

Duty on a Lesser Front



ROB McLAREN

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Prologue

April 1794, Ponte di Nava, Italy



Captain André Jobert clenched his teeth. His fingers lingered as he placed Corporal Arbod's cold hand onto the dead man's chest. Arbod's sightless, seared eyes, behind raw, half-closed lids, pierced Jobert's heart.

Beside the dull embers of the campfire, *Chasseur* Faure moaned as he rocked, crushing in his fist a corner of the blanket that covered his lower body. His eyes flickered toward the space his lower right arm and lower right leg ought to be.

Jobert and Sergeant Major Koschak lifted Faure onto his one leg to help him urinate. Too weak to stand, Faure had no ability, with his remaining left hand, to bring himself out of his underdrawers. With a forlorn sob, Faure urinated down his own leg. Tears oozed down through the filth on his pallid cheeks.

Jobert and Koschak lowered Faure beside the other wounded *chasseur*. Saint-Dizier, disembowelled by a spinning cannister ball, now writhed and kicked in the dirt.

'Captain Jobert, sir, he is my cousin.' Faure lifted Saint-Dizier's grimy hand to his lips. 'He is only nineteen. He deserves better.'

Please, sir, a pistol? We show such mercy to our wounded horses, sir. Please?’

A vast weight slumped down on Jobert’s neck and shoulders. Accusatory whispers gathered in the shadows. Jobert shrugged himself upright and gave Koschak a nod.

Koschak’s mouth tightened. He turned to his bedroll and drew a pistol from his saddle holster. Sucking his breath through bared teeth, Koschak drew the ramrod and repacked the charge, opening the frizzen and checking the powder in the pan.

Jobert reached for Koschak’s pistol and cocked the mechanism. As he bent to place the pistol in Faure’s lap, Jobert kissed Faure’s greasy scalp.

Staring at the fire, Faure calmed his breathing. He placed down his cousin’s hand and took up the heavy cavalry pistol. His eyes on the flames, Faure placed the muzzle in his own mouth and fired.

Some chasseurs around nearby fires jerked in alarm. Some hung their heads, their faces in their hands.

Saint-Dizier squirmed at the pistol shot, crying out as his hand scraped at the mud to grip Faure’s twitching fingers.

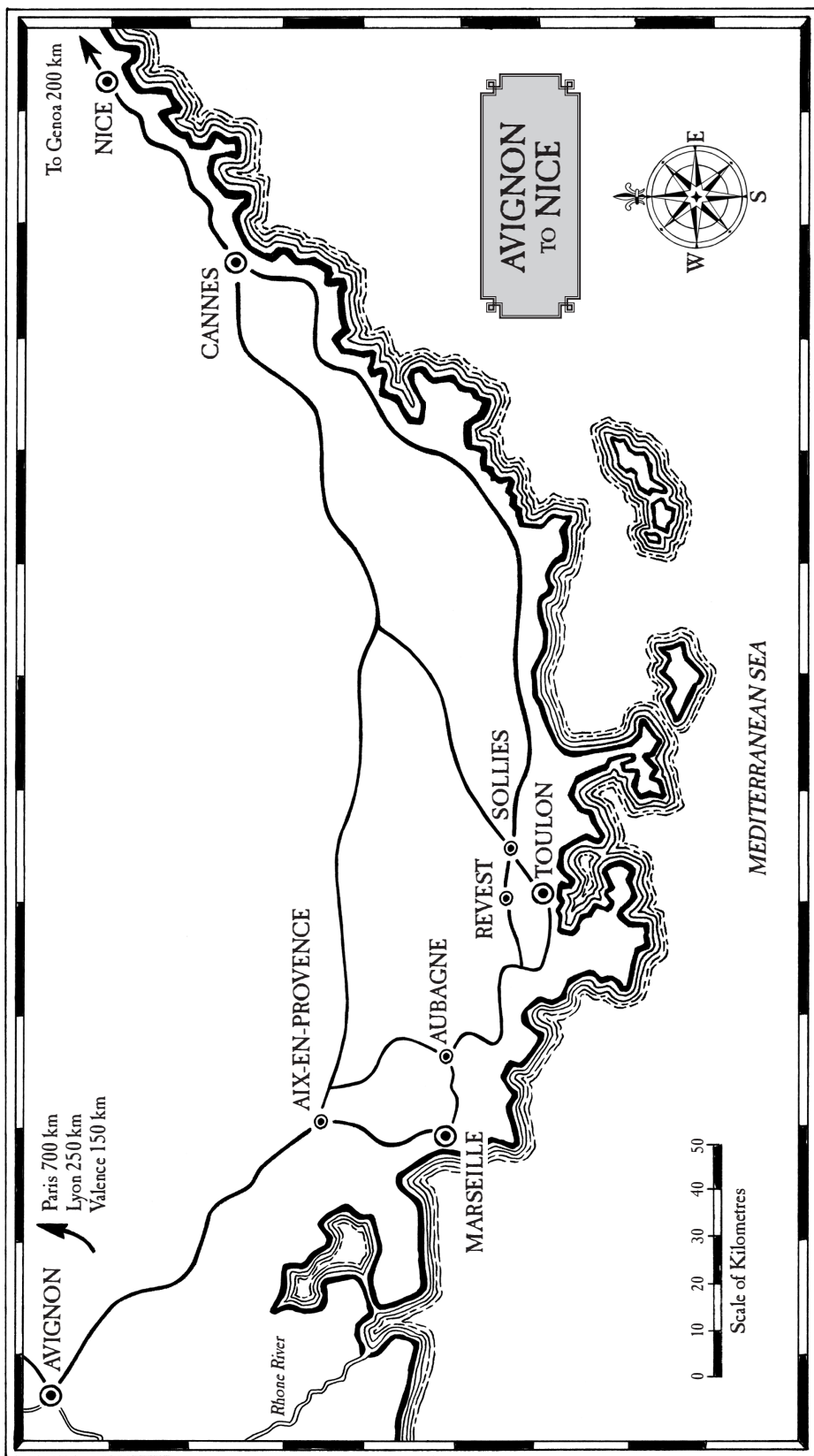
Jobert’s hands trembled as he draped the stained blanket over Faure’s body. *Did I fail them*, he thought? *What else could I have chosen?* ‘I will stay with Saint-Dizier, Sergeant Major.’

Koschak retrieved his pistol from the widening pool of blood. ‘No, you will not, sir.’ Koschak glanced towards the other platoon fires. ‘As a sergeant, yes, but not now as their captain. You lead them in battle. No! Go to bed. I will ... sit with him.’

‘My wound will not let me sleep.’

‘I care not, sir. Go.’

Jobert turned away into the darkness. He knew, when all was quiet, except for the snores of exhausted men and the soft footfall of the sentries, Koschak would pinch Saint-Dizier’s nose then clamp down on his mouth until the writhing stopped.



Chapter One

January 1794, Auvergne, France



André Jobert looked up from the cairn of black rocks that marked his grandfather's fresh grave in the family plot to the still, snow-covered slopes that surrounded him. The thick clouds blanketed the mountain sides, removing any view of the western heights of the Massif Central across the Allier Valley far below. Jobert's vision was restricted to the frozen granite and the snow-laden boughs within a few hundred metres.

The slowly drifting snow muted most sound. When one of the horses pawed at the crust of snow, crackling the frozen, dry grass and snorting a plume of thick steam, the noise punched the crisp air.

Jobert's gaze lingered on the pile of mossy stones, beyond the fresh grave, that pinned his father's bones. *You will never know how much I ...* Jobert expelled the sentiment away in a huff of steam, before looking towards his companion, a man he had known since childhood.

His lower face buried in an ice-encrusted scarf, Duque stared

towards the black, silent pines. He sighed as his face turned back to the mound of ice-shrouded earth. He made the sign of the cross with the three remaining fingers of his right hand, his thick glove barely moving.

Jobert locked eyes with Duque for a moment. Duque tilted his head towards the descending slope. Jobert nodded.

A pulse of breeze rising from the valley floor whistled through the pine needles and swirled the snow in the air. Jobert let his horse pick his steps down the brittle, rocky slope, Duque by his side, away from Jacques Chauvel's grave to the huddled farms shrouded in the mist below.



‘I have no desire for immediate cash, uncle,’ said Jobert. ‘I have no call to take my share of the estate. I live simply within my means. I am proud of our family’s journey, and I wish to play my part in reinforcing that hard-won success.’ Jobert spoke in German. An ancient rule since the family were itinerant drovers, and now a well-ingrained habit of the Chauvel family, only German was spoken within the house.

Yann Chauvel’s eyes narrowed as he peered at his nephew. He then adjusted his wire-framed spectacles to squint at the document in his hand. ‘Now, the last will and testament of my father, ... of Jacques Chauvel, directs the division of his estate into thirds. One-third to his sister Sophie, one-third to me and one-third to the children of his daughter. Here in one room are all those beneficiaries.’

Yann’s daughter, Michelle, a tall woman in her early twenties, long hair pinned up into tresses, draped a knitted blanket across the waist of her great aunt Sophie. The elderly Sophie flapped

a bony hand, tut-tutting over such fuss, but raised her slender arms and allowed Michelle to tuck the blanket.

Yann looked over his wire-framed spectacles at the faces illuminated by the flickering fire. 'Jacques' estate has grown, over thirty-five years, from nothing to a herd of two hundred and eighty horses based on five hundred and twenty acres, with a workforce of over forty men.'

Jobert gave his elder brother, Didier, a wink as he poured a myrtle-flavoured chartreuse, a local favourite, from a dark-glassed bottle into the small glasses of Yann, Michelle, Didier and himself. Aunt Sophie took a small splash in her coffee.

'In 1790,' said Yann, 'with the changes sweeping France, we acquired the land at a low price, but the interest rates from the lenders were high. That loan has a term of twenty years. The land is valued greater than the herd, so we pay an extreme rate of interest to cover the difference. Until the difference is covered, we cannot claim ownership of the land. The war over the last eighteen months ensures our artillery horses command a good price, but the sale of forty horses per annum barely covers the loan repayments and the needs of our workers.'

'Uncle,' asked Jobert, 'what part do the immense efforts of our dear aunt play in the family's endeavours?'

'Immense, indeed. Aunt Sophie's four workhouses are all owned in her brother Jacques' name —'

'The net profit from sewing uniforms is the equivalent to the sale of ten extra horses per annum,' said Michelle. She exchanged a curt nod with Aunt Sophie as she fussed with her skirt.

'Quite so, my dear.' Yann savoured his chartreuse.

Duque's family has cared for our family's herd for three generations. 'And what of the venture to extend our cartage capability with the Duque family?'

'Indeed, a third venture was undertaken in the last twelve months. The Republic's demand for cartage to supply the arm-

ies, and the subsequent income, cannot be ignored. Under the management of the Duque family, we are expanding in this area based on our forty-five-odd herd of three-year-old colts. Each March, the junior two-year-old colts become our senior colts. Since these new senior colts are still growing, one element of their schooling is to work as a team. By the end of the year's training, including their work under saddle, the colts are strong enough to pull a light load in pairs. Investing whatever is spare grows the fleet of wagons required.'

'Father, as you say, until the loan is repaid considerably, we cannot claim ownership of the land,' said Michelle. 'How does the combined income from these enterprises impact upon the loan?'

'At our current repayment level, we shall have access to the deeds by 1799,' said Yann. 'Drawn in 1790, little principal is repaid. We sit precariously. Any financial shock, and 1793 just past has threatened more than a few, will have our lenders pull the rug from under us. Jacques' estate, a family enterprise nearly fifty years in the making, is in a delicate financial position. The Republic provides good income through the demand for gun teams, cartage and the manufacture of uniforms, but our loan repayments leave no net profit. If any beneficiary of Jacques' estate decides to claim their share, the land and the herd would be sold. That sale repays the loans in full, with nothing left over, and have all the herdsmen dismissed. A meagre dividend for us all.'

The fire hissed and popped, giving reason for everyone to contemplate the hearth.

'Not only no dividend,' said Didier to the flames, 'our fortunes are entwined with the Republic's success on the battlefield.'

Yann shifted in his creaking chair and faced his nephews, sons of his long-dead sister. 'To that end, Aunt Sophie and I propose establishing a company in which there are four shareholders.

Aunt Sophie holds one-third, a second third to my estate, and a one-sixth holding to both you boys. If you concur, I propose to draw up company deeds whilst both of you lads are home on leave. We have the opportunity to consider signing them in the weeks prior to your return to your regiments.'

Jobert smiled grimly at Michelle and Didier. *We cousins now shackled tighter by our family's fortunes.*



A day of January sunshine was a rare treat on the upper slopes of Auvergne's Massif Central.

With the cloud cover absent, the sun rose over the ridges to the east by ten o'clock. As it skimmed the southern horizon, the watery sun warmed the household's spirits. After a family lunch, and before the sun set on the western heights across the valley by mid-afternoon, the brothers decided to escort Michelle down to the stables from the ramshackle farmhouse.

An icy wind raced south as the trio crunched through the snow arm in arm. Jobert felt Michelle's body jerk as a pistol fired from the vicinity of the stables.

'I hate that sound,' said Michelle. 'Even if it signals dinner-time for the horses.'

Jobert thought nothing of the standard practice to desensitise all military horses from the sound and the smoke.

Michelle leant her head on Jobert's arm. 'And what of Duque? How has he fared with his injuries since Jemappes? Will he return to the regiment as your groom? Or will he take a place in this cartage venture his father leads?'

Jobert shrugged. 'He has become adept with the remaining fingers the hussar's sabre did not remove. I raised the matter of

re-joining his family with him, thinking I would require a new groom. Duque replied maybe one day, but not at the moment. He felt the venture had enough brothers and cousins involved. I think he enjoys the place he holds in my *chasseur* company as a respected horseman. All the perks of a non-commissioned officer without the responsibilities, perhaps.'

The three fell silent as they negotiated a length of slippery ice.

'What news of the de Chabenacs?' asked Jobert.

'Who?' asked Didier.

'A stunning noble woman André rescued from the Avignon revolt last year,' said Michelle, 'and her equally gorgeous mother.'

'Is the mother widowed and rich?' asked Didier.

Michelle glanced mockingly at Didier.

'Like many minor nobility,' said Jobert, 'destitute with the loss of land and title. The son commanded the junior company in my squadron before becoming a regimental *aide de camp*.'

'To answer your question, André,' said Michelle, 'both ladies are well, considering their unfortunate situation. With the Committee of Public Safety's new Law of Suspects, and the consequent rise in the number of executions in Paris, we all go about our lives with great care. The de Chabenac ladies are guests in our apartment, and they devote their daily energies to our women in the workhouses. I shall pass on your warmest regards, cousin, which I know will be appreciated. Valmai speaks highly of your dancing skills, of which I was unaware. No chance of ...?'

Jobert rolled his eyes. 'Of what? Dancing or marriage?'

Michelle winked at Didier. 'Surely one leads to the other.'

'Good grief, woman. Take a wife on a captain's salary in the middle of a war? You cannot be serious? I hardly stand still long enough to change my stockings, let alone fall in love.'

'Indeed! Preposterous notion.' Didier huffed. 'What of you, cousin? Are you close to marrying? How does Uncle Yann feel

about your escapades as a single woman in Paris?’

Michelle’s smile ceased. ‘Paris in the grip of the Terror is not the place to consider courtship, let alone matrimony. My father is too aware of our need to survive and places his trust in me to secure my station, as all the women in our family have. No, with Aunt Sophie now seventy-five, my place is at her side. It may only be lace and braid we sew, but our production to fill contracts for military headdress is considerable. I will not lose all that to attend a husband.’

Jobert scowled across Michelle’s wrapped head towards Didier. Didier grimaced an apology in return.

‘Michelle,’ asked Jobert, ‘how can we assist the farm?’

Michelle stopped walking and disengaged her arms and wiped tears from her eyes. ‘Stay safe. Come home.’

The brothers exchanged furtive glances. Didier shrugged. ‘Perhaps allocate a small stipend from our salaries to the farm?’

Jobert shook his head. ‘On your major’s salary possibly. A captain’s salary would certainly not allow it.’

‘Then get promoted. Act recklessly brave in front of a Deputy of the People and be promoted to general. I am serious. All sorts of fellows are achieving it. Since 1791, our chance for rapid promotion is upon us.’

‘Shut up, idiots.’ Michelle stamped her foot, her face flushed. ‘You are not with your hussars, or *chasseurs à cheval*, or what have you, now. Talk of reckless bravery somewhere else. A dead hero, cloaked in glory, will not help the farm ... though you might consider cartage contracts at a regimental level.’

Michelle’s comment reminded Jobert of his close connection to Colonel Raive, now posted to the headquarters of General Masséna’s division within the Army of Italy.

Michelle resettled her scarf around her freezing face, snuggled her arms into those of her beloved cousins and set off again for the stables.

Jobert cleared his throat. His brother and his cousin tipped their faces towards him anticipating some announcement. Jobert sought his words, reluctant to reveal his part in an armoury raid in Valence ten months ago.

‘I ... I have three thousand francs to contribute to the farm. I wish to repay my grandfather for his gift of horses upon my promotions.’

Didier stopped in his tracks to stare at André. ‘I beg your pardon, brother. That is over a year’s salary for a captain. My word, you do live within your means.’

Michelle looked into André’s stern eyes. ‘Darling André, that is a lot of money. As father explained our situation, it is most welcome, of course. Are you sure you wish the farm to have it?’

Jobert shrugged. ‘The new company’s deeds described the ability to increase our shareholding by contributions, did they not?’

The three arrived at an outer gate to the stone stables. Unlinking arms to open the gate and usher their cousin through the muddy slush, Didier looked hard at André. ‘What occupied you last year?’

‘I told you. I joined one of the new chasseurs à cheval regiments and raised a company. My men were blooded screening Marseille and Avignon during their revolts.’

Didier stared with brows furrowed. ‘But three thousand francs, brother? Did you benefit from the siege at Toulon?’

‘No. Patrols, escorts, guides, and a few scraps here and there. We were lucky to come through reasonably unscathed.’

‘But no glory, eh?’

Chapter Two

February 1794, Avignon, France



Jobert and the forty seated men looked down the long tables towards Colonel Morin, his glass raised in a toast.

‘Vive le République.’

‘Vive le République.’ The response boomed back from those assembled.

‘The 24th Chasseurs à Cheval.’

‘24th Chasseurs.’ The chorus patted the table with their free hands.

‘To absent brothers.’

The room’s mood changed in an instant. The young men’s faces hardened with the memories of the regiment’s first campaign prior to the new year. *‘Absent brothers.’*

Morin refilled his glass once more. *‘Gentlemen, welcome back to the regiment. Let us now focus on our immediate task in this new year. With Colonel’s Raive’s promotion and his posting to General Masséna’s staff, we welcome Lieutenant Colonel Spiccard as the regiment’s second-in-command.’*

‘Hear! Hear!’

‘We welcome our two new chiefs of squadron,’ said Morin, ‘Majors Fergnes and Clemusat. These well-deserved promotions are the result of uncompromised dedication from these fine officers. I wish to mention one of our brethren who has not received such honours. Captain Jobert, and his 2nd Company, gave excellent service to the regiment and France last year, in the face of the enemy in a number of exceptional situations, but he was not rewarded with promotion. I have chosen to acknowledge Jobert’s actions with the granting of a small prize. Jobert, if you will?’

As Jobert walked the length of the dining tables to his colonel, each young officer eyed the small, calf-skin purse hefted in Morin’s fist.

Jobert recognised the purse. It was identical to three purses he had acquired during a raid he had led to Valence last April. *We hear you, sir. Fight hard, my lads, fight hard for the 24th Chasseurs and France, and glory, promotion and gold will be yours.* Jobert expected the purse still contained fifty gold louis, equivalent to one thousand francs, or four months wages as a cavalry captain.

Morin rapped his knuckles on the table. ‘Now, gentlemen, to our pressing task of marching the regiment three hundred kilometres from Avignon to Nice to join General Masséna’s division within the Army of Italy. The natural frontier between France and Italy is the Maritime Alps. With its headquarters in Nice, the Army of Italy holds the frontier. Our Piedmontese enemies garrison fortresses on the French side of this natural boundary and threaten the Republic’s sovereignty. With lunch about to be served, are there any pressing questions? No?’

Jobert drained his glass of *poire william*, his mind on the promise and the dangers of the Mediterranean coast.



Three caped horsemen entered from the tavern yard. The small kitchen's battered door admitted an icy gust. Jobert saw the fire in the hearth flare, and his valet, Orlande, scramble to cover the soup kettle from the frozen strands of hay in the dusty cloud.

Orlande winced. 'Tea, sir?'

'Thank you, Orlande,' said Jobert, inviting the two other men to take one of the rickety chairs at the decrepit wooden table. 'What of your inspection of the company's remounts, Neilage?'

Lieutenant Neilage, 2nd Company's second-in-command, reaffirmed the curl of his red-blond moustache under his slim, pointed nose. 'Feet are fine and newly shod, sir. Manes are hogged. Standing in stables, the horses are putting on condition, more so under their new canvas rugs, so I have reduced the grain ration. Sergeants continue to lead their platoons out for daily exercise and for horses to pick at the winter grasses.'

'Did we receive a good price for manes?' asked Jobert. 'And what of regimental tasks in preparation to march?'

'Company funds are in a good state,' said Neilage. 'What constitutes our daily juggle is the requirement to man regimental work parties, loading ledgers and stores from headquarters and the contents of armouries and magazines into nearly sixty regimental wagons.'

'Where are our two troop commanders?'

'Lieutenant Colonel Spiccard has all the second lieutenants scribing the load lists for the regimental trains, sir.'

Jobert slid his eyes over the rim of his mug of tea from Neilage to Koschak. 'How do the men view our march to Nice, Sergeant Major?'

Company Sergeant Major Koschak removed his green *bonnet-de-police* from his hair bound back in a queue and allowed the heat from his wooden tea mug to warm his fingers. ‘Some of our local lads are downcast they are marching far from home and sweethearts, sir. Of the four chasseurs who failed to report back for the muster parade, we retrieved three easily enough from their mothers’ hearths. Others with itchier feet are keen to see more of the wider world.’ Koschak’s mouth tightened as he inspected the tea leaves at the bottom of his mug. ‘I have adjusted their expectations by saying that the Austrian bastards on the frontier will be hard men.’

‘Good,’ said Jobert. ‘We will not be as fortunate as Toulon.’ *Barely a year under their belt, these lads still have far to go.* ‘What else needs our attention, Sergeant Major?’

Koschak shrugged his broad shoulders. ‘Naught else, sir. Just saddle, mount and march.’



By the spluttering light of pitch-soaked torches, under a freezing full moon, Jobert, Orlande and Moench huddled within the warmth generated by the three warhorses that surrounded them. At Rouge’s nose stood Vert, Jobert’s mount for the day, and Trumpeter Moench’s grey gelding.

Distinctive from the mounted men around them, all trumpeters rode greys. Not only was Moench’s gelding noticeable, Moench wore the dark-orange, or capucine, jacket of a regimental trumpeter, a complete reverse of the dark-green jackets of the remainder of the regiment. The reverse-coloured jacket combined with the grey horse indicated both the location of the trumpeter and the nearby presence of the officer they served.

Jobert observed Sergeant Major Koschak assemble the chasseurs, whilst the convoy commander, Lieutenant Neilage, liaised with the wagons detailed to 2nd Company. Leaning across Vert's saddle, Jobert watched his chasseurs lead their remounts out of the Avignon barracks stable for the last time.

'Happy to be back on the road, Moench?'

'Ooh, yes, sir,' said Trumpeter Moench. 'There are too many husbands in this town who want to cut my cock off.'

'Would shortening it a smidgeon be such a bad result?' Jobert winked at Orlande. 'You will not miss your hometown, Moench?'

'My little brother might.' Moench shrugged. 'I feel it is time to enjoy all the pleasures that Italy has to offer.'

Orlande pressed his spectacles back onto the bridge of his nose. 'Ah, lovely.'

'What about the kaiserliks, sir?' asked Moench. 'Will they be as tough as they say?'

Jobert scratched Rouge's ears. 'The Austrians will fight as hard as the Spanish and British we faced a few months ago. Since they have no fleet to escape in, the kaiserliks will stand their ground sure enough.'

Rouge pushed his muzzle into Jobert's ribs to scratch a bridled itch. Both Jobert and Vert shuffled to regain their balance. Jobert raised a warning finger at Rouge, at which the horse dipped his nose away.

Jobert owned a string of three warhorses, Rouge, Bleu and Vert. Today, Rouge was harnessed in the shafts of Jobert's light trap, a small two-wheeled cart that allowed Jobert to maintain a small store of water, an iron firebox, and a simple command marquee close behind the tail of the company. Bleu, rugged in canvas, was tied to the rear of the cart.

On campaign, Orlande rode the horse saddled in the shafts, able to abandon the cart should the situation require.

This morning, Orlande would drive from the cart's seat with a thick blanket wrapped around his legs. As Jobert's groom, Corporal Duque normally led Jobert's spare horse when his captain required it in battle, but today Duque drove one of the company's wagons.

Wheels squealed against laden axles and groaned on the compact gravel of the regimental square. Responding to the growled commands of their four platoon sergeants, with a jingle and clatter of bit chains, spurs, scabbards and slung musketoons, the chasseurs of 2nd Company mounted their horses.

Moench whistled the trumpet call *To Mess*, the signature tune of 2nd Company.

Young faces pinched with cold emerged from cape flaps and under helmet visors, whistling the trumpet call in response.



A strong southerly blew in from the Mediterranean, skidding clumps of low-lying grey cloud north towards the higher coastal ranges. Branches in the leafless orchards around Toulon rattled and scraped in the wind. The smoke from nearby kitchen chimneys eddied with the dust from the fallow fields in which 2nd Company had camped.

Observing the company and its train of wagons assemble on parade, Jobert and Captain Chabenac, one of Colonel Morin's aides de camp, breakfasted on Orlande's fried bread filled with poached egg and feta cheese, as their capes whipped around their legs.

Chabenac's clean-shaven face scowled as he watched Corporal Duque assist the squadron's *cantinière*, Madame Quandalle, and her son onto the back of a wagon. 'Is it for the best?'

Jobert wiped yolk and crumbs from his mouth with his thick glove cuff. 'My mother followed her brother up and down the Rhineland for seven years in the last war, darning stockings, replacing buttons and removing the lace of rank from dead men's sleeves. Madame Quandalle and her son served us well last year. She will make a fine cantinière.'

Jobert slid his eyes towards Chabenac as he reflected on his friend's boyhood of noble privilege. The execution of his uncle, the Comte de Chabenac. The mob's vicious beating of his parents, from which his father died. Deciding to remove the 'de' from his name thus publicly disavowing his nobility. When all Avignon society turned against his mother and sister in their moment of crisis, it was Jobert's family, a family of harness-makers and common soldiers, who provided charity and refuge.

'I have heard the Austrian is a doughty foe,' said Chabenac. 'Are you satisfied with 2nd Company's preparation?'

'No.' Jobert cast the dregs of his cold tea onto the ground and tucked the wooden cup into a deep pocket of his cape. 'There is still much to learn. I expect the Austrians will provide the severest school.'



On the improvised drill ground in the chill March wind, Sergeant Major Koschak stood rigid with a musket tucked under his left arm, the weapon's hammer snug in the crook of the left elbow, in the position of 'Shoulder Arms'. With the bayonet fitted to the musket's muzzle, the firearm, with a length of one hundred and thirteen centimetres, extended to become a weapon nearly one hundred and sixty centimetres in length.

'Sergeant Major, ready!' called Jobert.

Koschak stepped forward with his left foot, grasped the waist of the musket's stock with his right hand, the barrel with his left hand and positioned himself to fire.

'Lads,' said Jobert, projecting his voice to the troop of fifty 2nd Company chasseurs about him, 'you will note the fusilier is ready to fire. Sergeant Major, *en garde!*'

Koschak adjusted his stance, his knees bent, ready to thrust the bayonet if required.

'Take note that the right hand will provide the thrust to the musket,' said Jobert, 'and the left will guide the bayonet home. With the tip of the bayonet at the eye level of my horse, you will observe how my horse finds it difficult to approach the fusilier with his musket in this position.'

Jobert backed Rouge a few steps away from Koschak. 'Sergeant Major, at a mounted opponent, thrust!'

Koschak lunged, his left arm outstretched, the tip of the bayonet level with his eyes.

'Note the targets available to the fusilier. I spoke of the face of the horse, but the bayonet is easily parried by the horse's thrown head, leaving the fusilier vulnerable. Of greater value to the fusilier is the groin of the cavalryman, and just above that area, the abdomen. What protects the groin?'

'The saddle bow, sir,' said Chasseur Faure, 'with pistol holsters attached, and the horse rug and cape rolled under the shabraque.'

'Well done, Faure. The waist sash provides only limited protection to the abdomen. On initial inspection it appears that, in the outstretched arms of both opponents, the musket with the bayonet is longer than the sabre.'

Jobert side-stepped Rouge so that the tip of the bayonet rested against his ribs, and the tip of his one-hundred-centimetre sabre was still a good forty centimetres from Koschak's face.

'Observe, now, the wounding and death of the lazy chasseur

who chooses to slash at the fusilier.' With that, Jobert raised his sabre for a downward cut. As Jobert's arm swung the sabre above his head, Koschak leapt forward and again applied the tip of the musket to Jobert's ribs.

Jobert then sidestepped Rouge away from Koschak until only the tips of both weapons were touching.

'Aim your strike for the fingers of the fusilier's hands, especially the unprotected fingers of the fusilier's outstretched left hand. As we know from our fencing, the tip of the sabre and the tip of the bayonet are equal, for it is the parry that matters.'

Jobert nullified the threat with a gentle sweep of his wrist and a screech of blade on bayonet.

'It is the use of the horseman's nearside, or left, heel that signals the horse to sidestep towards the fusilier, thus creating the momentum of the strike. With the horse moving sideways, the bayonet tip parried, your blade glides down the barrel and slices off the fusilier's fingers, rendering him *hors de combat*. As the bayonet has no cutting edge and the sabre has a knuckle-guard to deflect both bayonet and barrel, the movement is achieved with complete safety to the horseman.'

Jobert's horse stepped sideways allowing Jobert to rest his sabre's edge on Koschak's bare fingers.

'Reform ranks and prepare to practise that stroke.'



As he broke a crusty bread roll over his steaming seafood *burrida*, Colonel Raive leant toward Jobert seated beside him, his eyes darting towards his dining companions. 'General Dumberbion is an interesting fellow.'

Jobert looked through the wavering candlelight at the young officers across the table staring eagerly towards the senior officers. Their keen eyes waited for the regiment's guests, and their host officers, to begin their soups, indicating they were allowed to begin their own meal. Far along the table General Dumberbion lifted his spoon and took a polite sip. This signal allowed the junior men to snatch up spoons and slurp.

'As the Commander of the Army of Italy,' said Raive, 'Dumberbion commands a force of forty thousand on paper, but effectively fields twenty thousand men due to rampant illness. He is quite canny. Having watched many of his peers executed by the People's Deputies, he asks the Deputies their opinion on how operations be conducted, and then complies with their advice. You will remember our citizen Deputy Saliceti from last year.'

Jobert slid his eyes in the direction of Raive's nod toward the sharp faced Deputy of the People Saliceti.

'Where do our Deputies derive such insightful military opinion for General Dumberbion?' Raive's eyes twinkled. 'None other than the Army of Italy's Chief of Artillery, our friend Brigadier General Bonaparte. With Austria's and Prussia's recent advance across the Rhine, young Bonaparte is advocating for an offensive into northern Italy to divert Austrian pressure from the Rhine. Desperate times these, Jobert. Paper money is worthless. The country is afflicted with famine and supply is woeful. Carnot, the Minister of War, is making noises for France to invade beyond our boundaries simply to feed the armies.'

'Speaking of supply, sir, my family is incorporating a small cartage business into the training of our colts. If they were seeking cartage contracts within the Army of Italy, where might they begin?'

Raive sucked his teeth and wobbled his head. 'For any supply

extending back to the Rhône, army contracts originate in Paris. Local resupply contracts are well supported by local carters. The difficulty is when contracts are awarded, and the money paid, the material supplied is of inferior quality. What is more, the drivers are not paid, which results in the theft of those inadequate supplies.'

Raive considered Jobert a moment amidst the laughter, chatter and clinks of cutlery on crockery. 'Perhaps General Masséna and I would be glad of access to a small outfit, with a reputation for integrity, for the movement of key items both to and from Nice. If I placed an order for, say, wine for example, how might I arrange it?'

'My uncle has delegated the enterprise to the Duque family.' Jobert tipped his bowl to finish his soup. 'I will make Duque available to you as your agent.'

'Corporal Duque? Excellent! Then I am obliged, my dear fellow. Let us start with one load and grow it from there.'

'What of your new commander, sir, divisional commander Masséna?'

'Masséna is a sharp fellow. I enjoy working for him. He hails from the coast around Nice and knows the country well. Like us, a royal army sergeant major, he enjoyed rapid promotion in the volunteer infantry battalions that sprang up in 1791. With Saliceti promoting him to divisional commander, he now commands a force of six thousand men of four infantry regiments.'

'And what is the state of your battalions?'

The twist of Raive's mouth caused his moustache to flicker. 'The Minister of War continues to drive the amalgamation within each infantry regiment of one old, royal army battalion with two patriotic volunteer battalions. That amalgamation is now occurring here in Nice.'

'Is there any artillery allocated to the division?'

‘A foot battery of six four-pounder guns and two six-inch howitzers.’

‘And the 24th Chasseurs?’

‘As Masséna is General Dumerbion’s darling and leads all his operations here on the frontier, Dumerbion has allocated Masséna’s division a regiment of chasseurs. You have seen a chart of the area, have you not? We sit south of the door to the vast Po River valley that flows east from the Maritime Alps to the Adriatic. To protect that entrance, our enemies hold a defensive line west of the Maritime Alps within the natural boundaries of France.’

‘And what of our enemies?’ asked Jobert.

‘The Army of Italy faces three enemies. Twenty thousand Piedmontese in the mountains to the north, entrenched in a fortified line around the mountain fortress at Saorgio. Twenty-five thousand Austrians along the coast to the east. The British navy interdicts our coastal resupply to our south and intercepts our grain resupply from Genoa.’

As fresh carafes of wine were passed along the table, the young officers filled each other’s glasses whilst soldiers removed the soup bowls.

‘France secured the province of Savoy and the port of Nice in ’92,’ said Raive. ‘But we failed to secure Saorgio. Early last year, the Army again attempted to take the fortress line that protects the high passes. The attack failed with disastrous results and our commanders executed. Hence the current general’s well-developed sense of caution.’

Both Jobert and Raive leant back as a plate of fish in a fragrant wine and lemon sauce was placed in front of them.

‘The use of cavalry in the mountains is currently a much-debated topic in the regiment,’ said Jobert. ‘What are Masséna’s views on the use of the 24th Chasseurs?’

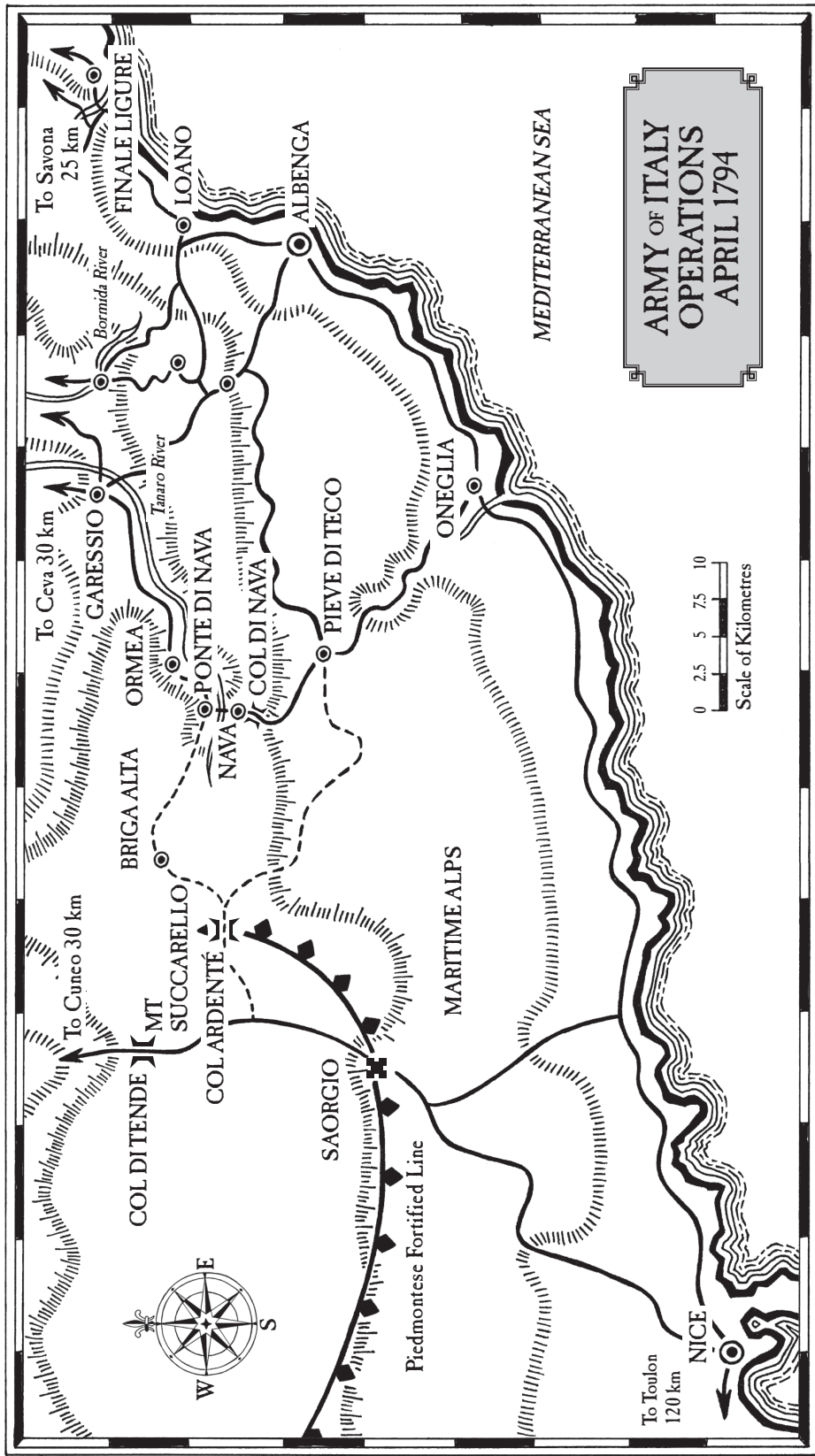
‘The challenge for cavalry is that mountain soil is poor and

there is next to no forage. Due to steep terrain, all movement is restricted to roads. The vital roads allow two carts to move past each other, so, at best, a battlefield frontage of a standard marching column, four horsemen or six infantrymen. But this is the exception, as most roads only allow one cart, or a frontage of two horses. Any bypassing of enemy positions can only be achieved on local village footpaths. Perhaps small groupings of horsemen can move rapidly and sustain themselves in such an environment, which gains some temporary tactical advantage, but the best use of the chasseurs is escorting artillery and resupply columns.'

'A platoon sergeant's war?'

'Due to the importance of the passes that need seizing, perhaps platoons commanded by colonels? But snow in the passes begins to melt. I suspect our friend Bonaparte has a scheme. He will feed it to Dumerbion via the People's Deputies. Masséna will be given his order to march, and the 24th Chasseurs will lead the way. I hope your men are ready, Jobert?'

Jobert's teeth ground his mouthfuls, his senses oblivious to the rich flavours.



Chapter Three

April 1794, Nice, France



A fire in the hearth and candles in the beams of the low-ceilinged tavern lit the terrain model.

‘2nd Company, on parade, sir.’ Jobert gave a respectful nod as he handed control of the assembly over to his commanding officer.

Colonel Morin stepped into the centre of the ring of smoky light.

‘General Dumerbion has orders from Paris to expel the Piedmontese from French soil. General Dumerbion has selected General Masséna to spearhead that attack. General Masséna has requested I pass on how delighted he is that the 24th Chasseurs will lead his division into battle. The 2nd Company’s role is vital to the Republic’s success in this endeavour. From my close observation of you all, I believe wholeheartedly that every man, without exception, will do his best. Captain Jobert, your parade.’

Jobert stepped forward, his gaze passing with assurance across each face.

‘Men, on this model of the Mediterranean coast before you,

you will note Mount Succarello, a dominating local mountain around which there are three passes across the range, the Col di Tende, the Col di Nava and the Col Ardente. Blocking the Col di Tende is the fortress at Saorgio. Over the Col di Nava, a road runs from Oneglia into the Tanaro River valley, which includes the towns of Ormea and Garesio.

‘Consider the enemy. By defending the Col di Tende, the Piedmontese deny any movement over the Maritime Alps, into Piedmont and the headwaters of the great Po. To defend the Col di Tende, the Piedmontese hold a line of forts centred on Saorgio. The east flank of the fortified line extends to Mount Succarello. Beyond Mount Succarello, a string of isolated Austrian battalions is dispersed from the mountain down to Savona on the coast.

‘General Dumerbion’s plan is to secure the Col di Tende for France. The General will attack with three large columns. The first column will advance from Nice against Saorgio, attacking the fortress from the front, thus pinning the Piedmontese defence and their reserves.

‘The second column, General Masséna’s division – our division – will attack along the coast to Oneglia. General Masséna will then turn away from the coast and attack up and over the Col di Nava, enter the Tanaro River valley on the far side of the Alps and capture the towns of Ormea and Garesio.

‘General Masséna will then reverse his advance west to Mount Succarello, break through the Piedmontese fortified line at the Col Ardente to secure the road between Saorgio and the Col di Tende, isolating the Piedmontese at Saorgio. The third column will advance along the coast beyond Oneglia to Loano, threatening the Austrians at Savona and diverting their reserves from the mountains to the sea.

‘The 24th Chasseurs play a crucial role in General Masséna’s success. Our 2nd Squadron is to lead General Masséna’s division

into every attack against the Austrians, with 2nd Company and 5th Company alternating as the divisional advance guard.'

The first into every fight. As they listened, the mouths of the 2nd Company men tightened.

'To begin with, 5th Company will lead General Masséna from Nice to Oneglia along the coast. We, 2nd Company, will lead General Masséna from Oneglia up and over the Col di Nava and into the Tanaro River valley.

'When 2nd Company turns north, taking the lead away from the coast, we will be followed by the 16th *Légère* Regiment. The 16th *Légère* have three light infantry battalions, not line infantry. They are chasseurs like us, but on foot. It is our job to find the enemy. It is the 16th *Légère*'s job to attack the enemy.

'We will face steep hillsides and poor forage. Advancing on narrow roads and tracks means only small groups of chasseurs can patrol forward, and then only for a short time before being relieved by another small group.'

The grim commanders of 2nd Company studied the terrain model.

'This attack on the passes around Mount Succarello is so important that General Masséna wants Colonel Morin to be his personal eyes and ears as far forward as possible. Colonel Morin and I intend to lead the advance with one platoon and have Lieutenant Neilage follow with a reserve platoon. Lieutenant Voreille, your troop will provide those two advance guard platoons. Sergeants Pultiere and Bredieux will alternate at the head of the column with me, as ground and enemy allow.'

Second Lieutenant Voreille, Sergeant Pultiere and Sergeant Bredieux glanced at each other.

'But there are other vital tasks to be completed by 2nd Company. It is not enough that General Masséna has broken through the Austrians and outflanked the Piedmontese fortifications.

General Masséna must cut the road behind the Piedmontese holding the fortress at Saorgio. For the General's infantry to succeed, we chasseurs seek a path for the division up to the Col Ardente. Lieutenant Huin, that will be the task of one of your platoons. The division's artillery battery has a critical role in the ability of the 16th Légère to defeat any enemy positions encountered. Lieutenant Huin, your other platoon will escort the division's foot artillery battery.'

Huin nodded at the gravity of his independent tasks.

'Finally, Sergeant Major Koschak, our five company wagons will travel behind the advance guard platoons. Expect the regimental surgeon and a sergeant veterinarian to travel with your train.'

Koschak made a jot in his notebook.

Morin looked up from the model laid out on the floor to give Jobert a satisfied wink.

Jobert scanned his notebook pages. 'Men, we have only tonight and tomorrow to prepare. Are there any questions?'

Corporal Arbod raised his hand. 'What will the Austrians be like, sir?'

All eyes locked on Jobert.

'Sergeant Major Koschak and I were just discussing this very topic.' Jobert's face melted to a smile as his weight relaxed onto one leg. 'We both agreed we found the kaiserliks tough opponents at Jemappes. Yet we broke them. Sergeant Major Koschak and I also know you fellows. We feel absolutely confident that 2nd Company will triumph in the face of the enemy, just as we did at Toulon.'



Jobert pressed Vert to the side of the road and wondered at the length of General Masséna's six-thousand-man column.

For the last three days march to Oneglia, Jobert's 2nd Squadron was Masséna's vanguard. Captain Geourdai's junior 5th Company had led the march. In the approved style, Geourdai had set a file of four chasseurs to patrol two hundred metres ahead of his lead platoon.

In column of fours, and to the beat of hooves and clink of scabbards, bit chains and slung musketoons, Geourdai's lead platoon followed down the dusty coast road. Should contact be made with the Austrian outposts, Colonel Morin rode beside Geourdai, with his aide de camp Chabenac close behind.

Two hundred metres behind the lead platoon, the remaining three platoons of the 5th Company marched on the road, with two section flank guards weaving through the bleak, shuttered farmsteads. Within this larger group rode General Masséna, accompanied by his lead brigade commander, the lead regimental commander and the artillery battery commander.

Beyond 5th Company marched Jobert's own senior 2nd Company. Ninety-five men and horses tipped their faces away from the icy northerly wind which had brought the late snow falls to the Mediterranean slopes of the Maritime Alps. Wrapped in flapping chasseur-green capes, Lieutenant Voreille's troop led today, followed by the nine wagons of 2nd Squadron's train. Huin's troop acted as rear guard.

Another five hundred metres behind Huin's troop marched the remainder of Masséna's advance guard, five hundred blue-coated, bicorne-wearing light infantrymen, one of the three battalions of the 16th Légère Regiment. Then came the divisional foot artillery battery, the gunners marching beside their horse teams, two pairs of light draught horses pulling either the slim brass four-pounder cannon or the stocky six-inch howitzer hitched to a two-wheeled limber, or a long ammunition caisson.

One thousand metres beyond the advance guard, Masséna's remaining eleven infantry battalions – a mixture of light and line infantry distinguishable by their blue or white trousers respectively – and their trains, stretched out for over ten kilometres.

Jobert's face whipped around when he heard musket fire from the direction of Oneglia. His leg pressed Vert back onto the road, and a muscular squeeze through his saddle lifted Vert into a canter towards Geourdai's platoon.

Morin, Geourdai and Chabenac had already cantered forward to the chasseur patrol. Jobert and his eternal shadow, Trumpeter Moench, sank in their saddles to bring their warhorses in beside them.

'Austrians on the bridge, sir,' said the 5th Company corporal, pointing into the shallow valley in front of them.

All the officers extended their telescopes and surveyed the scene.

A wide, but shallow, stream raced down from the coastal hills on their left and into the grey, froth-whipped Mediterranean on their right. Over the rocky stream squatted a solid stone bridge. Beyond the bridge and a few thatch-and-timber hovels rose the yellow and white-plastered buildings of Oneglia, chimney smoke from evening fires eddying between the brown-tiled roofs.

Above the whip of the wind, the rattle of drums sounded as the Austrians beat *To Arms*. The bridge guard, a one-hundred-man company of Austrian fusiliers in black, visorless, leather helmets, white tailcoats, white trousers and long black gaiters, raced to assemble.

Morin collapsed his telescope. 'Geourdai, advance 5th Company to the bridge and secure the near side. Jobert, locate a crossing point upstream, then descend on the flank of the bridge from the far side. Chabenac, pass my compliments to General

Masséna and inform him of the situation. Pass on that I suggest the guns be brought up to secure the bridge before sunset. Go!’

Shortening his reins, Jobert saluted as he pivoted Vert over his hocks, then pressed his bay gelding to leap from a halt to a fast canter over three hundred metres, past 5th Company with its retinue of senior officers, to 2nd Company.

2nd Company’s Neilage, Koschak, Voreille and Huin were alerted by Jobert and Moench cantering towards them. ‘2nd Company,’ called Koschak, ‘stow capes, musketoons ready.’

Jobert’s eyes were wild and his nostrils flared as he prepared for the anticipated violence. ‘Over the lip of the rise runs a river, a bridge and Oneglia just beyond. An Austrian company holds the bridge. 5th Company is to take the near bank. The lead infantry and the guns are coming forward. 2nd Company is to cross the river and flank the bridge. Voreille, take your troop now and find a crossing point. Go! Sergeant Major, clear our train off the road for the infantry and the guns to pass. Huin, column of fours, follow me. Trot, march!’

As Huin’s forty-five-man troop surged onto farm paths beside the road, one of Masséna’s aides de camp, the commander of the 16th Légère and the battery commander, all three now appraised of the situation by Chabenac, galloped passed 2nd Company to find their units further down the column. On the heels of the chasseurs, the French infantry’s drums thrashed out a high tempo beat as bellowed commands prepared the five hundred fusiliers of the advance guard battalion for the assault.

Following farm lanes into the miserable, dusty wind, Jobert and Huin’s troop wound their way towards the grey stream swirling in its wide, shallow bed. Ahead, Jobert observed Voreille’s troopers trotting here and there, inspecting places on the bank where horses could descend, and yelling to mates who had already crossed the freezing water and found paths up onto the far bank.

Voreille waved his gloved hand at Jobert's fast approaching column of fifty horsemen.

'Voreille,' called Jobert, 'leave a platoon to hold both sides of this crossing. You bring a platoon in column to my left rear as flank guard.'

Glancing to see Voreille's nod of acknowledgement, Jobert led the troop down the bank where Voreille's guides indicated. The neat column of horsemen with a frontage of four broke into an inelegant gaggle of ones and twos. Horses dropped their heads and picked their way across, the icy water splashing their bellies and swirling over the men's booted ankles. The horses then leapt up the stony shelves to the fallow fields and leafless olive groves on the far bank. As they ascended the banks to the snarls of the section corporals, Huin's wide-eyed chasseurs reformed in the files of four riders to recreate the 'column of fours' formation which allowed the fastest movement.

'Huin, form column of troop, walk, march!' yelled Jobert over his shoulder. Moench repeated the command with hand-signals. Huin's troop formation spread wider and wider to the left, from a frontage of four men to a 'column of platoon', a frontage of twelve men, all the way to 'column of troop', a frontage of over twenty horsemen in two ranks. The river tumbled on their right. On their left the silent cottages of the town stacked on the rising slope.

As Jobert twisted to confirm 2nd Company's formation, Moench tucked his grey gelding just behind and to the right of Jobert. Moench sucked and squeezed his lips, numb from the bracing wind, in anticipation of the trumpet calls required, and rubbed his trumpet's mouthpiece on the ribs of his braided dolman jacket.

Musket fire erupted downstream.

'Sabres!' called Jobert, satisfied that Voreille and his platoon had taken their post on his left rear.

Short-barrelled musketoons clattered as they were released to swing on their cross-belt clips. Steel blades drawn from brass scabbards gave an evil hiss into the gusting wind. Thick gloved hands clutching at cord-bound grips rested the sabres' pommels onto the chasseurs' right thighs.

'Shorten your reins, lads,' called Koschak. 'Up around their fucking ears.'

'Trot' was signalled along the line.

Except for a few outlying cottages obscuring his view, Jobert observed the length of the road from the bridge on his right to the gates of Oneglia on his left.

Bounding back by half-company, the Austrian bridge guard company was retiring from the bridge in good order, as the dark green figures of 5th Company darted on the far bank. Across the river on the far slope, the lead battalion of blue-coated French light infantry descended at a fast pace towards the bridge.

Two Austrian fusilier companies formed a fire line at Oneglia's gate. A third company marched towards the bridge to support the bridge guard.

Screams from the Austrian column on the road mid-way from gates to bridge, as they spotted Jobert's flanking chasseurs, turned into the insistent thrash of Austrian company drums. Expecting to receive a French cavalry charge, the fusilier company executed a flawless transformation from column to square.

Until alerted to the threat of French cavalry, the Austrian company had marched six fusiliers abreast. In response to their drum's insistent order to form square, the first quarter of the company moved outwards to form a three-rank frontage approximately eight men long. The middle half of the column faced left and right to form the sides of the square. The final quarter of the column simultaneously pressed forward to connect the two sides with the rear side of the square, before

turning to face out. The front ranks knelt and, to create a horse-proof hedge, pressed their musket butts into the ground by their knees and held their bayonet-tipped muskets outwards at forty-five degrees. The two ranks behind readied their muskets and prepared to fire.

Jobert was surprised when the Austrians fired a volley whilst 2nd Company was well over two hundred metres away. Over the deep rumble of two hundred hooves behind him, he was hard pressed to hear any balls zip past at that extreme range, considering the Austrians fired into the prevailing wind.

Then Jobert understood the reason for the volley as the white-coated fusiliers reloaded. *The bridge guard is now alerted to our flanking threat.*

The Austrian drums from the square at the mid-way point pounded out the order *Form Square*.

Jobert judged the distance from 2nd Company from their target, the retiring bridge guard. *Two hundred metres, well out of musket range but twenty seconds on a galloping horse. Only enough time to discharge one musket volley.* Vert's swinging gait brought Jobert closer to his enemy. Now was the time for his decision.

If the bridge guard either freeze due to indecision, or break and run for the mid-way square, we charge. Why not add a little pressure? 'Moench, sound *Advance*.' Moench's trumpet screamed the command.

The bridge company halted and, due to the relatively small size of the unit, smoothly formed square, as had their sister company. *I would attack either squares with both 2nd Company and 5th Company, but not with Huin's troop only.* Jobert thrust up his sabre and signalled 'Halt'.

Non-commissioned officers yelled. Men shivered with the bitter winds on their backs. Impatient horses threw their heads.

Far over on his right, Jobert watched a 5th Company troop trot across the bridge, followed by a company of light infantry.

The troop halted unsure of Jobert's movements. A square of Austrian infantry is safe from a small group of French chasseurs à cheval, but they were extremely vulnerable to the French infantry about to cross the bridge. Jobert took in the sun sinking toward the western skyline over his right shoulder knowing Colonel Morin's purpose was to secure the bridge. The capture of the town would occur tomorrow.

'Lieutenant Huin, return to Voreille's crossing, form column of fours to the left, walk, march!'

With the chasseurs now turning their line away from any commitment to charge, the Austrians, remaining in square, withdrew towards the gates of the town.

To form square so composed and then to alert its sister company to the flanking threat, indicated to Jobert the Austrian company's disciplined steadiness. *As our first encounter, such skill requires acknowledgement.* Jobert trotted forward to within one hundred and fifty metres of the Austrian square. Saluting the square, Jobert brought the hilt of his sabre up to his lips in salute and then swept the blade back, his hand by his hip, the sabre's blade describing a line towards Vert's muzzle.

An Austrian officer, the black and yellow plume of his black bicorne whipping in the breeze, pushed his way forward through the close-packed ranks. Standing clear of his front rank, with sword drawn, he reciprocated Jobert's compliment.

Both men brought up their sabres to their lips in unison and completed the movement.

Chapter Four

April 1794, Pieve di Teco, Italy



The soaking, miserable drizzle excited Jobert. *This is always the best weather to kill.*

Rain kept the defender indoors. Rain outside gave rise to a fire inside and the opportunity to while away the hours cooking a cheery broth. Cooking fires created smoke which lay in the hollows and the low ground, revealing the location of the cosy prey.

Rain caused the defender's bored sentries to be uncomfortable and careless, whilst the aromatic smoke distracted their attention. The ability for a sentry to listen to the sodden world was reduced by the plips and plops from boughs and tent flaps onto capes and helmets. Rain caused hands and feet to become sodden and stiff. Rain seeped into the working mechanisms of the musket, either via the pan or down the barrel to the rammed charge, despite the best efforts of the most disciplined fusilier, increasing the likelihood of misfire.

In the rain, the hunter moved with swift stealth across the mud-softened earth and timber underfoot. Senses heightened

by cooking-fire smoke, the hunter's fear of being shot-at diminished knowing wet powder would fail to warn the sentries' warm and drowsy comrades.

After four hours in the saddle from Oneglia, Jobert tickled the base of Bleu's shorn mane and looked down into the broad valley of Pieve di Teco. As the junction of three valleys, the main valley ran west to east guiding a small, rocky river to the sea. The minor valleys allowed snow-fed streams to join the small river and the road from Oneglia to wind north towards the Alpine peaks shrouded in low, wispy clouds.

Around the fertile intersections of streams and river nestled a series of villages and farms, all connected to the major road by fords and bridges. Each village was cloaked in smoke, the rain pressing the smoke against the walls of the squat stone houses.

From their vantage point on the upper slopes of the valley, Jobert, Morin and Chabenac saw no movement within the villages and the farms with the naked eye. They chose not to draw their telescopes and scrutinise in more detail, knowing their lenses would fog over.

An abrupt movement from the chasseur patrol descending the slope two hundred metres ahead caught their attention. The chasseurs signalled 'infantry'.

'Platoon stow capes, ready!' said Sergeant Bredieux to his platoon.

As hurriedly as sodden gloves and frozen fingers allowed, the platoon unbuttoned their capes and lashed them to their saddle bows. Musketoons emerged from beneath protective capes for butts to be held steady on the men's right thighs.

'Bredieux, trot, march!' said Jobert. 'Moench, signal trot march for Lieutenant Voreille to bring the rest of the platoon forward.'

Following Morin and Jobert, Sergeant Bredieux's platoon

soon closed the distance to the scouts ahead.

‘Austrian sentries, sir,’ said rain drenched Corporal Arbod.

Four white-clad, black-helmeted soldiers ran down the road towards the village bridge. At least three more descended the slope away from the road, through the gaunt trees, to the gurgling stream well below.

‘None of them fired, sir,’ said Arbod. ‘No signal of our arrival.’

‘Jobert,’ said Morin, ‘if there is an Austrian battalion in the town, the main bridge will lock the centre of their defences. Look to position yourself on the far bank by flanking crossing points. Chabenac, inform the 16th Légère of our intent. I shall wait for General Masséna.’

‘Follow me! Trot, march!’ called Jobert.

Trotting is a balanced, two-beat gait where the horse extends its stride to increase the speed. Squelching down the muddy road, Jobert’s troops maintained a fast trot to overtake the fleeing Austrian sentries. Faced with an uphill scramble on one side, to be sabred down on the road or leap over the stone walls into the bare groves beneath, the harried Austrian fusiliers chose to depart the road downhill. Before he leapt the wall, a fierce-looking Austrian sergeant with a bristling black moustache, bellowed in German, ‘Fire! Fire to warn the bridge company.’

‘He wants his men to fire.’ Jobert threw up his right hand to signal halt. ‘He wants to warn the company on the bridge.’

‘Follow them, sir?’ asked young Voreille.

‘No. I have an idea.’ *Will we be fast enough to fool them?* ‘Have Neilage bring Sergeant Pultiere’s platoon forward to join us. Moench, fetch Sergeant Major Koschak to me now.’

As Bredieux’s platoon clattered to a halt, Moench peeled his grey warhorse from the column and ascended the hill at the canter.

Through the trees, muskets fired by the stream. Perhaps a half-

dozen shots, each with a pause between, signalled the village.

Now lower down the slope, and within the trees lining the road, the chasseurs had lost their vantage point and the village or enemy ahead were obscured. Yet they heard Austrian drums explode as they beat *To Arms*. Within moments Jobert looked up the slope to see the French infantry cresting the hill while their drums beat *Double March*.

Koschak and Moench cantered down the hill to join Jobert and the company's officers.

'Listen in, lads,' said Jobert, projecting his voice to the soldiers around him. 'We are now Piedmontese volunteers re-joining the Austrians. Voreille, split Pultiere's platoon. Place a section in front of our train and a section behind. Sergeant Major Koschak, command Bredieux's platoon in front. On arrival at the bridge, form line, and face back up the hill as if you are to delay the French advance. Give all your orders in German, Sergeant Major, understand?' Koschak returned an affirmative nod. 'I will take Pultiere's platoon and train across the bridge and into the village. Nobody speak, understand? No French, lads. Hear me? No one speak French when we close with the Austrians. Now, follow me! Trot, march!'

Jobert saw Bredieux's troopers glance left and right at their comrades, in their toe-to-toe formation, wide-eyed with alarm. Growled expletives from their section corporals had the chasseurs gathering their reins to press their impatient remounts into the trot.

The leafless trees thinned at the base of the valley, the stream by the Oneglia road roared as it met the little river bearing east. Emerging into the open, Jobert saw two Austrian fusilier companies having formed a fire line beyond the low stone bridge and three more companies marching to join them. An officer on horseback, the battalion commander wearing a plume-adorned bicorne and white jacket, rode at the head of the column.

‘Moench, signal walk march,’ hissed Jobert from the side of his mouth.

‘Company, walk, march!’ Jobert called in German. ‘Lieutenant Koschak, form line and face the French.’

Koschak saluted.

Jobert gave a cheery wave towards the Austrians on the bridge.

‘Form column of platoon, at the halt!’ called Koschak in German. ‘About face!’

Neilage and Pultiere with the section ahead of the five company wagons and Voreille’s section behind, maintained their silent walking column, musketoons resting on thighs, towards the now five hundred Austrians forming an imposing three-rank line on the far bank of the river. In the centre of the fire line squatted two three-pounder cannons, loaded and aimed by a dozen brown-coated artillerymen and white-coated fusiliers.

Jobert squeezed Bleu into a gentle canter towards the bridge and approached the Austrian battalion commander.

The major blinked hard and licked his lips at the approaching cavalryman.

In the icy rain, Jobert drew up to the Austrian and saluted.

‘Good morning, sir,’ said Jobert in German. ‘Captain Chetcuti of the Legion of Savoy, at your service. You are aware of the French approaching. The drums you hear are a battalion of ragged volunteers with a brigade struggling to keep up. We have impeded their advance since before Oneglia.’

The major looked at an elderly captain beside him. The Austrian captain’s suspicious stare never left Jobert, his forehead creased in concern.

‘Good morning, sir,’ said the battalion commander. ‘Major Leitzer of the Purn Regiment. Do the French advance with artillery?’

‘Guns, sir? Not that I have seen. How might I support your defence, sir?’

The rattling French drums beyond the treeline held the Austrian major's attention. 'What was your regiment again, sir?'

'The Legion of Savoy, sir. Piedmontese volunteers.' Jobert pointed downstream. 'I suggest I place my train on the far side of the village and regather my company, cross the stream perhaps down there using the cover of the trees, and then take the French in the flank, sir?'

The sound of drumming and marching feet grew louder.

'Very well. Have the line break ranks to let them pass.'

Alarm showed in the eyes of the old captain.

'Company, advance!' called Jobert in German.

As Pultiere's platoon and the five wagons passed close by the tall wheels of the two artillery pieces, Jobert yelled, 'Lieutenant Koschak, retire your line, sir.'

Moench looked about wide-eyed, conscience of the simmering glare of the Austrian captain now snarling to a likewise sullen sergeant major.

'At the walk, in front of the French, Lieutenant Koschak,' called Jobert. 'This is not the place for unseemly haste. Well done the Purns. Do not let the bark of the French dogs unsettle your aim.'

As Jobert's fifty-odd horsemen departed the riverbank they passed the two limbers and two caissons serving the two Austrian cannons. The horse teams faced away from the gun position at the bridge towards the town. The four grey-jacketed, unarmed civilian drivers appeared anxious as they twisted in their saddles and watched the events behind them unfold.

As the chasseurs entered the steep streets, the beat of French drums and marching feet were amplified amongst the timber buildings. Local men and women, faces strained with fear, raced to close shutters and gather children and animals inside.

Two more Austrian companies advanced through the village. Company officers looked up in surprise to see green-clad horse-

men blocking the street.

‘The French are coming,’ cried Jobert to the Austrians. ‘Form line at the bridge. Clear the streets for the Purn Regiment. Hurrah for the Purns!’

Voreille’s troop passed the infantry and pressed on at a fast walk and reached the far side of the village.

‘Company, halt!’ Jobert called to his men in French. ‘Duque, secure our wagons in that tavern yard. Fall out!’

‘Sir, riders!’ called Duque.

Jobert looked up the slopes at the rear of the village where Duque pointed. Two white-coat horsemen, probably battalion aides, galloped north with the news of the French advance.

‘Troop, about face! Sabres! Column of fours, walk, march!’

As the chasseurs rode their horses back down the street, the village walls distorted the cacophony of the drumming from both the Austrian line and the approaching French column.

Taking cover behind the last of the buildings in the narrow streets before the bridge, Jobert signalled halt and observed the scene.

Two hundred metres beyond the edge of the buildings the Austrian battalion covered the bridge with two four-hundred-man fire lines in three ranks, creating great wings over one hundred metres long, either side of the two patient cannons levelled across the bridge.

Three hundred metres beyond the bridge, emerging from the treelined slope in the drizzling rain, a company of blue-coated French skirmishers darted towards the riverbanks, taking cover behind trees, shrubs, boulders and low walls.

At the entrance to the road sat mounted French officers. Jobert expected Masséna and Morin rode in that group. Jobert had seen French commanders handle French volunteers for two years now. Acting on instinct, the drum-enraged fervour must unleash a battalion charge, particularly in the rain where

the bayonet triumphs over the volley.

But, on this occasion, no such action. Instead, three artillery limbers rolled forward. Within sixty seconds, the teams turned about and delivered their four-pounder cannons to face the Austrian line. Preloaded with canister, the French gunners stood to their guns, matches lit.

The Austrian gunners screamed at their battalion commander. *They are loaded with canister for our infantry, not ball for our guns.* As for the infantry, Jobert saw the Austrian line was prevented from charging the unlimbering gun teams, blocked by the river, as the narrow bridge disallowed any forward movement. At three hundred metres, the imminent fire of French canister would be devastating.

The head of the French infantry column emerged from the tree line, the soldiers howling *La Marseillaise* over the sound of their thrashing drums.

A visible ripple of fear shuddered through the Austrian battalion. *Our deployment is occurring far too fast for them.* The mounted Austrian major looked left and right. He slumped in the saddle at the sight of more green-clad horsemen, Geourdaï's 5th Company, crossing the rain-swollen river downstream.

As Jobert gathered his reins, Moench rolled his lips to warm them. 'Form troop line! Trot, march! Moench, sound *Advance*.'

As Moench's trumpet call tore through the rain, the old infantry captain screamed expletives and shook his fist at the two ranks of horsemen, over twenty-men wide, assembling uphill between the battalion and the safety of the village's buildings.

'Halt!' Jobert kept his sabre high in the air in case he needed to drop it to order the charge.

The chasseurs shortened their reins. Horses threw their heads.

The Austrian gun team drivers' eyes bulged with fearful surprise as they raised their hands to show they were unarmed.

Austrian fusiliers half-turned in their packed ranks. The Austrian major spun his nervous horse and looked to Jobert.

The scene descended to silence, except for the spattering of rain on shoulders and faces.

The major turned to his battalion. 'Battalion, open order, march! Ground arms!'

The battalion looked at him. They looked to each other. Then feet shuffled to open the ranks followed by the clatter of muskets dropped into the mud. 'Form column to the left, left turn! Quick march!' The Austrian battalion cleared the egress to the bridge.

The battalion commander spurred his skittering horse across the bridge towards the knot of French officers by the treeline. General Masséna rode forward and accepted the Austrian's sword.



A freezing northerly pushed thick clouds across the face of an icy full moon.

Jobert straightened his mud-encrusted uniform and stepped through the low doorway into the wavering firelight. Despite his exhaustion, Jobert drew himself up to salute the senior officers in the room. The faces of General Masséna and his commanders turned unsmiling towards Jobert, their own eyes ringed with the signs of fatigue. 'Tell me of Ponte di Nava, Captain Jobert.'

'I have drawn a sketch in my notepad, sir. The Tanaro River runs west to east with banks one to two metres high, the river runs high and fast with snow melt, perhaps one metre deep and ten metres wide.

‘The north-running road winds down from Nava to the bridge. The bridge is stone, wide enough for two carts and is quite high above the level of the Tanaro, perhaps three to four metres. Once the road crosses the bridge, it branches at a T-intersection inside the village.

‘The majority of the village of Ponte di Nava lies on the northern bank. There are several two storey stone buildings in the village, with a few timber homes on the southern bank. There is a row of stone buildings behind the main street, perhaps accessed by a rear lane running parallel to the east-west road.’

‘You have given me a good feel for the town.’ Masséna rubbed his eyes. ‘What of the enemy, Jobert?’

‘A Hungarian battalion, sir, Austrians in tight blue breeches, occupy the town. Two companies skirmished on the southern bank, two companies worked east and west of the bridge on the far northern bank. Another two companies were sighted on the slopes to the rear of the town.

‘In the centre of the town, at the T-intersection, there are three six-pounders, with dozens of their brown-jacketed artillerymen. The battery stands in a compressed front over one hundred metres beyond the bridge. All three are laid to cover the bridge.’

Masséna squinted at Jobert. ‘Six-pounders? You feel quite certain?’

‘I know Austrian six-pounders from Valmy and Jemappes, sir.’

‘Were you able to identify the Austrian battalion’s own battery, a pair of three-pounders?’

‘No, we were not, sir.’

‘Anywhere to site our guns?’

Jobert blinked away his fatigue. ‘There is a small apron perhaps two hundred metres from the outer buildings, three hundred metres from the bridge that will accommodate three to four guns of the battery.’

Masséna snorted. ‘Our four-pounders place themselves four hundred metres across the bridge from the enemy’s six-pounders?’ Masséna’s eyes darted across the page from Jobert’s notebook and the maps that covered the table to the assembled commanders in the smoky, stuffy room. ‘Gentlemen, what I desire more than the bridge itself is the road east to Ormea. When I look at Jobert’s sketch I feel the 16th Légère has three options. One, to conduct a frontal assault over the bridge into the mouths of the enemy’s guns. Two, to assault across the river on the right, Ormea-side of the bridge. Jobert, can you describe the ground for this easterly, or north-easterly, approach?’

‘We found no paths that allow that approach, sir. Except to go down beneath the bridge into the river and cross under the fire of the Austrian left.’

‘Very well, what of the left approach on the western, or Briga Alta side, of the bridge?’

‘There are difficult goat tracks on that side. Much of the time the tracks move under such low vegetation that crawling on hands and knees is required. Hence my state of dress. But there may be a fourth option, sir.’

‘Indeed?’

‘We found more goat tracks going further west along the southern bank for three hundred metres. The tracks become footpaths allowing a man to stand. The footpaths arrive at a simple ford allowing men, but not horses, passage across the river near a hamlet with a chapel. The chapel stands on the Briga Alta road about four hundred metres west of the T-intersection. One kilometre further west we found a horse-capable ford.’

‘On any other piece of ground, for a divisional flanking manoeuvre, quite simple to achieve. But here? Allow me to reflect on that option, thank you, Jobert.’

Dismissed, Jobert shuffled back into the shadows and stood beside Colonel Morin and Masséna’s other commanders.

Masséna turned to his lead regimental commander, the commander of the 16th Légère. ‘Colonel, your thoughts at this stage?’

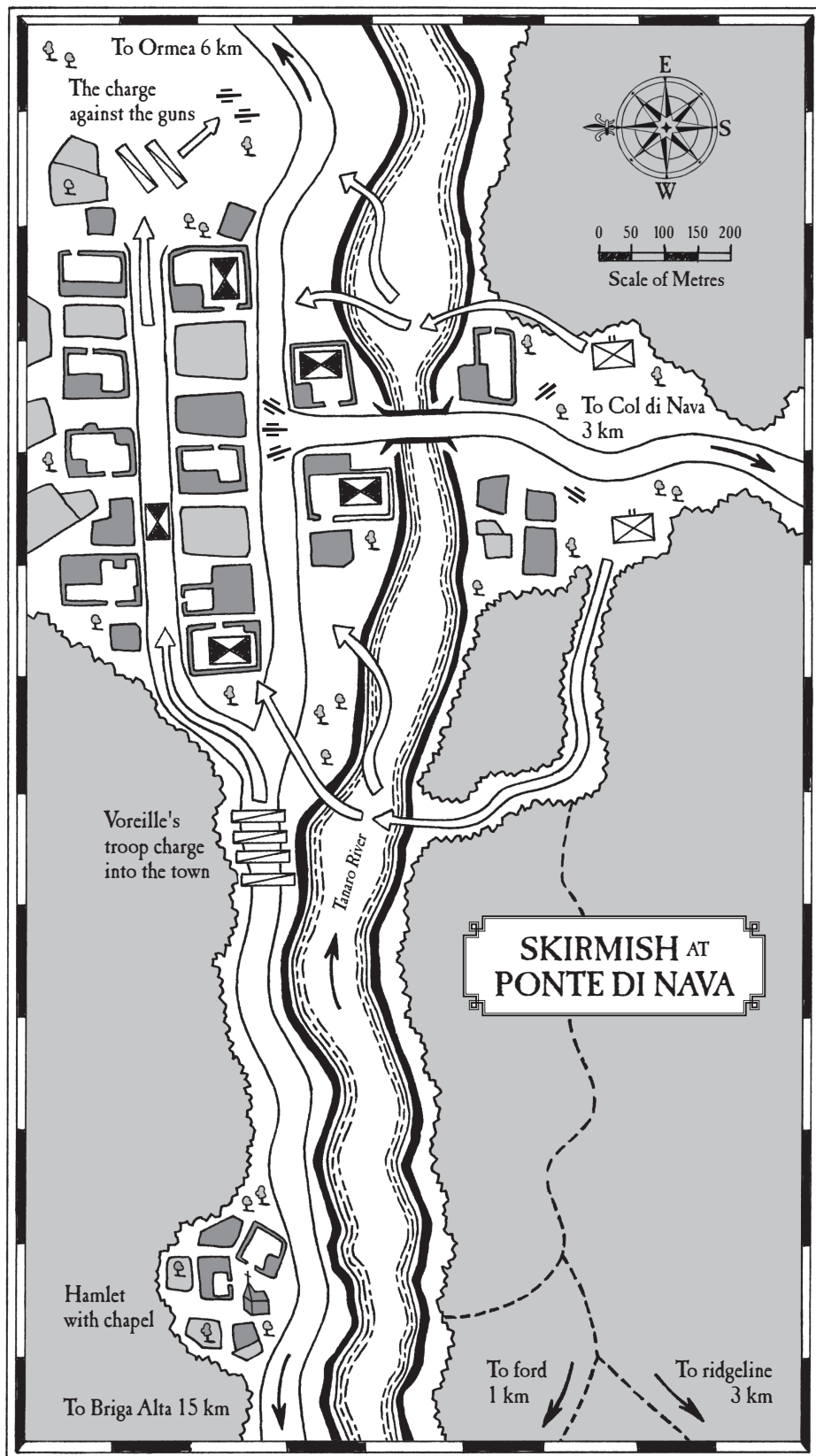
‘I have two battalions at your immediate disposal, sir. With what is known, and with the intent of minimising exposure to the Austrian battery laid across the bridge, I will secure the southern bank of the Tanaro. I will concentrate all the sappers from my regiment to clear these western tracks, allowing one battalion descent into the river to assault the town from the west. Once a foothold on the far bank is achieved, I will send my second battalion, under the bridge as Jobert suggests, and seek a way to cross on the eastern flank.’

Masséna rocked his head as he evaluated the plan, then looked up to his artillery captain. ‘Captain, how will your guns support the infantry assault?’

‘I, too, seek to minimise the exposure of our guns to Austrian fire. I will unlimber the four field guns to support the assault into the southern outskirts. I will then push the guns forward, tuck them in behind the buildings and gain crossfire onto the stone buildings on the far bank thus supporting the infantry’s movement across the river. I will site my pair of howitzers to target the rear of the village where the enemy’s reserves will shelter.’

‘Gentlemen, I feel exceedingly confident.’ Masséna’s eyes burned with confidence. ‘The assault is to commence at midday.’

In the smoky shadows, Morin spun to face Jobert. ‘Jobert, gather Voreille’s troop tonight. At first light follow these footpaths you have discovered down to this chapel and assemble on the far bank. Locate yourself there by midday when the infantry assault.’



Chapter Five

April 1794, Battle of Ponte di Nava



Jobert, Moench, Pultiere and three chasseurs descended the paths of gluggy sand, winding through the drooping pine branches, heavy with early morning rain. Midway down the flanks of Mount Succarello, a line of sheer granite cliffs divided the upper and lower slopes. Tight ravines allowed the ancient forest path to link the higher ridgeline with the Tanaro River below. As Jobert's foot patrol emerged into the heavily vegetated lower slopes, they heard distinct musketry, probably the clash of the skirmishers, over one thousand metres to the east. As they continued to descend, the gurgling of the Tanaro River, increasingly heard but not yet seen, drowned out the sporadic fire.

If patrolling the Tanaro's banks yesterday was tiring for the chasseurs, it had become an even longer night.

Once Morin obtained Masséna's permission for the venture, it took three long hours for the chasseurs to hand over the piquet line to a company of light infantry. A two-hour, pitch-black climb followed, in freezing light rain, back up to the

village of Nava. There was a great deal of midnight movement within Nava as the two 16th Légère battalions prepared for the morning's assault. Further on to the farms above the Col di Nava, the march was achieved more easily as the roads were clear of infantry.

The chasseurs had less than two hours rest before retightening girths. Then, one by one, each man leading his horse, with packhorses and remounts of the forward dismounted patrol following, they stumbled along the faint footpath into the mist-enshrouded pine forest.

As a general rule, a horse could traverse terrain where a man could walk without requiring his hands to assist him. Once a man needed to reach out and scramble over logs and boulders or climb a slope, the terrain was regarded impassable for horses. Today's path allowed men to walk and lead horses, yet the progress of the single file of men and horses down the rocky, twisting slope was tedious.

Well in advance of the horse column, the lead chasseurs signalled to Jobert that the river was in sight. Above the rushing current in the river, an intense fusillade was soon followed by the boom of artillery. Jobert opened his watch. Twelve o'clock. He looked up to see the scouts' signal and waved for them to continue.

As Pultiere's patrol descended the bank and waded into the freezing stream, musketoons and cartridge boxes held high, the individual explosions of cannon fire echoed up the valley. As the sodden troopers waved from the northern bank that all was well, the head of the horse-column emerged from the straggling thorns lining the forest edge.

It took another hour to bring the horses down the paths, allow each to drink and cross to the other side.

From the road on the northern bank, sharing a crust of bread with Morin, Chabenac and Moench, Jobert looked up

the flanks of Mount Succarello they had just descended and marvelled at the thick pines and the massive cliffs they had meandered through.

The cannonade intensified above the rolling musketry.

‘Our artillery has joined the chorus,’ said Morin, taking the opportunity to empty his boots of river water. ‘Jobert, march east to the sound of the guns. I expect we will find elements of the 16th Légère on the outskirts in the process of flanking the village.’

Jobert turned to his assembled commanders. ‘Pultiere, lead us the one thousand metres to the chapel. Sergeant Major, secure the chapel for our packhorse section. Voreille, with four hundred metres to the village of Ponte di Nava, we will take a dismounted patrol forward to assess. Mount, musketoons ready, column of fours, trot, march!’

The troop column trotted one thousand metres to the chapel in under ten minutes. The sound of gun and musket fire from the village intensified despite the clatter of over two hundred hooves on the gravel road. The smoke of spent powder, smelling of sulphur, wafted up the riverbed, overcoming the mist clinging just above the roaring torrent.

The act of securing the hamlet in which the small stone chapel sat was swift. The few local peasants anxious of the fighting to the east, scurried terrified indoors when the column of horsemen entered their hamlet from the west.

Jobert drew his sabre and took a silver-inlaid cavalry pistol from his saddle holsters. ‘Voreille, Pultiere, dismount a section patrol and follow me.’

Creeping further down the verges of the road, the chasseurs soon connected with a company of light infantry, whereupon they were directed to an elderly captain with a thick, drooping moustache.

‘Good afternoon, captain,’ Morin introduced himself. ‘What

is your situation? My chasseurs are keen to join the fight.'

The infantry officer saluted. 'Our battalion is struggling to cross the river under Austrian musket fire from the village's western buildings. Within the riverbanks, we are under their guns. My company is to hold the road. I will take you to an observation position of the Austrian defence.'

The chasseur patrol moved forward to the edge of the infantry defensive perimeter hugging the tree-lined strip between road and riverbank.

The captain, kneeling amongst a knot of saturated fusiliers, indicated towards the western outskirts of Ponte di Nava. 'As you see, sir, the kaiserlik guns cover the main road entering the town from the south, the east and the west. You see their ammunition caissons tucked into the lanes between the buildings. Their guns are well fed.

'My sister companies throw themselves at the buildings full of kaiserliks fusiliers. We are receiving crossfire from the buildings at the rear of the village. You see down the rear lane how the Austrians are transferring more of their companies to this side of the village. My chief of battalion has sent word to our other eastern battalion that the Austrians are shifting their reserves to the west. Thus, our sister battalion begins the assault to the Ormea-side of the bridge.'

As stray musket balls zipped unseen overhead, Morin, Jobert, Chabenac and Voreille considered, with their telescopes, the Austrian six-pounders firing south across the bridge. Morin and Jobert collapsed their glasses and exchanged determined glances. Chabenac and Voreille put away their telescope with pensive looks.

'I am not sure there is anything a body of cavalry can achieve here, sir,' said the grizzled infantryman. 'Surely you will not charge the guns?'

'No, not directly,' said Morin, then turning to Jobert, 'but

if we moved down the lane behind the road, would it not threaten their guns? Would it cause their battery to depart?’

‘But, sir,’ said the infantry captain, ‘that lane is a crush of kaiserliks moving to this end of the town. What is more, our howitzers now have the range to the lane with their shells.’

‘My friend,’ said Jobert, ‘if you were marching your company in column down a tight lane, would you accept a charge by horse? For that is what we will do. May I request your company discharge a fusillade as we come up to provide a modicum of concealment prior to us dashing across to the rear lane?’

The veteran captain considered the grimly confident faces around him. Only Moench, dutifully trailing Jobert, continued to stare at the smoke-enveloped village with blinking trepidation.

‘There we have it,’ said Morin. ‘Chabenac, take a message to the commander of the 16th Légère and the battery commander that I lead a troop of chasseurs into the rear of the town with the intent of threatening the guns.’

Chabenac looked down into the freezing river with a grimace.

Morin, Jobert and the patrol returned to the waiting chasseurs.

‘Mount!’ called Jobert, swinging into Rouge’s saddle. ‘Commanders in! Voreille, lead Pultiere’s platoon into the rear lane behind myself and Colonel Morin. Sergeant Major, leave the section with the packhorses here. Move forward as we advance further into the village.’

‘Regimental surgeon,’ added Morin, ‘yourself and the sergeant veterinarian are to accompany Sergeant Major Koschak forward.’

‘2nd Company, sabres!’ Jobert gathered his reins. ‘Give point, boys. Parry the bayonets to slice fingers and faces. Do not slash. On me! Trot, march!’

The men from the 16th Légère company scrambled to the side of the road and gawped in awe as the column surged forward. As the chasseurs passed, the light infantry cheered. The explosion of infantry muskets around the horses was deafening. The resultant gun smoke was trapped within the roadside trees and pressed low due to restrictions of the lane in the valley.

‘Moench, sound *Charge!*’ The trumpet blared the insistent call.

The thunder of two hundred hooves was distinct against the violent eruptions of musketry.

With a leap, Rouge extended into a gallop. Morin and Jobert covered the two hundred metres from the French lines to the smoke-engulfed village in less than fifteen seconds. Although the Austrian infantry were protected within the stone buildings, they were unable to produce any devastating volleys. In column of fours, Voreille’s fifty-man troop was less than one hundred metres long. As the last man, Neilage entered the town ten seconds after Morin and Jobert.

Although a few Austrian muskets fired at the galloping horsemen erupting from the thick smoke, the screams of alarm spread through the town sharply enough. Behind Neilage, a full-throated roar from the blue-jacketed infantry erupted as companies struggled up the riverbank to charge in the wake of the green-clad horsemen.

Once in the rear lane, Jobert let the press of a company of Austrian fusiliers check Rouge’s stride.

At the head of the column, the company commander and his drummer disappeared beneath Rouge’s flashing hooves. The column was six men wide, each astonished face framed by the squat leather helmet and the white powdered curls above the ears, the open mouths under black moustaches.

The Austrians were not able to bring their muskets to the ready position before Jobert was slicing through the first face.

Jobert leant forward in the saddle, his vulnerable groin protected by his holsters, rolled cape and canvas horse rug, covered in thick sheepskin, with sabre arm outstretched, elbow locked, blade to the right. Jobert screamed, teeth bared, as Rouge's ploughing momentum drove the steady blade across ears, eyes and cheeks deeper into the column.

Homes on high terraces, accessed by steps, were on the left side as they pressed east down the lane. Stairs descended the tight lanes between tall stone buildings on the right. The white-jacketed, blue-trousered Hungarian fusiliers roared at each other, and soon the column disappeared down the lanes, between the buildings fronting the river, towards the main road.

Jobert's head jerked up as a demonic squeal sounded just ahead of him. A black blur plunged amongst the packed fusiliers. The Austrians recoiled to avoid a French howitzer shell hissing at their feet.

Within the shell, the quickmatch fuse found the packed powder at the shell's centre. The resulting explosion felled as many men with its blast, as did the shell's thin iron case fragmenting into hundreds of spinning blades. Receiving the full blast, over a dozen men were scythed down in an instant. The smoke-filled gap allowed others to turn, slip on the wounded and run.

In the road below, between the buildings, the grey-jacketed artillery drivers were yelling. They slashed at their teams to move the caissons and limbers out of the infantry crush. The brown-jacketed artillerymen started to limber the guns in response.

With three stone buildings on his right and two timber houses on his left, Jobert would soon be clear of the lane and on the eastern side of the village.

Another fizzing shell squealed into the horsemen somewhere behind Jobert.

The explosion caused long groans from the wounded horses. Jobert parried a bayonet then twisted to look back on Pultiere's platoon. Pultiere and Voreille were just behind him, with white-faced Moench, trumpet in hand, sabre swinging on his sword knot, sandwiched between them. 'Voreille! Pultiere! On me!'

'Eyes front, sir!'

Rouge shuddered, reared and screamed.

Jobert rolled his wrist over to deliver a quick cut at a young, bewildered face. The blade bit into flesh, the weight of the falling soldier taking Jobert's blade back behind him as Rouge lurched forward. Jobert felt the blade come free, and he swung his sabre in a practised motion to 'give point' once more.

Rouge hesitated to move forward. Jobert urged him with knees and heels. Rouge bounded forward into a canter with a deep groan.

The grunting and swearing of the soldiers driving the twenty-four horses of the Austrian half-battery were clear to Jobert as he passed the final laneway beside the last stone building in the village.

Two rapid explosions reverberated. A cloud of gun smoke obscured the end of the rear laneway.

Who? The battalion's own three-pounders? Where? Jobert emerged from the last buildings on the rear lane and looked down the slope towards the roaring river.

Through the smoke haze, the six teams of the enemy's six-pounders defined the road as they dashed east to Ormea. Beyond the frantic gun teams, a solid-white, three rank fire line of Austrian fusiliers on the verge of the road fired down into the river, as companies of the 16th Légère's first battalion struggled across the freezing torrent. Incessant screaming filled the lulls between the fusillades.

Two more violent explosions caused Rouge to throw his head and sink back on his haunches.

On a terrace just above the road but below Jobert, the Austrian battalion's own two three-pounder guns fired across the river towards buildings on the southern bank. Jobert saw artillery drivers and Hungarian fusiliers in support of the guns pointing up towards the horsemen forming two ranks behind him.

Where is Morin? Surely I must charge? To fortify his commitment, Jobert extended his blade towards the two cannon and the twenty-odd men crewing them. 'Voreille, Pultiere, form column of platoon, trot, march!' Jobert's voice was hoarse due to the smoke. Moench pressed his grey gelding in beside Jobert. 'Moench, sound *Charge!*'

The artillerymen were one hundred metres from the chasseurs' line. The supporting infantry heaved to wheel the guns' trails around and face the cavalry threat above them. The gunners bawled at each other as they loaded their guns while the barrels were moving. The closest gun loaded ball. The farthest loaded canister. Neither crew had time to load ball and case to be 'double-shotted'.

With the crazed howl of madmen, the chasseurs spurred their agitated, resistant horses down the steep slope.

The gun commanders adjusted the rear-screws to elevate their barrels. Their barrels were too low, their targets too high.

The rocks on the slope had the horses dropping their heads to pick their way at the trot. Rouge was stepping short, despite Jobert's urging thighs.

Jobert watched the first gun's firer step forward with his smouldering portfire. Jobert dropped his sword onto his sword knot and swept up his musketoon.

The closest gun fired at fifty metres to the chasseurs' line. Jobert saw the black streak ricochet, covering him in stinging spray of gravel and powder, before howling past his right boot.

Cacophony. Muskets firing. Hooves striking. Torrent splash-

ing. Men screaming. Screaming in frustration. Screaming in pain. Twenty metres.

The Austrian ventman took his finger off the vent of the second gun, the firing tube was thrust into the breech vent. The Austrian firer touched his portfire's quickmatch to the smouldering slowmatch wrapped on the nearby linstock. The quickmatch sputtered into life.

Jobert cocked and shouldered his musketoon. *Rouge, you prick, extend your trot if you will not canter.*

In his peripheral vision Jobert glimpsed an artillery officer, bicorne, brown tailcoat, yellow waist sash, raise his pistol at Jobert. To the side of the gun the artillery firer swung his portfire towards the powder-packed firing tube extending from the vent.

At ten metres, Jobert fired at the gunner's chest.

In that moment, his face seared in excruciating pain. His vision lost to a burst of red light.

The cannon roared just beyond his right stirrup.

Jobert found himself blind on a swerving horse. Habit caused him to drop his musketoon onto his cross belt and shorten his reins. Rouge moved sideways beneath him. In a well-practised movement, Jobert flicked his wrist to swing the tip of his sabre onto his boot to catch the grip. All around him there was screaming.

'Cut the pricks down!' shrieked Pultiere. 'Cut them all down!'

Rouge had stopped moving. Jobert stood still in the middle of a melee. *Oh shit, I cannot open my eyelids.* Fire raced down the side of his cheeks. Blood filled his mouth. Jobert's guts churned with nausea.

'Moench, sound Rally! Moench?' He pressed his left gloved hand to his eyebrow and peeled open his left eye. The pain was so intense he vomited down his chest.

All he saw were green-clad men, mounted and dismounted,

hacking brown and white jackets and bleeding meat. The thwack of steel crunched on bone and on steel. The grunts of labouring men, the blowing of terrified horses. The thud of bodies, man and horse, ramming each other out of the way. The panting moans of the wounded and those being carved.

‘On me!’ someone called nearby.

Neilage? Somewhere. ‘Neilage! Neilage?’

Jobert dropped his sword and used both hands to open his left eye. His right eye was in extreme pain. Rouge stood quite still the whole time, and only took steps as he was buffeted by the movement of other horses.

Bredieux called from somewhere under him. ‘Lieutenant Neilage is forward, sir.’

‘Bredieux! What is happening? I cannot see.’

‘Stay where you are, sir. You have a face wound. You are safe where you are. Our infantry are pushing through.’

Jobert groaned through the pain. He looked down the slope to the writhing bodies on the road and the river tumbling blue-jacketed bodies in pink-tinged waves as the water pulsed over the rocks beneath.

A line of mounted chasseurs stood guard on two Austrian ammunition caissons, Morin and Neilage at their head. Their immobility in sharp contrast to the dismounted mayhem swirling on the road beyond them.

French infantry scrambled up the banks and onto the road. White-jacketed Austrians were firing, or scrambling along the road further down the valley, or parrying French thrusts with their bayonets.

Jobert pressed Rouge to pivot so he could look up the hill, but Rouge resisted the command. Jobert twisted in his saddle and peered up the slope they had charged down.

The ground around the silent guns was strewn with blood, shit and brown cloth. Around the guns sat, or walked, blood-

soaked chasseurs, their horses standing unattended, reins hanging in the mud, shuffling together in their discomfort. Voreille, both pistols in hand, held back chasseurs keen to butcher the unarmed, grey-jacketed artillery drivers. Sergeant Pultiere was identifiable as one of the few still walking among the dead and wounded with his sabre. With malicious method, he plunged his sabre into every Austrian corpse with a two-handed action.

At the mouth of the guns Jobert struggled to make out a wide mound of steaming meat and brown fur. His strained vision was dizzying. Beyond the steaming mounds, lay a large grey sack covering horses' legs.

'Bredieux! Bredieux?' Jobert rasped a spray of blood.

'Sergeant Bredieux is ... fuck, sir, dismount,' said Duque close by.

'Duque, I cannot see.'

'You do not need to see to dismount.'

With a tight grip on his saddle, Jobert swung down beside Rouge.

'Duque, I need to piss, I cannot hold it.'

'You do not need to see to piss either. Go on, I have you.'

Jobert was barely able to reach into his underdrawers to pull himself clear of his breeches when he urinated, due to the shock, down his own leg.

'Duque, who is in command? What has happened to the troop? Are we safe? Where are the fucking kaiserliks? The fucking pain ... I cannot think.'

'Sir, listen.' Duque gripped Jobert's shoulder and shook him firmly. 'We have the village. The enemy have gone. Our infantry has formed line to hold the Ormea road. Colonel Morin and Lieutenant Neilage have Sergeant Bredieux's platoon formed up to support the infantry. Lieutenant Voreille is regathering Sergeant Pultiere's platoon.'

Jobert faded with shock. 'Duque! Duque?'

‘I am here, sir. Rouge has taken a bayonet in the chest.’

Jobert peeled his left eye open. He gagged at the nausea his action created. Jobert’s vision swam, but he made out a flap of Rouge’s flesh, the size of two hands together, hanging from Rouge’s chest. Duque was struggling to lift the horses’ head and examine the wound.

Jobert pressed his forehead to his horse’s withers. *Not Rouge, not today.* ‘He caught it in the street. He was a bastard to force into the trot down the slope.’

Duque grunted in response, as he attempted to strap Rouge’s wound with a roll of bandage from the portmanteau at the rear of Jobert’s saddle.

‘Corporal Duque,’ said Koschak from somewhere nearby, ‘will Rouge return to camp or —’

‘Absolutely yes, Sergeant Major. I will lead him to camp.’

‘Thank you, Duque.’ Jobert felt his tears dribble into his cheek wound.

‘Ooh, fuck, sir! That is a nasty one,’ said Koschak.

‘Who? Me or Rouge? What is my wound? I cannot see.’

Koschak twisted Jobert’s face in his gloved hands and removed Jobert’s helmet. Jobert moaned as a pulse of pain surged into his right temple now that his scalp was free of the helmet’s headband.

‘Your face has burst open under your right eye,’ said Koschak, ‘and the whole side of your head is swollen. That is why you cannot see.’ Koschak hefted Jobert’s bent musketoon hanging on his cross belt. Jobert squinted to see the indent in the barrel.

‘Did it misfire?’ asked Jobert.

‘No, the barrel was struck by a ball.’

‘I nearly had the second gun’s firer. I got my shot off, but some prick’s shot has gone wide, hit my barrel, kicked the musketoon into my face.’

‘That will do it. Just a moment, sir, I need to provide some

soldierly guidance. Sergeant Pultiere! Stop that bullshit and come here now! Oh, for fuck's sake man, wipe the bastard of a thing before you return it to the scabbard.'

Pultiere quivered with anger, tears carving patterns down his grime-encased face. 'Those arseholes slaughtered my platoon, Sergeant Major.'

'Shut up, Sergeant Pultiere, and listen. One, get your men on their feet and gather your horses. Two, gather both limber and caisson teams, any loose horses and all their drivers. All ten drivers, hear me, Sergeant? I will remove one of your fingers for any one of those grey-jacketed cocks who fails to arrive in camp tonight.' Koschak pumped two thick fingers into Pultiere's broad chest.

'Yes, Sergeant Major.'

'Now, have you searched that mess to see if there is anyone alive? Wheel the limbers around to pick up our boys and strip the horses of all saddlery and equipment.'

Jobert spat blood. 'And Pultiere, strip the kaiserlik gunners of their satchels and purses.'

Pultiere stumbled away to roar oaths at his stunned men.

'Sergeant Major,' said Jobert, 'the first gun fired shot and the second fired canister. What hit us? Take me there.'

Koschak nodded towards Vert besides Duque's mount. 'Duque, help me get him up.' Koschak remounted his bay warhorse and took one of Vert's reins and led Jobert back to the muzzles of the guns.

Jobert spat continuously into his left hand to create enough moisture to clean the crusty serum from his left eye.

As they approached the macabre scene, Jobert watched the company farrier and the sergeant veterinarian shoot four wounded horses with their pistols. Standing horses folded with a great wheeze. The lying horses quivered momentarily after the shot, then relaxed, their service to the Republic complete.

‘The canister has taken about seven in the front rank, about twenty metres out from the gun’s muzzle,’ said Koschak. ‘It looks as if three men were taken by the blast. Another four wounded are being loaded onto the limbers.’

As chasseurs lifted the torn body of Faure, Jobert involuntarily clenched his jaw to suppress a groan, only to release a punch of pain throughout his head and throat. One chasseur vomited as Faure was settled onto the artillery limber.

The regimental surgeon turned from supervising the lifting of the crushed and moaning bodies from beneath the peeled horse carcasses to peer up at Jobert’s bleeding face. ‘Captain Jobert, sir, there are a number of minor wounds such as yours, but the four here are serious. Two will not survive long. I will return to the chapel and attend to the other three or four.’

‘If I had shot my man the gun would not have fired,’ said Jobert.

‘Take him to camp, Duque,’ said Koschak. ‘Follow Lieutenant Voreille and Pultiere’s limbers. I will follow up with Bredieux’s platoon.’

Jobert now saw a grey corpse crumpled in on itself like a pair of folded socks, the front hooves scarcely emerging from the headless chest. ‘Duque, is that Moench’s horse?’

‘It took that ball in the chest.’

‘Moench?’

‘He is walking, but he is hurting. Moench was rolled up and stepped on as everybody rode over him. His worst injury is his broken fiddle.’

The follow-on French companies were marching into and through Ponte di Nava. Duque, leading Rouge and Jobert mounted on Vert, picked his way through the crowded main road at the tail of Pultiere’s Austrian prisoners.

Surrounded by an escort of Huin’s chasseurs, four limbered French four-pounder crews yelled and whipped their way for-

ward. As an old habit, Jobert always looked to the brands on the artillery horses left, or nearside, shoulders to determine if the animal was from his grandfather's farm. But in this afternoon's watery sunshine Jobert's vision lurched in a sickening blur.

Nearly two thousand men, Austrian and French, moved, or lay motionless, throughout Ponte di Nava. Men crumpled to sit, slouched to piss, or squatted to shit wherever they found themselves. The wounded writhed, whimpered and grasped. The dead were flipped over to have their possessions rifled. Water in the canteens of the dead and wounded held the greatest value.

Officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, bellowed in French, German or Hungarian to overcome the stupor that follows combat, to get men moving, to re-establish order, to recover the wounded, to prepare for counterattack.

Columns of prisoners stripped of their jackets, shirts, satchels and shoes shuffled towards the bridge. Blue-jacketed captors laughed at the spoils bulging from their backpacks. Prisoners carried both French and Austrian wounded. The wounded slouched against the two prisoners who held two muskets as a makeshift chair.

Abandoned horses stood trembling, their noses pressed to comforting flanks. Some with broken legs swinging within the skin's envelope. Some adjusted their feet entangled in the loops of their own intestines.

Local people huddled in family groups in doorways.

Light infantrymen, alone or in pairs, ducked in and out of broken doors ransacking the homes and stores.

Breaking jars and bottles. Swearing.

The occasional shot was fired.

A dog barked. Toddlers bawled. A woman screamed.