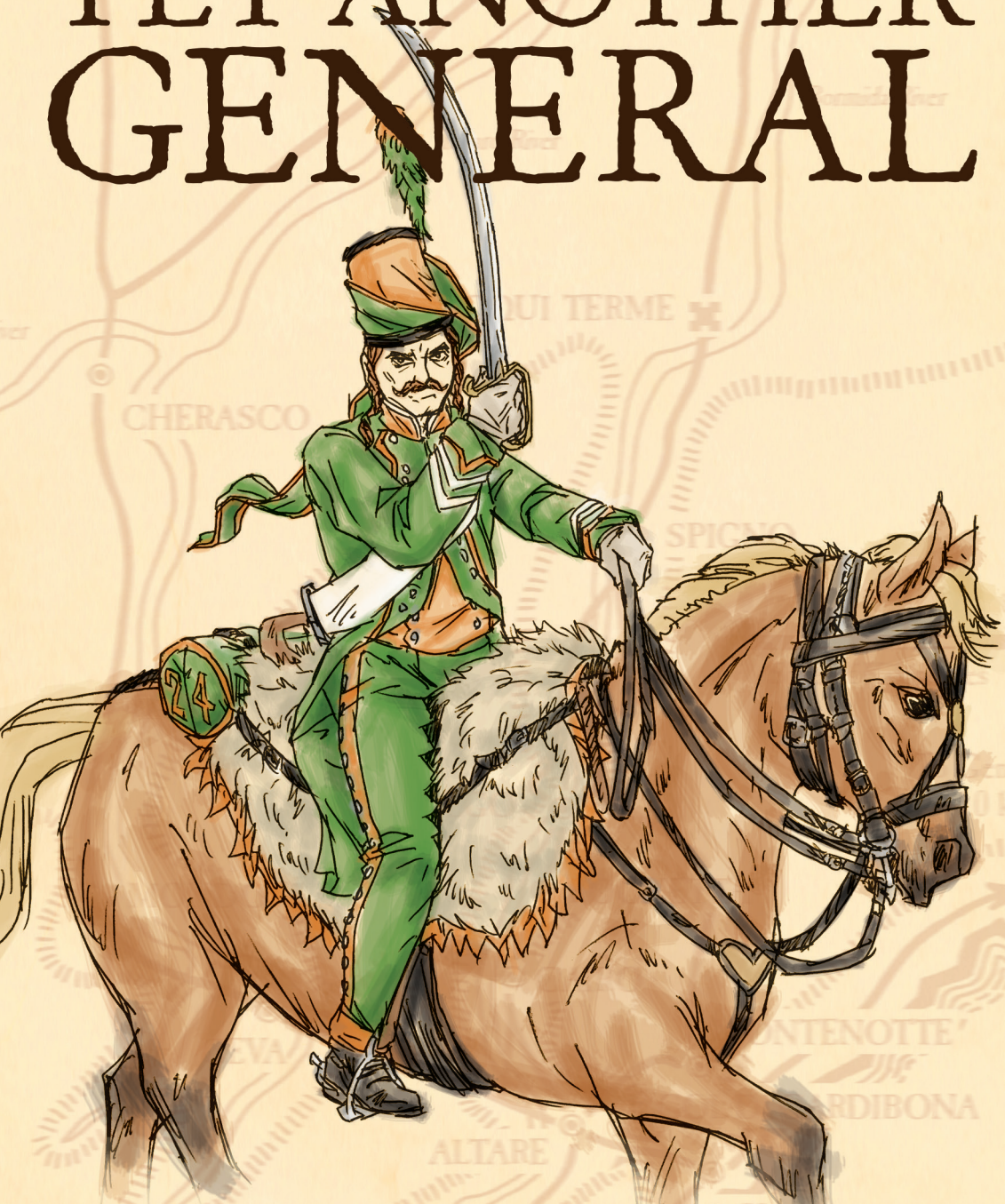


YET ANOTHER GENERAL



THE THIRD ADVENTURE IN THE JOBERT SERIES



ROB MCLAREN



To Nice
100 km

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

1796. Desperate for gold and grain, France focuses on the elimination of Austria as an enemy. Twenty-seven-year-old Napoleon Bonaparte joins a ragged army on a ravaged shore to create a diversion to support the main effort against Vienna.

Promised 'honour, glory and riches' by their fifth commander in two years, veterans André Jobert and Koschak lead the embittered light horsemen of the 24th Chasseurs à Cheval across the fertile plains of northern Italy, onto the battlefields of Lodi, Castiglione, Arcole and Rivoli – battles which bestow international acclaim upon their 'boy general'.

Yet Another General is the third of many adventures Jobert and his chasseurs face as the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars continue over the next twenty years. Join Jobert's squadron, hardened by relentless combat and bitter from endless privations, as they carve a blood-soaked victory for the boy-general Bonaparte which no other commander pitted against the determined and disciplined ranks of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire has achieved in the previous four years.



Cover design and
illustration: Matthew Lin

HISTORICAL FICTION

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Yet Another General



ROB McLAREN

Yet Another General

Rob McLaren

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Maps

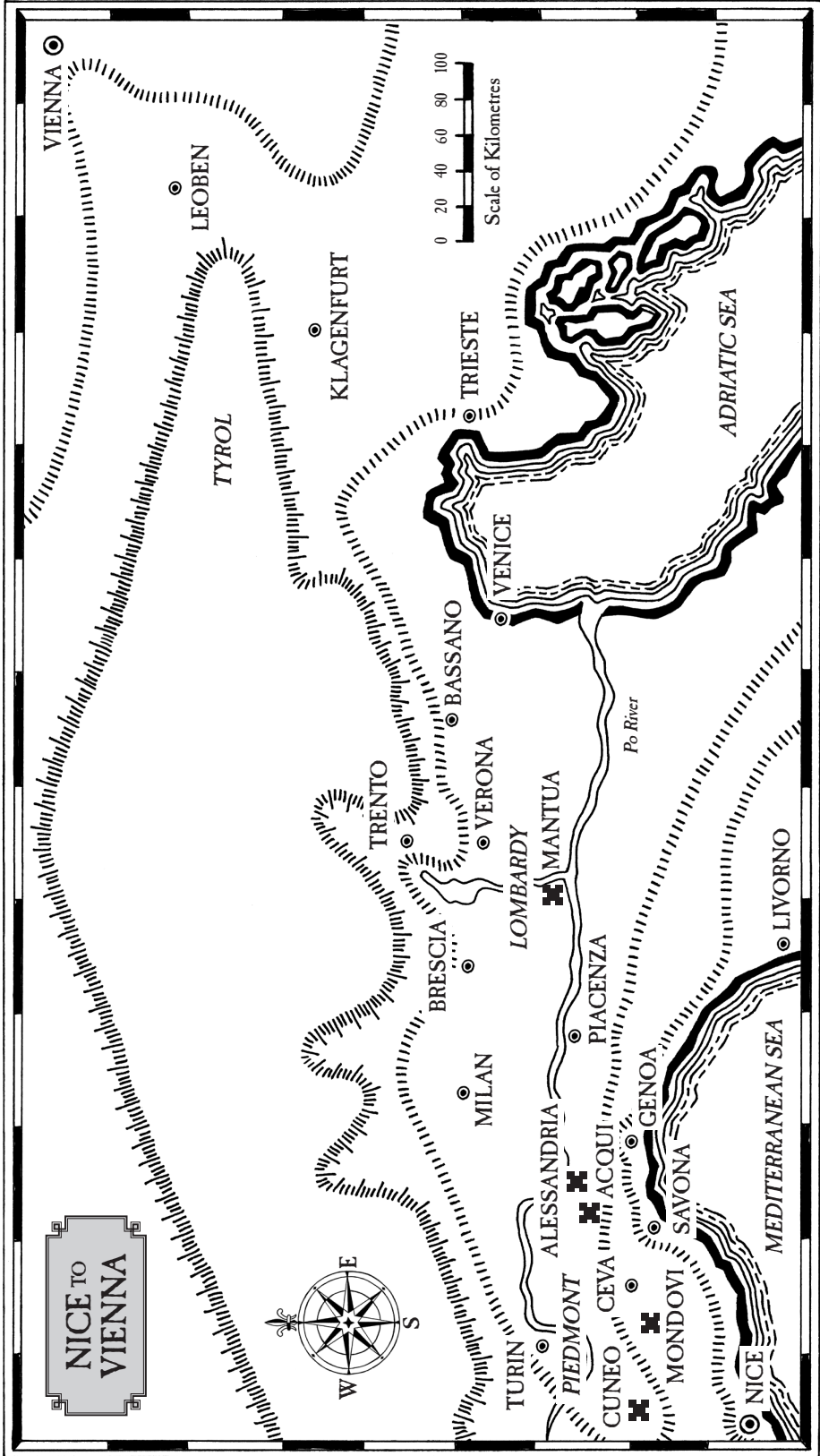
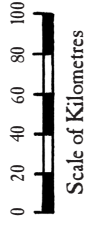
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NICE TO VIENNA



Prologue
November 1796, Caldiero, Italy



Blood poured from the wounded man's mouth, as Major André Jobert slipped in the mud to lift him. *Not you*, thought Jobert. *Not today*.

'He is too heavy,' yelled Jobert above the din of battle and the pelting rain. He staggered to raise their combined weight to his knees. 'He is waterlogged. Pull us out of here.'

Two riders pressed their horses in beside him.

Jobert put his right arm through his friend's cartridge belt and under his armpit. With his arms hugging around the wounded man's body, Jobert gripped the offside stirrup on his left. The rider reached down and grabbed Jobert's cross belts.

Jobert's left hand grasped the other rider's offered stirrup. The rider forced his gloved fingers deep within the wounded man's collar to lift his weight.

Jobert thrust his chin clear of the lolling man's neck. 'Take us away.'

The warhorses scrambled in the slippery mud. The shared weight of Jobert and his groaning burden pulled the horses to-

gether, causing the horses' shoulders to rub as they cantered. Crushed by the two heaving horses, Jobert was dragged on his knees, the wounded man limp beneath him. Jobert's splayed legs were struck hard by pounding hooves.

Through his forearms burning with the strain, Jobert could feel soggy heat oozing from the stab wound in the man's back. Despite his neck jerking at each arduous stride, the man's glazed eyes never left Jobert.

'I have you.' Jobert grunted to make himself heard above hooves thudding about him, the rhythmic growls of the labouring horses and the warning cries of their riders. 'Your wound is not deep. You will make it.'

Jobert was smacked around the head and shoulders, on his left, by one rider's musketoon, and on his right, by the other's scabbard. Jobert's grip on their stirrup leathers caused the rider's spurs to dig into Jobert's elbows. The two loose blades, his own and the wounded man's, jerking from wrists, sliced at his thighs and ribs. Jobert screamed as he willed himself to hang on.

At the top of the ridge, Jobert released the stirrups. They collapsed in the mud. The wounded man wheezed a spout of hot blood into Jobert's face. *Stay with me, brother, I need you.* In frustration, Jobert tugged to remove the slippery sword knots on his wrists and his sodden leather gloves, before flipping the wounded man over. Jobert wiped grass, mud and blood from his pale skin.

The soldier's eyes searched Jobert's face. His jaw and lips quivered as he bit at unformed words.

Chapter One

April 1796, Savona, Italy



Seven months earlier, no visible sunset marked the end of the day for the occupants of the port of Savona.

Blasts of an onshore wind whipped the rumps of thick, low clouds across the harbour before climbing the foothills of the Mediterranean Alps behind the city. Channels of yellow water coursed down the forested slopes, where the trees had been reduced to denuded stumps, the last of their branches hacked for winter's firewood.

The town cringed as sharp autumn rain lashed crumbling stone walls and broken tiled rooves. Icy drops spat through shattered windows.

In the putrid mud of the streets below, axles screeched and slab-sided horses, in either harness or under saddle, plodded. Skeletal dogs dashed amongst the hooves, intent on snatching a gulp of fresh horse manure. Wrapped in capes and coats, scarves and oilskins, columns of grey soldiers sloshed through churned slop.

As the dull light faded, bedraggled women hawked pitiful

rough-milled cakes to the hungry troops or begged alms from mounted couriers. Waifs, hoping for a small coin, scampered to either deliver messages or fetch mugs of straw-tea for men squatting in alcoves chewing on unlit pipestems. Children, with parched seaweed or dried cowpats piled high on their heads as fuel for evening fires, slipped barefoot through ruptured door-frames to relinquish their burdens and complete their efforts for the day.



It was how Raive manipulated the poker as he stoked the fire that irritated Colonel Spiccard the most. Raive caressed the hearth's base of glowing coals. Flames throbbled in response. Raive stacked the split logs with deft leverage. Embers winked sharp orange. Wafting flames slid to ignite neighbouring blocks with a puff.

Colonel Raive settled back into his upholstered armchair and brushed his moustache with the back of his finger. 'My thanks, dear sir, for the regiment assisting our friend across the frontier.'

Spiccard snorted. 'Do you trust Inoubli?'

'I value results above trust,' said Raive. 'Inoubli performed well for us prior to Savona. I look forward to the dividends from Turin.'

'Then there is confidence we will invade Piedmont?' asked Spiccard. 'Gossip is of nothing else.'

'Talk is cheap.' Raive shrugged. 'Paris must appoint our new commander before we march or stand firm.' Raive poured a rich amber liqueur into crystal tumblers. 'Here, you will enjoy

this.' Raive passed across the glass. 'A toast ... the 24th Chasseurs.'

'The regiment.' Spiccard raised his glass and savoured the sip. 'Another delicacy from Jobert's devious little wagons?'

'I find Jobert's family a reliable conduit of Masséna's favourite gourmet items.'

Spiccard shifted in his seat. 'How fares our illustrious Masséna?' asked Spiccard. 'Everyone is expecting him to assume command of the army. I hope your efforts on his staff these past years are rewarded with your own advancement to army headquarters?' Spiccard raised his glass.

'You are too kind, sir,' said Raive, 'but we await the arrival of the government's direction.'

'Then from your divisional perspective,' asked Spiccard, 'what are your views of the 24th Chasseurs?'

'It has certainly changed since I was with the regiment, but your second-in-command submits his reports promptly enough. Which chiefs of squadron wait in the wings? Fergnes and Jobert? I remember Fergnes as a sound company commander.'

'Fergnes is a reliable sort,' said Spiccard. 'I based him here to supervise Depot Company and our rearward escorts.'

Raive smiled. 'While establishing his household, much to Jobert's annoyance, I am sure. Damn, Fergnes' bride is a fine woman.'

'Yes, a clever match,' said Spiccard. 'Her father has done quite well in the metal trade.'

'And Jobert?' asked Raive. 'Enduring the privations of the divisional screen while Fergnes enjoys the pleasures of Nice.'

'Ah, your favourite.' Spiccard sneered. 'Did he not save your arse at Jemappes?'

'Indeed, he did.' Raive's eyes twinkled. 'Does Jobert displease you?'

'He certainly makes no effort to act as would be desired of his rank.'

‘However so?’ Raive cocked his head. ‘Is he remiss in his duties?’

‘Like all ... you fellows from the royal army,’ said Spiccard, ‘he dots his i’s and crosses his t’s.’ Accepting the compliment, Raive bowed his head. ‘It is his temperament in the field I deplore. He lacks caution. I despair at the casualties he creates.’

‘Surely, if you want results,’ said Raive, ‘you must accept casualties. I would venture Jobert has a keen eye for opportunity and a rare sense of timing. I have the impression his men respect his judgement.’

‘Who?’ Spiccard scoffed. ‘More sergeants like Koschak or Bredieux—’

Raive frowned. ‘More?’

‘—or impressionable lieutenants?’ continued Spiccard. ‘I am dismayed by Jobert’s recklessness these last two years. Ponte di Nava, Dego and twice at Savona. I shudder to consider what calamity will come of his ill-conceived judgements should we enter Piedmont.’

‘Masséna described his satisfaction with Jobert’s results at those affairs.’ Raive sank back into his armchair. ‘Do you not concede, dear Spiccard, that Jobert obtained considerable advantage with, to be fair, negligible casualties?’

‘Hah! I will concede pure luck.’ Spiccard glared at the fire. ‘Once we cross the Maritime Alps, Jobert’s luck will dissipate to the detriment of the men and the shame of the regiment.’



‘Sergeant Major, we best return for dinner,’ called Major André Jobert.

Jobert watched Squadron Sergeant Major Koschak across the abandoned meadow of brown weeds. Koschak schooled the dappled grey of Moench, Jobert's trumpeter. He put the nimble-footed mare over a broken stone wall before halting, spinning and leaping back over again.

No matter the weather, Jobert schooled his new bay gelding, Jaune, every second day. The rising four-year-old, arriving with Jobert's brother's hussar regiment at the beginning of March, now joined Jobert's other veteran warhorses, Rouge and Bleu.

Jobert halted Jaune beside a packhorse tethered to a dead plum tree. One-eyed Grenzer snuffled into Jaune's flank. A few months ago, in the heat of battle, Jobert deliberately flicked the tip of his sabre into an enemy's horse's eye allowing him to dispatch the rider. Now healed, Grenzer served as Jobert's packhorse. Jobert reached down and stroked Grenzer's ears, as Koschak trotted to join him.

'This fucking mirliton!' Koschak pressed his newly issued, cylindrical leather cap, wrapped in chasseur-green and dark-orange cloth, onto his forehead. 'I have enough to think about between my horse, the ground under foot, the enemy and the state of my musketoon without being conscious that my pissing cap is going to fall off.'

Doubling over his saddle bow, Koschak erupted in a bout of throaty coughing. He groaned as he spat a glob of yellow phlegm into the mud, wiping the spittle on his lips and the sweat on his brow with the back of his glove cuff. Koschak's hands trembled as they held the reins, his eyes dull, his face flushed and sweaty in the wind.

As Jobert drank from his flask, he nodded slowly and passed across the flask.

Koschak gargled a mouthful of water and then took another deeper swallow.

'And do not start me on the loss of our dolman jackets, sir.'

It is all very well for the tails of my tailcoat to fall elegantly as I promenade down the fucking *Champs-Élysées* at a leisurely trot but shifting in the saddle to complete my sabre evolutions has my tails snagging under my arse.'

Jobert and Koschak walked their horses back to their regimental billets.

The area south of Savona was allocated as an assembly area for General Masséna's division, where the division's six infantry regiments quartered in the surrounding villages. With the port's coastal road now churned to freezing mud by the endless stream of wagons, Jobert and Koschak passed infantry battalions, seven hundred fusiliers strong, marching and forming to the beat of their drums in the ruts and puddles of unploughed fields.

They stopped to allow their horses some rare green pick and watched nearby teams of an artillery battery rehearse their gunnery drills.

Bending to rub his horse's outstretched neck as it munched the meagre shoots, Koschak wheezed. 'I am tired of my horses being hungry, of my soldiers being hungry. Despite our best efforts to boil water to wash, I am angry that my soldiers are ripped with contagion from the turds in the water and the vermin on our skin. I am tired of being hungry. I am tired of wearing rags, my blankets threadbare, holes in my boots, buttons I cannot replace, my drawers rotting off my skinny arse. But ever thankful the fucking army has given me a new hat that will not stay on my fucking head.'

Jobert nodded. Every few days, some particular frustration would spark one of Jobert's squadron staff to bemoan the difficulties of their present condition.

'Only two days north of here,' said Koschak, 'those fucking Austrian bastards with their magazines crammed with blankets and soap. Larders full of sausage and jam, cheese and butter. Lambs, geese and pigs, fat for the—'

Koschak gripped his pistol holsters before being bent double with a hacking cough. He pressed a thick, gloved thumb to a nostril discharging a viscous stream of snot. 'I feel like a chained beast. I am tired of stomping these poor bastard Italians into the filth just to stay ...' Closing his eyes to settle himself, Koschak's face twitched. 'Any news of who our new army commander is, sir?'

'There may well be an announcement at the salon this evening,' said Jobert.

'If this latest general has the balls to release us into Piedmont, I am going to tear those fucking kaiserliks' throats open,' said Koschak. 'Not just for me, but for our lads. I am going to strip the bastards of every thread of clothing, every piece of equipment, their rations, their purses, their horses, their wagons. Anything we can use. Anything we can sell. I am not going to stop.'

Koschak's feverish green eyes searched Jobert's face.

A humourless half-smile twisted a grey scar on Jobert's right cheek. 'I assume you will allow the kaiserliks to retain their hats, Sergeant Major?'

'My goodness, sir! With the Republic blessing me with such a resplendent headdress, sir, how could I not?'



The Savona salon was swollen with this evening's patrons, predominantly officers of France's Army of Italy.

Jobert turned from the bustling crowd in the popular bordello to his brother. 'Bonaparte has been confirmed as the new commander, has he? My trumpeter will collect handsomely. No one

put money on Bonaparte. He is our fifth army commander in three years.'

Major Didier Jobert-Chauvel appraised his glass of wine with disdain. 'That does not bode well. You know him, I believe?'

'I met him briefly,' said Jobert. 'Escorted by a company from the 24th Chasseurs, Bonaparte oversaw a transfer of powder in mid-'93. We met now and then in our Mess. The whole business was interrupted by the uprisings in Marseille and Avignon. A canny fellow, he wrote a little piece of Jacobin prose at the time. Being quite chummy with our local deputies, his essay came to the attention of Robespierre no less.'

'The dictator himself, you say?'

'When the lot of us were drawn into the affair at Toulon, I found myself on one side of the harbour, while Bonaparte was doing well for himself on the other. The deputies made him brigadier-general once the enemy abandoned the port.'

Didier winced. 'Another one?' He regained his composure by smoothing back his elegant moustache with the back of his finger.

Jobert withdrew his legs as a waiter, with his arm's full of empty bottles, navigated around the salon's babbling crush. 'In '94, the 24th Chasseurs were transferred to the Army of Italy. Bonaparte was on the staff as the Chief of Artillery. As I was a lowly company commander and he a brigadier staff officer, we did not do coffee together as much as he and I hoped we might.'

'Tsk, what a shame. He is quite young I understand.'

'My age, maybe a little younger' said Jobert. 'Last year, he departed here, only to appear in the Paris news-sheets and Michelle's letters after he slaughtered some royalist rioters with artillery.'

'He saved the Directory's hide with all of that,' said Didier. 'The government is now indebted to him.'

‘Then that is how he has emerged from obscurity to become a major-general. Enough of our latest general. Bonaparte will soon float off to wherever the next bright, sparkling bauble might be.’

Anger burst from a card table nearby. The brothers looked to the card players in their pipe-smoke haze.

‘How is the farm?’ Jobert emptied their bottle into Didier’s glass. ‘How is Uncle Yann? I have not had news from Michelle in Paris since October.’

Didier sneered at the liquid in his glass. ‘Uncle is busy and well. The farm continues to churn out forty colts per year to the blessed artillery. The cartage business with the senior colt herd continues to be lucrative. Who is this Raive fellow with whom we have the contract? He pays most generously.’

‘Raive is a divisional staff officer for Masséna, the Army of Italy’s brightest star. Raive and I were brigaded together at Jemappes before we joined the 24th Chasseurs, where he served as the regimental second-in-command.’

‘Ah, how cosy. But what does he carry? Wine in and furniture out?’ asked Didier.

‘As any good hussar officer constantly seeks any available reflective surface,’ said Jobert, ‘you may not have noticed our pitiful state of supply.’

‘Piss off, little brother.’

Jobert sucked on a short, brown cigar. ‘Raive stocks Masséna’s larder. A general is ever entertaining guests of the division.’

‘Yes, more to the point Masséna, or Raive, is carting furniture out of Italy.’ Didier jabbed Jobert’s calf-length riding boot with his own. ‘Fascinating, no?’

‘Masséna has a name for organising a little something extra on the side. Either cash or flesh. Heed me, brother, stay aware of the progress of Yann’s wagons to maintain a supply of necessary items. Especially coin. Paper assignats are worthless here.’

‘As they are throughout the Republic.’

Jobert tilted his head to blow the blue-grey cigar smoke towards the stained ceiling. ‘Perhaps Raive has a racket looting furniture from abandoned villas on Masséna’s behalf and selling into Paris’ latest chic set. Michelle may know its destination.’ Jobert waggled the empty wine bottle at a flustered waiter. ‘Michelle? What of Michelle? Her last letter spoke of evenings, parties and friends.’

Didier’s eyes followed two courtesans as they glided through the leering officers. ‘With the end of the Terror last year, there has been a remarkable shift in how those that can afford it play together.’

‘Did you get up to Paris?’ asked Jobert.

‘No, unfortunately. The scandalous Parisian standards had been all the gossip in Lyon and Grenoble before the 1st Hussars departed. Not surprisingly, Michelle’s letters to Uncle Yann omit the scintillating details of her social life. Although, I can now impart that the recent contract of new mirliton caps has cleared Aunt Sophie’s workhouses of debt. Have you been issued yours?’

Jobert squinted into the shadows under his chair, then held up his new, tapering, tubular regimental headdress. Didier pinched the near metre long, vaguely triangular ‘flame’ which could either wrap around the mirliton or drape across the horseman’s shoulder.

‘Is this dark-orange your regimental facing?’

‘Capucine,’ said Jobert.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The dark-orange colour is called capucine. Why do you ask?’

‘We rode into Nice with another reinforcement regiment,’ said Didier, ‘the 22nd *Chasseurs à Cheval*, and they wore this facing colour as well.’

‘Unlike hussar regiments who may wear whatever they

please,' said Jobert, 'groups of three chasseurs à cheval regiments are allocated the same facing colour. In this case, the 22nd Chasseurs will have capucine collars and cuffs, and the 24th Chasseurs have a capucine collar and green cuffs. Somewhere in the army, the 23rd Chasseurs have a green collar and capucine cuffs.'

'How fascinating. I am so pleased I asked,' said Didier.

'My apologies, did I begin to speak of something other than how pretty hussars look on parade?' asked Jobert.

'Be careful, dearest André. Your schoolboy jibes are building the argument for the removal of my regiment from the Army of Italy's order-of-battle. With your General Bonaparte bereft of the iron fist of the 1st Hussars, not only will he be denied his glory, but the Austrians will have the five remaining divisions at their mercy for all your vaunted capucine. Now with such a reprimand, will you promise to behave?'

'I would, on my honour, if only you could afford the next bottle.'

'Why ever can I not?' Didier considered his glass with distaste. 'Indeed, upon reflection on the last bottle, why ever would I?'

'One, because your hussar waistcoat is so tight you cannot push your manicured fingers into your pockets. Two, I see you have spent your last franc trimming your hussar's pelisse jacket with the eyebrows of a Patagonian orangutan, or some such.'

'I was going to make polite enquiry into your love life,' said Didier. 'With your juvenile comments, I sense a soul burdened by unreleased frustration.'

'Again,' said Jobert, 'how distracting reflective surfaces are for hussar officers. You have ridden three hundred kilometres from Nice. Had you not noticed the condition of the country, the troops and the people? Oh, forgive me, reconnaissance is a duty beneath the hussars.'

Didier searched the crowd. 'Let me order you a pretty harlot so you might be relieved of your current humours, and we might converse like adults.'

A sullen look settled on Jobert's face, as his eyes lingered on the hips of a passing woman. 'Before your doctor of love is summoned, if they are not toothless crones, the women of this country are all whores, forced by their families so they can eat, disgraced by rape, rarely by choice. It is a formidable woman who can navigate these towns and hold a drunken soldier's desires at bay. No, any eligible society ladies have either fled east into Lombardy with their families, are companions or governesses to a general's wife's retinue, or have remained as general's or deputies' courtesans.' Jobert waved his empty wine glass at the knots of officers in the noisy room. 'And circumstances here are difficult.'

'Do tell?' asked Didier.

'The reinforcements last autumn,' said Jobert, 'from the Pyrenees and the Rhine such as your regiment, have burdened us. Weight of numbers contaminate the mountain streams with contagion. The countryside is ravaged of forage and firewood. Supply here is shocking. Our focus is bread, brandy, grain and firewood.'

'Where does the solution lie?' asked Didier.

'To take the army over the mountains and feast on the bounty of Piedmont.'

'What is precluding that from happening?'

'Our endless parade of fucking useless army commanders,' said Jobert.

'And this latest one?' asked Didier. 'Bonaparte, the golden boy. More of the same? Will this army's tattered rags tarnish his rising star?'

Jobert shrugged as he looked around the crowded, smoky salon. 'Damn you and your talk of a pretty whore.'

Chapter Two



The relentless April rain drummed against the tiled roof and dribbled through the shutters. Although the regimental clerks, *aides de camp* and couriers spoke in hushed tones as they came and went, the thud of boot-heels and spurs reverberated throughout the farmhouse.

Chiefs of squadron Jobert and Fergnes shuffled into Colonel Spiccard's office gripping their scabbards to their thighs. Spiccard, the commanding officer of the 24th Chasseurs à Cheval, slouched in his high-backed chair behind his desk and contemplated his senior officers with wary eyes.

'The new commander's arrival this week has been quite dramatic,' said Spiccard. 'On the day of his arrival, General Bonaparte reviewed a parade in Nice where he promised his "heroes in rags" food and glory. That evening, he ordered us to invade Piedmont on the 15th of April. The Directory has declared "war must pay for war" and the army must bring France gold and grain. The Republic, having forced Prussia and Spain to terms last year, must now defeat Austria. Aside from the Chouan

uprising on the Atlantic coast, the entire French army's single aim is to capture Vienna.'

Jobert slid his eyes towards Fergnes. Fergnes clenched his jaw.

'Generals Jourdan and Moreau are to launch two vast armies,' said Spiccard, 'both over seventy thousand strong, over the Rhine, down the Danube to Vienna. General Bonaparte's forty-five thousand strong Army of Italy is to divert Austrian reserves by attacking into the Sardinian province of Piedmont and threatening the Austrian province of Lombardy.'

No longer a backwater, thought Jobert.

'General Bonaparte's plan is simple,' said Spiccard. 'First, separate the Austrian army of Lombardy from the Piedmontese. Second, defeat the Piedmontese and capture Turin.'

'And where are we in this grand scheme, sir?' asked Fergnes.

'Although the hussars and the dragoons are brigaded centrally, General Masséna has retained the 24th Chasseurs under his command.' Spiccard's face soured as he turned to Fergnes. 'Bonaparte has claimed our regimental second-in-command as another aide. Our dear Clemusat obviously made an impression escorting Bonaparte's powder convoy and establishing his batteries at Toulon. I have the authority to promote you to second-in-command, Fergnes, should you care to take it up.'

Fergnes blinked as he straightened his posture. 'I am at your service, sir.'

'Fergnes, your post is now here in Savona,' said Spiccard. 'No more visits to your pretty wife in Nice for the foreseeable future. Of course, if that is agreeable with Marguerite?'

Jobert dropped his eyes, his lip twitching with envy.

'My wife will be well occupied with my baby son, sir,' said Fergnes. 'I have no doubt she will furnish me with a list of purchases while we sojourn in Turin. What is your first requirement, sir?'

Spiccard scowled. 'Preparing the regiment to lead General Masséna's division into Piedmont, of course.'

'Indeed, sir,' said Fergnes. 'Over the last two years, battle and fever have reduced us to six companies of seventy sabres. Are reinforcements worth considering?'

Spiccard shook his head. 'To increase each chasseur section by one extra man would require a regimental intake of fifty recruits. Have you two been hatching schemes again?'

Fergnes looked to Jobert.

'Sir,' said Jobert, 'fifty recruits are necessary even to maintain our current strength in the face of the upcoming operations. Surely we can afford one corporal and one wagon per company, led by a lieutenant and a sergeant-major, to return to Avignon? With our former commanding officer now established within Avignon's administration, local mayors and gendarmes could assist in the raising of a small *levée*.'

'The same formula could be applied for the fifty or sixty remounts required,' said Fergnes. 'We would have these new chasseurs being brought into the line by July. We could then turn the whole circus around and bring another fifty in before next winter.'

Spiccard's humourless eyes tightened. 'Sixty horses will easily cost sixty thousand francs. The regiment can only afford half that sum.'

'I have a feeling, sir,' said Jobert, 'that General Masséna's war chest might be full at the start of the campaign season. Perhaps a reasonable argument put to our Colonel Raive, on the General's staff, might tip a handsome purse our way?'

'I will consider it.' Spiccard rocked back in his chair and stared upward at the dust-laden cobwebs in the grimy, ancient beams of the low ceiling.

'I have the authority to promote Quillet to major to join Jobert as a chief of squadron,' said Spiccard. 'His promotion will

cause a change to our company commanders. I have reflected on the experience of our captains, and these are my changes. Within 1st Squadron, I will bring Geour dai across to command 1st Company and Neilage into 4th Company. As for 2nd Squadron, Chabenac will take 2nd Company. He will never be promoted if he remains as an aide de camp. As for Voreille – absolved of his sins when he claimed the honour over that hussar last year – he will be given command of 5th Company. There will be no change to 3rd Squadron. This new manning will be effective as of tomorrow morning. Your initial thoughts as second-in-command, Fergnes?’

Fergnes raised his chin from his notebook. ‘Bread and grain, sir. Bread and grain.’

Spiccard coughed a mocking laugh, before his gaze evaluated Jobert. ‘As for you, Jobert, in light of Quillet’s inexperience ...’

Jobert lifted his chin and took in a long breath to contain himself.

Spiccard’s cheek curled into a sneer, then he dismissed his thoughts with a snort. ‘Perhaps against my better judgement, I will entrust you with the more wide-ranging responsibilities. In the coming days, you can expect to work predominantly with 2nd Squadron.’

Jobert released his breath. ‘I am at your service, sir.’



Jobert watched the six captain company commanders complete their lists in their notebooks. Their pencils dashed off Lieutenant Colonel Fergnes’ requirements for the coming inspection parades. He looked over at the new captains of 1st Squad-

ron, his friends Geourdai and Neilage. As the commander of the regiment's senior company, 1st Company, Geourdai made his own notes yet kept a weather-eye on Neilage's list. Having already commanded a company for a year, Neilage appeared unperturbed at the preparations demanded of him with his new 4th Company.

Jobert's attention turned to the officers of 2nd Squadron, Chabenac and Voreille.

Chabenac blinked with trepidation at assuming the reins of Jobert's old 2nd Company.

Jobert reflected Chabenac had not led soldiers for over two and a half years. *Should I send Koschak to assist him?*

Voreille's face was a study in concentration.

So determined to perform well. Jobert contemplated Voreille's duel with an enemy hussar between the lines a few months previously. In the courageous act of claiming the Austrian, Voreille redeemed an issue of poor judgement and regained the esteem of his senior officers.

Fergnes flipped the pages of his notebook. 'Colonel Spiccard and I will inspect 1st and 3rd Squadrons here in Savona. 2nd Squadron will be inspected on your return to screen duties at the Col di Cadibona by Major Jobert, the assistant surgeon and one of the sergeant veterinarians. I will then have, from your company seconds-in-command by tomorrow evening, a consolidated regimental return of deficiencies that will depart with 3rd Squadron convoy for Depot Company. Major Jobert, anything to add?'

'No, sir.' Jobert gave a conspiratorial wink to Geourdai, Neilage, Chabenac and Voreille. 'But might I have a word with the commanders of 1st and 2nd Squadron once dismissed?'

'Certainly,' said Fergnes. 'Are there any questions from the captains? No? Then, gentlemen, to your duties.'

As Fergnes and the 3rd Squadron officers departed, those remaining at the table relaxed in Jobert's company.

‘Lads, what are your thoughts on our invasion of Piedmont?’ asked Jobert.

Relaxed postures stiffened, eyes blinked, foreheads creased and faces lowered.

Neilage raised his pointed nose, his red moustache bristling. ‘Better to be out there, sir, than rot here. Here we will die of contagion—or worse. I choose Piedmont over one of our hospitals.’

Geourdai rolled his head from side to side, his mouth tight. ‘Our horses come first. At least, over there will be fresh water and green pick.’

Voreille’s eyes narrowed as he crossed his arms. ‘Maybe we will scrounge a little something here and there for ourselves?’

‘You were at Valmy and Jemappes, sir,’ said Chabenac, his mask of aristocratic nonchalance firm. ‘Where do the true threats on campaign lie?’

All eyes upon Jobert tightened in focus.

‘We will be given impossible tasks when we are exhausted.’ Jobert braced his weight, his elbows upon the table. ‘The kaiserliks will surprise us when they are fresh. If they do catch us, we may be butchered.’ Jobert shrugged. ‘But there is a worse outcome. To catch us chasseurs napping is to catch the entire army. What is a sabre cut or a ball in the belly when we risk the loss of our good name?’

‘How then do we counter being surprised when we are spent, sir?’ asked Chabenac.

‘Vigilance,’ said Jobert. ‘Look to the wellbeing of your horses. Look to your men for the correct performance of their duties. Do these few things and we will stand at the end. We have endured much together in the past three years. This will be our greatest test. I have watched you closely, my friends. Fear not, for I see that you are ready.’



A burst of laughter erupted from Didier and Fergnes across the table, each trying to outdo each other with their escapades at card evenings. As Jobert watched Didier apply his considerable charms to his friend Fergnes, he reflected on his brother's ambition.

Beside him, Raive made a polite wave. Fergnes passed them the decanter.

'Fergnes will make a sound second-in-command,' said Raive. 'Colonel Spiccard speaks well of him.'

Jobert looked at Fergnes' laughing profile. 'For a fellow inexperienced in war prior to joining the regiment, he has proven incisive. I admire the depth of consideration he gives to issues.' Jobert smiled at Raive. 'Like a good brother, he tempers my rashness.'

'Rash? Huh!' said Raive. 'Your audacity, Jobert, I would say. Do not let more wary men stifle you with their emphasis on prudence.' Jobert frowned as Raive refilled his glass. 'Your brother is a charming fellow. He remarked on General Masséna's contract with your family, particularly on the return loads into France.'

Jobert sipped at his Nardini grappa. 'I imagine Didier hoped the general was satisfied with the service of our family and the state of goods on arrival.'

'You know General Masséna exports small items of well-crafted furniture to Paris? Of course, you do. He pays a fair price to the owners, thankfully received on these desperate shores.'

'For which, I hope, he receives a fair price for such efforts in Paris?' asked Jobert.

‘For which your family receives a fair price for their own services,’ said Raive. ‘No?’

The door opened. Candle flames shuddered. Four chasseurs crowded into the small, smoky dining room.

Jobert leant back as a young soldier removed his empty plate. ‘What is your view, sir, of the Austrian and Piedmontese armies?’

‘First and foremost,’ said Raive, ‘Austria’s strength will always be focused on her provinces along the Rhine, Bavaria, Baden, Württemberg, and so forth. The emperor’s ministers will be keeping a close eye on our foremost generals, Hoche, Jourdan and Moreau. Their attention always on the least distance from Paris to Vienna.

‘Second, should the Austrians consider the Maritime Alps at all, what must be their views of us as a threat? We are a small, half-starved, egregiously supplied army, hamstrung by a gaggle of commanders, the latest one a complete unknown. What is the likelihood of our rag-tag force breaking through their mountain defences, advancing down the plains of the River Po, extending our lines of communication while the Austrians shorten theirs? Could they imagine us securing the Adriatic coast essential for resupply? Or us blocking the passes of the eastern Tyrolean Alps vital for any defence of our conquest? The Austrian command probably expect that eventuality extremely unlikely.’

Jobert refilled Raive’s glass. He watched Raive’s face for any sign of discomfort with the impending operation, but Raive maintained his good humour. *Your merriment masks many secrets.*

As a red signal flare might start with a pop to cast a giddy light, so a memory of a naval bombardment on a blood-soaked beach swung across Jobert’s vision. The carnage inflicted on 2nd Company eight months ago confirmed one secret of Raive’s, that twin brothers, the Inoublis, were royalist spies. This secret

nearly had Jobert and Voreille shot. Raive had played a role in averting that execution.

‘And will the services of our friend, or friends, Inoubli be enlisted?’ asked Jobert.

‘With Anissa as our pretty bait, and with the support of our influential friends in Avignon, we carefully plucked the Inoubli brothers from their web. With our twin dance masters in hand, considerable persuasive power pressed them to aid the Republic’s cause.’

‘They are now in our pocket?’ Jobert snorted. ‘And Anissa’s fate?’

‘She has adapted well to a domestic arrangement.’

Jobert frowned. ‘Anissa was not hanged?’

‘No, she was not.’ Raive savoured his liqueur and responded with a tilted bob of his balding head and a grim smile. ‘Their efforts contributed to our success at Loano and the recapture of Savona five months ago. The Inoublis now ply their trade into Turin, planting seeds. We will observe the harvest in the coming weeks.’



Above the port of Savona, high on the Col di Cadibona, a strategic pass across the Maritime Alps, the tavern room was small and windowless, lit only by the cooking embers and a single candle on a folding table by the hearth. The mouth-watering aroma of herbs, onions and freshly baked bread was tinged with soap and smoke. Washing lines criss-crossed the room above the hearth. Drying laundry cast shadows on the five bedrolls and saddle portmanteaus stowed in the corner.

Jobert hung his number-two tailcoat, mirliton and sword belt on a peg in the wall, before sinking onto a spare camp stool. ‘My word, something smells good, Orlande. Whatever is on the menu tonight?’

Orlande, Jobert’s valet, swept his red hair off his forehead and pressed his spectacles back onto his nose. ‘A veritable feast, sir. As part of the regimental resupply, we have been issued rice and flour. Young Tulloc has secured us a bag of fresh mussels. Tonight, sir, mussel and olive risotto with onions and beans, with a baked garlic and fetta baguette. Bouillon, sir?’

As Orlande passed Jobert a mug of herbed broth, Jobert’s mouth filled with saliva. ‘Your concoctions from meagre fare continue to impress, my friend. Bonaparte’s investigation of the commissariat and the supply contractors is causing all manner of supplies to reach Savona. I feel a cup of armagnac is warranted in the circumstances. What say you, Orlande?’

‘Just one bottle, sir.’ Orlande withdrew small, fragrant bread rolls from a camp oven. ‘I am saving the other bottle for your birthday. I have paid for some decent fish for tomorrow night, sir, and Madame Quandalle has acquired flour, eggs and raisins for a pudding. We will approach the remaining armagnac with economy, if you please?’

Jobert grinned across the table at Tulloc, his groom, a muscular young man who was cleaning the locks of Jobert’s pistols. ‘A bag of mussels, no less, Tulloc, well done. Did you and Trum-peter Moench attend the paymaster’s parade today?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Tulloc. ‘Thanks to General Bonaparte, sir, we are only one month in arrears now. I am grateful, of course, sir, but it is only assignats, not coin.’

‘Better that than naught, lad. Speaking of pay parades and Moench, what book is he running now?’

‘The date General Bonaparte will enter Turin, sir.’

‘We advance on the 15th of April,’ said Jobert, ‘and it is a five-

day ride from here to Turin without encountering any enemy. Thus, our new general will not enter the capital before the 20th of April. Do not lose your money to Moench, lad.'

Tulloc's face creased with worry.

The sound of squelching boots and the clatter of scabbards on the buttons of over-breeches came from the tavern yard beyond the door.

His vision obscured by a drying shirt hanging from a laundry line, Jobert ducked his head. The door burst open. Huin, Spiccard's aide de camp, entered with Koschak and Moench close behind.

'Orlande, we have a guest for dinner,' said Jobert.

Huin blinked the eye not covered by his eye patch, as he inhaled the fresh-baked aromas. 'Good evening, sir, Colonel Spiccard extends his compliments. An Austrian column is driving down the coast, through our outposts, south towards Savona. General Bonaparte is discussing the situation with General Masséna and seeks a report of any enemy activity here at the Col di Cadibona, sir.'

Jobert's grip on his cup tightened, slopping his bouillon on his thigh. 'The Austrians have begun their offensive before ours. That is my birthday treat. Moench, have Captains Chabenac and Voreille attend me.'

TURIN

THE ARMY OF ITALY
DEFEATS PIEDMONT
APRIL 1796



To Milan
70 km

Po River

VALENZA

To Mantua
160 km

ALESSANDRIA

Bormida River

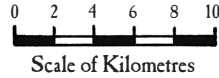
Tanaro River

Stura River

ACQUI TERME

CHERASCO

SPIGNO



To Genoa
10 km

DEGO

ROCHETTA

MONDOVI

CAIRO

CEVA

MONTENOTTE

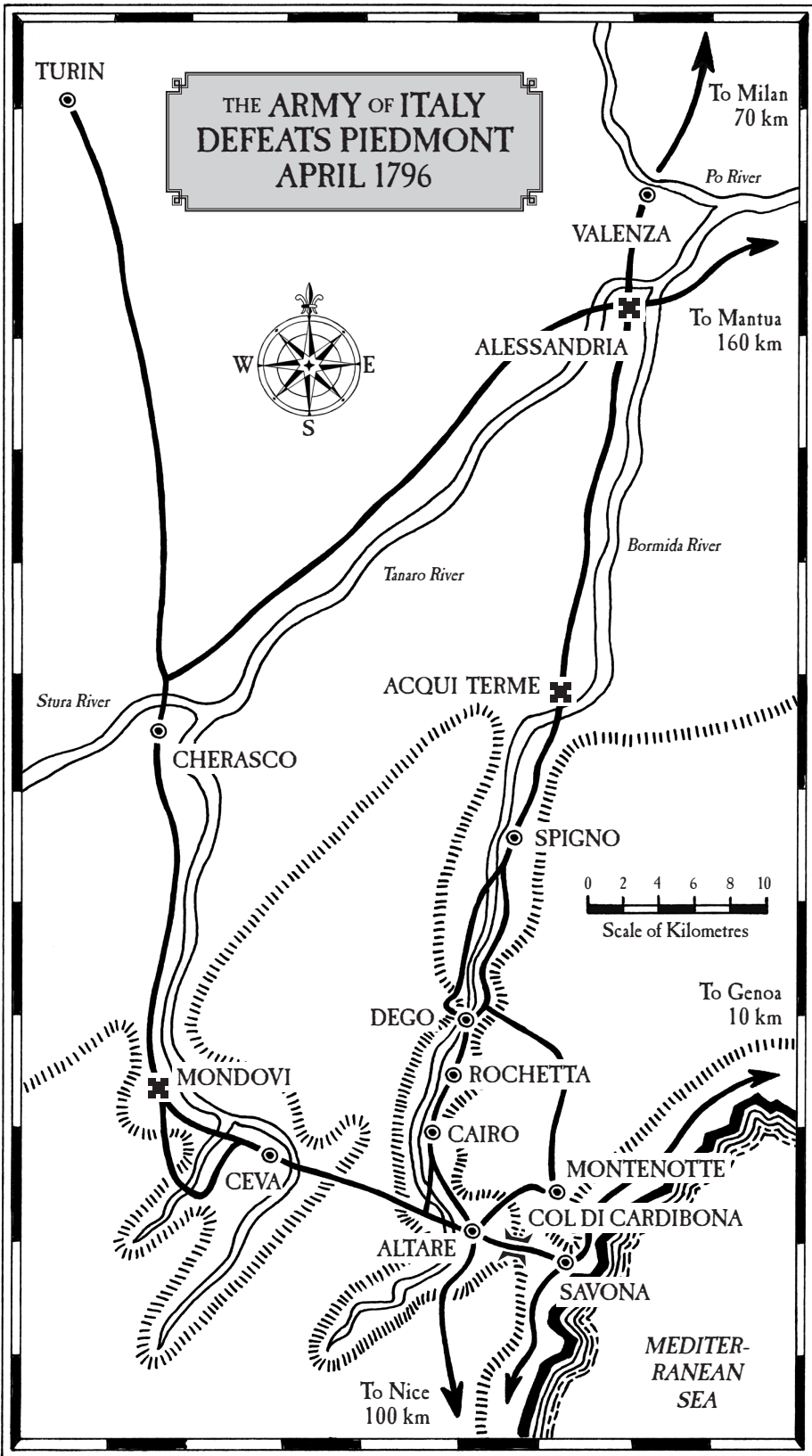
COL DI CARDIBONA

ALTARE

SAVONA

MEDITERRANEAN
SEA

To Nice
100 km



Chapter Three

April 1796, Battle of Montenotte, Italy



‘Hussars?’ Jobert peered through his telescope at the pairs of blue-clad Austrian horsemen six hundred metres away. ‘Protecting the infantry? Those idle bastards are never out of bed before ten o’clock. Something is afoot.’

‘Indeed, sir,’ said Chabenac, commander of 2nd Company at the northern end of Jobert’s squadron outpost line.

On Jobert’s left, the grey snow-swollen water of the Bormida River tumbled north over its rocky bed. Although the men raised their voices to be heard over the rushing torrent, the river was obscured from the French horsemen by the dense underbrush within the forest’s tree line.

Koschak looked north along the river line, across the wide flats and bright-green meadows to the smoky hamlet of Cairo, five hundred metres beyond the Austrian hussars. ‘They have a troop here at the most. One platoon in skirmish order across the fields and the other platoon at rest in the village behind.’

With a spacing of one hundred metres between the six pairs

of enemy horsemen in each line, a cordon of observation was created across the dewy meadows of early spring shoots, stretching from the banks of the gurgling Bormida to the dark-forested slopes to the east.

‘Where have their infantry gone?’ asked Jobert.

‘The village of Cairo lies a little over one kilometre from us now, sir.’ Chabenac’s eye was glued to his glass. ‘I estimate a company or two of their fusiliers in the village, certainly not the half a battalion’s worth as there was yesterday. As there has been each evening this week, wagon and torch movement during the night, but no drums. Is it me, or are these hussars in the same uniform as our own 1st Hussars?’

‘Yes, the light-blue and the red facings are similar,’ said Jobert. ‘The immediate difference is in the headdress. The kaiserlik hussars have red shakos with pom-poms, our hussars have the mirliton with plumes and a flame. As to the mystery of missing infantry, a prisoner will tell us more. Chabenac, who do we have available to capture a prisoner?’

Chabenac snapped his face towards Jobert, his eyes alight. ‘I have never taken a prisoner. I have a troop ready to skirmish into the meadow.’

Jobert slapped Chabenac’s shoulder. ‘Have one of your platoons form line in skirmish order here on the wood’s edge. Sergeant Major, strip down the other platoon’s saddles in readiness for the hunt. We will move out of the forest as six vedette pairs, to every appearance setting a counter-screen to the kaiserliks. Tulloc, fetch me Bleu.’

With an ugly grin, Koschak spun to gather the nominated platoon about him. Any extraneous equipment was stripped from the saddles to reduce the weight on the horses. Capes, horse rugs, portmanteaus, horse lines, staves, sickles, hammers, shovels, picks, nose bags, forage bags, water flasks and gourds, cartridge boxes, pistol holsters. The chasseurs would ride with

just their sabres and a single charge in their musketoons.

‘Chabenac,’ said Jobert, ‘the kaiserliks have a platoon in the screen. There will be a sergeant, perhaps a junior officer, somewhere towards the centre. They will tell us more, but with the flatter ground and the straight run to the village, they will not be easy to bag.’ Jobert’s tone changed as inner humours morphed prior to the delivery of violence. Jobert pointed at the Austrians high on the mountain’s side. ‘Those on the end of the screen will have the longer ride home. The horses coming down the slope will step short, so will not have the speed until the ground flattens. The pair of hussars at the end of their line on the upper slopes, furthest from the riverbank, is sure to have a corporal. He will be our quarry.’

‘I would be obliged, sir,’ said Chabenac, ‘if I might be there at the “kill”, so to speak. What would you require of me?’

‘Moench, ride with Captain Chabenac,’ said Jobert to his orange-jacketed trumpeter. ‘Be the pair at the end of the line. Stay wide from each other. You may attract a shot if you appear as a single target. Do whatever you can to get higher up the slope to drive the hussars down. Yes?’

Moench, Jobert’s eternal shadow, swallowed hard.

‘Sergeant Major and I will be the second pair down our line,’ said Jobert. ‘We will mark our prey as they descend down upon us.’

‘There we are, Moench.’ Chabenac slapped the downcast trumpeter on the shoulder. ‘A quick gallop up a gentle hill and home in time for soup. What say you?’

‘Ready for my birthday sport, Sergeant Major?’ Jobert called, swinging into Bleu’s saddle. ‘Moench, sound Skirmishers Out!’

As Moench blew the long notes of the order, the chasseurs formed in familiar pairs and rode forward to their comrades observing their enemies under the outer boughs.



The foreign trumpet call gripped the guts of the Austrian hussar from his throat to his arse. The muscular tension through the saddle had his horse jerk its ears alert, nostrils scenting the mountain breeze.

From his sentry position on the slope, with the sun just cresting the eastern mountain wall, the Austrian squinted into the shadows far below.

The hussar by his side shaded his eyes. 'There in the tree line, corporal?'

Six pairs of green-jacketed French chasseurs plodded into the meadows, the butts of their musketoons resting on their right thighs. As the line of Frenchmen advanced, a second line of paired chasseurs in skirmish order, appeared under the low boughs.

'A troop of the pricks. I can smell them from here.' The corporal shortened his reins. 'Fire! Wake the others.'

The corporal's mare flinched at the shot. 'Reload, you slug,' called the corporal. 'Forget them. Stay focused.'

The corporal swivelled in his saddle. The pair of hussars one hundred metres behind him stood in their stirrups, craning their necks unable to see the threat. The corporal raised his flat palm to halt them.

At three hundred metres, the French moustaches and hussar plaits became distinct. Their scabbards clinked on their spurs.

'How close will he let them come?' The corporal peered down the slope. 'What is the fat bastard doing?' No signal was waved from his platoon sergeant three hundred metres down the hill.

A cry from somewhere down the meadow.

‘Corporal, what—?’ The hussar dropped his ramrod. It clattered on his stirrup as it fell.

The corporal stared at the wooden ramrod under the horses’ hooves. ‘You fucking useless —’

‘Corporal!’

The thunder of French hooves squeezed the corporal’s heart. Six pairs of chasseurs at the gallop. Two pair flew straight up the slope towards them. They had thirty seconds.

‘Fire again, corporal?’

‘Yes, warn the village.’

Down the Austrian screen line, a ripple of musketry caused an instant grey cloud of gun smoke. In the village of Cairo, Austrian drummers beat To Arms.

The corporal shortened his reins. ‘Retire!’

The younger soldier wrenched his remount around. With a rake of spurs, his horse leapt towards the second line of Austrian skirmishers.

The corporal attempted to predict the paths of the four closest Frenchmen. He winced at the speed of their horses.

One pair of chasseur horses bounded up the weedy rocks.

The corporal lifted his musketoons’ barrel, spun his horse and urged it to race. ‘Fly, Theresa!’

He glanced at the two chasseurs speeding along the slope beneath his left. Smug grins funnelled their urgent breathing. Their eyes were on the stones ahead. Their forward seats and rocking hips urged their bay horses to extend the galloping stride.

His horse slowed to the canter. His calves pulsed her ribs. She ducked her head to lean into the gallop. The corporal’s eyes bulged from his skull as he sought the best path down the rutted mountain side. The weight of his rolled cape and blankets buffeted his thighs. His portmanteau behind his saddle punched his mare’s loins.

The pair of enemies had split either side, the blond one on the right only five horse lengths behind.

He sought the second line of hussars. Sixty metres? Seventy? Five seconds.

On his right above him, the closest Frenchman let burst a demonic scream. He glanced back, balance shifting. Theresa adjusted her descending steps. The Frenchman's howl was framed by bared teeth in a blood-red face. Gloved fingers stretched out towards him.

One horse length.

His dropped musketoons bludgeoned his thigh. He groped for the leaping sabre hilt. The nose of the other chasseur's remount grunted with effort under his left elbow. His scabbard slapped its neck. Its chest rammed into Theresa's rump.

She dropped her head to kick out at the canter.

He lost his balance.

A tree branch, or something like it, clamped around his throat. His scream was stifled. He was wrenched by the neck from the saddle. The Frenchman roared in his ear and tugged on his own reins. Theresa leapt away with the reduction in weight towards her stablemates just ahead, yet his right stirrup snagged his boot.

Suspended in mid-air over the thunder of hooves on rocks, stale French breath blasted the hussar's ear. With the dizzying slope in his peripheral vision and his foot trapped in the stirrup of his bolting mount, vomit burnt his throat. His fingers raked for any hold on the saddlery behind him.

The second chasseur on the right snatched Theresa's trailing reins. The blond Frenchman sent a vicious snap through to the iron bit in her mouth. All three horses sunk on their haunches to a shuddering halt. The corporal's stirrup slipped free of his boot.

His captors yelled to a pair of chasseurs above them.

The Austrian's eyes implored his comrades within musketoons

range. 'Fire!' he croaked. 'You useless bastards, fire!'

The foreign trumpet screeched again. The two chasseurs spun the horses towards the tree line from which they had emerged and plunged down the slope.

Arched backwards over the saddle bow, the hussar's body jerked, his neck stretching, the Frenchman's musketoon gouging into his arched spine, his own firearm thrashing to break his knee. The blond chasseur leered at him and drove Theresa into captivity with a slash of the flat of his blade.

His vision dimmed as he choked.



Once inside the tree line, Jobert released his captive.

The blue-clad hussar collapsed on the ground with a painful thud and pawed at the earth with gloved fingers. Rough hands closed on the prisoner and threw him on his back. He curled into a caterpillar-like ball, fighting to breathe.

Jobert groaned as he dismounted, cradling his upper arm which had ensnared the Austrian. 'Tulloc, fetch Rouge and re-pack our horses.'

Jobert squatted among the feet of the inquisitive chasseurs and steaming horses. He gripped the quivering hussar. The Austrian corporal's face twitched. His eyes widened with alarm as Jobert held out a hipflask and a wicked dagger.

'Sore neck, huh?' Jobert asked in German. 'I can soothe your throat or open it. You choose.'

The corporal searched Jobert's face.

Jobert pushed the flask towards the hussar. 'Your platoon had outpost duties this morning? Yes?'

The corporal swallowed the rough grappa painfully. An ensuing coughing fit caused harsh laughter from the surrounding chasseurs. 'Yes, sir.'

'While your other platoon rests in Cairo? Yes?'

'Yes, sir.'

'It is correct, is it not, your troop has never screened south of Cairo before?' asked Jobert.

'Yes, sir.'

'Have a little more, my friend. Just a sip. But now you are in the screen because the infantry withdrew last night?'

The hussar sat up a little straighter and sipped at the biting liquid. 'Yes, sir.'

'They withdrew to Dego?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Took their wagons with them?' asked Jobert.

'Yes, sir.'

'You have a good horse, son. She did well over that rough slope. What is her name?'

'Theresa, sir.' The hussar blinked back tears as his mare was brought forward to appreciative murmurs from the crowding French troopers.

'See, my friend, she is unharmed,' said Jobert. 'Her legs are sound. We will give Theresa a little grain, yes? Your troop came forward from Dego last night, did it not?'

The hussar nodded. 'Yes, sir.'

Jobert offered the flask again. 'You would have seen other infantry arriving in Dego yesterday and last night?'

The alcohol burnt the hussar's raw throat. 'Yes, sir.'

'They were preparing to advance to Altare and the Col di Cadibona?'

'No, sir.' The hussar jerked to look Jobert directly in the eye and shook his head emphatically. 'No, sir, the infantry are advancing to Savona via Montenotte.'

‘Montenotte?’ asked Jobert. ‘No, that cannot be.’

‘Ah, no, sir, I mean ...’

Your face betrays you. Jobert snatched his hip flask from the Austrian corporal. His face creased as he visualised the steep ridges around Montenotte. ‘Chabenac, the kaiserliks have withdrawn their infantry to advance on Savona via the ridgelines descending from Montenotte. Do you have a messenger with a fresh horse?’

The clatter of a rider entered the camp at the trot. The chasseur peered through the low branches for the dark-orange jackets of any trumpeters, calling to his 2nd Company comrades for an officer.

‘Corporal Durand! Come here, lad,’ called Koschak. ‘Sir, there is a 5th Company messenger.’

The young chasseur saluted. ‘Sir, Captain Voreille wishes you to know of gun fire and musketry coming from Montenotte. He has sent a patrol to investigate.’

Jobert sought the sounds of the fighting. With the forested high-country shielding Montenotte eight kilometres to the east, the rumble of the river torrent and the clatter of soldiers and horses moving around the camp, the sound of gunfire eluded him.

‘I need to join that patrol. Chabenac, maintain your screen. Tulloc, fetch Rouge now.’

Chapter Four

April 1796, Battle of Dego, Italy



Two days later, the cannon's fire caught everyone's attention. Then another shot cracked the cloudy April day. A further fourteen guns fired, each a second apart.

Under two thousand metres away from the two eight-gun French batteries, Jobert watched the fall of solid shot thud into the field works and skip through the wagon teams of the Austrian defence.

'What, sir,' Jobert asked Raive beside him, 'is your view of the last few days since the Austrian offensive began?'

'Early days, of course, early days,' said Raive. 'The Austrians began with a half-hearted advance along the coast which they chose to stop. Then they attack down the knife-edged ridgeline at Montenotte and were blocked by our defences. We routed that Montenotte force, who were well out of support from the coastal force. That coastal force must now march around the intervening ranges, which creates a window of opportunity for General Bonaparte. While General Masséna forces the Austrians to protect their fortress at Acqui, beyond this road to Spigno,

General Augereau is at liberty to drive the Piedmontese further to the north-west.'

From their elevated westerly observation post on the north-running Dego-Spigno-Acqui road, over two kilometres from the Austrian chain of redoubts north of Dego, Jobert, Raive and Chabenac raised their telescopes and observed the defenders' reaction to the cannonade.

All morning, as Masséna's three columns advanced from Cairo, the consistent artillery bombardment of another fierce battle ten kilometres south rent the air. Last night, Bonaparte brought up General Augereau's division from the coast and, today, was driving the Piedmontese east out of the Bormida valley.

In preparation for an assault on the Austrians tomorrow, Masséna, his staff and his commanders observed the reaction from different aspects of the field. Two French batteries fired into the Austrian defence and two infantry regiments surged forward giving every appearance of a full-frontal divisional attack. Away on the western heights of the left flank, Colonel Raive, of Masséna's staff, identified the redoubts in the depth of the Austrian defence. Around Raive sat the alert vedettes of 2nd Company, commanded by Jobert and Chabenac.

Within a minute of the French four-pound cannon balls impacting, the Austrian defence changed character. Through their glasses, Raive, Jobert and Chabenac watched Austrian guns coming into action, drums driving their infantry to put down the loads of their work parties and take up arms, wagon and their teams being urged away to the rear and couriers trotting between the small fortresses.

'What say you, Jobert?' asked Raive. 'I estimate two Austrian and two Piedmontese battalions here today.'

'We are only a day's march from Acqui, sir, they may well be reinforced through the night.'

The Austrian guns rang out in response. Since arriving on the western heights, the three officers saw the gun positions, revealed by telltale earthworks and a concentration of human activity, had been sited in ones and twos to cover each fold in the ground. As the larger Austrian six-pounders returned the French compliment in iron, flame and smoke, guns were either confirmed or new positions identified.

‘What is your tally, Chabenac?’ asked Raive. ‘I have fourteen.’

Chabenac rechecked his notebook. ‘Yes, sir, I have fourteen.’

‘A heavy ratio of artillery to infantry, no?’ asked Raive. ‘Probably due to being committed to the Montenotte ridgelines in the last few days, the Austrian infantry would be unable to take their artillery with them.’

An open-backed fortification, or redan, on the extreme right of the Austrian line contained three guns. Watching their balls sizzle one thousand, six hundred metres to support the forward Austrian defence fascinated Jobert. As a light horseman on escort duty, Jobert knew better than to be focused on the same point of interest as the senior officer present. Jobert scanned the protective sections of 2nd Company. Content that none of the chasseurs were signalling alarm, Jobert glanced back over his shoulder down a long spur line towards the hidden village of Dego.

On the centre of the broad spur, enwrapped on three sides by the Bormida River, Jobert gazed upon a broad olive grove and contemplated a previous skirmish with Austrian cavalry over eighteen months before. On that occasion Jobert led his chasseurs in an opportunistic swarm against Austrian *chevaux-léger* and dragoons.

‘Will General Masséna’s plan be the same as when we fought here in September ’94, sir?’ asked Jobert.

‘Masséna has access to more infantry this time,’ said Raive, ‘but the ground will dictate the same approaches. General Masséna

will attack along the road toward Dego. General Laharpe will command one of his brigades on the left to turn the Austrian right flank. There, toward that three-gun redan that has held your attention. I think we have seen enough. Shall we return?’

Jobert caught himself from ordering 2nd Company to assemble to return to the French lines. He waited to see how long it would take for Chabenac to cease his tutorial in tactics and become a chasseur company commander once more.

‘Major Jobert, sir,’ asked Moench, a horse-length behind the officers, ‘shall I sound Skirmishers In, sir?’

‘Forgive me, sir.’ Chabenac returned from his reveries with a jolt. ‘Sound Skirmishers In. 2nd Company, column of fours, walk, march!’

Once the column of chasseurs was following Raive south towards the French lines, Chabenac rode up beside Jobert. ‘What does tomorrow’s battle have in store for us, sir?’

‘2nd Squadron is to protect the left flank of General Laharpe’s attack, along this western road to Spigno and Acqui.’

‘That sounds simple enough,’ said Chabenac, ‘but I sense ... when can we expect the curtain to rise on such a spectacle?’

Jobert inspected the high cloud over the valley. ‘A cold, clear night tonight will bring a thick fog in the morning. Once the fog lifts, our artillery will acquire their targets. Once our guns fire, the drums will roll and our infantry’s assault will begin.’



‘Go!’ ordered Jobert, the next day.

In an unnecessary flourish, Voreille swept up his blade in salute. 5th Company’s trumpeter sounded Skirmishers Out, the

notes competing against the river torrent, the irregular thumps of cannon blasts and the thrash of drums.

Jobert's eyes followed the backs of Voreille's soldiers as their horses leapt up the banks to canter up the slope of the broad, low promontory that thrust the north flowing Bormida abruptly to the east.

Jobert's long-developed senses watched the last of Voreille's skirmishers be consumed by the gun smoke. The grey figures, a mere two hundred metres up the slope but already engulfed, checked their gait and waved to each other to redress their line, before thick clouds consumed them.

Jobert turned to Chabenac mounted beside him. 'Something is up there. A line of fusiliers ought not slow Voreille to a walk, but cavalry skirmishers might.' A blink was the only change to Chabenac's smiling mask.

The urgent beat of drums and a squadron of 22nd Chasseurs heralded General Laharpe's smoke-obscured infantry, advancing on Masséna's left flank. 'Here comes Bessières' chasseurs leading Laharpe,' said Jobert. 'Advance, Chabenac. Establish your column on Voreille's left.'

Chabenac chose to sword-salute his chief of squadron. Jobert frowned at the act. *First fight with their new companies, I suppose.* As Chabenac swept his sabre's hilt to his lips, Jobert saw his friend drive all his courage into his churning stomach, forcing icy clarity to the forefront of his mind.

'2nd Company, column of fours, walk, march!' called Chabenac. 'Sound Advance! Lieutenant Peugeot, vedettes out. Keep 5th Company on our right, if you please.'

Clumps of dark figures, French light infantry in skirmish formation, swarmed behind a band of approaching horsemen. Laharpe's brigade column was closing up to Jobert.

With his right hand gripping the waist of his musketoons' stock, and thus unable to salute, Jobert nodded a brief acknow-

ledgement to Captain Bessières' sword salute. Jobert shrugged away his annoyance as yet another captain sought his confidence.

Bessières' sharp nod confirmed orders had not changed. Voreille's 5th Company would identify river crossing points. Bessières' chasseurs would screen Laharpe's infantry in an assault on the extreme end of the Austrian line. Jobert and Chabenac's 2nd Company would remain on the high ground left of the French attack to screen the Dego-Spigno Road.

A firm squeeze instructed Rouge to descend the banks and enter the tumbling water. Water filled Jobert's boots. Beside him, Moench's lips clenched with nerves, his stare fixed on the ridge's summit masked by smoke. Koschak and Tulloc, leading Bleu and Grenzer, followed.

On the far bank, Rouge stretched his great body to power up the slope. Sporadic musketry crackled from the right of the spur toward Dego.

On top of the promontory, Voreille trotted over to Jobert. 'I have enemy hussars to my left front, sir, and enemy infantry on our right towards Dego. Should I ... should I pass the hussars to Captain Chabenac, screen the infantry with a troop and press on down the other side of the spur to locate Bessières' next crossing points?'

'Yes, Voreille,' said Jobert, 'that is exactly what you should do. Stay close to the Bormida below us. Once 2nd Company clears these kaiserlik hussars, I will send a patrol down to link with you once Laharpe's assault goes in. Good luck.'

Rouge trotted west through the smoke haze. Jobert, Koschak and Moench passed through a section of chasseurs holding 2nd Company's packhorses, a few men with light wounds or lame horses, standing to the rear of Chabenac's battle-line. Beside Jobert, Koschak growled, with satisfaction Jobert assumed, that two four-man vedettes stood post on the flanks of the battle-line staring into the swirling, dusty fog.

On the gravelled Dego-Spigno road that ascended the ridge's spine, 2nd Company's column extended into troop battle-line. Koschak peeled away to hasten the alignment of the second rank.

Skirmishers trotted into the gloom ahead. Jobert and Moench followed them well forward of 2nd Company's battle-line. On the heights from which Raive and he observed the defences yesterday, the smoke thinned, allowing Jobert to identify the road to Spigno bending to run north.

Two hundred metres along that road stood the grey shapes of the enemy hussars, their outlines distinct with their pelisse jackets worn raffishly off their left shoulders. They too held their musketoons at the ready on their right thighs, horses on a tight rein. Jobert counted six enemy horsemen in the first line across the road. Half of a twelve-man section, the other half further back in the gloom.

Until now, a troop of hussars had been the only Austrian cavalry encountered in the Bormida valley. Jobert's mind raced to anticipate his enemy's deployment based on what the diminishing gun smoke revealed.

Jobert cantered back to Chabenac's battle-line, dropping his hips to bring Rouge into a smooth halt facing 2nd Company. His musketoon swung on its white cross-belt as he drew his sabre.

Jobert stared hard at the faces along the front rank. Scars across his chest burned. 'Five months since Savona, my lads,' Jobert called. 'Sabres!'

Musketoons slapped onto thighs. Sabres were drawn with a sizzle. Horses rocked and threw their heads. Some chasseur faces set with ugly grins. Some faces blanched, scared eyes searching Jobert.

'Shorten those fucking reins, boys,' roared Koschak. 'Get them up around their fucking ears.'

Acting on the command, the troopers filled their chests with smoke and determination.

Jobert's glare slid along the ranks ending with a sharp nod to Chabenac.

Chabenac wore a mask of confidence. '2nd Company, trot, march!'

An explosion of musketry from the skirmishers. The scream of a foreign trumpet sounded beyond the instant grey cloud.

'Moench, sound Charge!' shouted Jobert.

Amidst the thunder of shod hooves, and with the sound of Moench's trumpet piercing call over his shoulder, Jobert found himself amongst Chabenac's skirmishers. 'Clear to the flanks. Swiftly, sergeant!'

The skirmishers screamed at each other to clear the field in the face of their oncoming comrades.

Clearing the skirmishers' smoke screen, Jobert saw a full troop of hussars trotting forward with their musketoons at the shoulder.

In the centre of the Austrian line, the hussar officer held his jet-black charger in a prancing canter, his hand on his hip. A smirk completed his posture of nonchalance. *Are we not worth drawing your sabre for, you turd?*

The line of hussars was closing at the trot. Impact in ten seconds.

His twenty musketoons against our forty blades. I think not. Jobert lifted his chest and squeezed Rouge with his knees to shorten the length of Rouge's stride. Jobert rolled his extended sabre over his wrist. A warning to Moench. Options flashed though his mind.

Koschak bellowed incoherently behind him. Jobert flicked a glance to his right. Chabenac cantered front and centre of his company. The chasseurs in the charging front rank followed three strides behind him, gaps, due to avoiding the delayed

skirmishers, disrupted their line as if 2nd Company had already received a volley.

Musketry exploded. The hussars were engulfed in their own smoke cloud. Beyond effective range, Jobert heard the balls skip into the gravel around Rouge's hooves.

The troop of Austrians split their line left and right, reforming column of fours and cantered away.

Jobert held his sabre aloft, as he passed into the clearer air on the far side of the hussar's gun smoke. 'Halt!'

Moench choked on the smoke as he raced to blow the urgent call of Halt.

As horses checked back into a walk and then halted, Koschak growled for the ranks to align their dressing.

Jobert scanned 2nd Company's ranks for empty saddles. None identified, he then focused on the enemy hussars' reformed troop line three hundred metres distant. Their officer still maintained a most curious pose with his hand on his hip. Jobert glared. *Why do you feel familiar? Matters not. Your strength is revealed, laughing boy, and the field is ours without loss.*

With the hussars withdrawn, Jobert looked east, across the thunderous battle in the vale beneath him, toward the three-gun Austrian redan which he observed with interest yesterday. A yellow-grey cloud, fed by gunfire or burning buildings, obscured any sense of General Laharpe's progress. *Honour enough for 2nd Company to hold the left of the battle-line.*

'Chief of squadron Jobert, sir!' called Koschak.

Jobert turned towards the glowering face of Koschak, indicating 2nd Company's relaxed state with the sweep of an open palm. Jobert saw Chabenac exchanging a hip flask with his two troop commanders, Bredieux and Peugeot.

'Captain Chabenac!' called Jobert. 'Re-establish your skirmishers, sir!'

Chabenac smiled as if, at a high tea, he was informed that his

serviette had fallen to the carpet. 'Lieutenant Bredieux, skirmishers out, if you will.'

Jobert shuddered at the memory of the command style of the nobility.

Chapter Five



Jobert bowed his plumed mirliton beneath the canvas awning of Bonaparte's headquarters marquee.

Jobert saluted the Army of Italy's chief of staff. 'Excuse me, General Berthier, General Masséna extends his compliments, sir. He wishes you to know we have secured the field at Dego. Our enemy withdraws towards Acqui. I have his dispatches, sir.'

As Berthier blew the blotting sand from a document, he squinted to focus on Jobert in the gloom beyond the flickering candlelight, taking in Jobert's filthy uniform.

'I know Clemusat and Fergnes of the 24th Chasseurs,' said Berthier, 'but I have not met you, sir.'

One of Jobert's cheeks crimped with a brief crease. 'Major Jobert, at your service, sir.'

Berthier's eyebrows arched in enquiry. 'Something amuses you, chief of squadron?'

'No, sir.'

'I detect something does.' Berthier lounged back in his creaking chair, holding his hands out wide. 'Before I am immersed in

digesting General Masséna's news and fulfilling his pressing requirements, indulge me in a momentary distraction.'

'I meant no disrespect, sir,' said Jobert. 'It is just ... you and I have met before, sir ... in America.'

A crease appeared on the senior gentleman's brow. 'I cannot place you, sir.'

'You were an aide to General de Rochambeau,' said Jobert, 'as was Colonel de Lambert. I was de Lambert's groom, sir, a mere boy chasseur in de Rochambeau's retinue.'

Berthier's eyes narrowed. 'I remember de Lambert, the chasseur colonel, of course. Forgive me, Jobert, it is good to be reunited with a fellow Virginian. I cannot recall our time together, sixteen years ago and all that, but I am sure it will come to me. Perhaps over dinner? Allow me to confirm our reacquaintance by offering you my hand, sir.'



'Scavengers,' said Jobert. 'Halt them, Bredieux.'

'Who goes?' Lieutenant Bredieux called.

In the pitch-black night, the gaggle of clattering men hissed themselves to silence.

'France,' came the response from the darkness. 'Laharpe's 75th Ligne.'

Bredieux's flint spark lit his pipe, the glow in his pipe bowl illuminating his face. 'Masséna's 24th Chasseurs. Approach, friend.'

A dark form stepped forward from a group, Jobert estimated, of twenty infantrymen. Far more than the usual ten-man forage parties per fusilier company.

‘Any farms down this road?’ asked an infantryman. Jobert heard desperate aggression in the voice.

‘No, my friend,’ said Bredieux. ‘Keep walking and you will soon arrive at the divisional screen. The fire you see there is the inlying piquet. Beyond the chasseurs are enemy hussars. Depending how hungry you boys are, and how good your German is, they may have a feast waiting?’

Grunts emitted from the dark. The infantry foragers slouched off towards other possibilities.

Descending the road towards the fires in and around Dego, Jobert brooded at the impending thunderstorm. Despite the darkness, the meadows, groves and avenues on the plain north of Dego heaved with movement, shouts and musket shots as similar large groups sought food.

‘Today, sir,’ Bredieux asked Jobert beside him, ‘we saw off those kaiserlik hussars, and their laughing imbecile of an officer. Do you think that hussar officer was the same fellow that Captain Voreille fought last year outside of Savona?’

‘I did not take that much notice of either last year’s man or today’s, Lieutenant, but, yes, they are from the same regiment. Why?’

Jobert’s Bleu snorted into the darkness ahead, alerting Jobert to a long column of horses lining the road. With the characteristic clink of spurs and rattle of scabbards, and the deeper clank of trace chains, Jobert guessed that dismounted horsemen were moving around a stationary column of wagon teams.

‘Who goes?’ called a sentry from the gloom.

‘France,’ said Bredieux. ‘Masséna’s 24th Chasseurs.’

‘Bredieux, you rogue? It is me, Yinot, 5th Company.’

‘Yinot?’ said Bredieux. ‘Surely not? We should shoot the bastard just in case it is him, sir.’

‘Lieutenant Yinot, what are you doing here?’ asked Jobert.

‘Why are you not forward in the screen?’

‘Ah, ... Major Jobert, sir,’ said Yinot. ‘Colonel Spiccard has detached us on task, sir.’

‘What task?’ asked Jobert.

‘My troop is to escort these half-dozen artillery teams to fetch the kaiserlik caissons from the redoubts on the heights and return to our own gun-lines.’

‘How many caissons are you to fetch in?’

‘I am told the Austrians fled leaving twenty-four ammunition caissons and sixteen guns,’ said Yinot. ‘But we have only brought in six caissons so far.’

‘Sh—’ Jobert clamped down on the expletive. ‘Damn it, man, you will be out here all night. I accept the need to gather abandoned guns, but when this storm hits, you will be floundering in the mud in the middle of the night. What do you know of the other companies?’

‘Captain Voreille asked the same, sir. Huin, who delivered the Colonel’s order, reported Geourdai’s 1st Company ought to be returning from screening the Austrian withdrawal north of Montenotte. Neilage’s 4th Company ought to be returning from Savona following their escort of the Montenotte prisoners. 3rd Company is being held as regimental reserve at Rocchetta with the regimental trains. 6th Company has escorted the two thousand kaiserliks we captured today back to Savona.’

‘Oh, give me fucking strength!’ Jobert punched the *shabraque* covering his pistol holsters. ‘Voreille is screening the eastern Spigno Road with only his remaining troop?’

Jobert’s mind reeled at the implications. Deago was a vital defence because it blocked any movement towards the strategic Acqui fortress. From Deago, two roads ran towards Spigno and Acqui, one on either side of the Bormida. Chabenac’s 2nd Company secured the route on the western heights above the Bormida, and Voreille’s 5th Company observed the route in the

rolling woodlands east of the Bormida.

‘Bredieux, take an escort, return to 2nd Company,’ said Jobert. ‘Tell Captain Chabenac of the weakness in Voreille’s screen. Strip a platoon out of 2nd Company and take it across to strengthen 5th Company.’

‘Sir,’ said Yinot, as Bredieux’s escort departed, ‘our escort and these gunners have orders from General Masséna’s headquarters to bring in the captured caissons and guns. But with the rain threatening, the artillery officers are satisfied with simply identifying what ammunition the kaiserliks have left behind and bringing in any loaded caissons to just General Laharpe’s battery tonight. They will sort the rest in the morning.’

‘Why only Laharpe’s guns tonight?’ asked Jobert.

‘The word is, sir, General Masséna is to hold Dego tomorrow and General Laharpe is to march against the Piedmontese at dawn.’

‘What of you?’ asked Jobert. ‘Have your soldiers eaten today?’

‘We had a kettle of bouillon before we marched this morning, sir. Nothing since.’

‘You have already taken kaiserlik caissons from the captured redoubts? Was there any food on their dead? Do the gunners have any ammunition bread? Has Madame Quandalle brought any cantinière supplies forward from Savona?’

‘I asked, sir,’ said Yinot, ‘and the gunners have nothing. As for corpses manning the redoubts, there was nothing there either. The kaiserlik baggage and wounded had been stripped immediately our fusiliers surged over their parapets.’

Jobert, Moench and remaining escorting chasseurs continued along the road as intermittent raindrops splattered on their chests and faces. The men adjusted themselves in their saddles as they pulled their capes tighter around themselves and their exposed musketoons. Their horses flicked their noses taking the reins from their riders’ grip, extending their heads down and

away from the impending deluge.

Ahead, a wavering torch flickered an orange light on the dark mirliton caps of a column of approaching horsemen. 'Who goes?

'France,' called Jobert. 'Masséna's 24th Chasseurs.'

'Laharpe's 22nd Chasseurs and 51st Ligne,' came the reply from a dark figure. 'Major Jobert, is that you, sir?'

'Captain Bessières, it is indeed, sir,' said Jobert.

'My word, is that Jobert?' asked another voice.

'Good evening, Colonel Lannes, sir,'

'There will be no supper with General Laharpe as planned, Jobert,' said Lannes. 'Tonight is an absolute shambles. Both Masséna's and Laharpe's regiments have simply ceased to exist. Including, I am ashamed to say, my own 51st Ligne. Tonight, approximately twenty battalions have dissolved into the darkness, so there are now ten or twelve thousand famished individuals dispersed in pillaging gangs seeking food. I have not seen anything like it.'

'Have I heard correct, sir,' asked Jobert, 'you are to march at dawn to support General Bonaparte's drive against the Piedmontese.'

'Indeed, sir,' said Lannes, 'General Bonaparte is satisfied we have driven a wedge between the Austrians and the Piedmontese. Now, with a thunderstorm upon us, I am to reassemble my three battalions ready to march. We are set for an utter calamity if the Austrians counterattack while we are in this state. I suggest most strongly, sir, you return to your screen.'

The incoming curtain of icy water approached Jobert and his chasseurs across the valley, sweeping branches, rooves and earth with a rattling hiss.



Hours later, Jobert drew a tin mug from his cape pocket and helped himself to the kettle's contents bubbling on Voreille's fire. 'Has Yinot returned?'

'Sir.' Voreille grunted the time-honoured word which was both the morning greeting and the question's answer.

Alpine rain had drifted down as Jobert arrived back at 5th Company's camp. With the change of the midnight piquet, heavy, soaking rain fell in earnest. Now, a chill fog seeped from the saturated mud and thickened the pre-dawn dark.

Too hot for his lips, Jobert allowed the cup to warm his fingers and the steam to warm his face. 'Why are there men sleeping in the mud around the fires?'

Voreille looked up from the coals to the sodden forms lying in the dark mud nearby. 'Lost infantrymen, sir. The rain was so heavy, they were unable to return to their regiments.'

'Their regiments no longer exist,' said Jobert. 'Every hungry one of them wandered off seeking food, love or loot. Now they are all lost. Sergeant Major Koschak?' Koschak looked up from Moench's fire. 'Have those fusiliers by the troop fires roused and set back upon the road to Dego. Or remove their muskets and have them charged with desertion.' Koschak growled with relish.

Receiving a saddled Bleu and a refilled bouillon mug from Tulloc, Jobert, with Koschak and Moench, squelched from the 5th Company's fires into the clammy, dark cloud beyond towards the outlying vedettes.

Birdsong erupted from under the thickets and groves where the fog was less thick. The outbreak of bird twitter caused the awakening of drums. Further south in the mist-blanketed valley, those insistent drums demanded Laharpe's fusiliers and grenadiers assemble and prepare to march to meet the

Piedmontese somewhere twenty kilometres to the south-east.

‘The road is as quiet as a grave, sir,’ said Lieutenant Yinot, commander of the outlying piquet. ‘The kaiserlik hussars changed their piquet an hour ago. We heard one of their lads head off down the road when the drums summoned our boys.’

As the fog-muted light changed gradually from black to blue-grey, sporadic musket fire was heard. Jobert frowned. Due to the fog and the distance, the direction could not be determined.

Koschak pivoted in his saddle. ‘That fire has an odd rhythm, sir. Not the random shot from morning hunters. Neither volley fire, nor the irregular intensity of skirmishers clashing.’

‘Something is not right,’ said Jobert. ‘Yinot, keep a close watch on your hussars. I shall ride your outpost line, cross the Bormida and proceed up to 2nd Company.’

On the slopes above the Bormida River, the sun burnt off the fog. A cold blue day was promised. Yet irritated by the odd pattern of musketry, Jobert glanced at the first rays cresting the shrouded eastern slopes, recognising it would be hours before the fog cleared in the deeper folds around Dego.

Chabenac had been tasked with observing the western route to Spigno. Jobert, Koschak and Moench entered 2nd Company’s camp in an olive grove.

Jobert took in every detail of 2nd Company’s current state of preparedness. Tent flies, empty of soldier’s bedding and saddlery, dried in the early sunshine. Horses stood freshly groomed, with nosebags on and saddled with loose girths. Three local farm hands raked manure. The company farrier inspected hooves. With a nod from the duty sergeant, small groups of horses were led away to be watered from farmyard wells.

Chasseurs, resting in reserve for either the inlying or outlying piquet, smoked pipes around their hazy fires, breakfasted on hotcakes baked in nearby cottages, or crooned as they cleaned their musketoons and sabres.

‘Good morning, sir.’ Chabenac saluted. ‘Would you care for soup?’

Jobert fished in his cape’s deep pocket for his cup. ‘Anything to report?’

‘We remain in contact with the hussars, sir. There has been no untoward movement on the road.’

Jobert observed two local women, with grimy toddlers in tow, passing out small loaves and winter vegetables to the chasseurs. ‘Did any infantry foragers come into your camp last night?’

‘Some sought food, sir, but were turned away,’ said Chabenac. ‘We are well situated here, sir. Last evening, we dined on roast chicken and received a freshly butchered goat for today and tomorrow. Breakfast, Sergeant Major?’

Chabenac passed Koschak a grubby cloth in which four boiled eggs and six onions were nestled.

Jobert and Koschak spun toward a ragged, distant blast of musketry.

‘There it is again, sir.’ Koschak thrust Chabenac’s breakfast into Moench’s chest so he could glare at the blanketed east. ‘Not quite a solid volley, yet hundreds of muskets need to fire to produce such a noise. It is like skirmisher fire, but there is no reply. Look, there!’

A flock of ravens, disturbed from breakfasting on yesterday’s dead, flapped through the top of the fog, indicating the musketry was in the hills east of Dego.

‘Nowhere near 5th Company’s outposts,’ said Jobert. ‘Perhaps the ill-discipline created by empty bellies has caused greater unrest? I would be obliged, Chabenac, if Bredieux might take a patrol and investigate. As it is seven o’clock, I shall inspect your outlying piquet until his return.’

Once amongst Chabenac’s sentries, Jobert observed the Austrian hussars through his telescope. The huddled pairs of

enemy horsemen revealed no clues as to the strange eruptions.

As the clammy valley lay in chill shadow, the unusual bouts of firing continued throughout the morning. As the fog thinned, a single cannon fired. *Why?* thought Jobert. *To clear a barrel, or—*

Bredieux's patrol cantered into the camp. 'Sir! There is a column of Austrians occupying the redoubts north of Deگو.'

Jobert checked his watch. Nine o'clock. 'Why is there no fighting? No firing?'

'The roads are full of our infantry and gunners running for Deگو, sir. There are officers amongst them, sir, but they are not rallying. It is a rout.'

Jobert strode towards Bleu, signalling Koschak and Moench to mount. 'Where have the Austrians come from, Bredieux? Obviously not from Spigno or Acqui.'

'The kaiserliks have come down out of the hills on the Deگو-Montenotte road, sir.'

Jobert froze. All around the camp Chabenac's chasseurs stood in readiness for the expected orders. Chabenac slid a notebook and pencil from an inner tailcoat pocket.

Jobert's eyes flickered as he imagined the enemy's dispositions in his mind. 'Then there is a chance they will come in behind 5th Company's inlying piquet. Chabenac, send a message to Colonel Spiccard. It is now nine o'clock. There is no enemy movement south on the two roads from Spigno. The Austrians have arrived in the fog from the east, from the direction of Montenotte. Masséna's flank has collapsed.'