

Brothers
of the
Capucine



ROB MCLAREN

Brothers of the Capucine

This paperback edition published in 2021.
Lulu Publishing — www.lulu.com

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Graphic Design, typesetting and map illustrations by Matthew Lin
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Paperback ISBN 978-0-6484-716-0-8
E-book ISBN 978-0-6484-716-1-5
Hardcover ISBN 978-0-6484-716-2-2

Typeset in Bembo Semibold 12 pt

To Dylan
My brother who ensured I made it home
- every time

Brothers of the Capucine

Acknowledgements

I wish to sincerely acknowledge and thank the following people for their contribution to the work:

Sophie Walker - My beautiful, talented and patient wife.

Peter Cross – for his unwavering friendship and support, access to his excellent collection of Napoleonic books and artefacts, and his vast collection of exquisitely painted Napoleonic figures, the largest collection of 28mm Napoleonic wargaming figures in the Southern Hemisphere, which have been kindly provided to create selected images.

Joe Tapping – for his sincere encouragement, his extensive research into the Nelsonian navy and his market experience in online publishing.

José de Andrade – for his friendship, access to his Napoleonic library and extensive collection of Napoleonic figures.

Katie Whiffen and Andrew Koranski – two dear friends whose own writing inspired me.

This story culminates within the siege of Toulon in December 1793. For the depth of detail woven into the story, I am very grateful for one particular reference, the in-depth research of Robert Forczyk, PhD, laid out in his excellent work *Toulon, 1793, Napoleon's first great victory*.

Cass Moriarty, Lauren Daniels, Gail Cartwright, Belinda Pollard and Geneve Flynn - for their superlative editorial support.

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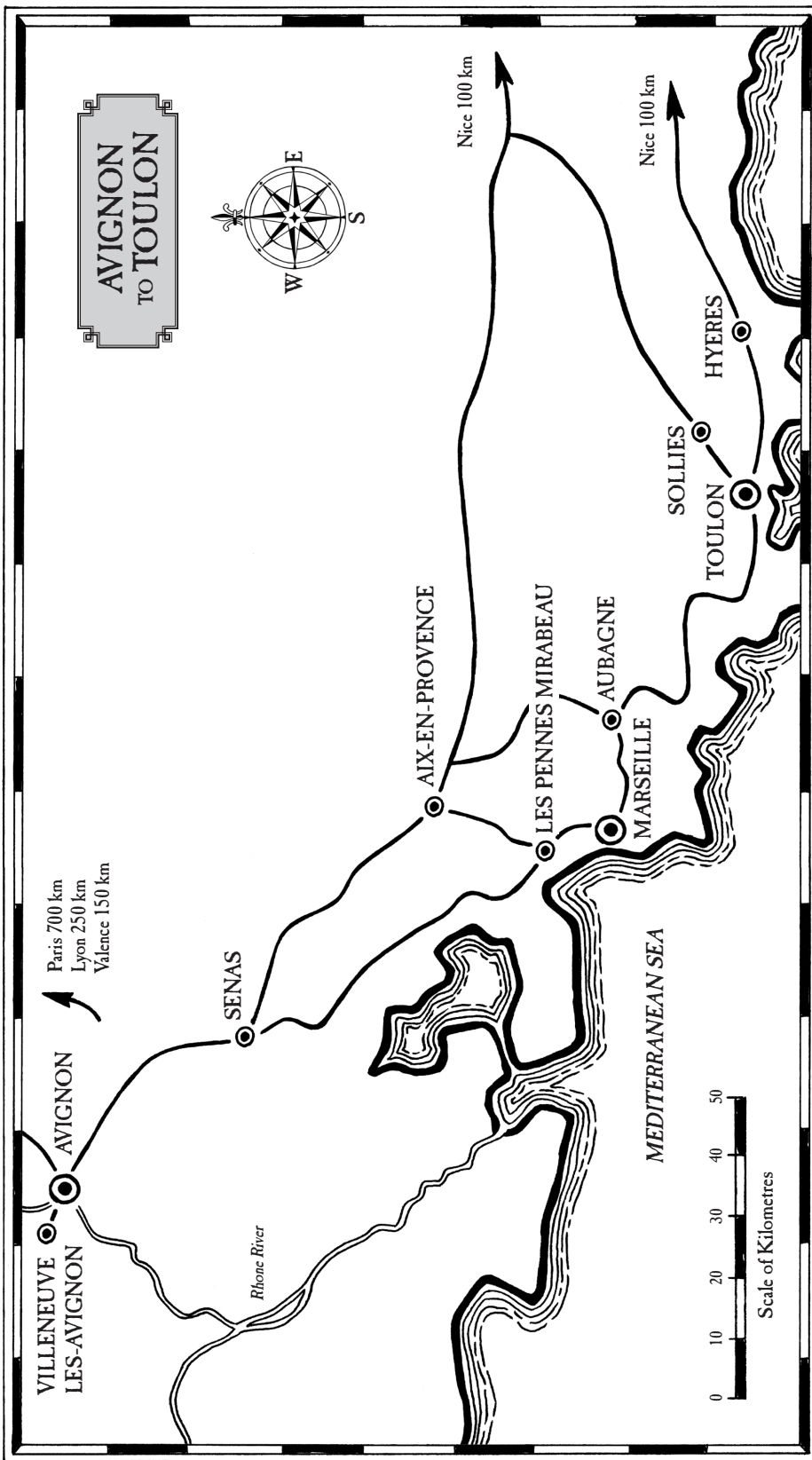
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Prologue

December 1793, Toulon, France



Blood oozed from Captain André Jobert's scalp, dribbled down his neck and pooled inside his collar. The splatter of grey rain against his hunched shoulders encouraged clotting blobs to wriggle icy trails between his shirt and his back. The congealing tendrils pulsed dread down his spine to puddle heavily in his guts.

I have risked my arse too many times this year, he thought, but this stunt is just idiotic beyond reason.

Jobert's gaze drifted across the wounded having their injuries dressed, squirming against the wrapping of bandages and the pelt of icy rain.

My arse ... and theirs. I have committed eighteen recruits to achieving what? No-one will know if we fail. This time there will be no shame in —

A soldier crouched beside Jobert. 'I need to bind your head wound, sir, and put your arm in a sling.'

Jobert hung his head toward his sodden wool jacket, a coat of the Spanish infantry. Blood seeped from the left elbow of

the grubby, white jacket into the linen of the sling. *Why did I ever say 'yes'?*

A squelch in the mud beside him caused Jobert to jerk. The cold water reached deeper inside his shirt. Sergeant Major Koschak grunted as he squatted stiffly beside Jobert. The crimson bandages binding Koschak's forearm and thigh were leached by rivulets of rain.

Koschak's green eyes, red rimmed in a pallid face, searched Jobert's face. *He too doubts we will make it.*

'General Masséna has begun his attack on Fort D'Artigues,' said Koschak. 'The wounded are ready to march. We await your command, sir.'

Chapter One

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.

André Jobert 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 its weight through his wrist. To fence in the mornings, his mind 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 is different. Jobert's mouth creased in uncertainty. *Another beginning.*

Today Jobert was to enter a new home. He was to join a different family where his total worth was measured in his knowledge of this tool.

Not my total worth. There are four essential elements of a cavalryman. My skill with a sabre is 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 strode along corridors with low beams and greasy walls. Begrimed servants pressed into doorframes and corners as he passed.

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 to the sharp cold of churned horse dung, mouldy hay and the shouted curses of stable boys.

Bleu, always impatient, stopped his pawing hoof and greeted 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, showing his affection without soiling his dress gloves.

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

Horsemanship. The second essential element 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 rapid 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 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. *My 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 Bleu towards the tavern gate. With a squeeze through the saddle, Jobert and Bleu 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 motes rising on the air currents as the room warmed. The room smelt of fire smoke, furniture polish and parchment. His 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 recognised the lieutenant colonel, but he remained focused on the commanding officer. ‘Good morning, sir.’ Jobert saluted.

‘Welcome to the 24th *Chasseurs à Cheval*, Captain Jobert,’ said Morin.

Morin’s eyebrows bristled. Jobert felt the colonel’s scrutiny glide across his face, hair and uniform. Morin made a flourish towards the other man.

‘I was informed in the last day that you are both known to each other. Lieutenant Colonel Raive speaks highly of your service together under General Dumouriez in Belgium last November. 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 24th Chasseurs.’ Jobert took in the extra lace on Raive’s coat sleeves, as well as the new facings of the 24th Chasseurs on his coat and trousers, noting to have all his old regimental uniforms changed over to the new facings. ‘Very good to see you also, sir. Congratulations on your promotion.’

‘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. He will have with him your new regimental plumes.’

Morin indicated a chair, as an orderly with a fresh pot entered the room. Jobert adjusted his scabbard and *sabretache* to sit.

‘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 with a war establishment of four squadrons barely manned three.*

‘In total, over one thousand two hundred men and horse,’ said Morin. ‘My staff and I arrived ten days ago. To raise the 24th Chasseurs, the regiment will be based on the five hundred sabres of the recently disbanded *Chasseurs Volontaires* Regiment. In the 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 chaos issuing from Paris, I am informed trains of equipment and supplies will arrive within weeks. With the enthusiasm and flood of promissory notes, it appears every village in the land is sewing breeches, weaving blankets, hunting hares for hat felt and melting church bells for cannon.’ A bitter cloud crossed Morin’s face. ‘Except of course, for those towns in open revolt.’

Morin scoffed his tea. ‘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 flicked thick fingers at a stack of documents on his desk.

‘As well as your own letter of introduction, Jobert, I have a most agreeable letter of recommendation from your previous commanding officer. You 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 2nd Company to you.’

A tightness gripped Jobert's chest. *Command of a senior company. Man, equip and train.* 'I am at your service, sir.'

Morin's baleful glare locked on Jobert. 'I am absolutely committed to raising a regiment ready for war in the coming weeks, Jobert. I only accept utterly focused men to make this happen. I will not accept verbal assurances from my officers.' Morin stabbed a finger into the desk. 'I only accept resolute action.'

Jobert rose and saluted.

Morin dismissed him with a curt nod. 'Again, welcome to the 24th 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 24th 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 24th 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 2nd 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.'

Jobert placed the plume into his sabretache, the stiff, embroidered pouch which swung off his sword belt, beside his scabbard. '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,' said Geourdai.

'I beg your pardon?'

'We are informed, sir, the dark orange colour is called capucine. You sought a place to speak, sir. May I suggest the stables? As there are no horses in now, we will be free of interruption. From there, you might consider your accommodation. 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.

Within the chill air of the empty stables, rows of stacked wooden crates and hessian-wrapped bales shielded the noise of bellowed orders and crunching gravel emanating from the drill lessons.

Jobert turned abruptly. Geourdai and Koschak faced him.

'Let me introduce myself,' said Jobert. '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?'

Geourdai shuffled his feet, then raised his face, his jowl clenching as he spoke. 'Sir, I am from the 7th 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 24th Chasseurs a week ago on promotion.'

'And you, Sergeant Major?' asked Jobert.

Koschak squinted at Jobert and raised his chin. '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. 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 5th 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. 'Here we are, then. Old sergeants with campaign experience with the job of taking recruits to war within weeks.'

Inhaling the strong smell of musty fodder hanging from the old spider webs on grimy walls, Jobert indicated they 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. The quality of our company leaders is key to our survival as a company. Focusing on our own 2nd 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?' asked Jobert.

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

'Where do we stand, Sergeant Major, with our corporals and chasseurs?'

Koschak grimaced at Geourdai. Geourdai's face soured.

'We have all eight section commanders for our company,' said Koschak. '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 and 2nd Company 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 will be at war with Austria once the Alpine passes thaw in the next four 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,’ said Koschak. ‘Those are the 1st and the 7th Companies’ recruits. We expect our recruits tomorrow.’

‘What can you tell me about weapons?’ asked Jobert.

Koschak’s jaw clenched. Geourdai wriggled on his crate. ‘The regiment has not yet received its issue of sabres, sir.’

‘What?’

Head hung, Geourdai looked at Jobert from 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.’

Jobert rubbed his jowls. ‘This is not good, gentlemen. 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?’

An invisible vice crushed his chest. *No sabres!* Jobert’s gaze drifted towards the parade ground activity. ‘Without sabres, does it matter how we are clothed?’

Chapter Two



‘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 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 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 throughout the barracks. Soldiers and non-commissioned officers raced to the dormitory windows and stable doors and observed 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 between the rain of blows, swearing 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, played for a merry, dusty dance cavorting in the centre of the ramble. Around them, recruits who arrived yesterday, stopped drilling and cheered the happy crowd. Non-commissioned officers belated 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.

Koschak spied a mounted sergeant, 2nd 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?' called Koschak. '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 24th 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. 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 at 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, my name is Sergeant Major Koschak. You will address me as "Sergeant Major". Now, 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. 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.'

Jobert watched Sergeant Bredieux and the corporals who accompanied the men for the last twenty-four hours, with good humour, press the chattering crowd into a single rank facing the Sergeant Major.

Koschak pointed to his piper and winked. The piper produced a piercing blast. 'Men, you are all members of the 2nd Company. Yes, the 2nd 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, 2nd Company. Now ... 2nd 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 as the corporals managing the head of the file checked 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,' said Sergeant Pultiere, 'to the 2nd Company of the 24th 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 and provided 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 2nd Company.

Because of their original groupings of friends, the recruits came across from Huin's table and sat 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 paillasse, 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 would be issued the next morning and 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.

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 2nd 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 2nd 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 2nd Company, your company and therefore a man who is concerned with your welfare.’

Koschak looked across to Jobert and gave a slight nod.

‘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 2nd Company. The men who 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 2nd Company of the 24th 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 make 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 *vin de noix*.

‘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 *eau de vie*.

'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 and 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 and 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 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 must 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 also do your best in the role of corporal.’

Morin considered his glass.

‘Man a regiment, equip a regiment, train a regiment. Let us speak of training a regiment. Any idiot can be trained 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, and 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 Three



A thick mist hung over the Rhône valley. On this freezing 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 and enjoyed the morning display of horses entering the barracks, taking 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 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 any chance to kick out at those behind who might 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. Jobert's mount, Vert, 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 played with Vert by slowly reaching across and nipping Vert's muzzle. To the annoyance of Vert, 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 halted his team of horses and the dismounted troopers sprang forward and took the lead rope of a single horse each. The mounted platoon sergeants then shepherded 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 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 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. 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 2nd 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 *marc de provence* each from the soldier with a tray of aperitifs at the dining room door.

'2nd Company,' Jobert consumed the glass in a gulp.

'2nd 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, 4th Company, sir.'

'You are doing a good job, lad. Well done.'

The four 2nd Company officers strolled deeper into the room with their other glass.

The dining room brimmed 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, a variety of French cavalry uniforms were 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.

'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 eau de vie, were snatched up from tables and trays.

'Gentlemen, the 24th Chasseurs à Cheval.'

'The 24th Chasseurs!' boomed back the chorus. The room returned to noisy conversation.

As Jobert turned back to Geourdai, 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 24th Chasseur facings, strode across the room towards the 2nd Company officers.

'Gentlemen, Captain Fergnes, 1st Company, 1st Squadron and regimental fencing master.'

Jobert regarded Fergnes' dark curls cut in the latest style, a well-curved 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, 2nd Company, 2nd 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,' said an urbane voice. The party turned toward a tall, blond man, his face affable as he bowed. 'Captain de Chabenac, 8th Company, 2nd Squadron. I am at your service, gentlemen.'

Nobility! The group froze their expressions. 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 marc. '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's 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 24th 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 wine 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.’



Jobert scrutinised the three ranks of chasseurs, standing beside their led, 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 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 saddle trees 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 2nd 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 broke ranks, formed in sections and unsaddled, 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,' indicating himself, 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 and wiping 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,' said Jobert, his mouth full of bread and cheese. 'The twenty-odd very good horses will be divided between the four platoons. The rider will 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 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 company 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.

Jobert coughed from drinking too deeply from a water flask. ‘Geourdai, 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?’

Chapter Four



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 tailcoat.

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 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. This week, 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. *We are running out of time before ...* ‘When will sabres be issued?’

Raive’s merriment evaporated. ‘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 24th Chasseur’s plumes. Officers will assemble here in the square at six o’clock that evening. The ball will 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,’ said Jobert. ‘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 toward 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,’ asked Raive, ‘that you are aware of whispers desiring instruction in ... “dancing”?’ The chorus picked up the cue, as Raive waved in their participation.

‘My own agents, sir,’ said 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 around the table.

Raive put a finger to his lips. ‘Then may I suggest, gentlemen,

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, Geourdai 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 1st Squadron we opposed this morning were brutal.’

Jobert and Geourdai could see Voreille was hurting.

‘If you think 1st Squadron is uncompromising,’ said Geourdai, ‘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 are we required to parade in gloves tomorrow, 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 chasseurs 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?’

‘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,’ said Jobert, ‘we shall make a small profit for company funds.’



Paris

7th March 1793

My dearest André,

Jobert breathed in the hint of lilac that lifted from the unfolded pages.

I have 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.

Jobert winced. He had all those years. I have barely weeks. And without sabres.

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 with the invasion and then 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 sewing 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?

Jobert stiffened.

'Is everything well at home, sir?' asked Orlande from beside the hearth.

'All is quite well, my friend. Just a whisper of opportunity.'



With a nod from Jobert, Geourdai banged a tavern chair several times on the ancient floorboards. Lit by candles set into the smoky, low beams the throng of cheerful young faces turned towards them.

Geourdai stood on the chair and held up his hands for quiet. 'Gentlemen, welcome to the Tavern of the Sky-blue Pompom.'

'If you are going to rename my tavern,' boomed the tavern keeper, as he pushed tables and benches aside to make room for the dance class, 'that will be another five francs.'

‘Yes, yes,’ said Geourdai. ‘I recommend you unsling your scabbards and give them to Corporal Duque, there, for safe keeping.’ Duque indicated his position by raising his beer tankard.

‘I have appointed six squadron representatives,’ continued Geourdai, ‘who have the choice of receiving three francs from each member of their squadron tonight or paying ten francs themselves.’

‘Hurrah!’ erupted the majority. Six second lieutenants pointed fingers at their squadron colleagues, acknowledging the debt due.

‘Gentlemen, this would not be possible without our orchestra.’ Wobbling on his chair Geourdai indicated the dance master’s violinist, the two musical brothers from 2nd Company with their own fiddle and fife and Corporal Duque with a mouth harp and tambourine. The musicians bowed low as the crowd gave a hearty round of applause.

‘Yes, well done.’ Geourdai waved to regain the crowd’s composure. ‘Our next thanks are to Anissa and her friends who will support our class this evening.’

Eight women aged between fifteen and forty-five curtsied low to the officers, their simple above ankle-length dresses adorned with tricolour sashes, either wound tightly around their waists or over their shoulders. Many with low cut bodices, all with merry eyes, cheeky smiles and their hair tied up with ribbons, with loose curls on foreheads and necks according to the latest Parisian style. The officers applauded and bowed in response.

‘Now I beg you to give your full attention to our dance master, Monsieur Inoubli.’

Inoubli, a slim, clean shaven man in his early thirties, in matching purple satin jacket and breeches, with a vibrant orange waistcoat, white stockings, purple shoes with orange bows and

his hair slicked back into a queue held with a purple ribbon, bowed low to the officers with a theatrical flourish. Nodding to the officer’s applause, Inoubli stepped into the centre of the group and with rolling hand gestures to Geourdai, the musicians and the ladies in turn, extended the applause.

With another bow and a raised hand, Inoubli returned the room to silence. ‘Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, my name is Inoubli. It is my pleasure to be here this evening to assist you in any small way that I can. I can assure you Madame de Rossi has confided in me her selection of dances for the ball to ensure maximum participation from her guests by minimising the number of dance styles. To that end, I have placed myself at the disposal of the regiment for four evenings. I propose to introduce a particular dance during the first three evenings and review our progress, on the fourth evening, prior to the ball. If that is to your satisfaction, then we might commence the evening with the *gavotte*, a harvest festival and wedding favourite. If all goes well, proceed to the well-known *bourrée*.’

Jobert slapped his thigh in good cheer. Most of the women and many of the officers responded with delight, as they were acquainted with these lively dances of rural origin.

‘Ladies, do you feel you can accommodate so many well-formed fellows?’ asked Inoubli with a devilish wink.

‘There are not many times we girls can be paid so well, so early in the evening and later, only complain of how sore our feet are,’ said Anissa, a slim, flashing-eyed brunette, with her hands on her hips, creating a laugh and cheers from all.

‘If our musicians will take up the tune so we might measure the metre and if our ladies divide into two groups of four,’ said Inoubli. ‘Then, gentlemen, please separate into two groups so you may dance into one of the ladies’ circles, then dance one rotation before departing the circle, allowing another gentleman in.’

The evening began with Inoubli guiding the twirling gentlemen through the steps of the gavotte. The tavern keeper ensured a steady flow of liquor to dancers and musicians. Half an hour into the class, Geourdai, his face flushed from dance and drink, tapped Jobert on the shoulder and jerked a thumb at over a dozen men drinking at tables by the fire.

The men were filthy from toiling outdoors, either local construction or farm labourers, their dirty hair loose, their muscular hands begrimed. Their drunken sneers showed they were taking great delight in mocking the dancers and interrupting the instruction by clanging jugs and drinking vessels on the greasy tabletops.

With a swift appraisal, Jobert spun towards the menacing labourers. 'On me! On me! Duque, Fergnes, Geourdai! On me!'

The men at the tables lurched upright to receive the impending attack, some drawing knives and belts, other changing their grips on wooden beer-mugs. The crackling of the fire in the hearth the only other sound in the now silent room.

'Gentlemen,' said Jobert, 'it is now time you all went home to your wives.'

The labourers looked at each other in confusion. One thick-set fellow, beer-stein in hand, stepped toward Jobert, responding, 'And if we do not have wives?'

'But you good citizens must have wives. Otherwise, as unmarried patriots you would be avoiding the levee en masse. Then I would call out the barracks guard to hold you all in the regimental cells until the gendarmes arrive.'

Jobert sensed the men's hesitation. 'Would you like to go home now to wake tomorrow morning besides your wives? Or go to bed this evening in the army?'

The men shrank back, the threatening postures dropped away, knives, belts and wine-jugs returned to their original locations. Draining their mugs, they pressed towards the tavern's front door.

'Monsieur Inoubli,' said Jobert, 'your parade, sir.'

To which Inoubli bowed, the musicians struck up their tune and the girls took up their partners' hands.

Chapter Five



Freshened by the early snow melt from the Alpine headwaters to the east, the cold, dark stream tumbled and raced among the stunted pine to join the larger streams emptying into the Rhône less than five kilometres to the west. Although the Lyon road wound north from Avignon, the road here paralleled the east-west stream. At the top of a long slope running north from road and stream, Jobert and the regiment's officers gathered around Colonel Morin, as horses were led away to pasture by attendant troopers.

'Let me introduce today's discussion with the following news,' said Morin. 'Those district administrators with a modicum of patriotism and integrity are complying with Paris' directions for the raising of recruits in a timely manner. The ... less than responsible district administrators are either delaying their provision of allocated men, or sending in the district's criminals, drunkards and imbeciles. This action both slows the enrolment of men in the local centres and, what is more, decreases the number of recruits who have an ability to ride.'

‘I have decided to adapt to these circumstances in two forms. First, the recruit batches will now arrive every second day. Second, I shall suspend the formation of 11th and 12th Companies and integrate their current manning into the 5th and 6th Companies, thus reducing us to a five-squadron regiment for the foreseeable future. I have already shared this development with those 5th and 6th Squadron officers affected.’

Many officers rocked back on their heels. Jobert looked about and found downcast colleagues.

‘But now for today’s tactical study,’ said Morin. ‘North is in the direction of the road crossing the saddle two-thousand metres hence. We may assume the enemy’s main force lies to our north over that saddle. Our own main force lies to the south. For our purposes today, two squadrons of the regiment will camp on the meadow on the opposite, or southern, side of the stream and road. We will focus on the requirements for a two-squadron camp down this northern slope towards the side of the stream.’

‘The officers of the 1st and 2nd Squadrons, under Major Avriol’s guidance, will consider the factors of the camp relating to horses. The officers of the 3rd and 4th Squadron, under Major Spiccard will consider the factors of the camp relating to the men. I shall take the 5th and 6th Squadron’s officers and discuss the issue of supply to the camp. In two hours, we shall reconvene and share our learnings before returning to barracks.’

The dozen officers of 1st and 2nd Squadron returned to the stream bank to be addressed by one of Morin’s two chiefs of squadron, senior regimental combat leaders capable of independent tasking.

‘I am Major Avriol. The chief of squadron for 1st and 2nd Squadrons.’ Avriol’s low voice caused all to focus on his iron-hard, nonplussed visage. Jobert considered how Avriol projected his ferocity; his intense eyes and thick black moustache, his hair bound back into a queue.

‘Gentlemen,’ said Avriol, ‘the Colonel made it most clear what drives our momentum. The Colonel identified that accelerated individual promotion and rapid regimental expansion in the last three years has created critical areas of inexperience as much as it has allowed fresh ideas to form. Here we are, confronting an essential battlefield requirement, the setting of a camp. As we must always consider the enemy first, how does the enemy affect the sighting of the horses in camp?’

The subsequent eager discussion recognised that the enemy’s light cavalry could approach this camp as easily from the east or west. The young officers identified the enemy’s objective to either steal or destroy the squadron’s horses and advocated for placing the horse lines furthest from the enemy.

‘Where on the ground might we see the horses located?’ asked Avriol. Due to the lay of the land, this consideration inferred the horse lines would be parallel to the stream.

‘Wherever there is cavalry, there are four elements.’ Avriol held up four fingers. ‘Dust, mud, shit and lots of it. Are we satisfied with the placement of the lines?’

It was acknowledged that the ability of the horse lines to foul the water over a significant length compromised the location. Discussion identified water access for the men at the most upstream limit of the camp, then further downstream, water access for the horses, then even further downstream, a ford for the crossing of traffic from the road into the camp. A piece of ground was identified which, should there be heavy rain, the water run-off, from where the horses stood and defecated, would not foul the identified water access points.

‘Two squadrons consist of four hundred horses.’ said Avriol. ‘What will be the dimensions for the horse lines required? We have enough fellows. Let us pace it out.’

It took Fergnes and Jobert to point out the stream’s high-water mark, from evidence of previous storm debris, to mark

the minimum safe base of measurement. A solution of four company-strength horse lines was established, extending from the stream's high-water mark far up the slope. Once paced out and marked by the syndicate, the area of two hundred by twenty metres was impressive. Moreover, this was just for two squadrons, not the entire regiment.

Convening once more at the top of the long, sunny slope with the other officers, Avriol had appointed Jobert to present the group's findings to the wider audience.

'In summary, sir, gentlemen,' said Jobert projecting his voice to those assembled, 'our group identified the following considerations for horse lines: protection from enemy raids; relationship to the water source to gain access and to eliminate the fouling of the water due to either movement or rain run-off and to eliminate the impact of the stream rising due to storms; the dimensions requiring both the positions of the horses and lanes allowing men to feed, clear manure and lead horses to and from; and the significant amounts of rope, pegs, hammers, shovels and rakes to cause this all to happen.'

The group who would consider the requirements of the men presented a long list of considerations, which were scribbled into notebooks. Such considerations included flat sleeping areas, access to water, security picquet locations, access to horses, access to timber and sighting of cooking fires, sighting of latrines for both access and rain-induced run-off, access to a dismounted parade ground and the siting of command, medical and supply tents.

Before the 'men versus horses' compromises could be resolved, the third group provided insight into the need of supply: the location of the ford to allow wagon access from the Lyon road and the ford's relationship to other water access points; the need for a circular one-way route around the outside perimeter of the camp and a centre road through the middle of the camp;

the need to establish unload points uphill so stores could be walked downhill; and a wagon park with subsequent horse lines dedicated to the supply trains.

While small, white butterflies flitted about the meadow, the ensuing debate was of great interest. The junior officers desired a definite solution. The senior officers observed how each junior fellow revealed his character by his participation in the discussion. The robust discussion failed to produce a definite plan.

Morin held up his hand. 'Gentlemen, look at what we have not achieved in three hours in the middle of a sunny day, after a good night's rest, a hearty breakfast and without anyone shooting at us.'



Jobert heard Sergeant Major Koschak before he saw him.

'If you gutless worms ever try that again,' said Koschak, '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 to Jobert 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 trembled.

One sergeant jerked as he spotted Jobert approaching. Jobert held up a hand and shook his head. *I want to hear this.*

‘I have lost two teeth.’ Koschak lifted his lip. ‘Broken ribs.’ He showed a deep indentation on his side, then flexed a jagged scar on his left shoulder. ‘And taken a cut, all from enemy action.’

Koschak then turned his back on the corporals. ‘There is the royal, fucking army, you sacks of shit.’ Three of the corporals took a step backwards from Koschak’s scarred back lacerated from floggings. ‘Not enough pipe clay, horseshoe too loose and while putting a wheel on a wagon, not saluting an officer smartly enough.’

Koschak spun and faced 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 credible as battle-field leaders?’

The eight corporals shook, their heads wobbled, while eyes flickered 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 demand you scream “I am a corporal section commander of the 2nd Company, 24th 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 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.’

Blood throbbed against Jobert’s high collar. *Bloody young fools. Your arrogance will get us all killed. Or worse.*

‘Now, you rancid weeds,’ said Koschak, ‘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 listen to 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.'



Drizzling rain dripped from Jobert's bicorne. He tilted his head to the right to allow the dribbles of rain to bead off. At the front centre of 2nd Company, Jobert looked from one end of the company line to the other. *I should be savouring the moment of a full-strength chasseur company, but ...* His eyes slid to his men's right hips incongruously devoid of scabbard and hilt.

For most souls on parade in poor weather it might be considered a time of discomfort, but Jobert noticed Geourdai's self-righteous smile. At that moment, Geourdai was the right-most person of the regimental line and no-one stood beyond him.

In centuries past, when men fought with shields, the left side of the body was well protected and the right ribs were always open to attack from an opponent diagonally opposite. The natural impulse of the warrior was to press left, which subsequently crushed the sword arms of the men to the left. Hence only the bravest of the brave stood their ground on the right of the battle line. At an individual level, a warlord's champion was referred to as his 'right-hand man'. At an organisational level, to occupy the 'right of the line' was a point of honour, either an individual person or a selected group of soldiers.

As company second-in-command, Geourdai stood on the very right of the 2nd Company's front rank. Today, with 1st Squadron absent in camp, 2nd Company and thus Geourdai, was the right of the regimental line and hence, Jobert assumed, his smugness.

'Second-in-command!'

Geourdai squeezed his horse forward into a trot, halting in front of Jobert to salute.

'March 2nd Company to camp, Lieutenant.'

'2nd Company,' called Geourdai, 'form column to the left, walk, march.' Behind Neilage's lead, Sergeant Pultiere's platoon wheeled out into column of fours, at the walk, across the face of the company.

Jobert heard Koschak's 'whisper' to the men, 'Shine, lads. The whole regiment is watching you.' The chasseurs were rigid in the saddle as Pultiere's two corporals snarled comments out of the side of their mouths to maintain the perfection of the drill movement. Jobert snorted at the corporal's newfound ardour following their recent chat with the Sergeant Major.

His bemusement was cut short when he spotted Colonel Morin and his party by the stone entrance to the barracks. '2nd Company, eyes right by troop, carry on.'

'Troop, eyes right,' ordered Neilage, four horse lengths from Colonel Morin.

The lead corporal's face remained rigidly to the front, to maintain the alignment of the platoon, as the twelve ranks of four horsemen passed the Colonel. All the other fifty men of Neilage's troop had their chins over their right shoulders, eyes flickering to gauge their dressing, where their horses were walking and to look the Colonel in the eye.

'That man!' called the Regimental Sergeant Major mounted beside Morin. 'Do not look at your horse. He will not change colour. Look the Colonel in the eye, lad, and convince him you are the best bloody chasseur in the Republic.'

Unsure to whom the Regimental Sergeant Major's comments were levelled, near fifty heads and associated eyeballs swivelled even further.

'Well done, Sergeant Pultiere, well done, carry on.' Colonel

Morin returned Neilage's salute. 'Horses looking good, Sergeant Bredieux, well done, carry on.'

Morin twisted in the saddle and inspected Bleu's hind hooves. 'You are one of those "shoes on the front feet only" men, are you, Jobert? Let me know how your experiment goes. Major Avriol, do not let his wild ideas cripple my 2nd Company.'

'No, sir,' said Avriol, beside Jobert.

'Smartly executed. Good dressing, men,' called Morin as he received Voreille's salute. 'Good lord, Jobert, another experiment?' Orlande drove Jobert's personal two-wheeled cart, as part of the company's wagon train, past the Colonel's party.

'Yes, sir. Should you so desire, sir, there is a steaming cup of tea moments after the cart pulls up.'

'I look forward to your review of the tea, Avriol.'



Having cantered onto a low rise, Avriol and Jobert brought their horses back to a walk and pushed their horses under the boughs of a dripping oak tree. Avriol watched the walking progress of 2nd Squadron's six hundred metre column, of both Jobert's senior 2nd Company and de Chabenac's junior 8th Company, cross a brook at the bottom of the knoll.

'As my father would say, sir,' said Jobert, 'any bastard can be soldier on a sunny day.'

Avriol smiled as he arranged the folds of his coat over his saddle. 'Yes, my old regimental sergeant major would add, there is a thin strip of skin between a man's anus and his scrotum. When you get that wet, that is when you have leadership problems.'

They both laughed at solid military wisdom.

'You have had the recruits two weeks and the horses ten days. How would you summarise your company's capability right now?'

'They can dress themselves and assemble on parade, sir. They can strip, clean and assemble a musketoon. They can tack up a horse properly. They understand the fundamentals of columns of fours. I have committed sergeants. My second-in-command, sergeant major and myself seem to be connecting well enough.'

'Where do your concerns with your company lie?'

'I am gravely concerned that my men do not have sabres, sir.'

Avriol dropped his eyes to his gloved hands and flicked his reins.

'A quarter of my men are poor riders,' said Jobert. 'Extra equitation is required. Spending time learning to ride cuts into our time to prepare for battle. I am concerned with inexperienced junior leaders. In days past, having nobility as useless troop commanders was never an issue, whilst they were surrounded by veteran sergeants and corporals. I have second lieutenants and corporals far from capable at this rank level.'

'Where does your focus lie in the coming days?'

'We will establish camp today, but it is my intent to break and set camp daily. I want to set solid guard routines and procedures. The officers and senior non-commissioned officers will fence daily. Mounted drill will extend from column of fours to column of platoons and, of course, extra equitation for men and horses who require it. I intend to conduct dismounted reconnaissance patrols by night with the officers and non-commissioned officers, with the wider intent of testing the guard. I will introduce advanced riding techniques across country and jumping.'

Avriol twisted in the saddle to look Jobert in the eye. 'Lieutenant Colonel Raive described to us what you achieved

against the Austrians at Jemappes, Jobert. I demand you bring that level of élan to 2nd Company.’

Chapter Six

April 1793, Avignon, France



‘Fire!’ called Jobert down the line of four officers supervising the four chasseurs.

Four triggers were pulled. Four musketoon cocks struck forward, sparks from flints catching the priming in the pan, issuing a sharp hiss. Then a moment later, the charge exploded in the inner chamber propelling the four recruits’ first musket balls fired in the army towards the targets fifty metres away.

‘Load!’

This third day in camp for 2nd Company was choked with gun smoke.

‘Ready!’

Jobert stood at the right of the line of the firers so he could see the firing mechanism of the chasseur he instructed, as well as kept a watch on Voreille and his chasseur. Geour dai stood next in the line and Neilage on the left with their respective chasseurs.

‘Present!’

In an unsupported standing position, with butts thrust into