize power.

In the years since the Battle of the Nile he put aside his frustration with what happened while the need to stabilize the country after years of war and strife commanded his full attention, but the bitter taste of defeat was not forgotten. Napoleon used the short period

of peace brought about by the Treaty of Amiens to rebuild and rearm his military at a furious pace. But now that he was Emperor, he judged the time was right to make a push and finally deal with the British. All he needed was for the plan churning in his mind over the last several days to work.

Napoleon said nothing of its details to the two Admirals and his Minister, for the meeting was in reality their last chance to demonstrate at least some degree of boldness or initiative. He knew all of them were counting on Napoleon's lack of experience with naval warfare and expected him to defer to them on any plans involving the Navy. What they all failed to understand was their commander was testing them and the result was they were judged to be barely competent enough to follow orders and nothing more.

Napoleon shook his head in frustration and finally turned away from the window, walking back to the enormous dining table serving as a convenient place to spread several maps out for study. He knew a dispassionate analysis of the situation must acknowledge the Admirals were right about his lack of naval expertise, but to his mind this was more than offset by the equally true reality of his proven brilliance as a military tactician. And since he had no one with initiative he could rely on to do anything other than just follow orders, the time was now to make what he wanted become reality himself.

Napoleon moved from one map to another on the table, occasionally tapping a finger on various spots as he went through the plan in his mind one last time. Maps of the entire Caribbean, the Channel between France and England, the western coast of southern Europe, and the Mediterranean in its entirety all found his attention. After studying the maps for several minutes Napoleon reached for the four-page document the Admirals had brought with them and left for Napoleon to review. He had already read and digested its contents, but prudence dictated he consider it one more time.

Napoleon permitted himself a brief smile for the first time that day as he finished scanning it. The document was a detailed report of the readiness of both the French and Spanish Navies, listing types of ships and their current locations, along with who was in command at each. What made him happy was the certainty it would be more than enough for the task at hand.

The Spanish were reluctant allies taking direction from the French, but allies they were nonetheless and with their ships at his disposal Napoleon was convinced the British Navy would finally taste defeat. Napoleon was sure the key would be to create the conditions leading to success at sea, just as he always found a way to do the same on land.

Napoleon had to contain the optimism surging within him as the final small details of the plan crystalized in his mind. The British had proved wily foes in past, at least at sea, and the risk his carefully thought out plan could be exposed by the capture of French ships carrying his orders was great. Napoleon shook his head in frustration, for the simple solution would have been to explain his goals and the plan to his senior Admirals without putting it all in writing. But he dismissed the thought, for he was certain they would merely turn around and do exactly that if he left it in their hands.

The solution was to keep the overall plan to himself and share nothing more than the barest elements of what he expected his commanders to do until the last possible moment. As he reached the decision point which balanced on a knife edge where he knew the time had come to either act or to stay his hand, he smiled once again.

He knew he had thought it through and was supremely confident of his success. Napoleon valued being a man of action and decisiveness and, as far as he was concerned,

he was the best in the world at being both. And in his judgement, the time was now for the British to pay for thwarting his designs.

Napoleon reached for a small bell which sat on a nearby table and rang it. Within seconds a nearby door opened and a servant appeared wearing a questioning look on his face. Napoleon gave him the briefest of glances before turning back to the map table. He didn't even bother to look up from the map of the Caribbean he was studying once again as he gave orders to the servant.

"Send for my clerk, Maurice. Tell him to bring his writing supplies and plenty of paper. I have several sets of orders that need to be sent."

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The distant bark of the French frigate's forward chase gun was muffled a little by the abysmal weather, but they were still close enough to hear and see the fall of the shot which was well off the mark. Moments later the First Officer saw his Captain signal for attention, and he made his way across the quarterdeck, struggling every step with the heaving deck. The cold, driving rain at the point of being slushy snow threatening to coat everything with ice made finding safe footing almost impossible.

"Sir?" said the officer, saluting with one hand as he grabbed the railing with the other to steady himself.

"You have the deck, Lieutenant. They are bearing off, so you can stand the men down from quarters," said the Captain, pointing in the direction of the French chase frigate. "I am going below to my cabin. I must have a report ready for the Admiral the second we find him. Be ready to take it to him when we do."

"Sir," said the Lieutenant, saluting a second time, although his Captain was already making for the hatch entrance to escape the weather. And unbidden once again the image of the glass of brandy he would permit himself stole across his mind for when he too could find refuge from the dreadful weather.

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The Admiral was anticipating the rap on the cabin door from his Marine sentry and he called an order to enter instantly, grateful the wait for news was finally over. But in reality, he already knew what was happening, as there could be only one possible reason these two particular frigates were rejoining the fleet.

The young Lieutenant who was ushered in stepped forward to stand before the desk, salute, and proffer a sealed envelope from his Captain. The Lieutenant couldn't stop himself from swaying slightly on his feet before catching himself as the Admiral grasped the envelope. Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson, Commander of the British Mediterranean naval forces, gave the young man before him a grim smile as he put the message on his desk.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Sit down, please, before you fall down. I shall read your Captain's report in due course. Tell me, what news?"

"Thank you, Admiral," said the officer, a weary smile creasing his face for the briefest of moments. "My Lord, the French came out in force from Toulon just over two days ago. They went hard after us, sir. It was touch and go and they were within pistol shot of *HMS Active* at one point, but we finally lost them."

"Direction?"

"Admiral, I cannot be certain. I know my Captain thinks they may have gone west, and I agree with him, but the truth is there was no time to verify this. Their chase frigates were

the first out and we did see their ships of the line queuing to leave port in the distance, but that is the best I can offer. The winds were favoring a course to the west, but to be honest, the weather was foul and little better than what we are enduring right now. Perhaps my Captain has further wisdom on this point in his correspondence, sir?"

Nelson sighed. "Indeed. Well, this is the Mediterranean in January, isn't it? You may return to your ship, Lieutenant. Please have my clerk send word for Captain Hardy to attend me as you leave."

The Lieutenant stood and saluted, but Nelson was already slitting the envelope open with surprising dexterity for a man with only one arm. The message inside didn't take long to read, for there was little to tell other than what the Lieutenant had already offered. Nelson sat back in his chair and frowned, still holding the letter, but staring at nothing as he contemplated the ramifications of the changed situation. Another knock on the door announced the arrival of his Flag Captain, drawing Nelson out of his reverie long enough to bid him entrance.

Thomas Masterman Hardy, Captain of Nelson's 104-gun flagship *HMS Victory*, came forward to stand before his Admiral and Nelson simply waved him into the chair opposite. The two men knew each other well, having long served together. In the years since the crushing defeat of the French at the Battle of the Nile the Captains of Nelson's fleet had come to be known as his band of brothers, such was the high regard with which Nelson was held.

Nelson fostered this close camaraderie with his inclusive style of leadership and the simple respect he displayed for the competent professionals his Captains were. Hardy in particular was more than the Flag Captain, being close enough to Nelson to be his best friend and, in many ways, the Admiral's missing right arm.

The two men held each other's gaze for a moment before Nelson pushed the letter across the desk for his friend to read. Nelson rose from his chair and went over to stand at the transom windows on the other side of the cabin. Having been at sea for close to three years now Nelson had no trouble with the steady roll of the ship because of the heavy seas they were in. He reached out to hold the beam framing one of the windows nonetheless, with a grasp which was more a caress than a simple touch.

Nelson loved this ship. Over his years of service Nelson had lost the sight of one eye on Corsica and his right arm at Tenerife in the Canary Islands, had suffered a brain injury at the Nile, and was wounded in the stomach off Cape St Vincent. Despite all this, Nelson somehow never felt lessened as a man, because it seemed as if *HMS Victory* had become an extension of his own body in order to compensate for his losses. She had done all he asked in his time with her and yet, once again, he knew he would now have to ask her to do more.

Behind him he heard the rustle of paper as Hardy finished reading the letter. Nelson continued staring out the transom windows at the cold, roiling seas as he spoke.

"Well, Thomas? What do you think?"

"I confess to some surprise, Horatio," said Hardy, unfazed by his Admiral's use of his first name. In private when only the two of them were together they permitted themselves a degree of informality. Hardy stood and came over to join Nelson at the window as he continued.

"Something is afoot here. We've had plenty of credible reports from multiple sources that the French in Toulon were simply not ready for this kind of a move and especially



not in this kind of weather.”

“Indeed,” said Nelson, permitting himself a frustrated sigh. “I never should have left the blockade.”

“Horatio, there was no choice. Everyone was in dire need of the provisions we took on in Sardinia. The men can’t be fed nothing. My report will back you to the hilt on your decision to leave the frigates while we dashed here for supplies. And meanwhile, the French decide this is the instant to make a run out at this time of year and in this weather? Horatio, this was a reasonable risk for us to take. Which again brings me to the point something else is going on here. I don’t think they have come out to face us. As far as we know it is Admiral Villeneuve we face in Toulon. The man knows damn well who his opponent is and what would happen if he tried to take us on, even with the whole Toulon fleet at his back.”

“Well said, my friend. And I agree with you. The question is, if they are not coming to face us, then where are they going? I am thinking Egypt again, Thomas.”

Hardy rubbed his chin in obvious thought before frowning.

“Well, God knows they wanted it bad enough to try once before. But what about the winds?”

“I know, that is a concern. But in reality, if they have been prodded into action, perhaps by Napoleon himself, this may explain this strange decision to come out. We all know Napoleon isn’t a sailor. He wouldn’t care what the wind or weather was doing.”

“True. And the reasons for going to Egypt again are unchanged. If they succeed in taking and holding it, they have a base with which to make the move on our possessions in India they want so badly.”

“Yes, and we will never be forgiven if we let them have the opportunity. Added to this is we have had no intelligence from London about anything like this happening. Well, this all means we are on our own and I simply must act as I see fit. I will contemplate this further, but I think we will be on our way to Egypt at dawn, Thomas. Please signal an invitation to the fleet Captains to dine with us here tonight. We must talk about the situation and I must make my rationale and intent clear to them. I must also give some thought to disposition of the frigates. We must leave some to scour the area, despite having a nigh impossible area to cover, and give us intelligence in case my logic is wrong.”

Nelson turned to face his friend with his fist clenched in frustration.

“Damn me, Hardy. I never have enough frigates.”

“It was ever thus, Admiral. I shall take leave and make the arrangements now.”

Nelson remained standing at the windows staring out to sea, once again lost in thought. He went over his logic methodically, but he saw no flaws in it. He knew he could be wrong, but he simply couldn’t take the chance of losing Egypt. And if he was wrong, he would still be able to return and sweep west through the Mediterranean for signs of the French fleet.

The problem was it would take two weeks to sail to Egypt. Nelson consoled himself with the thought he would still have time to return soon enough to come to the aid of British possessions such as Sardinia and Malta if they were the true destination of his foes.

The only other possibility was the French were attempting to escape the Mediterranean to the Atlantic for some reason. If so, Nelson felt confident there were enough resources

at Gibraltar, along with Sir John Orde's small squadron off Ferrol, to keep the French at bay until he arrived.

Nelson shook his head in frustration, but he reached out to caress his ship and draw the strength he needed from it yet again to carry on. He felt a strange sense of shared destiny with the ship steal over him as he did so, and his resolve hardened.

*HMS Victory* and her Admiral would be relentless in their pursuit of the French fleet.

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Rear Admiral Edouard Burguès le Comte de Missiessy was not a happy man, although his frustration had nothing to do with his current role as commander of a French naval squadron. The problem was what he was now supposed to do with it.

Admiral Missiessy received three sets of sealed orders from Paris in late December. The first set directed him to make ready for sea and to sail from his base in Rochefort, on the rough, western coast of France to the port of Ferrol on the northern tip of Spain as soon as possible. No explanation was given as to why, although he was directed to embark a large number of French soldiers.

The second set of orders was not to be opened until reaching Ferrol, which he had done as soon as he arrived. This next set of orders at least gave him some guidance as to what was expected of him and, more importantly, where he was supposed to go as his first real destination. That he was not being permitted to read the final set of orders until reaching this specific destination several weeks hence was the most annoying part.

The temptation to simply open the third envelope now was enormous, but he couldn't bring himself to do it as he sat at his desk in the great cabins of his 120-gun flagship *Majestueux*. The Admiral had been serving in the French Navy since he was ten years old and the instinct to obey orders no matter what had long since been drilled into every fiber of his being. He would obey his orders, but he didn't have to like it.

In all his years of service the Count had never seen a level of secrecy attached to his orders quite like this and he was unimpressed. The Count had risen in the service, serving in the American War of Independence, and when the French Revolution came he was a frigate commander. Imprisoned for a time because of his suspect loyalties and status as a noble, he was freed to serve again because of the need for people with experience.

Through it all the Count felt he had proven his loyalty to his country many times over, so being treated as someone who could not be trusted with top secret information was insulting. But orders were orders and he wasn't about to compromise his loyalty over it.

A knock on his cabin door broke his thoughts and he tore his gaze away from the still sealed final envelope long enough to bid whoever it was to enter. His Flag Captain, Georges Berger, entered and came to stand before the desk, saluting as he did.

"Admiral, all is now ready. The last of the soldiers from Ferrol are finally aboard the ships and your Captains have signaled their readiness. We await your orders to proceed. However, a message has come from the commander of the local garrison here. You and your Captains are invited to dine ashore with them tonight."

The Admiral rubbed his chin in thought.

"Has the weather eased?"

The Flag Captain shrugged. "My sailing master swears this storm is abating and he thinks tomorrow will be better, but I can't tell if he is right or not. This is the Atlantic in January, after all."

"Well, then. No point missing out on one last shore dinner before we sail. The food will

likely be far better than what we're going to have the next long while. And besides, we don't really want over three thousand soldiers on the ships throwing up because of a storm the second we leave port, do we?"

The Flag Captain laughed. "There will be plenty of opportunities for that, I'm sure. And the bonus for waiting till dawn also means the British trying to blockade us will get to suffer through the storm while we enjoy a pleasant dinner ashore. I like that thought, Admiral. Shall I reply accordingly and send word to your Captains?"

"Please do," said Missiessy, with a wave of his hand to dismiss the man.

As the cabin door closed behind the Captain, Missiessy went back to staring at the remaining sealed envelope on the desk before him. He sighed and put it away in a drawer of his desk, locking it with a key he kept on a chain around his neck at all times. The Admiral got up and went over to a side table bearing a decanter filled with cognac. He poured himself a generous helping and went to stare out his stern windows, enjoying his view of the fleet around him at anchor in Ferrol's harbour.

That there were a few British warships attempting to keep him bottled up in Ferrol was not a concern. What they didn't know is the force under his command had increased significantly, for his orders were to amalgamate the few ships he brought with him from Rochefort together with what was already awaiting him in Ferrol.

In addition to his flagship *Majestueux*, he now had four 74-gun ships of the line, three 40-gun frigates, two 16-gun corvettes, and one schooner at his disposal. This was a force capable enough to swat away any British ship of the line or a couple of frigates trying to keep them at bay.

The squadron was also large enough, along with its significant complement of soldiers, that he knew he could cause plenty of havoc when they got to where they were going. He certainly had his doubts about the true readiness of the men and the ships under his command, but this was a problem he could work on while he made his way to their destination. He just wished he knew what else was to be expected of him. He sensed there could be much more to the picture, but the question was what.

He reached up with his free hand to grasp the key hanging around his neck for a brief second, but with effort let it go as he found his resolve. Sighing, he downed a large measure of the cognac in his glass and went to get ready for dinner.

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Admiral Pierre-Charles-Jean-Baptiste-Silvestre de Villeneuve was not a happy man as he entered his cabin with his servant Jules following behind. Steadying himself with one hand on the wall from the constant, heavy lurching of the ship, he stripped off his sodden, frigid clothes and wordlessly piled them in the servant's arms. The driving, freezing rain outside had penetrated all of his defences even though he had huddled in his heavy weather canvas cloak while on deck.

"Do you wish me to return and lay out a dry uniform for you, Admiral?"

"No," he replied, in a tone which was close to a growl. "Leave me. I will take care of myself. Send for my Flag Captain and then leave us alone. I must think."

Five minutes later Villeneuve was fully dressed once again. He was warming himself with a generous glass of brandy from the chill he still felt when a knock came at his door. His Flag Captain Jean-Jacques Magendie was ushered in, looking as chilled and unhappy as the Admiral had only minutes before.

The two men shared a silent moment of commiseration before Villeneuve gestured with

a questioning look at the brandy decanter. The Captain appeared grateful and he nodded. "Thank you, Admiral. Just a small one to warm myself. I must keep my wits about me. We are not safely out of this yet."

Villeneuve poured him a small shot and handed the glass to his Captain. The Admiral knew the man was right, for if his 80-gun first rate ship of line *Bucentaure* was struggling in the gale outside like this, he knew the other ships under his command would be faring even worse.

"How long before we are free of this, Jean?"

The Captain shrugged. "The frigate we had to take in tow is slowing us and everyone else down. But I think we are sailing away from the storm's grip now. It will be better by tonight, but it will be a long, slow sail back to Toulon, Admiral."

"And the men?"

"They will need rest in port, Admiral, especially the raw recruits. We have far too many of them and they are in no less need of training than before we left Toulon. We will need to be on guard when we return, because I fear they were totally unprepared for this and will attempt to desert at the slightest opportunity. The ships will obviously need repairs, too. I can't say for certain, but I think everyone has sustained damage, some far worse than others. This gale came on so fast I can hardly believe it. It is simple bad luck, Admiral."

Villeneuve stared at the remaining brandy in his glass and gave it a swirl before taking a much smaller sip than he wanted to.

"Yes, bad luck. I fear we will have to push them hard nonetheless, Jean. Our master is not a patient man. You are dismissed."

As the door closed behind him Villeneuve finally gave into temptation and downed the remainder of his brandy, before sighing and pulling the decanter over to refill his glass with a smaller portion this time.

Like many of his contemporaries, Admiral Villeneuve was of noble birth and had grown up serving in the French Navy. Unlike others, he had taken part in the Revolution willingly and survived to continue his rise. But Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte was proving a hard taskmaster who expected results. He was also proving to be secretive in the extreme.

The Admiral was still puzzled and frustrated regarding the strange orders he had received. He knew what he was supposed to do and where he was supposed to take his forces, but only to a point. This was highly unusual, because requests for guidance when on a distant, foreign station would take many weeks for messages to be sent and returned. That he was taking a significant force with him, without a clear understanding of the ultimate goal, left him feeling hamstrung.

The question gnawing at Villeneuve was what it all meant. The particular worm of fear squirming inside him was the thought Napoleon simply didn't trust him any longer, although why this could be was the next question. Unfortunately, at least some part of the answer to that seemed all too obvious.

While the long serving, professional core of the French Navy remained dedicated and hardworking, they were too few. The results Napoleon was used to enjoying on land were simply not happening at sea. The French Navy enjoyed a degree of success in small, limited engagements, but in the great fleet actions to date the record was abysmal. What remained at issue was whether Napoleon's secrecy was simply a general disappointment

and distrust with the Navy, or whether Villeneuve himself was the specific target of his displeasure.

Another possibility was some much larger plan was in progress and he and his force were simply one element of it. The Admiral grimaced as he considered the thought, knowing Napoleon had a penchant for grand designs. The Emperor was also known on occasion to be juggling several possible plans to achieve his goals in order to sow confusion among their enemies.

Worst of all, the possibility existed Villeneuve was being set up to fail by a rival within the Navy, although how the trap would be sprung or what it might be was far from clear. The French Navy had no shortage of men with ambition, and it was all too real a chance someone had found a way to manipulate Napoleon himself with their plot.

Adding to his misery were the British. The Admiral was grateful to have eluded the blockade ships of Nelson, but returning to Toulon risked returning to the earlier status quo of being trapped in a cage with a hungry lion looking to find a way in. Escaping Toulon a second time without a fight might be even harder, but he had no choice. Being an experienced officer, he could sense even from a distance the bad damage his ships had sustained, and Toulon was the best place to get his repairs done as fast as possible.

Fortunately, a small glimmer of hope existed on the point. The risk was there the British would learn of his return, but they certainly wouldn't be expecting it so soon, which meant the likelihood they would be able to bottle him up again in time was limited. If they did find him it would be even worse luck than being caught by the storm, for Villeneuve had every reason to fear facing Horatio Nelson.

The Admiral thought back to the Battle of the Nile and once again felt a small quiver of fear gnaw his stomach. Villeneuve was in command the rear division of the French fleet and he saw the destruction wrought by Nelson and the British firsthand. He was on one of only two French ships to escape from the battle, but was subsequently caught by the British at Malta. Freed in an exchange, Villeneuve was forgiven by Napoleon and given a new command. But ever since Villeneuve had wondered at just how solid his position with Napoleon really was.

Villeneuve finished his brandy and rose unsteadily to make his way to his chart table. He looked at the map of the Mediterranean still unrolled on the table where he had left it and stared gloomily at the distance they had to cover to return to Toulon. The only positive he could find was the hope when he next left port the weather would be better than what they were now facing at the end of January. His hope was he could be back on his way by the end of February, but he despaired even as the thought came, knowing how slow the naval dockyard in Toulon could be.

The Admiral knew there was only one solution, risky though it was. He would take his time sending word of what had happened to Paris. Blame for this in his report would rest on the dockyard itself. The reason to hold off would thus be he wanted to give a full picture of the situation and when he would resume following his orders.

Using this he could paint an image of himself as a thorough, capable officer hamstrung with incompetence in the Dockyard. He could only hope Napoleon would not see it differently and conclude Villeneuve was a leader hiding behind the bureaucracy and shortcomings of others to escape blame. But because the report would only be sent just before he was ready to depart, he would be long gone from Toulon. And this, hopefully, would give him a chance to fulfill his orders and do something to regain the trust he

feared may already be lost.

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With the steady, methodical crash of the welcoming gun salutes firing in response to the forts which were doing the same, *HMS Victory* sailed slowly into the Grand Harbour of Valletta on the island of Malta at the end of February, 1805. Nelson and Hardy were standing on the starboard side of the ship enjoying the sunshine and pleasant, unseasonably mild warmth of the day.

The hint of an early spring in the air was enough to bring Nelson out of his great cabin feeling like a bear coming out of his den from hibernation, but in truth he always enjoyed seeing this island and would willingly appear regardless. Malta's fate was to be a crossroads for the many civilizations rimming the Mediterranean and it had a storied history Nelson drew inspiration from. But even if the weather weren't so pleasant, Nelson would still have appeared on deck to enjoy a view of sailing past the forts of Valletta.

Two key forts involved in the Great Siege of Malta in 1565 guarded the Grand Harbour, one on each side, and they both played critical roles in the defence against the besieging Turks. The Hospitaller Knights manning the walls together with Maltese soldiers withstood great hardship and vicious fighting for several months that year, culminating in defeat of the far larger force of the invaders. The lesson of what could be achieved with steadfast resolve like Jean de la Vallette, his Knights, and the Maltese people displayed was not lost on Horatio Nelson.

"Let us hope we have news today, Captain Hardy. And let us hope it is good news for once."

"I agree, Admiral," replied Hardy, while keeping a watchful eye on the efforts of his First Officer to bring *Victory* safely to a berth along the docks before continuing.

"I think we will get some news, whatever it may be, Admiral. I recognize that fellow standing beside the port officers on the dock. He is senior clerk to the Governor. He wouldn't be here if he didn't have something to impart that couldn't wait."

"Very good. Bring him with you and join me in my cabin when he is on board. Be it good or bad, at least it is news and our frustrating wait will be over."

"Admiral, I know you have been second guessing your decision, but I still believe it was the right one. We had to make sure they were not making an attempt on Egypt once again. The Admiralty will agree."

"I know, Hardy. You must forgive me my moments of weakness. As frustrating as it was to find no sign of the French, you are right. And now let's hope we have news that will help us bring them to account."

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An hour later the messenger from the Governor rose from his chair to leave the two officers.

"Captain Hardy, I will convey your requests for the usual supplies and water to the Governor. When we received word of what had happened, we anticipated you might stop here on your return voyage. Everything you need will be loaded in short order and you can be on your way expeditiously. But for tonight, the Governor has extended invitation to you both to dine with him. May I tell him you will attend?"

"Please do, sir, and thank you for all your help," said Nelson, rising to shake hands with the clerk. As the door closed behind him the two officers turned as one to look at each other.

“Well, a tiny bit of good fortune for a change, Horatio.”

“Yes. I am not surprised they had to return to Toulon. This merely confirms the intelligence we have received over the last months. The French Navy simply doesn’t have the experience and resolve we do. We both know if we were in the same position the storm would have been a challenge, but we would have got through it.”

“And it may be their ships weren’t in as good a shape as they needed to be in the first place. Well, whatever the reason, at least now we know where they are.”

“Hardy, we must make best efforts for Sardinia the instant we are able. I fear they are not going to stay long in port, and we must be ready for them.”

“My officers are already pushing the men hard, Horatio. We will be on our way before the day is out tomorrow. Even better, the tide will be with us. But what do you think they are going to do? Are you sure their orders will remain the same?”

“I am, Hardy,” said Nelson, reaching for the bottle of wine on the table before them to top up their glasses. The two men took a minute to down portions of their wine in silence before Nelson continued, holding his glass aloft to peer at what was now left.

“Say what you will about the French, they make damn fine wine.”

Hardy laughed and Nelson grinned.

“Look, I have been giving it thought ever since we came up empty handed in Egypt. None of the possibilities that come to mind are pleasant. Hardy, if they haven’t come for Egypt, Malta, or Sardinia, then they really are attempting an escape from the Mediterranean itself. I feel it in my bones. The real question is what they might do once they break out.”

“Gibraltar?”

Nelson grimaced, taking another mouthful of his wine before responding.

“Too well defended. Not impossible, but I can’t see why a fleet is necessary, unless they think they will have to face us while they try. And as I believe you said to me a while back, they are not interested in facing me.”

“Portugal? The Caribbean? Or perhaps even the Channel itself? Or some other mad scheme by Napoleon?”

“Perhaps, my friend. Sadly, there are too many possibilities and none of them are pleasant. But we must be of good cheer. For now, we at least have some sense of what the game is. We don’t know all of their mind yet, but we will. And now I must consider how to put a stop to this. Hardy, they must not escape us a second time.”

“What do you propose, Horatio?”

Nelson rubbed his chin in thought for a few moments, before standing and taking hold of his glass of wine. Hardy took the cue and rose to join him, glass in hand.

“I think we should see if we can’t arrange a little surprise for Admiral Villeneuve. If he goes west again, as I expect he will, there are only so many courses he can chart. Perhaps we can find a way to ensure he falls into a little trap, eh? I will put my mind to it on our way to Sardinia.”

“And I will get us there as fast as possible, Horatio.”

“Well, then, let us toast to success,” said Nelson, raising his glass in concert with his friend.

“To victory!”

