

Brothers  
of the  
Capucine



ROB McLAREN

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To Dylan

My brother who ensured I made it home  
- every time



# Brothers of the Capucine

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# Brothers of the Capucine

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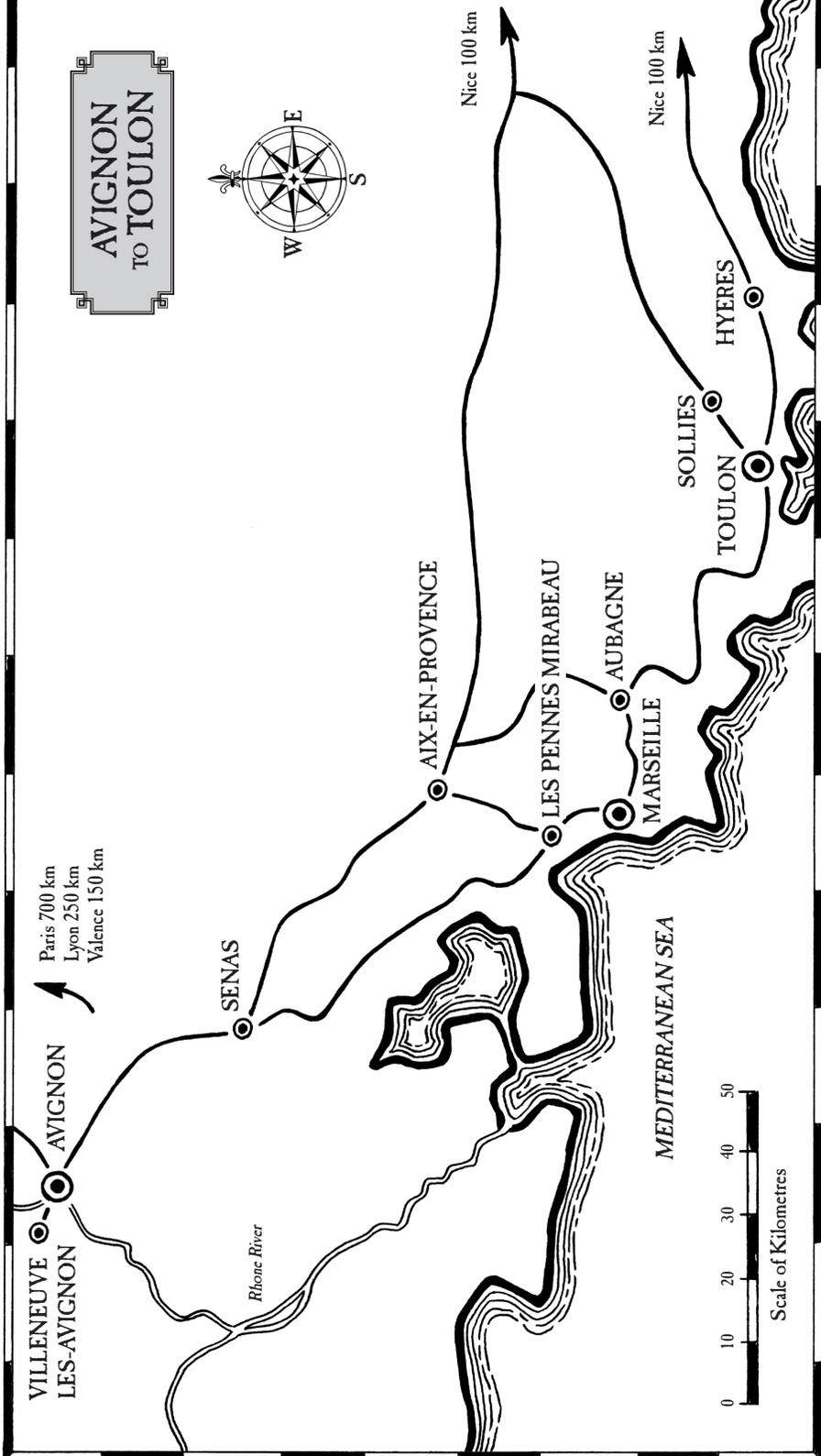
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# AVIGNON TO TOULON



# Chapter One

## *March 1793, Avignon, France*



Jobert heard Sergeant Major Koschak before he saw him.

‘If you gutless worms ever try that again, I will rip you a new asshole. I will show you royal fucking army.’

Koschak’s jacket, helmet and sword belt already lay on the ground as he unbuttoned his waistcoat. The eight corporal section commanders were braced to attention in a single rank, obscured by the dung piles and wagons beside the barrack’s wall.

The four platoon sergeants faced the men at one end of the rank. The manner in which the sergeants held their scabbards inferred they would draw their sabres and cut the corporals down at the slightest suggestion.

As Koschak removed his shirt the corporals’ eyes were wide with fear. At the sight of his muscular torso, the men began to tremble.

One sergeant jerked as he spotted Captain Jobert approaching. Jobert held up a hand and shook his head.

‘I have lost two teeth,’ Koschak lifted his lip to the corporals, ‘broken ribs,’ showing a deep indentation on his side, ‘and taken

a cut, all from enemy action,' he said, flexing a jagged scar on his left shoulder.

Koschak then turned his back on the corporals.

'There is the royal, fucking army, you sacks of shit.'

Koschak's back was so lacerated with the scars from floggings, that three of the corporals took a step backwards.

'Not enough pipe clay, horseshoe too loose and while putting a wheel on a wagon, not saluting an officer smartly enough.'

Koschak spun to face the terrified men, his roar mere centimetres from their faces.

'Do not ever fucking royal army me again, you weeping pox-sores. Ever! Men like me killed the royal army, not worthless piss dribbles like you. Men like me massacred our officers to ensure the end of flogging, not putrid snot like you. Men like me fought France's enemies, screaming "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" at the top of our lungs, while you arseholes tied pretty ribbons on each other's cocks.'

Clenching and unclenching his fists, his powerful shoulders running with sweat at his exertions, Koschak's eyes sought the slightest reason to drive his fist into any, or all, of their throats.

'How fucking dare you shame that uniform with those comments, you clap-ridden turds. As a point of regimental honour, I should reach down your throats and rip your balls out. You have no fucking idea of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" until you have killed another man to keep it, you fucking maggots.'

'You and your soldiers will not know how to survive Austrian steel unless you obey my experienced instruction. Do you seriously believe your soldiers think you are actually credible as battlefield leaders?'

The eight corporals shook, their heads wobbling, with eyes flickering from side to side but never leaving Koschak's face.

'Which of you steaming dung balls wants to go? Obviously, this company, this regiment does not understand patriotism like

you do, so fucking leave. But if you want to stay,' he now poked each man in turn in the chest with two rigid fingers, 'I challenge you to scream "I am a corporal section commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs". Go on, you spineless bitches, scream it, or I will tear your fucking hearts out.'

They screamed the required phrase for all they were worth. Flecks of their white spittle hitting Koschak's beetroot face, his malevolent green eyes not wavering from their blanched faces. Koschak stepped backwards from the last man, regarding them all with his hands on his hips.

'If you wish to instantly become a trooper forever, posted to lick my shit for eternity, you even think the expression "royal army", whilst wearing that uniform and your only desire will be the liberty, equality, fraternity you receive from an enemy's blade.

'Now, you rancid weeds, on the command "Move" you will gather your sections in column of fours on the square. If any man in your section squeaks or quivers, I will poleaxe you limp pricks, with a single blow right there, on the square. Now, ... move!'

All the men ran as if shot out of a cannon. Four men stumbled, two fell, then scrambled to run after the others.

Koschak noticed Jobert approaching as he pulled his shirt over his head.

'Good afternoon, sir. Can I assist you?'

Jobert studied the bearing of each warily still sergeant.

'Sergeant Major, my observations of the company's preparations for deployment tomorrow appear most positive, but I am keen to understand your perspective.'

'The men's readiness for deployment to either camp, or war, could not be more perfect, sir.'

A grim half-smile creased Jobert's face.

'I thought as much. Then I will let you get on. Good afternoon.'



## Chapter Two

*March 1793, Avignon, France*



It was time to go.

Yet he hefted the sabre in his hand and regarded it closely. Something he did not often do.

Jobert certainly paid attention to its cutting edge when standing by the armourer's spinning grindstone. He fussed over the speckled rust caused by brushing against the sweaty flanks of his horses, as he twirled his rag-wrapped, polish-soaked fingertip in tight circles. He inspected the tightness of the fit of the blade's tang into the hilt, both by eye and feel, when examining the brass-wire woven around the leather grip.

To wonder at the simple flesh-cutting tool itself was a rare indulgence.

When he drew it from its scabbard, Jobert felt only its weight through his wrist. To fence in the mornings, his mind was filled with the relationship of his opponent's sabre tip and weight shift in relation to his own wrist. In the charge, with knees gripping the bounding saddle, Jobert's eyes flicked between the path over which his horse raced towards his target. He never

thought of the blade extending from his locked right arm. Just the delivery of the floating steel tip to his foe.

But today was different.

Another beginning.

Today he would enter a new home and join a different family, where his total worth was measured in his knowledge of this tool.

Not my total worth, he thought. There are four essential elements of a cavalryman and his skill with a sabre was just one.

Jobert returned the steel sabre to its brass scabbard in a long-practiced, fluid movement. He drained his wine cup. With spurred heels clumping across the tavern's ancient floorboards, he walked swiftly along corridors with low beams and greasy walls. Begrimed servants pressed into doorframes and corners to let him by.

Stepping down from a stone threshold he entered the tavern yard. The warm internal reek of stale urine, smoke and garlic, with its upstairs' footfalls and murmurs changed immediately to the sharp cold of churned horse dung and mouldy hay and the shouted curses of stable boys.

Blue, always impatient, stopped his pawing hoof to greet his rider with a thrust of his great nose into Jobert's midriff.

'No, lad.' Jobert raised a warning finger at which the bay gelding stepped back. 'Today I must not be covered in your hair and snot, thank you.' Jobert gave a gentle rub with the back of two fingers to show his affection without soiling his dress gloves.

The groom had Blue ready to mount. Jobert shortened the reins, twisted the stirrup leather to place his polished toecap in the stirrup iron. Then with a muscular hop, Jobert rose up towards the grey clouds to seat himself on his sheepskin saddle cover as lightly as he would put a hat on his own head.

Horsemanship was the second essential of a cavalryman. Jobert's knowledge in this regard would be scrutinised over the

coming days, by superiors, peers and subordinates alike. As his groom wiped both of Jobert's boots clean of hay chaff and wet sand, Jobert reflected on his ability to communicate the rapidly changing dance of mounted combat to his horse, through weight shift and muscular tension.

His valet held up his helmet, a moulded leather casque. Before placing on the peaked helmet with its thick horsehair crest, Jobert regarded the long, feathered plume. The feathers of the lower two-thirds were dark green, the same colour as his heavily braided dolman jacket and his snug-fitting Hungarian breeches; the colour identified him as a chasseur.

A hunter.

A hunter of men.

The remaining top third of the plume, the tip, was yellow. The facing colour of his last regiment. A military family he had called home for his entire life.

His home no more.

Within the hour he would join a new regiment. By sunset this day a new plume would adorn his helmet. Jobert placed the helmet on his head and adjusted the fit with a wriggle of the leather peak.

Jobert turned Blue towards the tavern gate. With a squeeze through the saddle, Jobert and Blue departed at a smart walk into the raucous Avignon lanes beyond.



‘Excuse me, gentlemen. Captain André Jobert.’

As doors closed behind him, Jobert's eyes adjusted to the morning light now streaming through the tall windows, the dust mottes

rising on the air currents as the room warmed. The room smelt of fire smoke, furniture polish and parchment. His stern gaze swept the room, identifying two men: the regimental colonel and a lieutenant colonel.

‘Jobert, very good to see you again,’ said the lieutenant colonel. ‘May I introduce Colonel Morin?’

Jobert’s eyes hesitated as he recognised the lieutenant colonel, but he remained focused on the commanding officer.

‘Good morning, sir.’ Jobert saluted crisply.

‘Welcome to the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval, Captain Jobert,’ said Morin.

From under Morin’s bristling eyebrow’s, Jobert felt the colonel’s scrutiny. Of above average height, Jobert was found unremarkable, though he did sport the latest Parisian fashion choices of upper lip shaven clean and dark hair cut short and brushed forward.

‘I was only informed in the last day that you are both known to each other.’ Morin made a flourish towards the other man. ‘Lieutenant Colonel Raive speaks highly of your service together under General Dumouriez in Belgium recently. Were you aware that Lieutenant Colonel Raive was the regimental second-in-command?’

‘No, sir, I was unaware of Lieutenant Colonel Raive’s posting to the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs.’ Jobert turned to address Raive. Jobert took in the extra lace on Raive’s coat sleeves, as well as the new facings of the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs on his coat and trousers. Jobert made the mental note to have all his old regimental uniforms changed over to the new facings. ‘Very good to see you also, sir. Congratulations on your promotion.’

Morin indicated a chair, as a fresh pot was brought into the room. Jobert adjusted his scabbard and sabretache to sit

‘Sir, I must away,’ said Raive. ‘Again, good to have you with us, Jobert, but correspondence awaits. I will have your company

second-in-command summoned to meet you and he will have with him your new regimental plumes.’

Morin nodded to the departing Raive as he returned to his desk to push a number of documents in front of him.

‘With the recent execution of His Majesty ...’

Morin sought a reaction. Jobert’s face remained stern.

‘... and with the recent declaration of war by the British and the Dutch, the constant climate of both civil war and foreign invasion has heightened to an alarming degree. Another twelve regiments of chasseurs are to be raised. I am ordered by the War Committee to raise a regiment of six squadrons.’

Six squadrons! Jobert’s face tightened. The old regiments had a war establishment of four squadrons yet could barely man three.

‘In total, over one thousand two hundred men and horse. My staff and I arrived ten days ago. To raise the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs, the regiment will be based on the five hundred sabres of the recently disbanded Chasseurs Volontaires Regiment. In the current spirit of patriotism and with the War Committee’s recent levee en masse for three hundred thousand men, the districts will have our seven hundred recruits here within days.

‘Somewhere out of the current chaos issuing from Paris, I am informed trains of equipment and supplies will arrive within weeks. With the current enthusiasm and flood of promissory notes, it would appear every village in the land is sewing breeches, weaving blankets, hunting hares for hat felt and melting church bells for cannon. Except of course, for those towns in open revolt.’

Jobert watched a bitter cloud cross Morin’s face.

‘Lieutenant Colonel Raive and my staff are busy as a result. With His Majesty’s execution, manning the regiment, equipping the regiment and training the regiment cannot occur quickly enough.’

Morin reclined back into his chair to sip his tea.

‘As well as your own letter of introduction, Jobert, I have a most agreeable letter of recommendation from your previous commanding officer. You have recently served on campaign against the Austrians and Prussians as a company commander. With your previous regimental commander and Lieutenant Colonel Raive as your referees, I am entrusting command of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company to you.’

Within the mantra of ‘man, equip and train’, with one hundred recruits under his direct command for impending war, training was clearly Jobert’s immediate responsibility.

‘I am at your service, sir.’

Morin’s baleful glare locked on Jobert, his voice a menacing growl.

‘I am absolutely committed to raising a regiment ready for war in the coming weeks, Jobert. I will only accept utterly focused men to make this happen. I will not accept verbal assurances from my officers.’

Morin raised a finger, only to stab it into the desk. ‘I will only accept resolute action.’

Jobert rose and saluted. Morin dismissed him with a curt nod.

‘Again, welcome to the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs, Jobert.’



‘Excuse me, sir.’

A short, stocky man saluted, his intense brown eyes drilling into Jobert.

‘Welcome to the regiment. I am Lieutenant Geourdai, your company’s second-in-command. May I introduce our company

sergeant major, Sergeant Major Koschak.'

As blond as Lieutenant Geourdai, Koschak had a muscular neck, deep chest and powerful arms, which flexed within his jacket as he saluted.

'Welcome to the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs, sir.'

Jobert noted that both Geourdai's and Koschak's uniforms were in the correct regimental facings.

'Colonel Morin informs me there is much to do. I am keen to start immediately. Where can we talk?'

'Before we go, sir,' said Geourdai, 'the regimental second-in-command gave me a regimental plume and a company pompom for your headdress.'

Jobert took the thirty-centimetre plume of bound feathers, the lower three-quarters dyed chasseur green and the top quarter dark orange, the facing colour of the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval. At the base of the plume, just above a small brass spike which fitted into the chosen headdress, was a woven-wool sky-blue pompom, an indicator that the wearer was of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company.

'For a regiment that did not exist ten days ago, I am told, I note you are all in the new uniform. What is the dress of the day?'

'The Colonel is adamant the regiment maintains a common dress,' said Geourdai, 'to bind members of previous regiments with the daily influx of recruits and in the face of uniform supply shortages. To that end, linen pants over boots worn with your number-two tailcoat. Officers are to wear bicornes with plume, so the recruits know who to salute. Non-commissioned officers are to wear helmets with plume, again to orient the recruits. All troopers, either old hands or new recruits, are to wear bonnets-de-police. Until more uniform stocks arrive in the unit, that is dress of the day.'

'Very well, Lieutenant, then you and I need to speak of my accommodation and how I might get my current uniforms

changed over to these new dark orange facings.’

‘Capucine, sir.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘We are informed, sir, the dark orange colour is called capucine.’

Jobert placed the plume into his sabretache, the stiff, embroidered pouch which swung off his sword belt, beside his sabre.

‘You sought a place to speak, sir,’ Geourdai continued. ‘May I suggest the stables? As there are no horses in now, we will be free of interruption. From there, you might consider where you might base yourself. Our two troop commanders and I have taken rooms in a nearby tavern, just a short walk from the barracks entrance. We could visit that establishment, if you are agreeable.’

‘A fine plan, Lieutenant. Shall we proceed?’

As the three made their way from the headquarters’ steps to the stables, Jobert accepted the salutes of the non-commissioned officers observing the drilling of a new company. Geourdai and Koschak marched in step with him, spur rowels and metal-capped heels making a harsh military beat.

Once within the chill air of the empty stables, among rows of recently stacked wooden crates and hessian-wrapped bales, shielded from the noise of bellowed orders and crunching gravel emanating from the drill lessons, Jobert turned abruptly toward the other two. Geourdai and Koschak stopped to face him.

‘Let me introduce myself. I was a sergeant when my regiment mutinied. I was elected company commander. When the Austrians and Prussians invaded last year, my regiment served under General Dumouriez at Valmy and Jemappes. That is me. Who are you?’

Jobert stared grimly at Geourdai. Geourdai shuffled his feet

as he summoned his thoughts. He raised his face to Jobert, his jowl clenching as he spoke.

‘Sir, I am from the 7<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs. When the old officers departed, I was elected from sergeant to second lieutenant troop commander. My troop saw action with the Army of the Rhine last year. I joined the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs a week ago on promotion.’

‘And you, Sergeant Major?’

Koschak squinted at Jobert, raising his chin as he considered his response.

‘I too was present on the field at Jemappes last November. Lieutenant Colonel Raive was my squadron commander there and we arrived also on promotion, ten days ago. Furthermore, sir, ...’

Koschak scowled as he shifted his stance.

‘I have the clear memory, sir, of charging the Austrian trains beyond Jemappes immediately behind, then, Major Raive. I remember looking over my right shoulder and observing the Austrian hussars about to hit us in the right flank and those hussars looking over their left shoulders as you, sir and your company of 5<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs butchered your way through their left flank. For that, sir, I am much obliged.’

Jobert shifted his gaze from Koschak’s stony face to the marching men and the shouting non-commissioned officers outside.

‘Then we all have campaign experience that bodes well for our new company.’

Inhaling the strong smell of musty fodder hanging from the old spider webs on grimy walls, Jobert indicated they might sit on the closed crates and bales, stored just inside the stables’ doors.

‘The Colonel is intent on manning, equipping and training the regiment as quickly as possible. Focusing on our own 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, would you update me on manning?’

Geourdai cleared his throat, exchanging glances with Koschak before proceeding.

‘Company headquarters is not yet complete. There is the three of us, but we have not been allocated a trumpeter, a farrier or a quartermaster corporal.’

‘At troop command level, sir, we have two second lieutenants. One is away with the regimental remount group. The other, Second Lieutenant Voreille, arrived yesterday from the École Militaire in Paris. His class graduated early to fill the new regiments.’

‘Platoon sergeants?’

‘We have four sergeants, sir. One is away collecting our recruits. Another is with the remount group. Two sergeants remain in barracks, both currently working in the armoury.’

‘Corporals and chasseurs, Sergeant Major?’

Koschak grimaced at Geourdai. Jobert saw Geourdai’s face sour.

‘We have all eight section commanders for our company. Every one of them was a trooper with the Chasseurs Volontaires. They have neither prior regimental experience nor have seen active service. I foresee a range of difficulties arising from corporals who have eighteen months experience in a gentleman’s riding club.’

‘The whole French Army appears to be on promotion, Sergeant Major, with little or no experience for the roles they hold. The three of us are no exception. But we have survived our first battle and we are all that France has.’

‘Yes, sir. Of the company’s eight sections, we have manned our sections with three ex-Chasseur Volontaires and the other eight men will be recruits.’

‘We are three-quarters recruits? We could be at war with Austria once the Alpine passes thaw in the next four to six weeks. Where are these recruits? Who do we see on the square?’

‘Lieutenant Colonel Raive is bringing in a company of sixty recruits from the districts every day,’ Koschak replied. ‘Those are the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup> Companies’ recruits. We expect our recruits tomorrow.’

‘What can you tell me about weapons?’

Koschak’s jaw clenched. Geourdai wriggled uncomfortably on his crate.

‘The regiment has not yet received its issue of sabres, sir.’

‘What?’

Geourdai had lowered his face to look at Jobert up under his brows.

‘Indeed, sir. Corporals and chasseurs on guard are issued the sabres we do have. There is a limited supply of wooden swords for drill, sir.’

‘Very well. Firearms?’

‘The armoury has just received two thousand examples of every calibre of musket, rifle, musketoon, carbine and pistol imaginable, from every war France and her enemies have fought for the last hundred years. Regimental work parties are still sorting through a veritable nightmare. The regimental second-in-command is not impressed.’

‘Cartridges?’

‘No ammunition has arrived yet, sir. But we can appraise you of uniforms and equipment, if you wish, sir?’

Jobert let his gaze drift towards the parade ground activity.

‘Without sabres, does it matter how we are clothed?’



## Chapter Three



‘Gentlemen, salute.’

With heels together, the six ranks of nine to ten officers, each two ranks facing each other, each officer stripped to waistcoat and shirt, on the command of the regimental fencing master, saluted the man opposite with his wooden sabre.

Jobert stared his opponent in the eye, brought his sword hand up to his chin, the sword hilt at lip level, the action based on ancient custom of Christian knights kissing the crucifix. Then the sabre hand was brought smoothly back to just past the hip, the sabre held low, the blade tip at ankle level from the ground. This elegant sweep of blade originated from the Crusades, where Muslim warriors would draw back their lance tips as a form of recognition. Halting momentarily in this lowered position, the sabre hilt swept back up to Jobert’s lips before returning to the carry position, where the upper arm hung naturally against the ribs, the forearm perpendicular to the ground, the blade balanced directly over the wrist.

‘Gentlemen, on guard.’

The sun had not yet penetrated over the barrack rooftops. With dust from the movement of horses as stables were mucked out and smoke from the kitchen fires hanging across the chilly morning square, the officers immediately prepared themselves for action.

Jobert's left foot slid rearward taking the body weight for any forward launch. His torso twisted so his heart was furthest from his opponent's sabre tip. His right hand holding the sabre, lowered to mid-thigh level, allowed his sabre tip to align at his opponent's upper abdomen, centrally ready for offensive or defensive movement, higher or lower, left or right.

The regimental fencing master strolled between the ranks with his fencing foil reclining on his right shoulder.

'Gentlemen, listen carefully. Odd-numbered squadrons, salute.'

Three ranks saluted again.

'You gentlemen will make four attacking strokes on your opponent and then prepare to parry. Once you have completed the five actions, step one opponent to your left and repeat without hesitation until you return to your original partner.'

'Gentlemen, on guard.'

The three ranks of officers returned to a position of balance.

'Now, gentlemen, even-numbered squadrons, salute.'

The other three ranks, including Jobert and Geourdai, saluted.

'You gentlemen will make four parries against the attacking strokes and then immediately counter-attack with a cut of your own once your opponent completes his fourth stroke. Be prepared to hold your ground as a new opponent engages you from your left with the repeated pattern.'

'Gentlemen, on guard. Gentlemen, attack!'

The near instantaneous crack of sixty wooden blades colliding was heard clearly throughout the barracks. Soldiers and non-commissioned officers raced to the dormitory windows and

stable doors to observe the spirited melee in the centre of the square.

Within the delivery of the first four cuts, a simultaneous roar of sergeant's invective for men to return to their duties caught many sabreurs by surprise. More than a few wooden sabres found their mark on the thighs, ribs and arms of the distracted young gentlemen.

Each rank was given the opportunity of each exercise and many others beside. The fencing master would whip with his foil the target areas on the bodies of those to whom he directed his suggestions. Some of the younger fellows were forced to vomit quickly between the rain of blows, swearing silently to themselves and at themselves, for their over-indulgence in spirits from the night before.



Jobert watched the scene of riotous gaiety as the recruits entered the barracks square.

Laughing young men with tricolour cockades and ribbons in their hats and caps, some with tricolour sashes, some with sloshing beer steins, strolled the length of the regimental parade ground as if entering a town fair during a harvest holiday. Two young fellows, one with fiddle and one with fife, even had a merry, dusty dance cavorting in the centre of the ramble. Around them, recruits who had arrived yesterday, stopped drilling to cheer the happy crowd. Non-commissioned officers bellowed to retain control of their drill lessons.

Sergeant Major Koschak sat on his war horse like a bemused pillar, watching the shambolic merriment enter through the

stone entrance to the barracks. Beside him, mounted on a grey horse, sat a headquarters' sergeant carrying the tricolour regimental standard.

Finally, Koschak spied a mounted sergeant, 2<sup>nd</sup> Company's own Sergeant Bredieux, a wiry man with a fat-bowled pipe curving from the side of his mouth, pass through the stone entrance and wave to him, indicating he was the last man in the column.

'Who wants lunch? Gather around the tricolour, lads.'

With a cheer, the revelry gathered in a circle around Koschak and the standard bearer.

'*Vive la République!*,' Koschak bellowed. 'Welcome to the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval.'

The square boomed with response from the recruits, as well as those drilling nearby. The two horses in the centre of the crowd skittered at the roar, causing those closest to press back quickly. The standard bearer held the regimental standard aloft and wafted its silken folds.

Koschak leant on his saddle bow, looking into the faces about him.

'Who wants lunch?' That question resulted in a deafening cry.

'You,' Koschak pointed at one of the young musicians, 'yes, you with the fife. What is the loudest, shrillest note you can play?'

The young musician blew a loud squeal to which everyone recoiled and groaned.

'Excellent. Listen, friends, that is our signal for silence. Lad, if I point at you, you split our ear drums. Understand?' The boy grinned and nodded.

'Lads, listen carefully. We want to get you to lunch, but there are a few tasks to be done to make that happen. I need your help. Keep quiet, listen carefully, do as I ask quickly and

a hearty soup, fresh bread and wine will be yours before long.

‘My name is Sergeant Major Koschak and you will address me as “Sergeant Major”. I am going to request that you all line up, in your village groups, friends and family together, with your recruit paperwork in your hands. All right, off we go.’

Sergeant Bredieux and the corporals who accompanied the men for the last twenty-four hours, with good humour, pressed the chattering crowd into a single rank facing the Sergeant Major. Koschak pointed to his piper and winked and the piper produced a piercing blast.

‘Men, you are all members of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. Yes, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. In this formation, I look at you now and I know the Austrians are trembling in their boots.’

A spirited ‘Hurrah!’ erupted from all. Koschak pointed to his piper. With the signal, all stood silent.

‘When I give you the command, you are all going to turn to the right towards those tables, move forward and receive your new uniforms. Wait for it, wait for it, wait for my command, 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. Now ... 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, will move to the right in file. Right turn!’

As the company’s first drill movement, the resultant chaotic shuffle caused deep breaths, rolled eyes and wry grins from all uniformed personnel watching.

Koschak and the standard bearer dismounted and strode down the file of recruits to a series of trestle tables, besides which waited unlimbered wagons laden with bundles of equipment. Upon the tables were laid out all the items that the new soldiers were to receive.

Reclining on a camp chair, Jobert watched the corporals manage the head of the file, checking the recruits’ documents. One by one, a recruit moved forward to one of the two trestle tables where Sergeant Pultiere, a bull with a heavy moustache covering acne-pocked skin, was waiting.

‘Welcome, lad, to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company of the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval. The corporal will read out an item on the table and you will put that item into either your satchel, your paillasse, or your saddle portmanteau.’

As the recruit packed away his equipment on one table, the other table was laid out by an attendant old hand from the nearby wagons ready for the next man.

‘Well done, young fellow, well done. Now, go to the next table and hand over your paperwork.’

‘What is this, sir?’ a recruit might ask.

‘Do not call me “Sir”, I work for a living. That, my lad, is your paillasse. It is a mattress cover you fill with straw, so you may sleep each evening like a babe at your mother’s breast and awaken each morning ready for a new adventure. Now keep moving, well done.’

A further twenty paces away from Pultiere’s equipment table, Second Lieutenant Voreille and another sergeant were seated at a table, beside which the standard hung in the morning air. As each recruit approached the table, Voreille receipted the man’s documents from the central recruiting office and entered each man’s name on a growing roll. Sergeant Huin then took the equipment issue paperwork and passed the recruit a slip of paper upon which was written his name, company, troop, platoon and section. Despite having the build of a skinny, petulant teenager, Huin evaluated the recruit with grey, unblinking eyes.

‘Keep this piece of paper on you at all times. Produce it whenever you are asked. You need this piece of paper to eat and be paid. Lose it and you will be punished. Now wait here until summoned by the Sergeant Major. Do you understand?’

Each man’s face showed a sobering foretaste of the days to come.

‘Next man,’ called Koschak. ‘Yes, you lad, over you come.’

Bring your kit with you, lad. The Republic has gone to great expense to provide you the best equipment in Europe and you lose it the first time you put it down.'

Beyond the tables, Koschak was laying out a seated formation, building up the company one section of twelve men at a time.

Ever so slowly, one section became two sections, or a platoon.

Then a further two sections became a second platoon, or troop.

As the initial long file diminished, each recruit receiving equipment and handing over documents, the second troop slowly filled out to become the full 2<sup>nd</sup> Company.

Because of their original groupings of friends, the recruits came across from Huin's table to sit with known village friends or family members. The section corporal and the troopers welcomed each fellow to his seating position in the mid-morning sun and kept the new recruits from wandering off or spreading out their new equipment in the dirt.

Jobert kept a keen eye on each parcel of equipment, watching if sufficient stock was on hand for each man. Each recruit received an initial issue of one linen satchel, with mug, bowl, towel, knife, fork, spoon, soap, candle and uniforms. Two shirts, two underdrawers, two stockings, one set of linen parade breeches, one set of hemp stable breeches, one pair boots, one pair stable clogs, one summer waistcoat, one stable jacket, one undress tailcoat, one cape, one bonnet-de-police, one pailleasse, one blanket and one saddle portmanteau to carry it all in.

That equipment would allow the recruits to sleep their first night in barracks. Sword belts, cross belts and cartridge pouches were to be issued the next morning to be whitened with pipe clay that day. The following items would be issued as stores arrived; a second pair of boots, winter waistcoats, full-dress tailcoats, dolman jackets, sashes, full-dress Hungarian breeches, over-breeches and helmets.

Finally, Sergeant Bredieux accompanied the last man to be processed. Jobert watched the sinewy man, hair swept back into a queue, with thick hussar plaits against each temple, a drooping moustache framing his weathered pipe. Jobert marked Sergeant Bredieux down as rogue until proven otherwise.

Koschak signalled to his piper. The shrill squeal created silence.

‘Men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, well done on achieving that task so well. Each of you now sits in your sections. Ensure, right now, you know the face of one of your friends in your section, one old hand and your section commander.’

The invitation to look about them caused another sharp note from the fife.

‘Men of 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, your sections are grouped into platoons. Myself and these three men,’ Koschak indicated Pultiere, Huin and Bredieux, ‘will guide you as platoon sergeants over the coming days. You note your section corporals, platoon sergeants and I wear helmets. If you are addressed by any person in a helmet over the next few weeks, you are to listen respectfully and act immediately. As eagle-eyed chasseurs, you will have noticed the sky-blue pompom on each of our plumes. That sky-blue pompom indicates a man of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, your company and therefore a man who is concerned with your welfare.’

‘Now, I want to introduce some very important people within our company, also with sky-blue pompoms on their plumes. The commissioned officers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company. The men that will lead us to victory in battle against the Austrians.’

Jobert, Geourdai and Voreille stepped forward.

‘You will note these gentlemen wear bicornes. When any person wearing a bicorne enters a room, you must cease what you are doing, remain silent and listen respectfully.’

All eyes watched the three officers with a mix of suspicion, confusion and awe.

Jobert stepped forward into a central position, surveyed the company in three ranks with a frontage of over thirty men

‘I am Captain Jobert. I am your company commander. I began my service to France, as you are today, as a trooper thirteen years ago. Welcome to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company of the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseur à Cheval Regiment.

‘The War Committee of the National Convention has tasked the Sergeant Major and I to prepare us all for victory on the battlefield. The Sergeant Major and I take such responsibility very seriously. I echo the Sergeant Major’s comment. As I look at you all, on our first day together, I despair for the Republic’s enemies. Sergeant Major, carry on.’



The dining room was set for lunch. Tureens of soup, bowls of apples, platters of bread and carafes of wine sat on buffets to the side of the room under the tall windows.

‘Gentlemen!’ boomed a captain standing by the door. ‘Colonel Morin.’

The officers braced to attention. Morin surveyed the room.

‘Please sit. Allow me to say a few remarks before we dine.’

Once seated, Jobert watched Morin pace to a central position in the room. Stepping forward to the table, he poured himself a glass of wine.

‘Gentlemen, as you know, last month Britain and the Netherlands joined Austria, Prussia and Sardinia as our declared enemies. I am informed that, first, the National Convention has now declared war on Spain.’

The creaking of chairs was pronounced as fifteen silent officers adjusted their weight to accommodate the news.

‘Second, France’s gains in Belgium, in the last few months,

have just been lost with our defeat at Aix-la-Chapelle to the Austrians last week, with the loss of three and a half thousand casualties and one and a half thousand captured.'

The audience collectively breathed out in astonishment and slumped deeper into their chairs.

'Gentlemen, today France is in anarchy.

'Throughout the last four years the energies and emotions of our fellow countrymen remain unsettled, as we all seek a common understanding of liberty, equality and fraternity. Four years of fear and greed dominate the lives of ourselves, our families, our communities and our soldiers. Should we, as brothers, disagree, the waste of civil war threatens every home, every day.

'Ancient families who rule the people of neighbouring nations are terrified of the simple idea that the people of France can determine their own path. It terrifies these noble houses that their own people may erupt with the same energies and emotion and choose to determine their own path.'

Morin sipped his wine.

'Acknowledging there are many who disagree within our nation, and without, the National Convention remains the current legitimate government of France. The National Convention raises taxes from the people of France to create this regiment. The National Convention causes this regiment to exist on behalf of the people of France, to protect the people of France.

'On this very day, hundreds of regiments are forming and preparing for war. Civil war and foreign war.

'On this very day, hundreds of thousands of energised young Frenchmen are farewelled with cheers and tears to join such regiments to protect the terrifying values France now embodies.

'On this very day, millions of men and women labour ceaselessly across the length and breadth of this land to supply not only their menfolk but all the accoutrements of war.

'Here we all are. All sons of France. My regimental brothers.

On this very day, raising a regiment of one thousand two hundred men and horse. On this very day, preparing for war tomorrow.'

Morin walked to the table, poured himself another glass of wine and took a long sip.

'Why, might we ask, has France ordered another levee en masse of three hundred thousand men? Why has the Army doubled the number of chasseurs à cheval regiments, increasing regimental establishments from four to six squadrons, in essence, tripling the Army's number of chasseur squadrons?

'A number of possibilities emerge. To create nation-wide manufacture through nation-wide expenditure. To harness the energies of the young men of France. To demonstrate to all French people if you wish to maintain liberty, equality and fraternity, then you need to participate to ensure such values are sustained.

'Another military possibility exists. That in light of our experiences from the last war against Europe thirty years ago and in recent campaigns, that France can only succeed by overwhelming her enemies with so many bodies that her enemy's arms and ammunition are exhausted by our weight of numbers. In the end, whichever few French soldiers survive become the core of a most fearsome legion.'

Morin drained and then refilled his glass.

'Although tasked with raising six squadrons, I will not be satisfied with a regiment of quantity. I strive to my utmost to create a regiment of the most disciplined and hardest quality.

'To that end, I demand your best. France demands your best. Your soldiers demand your best. I daresay it, your horses demand your best. If you cannot or will not give your best, you will be sent quickly from this place.'

Morin paused to drink again.

'In the twelve months following the fall of the Bastille, one-third of the officers remained in the regiments. On the raising

of the volunteer legions, halfway through 1791, only one-sixth of the experienced officers continued to remain in the regiments. The majority of these officers promoted far beyond their experience. A new generation of officers arose to fill the void, originally sergeant majors and sergeants.'

Jobert reflected on his own rise from sergeant to captain.

'As sergeant majors were promoted to officers, our sergeants became the fresh new sergeant majors. Our corporals became the fresh new sergeants. Our best chasseurs became the fresh new corporals. New blood, new ideas, new energies.

'But now, with the Army tripling its number of squadrons, another void of experience is created. Now our sergeants are yesterday's troopers, our corporals are yesterday's volunteers in the hastily created legions.

'In the next ten days, over seven hundred raw recruits will be placed in the hands of such non-commissioned officers. Civil war, foreign invasion and now, as the recent defeat at Aix-la-Chapelle reminds us, we are threatened with severe regimental inexperience. Not only am I calling on you to do your best in the role of captains, you must do your best in the role of corporal.'

Morin considered his glass of wine.

'Man a regiment, equip a regiment, train a regiment. Let us speak of training a regiment. Any idiot can train a trooper to charge. He need only sit on the back of a galloping horse, wave his sword in the air and scream his silly head off. The lesser training challenge is to identify those who will, at the end of executing a charge, remain in the saddle without bleeding and think clearly. The greater challenge is getting one thousand two hundred men and horses, who are forced to eat and sleep in their own filth, without succumbing to disease and desertion, to arrive at that point of charge.

'On my honour, I swear to you now, I will give my best to

overcome these challenges. If you are willing to give your best to the regiment and to France, I welcome you by my side and by the side of my chasseurs.'

Morin surveyed his audience, holding each man in his fierce gaze.

'Second-in-command!'

'Sir!'

'Your parade.'

'Gentlemen!'

The officers stood. The Colonel departed.



## Chapter Four



A thick mist hung over the Rhône valley. On this particularly chilly March morning, sixteen chasseurs, riding one horse and leading four others, were having their skills as horsemen extended. Households lining the Lyon road into Avignon rose early to enjoy the morning display of horses entering the barracks and took great delight in the jostled discomfort of the troopers.

For the eighty horses, despite walking for two hours, the sights, sounds and smells of the outer suburbs of the city were certainly providing extra stimulus. Their incessant non-verbal conversation went back and forth to the irritation of the weary horsemen. With ears flickering, eyes rolling, snorting and throwing of heads every horse tried to understand the new environment.

Some horses leant on their lead ropes at the slowest walk; some horses unable to walk due to excitement, jig-jogged. Junior horses, awaiting any opportunity where the seniors would be unable to respond, bit at the faces and necks of senior horses.

Senior horses responded by baring teeth, nipping at chests and barging with shoulders. Woe betide any rider's horse who was considered junior to the horses led beside it. The led horses would bite at the rider's horse then lean back on their lead ropes.

The rumps of the five horses in front invited more opportunities to bite by those who followed. When the clear warning of flashing black tails was ignored, the section in front slowed and sought the chance to kick out at those behind who sought to lunge forward and nip.

The air was as thick with the troopers' colourful language as it was with fog.

Jobert and Geourdai sat by the side of the street and watched the procession approach. Green, experienced in the company of unfamiliar horses, stood patiently and flicked an ear back towards Jobert should Jobert shift a hand or adjust his seat. Geourdai's less experienced horse sought to play with Green by slowly reaching across to nip Green's muzzle. To the annoyance of Green, who threw his head out of reach and Geourdai, who slapped his horse's neck with the reins.

Jobert looked up the street towards the barrack's entrance some four hundred metres away. Eight sections of the company lined that distance, two dismounted men on either side of the street. As a rider came between a pair of dismounted men, the rider would halt his team of horses, the dismounted troopers would then spring forward and take the lead rope of a single horse each. The mounted platoon sergeants would then shepherd their two sections with twenty-four new horses onwards up the street towards the barracks stables.

'Good morning, sir. Second Lieutenant Neilage. My report on the remounts, sir.'

Jobert glanced briefly at the young officer in the uniform of the recently disbanded Chasseurs Volontaires. Neilage was of

slim build, his reddish blond hair swept back into a queue, with a bristling moustache under a rather pointy nose.

Neilage extended a sheaf of papers toward Jobert. Jobert's continued his detailed observation of the bay remounts filing past. Geourdai clicked his fingers and extended his hand for the documents.

'Lieutenant Neilage, your section has completed its task,' said Geourdai. 'Sergeant Major Koschak will now take responsibility for your men and your horses. You may now retire to the tavern. You and I will lunch there together at noon.'

'Yes, sir, I am obliged. Would you excuse me, sir?' Neilage saluted, his eyes betraying his disappointment at not being welcomed more warmly.

Jobert turned his head from the procession to watch Neilage join the remaining flow of horses along the street.

'What had you said about him? Joined the volunteers without any prior experience, elected sergeant major in less than eighteen months and the Colonel promoted him to troop commander.'

'Sir.'

'I am interested in where our commanders call home. There are a range of divisions which may impact on our ability to form the company. You, Koschak and I, as old, royal army, versus volunteers like Neilage and the sergeants. Yet all the sergeants were all old army prior to the volunteers. Are they at odds with their local corporals? You and I need to know where our people's allegiances lie.'

'Absolutely, sir.' Geourdai flicked his eyebrows at Koschak approaching behind Jobert.

'Sergeant Major,' Jobert said, twisting in the saddle, 'I note the horses have only their front feet shod. The company farrier ought to be holding the remaining shoes. Do not have them tacked on. Keep them in store. Also, no manes are to be hogged,

nor tails shorn on any 2<sup>nd</sup> Company horses without my explicit orders.’

‘Sir.’

‘Once settled in barracks, I will have all the horses’ manes hogged. Geourdai, find us a mattress maker who will give us a good price for company funds. I want to purchase water gourds for the men. Remember, manes only. I want the tails left long, not bobbed, as summer’s insect season approaches.’



‘Take two,’ Jobert insisted.

Lieutenant Geourdai and Second Lieutenants Voreille and Neilage took two sherries each from the soldier with a tray of aperitifs at the dining room door.

‘2<sup>nd</sup> Company.’

Jobert consumed the glass of sherry in a gulp.

‘2<sup>nd</sup> Company,’ toasted the others in return, placing their empty glasses back on the tray.

‘Thank you, Chasseur,’ said Jobert to the soldier holding the tray. ‘Which company?’

‘Ah, 4<sup>th</sup> Company, sir.’

‘You are doing a good job, lad. Well done.’

The four 2<sup>nd</sup> Company officers strolled deeper into the room with their other sherry.

The dining room was brimming with officers. At four officers to a company and twelve companies in the new regiment, Jobert calculated, there will be approximately fifty to sixty officers, including regimental headquarters, at dinner this evening.

With the officers not yet having their uniforms amended, it

was quite a variety of French cavalry uniforms on display. Predominantly chasseur à cheval uniforms, especially those of the recently disbanded Chasseur Volontaires. There were green dragoon and blue heavy cavalry uniforms and at least a dozen multi-coloured hussar uniforms within the crowd.

The Colonel was announced into the room. Silenced descended immediately.

‘Gentlemen, thank you,’ said Morin. ‘What a pleasure to have us all here together at last. May I ask you to charge your glasses?’

Glasses, with varying levels of sherry, were snatched up from tables and trays.

‘Gentlemen, the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs à Cheval.’

‘The 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs!’ boomed back the chorus. The room returned instantly to noisy conversation.

As Jobert turned back to Geourdain, Voreille and Neilage, a raised finger caught his attention. A pair of dark eyes drilled into Jobert before the man’s athletic frame, enhanced by a well-tailored uniform with correct 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseur facings, strode across the room towards the 2<sup>nd</sup> Company officers.

‘Gentlemen, Captain Fergnes, 1<sup>st</sup> Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron and regimental fencing master.’

Jobert regarded Fergnes’ dark curls cut in the latest style, a well-curled moustache and emotionless eyes. Jobert recognised Fergnes’ fashion and speech as an officer of common, or bourgeois, extraction. Neither nobility nor up from the ranks.

‘Captain Jobert, 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron.’

‘Sir, that the army is unable to issue our regiment sabres is scandalous. I am alarmed that I have received a company of soldiers of which one-quarter admit to having knowledge of horses. Upon inspection, I have grave doubt as to the ability of at least half. I predict a disaster. Acknowledging you have only just arrived, may I prevail on you, sir, for your initial thoughts on the matter?’

‘I am considering training my company under canvas. My desire is to accustom them to field conditions and the duties of setting, guarding and breaking camp. In line with Colonel Morin’s dire warning of impending combat, I hope to avoid the beguiling comfort of barracks.’

A smile lifted Fergnes’ curled moustache.

‘Splendid. I shall join you. Where might one site our companies? I do not know the country hereabouts.’

‘I do,’ breathed an urbane voice. The party turned toward a tall, blond man, his face affable as he bowed. ‘Captain de Chabenac, 8<sup>th</sup> Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Squadron. I am at your service, gentlemen.’

Nobility! The group froze their expressions as de Chabenac sought a reaction.

‘Forgive my intrusion, gentlemen, but your topic is at the forefront of everyone’s mind, apart from, of course, Madame de Rossi’s impending ball. To overhear potential solutions to an approaching calamity demonstrates I have placed good manners aside. Then to be given the opportunity to step forward and offer the smallest contribution to your project, I simply could not resist, although it may blacken my name amongst my esteemed regimental brothers. Gentlemen, I beg your forgiveness.’

Jobert maintained a stern mask as he sipped his sherry.

‘I will forgive any man who knows what capucine is. You heard our scheme, sir. Do you have information which might strengthen our hand?’

‘My family is from this area, although my family’s influence has passed. My father, until recently the Comte de Chabenac, still enjoys the company of the major landowners around the city. I have hunted the surrounding countryside since a boy. I can think of many sites which would accommodate the numbers you have in mind. My family owes a debt of honour to Colonel Morin, so in facilitating the potential location of your scheme, sir, I am at your service.’

As the room was informed to take their places for dinner, Geourdai shuffled in beside Jobert.

‘Have you heard of the coming ball to which the officers of the regiment are invited? Madame de Rossi’s ball?’

‘Forgive me, sir, having only recently arrived I have much information to consider. That particular piece of news I have not yet received.’

‘Then forgive me, sir, but yes, a ball will be hosted in about ten days. But to the heart of the matter, sir, as an ex-sergeant, can you dance?’

Jobert guffawed with surprise at Geourdai’s alarm.

‘No, sir, I cannot dance. Well, certainly not the steps required at a society ball. I take it, neither can you?’

‘I do believe I will be choosing to charge the Austrian Army single-handedly on that particular evening.’

‘If we can put our men under canvas to instruct them in the arts of the battlefield, surely as brothers of the capucine, we can do our best to secretly instruct ex-sergeants to dance.’

Taking his place at the long dinner table, Jobert leant towards Voreille. ‘Are you aware that a society lady, Madame de Rossi, is hosting a ball to which the regiment’s officers are invited?’

Voreille’ eyes widened. ‘Yes, sir. The regimental aides are most excited.’

‘As a School man, can you dance?’

‘No, sir. Perhaps there was dance instruction before, but certainly not now. No.’

‘I inquire not to determine the nature of the syllabus of the esteemed École Militaire, sir, but to determine if you, sir, a gentleman of good breeding, education and connection, can dance.’

‘I am capable of a few routines, sir. But I do not profess to be proficient.’

‘Voreille, in the eyes of an ex-sergeant, any man capable of dancing a few routines in Paris is a bona-fide dance master in

Avignon. Second Lieutenant Voreille, as the messing officer of the Tavern of the ... the ... the Sky-blue Pompom, you are to secure the services of a local dancing instructor. Is your mission clear?’

‘I am at your service, sir.’

‘Then I am obliged, sir.’

The ringing of a small bell quietened the room

‘Gentlemen, Colonel Morin.’

The long tables thundered as they were patted in applause. A chorus of ‘Hear! Hear!’ was subdued by the Colonel with a wave.

‘Brothers of the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseurs, an exhausting ten days for us all. Whether by the extraordinary administration required of many of you, or by those who have journeyed from afar to join us. Such effort will be rewarded. Such exhaustion will pale in comparison to what lies ahead. Nevertheless, let us relax in each other’s good company for one brief evening.’

A further chorus of table patting ensued, the candelabra on the table shaking and the dim light in the room wavering as a result of the movement.

‘Second-in-command, take note to halve the sherry allocation at our next dinner.’

Raive’s ‘Sir!’ was drowned as the chorus hissed and stomped on the floor.

‘Enough from me. Now for the soup. I am aware of the wave of rabbit soup flooding the city, as milliners seek felt for our bicornes. I have sent out a proclamation seeking the top twenty lads who bring in the most rabbits. I will enlist them immediately. But no rabbit soup tonight!’

The chorus roared its good cheer.

‘Tonight, I am assured, it is hare soup.’

## Chapter Five



Jobert scrutinised the three ranks of chasseurs, standing beside their lead, but saddled, horses, on the quiet lane. The dew on the gravel surface had kept the dust to a minimum during their one hour dismounted march. As the morning fog lifted, the sunshine was delightful across the mown, pungent meadow they faced.

‘I wish to make clear my directive on padding under the saddle. We are not issued with saddle pads to make the wooden saddletrees fit better. Nor do we seek extra weight in acquiring saddle blankets. To that end, I require every man in the company to fold his bedroll as a saddle blanket.’

The sergeants stiffened. Their eyes slid towards Koschak. Koschak’s mouth tightened, eyes never shifting from Jobert. Geourdai lifted his head to gauge Jobert.

Jobert held each man’s gaze.

‘There are two initial concerns with this approach. First, the men’s blankets become wet with horse sweat, let alone smell of horse. The solution is to fold the blanket within the paillasse. The resultant second concern becomes that the men then

need to empty paillasses of straw each morning and re-fill each evening.'

Jobert leant towards them, two fingers of his right hand stabbing his left palm.

'Allow me to make this easy for the company to understand. The Republic paid for the horses and pays the chasseurs to be ready to make war on the Republic's enemies. Within days we will be living under canvas and within weeks we will be on campaign. More than likely not sleeping in billets but sleeping on the ground without access to straw. As the senior representative of the Republic within 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, those horses' backs are my responsibility. I will not discuss the mild inconvenience of re-stuffing a paillasse in barracks when the battle-readiness of our horses is at stake. Is my requirement clear?'

'Yes, sir,' the chorus responded, with Koschak the loudest.

'Sergeants, carry on.'

The sergeants' bellows became a flurry of action. Men quickly broke ranks, formed in sections to unsaddle, some holding each other's horses, some stacking saddles in section order, a few racing to receive the reins of the officers' horses.

Rummaging in their sabretaches for their notebooks, Neilage and Voreille moved stiffly to join Jobert, Geourdai and Koschak. From this morning's fencing, Neilage's swelling would become a black eye by lunch and Voreille still bled from his split lip.

'Neilage will record our findings on horses,' said Jobert. 'Voreille will record on soldiers. First, horse assessment. We three,' turning to indicate Geourdai and Koschak, 'will triage the horses. Reporting to Neilage, a score of one means the horse is very capable and you would be happy to take him on campaign. A score of two means the horse is a little hard, not impressive, sufficient. A score of three means this horse is not good enough and needs work. Remember, we are assessing horses today, not schooling them. I am interested in the horse's

desire to listen, to bend willingly, transition to trot, both canter leads and back-up. If the horse is up to it, move sideways and pivot over the hocks.

‘Neilage, ensure you have the section corporals telling you the hoof brands, stamped onto bridles, before the horse is given to the assessors. Voreille, ensure the sergeants are swapping our saddles onto each new horse, we will check girths as we receive them. Also, wash your face as you have blood on your cheek and reverse your stock as it too is bloodstained.’

For each assessor scoring each horse took only five minutes in the saddle. From mounting, riding and returning the first horse, reporting to Neilage while saddles were swapped, then mounting the next horse took ten minutes. At thirty-odd horses per assessor, it took five hours of dusty effort to complete the initial horse assessment.

Under the warm noon sun, the men lunched on bread and cheese, sitting in the long, roadside grass, upon which their horses grazed and lazily flicked tails at flies. While men and horses rested, the command group collated their findings and determined that approximately twenty percent of the horses were very good, forty percent were satisfactory and forty percent needed extra training.

‘With your permission, sir,’ asked Koschak. ‘Sergeants, has anyone else started to notice eyes rolling, sly comments and quiet groans from the corporals? And if so, what is the issue?’

Pultiere cleared his throat to break the awkward silence.

‘I found the newly promoted corporals very unsure of themselves in the company of their old section-mates, before they departed as members of the recruit and remount group. But they certainly have returned with a swagger.’

‘Perhaps the freedom away from the regiment filled them with an inflated level of importance,’ said Bredieux, grinding his teeth on his pipe stem. ‘Returning to barracks life to wipe

the arses of recruits might be taking the shine off their new rank.'

'Would you say there is any old royal army versus volunteer legion frictions?' Geourdai asked. The sergeants looked slyly at each other.

'Perhaps, sir,' said Huin. 'I feel that sentiment may well be there due to the workload required to stand up a company of recruits. The corporals have never experienced that pressure before.'

'Thank you, men,' said Koschak. 'That gives me a decent insight in how to support our fellows. I might have a quiet word in the corporals' little pink ears in the next few days.'

'Next, rider assessment,' mumbled Jobert, his mouth full of bread and cheese. 'The twenty-odd very good horses will be divided between the four platoons. The rider is to come out on his own saddle. The exercise is simple. Trot to the turn-around point and canter back on a right lead. Canter back out on a left lead and trot back.'

'A score of one means the man rides smoothly and is well balanced. A score of two means he has satisfactorily completed the exercise. A score of three means the soldier is rough and ungainly. Voreille, maintain the scores against the company roll. Neilage will assist to keep the process flowing. With men waiting saddled and mounted, we should have no reason for any delay. Keep them coming like sheep down a race.'

The next three hours flew by with men saddling and unsaddling, nervously taking their turn at the mounted exercise in front of their assessors or attending to horses not in work. Sergeants and second lieutenants barked to maintain the flow of riders and to connect the called assessment with the rider to which it pertained.

By late-afternoon, the results showed twenty-five percent of the men were very capable horseman, fifty percent of the com-

pany could control a cantering horse and the remaining twenty-five would need to show a distinct improvement in their riding skills, if they were to remain in the company.

‘Geourdai,’ coughed Jobert, drinking too deeply from a water flask, ‘you have one hour to allocate each man a horse based on Neilage’s and Voreille’s lists. All the good grade-one riders and all corporals to receive the poorer grade-three horses; that will be my training group. All the poor grade-three riders will receive a good grade-one horse and they will be Sergeant Major’s training group. Then the medium grade-two horses will be allocated to the medium grade-two men.

‘Once this combined list is created, we will form up on parade, exchange horses, saddle and ride home. We still have a troop guard to mount tonight, yes?’



Seated in squadron order down both sides of the dining table, Jobert waited for Raive’s regimental administrative notices, drawing a notebook and pencil from an inside pocket of his tail-coat. Lieutenant Colonel Raive’s eyes twinkled with his customary merriment as he entered the chilly dining room with a steaming cup of coffee.

‘Good morning, gentlemen. How are we all?’

The captains and their seconds-in-command quietly groaned their response, arching their stiff backs and shoulders from the strain of the morning’s fencing.

‘Down to business. Man the regiment, equip the regiment, train the regiment. In the past two weeks, interaction with the War Committee, city administrators and local suppliers, for the

collection of men, horses and equipment, has been the focus of the headquarters. As that flow has begun, Colonel Morin has planned a locally situated regimental field camp.'

The audience sat upright in their chairs, muttering to each other.

'This is possible with the arrival of the regiment's tentage stores yesterday. I might say the regiment is most grateful to the family of Captain de Chabenac in facilitating the project by identifying and securing potential campsites.'

The table chorus patted the table with a resounding, 'Hear, hear.' De Chabenac responded to all by looking up and down the table, nodding with his gracious smile.

'The Colonel's intent is to open the six-hundred-man camp in about four days' time. Tomorrow, the Colonel will lead a training ride to the campsite where the requirements of a site will be discussed. From there a plan will be devised and orders given as to the programme of occupation and rotation. Are there any questions of a general nature?'

'Yes, sir,' said Jobert. 'When will sabres be issued?'

'I do not know, Captain Jobert. I assure you all, this parlous situation is uppermost in Colonel Morin's mind.'

Notebooks were scanned in the uncomfortable silence. Raive evaluated the sullen young officers over the rim of his coffee cup.

'An item of good cheer, the de Rossi ball. Wear whichever full-dress uniform you currently have. Head dress for all, without exception, will be bicorne with the 24<sup>th</sup> Chasseur's plumes. Officers will assemble here in the square at six o'clock that evening. The ball is to commence at seven o'clock, supper at ten o'clock and the dance programme to conclude at two o'clock. Any questions?'

'Excuse me, sir,' said from someone further down the table, 'will there be fencing the morning after?'

‘What an excellent idea. Why not?’

Groans and creaking chairs from slumping issued from around the table.

‘Any further questions? No? Good. Am I correct, Captain Jobert, you wish to make a quick remark upon the subject?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Jobert, ‘I would indeed, if this is an appropriate moment?’

Raive indicated with a sweep of his hand that the floor was his. Jobert noted Captain Fergnes’ emotionless dark eyes narrow, resting his chin upon his hand with his elbow on the table.

‘Thank you, sir, for this opportunity. Gentlemen, I shall not detain you long, as your duties await. Our Colonel and senior regimental gentlemen maintain our focus on the perils of military operations that lie in the days ahead. For many of us, our experience in such intensive manoeuvres is scant. We would also be aware of the threat to our success in the shape of foreign and domestic agents and spies. To that end, I am forced to make my following remarks with discretion and in code.’

Some at the table glanced to Raive for enlightenment. Some noticed Geourdai leaning back, his lop-sided grin in place. To those prescient, something was afoot. Jobert looked over both shoulders to the closed doors of the room, then leant forward to whisper.

‘I refer to the loss of honour that will ensue should we fail in an impending regimental operation, to which I can refer in present company as ... Madame de Rossi’s ball and the risk and subsequent misery that lies within “dancing”. I am not saying that any man present is inexperienced in ... “dancing”, but you may be aware of other brother officers, who may need instruction in the brutal art of “dancing”.’

Geourdai led a growing chorus, who, seeking the cue, chimed in with “dancing” themselves.

‘Are you saying, sir,’ Raive stood to abruptly break the

mood, 'that you are aware of whispers desiring instruction in ... "dancing"?)

The chorus picked up the cue, as Raive waded in their participation.

'My own agents, sir,' responded Jobert, 'have made me aware of regimental limitations in ... "dancing":'

Raive's moustache twitched.

'I have bitter experience from this form of military operation, sir. I am aware that any instruction of "dancing" would require a master of such dark arts in attendance. Are your agents aware of a master of "dancing" in our midst?'

Various 'oohs' and 'ahs' emitted from those present.

'I am informed, sir, that such fellows can be found for a price.'

'Again, from harsh experience, sir, I am aware that ...'

'Dancing,' anticipated those seated.

'Or similar military operations require a large, open area, a veritable Champ de Mars, on which to practice the dreadful drill. Are your agents aware of such a location?'

Jobert checked if all was clear.

'Of this location I do not know, sir, but I am aware of its codename. I believe this terrible location is referred to as ... the Tavern of the Sky-blue Pompom.'

A drawn-out 'ooh' was shared from the chorus at this information. Raive rapped the table.

'This is a most serious situation, gentlemen. A situation I know to be doomed to failure unless ... unless there is a captive enemy force on which to practice such wicked evolutions. Is there, sir, captive enemy at this prepared terrain to which you refer, that other officers might complete manoeuvres in "dancing"?)'

Many leant forward keen to commit if the right answer was provided.

‘At this dreadful place, yes, sir, there are those of whom you suggest.’

Not just ‘ooh’, but knowing grins were shared at the table.

‘Then may I suggest, gentlemen,’ Raive put a finger to his lips to soften the chorus, ‘since no man here would admit himself deficient in the wicked art of “dancing”, that there is no more to discuss. And with that, I dismiss you all to your duties.’

The officers stood, Raive departed and the entire group followed.

As he fell into step with Jobert, Geour dai asked, ‘What enemy force?’

‘There is a suite of obliging ladies across the lane.’

‘Oh, them. Young Voreille will be busy with his negotiations.’



By the light of the fire, Jobert’s groom, Duque, polished boots. Orlande, Jobert’s valet, ladled out bowls of a fragrant chicken and bean soup onto the scrubbed kitchen table, where sat bottles of wine, fresh baguettes and cloves of roast garlic.

Wincing, Voreille took a letter from the inside of his jacket and passed it to Jobert.

‘Between the wooden sabre and the quill this morning I can barely raise my right arm. I prided myself on my fencing at the School, but those fellows from 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron we opposed this morning were brutal.’

Jobert could see Voreille was hurting, yet Voreille gritted his teeth, hesitating to say more.

‘If you think 1<sup>st</sup> Squadron is uncompromising,’ said Geour dai, ‘wait and see what Fergnes has in store.’

‘But we did not stop to refine our actions, sir. It was blow after blow for an hour. Why gloves, sir?’

‘Because the sabre is harder to grip with gloves. If you think your forearm aches now, wait until this time tomorrow. I promise you it will get worse.’

‘In battle, combat will be over in minutes,’ said Jobert, pointing his envelope at Voreille. ‘You will barely trade more than three cuts with each face you see in a melee, but that is not the point of the morning’s fencing. You, as an officer, need to know, deep in your bones, that you are good for a fight. This sense of hard-earned confidence must emanate from each movement, look and word prior to an action. The men will look to you for this confidence. Their white-knuckled grips on sabres and reins, vomit in the back of their throats, hearts pounding out of their chests and every eye on you. And there you are, knowing your enemy can not match the hours of suffering produced by Captain Fergnes.’

Jobert nodded his thanks to Orlande as he had his first spoon of the soup.

‘Voreille, have you finished writing letters home for the chas-seurs in your troop?’

‘No, sir, I have a few more tomorrow night —’

‘Is not our first dance class here tomorrow night?’

Voreille’s freckles flushed. ‘Yes, sir.’

Jobert continued enjoying his soup.

‘And have we secured a dance floor in the tavern?’

‘Yes, sir. For only one franc per dancer.’

‘As much as that? Have we secured a dance instructor?’

Voreille looked into his soup bowl.

‘Not yet, sir.’

‘Why not?’

Multiple excuses tumbled through Voreille’s mind, not the least that he had had no time. ‘I have no excuse, sir.’

Jobert scowled at the response.

‘What you want to say is you have not had any time. If you wish to be a troop commander of chasseurs, Voreille, you ought to make better use of the resources around you. What is your solution, Geourdai?’

Placing down his soup spoon and taking up his wine, Geourdai screwed up his face.

‘Knowing Orlande and Duque are able to undertake certain tasks for us, sir, at one franc per day, I would have paid Orlande to find our instructor.’

Orlande exchanged a wink with Duque.

‘And did Orlande find an instructor?’ asked Jobert.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Orlande, concentrating on ladling stewed brandied plums into bowls, ‘At five francs a lesson, he brings his own fiddler. I got the tavern keeper down to three francs for the hour.’

‘Voreille, you owe Orlande one franc. What of the ladies to assist our dancing?’

Voreille slumped back in his chair.

‘Duque?’ asked Jobert

‘Yes, sir. Eight ladies will be in attendance.’ Duque’s weary moustache twitched as he changed his grip inside the boot. ‘At two francs each.’

Jobert looked at the bewildered Voreille over the rim of his wine.

‘Now you owe Duque one franc. What will it cost? Sixteen plus five plus three equals twenty-four francs. Will we have at least twenty dancers at three francs each?’

Geourdai’s head gave an affirmatory twist.

‘Then, gentlemen, we shall make a small profit for company funds.’



Paris  
7<sup>th</sup> March 1793

*My dearest André,*

*I've just received the latest news from the farm.*

*Grandfather writes to Aunt that he is so proud of you both. He was so thankful you visited the farm as you travelled south to your new regiment. I know your father and mother are looking down lovingly on their very clever sons. I also know my father would be very proud of your new promotions and positions, but you know how he is. Although he would say nothing, he would crush you and Didier with a bear hug, plant a bristly kiss that would remove skin and send you both off immediately to work colts. Needless to say, Aunt and I are so very pleased for you both and we send all our love and best wishes.*

*Our great aunt remains very well; she is energised by the activity here. I find it quite frightening just as it was last August prior to the battle of Valmy. With the defeat at Aix-la-Chapelle and now at war with Spain as well as Austria, Prussia, Sardinia, Britain and the Netherlands, our friends within the War Committee are in chaos. The Jacobin faction are beside themselves with rage and their support here grows daily. Not satisfied with the King's head, the number of executions grows daily, which is quite sickening.*

*Sadly, our family does well as a result.*

*The War Committee continues to raise more of the new horse batteries, so Grandfather's horses and harness are in much demand by the officers, despite the market flooded with horses because of the levee en masse. Ironically, cheap horses and father's reliability in filling contracts means we are selected for more and more supply contracts.*

*The levee en masse is also emptying surrounding towns of women, children and the elderly. Our workhouses here are overwhelmed. I intend to open another as we cannot accommodate the women we have. Demand for our seamstressing grows, especially in the manufacture of headdress alone, so there is more than enough work to sustain us.*

*Apart from the chaos in the streets, I am busy, well and happy. I know you will laugh when I tell you suitors abound, but I am too engaged with our projects for all that.*

*Didier's regiment is desperate for horseshoes, so I am having our friends to dinner soon. Is there anything in particular that you need?*

*Write to me this minute,  
We love you very much,*

*Your loving cousin,  
Michelle*