

QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR

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## QUEEN TAKES EMPEROR

### 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.

### Characters

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

### Place

Prussian headquarters in Tilsit, East Prussia

### Time

July 6, 1807

*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 apologize.

**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.

**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!

**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.

**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 rumors, 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.

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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?

**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.

**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.

**LOUISE:** So. With this treachery Alexander gains your favor. 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.

**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.

**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?

**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.

**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.

**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?

**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.

**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.

**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.

**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?

**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 honor. 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.

**LOUISE:** You have a strange morality. Pleading honor, 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.

**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 lifesize 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.

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

**NAPOLEON:** Ah. A clumsy maneuver. 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.

**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 colors." 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.

**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.

**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:** Honor 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.

**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...

*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 realize 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. Savoring this victory is enough.

**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.*