The INVISIBLE EMPEROR

Napoleon on Elba

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

First published in the United States of America in 2018 by
Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Book design by Marysarah Quinn
Map illustration by Jeffrey L. Ward

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 802 6
eISBN 978 1 78283 336 9

Paradise is an island. So is hell.

—Judith Schalansky, *Atlas of Remote Islands* (2010)

. ——————— .

Lucky Napoleon! This is the most beautiful island. . . . There is no winter in Elba; cognac is threepence a large glass; the children have web feet; the women taste of salt. . . . The Island I love, and I wish I were not seeing it in one of the seasons of hell.

—Dylan Thomas, postcards and letters from Elba (summer 1947)

. ——————— .

The Island of Elba, which a year ago was thought so disagreeable, is a paradise compared to Saint Helena.

—Napoleon, on Saint Helena (February 1816)

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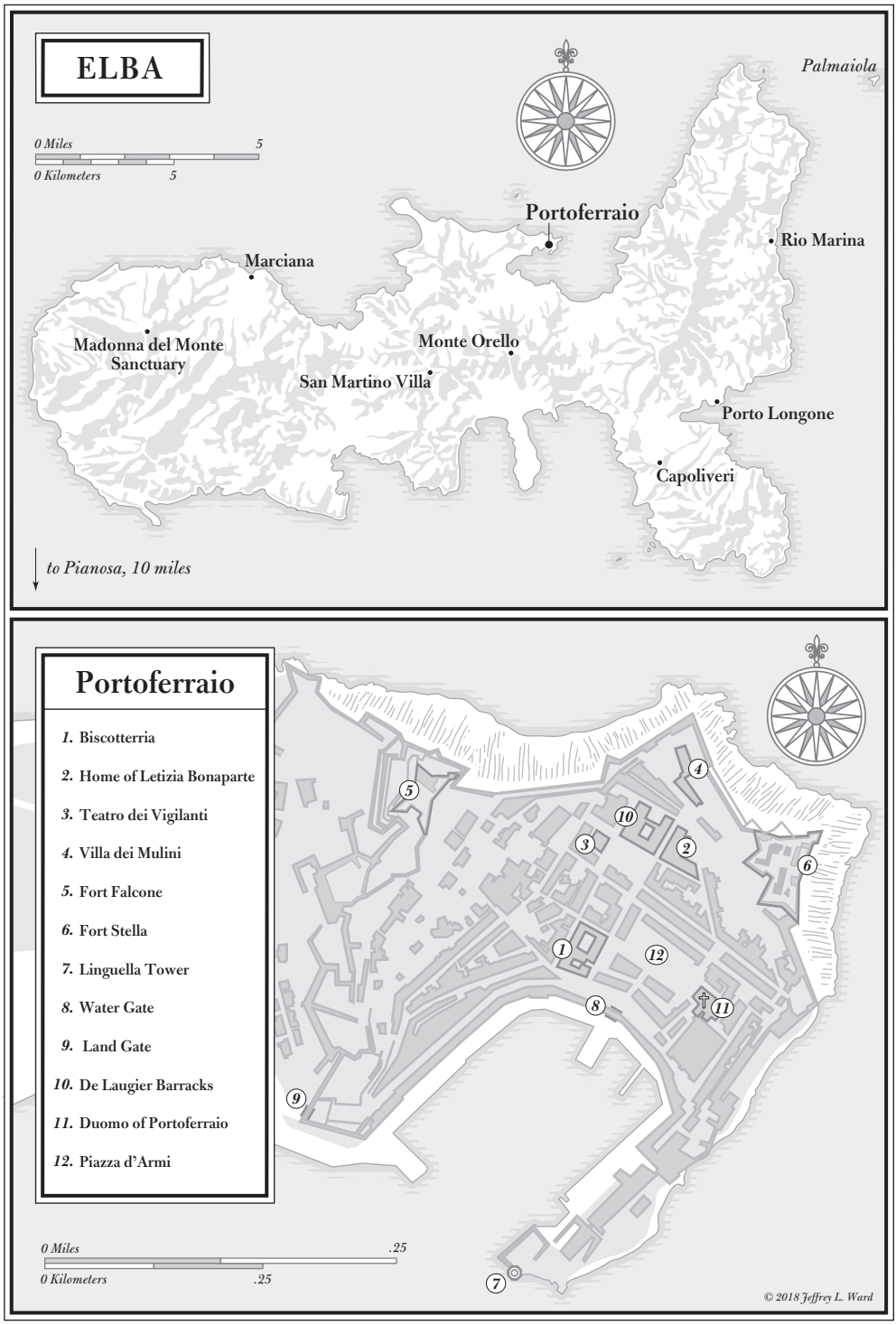
ELBA
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EUROPE, circa 1815
London
North Sea
ENGLAND
NETHERLANDS
GERMAN STATES
Paris
Fontainebleau
Vienna
FRANCE
SWITZERLAND
AUSTRIAN EMPIRE
VENICE
KINGDOM OF SARDINIA
LOMBARDY
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0 Miles 100 200
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Florence
Adriatic Sea
Fréjus
Golfe-Juan
Livorno
TUSCANY
Marseille
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PAPAL STATES
Elba
SPAIN
Mediterranean Sea
CORSICA
KINGDOM OF THE TWO SICILIES
Napoleon's Escape
to Antibes
Gorgona
Partridge
Noon, Feb. 27,
"Three sail" sighted
5:00 a.m., Mar. 1,
Partridge meets Fleur de Lys
6:00 p.m., Feb. 27,
Zéphir meets Inconstant
8:00 p.m.,
Feb. 28
Fleur de Lys?
6:00 p.m.,
Feb. 28
TUSCANY
0 Miles 10 20
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Capraia
Zéphir
Melpomène?
Macinaggio
Inconstant
Feb. 27
8:00 a.m.,
Feb. 28
Piombino
Palmaiola
CORSICA
Portoferraio
Elba
Porto Longone
to Naples
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Saint-Florent

INTRODUCTION

IT ALL FELL APART quite quickly. From the towers of Notre-Dame and some of the higher rooftops, people watched through telescopes as invaders breached the outskirts of Paris on the night of March 29, 1814. Cossacks crouched round their campfires atop Montmartre, the sounds of their eerie music drifting down into the village below. They were toasting the death of the miller of the Moulin de la Galette, whose ravaged body was tied to one of the mill's sails, or so went the rumor.

Parisians had good cause to be terrified just then. Fearing the populace's revolutionary potential as much as any foreign force, French officials decided against distributing arms en masse, even after troops failed to hold the enemy beyond the gates. This left the city's defense to the twelve thousand members of the Paris National Guard, facing a force nearly ten times larger.

Though the result would have been obvious to everyone going in, the spectacle was played out just the same. A British artist who lived in Paris, Thomas Underwood, recalled passing that bright spring day among "fashionable loungers of both sexes" at a popular café on the boulevard des Italiens, "sitting, as usual, on the chairs placed there and appearing almost uninterested spectators of the number of wounded French and prisoners of the allies

which were brought in." Each side suffered roughly nine thousand casualties, making this the deadliest battle of 1814.

Napoleon's subjects wouldn't soon forget his failure to appear in the capital alongside his generals. After a year and a half of fighting across much of Europe, an allied coalition led by Britain, Austria, Prussia, and Russia had driven French soldiers out of German territory and crossed into France. Instead of falling back to Paris, the obvious target, Napoleon had opted to dig in by the Aube River about a hundred miles east of the city, thinking he could cleave the attacking forces in two and defeat each half in succession. This had freed other allied troops to reach Paris largely unchecked.

Allied and French representatives had been trying to arrange Napoleon's surrender for months. Joseph Bonaparte warned his brother that people would turn against him as soon as they realized he preferred prolonging war to making "even a disadvantageous peace." But aside from a few brief moments of armistice, Napoleon had kept fighting, forever seeking the one dramatic victory that would allow him to negotiate from a position of strength. Having risen from artillery officer to general to First Consul to Emperor of the French on the promise of constant and glorious triumph, he feared he would be overthrown at the first sign that he was even considering bending to an opponent's demands.

Napoleon had ridden for Paris as soon as he realized his mistake, switching out his exhausted horses for fresh ones borrowed along the way at intervals. But by the time he reached a posthouse just south of the city, around midnight on March 30, he was too late; a column of French cavalry had already arrived with news of the capitulation signed hours earlier by representatives of his trusted general and confidant, Marshal Marmont.

Realizing they could avoid a wider massacre by surrendering, Parisians had rushed into the streets to welcome the occupying soldiers with shouts of "Down with the Emperor!" and "Death to the Corsican!" Imperial eagles and N's gave way to fleurs-de-lys, the stylized lilies of monarchy. People waved handkerchiefs of white, the traditional color of the Bourbon dynasty that had once ruled France. They brought down the statue of a laurel-crowned Napoleon that had topped the Colonne de la Grande Armée in the Place Vendôme,

built from melted-down cannons seized in the battle of Austerlitz, his gift to the city he had promised to make the most beautiful that ever existed.

After a short sulk by the side of the road, Napoleon retreated to the castle complex of Fontainebleau, nearly forty miles to the southeast, sending his aide-de-camp Armand de Caulaincourt to negotiate in Paris on his behalf.

At Fontainebleau, surrounded by his marshals, with soldiers bivouacked on the lawn and injured men recuperating in the outbuildings, he spoke of launching a counterattack on the occupied capital. He had about forty-five thousand troops at his disposal. But while his harangues drew cheers from the members of his Guard, beyond the castle confines such talk would have been dismissed as madness. Every village and town in Europe had been marked by the two decades of nearly perpetual war, with estimates of the death toll in the major conflicts since 1803 ranging from one to six million. Most of these deaths came not in the quick of battle but from festering wounds, or from dysentery, or from frost, or from being marched past the point of exhaustion. It was common to see mental patients forced out of asylums to free up space for incoming injured men.

"Nothing but abdication can save us!" said the esteemed Marshal Ney, not quite to Napoleon's face but loud enough for him to hear. And then he made a joke with ominous undertones, telling Napoleon he had no reason to worry since nobody wanted "to act out a scene from Saint Petersburg," a reference to the assassination of Tsar Paul I masterminded by two of his generals.

Napoleon began drafting the document of his abdication. At its height, his empire had spanned half the European continent and beyond. He had directly or indirectly governed the lives of some eighty million people. Soon he would be sent to a place with less than a hundred square miles of territory and a population of just over twelve thousand.

NAPOLEON'S POWER had rested largely on his ability to tell a compelling story, both about himself and about the historical significance of his rule. "What a novel my life has been!" he supposedly said, looking back on his accomplishments. The Napoleonic novel promised all those who consumed it

that they were participating in a glorious adventure simply by doing so. Napoleon and his supporters crafted this seductive lie through images as well as words. Their story depended on the right costuming (the famous hat, the hand in the greatcoat), the right heraldry, the right painting, the right sculpture and architecture. It depended on grandiose ceremonies and lavish processions. But while Napoleon presented himself as a sight to behold, the living embodiment of some abstract notion of greatness, the viewing was always meant to be done from a distance.

Which is what made the Elban exile such an unusual moment in this most unusual life. On Elba, Napoleon was seen by more people at closer range than at any other point in his career. Stripped of his wealth, abandoned by most of his family and all but a few members of his coterie, he was made to interact daily with men and women from different social stations. One afternoon might find him sharing a meal of hard-boiled eggs and crusty bread with the laborers preparing his hilltop villa for a much-delayed visit from his wife and child; another might find him serving as a kind of tourist attraction for a humble copper-master from Wales who showed up unannounced asking to see the Emperor of Elba and was granted an hours-long interview with the man who only a few months earlier had wielded more power than anyone on the planet.

What follows is the story of Napoleon's disappearance from the main stage of global power in the spring of 1814 and his reappearance the following winter, when he and a few hundred followers landed on a beach in southern France to begin their ultimately disastrous march on Paris. But rather than focusing on how Napoleon was rendered invisible during the ten months separating those two points, this history instead traces how people started to see him in new ways during that same stretch of time, precisely because he'd been banished to such a seemingly remote place and into unprecedented intimacy with others.

SPRING

{ 1 }

The Morning of the Poison Lump

Through the thin wall of the closet he lately called his bedroom, the valet Pelard heard liquid being poured into a glass, and then a gulp followed by a long silence, and he knew the emperor had poisoned himself. Another attendant had hidden his pistols, but this had been insufficient precaution. Only its creator, the physician Yvan, knew of the poisonous concoction of opium, belladonna, and white hellebore stashed in the silken bag Napoleon had taken to carrying around his neck ever since the Moscow campaign two years earlier.

Now the chamberlains were shouting for the same Yvan. It was three in the morning, April 13, 1814, in the royal bedchamber of the sprawling castle complex at Fontainebleau, two days' hard ride south from Paris. Napoleon was forty-four, and had a wife, an ex-wife, a mistress, two stepchildren, and two young sons, one legitimate and one not.

In his fever he spoke several names: his betrayers. He called for the red morocco portfolio that held letters from his wife, Marie Louise, so it could be given to their son, Napoleon, the King of Rome.

Yvan ordered hot drinks to be brewed, administered cold compresses, and made the patient swallow vomit-inducing ashes from the fire. By sunrise the

doctor had confirmed his initial suspicion that two years and its dilution in water had drained the poison lump of any real potency. Still, the task riled him, and as soon as it was completed he collapsed into a chair and had a delirious laughing fit, after which he ran outside, grabbed the first horse he could find, and rode off, leaving his hat behind in the mud.

Napoleon was left to sleep for a few more hours. Later he rose and signed the final document of his abdication:

> The allied Powers having declared that the Emperor Napoleon is the sole obstacle to the restoration of peace in Europe, the Emperor Napoleon, faithful to his coronation oath, declares that he renounces for himself and his successors the thrones of France and Italy, and that there is no personal sacrifice, even that of his life, which he is not prepared to make in the interests of France.

In Paris, people were meanwhile reading copies of a declaration signed in the name of the Russian tsar, Alexander, though actually penned by Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, Napoleon's former foreign minister and now the chief diplomat guiding the French surrender. The declaration stressed that while the allied sovereigns no longer recognized Napoleon's rule, they pledged to "respect the integrity of ancient France as it existed under its legitimate Kings" and that people should consider themselves under Alexander's personal protection until a provisional French government could be established.

Talleyrand—brilliant, elegant, reptilian—had invited Alexander to stay at his town house at the corner of rue de Saint-Florentin and the bustling rue de Rivoli, one of Napoleon's few great achievements in urban planning, meant as a modern triumphal way and named for his fame-making victory in his First Italian Campaign. Talleyrand and Alexander had been colluding since 1807, after Talleyrand resigned as Napoleon's foreign minister to protest his policies, though staying within the imperial fold as vice–grand elector, prompting the joke that this was the only "vice" he didn't yet possess. While Napoleon dismissed the higher-born Talleyrand as no more than "shit in a silk stocking," he valued his counsel and Talleyrand remained privy to military

and diplomatic intelligence, much of which he passed on to the Russians and later to the Austrians. Though he was compensated for doing so, Talleyrand seems to have been largely driven by the belief that he was saving the French people from their once promising but now disastrous ruler and that an alliance with Alexander offered the best chance for a lasting peace. This was the man who was famously quoted as defining treason as "only a matter of dates."

Talleyrand gently helped convince Alexander and the other allied sovereigns and ministers that France should be ruled by a member of the Bourbon dynasty: the Count of Provence, Louis Stanislas Xavier, younger brother of the guillotined Louis XVI, who would return from exile to lead a constitutional monarchy as Louis XVIII. Talleyrand predicted that the French Senate, stocked with his cronies, would grant institutional legitimacy to a Bourbon monarchy and that Louis, "having always had more liberal ideas and having lived in England, would return with the desired opinions."

People knew little about the exiled Louis aside from his famous name, and no one under the age of twenty-one had known a France that included a Bourbon. Yet his appeal was clear. He offered a living link in a dynastic chain that led back to the sixteenth-century grandeur of Henri IV and further to the very roots of the Capetian dynasty that had been established before the turn of the millennium. A Bourbon on the throne promised not only a definitive end to the Napoleonic age, but a return to order—just as Napoleon in coming to power as First Consul had declared the French Revolution and with it years of civil strife to be finally at an end.

The allied leaders had never actually formulated a clear idea of what they would do after Napoleon's fall, if they did manage to defeat him, just as they had never publicly called for the absolute destruction of the Bonaparte dynasty while fighting France. A Bourbon restoration appeared to many of the principal diplomats to be the least terrible option from which they now had to choose.

To stave off any chance of a desperate rally, the allies granted Napoleon light terms of surrender. He was allowed to keep his head, for starters, since it was feared that executing him would throw France into civil war. He still inspired feverish devotion in some circles, especially among those who killed and died by trade, and with so many public squares still bearing the stains of

a guillotine's work, no ruler wanted to suggest a beheading as the way to cap a victory. Napoleon also escaped heavier punishment because Europe's sovereigns still thought of themselves as a band of equals, "cousins," as he liked to call them, bound despite internecine conflicts by blood, history, and protocol. They alone understood the heavy task of ruling and they alone understood that a defeated emperor must be treated with the deference due his title, even if in this case the ruler in question had invented that title for himself.

The question now was where to put him. If the point of banishment was to render a threatening person invisible and ineffective by removing him from a place of power, Napoleon presented a strange case in the history of exile. He'd "not simply been at the center of the world," as one biographer put it, "but [had] *been* that center." Before sending Caulaincourt off to negotiate his surrender, Napoleon had told him to push for asylum in Great Britain, where he imagined a kind of country-squire existence as guest of the empire he claimed to respect most after his own. When Caulaincourt proposed the idea to the British foreign secretary, Castlereagh, the latter said he was shocked and embarrassed at even being asked.

Napoleon meanwhile wrote to Marie Louise, telling her to send "a very strong letter to your father commending yourself and your son to his care. . . . Make it clear . . . that the time has come for him to help us." Her father was the Austrian emperor, Francis I, who four years earlier had arranged for his then eighteen-year-old daughter to marry the newly divorced Napoleon. At forty-two, Francis had been only two years older than the groom at the time of the wedding, though with his ash white hair, frail frame, and timid bearing he looked much older than his age. The marriage forged an uneasy alliance between Europe's oldest dynasty and its newest. The Habsburg archduchess Maria Luisa became Marie Louise of the house of Bonaparte, empress of France. But Francis now had nothing to gain by his association with his defeated son-in-law. "The principal thing is to get Napoleon out of France," he wrote to his foreign minister, Count Klemens von Metternich. "And, please God, as far off as possible."

Alexander was meanwhile toying with the idea of a Russian exile. "I am more his friend than he thinks," he told Caulaincourt when they met in Paris

to negotiate the aftermath of Napoleon's abdication. Even while speaking of himself as a crusading "Angel" who had finally completed his quest to defeat the French "Antichrist," Alexander still admired his enemy's military brilliance and statesmanship; if Napoleon had sometimes acted ruthlessly it was only because he understood, as Alexander did, the value of unscheduled brutality. Napoleon had been similarly impressed by the tall and imposing Romanov. "If he were a woman," he once told his first wife, Joséphine, "I think I would make him my mistress."

The tsar eventually recognized that the other sovereigns were unlikely to favor Napoleon living under his protection, a setup that would have paired the two most dangerous men on the globe in relatively close quarters. His negotiations with Caulaincourt for an alternate solution weren't as tense as might be imagined; the two men had established a camaraderie from Caulaincourt's years as ambassador to Saint Petersburg. After ten days of talks the tsar devised an only slightly less eccentric solution than a Russian exile.

How Alexander came to choose Elba as the site of Napoleon's banishment remains a mystery. He and Caulaincourt fixed on the strategy of an island exile early in their discussions, floating Corfu, Sardinia, and even Corsica as options. There was a certain symmetry in casting this upstart islander back out to sea, a warning from this most hereditary of sovereigns and ruler of Europe's largest landmass to any other parvenu daring to step out of place. Alexander may have thought Elba a wise choice because it lay only a day's sail from Piombino, isolating Napoleon from the continent while keeping him close enough to observe. He might also have wanted to grant Napoleon dominion over a small and relatively well-secured bit of land surrounded by water out of genuine concern for his safety, reinforcing Alexander's religious convictions, which championed forgiveness and generosity. Or it may be that the tsar found the most insignificant territory he could think of and sent his fallen enemy there to humiliate him. Not that he gave his confederates much choice in the matter, one way or the other. He simply announced the decision as a fait accompli one night in Paris, as though testing out his newfound status as the globe's most powerful sovereign and daring anyone to oppose him.

The other sovereigns and their ministers were shocked by how boldly

Alexander had acted on their collective behalf. The British contingent wondered if Napoleon might not seduce the Elbans into forming the hard core of an army that could come to wreak havoc on the continent. Castlereagh thought this was all just more of Alexander's acting with too much emotion when it came to Napoleon, unconcerned by the ramifications of his deeply personal and quasi-mystical quest to defeat the French emperor. But Castlereagh recognized that separating Napoleon from his soldiers and warding off civil war trumped all other concerns for the time being. "The whole nation is released from their oaths to Buonaparte, but bound to *no one*," he wrote to his prime minister. "This is a dangerous state." He saw no advantage in challenging the ruler of a nation seventy times larger than Britain and so went along with the tsar's strange fancy, though he refused to sign any treaty codifying the terms of surrender.

The Austrians interpreted the tsar's choice of Elba, which lay close to their Tuscan territories, as a direct insult. "They give to others what belongs to my family . . . and Napoleon remains too near to France and Europe," Francis wrote to Metternich. The new setup forced Austria to dedicate extra resources to help make sure Napoleon stayed put, which left fewer men to deploy as a check against Russia's westward maneuvering. Metternich claimed that if he'd only reached Paris a few days earlier he would have stopped Alexander, "the biggest baby on earth," from acting "like a schoolboy who has escaped from his teacher." He predicted they would all be back on the battlefield before two years were out, but he knew that the weakened empire he represented lacked the ability to counter Russia.

Talleyrand, knowing Napoleon better than anyone, had the most reason to feel unnerved by Alexander's decision. Privately, he feared putting Napoleon so near to Napoleon's brother-in-law Joachim Murat, still the key force in southern Italy as he clung to his rule in Naples. (After months of furtive negotiations Murat had signed an alliance with Austria that January, strengthening his claim in Naples and making him an enemy of the French.) But Talleyrand sensed that the time had come for impetuous warriors to give way to orderly diplomats, of which he thought himself the shrewdest and most civilized of all, and that the real currents of power would now flow not on the battlefield or

the grandstand but around tables and behind closed doors. He stood to gain a great deal by shuffling Napoleon offstage, and quickly. "I see Talleyrand has been naturally taking as much care as possible of himself," wrote one British official to Castlereagh during the negotiations.

However odd the idea sounded, there were some practical advantages to an Elban exile. The French held it as a subprefecture under the jurisdiction of the Département de la Méditerranée, meaning that it technically formed part of metropolitan France, as was the case with much of northwest Italy. Napoleon had sent detachments there in 1802 to make it a base from which to block British trade in the region. And while it had some value from a naval point of view, handing it to Napoleon hardly constituted a huge economic loss. Across the Atlantic, islands were so valuable that a half century earlier the French had thought themselves wise for retaining sugar-rich Guadeloupe instead of swapping it with the British for all of Canada, but Elba, by contrast, had little by the way of natural resources or industry. And any island, even one as close to the European continent as this one, could serve as a kind of blank slate, terra incognita, a place that very few people involved in the matter would have known intimately, if at all, and so an empty space onto which to project all sorts of best-case scenarios. Such mysteriousness was what made islands such ideal rewards for would-be adventurers. Elba could be transformed overnight into Napoleon's fiefdom without much fuss. There is no evidence of the allies' giving any thought as to how this recoloring of the map might affect the lives of the roughly twelve thousand islanders.

Representatives of the allied powers (save for the British) put their names to what became known as the Treaty of Fontainebleau, though it was signed at Talleyrand's town house in Paris. Napoleon would retain his title of Emperor and would possess Elba as a separate and sovereign principality for the rest of his life, without the right to pass it down to any heirs. The Russians had almost single-handedly shaped the treaty's terms, though the British had devoted more men, time, and money to fighting Napoleon than anyone else, while the Austrians had arguably suffered the most humiliation at his hands, and the French were expected to foot the bill of two million francs to be paid yearly to their former emperor in return for his surrender, another key term of

the treaty. In the end, the signatories were united only in agreeing that they had crafted an imperfect solution. A British general who was following the peace negotiations closely wrote in his journal, "Napoleon in the Isle of Elba has in this case only to be patient. His enemies will be his best champions."

Why weren't Napoleon's enemies sufficiently terrified by the prospect of having the most fearsome general in recent history a day's sail from the Italian coast? The answer had much to do with water. For centuries, Europeans had thought of the sea as a boundary between order and chaos, and islands as places distinct from the realm of the everyday, worlds apart and unto themselves. Islands were for refuge and rites of passage, resting places for demigods, hermits, martyrs, knights-errant, pirates, and smugglers, and dream-spaces for seekers of sex, treasure, and utopia. For the same reasons, islands offered readymade holding pens to which to send anyone deemed dangerous to orderly society. Napoleon would be following in a long line of island exiles, real and imagined, from the Roman general Metellus Numidicus studying philosophy on Rhodes, to John wrestling with apocalypse on Patmos, to the mysterious masked convict on Île Sainte-Marguerite whose life Alexandre Dumas would turn into the stuff of fiction.

The ten-kilometer strip separating Elba from the Tuscan coast may as well have been an ocean by people's mental maps. The Elbans referred to the landmass across the water as the *continente*, the continent, rather than as *terraferma*, the mainland. The allied leaders, then, were following seemingly sound logic: that on this tiny island Napoleon would feel more distant from the centers of European power than if he were sent to the farthest tip of Siberia.