THE GREAT PLUNDER

VOLUME I – THE BIRTH OF THE SYSTEM

ROBERT CASANOVAS

HISTORICAL NOVEL

Summary

Paris, 1794. The Republic conquers. But it is not only territories that it takes from the vanquished — it is also, and above all, their masterpieces.

As French armies sweep across Flanders, Italy, Rome and Venice, another war is being waged in sacristies and palaces: that of the arts commissioners, armed with inventories and requisition orders, who methodically plunder the greatest collections to fill the Museum of Paris. Van Eyck, Rubens, Raphael, Titian, Veronese — everything most precious that Europe has to offer takes the road to France.

From Abbé Grégoire, the tormented theorist of legal plunder, to the young General Bonaparte, who imposes his law on the Italian princes with the smile of a man who knows exactly what he is worth, *The Great Plunder* traces the birth of an unprecedented system: state theft elevated to cultural policy.

The first volume of a four-part historical saga — epic in scope, grounded in fact, unflinching in its view of men and power.

The Author

Robert Casanovas, who has previously published *The Stolen Room*, *The Testament Was a Forgery* and *Pillage*, is an honorary agrégé professor and member of the Société des Gens de Lettres. A jurist with a passion for the history of art collections, he has devoted many years to studying the appropriation of artworks by states. President of the NGO International Restitutions, he has published numerous academic works on the subject.

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Third revised and corrected edition

By the same author:
The stolen room (historical novel)
The testament was a forgery (historical novel)
Pillage (historical novel)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is a historical fiction based on genuine research.

All the works of art mentioned were indeed requisitioned during the French conquests between 1794 and 1813.

Most of the characters existed.

The sequence of events traces authentic and verified facts.

For the purposes of the narrative, characters, scenes and dialogues may have been imagined.

The original version of this novel, written in French, has been translated into several foreign languages. Translated versions may contain linguistic errors, mistranslations or approximations.

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THE GREAT PLUNDER

Historical novel in 4 volumes

VOLUME 1 — THE BIRTH OF THE SYSTEM

1794–1798 – Flanders and Italy – Preparation of the Egyptian Campaign

PROLOGUE

Paris, June 1794

The room of the Committee of Public Instruction smelled of dust and ink. It was late. The candles had burned down three-quarters of the way. Outside, Paris was sleeping, or pretending to.

Abbé Grégoire read over the document before him one last time. A report to the Committee of Public Safety on the fate of the artistic treasures of the territories newly conquered by the armies of the Republic. He had drafted it over three weeks, revised it ten times.

The Austrian Netherlands had just fallen. Belgium, Flanders — everything Austria had held for a century and a half now belonged to France. And in those territories, in their cathedrals, their palaces, their academies, lay a concentration of works of art unequalled in Europe.

The question Grégoire had taken weeks to formulate was simple: what was to be done with them?

He had weighed every argument. War was expensive, and the Republic needed resources. But works of art were not ordinary resources. They could not be sold without scandal. They were transferred. Centralised. Offered to the people in the form of a museum, a living lesson, proof that civilisation had changed sides.

Paris deserved to be the capital of the arts. It already was, by ambition. It could become so in deed.

Grégoire picked up his pen and signed the report.

It was only a document. One recommendation among the hundreds the Committee received every week. It could remain unacted upon, buried under other urgencies, other wars, other crises. The Republic had other concerns than Flemish paintings.

But Grégoire knew that would not be the case. He knew David. He knew the appetite of the commission. He knew the logic of conquest. An army that advances always leaves something behind and takes something in exchange.

He blew out the last candle and left the room.

Outside, the night was warm. The streets of Paris still hummed with rumours. A city that never quite slept, especially these past five years. Somewhere to the north, beyond the frontiers, the armies of the Republic were bivouacking in the Flemish plains. They had won.

Now it had to be decided what to do with that victory.

CHAPTER I: THE FLEMISH REQUISITIONS (1794)

I — The Commission of Plunder

Paris, August 1794

Around a table cluttered with maps and lists sat seven commissioners. Abbé Grégoire presided. He was a member of the Convention, a promoter of French as the language of the Republic, and, only recently, author of the report that had given rise to this commission. To his right, Lebrun, an art dealer, whose inventories were considered authoritative on the Flemish collections. Facing him, David, painter and member of the Committee of General Security, who needed no one to explain to him why Paris deserved the finest things in Europe. Hassenfratz, chemist and engineer, the man who would calculate how to transport them. Faujas de Saint-Fond, geologist, specialist in terrain and roads. Thouin, botanist of the Jardin des Plantes, well versed in field collection and packing operations. Levesque, Hellenist, in charge of cataloguing the manuscripts and antique pieces.

Grégoire struck the table to call for attention.

— Citizens, we must today establish the principles that will guide our artistic requisitions in Belgium. The armies of the Republic have conquered these territories. It falls to us to decide what we shall do with their cultural wealth.

Lebrun drew a handwritten list from his satchel.

— I have prepared a preliminary inventory of the principal works in the Austrian Netherlands. Flanders possesses extraordinary treasures. In Ghent stands the altarpiece of the *Mystic Lamb* by the brothers Hubert and Jan Van Eyck, completed in 1432. It is one of the foundational works of Flemish painting. Nothing comparable exists in Paris.

He turned a page.

— In Antwerp, in the Cathedral of Our Lady, hangs Rubens's *Descent from the Cross*, painted between 1611 and 1614, a triptych four metres twenty tall by three metres ten wide. At the Church of Saint Walburga in the same city, *The Raising of the Cross*, an even more imposing triptych, four metres sixty by three metres forty, which Rubens painted between 1610 and 1611. Not to mention the many paintings preserved in the churches of Saint James, Saint Paul, Saint Andrew.

David interrupted him.

— Why are you focusing on religious works? There must also be private collections. Palaces. Academies.

— Certainly, Lebrun replied. The Austrian governor's palace in Brussels contains Van Dycks, Teniers, Jordaens. The Academy in Ghent holds a collection of Flemish primitives. But the greatest works, the most spectacular, those that will have the greatest impact at the Museum, are those in the churches. The altarpieces. The great triptychs. Works commissioned for solemn occasions.

Grégoire intervened.

— There is a theological and political problem we must consider. These works are not simple paintings. They are objects of worship before which the faithful have prayed for generations. To tear them from the churches — is that not to commit sacrilege?

— Sacrilege? exclaimed David. It is precisely the opposite. These works are locked in dark naves where a handful of the devout see them without seeing them. By bringing them to Paris, we liberate them. The churches will commission new works. It will be progress.

— The churches will commission new works, Grégoire repeated in a calm voice. That is what we tell ourselves to make it bearable.

David did not reply to that. He rose and went to unfold the map of Flanders.

Lebrun resumed.

— Three criteria. Artistic merit first — masterpieces, the summits. Then condition. And finally, feasibility of transport.

— And size? asked Hassenfratz. Some works are immense. How are we to transport them? The Flemish roads have been torn up by the passage of armies. Bridges are sometimes destroyed. Bringing a Rubens triptych four metres high from Antwerp to Paris is a logistical feat. And it will be very expensive...

— Money is not lacking, retorted Grégoire. The Convention has just voted a budget of two hundred thousand livres for "the enrichment of the National Museum." That is considerable. We have the means for our ambitions. As for size, we shall adapt.

— Let us establish a plan of action. We form three teams. The first goes to Ghent and requisitions the Van Eyck altarpiece along with the other Flemish primitives of the region. The second goes to Antwerp and handles the Rubenses and Van Dycks. The third remains in Brussels to inventory the collections of the ducal palace and the academic institutions.

— Who will lead these teams? asked Levesque.

— You, Lebrun — you have the necessary expertise to evaluate the works. You will lead the Antwerp team, the most important. Faujas and Thouin, you go to Ghent. Hassenfratz stays in Brussels to manage the administrative aspects.

— And you? asked Grégoire.

— I come with you to Ghent. I want to see the Van Eyck with my own eyes. And besides, my presence will lend weight to the operation. I am a member of the Committee of General Security. The local authorities will be unable to deny us anything.

Grégoire sighed.

— Very well. When do we leave?

— In three days. Time to prepare the necessary equipment and obtain the military safe-conducts. The roads are not safe. We will need an armed escort.

Toward the end of the afternoon, as the heat became unbearable, Grégoire adjourned the session.

— Gentlemen, we know what we must do. May God forgive us if we make a mistake.

David gave a derisive laugh.

— God? You are still a priest at heart, Grégoire, despite everything. We have no need of divine pardon. We are accomplishing a republican work, a work of progress. History will judge us, not God.

— Perhaps, murmured Grégoire. But I hope History will be merciful.

They dispersed. Each went home to prepare for departure.

Ghent, three days later.

The Cathedral of Saint Bavo rose through the morning mist, massive and austere. Built of grey stone, its Gothic spires pierced the low sky like lances. It was here, in the Vijd Chapel, that the altarpiece of the *Mystic Lamb* was kept — the masterpiece of the brothers Hubert and Jan Van Eyck.

Grégoire, David, Faujas and Thouin descended from their coach before the main portal. Behind them, three carts carried the necessary materials: crates, straw, ropes, tools. An escort of twenty National Guard soldiers kept watch around the perimeter, bayonets fixed.

Canon De Vos was waiting for them on the steps. Bent with age, his face deeply lined, he still wore his black cassock despite the revolutionary decrees prohibiting clerical dress. His eyes were red as though he had been weeping.

— Gentlemen, I implore you. Do not do this. This altarpiece has been here for more than three centuries. It is part of our church. Our city. Our soul.

David stepped forward, impatient.

— Canon, we have no time to waste in discussion. We have authorization from the Committee of Public Safety and from the Representative on Mission, Joubert. The altarpiece will be transferred to Paris. This is an irrevocable decision.

— You call this culture? This is looting! Plain theft!

David made a sign to the soldiers.

— Arrest him! He is obstructing the execution of a republican mission.

Two soldiers stepped forward and seized the canon by the arms. De Vos struggled feebly.

— Take him away, David ordered. Lock him up until we have finished our work.

The soldiers dragged the old priest away, still hurling curses. His voice echoed across the empty square, then fell silent when he was pushed into a neighbouring house.

Grégoire was ashen.

— Was that necessary, David? He is an old man. He could not have prevented us from taking the altarpiece.

— He was causing trouble. He could have roused the population. Better safe than sorry.

They entered the cathedral. The interior was dark and cool. Slender columns supported vertiginous vaults. The smell of incense and damp stone floated in the air. Their footsteps echoed on the flagstones.

The Vijd Chapel lay at the far end of the ambulatory, on the left. It was a relatively small space, closed by a wrought-iron grille. And there, occupying the entire back wall, stood the altarpiece.

David stopped, struck.

Even he, accustomed to works of art, was impressed. The altarpiece was immense. Five metres twenty wide by three metres seventy-five tall when fully opened. Twenty-four panels painted with extraordinary minuteness. Colours of an incredible vividness despite the passing years.

Thouin approached, examined the structure.

He touched the wood delicately.

— The panels are Baltic oak. Very dense. Very stable. But also very heavy. The three central panels of the upper register that we are taking — the Virgin in Majesty, the Deity Enthroned, Saint John the Baptist — already weigh several hundred kilos. The movable wings will remain in Ghent. Transporting all of them at once would be madness.

Faujas was taking notes.

— The exact dimensions? I need precise measurements to design the crates.

— The three central figures of the upper register are on panels of approximately one metre forty by fifty centimetres each. The great panel of the *Adoration of the Lamb* is too vast and too fragile for this journey. The commission judged that the three divine figures would suffice to represent the genius of Van Eyck.

While they talked, David contemplated the paintings.

The central panel depicted a vast meadow where different groups gathered: martyrs, confessors, wise virgins, all converging on an altar where stood the *Mystic Lamb*, symbol of the sacrificed Christ. The blood of the Lamb flowed into a chalice. In the foreground, a fountain of life from which crystal water sprang. In the background, an ideal city with innumerable towers and steeples: the celestial Jerusalem.

And the colours! Deep reds, luminous blues, intense greens, brilliant golds. Van Eyck had perfected the technique of oil painting, allowing accumulated veils of colour to create a depth

and luminosity without equal. Even in the semi-darkness of the chapel, the colours seemed to glow from within.

— It is... extraordinary, David murmured despite himself. I understand why it is called the masterpiece of Flemish masterpieces.

— Imagine the effect it will have at the Museum, said Grégoire. Visitors will be dazzled. Never has Paris possessed a Flemish primitive of this quality.

— Then we must have it absolutely. Thouin, how long will you need to remove the central panels and pack them?

The botanist considered, examining the fastenings, the hinges, the structure of the frame.

— If we work with care, with a reinforced team... two days. Perhaps three. The panels must be detached without damaging the wings that remain. Individual crates must be built. This is precision work. If we hurry, we risk damaging the paintings.

— Three days is too long. The Ghent population could rise. We must move quickly.

— I cannot go faster without taking unacceptable risks, Thouin replied firmly. The wood is fragile. The hinges are old. Rough handling and everything could break.

David was about to protest when Grégoire interrupted him.

— Thouin is right. We are not vandals. Let us take the necessary time. I will increase the military escort if need be. But these panels must arrive intact in Paris. Otherwise the entire operation will be a failure.

— Very well, David conceded grudgingly. Three days. But not one more. And in the meantime, Lebrun will requisition the Rubenses in Antwerp. We must coordinate our operations so that everything leaves at once for Paris.

They left the cathedral to organise the work. Thouin summoned the workmen and began explaining how to proceed. Scaffolding

was set up in the chapel. The necessary tools were brought in: screwdrivers, pliers, fine saws, cloth-padded hammers.

A crowd had begun to gather on the steps. The Ghent people had learned what was happening. They came to watch, to protest. Some wept openly. Others hurled insults at the French soldiers.

— Thieves! Barbarians! Give back our altarpiece!

David ordered the soldiers to form a cordon to prevent anyone from entering the cathedral. Grégoire did not turn toward the house where De Vos had been locked up. The cries of the crowd drowned out everything else.

II — The Wrenching: Ghent and Antwerp

That evening, Thouin and his team erected the scaffolding in the Vijd Chapel. Work would begin at dawn. Three days in total.

They worked with a slowness that exasperated David but was necessary. On the first day, they confined themselves to examining the structure, to understanding how its various elements articulated. The altarpiece was complex. The panels were integral to a massive oak frame, fixed to the masonry by wrought-iron fittings from the fifteenth century. Detaching them without touching the movable wings that would remain in place required the greatest precision. The hinges connecting the wings to the frame were fragile, oxidised in places. Excessive force and the whole assemblage might topple.

On the second day, they began the removal. Thouin had established a precise sequence: the load-bearing frame would be dismantled to free the three central panels of the upper register. Each operation was meticulously prepared. Before unscrewing a fitting, provisional supports were installed. Thick cloths were laid everywhere to absorb any shock. A team of six men stood ready to catch each panel the moment it was freed.

The first panel was detached around noon. The operation took two hours. When it was finally free, lifted flat by four workmen, a sigh of relief passed through the team.

Grégoire examined the panel of the Deity Enthroned, now laid on the padded table. The face looked up at the chapel ceiling. That gaze had been vertical, directed down at the faithful. Now it looked at the scaffolding boards.

On the third day, an incident nearly turned to disaster. As they were completing the final packing of the panel of Saint John the Baptist — the last of the three to be crated for transport — the strap holding it horizontally gave way. It tilted. The workmen supporting it were taken by surprise. The heavy oak panel slipped from their hands.

It fell sixty centimetres before they managed to catch it. But those sixty centimetres were enough for the lower right corner to strike the edge of the scaffold. A sinister cracking sound was heard.

Thouin rushed over. A crack had appeared in the wood, some fifteen centimetres long, running diagonally from the damaged corner. Fortunately, the painted layer was not affected. The crack was on the back. But the wood itself had been weakened.

— Can it be repaired? asked David, suddenly alarmed.

— Yes. But it will require restoration. The crack will be consolidated with strong glue and wooden pegs, then sanded, stained, varnished. The work will take several weeks.

— Several weeks? But we must exhibit this altarpiece quickly! The Committee of Public Safety wants an inauguration ceremony!

— Then they will wait. I will not deliver a damaged work.

David clenched his fists, furious. But exhibiting a cracked panel would have been disastrous for the Museum's reputation.

Thouin stayed alone in the chapel after the others had gone. The torches were burning down in their iron sconces. He sat on the edge of the scaffold, the panel of Saint John the Baptist laid

before him on the padded table, the crack still visible despite the first dabs of glue.

He had told David that the operation would take several weeks. That was true. He had told him he would not deliver a damaged work. That was true too. But what he had told no one was that the strap had given way because he himself had tied it too quickly, an hour earlier, pressed by the hour and by the fatigue of a third sleepless night.

He ran his finger along the crack. Some fifteen centimetres. He knew its exact price: weeks of restoration in Paris, a man like Joris bent over this wood for six weeks, a hand that was not his own repairing a fault that was.

All his life he had measured, calculated, foreseen. That was what distinguished him from David: he did not err on things that could be measured. And now he had erred over a knot.

He thought of telling Grégoire the truth the next day, at the emergency meeting. He did not. He said the strap had given way, which was true, without saying who had tied it. An omission, not a lie. He repeated this to himself several times that night, without the formula ever ceasing to ring true.

He blew out the last torch and went out into the darkness of the cathedral.

Outside, the Ghent people quickly learned what had happened. The rumour spread that the altarpiece had been damaged. Some spoke of broken panels, of destroyed paintings. Anger rose a notch.

That evening, stones were thrown against the cathedral windows. The soldiers had to charge to disperse the crowd. Three Ghent citizens were arrested. Tension was at its peak.

Grégoire called an emergency meeting.

— We must accelerate. If we stay here too long, there will be deaths. The population is on the verge of riot.

— The panel of Saint John the Baptist still needs to be definitively consolidated and packed, said Thouin. I can finish tonight if we work without pause. But it will be risky. Fatigue increases the risk of error.

— We have no choice, David decided. Let us finish tonight. Tomorrow morning, we load everything onto the carts and leave. The essential thing is to quit Ghent before the situation deteriorates entirely.

They worked through the night. Torches were installed in the chapel to light the worksite. The workmen took turns in teams. Around four in the morning, the panel of Saint John the Baptist was finally packed in its crate. Thouin examined it at length by torchlight before closing the lid.

At dawn, the three panels of the upper register were ready in their individual crates. In the Vijd Chapel, the altarpiece remained in place, amputated of the heart of its upper register.

The convoy formed before the cathedral. At its head, twenty cavalrymen of the National Guard. Then the two carts transporting the panels. Next, another cart with materials and workmen. Finally, a rear guard of fifteen foot soldiers.

The Ghent population had gathered despite the early hour. Several hundred people lined the streets.

When the convoy began to move, a woman began to weep. Then another. Then dozens. Soon the entire crowd was weeping. The men removed their hats. The women crossed themselves. Some knelt on the cobblestones.

The convoy left Ghent. The cathedral bells did not ring. They would remain silent for eight days, as a sign of silent protest.

On the facades of several houses, chalk inscriptions appeared in the following days: "Republican France loots like monarchical Austria."

These inscriptions were quickly effaced by the occupying authorities.

Lebrun had not waited. While Grégoire and Thouin worked in the Vijd Chapel, he was conducting his own operation in Antwerp, a hundred kilometres to the north. The port city, second largest in the Austrian Netherlands, possessed even more numerous artistic treasures. Rubens had lived and worked there for decades. His works adorned virtually every important church.

Lebrun had arrived in Antwerp on the 12th of August, while Thouin was still at work in the Vijd Chapel. He had spent his life buying and selling paintings. He knew the techniques, the schools, the artists. He could authenticate a work at a glance, estimate its value, detect a restoration or a forgery.

These competencies made him the ideal man for selecting the works to be requisitioned. But they also made him conscious of what was being done. Unlike David, who saw in these requisitions a political and ideological act, Lebrun knew that one was in the process of dismembering one of the richest collections in Europe. That Antwerp was being emptied of its artistic heritage.

The first target was the Cathedral of Our Lady, which housed Rubens's *Descent from the Cross*. Lebrun simultaneously dispatched a team to the Church of Saint Walburga to take *The Raising of the Cross*, the other masterpiece Paris intended to appropriate.

Lebrun went to the cathedral on the morning of the 13th of August, accompanied by his team and a military escort of fifteen soldiers. The dean of the chapter, Monseigneur Van der Noot, was waiting for them on the steps, his face stern, his gaze steely.

— Monsieur Lebrun, I must officially protest against this operation. These paintings belong to the cathedral. They were commissioned by our predecessors. Paid for with the money of the Antwerp faithful. You have no right to take them.

Lebrun drew a document from his pocket.

— Monseigneur, I have here an order from the Representative on Mission, Joubert, bearing the seal of the Committee of Public

Safety. It authorises me to requisition from the churches of the annexed territories such works of art as are judged necessary for the enrichment of the National Museum. This order is legal and enforceable.

— And if I refuse?

— Then my soldiers will break down the door. And you will be arrested. I would prefer to avoid that, for your dignity as much as for mine.

Van der Noot held his gaze. Then he sighed and drew a large key from his cassock.

— Very well. But know that I submit under constraint. And that this violence will not go without consequence. You are sowing hatred, Monsieur Lebrun. And one day you will reap the fruits of it.

They entered the cathedral. The interior was magnificent. High white columns supported elegant vaults. Light filtered through the stained glass, creating plays of colour on the marble floor.

The two great Rubens triptychs adorned the most prestigious positions. The *Descent from the Cross* occupied the entire north transept: a monumental triptych. The central panel represented the moment when Christ's body was lowered from the cross. The composition was of a startling audacity: the body slid diagonally, held by a white shroud forming an elegant curve. Around it, the figures — Mary Magdalene, John, the Virgin Mary, Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea — were arranged in a perfect equilibrium between movement and stability.

Lebrun approached, examined the painted surface. Rubens's technique was unique. Translucent layers laid one upon another created exceptional depth. The flesh had an almost living luminosity. The draperies fell with a natural fluidity. And the details — the tears on Mary Magdalene's face, the veins on Nicodemus's hands, the texture of the shroud — were rendered with infinite precision.

— This is an absolute masterpiece, murmured the restorer, the commission's restoration expert. One of the summits of Baroque painting.

— The dimensions? asked Lebrun.

— The central panel measures four metres twenty by three metres ten. The lateral wings, approximately two metres by one metre fifty each. The whole must weigh over five hundred kilos.

— How are we to transport it?

— It must be disassembled. The wings separated from the central panel. Perhaps even cut into sections if the chassis allows it. Then individual crates built.

Monseigneur Van der Noot, who had listened to this technical exchange, intervened in a voice heavy with anger.

— You speak of cutting this work? Of carving it up like an ordinary piece of wood? This is barbarism!

— We will cut only if absolutely necessary. And if we do, it will be with every precaution. The sections will be reassembled in Paris. The painting will be restored to its integrity.

— Restored! You call that restoring? A work cut apart, transported hundreds of kilometres, reassembled by unknown hands? It will never be the same again!

— Perhaps. But at least it will survive. It will be seen by thousands of people.

— I will not listen to these hypocritical justifications! cut in Van der Noot. You are stealing, full stop. Call it what you will — requisition, transfer, enrichment — it is theft.

Lebrun kept silent. He had no choice. Refusing this mission meant the end of his career. Perhaps even prison. The Republic did not tolerate disobedience. He concentrated therefore on the technical aspects and examined the second Rubens to be requisitioned.

The Raising of the Cross, which Rubens had painted for the Church of Saint Walburga, was even more imposing: four metres sixty by three metres forty.

Lebrun spent the following three days organising the operation. He brought in carpenters to build scaffolding, joiners to make custom crates, weavers to supply the protective cloths.

His restorers examined each painting minutely. They noted the damaged areas: cracks, lifting of the painted layer, failing old restorations. All this would need to be treated before or after transport.

The *Descent from the Cross* was dismantled first. It was decided to cut it into three sections — upper, central, lower — the cuts made along the natural joints of the chassis to minimize damage.

The three sections were packed, then the lateral wings. Over the following days, *The Raising of the Cross* was treated according to the same procedure. On the 26th of August, the two Antwerp Rubenses were ready to go. Nine crates in total. More than a ton of paintings, wood, canvas, frames.

The convoy left Antwerp in the early morning. A crowd had gathered. There were tears, prayers — as in Ghent. But also cries of hatred, threats, which Ghent had not seen.

III — Van Reyn and the Coudenberg Palace

Brussels, 15 August 1794

At the hour when Grégoire and Thouin were completing the first day in the Vijd Chapel, Hassenfratz's carriage entered Brussels through the Porte de Hal.

Hassenfratz had not slept since Valenciennes. He sat upright on the seat, his back not touching the leather, elbows on knees, and for five hours he had held the *Voyage pittoresque de la Flandre et du Brabant* by Jean-Baptiste Descamps, annotated in pencil in the margins until there was no space left to write. The list of ducal collections. The names of painters noted in each building. The

dimensions of the major pieces, as they could be estimated from Descamps's descriptions, which were not always precise, which sometimes wrote "considerable painting" where figures were needed.

Levesque slept at his left, head inclined on his shoulder, mouth ajar, an empty register slipping slowly from his hands. Hassenfratz did not have that faculty — of surrendering, of entrusting his body to the rocking of the coach as if someone else were attending to the rest.

Brussels was not Ghent.

Ghent had the whole character of water cities: its black canals, its facades leaning toward their reflections, the smell of wet stone that permeated even the most remote streets of the centre. Brussels was a capital, or had been a capital, which was perhaps worse: a city accustomed to dominion, to order, to ceremonies, and which carried all of that in its architecture like an inherited dignity of which it no longer quite knew what to make. The houses in the upper town, around the palace, had that discreet rectitude characteristic of Imperial construction: neither ostentation nor modesty, a geometry that signified that things were in their place and had no need to justify being there.

The carriage skirted the Place de la Monnaie, crossed the lower town through a narrow street that smelled of beer and sawdust, then climbed toward the Coudenberg quarter. The escort of twelve soldiers followed on foot, the same men since Paris, accustomed to the mission's instructions, who had learned not to ask questions.

Commissioner Pottier awaited them in the inner courtyard of the Council of Brabant. Thick-browed, he was dressed with the functional correctness of provincial bureaucrats who had passed through several regimes without attaching themselves to any. He had served Austria. He would serve the Republic. He would do his work in both cases with the same efficiency.

Hassenfratz recognised this type of man at once: he had met them in Paris, in the laboratories of the École des Mines, in the committees of the Convention — people with no particular passion for principles, but of absolute reliability on procedures.

The introductions were brief. Pottier had prepared a dossier: maps of the relevant buildings, a preliminary list of the collections, the names of the guards and managers in post, the state of military requisitions affecting each building. He set it all on a window ledge and began speaking before Hassenfratz had even finished removing his gloves.

— The situation is calm. The French garrison has controlled the main quarters for three weeks. There were disturbances at the start. Some brawls near the grain market, an attempted arson of a military depot in the lower town. Now the population has accepted things.

— The collections of the Coudenberg Palace? asked Hassenfratz.

— Catalogued over the past fortnight. In accordance with the instructions of the Committee of Public Instruction. You will find the preliminary inventories in this dossier. They are incomplete. My staff lacks the training to distinguish an original from a copy or to assess states of conservation. But for locations, they are reliable.

— The acting curator?

Pottier hesitated before replying — not from embarrassment, but with the caution of a man who chooses his words because he knows they will have consequences.

— Monsieur Van Reyn. Appointed under the Austrian government, twenty-two years ago. I have kept him in his post. He knows every painting, every room, every corner of the palace. For your mission, he is irreplaceable.

— And he cooperates?

— Within the limits of what can reasonably be expected of a man in his position. He does his work. He documents.

— He documents?

— Everything. With a persistence worth noting. Every painting you take, he will keep a parallel register alongside yours. Dates, dimensions, descriptions, condition at the time of requisition. He keeps copies. He sends some to correspondents whose names he has not communicated to me.

Hassenfratz closed his notebook.

— That creates no legal problem. The Republic does not forbid him to keep records.

— No. But I preferred you to know before entering the gallery.

Levesque, who had woken at the moment they passed under the arch of the courtyard and had listened to this exchange in silence, his hands clasped around the empty register he now held against his chest, said:

— A man who documents what is taken from him. It is a form of resistance that gives us no purchase.

— That is what he understood, said Pottier.

They went up to the palace that same afternoon. Van Reyn was waiting for them in the great gallery.

He was short, of a thinness that his dark woollen clothes made more visible. A long-standing thinness, constitutional, not that imposed by hardship. His steel spectacles were set at the centre of his face with the precision of a measuring instrument. He held under his arm a register bound in black canvas, thick, which his hands did not release. Those hands were remarkable: long, perfectly still, with the quality of absolute calm possessed by men who have spent their lives handling fragile objects and have learned that trembling is a form of rudeness toward whatever one holds.

He watched Hassenfratz and Lebrun approach without changing his expression. When Pottier finished the introductions, he said:

— I am ready.

The gallery stretched the full length of the north wing of the palace — perhaps thirty-five metres, perhaps forty. The high windows gave onto an inner courtyard where two soldiers stood guard for no visible reason, out of habit. Light fell on the waxed oak parquet in rectangles that did not reach the walls. The paintings were hung in two rows, some of them for decades to judge by the slight colour variations in the wall paper — darker rectangles where the frames had been for generations, protecting the surface from dust.

Van Reyn did not wait to be asked to begin. He advanced toward the first painting of the upper row, a *Virgin and Child*, medium format, oil on wood, and began to dictate in a low voice, without turning around, as if he had rehearsed this scene for several days in his mind and executing it now required no further effort.

In the corner of the gallery, a woman sat at a small table, a quill in hand. No one had introduced her. Her quill ran across the paper with the speed and precision of people who have devoted their entire existence to a single gesture. She looked at neither the paintings nor the commissioners. She wrote what was dictated to her.

— Page seven of my inventory, said Van Reyn. Workshop of Rubens, circa 1618 to 1622. Provenance Antwerp, arrived here under Archduke Albert. Oak, two boards assembled with tongue and groove. Surface cracks in the lower left corner. General condition satisfactory.

Lebrun had moved closer. He tilted his head to one side, a habitual gesture — the oblique angle revealed what frontal vision hid from him.

— Workshop certainly. But Rubens's own hand in the Virgin. Look at the light on the veil. That way of laying the white in two separate touches to suggest the transparency of the fabric — that is him, not a pupil.

— You are taking this? Van Reyn asked Hassenfratz.

— Yes.

— I ask for a receipt. Dated. With the description you have just heard, the names of the two commissioners present, and the exact hour of requisition.

— You will have it.

— I will keep one copy here. Another will go this evening in an envelope to a confidential addressee. A third copy will be given to Monsieur Pottier for the municipal archives.

Hassenfratz looked at him a moment.

— You had all of this prepared before we even arrived?

— I had the forms prepared. I did not have the names or the dates. Now I do.

They worked for four hours without interruption. Van Reyn moved alongside them with the regularity of a clock: first painting, description, condition, dimensions, then the next, then the next. Lebrun examined, authenticated, selected or set aside. Hassenfratz measured and noted in his own register. The soldiers carried the selected pieces to the courtyard, where the packers crated them in the crates brought from Paris.

Van Reyn never protested. He never said that any particular painting was too precious to leave, nor that another had a particular significance that should protect it from requisition. He described. He dictated, having verified each term, his eyes fixed on the quill of the secretary who transcribed his corrections without showing impatience. When Hassenfratz selected a piece, Van Reyn recorded it. When Hassenfratz hesitated, Van Reyn waited without a word.

Halfway through the gallery, before a large winter landscape — Flemish school, anonymous, late seventeenth century, good quality but no identifiable signature — Hassenfratz paused. The way the cold light fell on the snow between the trees held him longer than the work's market value warranted. He finally set it aside.

— You have nothing to say? he asked Van Reyn, without taking his eyes off the painting.

— About which?

— About what we are doing. In general.

— About the painting: you were right to set it aside. It is a good painting, not a great one. About the principle of what you are doing: I said everything in the report I submitted to the Committee of Public Instruction ten days ago. Through official channels. I express myself through official channels.

Lebrun, who had been listening to this exchange from the next painting, intervened without turning round.

— Do you truly believe the documents will be enough?

— No. But I can do no more.

They continued. The upper row, then the lower. Twenty-three pieces selected in the main gallery before the light began to fall in the high windows and Hassenfratz decided to stop for the day.

The second day, they worked in the lateral rooms and the reserves. Twenty-three more pieces, smaller formats, varied provenances that Van Reyn dictated with the same regularity.

In the private apartments, furniture arranged for everyday use — a chair drawn up to a desk, ready to receive someone; an empty carafe on a silver tray that no one had thought to take away; books open to pages their reader had not finished. War did this: it suspended gestures mid-course.

In the study, three paintings were hung on hooks that appeared more recent than the walls, installed or reinstalled in haste, perhaps at the very moment of flight, as if someone had wished to fix in memory the location of these particular works before leaving. Two northern landscapes, Flemish school of the seventeenth century, accomplished in execution but without singular distinction. And between them, a painting that made Lebrun check his step from the doorway.

He did not enter immediately. He stood in the door frame, his right hand flat on the jamb, and looked.

It was a canvas of nearly square format, perhaps eighty-five centimetres by ninety — difficult to estimate without approaching. Four figures in half-length, crowded in the frame: three dark-robed elders and, at the centre, a young figure almost androgynous, draped in white. At the far left, a man in profile held his hand raised near his face, as if held back by a thought. At the right, another held a quill. A large open book occupied the lower portion of the composition. Light entered from the left, dense, with that particular quality of Flemish interiors where light seems less to fall than to accumulate. It struck chiefly the central figure, making the white of its garments a fixed point around which the other three seemed to orbit. The faces were worn — not by age alone, but by an attention so profound it had used the features as water uses stone.

Van Reyn was behind them in the corridor.

— Page forty-two of my inventory. *The Four Evangelists*, Jordaens, circa 1625–1630. A sober composition of four half-length figures around an open Gospel book. Acquired for the French royal collection at the Vaudreuil sale in 1784. Oil on canvas. Condition satisfactory.

— It has never been restored? asked Lebrun.

— Never, to my knowledge. It has been in this state since I began working here. The Austrians did not touch their collections. They maintained them, but with the restraint of people who know what they hold.

Lebrun entered. He approached the painting until his face was forty centimetres from the surface — close enough that Hassenfratz saw the reflection of the canvas in the expert's spectacles. He remained thus for a long moment without speaking, his breathing slow and regular.

— Look at this hand. The figure on the left — look how he has raised his fingers near his face. Not to point. Not to explain. It is the gesture of someone who stops in the middle of a thought, who holds it back before letting it go. Jordaens spent time on this hand. There are pentimenti here, I sense them beneath the varnish. He changed the position of the fingers, perhaps twice. The first version was too demonstrative. Too didactic. Here, he found the right gesture: a man who no longer shows, who is still searching.

— We are taking it, said Hassenfratz.

— I know.

— Reinforced packing. Transport chassis, no rolling.

— Obviously.

Van Reyn dictated to his secretary with the same regularity as in the gallery; the painting's beauty, or his own sorrow at seeing it leave, had no purchase on the rhythm of his voice.

It was Lebrun who, turning to leave, asked the question.

— You will say nothing? Not one word about what you feel?

Van Reyn looked at him over his spectacles.

— I was not appointed curator to feel. I was appointed to preserve. Since I can no longer preserve, I document. That is what will remain when you have gone.

That evening, Hassenfratz reread the day's lists in his requisitioned room. Twenty-three pieces selected in the main gallery. Eight in the private apartments. Two in the archive room — two small Teniers, village scenes of miniaturist precision, that Lebrun had spotted behind a displaced wardrobe. Thirty-three pieces in all.

He closed his register. Tomorrow, they would settle the final preparations. The day after, departure for Mechelen.

Lebrun had spent part of the night on the packing of a medium-format Van Dyck, *The Deposition*, a single panel painted circa

1636–1640 for the Recollect friars of Antwerp, whose painted layer presented a troubling fragility that had held his attention longer than expected.

He worked with his packers in the palace courtyard from dawn, under a white sky promising heat. Hassenfratz watched from a first-floor window, then came down to settle with Pottier the administrative questions still unresolved. The requisition orders for the additional carts. The passes. The list of soldiers available for the escort. Ten men would be lost in Brussels, replaced by twelve soldiers from the local garrison that Pottier had organised.

— Mechelen, said Pottier, folding the documents. Is this for a single painting?

— A Van Dyck. In what remains of the Recollect church, destroyed last autumn, but the painting was secured in the Cathedral of Saint Rumbold by the chapter.

— Are you certain it is still there?

— The dean replied to our letter. He confirmed it.

Pottier expressed no opinion on that. Then, after a moment:

— There were incidents in Mechelen at the time the city was taken. Soldiers used the Recollect church as an ammunition depot. A fire broke out. The church burned in part. The chapter of Saint Rumbold holds the French responsible for the destruction.

— I know.

— I am informing you that the reception in Mechelen might be less neutral than here.

— It has never been neutral anywhere, said Hassenfratz.

Van Reyn submitted his documents late in the morning. Sixty-eight pages written in a close, regular hand, without crossing-out or visible corrections, as if he had composed each sentence before setting it on paper. For each piece requisitioned: complete description, dimensions, support, technique, condition at the

time of requisition, known provenance, exact date and hour of removal, names of commissioners present. A heading simply titled *Observations* contained, where relevant, remarks on the specific risks linked to transport or on prior restorations likely to compromise the work under certain climatic conditions.

— This document is for you, he said, setting the sheaf before Pottier. Not for me — I have my copies. It is so that Paris knows what it receives and in what condition. If a piece arrives damaged, it will be possible to establish where and when the damage occurred.

Hassenfratz leafed through the pages without speaking. The handwriting was of absolute clarity. He thought of the pentimenti of Jordaens beneath the varnish. Van Reyn did not retrace his steps. He knew what he wanted to say before he wrote it.

— You have had everything taken, but everything is written down.

He left without waiting for an answer. His footsteps on the corridor parquet diminished regularly, then disappeared.

IV — Mechelen: The Christ on the Cross

The road from Brussels to Mechelen was straight and bad. The armies that had used it since June had carved deep ruts that the first summer storms had transformed into hardened-edged channels. The laden carts moved forward; every jolt was followed by Lebrun cocking his ear toward the crates like a man listening to a patient's breathing.

Hassenfratz looked out at the landscape through the carriage window. The Brabant in August had that particular quality of cultivated plains at the height of the season. Harvested fields, dry golden stubble in the late-afternoon light, on one side — and on the other, parcels still standing, heavy with a harvest not yet

brought in, which no one seemed in any hurry to bring in. War passed through. It altered priorities.

From time to time they crossed groups of peasants who stopped at the roadside to watch the convoy pass. No visible hostility. Rather the caution of people who have learned that military convoys bring complications and that it is best to let them pass without drawing attention to oneself. A few children ran alongside the horses for a moment before being called back by women's voices.

Lebrun had fallen back asleep. Hassenfratz reopened his notebook and reread his notes on the Mechelen Van Dyck.

Christ on the Cross. Church of the Recollects, Mechelen. Noted by Descamps as one of the major works of the city. Painted for the high altar of the convent, probably in the second half of the 1620s. Oil on canvas. Approximate dimensions: approximately two metres twenty in height, one metre sixty wide. Transferred to Saint Rumbold's after the fire at the Recollect church in October 1793.

He had not yet seen the work. He had been working from Paris with second-hand descriptions, dimension estimates, quality judgments formulated by travellers of the previous century who did not share his criteria. He knew that Van Dyck had painted several versions of *Christ on the Cross* — the composition was one of his recurring themes, revisited and reworked throughout his career. Some versions were major. Others, less so.

The tower of Saint Rumbold's appeared above the trees before the city itself was visible. It pointed into the evening sky with that quality possessed by unfinished buildings of seeming more present than those that are complete, as if the absence of a crown drew the eye upward indefinitely, toward a point that did not yet exist. It was said the tower had been under construction for two centuries and that each generation had abandoned the work, for lack of money, leaving the next a debt of architecture that had

gradually become character. It stopped at mid-height, and no one in Mechelen seriously imagined it could ever be finished.

Hassenfratz estimated the height: ninety-four metres. He had this habit of constant, involuntary calculation, which came from his training as a chemist and engineer — measuring, estimating, converting. Everything he saw he transformed into dimensions, weights, resistances. It was a way of keeping the world at a safe distance. Of receiving only what he could process.

Lebrun woke at the moment the carriage crossed into the first houses of the city.

— Are we there?

— Yes.

— The Van Dyck is in the cathedral?

— So we have been told.

The dean of the chapter, Abbé Huysmans, received them in the sacristy. He had the build of a peasant that decades of clerical life had not erased, and eyes of a deep blue that did not blink. He did not offer them a seat. Behind him stood two younger canons and the sacristan, a slight man whose hands, unlike Van Reyn's, never kept still. They perpetually sought something to hold — the edge of a piece of furniture, the lapel of a cassock, the rosary at his belt.

— You have come for the Van Dyck, said Huysmans.

— Yes.

— I received your letter. And before your letter I received a letter from the general commanding the Brussels garrison asking me to hold the painting at your disposal. These are confiscatory measures. But words will change nothing, I imagine.

— Can you take us to the work?

Huysmans took a key from a hook behind the sacristy door and rose without a word. They followed him into the nave.

The interior of Saint Rumbold's had the cold, white height of the great Brabantine Gothic naves — columns of pale limestone, ribbed vaults whose geometric regularity produced an effect of almost mathematical calm. The stained glass had not yet been removed, as it had been in some cathedrals in French Flanders. The coloured light fell in bands on the flagstones. Pigeons could be heard somewhere in the crossing of the transept. A discontinuous, distracted cooing that seemed to come from very high up and from nowhere in particular.

They passed the rood screen, crossed the choir. Huysmans indicated the far wall of the apse, to the left of the high altar. The painting was there, hung too low for the space, the provisional hooks still visible beside the old permanent hooks that had held another painting — the work for which this position had been designed. The Van Dyck had been installed there for want of anything better, after the destruction of the Recollect church, as one installs a refugee in a room that was not prepared for him.

Lebrun stopped.

This was different from his usual pauses before works — that way he had of marking a step, tilting his head, evaluating with the distance of the dealer and the expert. He stopped completely, arms at his sides, hands open. He remained five metres from the painting and did not advance at once.

Christ on the Cross. Approximately two hundred and twenty centimetres in height, one hundred and sixty wide. Christ alone, no figure around him, no Mary at his feet, no Saint John the Evangelist, no thief within the picture space. Only the body in the dark space, and behind it a brown ground almost black, deep, against which the flesh stood out with the precision of a living anatomy. Not the body of a dead man, but a body still in the process of dying, and looking toward something beyond the frame, slightly to the right and upward, with an abandonment in the face.

Van Dyck had painted this picture in the second half of the 1620s, after his return from Italy. The Venetian influence was visible in the treatment of light. That way of laying colour, of obtaining through this work in transparencies a depth that direct painting could not have produced. The flesh of Christ was not white. It was an ivory, slightly warm in the illuminated areas, tending toward bluish grey in the shadows, with a transition so gradual that one could not say exactly where one ended and the other began. The outstretched arms were of a striking rightness. The stretching of muscles beneath skin, the weight of the body pulling downward against the resistance of the nailed wrists — all of it rendered without dramatization, without emphasis, with the same economy of means that characterised the composition as a whole.

The other figures, the angels, the turbulent landscape, the torn sky — that was something other than Italian influence. Lebrun understood it as a painter's decision: to isolate what was essential and remove everything else, until nothing remained but the body alone and the question it put to whoever looked at it.

— He painted several versions. The Vienna one is perhaps better known. But this one is more direct. Less constructed. He was still searching for something when he made it.

— And did he find it?

— That is not the question. The question is that you can see him searching. That is what is rare.

Huysmans had stayed back, at mid-nave. He watched the two commissioners looking at the painting with an expression Hassenfratz could not quite decipher. Not only the pain of losing a loved thing, but a wary, almost analytical curiosity — for men who examined what they were about to take with such attention and who seemed, in their way, to be affected by it.

— This painting was made for the high altar of the Recollect convent. The Recollects commissioned it, paid for it, housed it

for a hundred and fifty years. When their church was destroyed by the troops of your Republic who were using the building as a depot and did not know how to tend a fire, we took it in here. For ten months now. It was at home there. Here it is visiting.

— And in Paris? asked Lebrun.

— In Paris it will be in exile. That is not equivalent.

— It will be returned, said Hassenfratz.

Lebrun and Huysmans looked at him.

— I do not know it with certainty. The European powers will not accept indefinitely that Paris concentrates what the whole continent has produced. A congress will have to take place. Restitutions will be demanded. The Belgian collections will be partially returned.

— You calculate the politics of nations as you calculate the weight of a crate? said Huysmans.

— I calculate what I can calculate. It is my way of working.

— And while awaiting this hypothetical congress?

— In the meantime it will be in the Grande Galerie of the Central Museum. Thousands of people will see it. Artists will study its technique. Students of the Beaux-Arts will make copies after it.

— The people of Mechelen have no need of copies. They came to see it here. In its church, before its altar, with candles lit and the silence that suited it.

— In smaller numbers.

— With greater knowledge of what they were looking at.

Hassenfratz drew out his notebook and began the preliminary measurements. Height, width, estimated thickness of the chassis, visible condition of the canvas at the edges, quality of the hooks. Figures. Facts. Data independent of whatever one felt before them.

Meanwhile, Huysmans did not leave the cathedral. He came and went in the side aisles, stopping sometimes in the choir, watching

the canons who had established a rota of presence. The community had collectively decided that the Van Dyck would not remain alone during its last hours in Mechelen.

The sacristan, for his part, had found occupations in the most remote parts of the sacristy. He was almost never seen.

On the second day, the painting was taken down.

Huysmans attended the operation from the choir stalls, seated, his hands laid flat on his knees. The two canons remained standing behind him. No one spoke.

Lebrun knelt on the flagstones to examine the surface at grazing height.

— Perfect condition. No visible old restoration. The chassis is sound, no play in the joints. Original varnish intact, it appears. This must be noted in the report.

He remained a moment kneeling, his eyes on the face of Christ.

— I will come back one day to Mechelen. When it has returned.

Huysmans descended the choir steps. When he reached Lebrun, he stopped.

— Do you truly believe what you said last night about restitution?

— I believe what I calculate. That is not the same as belief.

— Does it change anything for you, knowing that it will return?

Lebrun considered the question seriously before answering.

— No. But perhaps for you.

Huysmans looked at the painting for a long moment.

— Perhaps. I will be dead before then. But the church will be here.

The crating took another two hours. The joints were caulked with tallow to prevent damp. Lebrun himself glued the heavy-paper label to the lid, writing in his own hand in black ink: *Van*

Dyck — Christ on the Cross — Mechelen, Saint Rumbold's — 25 August 1794 — must be transported flat — Fragile.

Four soldiers carried the crate from the nave to the cart in the side street. It weighed, with the painting, between a hundred and fifty and a hundred and eighty kilos according to Hassenfratz's estimate. The soldiers laboured in the afternoon heat.

In the street alongside Saint Rumbold's, some thirty people had gathered. Not a crowd. A woman carried a child on her arm. A very old man held his hat in both hands before him without putting it on. No one was shouting. No one appeared to be weeping.

Hassenfratz observed these faces from the threshold of the courtyard.

He climbed into the carriage. The convoy moved off toward Brussels.

That evening, in the requisitioned house serving as their headquarters in Brussels, Lebrun sat at the table in the common room and opened the personal notebook where he kept his notes. Not the official register of the mission, but a smaller notebook with a soft cover that no one but he read.

He noted the dimensions of the Van Dyck. The particular quality of the light in that painting. He noted the pentimenti he had sensed in the back — a change in the angle of the right arm that Van Dyck had corrected after beginning.

He stopped. Then he wrote, lower down, a line he had not planned to write:

Huysmans says I calculate where one ought to feel. Van Reyn documents where one ought to protest. I look where one ought perhaps to close one's eyes. We are three men doing what they can with what they have. I do not know whether that absolves us of anything.

He closed the notebook, blew out the candle, went to look out the window at the deserted street.

The crates were in the courtyard, under guard. In two days they would join at Valenciennes the great common convoy with the pieces from Ghent and Antwerp, then the long road to Paris. Thirty-three pieces from Brussels. One Van Dyck from Mechelen.

He thought of Van Reyn with his sixty-eight pages. Of Huysmans in the choir stalls. Of all those people who had looked without shouting.

V — The Convoy on the Flemish Roads

Valenciennes, late August 1794

Hassenfratz had arrived two days earlier from Brussels with the Mechelen pieces. He was waiting. The Ghent convoy arrived first, late in the morning. Hassenfratz watched it enter the barracks courtyard from the window of the room assigned to him on the first floor. Six heavy carts, grey-canvas covered, escorted by some twenty cavalrymen whose uniforms bore the marks of a longer and harder road than the one he himself had just completed. The horses were exhausted. The soldiers dismounted with the stiff movements of men who have spent too many hours in the saddle without adequate rest.

Thouin climbed down from the last cart — not from the coach that followed, but from the cart itself, sitting on the side of the largest crate, his legs dangling over the edge, as though he had refused to distance himself from the pieces in his charge even for the duration of a journey. He jumped to the ground, immediately placed both hands flat on the canvas, and remained so for a moment, eyes closed, in the attitude of someone verifying by touch that something is still there.

Hassenfratz came down to meet him in the courtyard.

— The panels? he asked.

— Intact. Three forced stops. A broken wheel on the first cart twenty kilometres from Ghent. We waited an hour in a field

while a replacement was found in the nearest village. Then a violent downpour at Ath that nearly soaked through the canvas on the second cart, the one carrying the panel of the Deity Enthroned. I spent the night checking that the damp had not penetrated. Then a slope too steep at the entrance to Condé that the horses could not climb loaded. The crates had to be unloaded, carried up by hand, reloaded. Six hours lost.

— And the panels themselves?

— I told you. Intact. I checked at each stop.

He removed his hands from the canvas, looked at his palms as if he expected to read something in them.

— Grégoire is not well. The road has exhausted him. And something other than the road.

— David?

— David did not come as far as here. He left the convoy at Ath. A courier from Paris was waiting for him there. News of Thermidor, I imagine, summoning him back urgently. He returned to Paris alone with two soldiers for escort. He did not tell us what the courier contained. But he was ashen.

Hassenfratz absorbed this. The news of Robespierre's fall had reached Brussels on the 29th of July, two days after the events. It was known that Thermidor had occurred. What this meant for the mission, for the commissioners, for the Republic as a whole, was not yet clear. David was a member of the Committee of General Security. His closeness to Robespierre was known. His precipitate departure boded nothing good for him.

The Antwerp convoy arrived two hours later. Lebrun, who had come out to the courtyard at the first sound of hooves on the street cobbles, recognised his own packers and greeted them with a gesture. Then he looked for the numbers painted on the flanks of the crates. A system he had put in place before departure to ensure none was lost or swapped.

The officer commanding the Antwerp escort came to report to Hassenfratz with the concision of a man who prefers facts to commentary. A cracked axle at Mons, repaired on site in three hours. An attempted theft during the night of the 9th to the 10th of August, at the Jemappes staging post. Two men had tried to force the lock of a crate while the guard dozed. They had been caught before succeeding. Flogged and left on the spot, tied to a tree at the roadside. Nothing else.

— Did they know what was in the crates? asked Hassenfratz.

— Impossible to say. Perhaps they were looking to steal anything at all. The roads are not safe for loaded convoys.

— From now on, the night guard will be doubled. I want two men standing at all times, not one.

— Understood.

Hassenfratz made a circuit of the courtyard.

He stopped before the carts bearing the Van Eyck panels and placed his hand on a canvas. The panels were there, beneath the cloth, intact.

He went and knocked on the door of the coach where Grégoire had taken refuge.

The abbé took a moment to respond. When the door finally opened, Hassenfratz saw a man who had aged considerably in three weeks. His face drawn, eyes rimmed with red, his clothes creased as if he had slept in them several nights running. But the gaze was still alert, still present, with that quality of moral attention that characterised him and that physical exhaustion had not extinguished.

— Hassenfratz. Everything went well in Brussels?

— Thirty-three pieces from Brussels. Plus the Van Dyck from Mechelen.

— Good. David has left.

— I know. Thouin told me.

— Thermidor changes many things. I do not yet know which, or in what order. But many things.

— For the mission?

— For everything. The mission too. Let us get back to Paris as quickly as possible. As long as we are on the roads, we know nothing of what is happening. And at present, not knowing what is happening in Paris is a form of danger.

They departed the following morning at dawn, before the heat had risen.

Hassenfratz had spent the previous evening reorganizing the convoy formation. Nineteen carts — too many to advance in a single column on roads whose condition he did not know precisely between Valenciennes and Cambrai. A column too long presented two distinct problems. First, vulnerability: an attack on the head of the convoy left the tail unguarded for however long it took the escort to respond. And then rigidity — the impossibility of adapting quickly if a cart broke down and blocked passage. He decided to split the convoy into three groups spaced roughly a kilometre apart, with a vanguard of eight cavalrymen, a rear guard of six, and scouts sent ahead to reconnoitre at each major fork.

Thouin had expressed reservations.

— A kilometre of spacing is too much. If the first group has a problem, the second won't see it.

— The second will hear the signals. Each group has a fife. Three short blasts for an emergency stop, two long for a request for reinforcement. That is sufficient.

— And if the wind covers the signals?

— Then the scouts behind the first group will relay on horseback. This is not a military operation, Thouin. It is a transport convoy. What matters is not immobilizing all nineteen carts every time an axle creaks.

Thouin had not replied. But when the groups were formed, he had arranged for the carts bearing the Van Eyck panels to constitute the core of the central group — the one Hassenfratz had planned to surround with the greatest part of the escort. This was not defiance. It was a priority clearly expressed through acts rather than words.

Lebrun, for his part, had asked in which group the cart bearing the Mechelen Van Dyck would travel.

— The third group. With the Brussels pieces.

— I travel with the third group.

— You travel with Grégoire.

— I travel with the third group.

Hassenfratz knew there was nothing to gain by arguing.

— Very well.

Hassenfratz rode on horseback between the first and second groups, going back and forth as things seemed to require his attention. He had given up travelling in the coach from the moment they left Valenciennes. A coach enclosed you. On a horse, one could see the entire convoy, could react, anticipate. He was a chemist and engineer by training, not a horseman, and four hours in the saddle gave him pains that would make him limp the following morning. But that was the price of keeping an overview.

The first serious incident occurred halfway to Cambrai, at the crossing of a narrow bridge over a canal whose guardrails had been partially torn away — by a cart perhaps, or by cannon wheels during the passage of armies in the spring. The usable width of the bridge was sufficient for an ordinary cart, but only just. For the widest carts in the convoy — those bearing the Antwerp triptychs, whose crates protruded slightly beyond the sideboards — the margin was less than ten centimetres on each side.

The officer commanding the vanguard sent a scout back to report the problem. Hassenfratz came to look, measured the width, looked at the crates, looked at the bridge, looked at the height of the water in the canal — low in this season, two metres perhaps at the centre, but enough to irreparably damage a canvas if a crate fell in.

— We cross one cart at a time. The horses led by hand, not by reins. Two men on each side to watch the overhang of the crates. Speed of a man at walking pace.

— This will take time, said the officer.

— Yes.

It took two hours. Each cart crossed the bridge led by hand, at walking pace, two men on each side with arms stretched ready to intervene, eyes fixed on the space between the edges of the crates and the bridge supports.

The cart bearing the *Descent from the Cross* grazed the right support at the moment when the horse shied for a reason no one clearly saw. There was a cracking sound. Everyone froze.

It was only the bridge support, not the crate. Old rotted wood giving way at the slightest contact. The crate was intact.

Lebrun, who had been overseeing the passage of his group from the bank, exhaled through his nose.

— Next time, he said to the officer, the scouts measure bridges before advancing the convoy.

— I have no graduated rule, said the officer.

— Then they measure with their arms. An adult arm is approximately seventy centimetres. Two arms make one metre forty. The widest crates are two metres ten. Three arms plus a half. It is not difficult to calculate.

The officer understood and fell silent.

They camped that evening at the outskirts of Cambrai, in a requisitioned field beside a farm. The carts were arranged in a

square, the most precious crates in the centre, the soldiers in an outer ring. Fires were lit at the four corners of the camp. The night was clear and warm, with crickets in the dry grass and, from time to time, the brief cry of a nocturnal bird from the trees at the field's edge.

Thouin inspected the crates bearing the Van Eyck panels after supper, by lantern light. He lifted the lid of each, ran his fingers over the packing, verified that the night damp was not beginning to settle on the wood.

Hassenfratz, seated on the other side of the fire, watched the camp. The night was silent except for the crickets. The soldiers were eating or sleeping. Grégoire had retired. Lebrun was somewhere near the third group's carts. His silhouette could be seen passing, checking, adjusting, making sure.

— Does he never sleep? asked Thouin, following Hassenfratz's gaze.

— Probably not much.

— He is a man who takes pains. Not like David.

Hassenfratz put wood on the fire and watched the sparks rise.

— David has his ways of taking pains. They are less visible because they are political rather than technical. But they exist.

— Existed, he corrected himself. He had his ways. I wonder what he is doing tonight.

It was the question everyone had been asking since they left Valenciennes. Thermidor. Robespierre dead. David compromised. The Republic recomposing itself around new balances that no one yet understood. This convoy had left Paris in the name of the Committee of Public Safety. The Committee of Public Safety was no longer quite the same as at the time of departure. Did the mission remain valid? Did the requisition orders, signed by men some of whom might be in prison at the hour the convoy was crossing the Cambrésis plain, retain their legal force?

Hassenfratz thought yes. The paintings had been taken. The receipts were signed. The legality of the seizure did not depend on the personal fate of the signatories. But he knew this kind of juridical reasoning could be challenged. And at present, in Paris, things were being overturned every day.

— We return. We deliver the pieces to the Museum. That is all we can do.

— And if in Paris we are asked to justify the mission before a committee whose members have changed?

— Then we will justify. The pieces are there. They exist. That is the best justification there is.

Thouin nodded, without conviction but without objection either.

Hassenfratz kept a road journal. Not the official register he would complete in Paris to report to the Committee of Public Instruction, but a personal notebook where he noted distances covered, travel times, incidents, the states of roads and bridges. There was something in this activity that calmed him. Reducing each day to measurable data — kilometres, hours, identified and resolved accidents. The road between Valenciennes and Paris thus became a series of successive technical problems, each having a solution, or at least a partial response. That was preferable to the other way of looking at this journey, which consisted of thinking about what the convoy was carrying and how it had been assembled.

They arrived at Compiègne on the 28th of August in the late afternoon, under a sky that had turned grey since morning — heavy, motionless clouds that held the heat against the earth without tempering it. There was a permanent garrison, a resident republican commissioner, inns still functioning despite the years of war. Hassenfratz obtained without difficulty the requisition of a warehouse courtyard large enough for the nineteen carts, with a lean-to roof under which the most fragile crates could be sheltered in case the storm finally broke.

Grégoire asked to dine with the other commissioners. It was the first time since Valenciennes that he had made such a request. He had eaten alone the previous evenings, or nearly alone, with Thouin for occasional company.

They dined in the common room of an inn. A low-ceilinged space, wooden tables, candles, a serving girl who brought bread, cold meat, a bean salad and a carafe of ordinary red wine without asking what was wanted. It was what there was.

For a moment, no one spoke of Thermidor. Thouin said something about the state of the roads between here and Senlis. He had questioned the garrison coachman who knew the stretch well. Lebrun asked whether better-quality tallow than the kind bought at Péronne could be found in Compiègne — its consistency was worrying him for the caulking of the joints. Hassenfratz said he would see to it the following morning.

It was Grégoire who finally broke from practical questions. He set down his cutlery, wiped his hands on his napkin, and said:

— I received a letter this morning. Forwarded from Paris by military courier. It is from Lakanal.

Lakanal was a member of the Committee of Public Instruction. One of the few to have survived Thermidor without being compromised, because he had never been sufficiently close to Robespierre to be associated with him, nor far enough away to have appeared hostile. A man of the middle ground, of those intermediate positions that become advantages when the extremes collapse.

— What does he say? asked Hassenfratz.

— He says the mission is confirmed. That the Committee of Public Instruction in its new composition has examined the requisition orders and validated them retrospectively. That the works will enter the Museum in the planned manner. That a welcome ceremony is being prepared.

— That is good news.

— It is news, said Grégoire. Whether good or bad it is too early to say. Lakanal adds something. He says the question of the legitimacy of the requisitions is going to be raised in the Convention in the coming weeks. That voices are making themselves heard to the effect that confiscations in conquered countries resemble ordinary army looting too closely to be defended as a cultural policy.

— Those are the same voices that made themselves heard before Thermidor, Hassenfratz replied. Grégoire himself was among them.

— I do not conceal it, Grégoire retorted. And they make themselves heard again because what they say is just. Thermidor has not made the looting more legitimate. It has made it possible to say so aloud without risking the guillotine.

The serving girl came to remove the empty plates and bring a cheese on a board. No one looked at her.

— What has been done is done, said Lebrun. The paintings are in the carts. In six days they will be in Paris. Reopening now the question of the legitimacy of the requisitions will not change that.

— No. But it might change what is done next. Lakanal implies that future requisitions — in Italy, if the military campaigns proceed as planned — will be subject to stricter conditions. Formal treaties rather than unilateral requisition orders. Financial compensation, perhaps. A list of works established in agreement with local authorities rather than imposed by the commissioners.

— Stricter conditions will not prevent the requisitions.

— No. But they will make them more defensible. Before History, if not before contemporaries.

Thouin, who had been listening from the start, intervened:

— What concerns me is the question of return. Does Lakanal say anything about that?

— No. He says nothing about return.

— Because that is the real question. What we have taken — have we taken it forever or provisionally? If forever, then the entire educational justification we have employed rests on the idea that Paris is the natural place where these things should be found. Which is debatable. If provisionally — if one implicitly acknowledges that these works have a vocation to return to their origins when circumstances allow — then the whole discourse about the superiority of Paris as a cultural centre collapses. One then admits that the requisition was circumstantial, not fundamental. Which makes the entire claim of Paris as the universal centre of culture indefensible.

— Both at once, perhaps, said Lebrun. We take them because we have the power to do so. We exhibit them because we have the will. And one day they leave again because the balance of forces has changed. That is the natural movement of things. Objects follow power. They always have. Rome took the Greek statues. Constantinople took what Rome had left. We take what the Holy Roman Empire had assembled in Flanders. In a hundred years, someone will take what we have gathered in Paris.

— That is a historical relativist argument that justifies nothing.

— It justifies nothing. It describes what is.

— Description is not justification.

— No. But sometimes description is enough to make one's peace with what one has done.

Grégoire looked at him for a moment without replying. What was on his face was not anger. It was something quieter and more definitive.

— I cannot make my peace with historical arguments. I saw Canon De Vos weeping in Ghent. I saw the crowd before the cathedral on the morning of departure. I saw people kneeling on the cobblestones. It was not History weeping. These were men and women losing something they loved. And no argument about the natural movement of powers touches that.

— Then why are you here? asked Lebrun gently.

Grégoire took up his cutlery again, cut a piece of cheese, looked at it without eating it.

— Because I believed, when I set out, that my presence could steer things. That I would prevent excesses. That Grégoire in the commission meant the commission would have a conscience. That was presumptuous. The excesses occurred anyway. Canon De Vos was arrested anyway. The panels are in the carts anyway. My presence did not change the facts. It made me complicit in the facts.

— That is not entirely fair, said Hassenfratz. You obtained that the requisition in Ghent take three days instead of one. You prevented David from brutalizing the operations. The panels are intact because Thouin was able to work in good conditions because you held firm against David's haste. That is concrete.

— Yes. And the panels are no longer in Ghent. Both of those things are true.

Outside, the storm that had been threatening since morning finally decided. A heavy rain began to fall on the courtyard cobblestones, regular, dense, with the particular sound of summer rain on warm stone. A sound almost pacified, almost satisfied, as if the sky had kept its too-long-deferred promise. Hassenfratz thought of the crates under the lean-to. Of the joints caulked with tallow.

— I am going to check the covers.

— Hassenfratz! exclaimed Grégoire.

He stopped.

— What you did in Brussels and Mechelen. How did it go?

— Correctly. A curator who documented everything in parallel. A cathedral dean who asked the right questions without fighting. No crowds, no violence. The account is complete. Everything in good condition.

— And you? How did you experience it?

Hassenfratz thought for a moment. It was a question he was not accustomed to being asked, and to which he was not accustomed to answering.

— I did my work. As Van Reyn did his by documenting. As Huysmans did his by keeping the painting safe for ten months. Each of us did what he was in a position to do in the situation in which he found himself. I do not know whether that is a satisfactory answer to your question. It is the only one I have.

He went out into the rain. The courtyard was empty. The soldiers had taken shelter under the overhangs or in the stables. The carts stood in the wet darkness, their covers dark and glistening, their massive forms barely distinguishable from one another. Under the lean-to, the great crates waited in the dark.

He remained there a moment listening to the rain. Somewhere in those crates were panels that Jan van Eyck had painted three hundred and sixty-two years earlier, canvases that Rubens had covered with paint with a vitality that crossed centuries, a Christ by Van Dyck that had been looking at something beyond its frame for a hundred and fifty years. They had survived wars, fires, the Reformation, the iconoclasts, the vicissitudes of faith and commerce and European politics. They would survive this August rain on the road from Compiègne to Paris. They would outlast him.

He went back into the inn. The common room was deserted. Grégoire, Thouin and Lebrun had gone up to bed. The candles were still burning, half consumed. He sat down, opened his road notebook, and noted: *"28 August. Compiègne. Rain at 10 p.m. Joints checked. Condition satisfactory. Departure tomorrow 5 a.m. if the road is passable."*

Then he blew out the candles and went up in his turn.

VI — The Arrival in Paris and the Unloading

They entered Paris on the 2nd of September 1794 through the Barrière de Saint-Denis, in mid-morning.

The last stretch from Senlis had been the most difficult. Not because of the road, which was in better condition than anything they had traversed since Valenciennes, but because of the traffic. The approaches to Paris concentrated everything that war and Revolution had set in motion: military carts going in the opposite direction toward the northern depots, columns of refugees walking along the roadsides with handcarts loaded with household goods, herds driven toward the abattoirs of the suburbs, dispatch riders on horseback overtaking the convoy and shouting for passage. Hassenfratz had taken five hours to cover the last twelve leagues. In normal times, two hours would have sufficed.

At the barrier, a sergeant of the National Guard checked the passes, counted the carts, asked what the crates contained. Hassenfratz handed him the order from the Committee of Public Instruction. The man read it slowly, his lips moving over the difficult words, then returned the document and let the convoy through.

The northern faubourgs had the characteristics of quarters that had developed without a master plan. Streets too narrow for a convoy of this size, intersections where one had to wait for oncoming teams to manoeuvre backwards into a side street, shop awnings protruding over the roadway and grazed by the cart covers as they passed. Twice, Hassenfratz had to dismount and personally direct a crossing manoeuvre in a particularly tight passage.

Lebrun, who knew Paris better than anyone in the convoy, had the previous evening proposed a route via the outer boulevards to avoid the centre. Hassenfratz had agreed. But the outer boulevards were no clearer than the inner streets. They were

simply wider, which meant they accommodated more traffic rather than less.

Grégoire watched Paris through the carriage window with the face of someone returning from a long journey who is not sure of recognising what he finds. The city had changed since Thermidor. Not in its stones, but in its atmosphere. The revolutionary symbols were still everywhere: Phrygian bonnets carved above doorways, *Liberty Equality Fraternity* inscriptions on the facades of former religious buildings converted to other uses. But something in the way people moved, in how the shops were open, in how conversations rose from terraces and intersections, indicated that the pressure had eased. That the word *citizen* had become a form of politeness rather than a declaration of allegiance.

Lakanal was waiting for them before the provisional warehouse that had been prepared to receive the crates. He was accompanied by three Museum functionaries, a National Guard officer in charge of security, and a secretary who held an open register and a ready quill. Behind them, some twenty workmen in the courtyard.

The welcome ceremony was brief. Lakanal had prepared a few words that he read from a sheet, in a voice loud enough to be heard by the workmen but without particular emphasis. The occasion deserved to be marked, not exaggerated. He spoke of the enrichment of the Republic's heritage, of the Central Museum's vocation to assemble what humanity had produced that was greatest, of the mission accomplished by the commissioners at considerable difficulty.

Grégoire listened without reaction. Thouin watched the crates now being unloaded from the carts. Lebrun watched Lakanal with a careful attention — as one watches a man when one is trying to measure what he thinks behind what he says.

Hassenfratz was not listening to the speech. He was counting the workmen and estimating how long the unloading would take.

When Lakanal had finished, he stepped forward toward Grégoire and shook his hand.

— You have worked well. Despite the circumstances.

— What circumstances? asked Grégoire.

— Thermidor. The David question. The uncertainties about the mission's legitimacy. You returned nonetheless. With the pieces.

— The pieces would have returned without me. It is Hassenfratz, Lebrun and Thouin who did the work.

— Your presence in the commission gave it a character it would not have had without you. That mattered. It still matters.

— It mainly allowed me to be present when things I should have prevented were happening. That is not a success I celebrate.

Lakanal did not respond immediately. Then he went to greet Thouin.

The unloading took all afternoon.

The workmen quickly grasped what was expected of them. They worked with a deliberate slowness, carrying the crates in twos or fours according to their dimensions, their eyes fixed on what they held. Some had evidently worked for the Museum before. They knew the movements, knew how to negotiate a difficult angle without pivoting the crate abruptly, how to set down a heavy object without dropping it even ten centimetres.

Lebrun accompanied each crate of his group to its position in the warehouse. He had established a layout plan since Valenciennes. The most fragile pieces in the centre, on trestles, away from the walls where damp could accumulate; the more robust pieces at the perimeter. This plan, worked out during the long hours on the road, was executed without modification. The Museum functionaries, who had their own ideas about the organization of the warehouse, observed Lebrun's arrangement for a moment and then deferred to his judgment without discussion.

Around four in the afternoon, the crate bearing the Mechelen Van Dyck was the last to enter the warehouse.

Lakanal's secretary noted the hour in his register: sixteen twenty-three.

Forty-seven crates. All present. All intact.

That evening, Lakanal gave a dinner in his apartments for the commissioners. Barbier, the Museum's chief curator, was there.

Barbier put the practical questions first. When would the crates be opened? When could the pieces be inspected by his restorers? When could the *Descent from the Cross* by Rubens, whose sections had been cut for transport, be reassembled and exhibited? Was it true that the panel of Saint John the Baptist from the Van Eyck altarpiece had suffered a crack during unloading in Ghent?

Thouin answered this last question with a clarity that admitted no imprecise interpretation.

— A crack occurred during handling in the Vijd Chapel, during the requisition. Not during unloading. The crack is on the back of the panel, in the wood of the support. Consolidation was done on site with the means available. It will need to be redone by your restorers with appropriate materials. I documented the exact state of the crack at the moment we left Ghent, and at each inspection since. No change since Valenciennes. The consolidation held.

— A full report will be needed, said Barbier.

— It will be on your desk tomorrow morning.

After dinner, the commissioners dispersed through Paris.

Thouin returned to the Jardin des Plantes where his assistants awaited him with six weeks of botanical observations accumulated in his absence. He shook each one's hand in the warehouse courtyard before leaving.

Grégoire took a cab home.

Lebrun chose to go back to the warehouse.

Hassenfratz learned this the following morning when he passed by the door. The night watchman told him that Commissioner Lebrun had arrived shortly after ten o'clock the previous evening with a lantern and asked to enter. He had stayed until dawn. He had not opened the crates. He had sat on a stool, among the crates, in the dark, with his lantern set on the floor before him.

The watchman, intrigued, had asked him if he needed anything.

— No, Lebrun had said. I am checking that everything is there.

— And if something is missing?

— Then I would know tonight rather than tomorrow morning. That is preferable.

The watchman had judged the answer reasonable and left him in peace.

On the 18th Vendémiaire Year III — the 9th of October 1794 by the old calendar — the Central Museum of the Arts opened its new rooms to the public.

The Van Eyck panels were exhibited in the great gallery, against a dark cloth background that brought out the luminosity of the colours. An explanatory caption written by Barbier described the work, its origin, its transfer to Paris, and honestly mentioned the crack in the panel of Saint John the Baptist and the restoration in progress. Before the panel of the Deity Enthroned, three artists had installed themselves from the moment of opening with their sketchbooks and had not left them all day.

The Rubenses occupied the transept of the great central hall. The *Descent from the Cross* had been reassembled in ten days. The cut joints were barely visible to the naked eye, invisible from the normal distance of a visitor. The effect of the painting in that space was considerable. Several visitors stopped for a long time — longer than they usually stopped — in that attentive silence one observes in people who are looking at something that surpasses them and who are not trying to defend themselves against it.

The Mechelen Van Dyck was not exhibited that day. Barbier had judged that the original varnish merited being stabilised by a light treatment before exhibition — a few days' additional work. The painting waited in the warehouse, in its crate, Lebrun's label still glued to the lid.

Hassenfratz did not come to the inauguration. He was in his laboratory at the École des Mines that morning. There was work that had piled up. He set to it.

In the afternoon, one of his assistants brought him a message from Lakanal. A summons for a Committee of Public Instruction meeting the following week, on the subject of future requisitions in Italy. The military campaigns in northern Italy were taking shape. If they succeeded, there would be new works to requisition. New missions to organise. New convoys to prepare.

Hassenfratz folded the message, slipped it into his jacket pocket. There was a meeting to prepare.

VII — The Museum and the Committee

Paris, October 1794

The Mechelen Van Dyck was exhibited on the 24th Vendémiaire, a few days after the inauguration of the other Flemish acquisitions. Barbier had insisted that the varnish treatment be completed properly rather than hurried. A decision that had irritated Lakanal, who was eager to show the full complement of pieces to the public, and that Barbier had maintained without unnecessary discussion — with the quiet obstinacy of men who know that in their domain they are right and that the arguments of others, however political, do not change the technical facts.

The painting was hung in the third room of the great gallery, between two high windows, in an October light slightly golden that Barbier had sought all morning by having the painting moved from wall to wall. He gave the signal for the final hammer blow and stepped back.

— Good, he said to the workman holding the level. It can stay there.

The first weeks, the Museum was overrun.

This was not new. The Museum had opened its doors in 1793 and the Parisian public had gone there from the beginning with a mixture of civic enthusiasm and genuine curiosity. But the Flemish acquisitions added a dimension that the previous collections had not had to the same degree: a radical otherness. The Italian paintings the Museum had possessed from the outset belonged to an aesthetic the Parisian public recognised. French painting from Le Brun to David had fed on it, and to see a Carracci or a Guido Reni at the Museum was to see a familiar source exhibited for its own sake. The Flemish works were something else. A different way of looking at the world, of rendering it in paint, of treating light and matter.

The artists arrived first, as always. From the day after the inauguration, students from the Beaux-Arts installed themselves before the Van Eyck panels, copying details, trying to understand the technique, discussing in low voices among themselves the procedures employed. The more advanced brought prepared canvases and began painted copies. A practice authorised by the Museum's regulations, which saw in copying a form of homage and apprenticeship rather than competition with the original.

A painter named Lantier installed himself before Rubens's *Descent from the Cross* on the third day and barely moved from the spot for an entire week. He was not copying. He was looking. From time to time he made a note. A word, a line, rarely more. Museum guards brought him a stool in the morning and came for it in the evening when the rooms closed. He thanked them with a gesture without taking his eyes off the painting.

Barbier passed by him one morning and stopped.

— Are you looking for something specific?

— I am looking at how he did that, said Lantier without turning round.

— That?

— The white. The shroud. There are three whites in that shroud. Not three shades of the same white. Three whites of different natures. The white of the fabric in direct light. The white of the fabric in half-tone. And the white one sees through the fabric where it is transparent and lets the colour of what is behind show through. Three ways of rendering white. I cannot see how he articulated them. One ought to be able to see it, at this distance. One cannot.

— It is the softness of the touch, said Barbier. Those superimposed layers of paint fuse the transitions. It is not an approach you can reconstruct through observation alone. You have to have done it yourself to understand what you are looking at.

— I know. That is why I am still looking.

Barbier approved and moved on.

The non-artist public arrived in the afternoons, in groups of twenty or thirty, sometimes more. It was a mixed public. Bourgeois in neat clothes, workmen in their working jackets, women with children, elderly men who looked at the paintings with an attention their posture rendered touching — leaning forward, as if a respectful distance were required of someone unaccustomed to finding himself before things of this kind.

Hassenfratz visited the Museum once, a week after the inauguration, one afternoon between two appointments. He entered, passed through the first rooms quickly, stopped before the panel of the Deity Enthroned. He remained there perhaps five minutes. Around him, people looked, sometimes murmured, moved about. A child asked his mother why the gentleman in the middle of the painting had a crown. The mother said she did not know, that it was very old, that it was from Belgium.

Hassenfratz looked at the face. This face that Jan van Eyck had painted in 1432, with its colours that had not aged, its clothing folds of a precision that abolished the distance of centuries. He thought of Ghent. Of the crowd on the steps of Saint Bavo. Of Canon De Vos being forcibly taken away. Of the light in the Vijd Chapel the morning Thouin began to remove the fittings.

He thought too of the mother and child behind him. Of the child's question. *Why does the gentleman have a crown?* It was a genuine question, asked by someone who would never have set foot in Ghent, who had no reason to go to Ghent, and who was now looking at something Jan van Eyck had made a long time ago, with a sincere attention, even if he did not yet know how to formulate it.

He left the Museum and returned to the École des Mines.

The meeting took place on the 3rd Brumaire Year III — the 24th of October 1794 — in the Committee's usual room, Rue Saint-Honoré, a rectangular space whose windows gave onto an inner courtyard and which received an indirect, white and flat light. Maps were pinned to the walls. Northern Italy, Piedmont, Lombardy, the Papal States. Someone had hung them with pins that marked the main cities and the mountain roads. Hassenfratz looked at them as he entered and understood at once that the discussion would be less abstract than he had supposed.

Lakanal presided. Around the table: Hassenfratz, Grégoire, Thouin, Lebrun, Dupont, a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, two men he did not know — introduced as Phillipeau, antiquary and numismatist, and Coullonges, a Hellenist whose name was vaguely familiar without his being able to place exactly in what context. And finally a staff officer in uniform, Colonel Beffara, whose presence signified that the discussion would not be exclusively cultural. David was not there: arrested the day before, taken to the Luxembourg.

— The armies of the Republic, said Lakanal, opening the session, are in a position to enter northern Italy in the coming months.

General Schérer commands in Liguria. The Austrians still hold Piedmont, but their position is weakened. The question we must address today is: if the armies advance, what cultural policy will the Republic implement in the occupied territories?

He let the question hang in the air for a moment. He had chosen his words deliberately and wanted them to be heard.

— I frame the question in these terms on purpose. Not: do we requisition works of art? But: how do we do it, with what principles, what limits, what legitimacy?

Colonel Beffara intervened immediately, with the economy of a man little accustomed to letting discussions open before the practical constraints have been established.

— From a military standpoint, the question of works of art in occupied territories is a question of war trophies. The Roman armies took what they conquered. The Austrian armies did the same in Flanders for centuries. Our armies will do likewise. This is not a political decision, it is a natural consequence of conquest.

— Colonel, said Grégoire, it is this way of framing things that poses the problem. If we treat artistic requisitions as war trophies in the same category as captured cannon and captured standards, we renounce any discourse about the cultural and educational value of the operation. We admit that we are stealing because we have the power to do so.

— You have an alternative formulation to propose?

— Yes. The requisitioned works are not trophies. They are cultural goods whose custody is temporarily entrusted to the French Republic while political conditions allow an international organization of their conservation. Paris is not a final destination. It is a provisional repository, the best available, which guarantees the safety and accessibility of the works in the current period.

Hassenfratz listened to this exchange without intervening. He looked at the maps on the wall. Piedmont. Lombardy. Milan. The roads descending from the Alps to the Po plain. He was thinking

of the dimensions of the mountain roads, of the question of bridges, of the weight of the great pieces he had transported from Flanders — which were nothing compared to what northern Italy might offer. The collections of Milan. The Duke of Modena's cabinet. The Parma galleries. He had read Cochin, had read Richardson, had read De Brosses's *Lettres familières* which described with the precision of an enlightened amateur the Lombard collections he had visited in 1739. Northern Italy was of an altogether different order of magnitude than Flanders.

It was Phillipeau, the antiquary, who posed the question that seemed most pertinent to him and that no one had yet posed directly.

— Who chooses? In Flanders, it was Lebrun for the paintings, Thouin for the botanical and natural aspects, Hassenfratz for general coordination. But the selection criteria were not formally established before departure. We took what seemed most important. With uneven results depending on location.

— The results were not uneven, said Lebrun. The requisitioned pieces are first-rate.

— I am not questioning the quality of the selections. I am questioning the absence of a formal framework. In Italy, we will not be able to proceed in the same way. The collections are infinitely vaster, infinitely more complex. There are questions of attribution, provenance, authenticity that will require competences not all represented in a commission of seven people. We will need specialists. Antiquaries for sculptures and coins. Architects for the questions of buildings. Naturalists for specimens. Musicologists if one envisages collections of scores and instruments.

— You are proposing an enlarged commission, said Lakanal.

— I am proposing a commission whose competences match its ambitions. If one wants to requisition systematically and well, one needs people who know what they are doing in each domain.

The Flanders mission was an experiment. Italy must be an organised operation.

Lakanal took note. Dupont asked whether it might be possible to negotiate with local authorities in advance of the requisitions — to establish an agreed rather than imposed list.

— With whom do we negotiate? asked Beffara. With the Duke of Parma? The Pope? The Italian Republics? These authorities may no longer exist when our armies arrive. Or they will be in a state of belligerence with us. One does not negotiate with an enemy the conditions under which one is about to take his paintings.

— One can negotiate with a defeated enemy, said Grégoire. Peace treaties contain clauses on goods taken during hostilities. It is an ancient practice.

— Peace treaties contain clauses on ransoms and territorial restitutions. Not on paintings.

— They could. It is a question of political will.

— It is a question of balance of power, said Beffara. If we are in a position to dictate the terms of a treaty, we can put whatever we want in it. Including clauses on works of art. But that means it is still the armies that decide, not the cultural commissions.

Thouin, who had not spoken since the start of the meeting, then took the floor.

— We should send someone ahead as a scout. Before the armies. One man, or two, with sufficient competences to evaluate what exists and in what condition. Not to prepare lists of requisitions, but to understand the real situation of the collections, the risks they face, the possibilities of conservation on site. There may be collections that would be better preserved in Paris. And others that would be better left where they are.

— A cultural spy, said Beffara, with a smile not entirely ironic.

— An observer. It is not equivalent.

— In practice, it is.

— In practice, perhaps. But with different intentions. A spy seeks information useful to a military operation. An observer seeks to understand a situation in order to make better decisions. If one sends someone to Italy now, it is not to prepare a looting. It is to ensure that what is done, if anything is done, will be done properly.

Hassenfratz took notes — names, figures, questions to explore. He had the impression throughout this discussion of assembling the elements of an enterprise whose complete form he could not yet see, like a man gathering materials without yet knowing exactly what he is going to build with them.

At the end of the meeting, when the members rose and began gathering their papers, Lebrun remained before the maps. He looked at the outline of the peninsula, the names of the cities, the hatching that indicated the relief of the Alps and the Apennines.

— Rome, he said in a low voice, almost to himself.

Hassenfratz, passing behind him, stopped.

— Rome?

— The Vatican collections. The Belvedere. The *Apollo*. The *Laocoön*. The Borghese, Doria, Colonna galleries. Raphael's frescoes in the Stanze. The Titians in the papal collection.

He was silent a moment.

— If one goes as far as Rome, it will be a completely different undertaking from Flanders. In Flanders, one was taking remarkable works from collections that contained others. In Rome, the most important works are the places themselves. One cannot take the Raphael Stanze. One cannot take the Sistine. These things cannot be transported.

— Then one does not take them.

— No. But one takes everything that can be taken. And that will be a great deal. And Raphael will remain in Rome, and

Michelangelo will remain in Rome, and people will go to Rome to see them. Which will mean that Paris will not have everything.

He unhooked his jacket from the back of his chair.

— That is not a reason not to go. It is simply a reason not to tell oneself stories about what one goes there to do.

He left. Hassenfratz remained alone for a moment before the maps.

In six months, perhaps less, he would be there.

VIII — The Interval

David's arrest, announced at the meeting of the 3rd Brumaire, was now on everyone's lips. A note from Thouin left on the laboratory table at the École des Mines confirmed the details: Thouin had obtained the precise chronology from a colleague at the Jardin des Plantes. David had been arrested on the 2nd Brumaire Year III — the 23rd of October 1794 — and taken to the Luxembourg. The charges were not yet public, but everyone understood what they concerned: his closeness to Robespierre, his signature at the foot of a list of suspects drawn up by the Committee of General Security during the Great Terror, his role in the revolutionary fêtes that Robespierre had used as instruments of his policy of forced dechristianisation.

Hassenfratz read the note, folded it, put it in his pocket. He finished what he was doing — a materials resistance calculation that the Flemish mission had interrupted in July and that he was now resuming with the difficulty of picking up the thread of a thought abandoned too long ago. Then he went to see Grégoire.

Grégoire lived in the Rue Saint-Jacques, in a three-room apartment on the second floor of a building whose staircase smelled of wax and old wood. It was a literary priest's apartment. Books everywhere, papers, a few religious prints hung in no particular order on the walls, a work table cluttered with

manuscripts. Grégoire was writing when Hassenfratz arrived. He looked up, read a tension in his visitor's face, set down his pen.

— David.

— You already knew?

— I was waiting. Since Thermidor, I was waiting. It was not a question of whether, but when.

He went to the window, looked down at the street below, at the passers-by, the shops, the ordinary movement of a Paris autumn morning.

— They have put him in the Luxembourg, said Hassenfratz.

— Yes. That is where they put dangerous people. It is a respectable prison for political cases. He does not risk the guillotine, I think. Not in the current climate. The Thermidorian reaction abhors blood spilled in public, precisely because it was spattered with the blood of those it overthrew. They imprison now. They no longer guillotine, for the moment.

— For the moment.

— For the moment, yes. Which can change.

Hassenfratz sat in the only free armchair. The other two were occupied by stacks of books that Grégoire had evidently not moved in a long time.

— This changes something for the Flemish mission. David was one of the political sponsors of the operation. His name is on the requisition orders. Not directly — it was Joubert who signed the orders in the field — but David was a member of the Committee of General Security, and it was that committee which authorised and financed the mission. If David is condemned, his acts within the Committee will be retrospectively invalidated or challenged. Which could include the mission.

— Lakanal said the mission was confirmed.

— Lakanal said that before David's arrest. In the new context, confirmation may need to be renewed.

Grégoire left the window.

— You think we could be asked to return the paintings?

— No. I think we could be asked to justify what we did differently. Not in the name of the cultural policy of Robespierre and David, but in the name of a principle that survives their fall. The Museum itself — the idea of the Museum — predates Robespierre. The paintings are there. They are exhibited. Thousands of people see them. That is a fact difficult to invalidate politically, whatever happens to the men who ordered their requisition.

— And we? Who are we in this new narrative?

Hassenfratz reflected for a moment on the question.

— Executors. Men who received orders from political commissioners and carried them out with competence and in respect for the works. That is not glorious. But it is defensible.

— Are you at ease with that position?

— I am at ease with the facts. The facts are that I carried out orders. That I ensured the works were properly treated. That I avoided the excesses that David, for his part, would not have avoided if we had not contained him. That is not a medal I am awarding myself. It is what happened.

— I find that position difficult. If I was there to lend moral authority, then I did something worse than carrying out orders. I served as cover.

— You prevented real damage. Thouin told you so at Compiègne.

— Thouin is generous. And perhaps he is right. The Van Eyck panels are intact because I held firm against David's haste. But the panels are no longer in Ghent. That too is a fact.

In the street below, a newspaper seller called out a headline they could not quite hear distinctly.

— What are you going to do? asked Hassenfratz.

— I am writing. What I have always done when things went badly. I am drafting a report on the Flemish mission that will say what happened. Not to condemn David, who will be condemned by others and for other reasons. But so that there exists somewhere an honest account of what we did and why it was problematic even if it was legal.

— Van Reyn already did something comparable.

— And that is precisely why I must do it too. If the only honest version of the story comes from the Brussels curator whose palace we emptied, that is not sufficient. There must also be a French voice, from inside the commission, that says what it saw and what it thinks. Otherwise, in a hundred years, when someone reads through the archives, they will find only official justifications on one side and the protests of the victims on the other. That is not a fair picture of what happened.

Hassenfratz looked at him for a moment.

— You truly think in such long terms?

Outside, the newspaper seller called his headline again. This time, Hassenfratz distinguished the word *David* in the noise of the street, then something else he did not catch.

— There is another consequence I wanted to mention. The commission for Italy. David was informally part of it. He had expressed his intention to participate, to direct the artistic requisitions as he had directed those of Flanders. With his arrest, that question is settled. The commission will be recomposed without him. Which changes the balance.

— In what direction?

— In the direction Lakanal probably prefers. Less politics, more concrete competences. Phillipeau for antiquities. An architect for the buildings. Lebrun of course for the paintings. Perhaps Thouin for the natural history collections. And people like me for coordination and logistics.

— And Grégoire for the commission's conscience?

The question contained an irony that Grégoire himself seemed not quite to have intended.

— I do not know whether you will go to Italy, said Hassenfratz. I do not know whether I will go. It is not decided. But if you go, it will be because your presence changes something.

— I thank you for saying that. I am not sure I believe it. But I thank you.

Hassenfratz rose.

— David's arrest may be a good thing for the Italian mission. Not for him. But for the way the operation will be conducted. Without him, it will be harder to turn the requisitions into political demonstrations. Which was the problem in Flanders. Not the requisition itself, but the triumphalist discourse that accompanied it. The discourse of French republican superiority over everything Europe had produced. That was false and offensive. Without David to maintain it, perhaps one can do the same things with less arrogance.

— Do the same things with less arrogance, repeated Grégoire. That is modest progress.

— It is the available progress.

He left. On the staircase he met a neighbour going up with a basket of linen. He stepped aside to let her pass. She thanked him without looking at him.

Outside, nothing had changed. Somewhere in the Luxembourg, David was in prison. In the great gallery of the Museum, artists were copying his Flemish paintings. In a laboratory at the École des Mines, calculations were waiting to be finished.

Hassenfratz turned up his collar against the October wind and took the road back.

Grégoire's visit to the Museum took place on the 12th Brumaire Year III — the 2nd of November 1794 — the Day of the Dead according to the old calendar, a coincidence he noted and did not quite know what to make of.

He had been writing all day. The report on the Flemish mission was progressing. He was at the third part, which dealt with the operations in Ghent — the most difficult to draft because it was there that things had been least defensible and most necessary to state honestly. He had rewritten the passage concerning the arrest of Canon De Vos four times since morning, trying to find a version that was neither a justification nor an accusation, that said what had happened and left the reader to judge. He had not yet succeeded. Every formulation tilted one way or the other, betrayed either defensiveness or self-flagellation, and neither was right.

Toward the end of the afternoon, he had set down his pen. He had stood up, walked through the apartment, stopped before a print hung near the window. A reproduction of Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* that a friend had given him and that he had always kept — not for its particular artistic merit, but for the quality of presence it gave off: that way Fra Angelico had of painting light as if it came from inside the forms rather than illuminating them from outside.

He had thought of Rome. Of what Lebrun had said after the Committee meeting — *if one goes as far as Rome, it will be a completely different thing from Flanders*. Fra Angelico was in Florence, not Rome. But the principle was the same. Works that could not be transported because they were the places in which they existed. Frescoes. Entire chapels. Architectural and pictorial ensembles whose meaning was inseparable from their location in a given space, a given building, a given city.

He had decided to go to the Museum.

He arrived at nightfall, as the rooms were closing to the public. Barbier was still there. He was always there at this hour, making his end-of-day round.

— Citizen Grégoire, said Barbier, seeing him enter through the side door used by the Museum's functionaries. The rooms are closing.

— I know. I would like to stay a moment. Alone, if that is possible.

Barbier assessed him with the neutral attention of a man processing a request without seeking to understand all its reasons.

— I need the guard to remain in the building.

— Naturally. I am not asking to be alone in the building. I am asking to be alone in the rooms.

— How long?

— An hour. Perhaps two.

— I will have a lantern sent to you. The appliqué candles will be extinguished within half an hour. There are replacement candles in the satchel if you need them. The guard will be in the lodge at the entrance. Knock three times if you wish to leave.

He left without adding anything. That was one of the qualities Grégoire appreciated in Barbier. He never asked why. He assessed whether a request was reasonable or not, and if it was, he granted it without requiring an explanation.

A guard brought the lantern a few minutes later. Then footsteps receded, a door closed somewhere at the back of the building, and Grégoire found himself alone in the great gallery.

The appliqué wall candles were still burning — for perhaps a quarter of an hour more. The light was warm, wavering, very different from the natural light of day. It gave the paintings a new quality, deepened the shadows differently, brought out certain colours and attenuated others. Grégoire was conscious of looking at the works in conditions that were not ideal for seeing them. But he had not come to see them in ideal conditions. He had come for another reason he could not have clearly formulated, which had to do with the fact that it was the Day of the Dead and that he had spent the day drafting a report about things that weighed on him.

He went first before the Van Eyck panels.

They were suspended on their dark cloth ground, the three central figures of the upper register, arranged in the order they had occupied in the Vijd Chapel, with between them the spaces that would have accommodated the other panels if they had all been taken. These empty spaces said something Grégoire could not ignore. They said that what one saw was a fragment. That the complete meaning of the work required other panels which were not there, which had remained in Ghent, and that the distance between Ghent and Paris figured exactly the distance between the fragment and the complete work.

He raised the lantern to see better the face of the Deity Enthroned.

Van Eyck had painted this face in 1432. Three hundred and sixty-two years before Grégoire looked at it in this room. During those three hundred and sixty-two years, this face had been looked at in the Vijd Chapel by generations of Ghent people who came to pray, who came to be married, who came to have their children baptised, who came to bury their dead. Priests had celebrated Mass before it. Children had learned to read by looking at the inscriptions surrounding it. Old people had spent their last years coming to sit in the chapel simply to be there — in that place that was theirs since always, in the presence of something that surpassed them and with which they had no need of an intellectual relationship for that relationship to exist.

All of that had ended on the morning of the 5th of August 1794 when Thouin had begun to remove the fittings.

The appliqué candles went out one by one, as they always did at this hour. Guards passed in the outer corridors and blew out the flames from the doorways without entering the rooms. The light of the lantern Grégoire held became the only light in the room.

He remained there in the dark with his lantern and the three panels.

This was not a visit of religious devotion. Grégoire was a priest, but what he felt before these panels was not exactly what he felt at Mass. It was a more complex reality, less clearly defined, which had to do with beauty, but not with beauty alone — with the ancientness of these paintings and everything they had traversed to be here.

He thought of the phrase he had been trying since morning to write in his report. The phrase about the arrest of Canon De Vos. He suddenly understood why it would not come. It was not because he could not find the right words. It was because he was trying to write something he did not yet think completely. He thought the arrest of the canon was regrettable. He did not yet think what it meant to have been personally present when it occurred and not to have protested loudly enough.

He had not reacted. He had told David it was pointless. He had said the old priest could not prevent them from taking the altarpiece anyway. He had let it happen. And two soldiers had seized an old man by the arms and dragged him from the steps of his cathedral.

He was there when it happened. He had done nothing.

He had felt this shame in Ghent, throughout the return journey, at Compiègne in the rain. Tonight, in the darkness of the room with his lantern, before these panels, it had an altogether different weight. The weight of things that can no longer be undone.

He lingered in the room. The lantern burned down to the end of the first candle, and he took from the satchel the replacement candle that Barbier had had put there, lit it from the dying flame of the first, and continued.

He passed into the Rubens room. He stopped before the reassembled *Descent from the Cross*, the cut joints barely visible, as Barbier had promised, the composition recovering its unity as if the Antwerp dismantling had never been. The body of Christ

descending from the cross in the white shroud. The figures around it in their perfect balance between movement and stability. Mary Magdalene kneeling, arms outstretched to receive the body. The fainting Virgin, supported by John.

Rubens had painted this in a city that was now bereaved of this painting. That thought was absurd — a city cannot be bereaved of a painting. And yet that was what Antwerp was, in the most concrete sense of the term. The walls of the cathedral still bore the marks of the vanished frames. The Antwerp faithful who came to pray before the empty space of the triptych saw the absence as much as they had seen the presence.

He passed into the third room.

The Mechelen Van Dyck was there, between the two high windows, in the position Barbier had chosen. The lantern light did not do it justice. It would need to be seen in daylight, in the October light that Barbier had so carefully sought. But even in this insufficient light, something of the painting remained present. The sobriety of the composition, the abandonment in Christ's face, that gaze directed toward something beyond the frame.

Grégoire raised the lantern. He looked at the face for a long time.

He thought of Abbé Huysmans in the choir stalls of Saint Rumbold's. *I will be dead before. But the church will be here.* Huysmans had said that with the serenity of someone who has settled for himself the question of his own place in time. Grégoire did not know whether he was capable of that.

The replacement candle began to fail.

He made a quick tour of the rooms, without lingering before each work. The three panels one last time. The great Jordaens that Lebrun had selected in Brussels in the governor's study. The two miniature-format Teniers, side by side, their village scenes of a precision that resisted all scales of observation. The Antwerp Rubenses.

He thought of Van Reyn. *Everything is written down. When circumstances change — and they always change — the documents will exist.* Van Reyn was right on one point and perhaps wrong on another. The documents would exist, yes — or at least some of them, those that would survive fires and wars and future revolutions. But the documents would state the facts. They would not say what the facts meant to those who had lived them. That, someone else needed to say. Someone who was there and who had had time to think about it.

The candle went out.

Grégoire remained in complete darkness, his eyes open, before his vision adjusted sufficiently to make out the shapes of the paintings in the obscurity — rectangles slightly less dark than the walls, barely perceptible, without colours, without detail, reduced to their bare presence in the space.

He found the door by touch, crossed the corridor, and knocked three times on the lodge door of the guard.

The following morning, he resumed his report. The phrase about the arrest of Canon De Vos came all at once, without effort, without revision. He wrote it, read it back, left it as it was. It said what needed to be said. No more. No less.

He continued.

David was released from the Luxembourg on the 28th Frimaire Year III — the 18th of December 1794 — after fifty-six days of detention. A guard returned his effects; another opened the door. He found himself in the street on a grey, cold December morning. No crowd. No ceremony. His name progressively disappeared from mission orders, from commissioner lists, from the convocation notices of the Committee of Public Instruction. It was not an official disgrace. It was softer and more definitive.

Grégoire personally brought him a copy of the report on the Flemish mission in February 1795.

David received Grégoire standing, a palette in hand. He did not stop painting.

— The report, said Grégoire, setting the document on a cleared table.

David glanced at it without approaching.

— I have read it. Lakanal forwarded it to me.

— And?

— And you say we acted badly. With nuance, with reservations, with all the moral complexity of which you are capable. But that is what you say.

— I say that we acted with mixed motives and questionable methods. That is not quite the same thing.

— For those we despoiled, it is the same thing.

— Yes. For them, it is the same thing. That is precisely why it needed to be written.

David set down his palette and looked at Grégoire for the first time since the start of the conversation. His face had changed since Ghent — not aged; something more precise than that. A permanent attentiveness to sounds, perhaps, or simply the habit acquired of letting nothing show. What fifty-six days in a closed room does to a man accustomed to filling spaces.

— Do you think your report will change anything? he asked.

— No. Not now. Perhaps later.

— Later, you will be dead. So will I.

— Documents outlive men. That is their use.

David gave his approval. He took up his palette again.

— You have always believed that words could catch up with acts. That is your strength and your limitation. The acts occurred. The paintings are in Paris. Your report will change nothing about that. In ten years, in twenty years, no one will read your report. They will see the paintings.

— The two can coexist.

— Theoretically. In practice, what is beautiful erases what is written about how it came to be there. Beauty has that quality — it makes one forget its history. Perhaps that is why men hold so strongly to possessing it.

Grégoire took his hat.

— I am not sure you are wrong. But I prefer to have written it all the same.

He left. On the staircase, he heard David resume his work — the characteristic sound of brush on canvas, regular, concentrated: a man doing what he knew how to do better than anything else, and who perhaps needed nothing more in order to continue.

Grégoire's report was registered by the secretariat of the Committee of Public Instruction on the 15th Pluviôse Year III — the 3rd of February 1795. It received an archive number, was copied in three exemplars according to standard procedure, and filed in the bundle devoted to artistic missions in conquered territories. Lakanal acknowledged receipt with a three-line note thanking Grégoire for the quality of his work and saying nothing else.

Grégoire waited. Nothing came. No summons to discuss it. No response to the questions he had posed in the final pages about the procedures to be put in place for future missions, about the question of possible restitutions, about the status of the parallel documents established by Van Reyn in Brussels and by the canons of Ghent and Antwerp.

The report existed. It was archived. It might perhaps be read one day by someone looking for something else and stumbling across it by chance. That was all.

Grégoire returned to his other work — there was a great deal of it, there always was. He wrote on dechristianisation, on public instruction, on the question of regional languages and their relationship to national unity. He attended the sessions of the

Convention and then of the Council of Five Hundred when his mandate required it. He corresponded with scholars, theologians, men of letters throughout Europe. His life was made of texts produced and received, of ideas put into form and debated, of an intellectual activity that had no need of the Committee of Public Instruction in order to exist.

But from time to time, when he passed before the archives building in the Rue Saint-Honoré, he thought of the numbered bundle where his report waited in the dark. He wondered whether Van Reyn was still in post in Brussels, whether his sixty-eight pages had joined their own archives, whether the two documents — the French report and the Belgian inventory — were echoing each other somewhere in two archival systems that did not communicate with each other. He would never know. It was a thought he learned to let pass without dwelling on it.

At the Museum, the year 1795 was a year of settling in.

Barbier had obtained in January the credits necessary to recruit four additional restorers — trained men, two French and two Flemish, who had worked for private collections before the Revolution and who knew the old techniques from the inside, through practice rather than theory. They installed themselves in the restoration workshops and began with the most urgent pieces: the cut joints of the Rubenses that required a lengthy treatment, the cracked panel of Saint John the Baptist whose provisional consolidation by Thouin was holding, but which Barbier wanted permanently resolved before the following winter.

The panel of Saint John the Baptist occupied the principal restorer, a Flemish man named Joris, for six weeks. He worked with a slowness and precision that reminded Lebrun, who frequented the workshops, of Thouin's method in the Vijd Chapel in Ghent — the same economy of gesture, the same attention to every millimetre, the same refusal to be hurried by anything external to the task itself. The crack was consolidated

with a mixture of hide glue and lime wood planed into very thin strips, laid crosswise on either side of the fracture line to stabilise the support without rigidifying it. At the end of six weeks, the result was invisible to the naked eye from the painted face. Joris spent three more days verifying that nothing was showing through in the painted layer before declaring the work finished.

Barbier examined the panel, said nothing for a long moment, then:

— Good.

That was his maximum approbation.

The public continued to come. The attendance figures that Barbier compiled each month showed a regular progression — not the great crowds of the first weeks after the Flemish inauguration, but a steady attendance made up of visitors who returned, who brought family members, who stopped longer before the same paintings at each visit. Barbier noted this with satisfaction in his monthly reports to the Committee of Public Instruction. It was not the attendance itself that mattered to him — he was not a man to concern himself with figures for their own sake. What mattered was what the figures indicated: that something had settled, that the Museum had become a habit for part of the Parisian population. That was what he had wanted from the beginning.

Lebrun came to the Museum two or three times a week. Rarely to look at the paintings — or rather, looking at the paintings was no longer his main activity when he came. He came to work in the small room that Barbier had assigned him on the first floor, a former meeting room with a window overlooking the Seine and a table large enough to spread out the maps and dossiers he needed.

He was preparing the Italian lists.

This work had begun informally, on his own initiative, from the autumn of 1794. No one had asked him to do it. Lakanal knew

he was doing it and had not said to stop. That was enough for Lebrun, who had learned long ago that in public organizations, initiatives that were not forbidden were often more useful than initiatives expressly ordered.

He compiled everything that existed on the Italian collections — travel accounts, guides, sale catalogues published over the previous century, collectors' correspondence, diplomats' reports. Richardson, Cochin, De Brosses, Lalande. De Brosses's *Lettres familières* on his 1739 journey were particularly precious. De Brosses had visited Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna, Florence, Rome with the eye of a scholar who loved painting and had the discipline to note what he saw with precision. His descriptions of the Farnese collections in Parma, the Este galleries in Modena, the Vatican, were the best available starting point for someone who had not yet been on site.

Lebrun annotated, compared, corrected where more recent sources contradicted De Brosses on a point. He drew up cards by city, by collection, by artist. For each identified work, he noted the approximate dimensions when he could find them, the support — canvas, panel, fresco, marble — the conservation condition as the sources described it, and a column simply headed *Feasibility* in which he noted the practical constraints of any possible requisition.

This column was often the longest. Frescoes, invariably, received the notation *Untransportable, to be documented on site*. The great altarpieces — there were several in Bologna and Parma whose dimensions exceeded those of the Antwerp Rubenses — received notes on the necessity of dismantling or cutting, with the corresponding risks. Marble sculptures posed problems of weight and fragility that Lebrun noted along with Thouin's estimates of the load capacity of Alpine carts.

This preparatory work was silent and invisible. It was done in a small Museum room, between a man and his documents, without anyone outside Barbier and Lakanal knowing its precise extent.

But it was this work that would make it possible, when the time came, to act quickly and well — not to find oneself in Milan or Parma improvising decisions under military pressure, as had happened in Ghent and Antwerp where haste had nearly proved costly several times over.

One April afternoon in 1795, Hassenfratz passed through the room where Lebrun was working. He lingered over the spread maps — the same map of northern Italy he had looked at in the Committee of Public Instruction room in October, but now covered in pencil annotations, in numbers referring to the files stacked to one side.

— Parma, he said, looking at an annotation.

— Correggio, Lebrun replied without looking up. Fifteen mobile paintings identified. Two major problems: the *Dead Christ* at the convent of San Giovanni Evangelista is set into a fixed altarpiece that would require intervention on the structure of the convent itself to free it. And the *Madonna della Scodella*, a poplar panel two metres seventeen by one metre thirty-seven, with its enormous original carved frame, exceeds the transport capacity of Alpine carts.

— Do you truly think we will go as far as Parma?

Lebrun looked up.

— I think we will go as far as Rome. Parma is on the way.

Hassenfratz looked at the map again for a moment.

— We need people who know the terrain. Not only from books. People who have been there.

— Denon, said Lebrun. He spent three years in Italy before the Revolution. He speaks the language. He knows the collections from the inside, not only from travellers' descriptions. Lakanal has already approached him.

— And would he accept?

— He is waiting. He is the kind of man who does things when formally asked, not when half-hinted at. He needs the mission to be real in order to commit to it fully.

Hassenfratz took a chair and sat down facing the table. It was not his habit to sit in another man's office to talk about things not yet decided. But something in Lebrun's maps and files made him want to stay a moment.

— When, in your view?

— When the army moves. Not before. One cannot plan a requisition without knowing which cities are in French hands. But when the army moves, one will need to be ready to leave within days. Not weeks. Days.

— The Italian campaign is planned for next spring. If the generals hold to the timetable.

— Generals never hold to the timetable. But next spring is the reasonable horizon, yes.

Hassenfratz rose. He looked at the map one last time — the pencil annotations, the columns of figures in the files.

— You have worked well.

It was the highest form of praise Hassenfratz produced. Lebrun knew it. He replied with a nod and returned to his files.

The Directory took power on the 4th Brumaire Year IV — the 26th of October 1795. Five directors, a new constitution, a regime that wished to be stable after the convulsions of the Terror and Thermidor and which resembled, to those who observed it closely, a provisional balance between forces that had not finished measuring themselves against each other. Lakanal survived the transition as he had survived all the preceding ones, through that faculty he had of making himself necessary to institutions without ever identifying with those who led them.

The war continued. In Germany, the armies of the Sambre-et-Meuse and the Rhine had advanced, retreated, advanced again without reaching a decision. In Italy, Barthélemy Schérer's army

had been stationary for months on the heights of Liguria, unable to force the Austro-Piedmontese positions for lack of means. The Directory was displeased. It wanted victories, territories, resources. Northern Italy represented in its eyes all of those at once: agricultural and commercial wealth, strategic positions against Austria, and the artistic collections whose inventories Lebrun had drawn up in his small Museum room.

In November 1795, Lakanal summoned Hassenfratz.

The summons arrived one morning as an ordinary note, without indication of subject. Hassenfratz went to the Rue Saint-Honoré the following afternoon. He found Lakanal alone in his office, without a secretary, without the usual functionaries who ordinarily peopled these meetings.

— Sit down. I am going to speak to you about a matter that is not yet official.

— Very well.

— The Directory has decided to replace Schérer in Italy. The new commander of the Army of Italy has not yet been publicly announced. But it is Bonaparte. General Bonaparte.

Hassenfratz knew the name. Everyone in Paris knew the name since Vendémiaire, when that same Bonaparte had dispersed the royalist insurrection before Saint-Roch with grapeshot. An effective man, they said. Brutal on occasion. Ambitious certainly.

— The Italian campaign will resume in the spring. Bonaparte leaves for Nice in March. If everything goes according to military forecasts, Milan could fall before summer. Which leaves us between four and six months to finalise the artistic commission.

— Lebrun is ready. The lists are ready. The essential preparatory work is done.

— I know. I have seen his files. It is remarkable. What I want to ask you tonight is whether you will accept to take up the role you held in Flanders. General coordination. Logistics. The link

between the artistic commissioners and the military realities in the field.

Hassenfratz did not reply immediately. This was not hesitation. He had made this decision long before — since the maps in the Committee room in October 1794, since the afternoon in Lebrun's office before the Italian files. It was not Italy that attracted him. He did not have the temperament of men fascinated by foreign countries. It was the idea that what had gone badly in Flanders could go differently, that the mistakes had been identified, that the conditions existed for doing the same thing with less damage. That kind of problem interested him. Not the paintings. The problem. But he had learned, in meetings and negotiations, that replying too quickly gave the impression one had not measured what one was committing to.

— Yes. Under two conditions.

— Which?

— First, the commission's authority over the requisitions must be real. Not nominal. In Flanders, David constantly exceeded collective decisions in the name of political considerations the other commissioners did not share. In Italy, with Bonaparte, military pressure will replace David's political pressure. The result could be the same: decisions made too quickly, badly packed works, avoidable damage. I want the commission to have the right to say no to an impossible deadline, and for that no to be respected.

Lakanal reflected.

— That is a difficult condition to guarantee when the army is in the field.

— I know. But if it is not guaranteed in principle, it will never be respected in practice. I want it written into the commission's instructions.

— And the second condition?

— Denon. He must be part of the commission. Not as an auxiliary or liaison agent, but as a full commissioner, with an equal voice to Lebrun or Thouin. He knows Italy from the inside. We only know books.

— Denon is already planned for. But the title of full commissioner — that is a question of precedence that complicates the hierarchical relationships.

— It is a question of efficiency. If Denon does not have the authority corresponding to his competence, he will be short-circuited by the military officers he deals with. They only respect official titles.

Lakanal reflected for a moment, eyes on the table.

— I will see what I can do. For the first condition — the commission's autonomy on deadlines — I can include a clause in the instructions. For Denon, I need to speak to the other Directors.

— That is sufficient.

He took his hat. Lakanal stopped him.

— One more thing. Grégoire.

— What about Grégoire?

— He wants to go to Italy. He told me so three weeks ago. He believes his presence in the Flemish commission served some purpose, despite what he says himself. He wants to do it again.

Hassenfratz remained standing, hat in hand.

— And you?

— I think he is right on the substance. His presence in Flanders modified behaviours. The Italian campaign will be long, physically demanding. The mountain roads are nothing like the Flemish roads.

— He knows that.

— Yes. He told me he knows it and wants to go all the same. What do you think?

— I think he should come. Not because it will change the facts. But because some men need to be present at things in order to testify to them honestly. And Grégoire is that kind of man.

— I will note that.

Hassenfratz left. In the street, the evening was falling on Paris with the early onset of November evenings. A light withdrawing quickly, without transition, leaving grey facades and cobblestones wet with a drizzle not quite yet rain. He took the road to the École des Mines.

The following weeks passed in that muted tension that precedes great enterprises. The decisions of principle had been taken, but nothing was yet real. The lists and plans existed on paper — they had not yet encountered the roads, the weights, the unforeseen resistances.

Lebrun continued his files. He added a section on Rome, less detailed than the others — because the sources on the Vatican collections were less accessible and less precise — but sufficient to have an idea of the scale. He wrote to two antiquaries he knew in Florence to ask for information about the current state of certain collections whose descriptions in his sources dated from several decades back. The replies were slow to come. The roads between Paris and Florence were not safe, the postal service was irregular, and the Florentine antiquaries had their own reasons to be cautious about what they communicated to Frenchmen.

Thouin prepared the equipment. He had drawn lessons from Flanders on several points: the carrying straps that had nearly given way in Ghent, the insufficient-quality tallow for caulking the joints in damp weather. For Italy, he wanted doubled straps, tallow verified before departure, and a surgeon or at least an apothecary in the team.

Hassenfratz dealt with the question of the Alpine passes. He obtained, through the intermediary of the general staff, the reports of military engineers on the roads of the Simplon and the

Mont-Cenis — their current state, their load capacity, the sections requiring works before they could support heavy convoys. He also studied winter storage in Milan, in case the campaign extended beyond October and made an Alpine crossing impossible before the following spring.

Monge joined the commission officially in December 1795. Berthollet followed in January 1796. Denon received his title of full commissioner. Lakanal had won his case with the Directors, after, it was said, a rather heated discussion with one of them who felt that artists and antiquaries did not need official titles to do their work and that official titles cost money. The efficiency argument had prevailed.

Grégoire was appointed last, in February 1796, by an order of the Committee of Public Instruction designating him as a commission member with the title of *moral and historical counsellor*. A title no one had ever held before him, invented specifically for his situation, because none of the existing titles corresponded exactly to what he was being asked to be. He accepted it.

On the 15th of March, Hassenfratz crossed Paris on foot to attend an important meeting. It was a dry cold. He walked fast, the notes of the previous week in his pocket.

Before the Committee building, he stopped a moment. The first-floor windows were lit. He could hear voices inside. Lebrun, recognizable by his delivery, and someone else he could not make out. The commission was already there. The table was no doubt covered with the same maps as in October 1794, the same pins in the same cities — but with this difference: that this time the army was truly moving, that Bonaparte had already left Paris, that what had been an abstract preparation for sixteen months was about to become real in the coming weeks.

Flanders. Ghent. The convoy in the Compiègne rain, the carts that had nearly overturned three times in the mud before Valenciennes. The summons he had found on his table at the École des Mines in October 1794 — an ordinary sheet of paper,

giving no hint of what it was about to set in motion. That was where everything had begun.

He pushed open the door and went up. The door closed behind him on the empty street.

CHAPTER II: THE RUSH ON ITALY (1796)

I — The Map of Italy

Paris, March 1796

Hassenfratz entered the room as Lebrun was unfolding a large map of northern Italy on the table. The others were already there. Thouin filing his notes, Monge leaning over something that Berthollet was pointing out to him, Denon standing near the window with the look of a traveller who recognises a country he has already passed through. Grégoire sat at the end of the table, his hands flat on the wood, watching the map unfold.

Lakanal presided. He gestured to Hassenfratz to sit.

— Lebrun was about to present the state of his lists. You arrive at the right moment.

Lebrun had spent eighteen months preparing for this moment. The dossiers stacked before him were covered in pencil annotations, corrections, crossed-out and rewritten figures. He had taken the matter seriously before it was official.

— Milan first. The Ambrosiana possesses what we lack most: *the Codex Atlanticus* by Leonardo da Vinci, twelve volumes of manuscripts, more than a thousand sheets of notes and drawings. Inestimable for the sciences and the arts. There are also the Bruegels: a series of four coppers representing the Elements, commissioned by Cardinal Borromeo. A *Virgin with a Garland*, a collaboration between Brueghel the Elder and Rubens. And a *Madonna* by Luini.

— The dimensions of the Codex? asked Hassenfratz.

— Sixty-four centimetres by forty-three. Twelve volumes. Leather bindings. Estimated weight forty kilos in total.

Hassenfratz noted. Transportable format. A compartmented, padded crate, with absorbent bags against moisture. He had already considered this problem — manuscripts were the most

delicate category, more so than paintings, because parchment reacted to temperature variations in ways that wood and canvas did not, to the same degree.

— The mobile paintings in Milan, Lebrun continued, represent approximately a hundred and forty-seven first-rate pieces if one includes the collections of the ducal palaces and the churches. But we cannot take everything. I have established a priority list — the twenty to thirty pieces without which the Museum will remain deficient on the Lombard Renaissance.

— The frescoes? asked Denon.

— Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* at Santa Maria delle Grazie. Untransportable — a mural integrated into the refectory wall. Luini's frescoes in various churches. Same problem. We document; we do not take.

— That is the limit of the system, said Grégoire without raising his voice. The most important works are precisely those that cannot be moved.

— It is the physical limit, said Lebrun. Not of the system.

Grégoire looked at the map.

Denon intervened. He knew northern Italy, having travelled there before the Revolution — three years spent between Milan, Venice and Rome, frequenting workshops, private collections, academies.

— In Milan, the authorities will cooperate if Bonaparte is behind us. The city has been under Austrian domination for a century and a half; a fraction of the population will welcome us willingly, at least at first. But the custodians of the collections will be another matter. The Ambrosiana is run by ecclesiastics. They answer only to Rome.

— They will answer to the French army, Thouin replied curtly.

— They will comply. But one must expect formal protests, parallel registers, testimonies intended for the future. As at Ghent and Antwerp.

— As at Ghent and Antwerp, Hassenfratz confirmed. It is inevitable and it is their right. The question is not to avoid their protests, but to handle the works with sufficient care that their complaints concern the requisition itself and not damage caused during transport.

Lakanal nodded.

— That is precisely the distinction the Directory wishes to maintain. The requisitions are stipulated in the armistices. They are legal under the law of war. Damage to the works, on the other hand, would be indefensible.

— Then the necessary time must be allowed, said Hassenfratz. Bonaparte will want fast convoys. Trophies in Paris before summer to justify the campaign in public opinion. I saw how David operated in Flanders when he was pressed for time. Result: the Van Eyck panels nearly sawed in the wrong place, the Antwerp Rubens subjected to a saw amputation that Barbier is still spending weeks restoring. Speed costs more than time lost.

— Bonaparte is not David, said Monge.

— No. Bonaparte is more efficient. That is what is dangerous for the works.

Lebrun turned a page of his dossier.

— Parma. The duchy possesses the largest collection of Correggio in the world. Antonio Allegri, died 1534. His frescoes in the cathedral and at San Giovanni Evangelista are untransportable. Same problem as the *Last Supper*, but on even larger surfaces. His mobile paintings, however, are accessible. The *Virgin and Child with Saint Jerome* — known as *Il Giorno* — is considered by some critics one of the most beautiful paintings in the world. Two metres thirty-five in height. Oil on poplar panel. Excellent condition.

— Weight? asked Hassenfratz.

— Approximately eighty kilos with the frame. Fifty without.

— Road toward the Alps from Parma?

— Across the Po plain to Milan, then the Splügen. But if one operates in Parma in June or July, the passes will be open. The problem will be the heat — the great thermal variations between the Italian plain in summer and the Alpine passes at altitude can crack wood panels.

— Reinforced crating with insulation, said Thouin. I have the specifications. We can solve that.

— Modena next, Lebrun continued. The Este gallery. Titians, Veroneses, Correggios, Dosso Dossis. But the duke has signed his armistice — he will deliver what is stipulated. The question is what we stipulate.

— Bologna, said Monge. The Bolognese school is absent from the Museum. The Carracci, Guido Reni, Guercino. At least a hundred works identified as priorities. The armistice with the Papal States will include Bologna — it is a pontifical city.

— And Rome.

Everyone looked at him.

— Rome, he repeated. The Vatican. The Belvedere. The *Apollo*. The *Laocoön*. The Raphael Stanze. The Sistine. Do we go that far?

— The handling of Rome depends on the Pope, Lakanal remarked. The Directory has not yet decided whether to march on Rome or negotiate. Bonaparte will have his say.

— Bonaparte will march on Rome if the Directory permits it, said Denon. He has northern Italy. He will want the rest.

— And the Raphael Stanze cannot be transported any more than the *Last Supper*, Grégoire went on. We can go as far as Rome. We can take what can be transported. But the heart of Rome will remain in Rome. Which means Paris will never have everything.

— That question has already been posed, said Lebrun. It has no satisfactory answer. That is not a reason not to go.

— No. It is not a reason.

The discussion stretched on. Hassenfratz took notes — columns of figures, city names, logistical questions to be resolved before departure. The passes. The carts. The crates. The escort numbers. The convoy timetable in relation to the military advance. All of it depended on one principal unknown: Bonaparte's speed. If the campaign went as quickly as some hoped, the commissioners would need to be ready to operate in Milan by May. That left six weeks to finalise the lists, assemble the equipment, recruit the packers.

Six weeks to prepare what Lebrun had taken eighteen months to plan and what Flanders had taken two years to make possible.

At the end of the meeting, Lakanal detained Hassenfratz for a moment.

— Bonaparte knows you are coming. I forwarded your name with the others. He replied that he wants to see you in Milan as soon as the city is taken.

— Does he know about Flanders?

— He knows the results of Flanders. The figures. The works in the Museum. He does not know the details of the operation.

— The details of the operation are what matters.

— For you, yes. For Bonaparte, it is the results that count. You will need to find common ground on this.

— In Flanders, we had David. He had clear preferences and imposed them. That caused problems — decisions made too quickly, pressure on packing deadlines, an unnecessary arrest in Ghent. Bonaparte will be different from David on some points. On others, the problem will be the same. The question is not whether we will be autonomous. We will not. The question is how we obtain the necessary time within the constraints he will impose on us.

Hassenfratz took his hat. Through the window, Paris was coming to life in the March light — a light still cold, but already different from January's.

In five weeks, perhaps less, Bonaparte would cross the Alps.

II — What Can Be Transported

— That is what I negotiated with Lakanal, said Monge. The commission's instructions include a clause on packing deadlines. No convoy can leave without the approval of the technical commissioner responsible for the conditioning.

— Will this clause hold against Bonaparte?

— It will hold if we defend it together. If each commissioner defends it individually, it will not last two days.

Denon smiled — a smile that was not irony, but a certain recognition of the lucidity of the formulation.

— Then we must be agreed.

Lebrun turned several pages of his dossier and stopped at a section marked with a red paper bookmark.

— Parma. The Duchy of Parma is governed by Ferdinand de Bourbon, son-in-law of the King of Spain. A small state of approximately three hundred thousand inhabitants, hemmed between Lombardy and Tuscany. Little military weight. But a ducal collection of exceptional importance for one unique reason: Correggio. Antonio Allegri, known as Correggio. Painter of the Lombard Renaissance. His frescoes in the cathedral of Parma and in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista are the most important in northern Italy after those of the Sistine. But it is the mobile paintings that interest us.

— How many paintings? asked Hassenfratz.

— Twenty-three Correggios in the ducal gallery alone. Plus works dispersed in churches and private collections. It is the greatest existing concentration of Correggio. The Museum possesses none.

— None, repeated Monge.

— It is the most serious gap, along with the Bolognese. A museum that claims to represent Italian Renaissance painting without a single Correggio is an incomplete museum. The critics have been saying so for ten years.

— What makes Correggio irreplaceable? asked Berthollet. I know the name. I know the reputation. But I have never seen his paintings.

Lebrun considered for a moment — not because he did not know what to say, but because he was searching for the right formulation, one that would say something real rather than repeat the usual critical judgments.

— Correggio invented a way of painting light that no one had found before him and that no one since has quite reproduced. Not the dramatic light of Caravaggio. Not chiaroscuro, contrast, violence. The opposite. A golden, diffuse light that seems to come from inside the forms rather than illuminating them from outside. The transitions between light and shadow are imperceptible — one cannot see where the shadow begins, where the clarity ends. Everything blends into a harmony that seems unconstructed. That seems given. Natural. Inevitable.

— Is it a question of technique? asked Berthollet.

— It is a question of technique and of something else that technique alone does not suffice to explain. Painters who have studied his paintings closely — Mengs, Reynolds — said they understood without being able to reproduce. As if the method were visible and the result inaccessible. That is what defines genius, perhaps: the possibility of analysis without imitation.

Denon intervened.

— I saw *Il Giorno* in Parma in 1788. The *Virgin and Child with Saint Jerome*. It was Francesco Algarotti who called it the most beautiful painting in the world — an excessive formula, as all superlatives are, but one that captures part of the truth about its effect.

— These dimensions pose a transport problem. A panel of this size means a custom crate, a reinforced cart, and particular attention to the thermal variations between the Italian plain in July and the Alpine passes at altitude. Wood works. Cracks appear at the joints when the temperature drops twenty degrees in forty-eight hours.

— That is manageable. We solved comparable problems in Flanders. The Van Eyck panels crossed the summer of 1794 without damage. With appropriate precautions — thermal insulation in the crate, daily monitoring of humidity — *Il Giorno* can make the journey.

— We will need Italian carpenters on site. One cannot transport empty crates from Paris to Italy. We bring the tools, the packing materials. Wood is available locally. So are craftsmen. The question is finding the right ones — men who understand what they are building, not naval carpenters requisitioned because they happen to be there.

— Does Denon know craftsmen in Milan? asked Thouin.

— Cabinet-makers, not crate-makers. But I can identify the right contacts. Workshops that work for ducal collections know the constraints of transporting works. They pack for loans between collections. It is a common practice in the Italian duchies, going back a century.

Lebrun continued.

— In Parma, beyond the Correggios, the ducal gallery possesses Parmigianinos. Francesco Mazzola, admirer and continuator of Correggio. Refined Mannerist style, elongated figures of a particular grace. Eight paintings identified. And Schedonis. Bartolomeo Schedoni, early seventeenth-century Baroque, dramatic chiaroscuro influenced by Caravaggio. Two or three first-rate pieces.

— The frescoes in Parma? asked Monge.

— *The Assumption of the Virgin* in the dome of the cathedral. Painted by Correggio between 1526 and 1530. Twelve metres in diameter. Painted surface of approximately two hundred and thirty square metres. Untransportable. The same physical impossibility as in Milan with the *Last Supper*.

— Have you seen it? Berthollet asked Denon.

— Yes. One climbs into the dome by a narrow staircase — two hundred steps — and arrives on a platform a few metres from the fresco. Close up, the figures appear deformed, almost monstrous. The limbs are absurdly elongated. The proportions are distorted. One cannot make out what one is looking at.

— And from below? asked Grégoire, who had raised his eyes from the map.

— From below, from the floor of the nave, fifty metres beneath, everything organises itself. The distortions disappear, corrected by the perspective. The spiral of angels truly rises toward the sky. It is a vision. A perfect illusion calculated over four years of work on the scaffolding. Correggio drew each figure with the exact distortion necessary for it to look right when seen from below. It is mathematical work of a complexity one would not expect from a painter.

— That is applied descriptive geometry, said Monge with sudden interest.

— Precisely. Two centuries before the discipline existed as such.

Monge noted something in his notebook. Hassenfratz watched him — the geometer had just found a personal reason to take an interest in Parma beyond the transportable paintings. That was not without use. A commissioner who wanted to see something with his own eyes worked better than one who was executing instructions.

Lebrun turned to the next section.

— Modena. The Este Duchy. Ercole III, last of a line that has ruled Modena since 1598 after losing Ferrara to the Pope. A

passionate collector like all his ancestors. The ducal gallery possesses Titians, Veroneses, more Correggios, Dosso Dossis — a Ferrarese painter of the sixteenth century, a remarkable colourist whose paintings have an almost dreamlike quality that critics find difficult to categorise. And above all a collection of drawings that particularly interests the commission.

— Drawings? said Thouin.

— Approximately thirteen hundred sheets. In twenty-six portfolios. Assembled over three centuries by the Este dukes. Raphaels, Michelangelos, Leonardo da Vincis, Titians, Correggios. Carraccis — Annibale above all, who left hundreds of preparatory studies. Guercinos. In practice, drawings are more precious than many paintings because they show thought at work — the idea before it becomes a work, genius in its movement rather than in its result.

— And lighter to transport, said Hassenfratz.

He had said it without thinking. The logistician's argument: what weighs less travels better. What this meant here was that Leonardo's drawings would leave more easily than Titian's paintings. He did not dwell on it. It was his work not to dwell on it.

— And lighter to transport, yes. A portfolio of fifty drawings weighs under a kilo. The transport risks are different — moisture is the principal enemy, not impact. One needs hermetic crates, lined with zinc if possible, with tissue paper between each sheet.

— Zinc is available in northern Italy, said Berthollet. The mines of Trentino. No supply problem.

— There is also in Modena, Lebrun continued, a collection of Renaissance medals and antique cameos assembled since the fifteenth century. Approximately three hundred medals — portraits of Italian princes, works by Pisanello, Sperandio, Niccolò Fiorentino, the great medallists of the Renaissance. And

a hundred and fifty cameos — Roman and Greek engraved stones of variable quality, but the best of which are exceptional.

— Will the duke surrender all of this voluntarily? asked Monge.

— The duke will surrender what the armistice stipulates. Bonaparte sets the framework. If the armistice says twenty paintings, the duke will deliver twenty paintings. The question is what we put in those twenty paintings and whether the drawings, medals and cameos count separately or fall under the same heading.

Hassenfratz looked up.

— In Flanders, the terms of the requisitions were deliberately vague. That gave us latitude, but also created conflicts with local authorities who disputed the interpretation. For Italy, I recommend precise terms in the armistices. Not twenty works of art, but twenty paintings, plus the drawings, plus the scientific objects, plus the medals. Each category named separately. That avoids disputes after the fact.

— Bonaparte will not want overly detailed armistices, said Denon. Details slow down negotiations. He wants quick agreements.

— Details in the armistices protect us, said Hassenfratz. Without them, the dukes can argue that medals are not works of art and refuse to hand them over. Or conversely that we are taking more than stipulated if we interpret broadly. Precision of terms is in everyone's interest, including Bonaparte's — he has no need of legal disputes after his military victories.

Lakanal took notes. Hassenfratz saw that he was noting exactly what had just been said — word for word, not a summary. He was a man who knew formulations mattered.

— Bologna, said Lebrun, turning another page. A pontifical city. It has belonged to the Papal States since the sixteenth century. A hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants. University founded in 1088, the oldest in Europe. A major artistic centre — the

Bolognese school of the seventeenth century is the most influential in Italy after the Venetian. The Carracci, who founded their academy in Bologna in 1582, trained generations of painters and defined the classical Baroque aesthetic that dominated European painting for a century.

— Which the Museum does not have, said Monge.

— Almost nothing. A few minor works acquired before the Revolution by private collectors and nationalised since. Nothing representative. Nothing that allows one to understand what the Bolognese school was. The Carracci are missing. Guido Reni is missing — the man considered the greatest painter in Europe by his contemporaries, whom Stendhal still calls the man with a French soul. Guercino is missing. Domenichino is missing.

— The major pieces?

The Massacre of the Innocents by Guido Reni. Two metres sixty-eight by two metres eleven. Painted in 1611. Sublime violence — terror and formal beauty in the same painting, which is what classical Baroque sought to achieve. Guercino's *Saint William of Aquitaine* — dramatic chiaroscuro, diagonal composition, physical force rendered in paint with a brutality that recalls Caravaggio, but with a lyricism distinctly its own.

— The dimensions of these paintings pose a problem, said Thouin. Three metres seventy-five — that is a crate that cannot pass through an ordinary door. One must enter through windows, use pulley-blocks, provide low-loading platform carts.

— It is feasible, said Hassenfratz. Complicated, but feasible. The Antwerp Rubenses were two metres fifty. We got them out. With the right teams and the right tools, three metres seventy-five is not an absolute limit.

— We need restorers on site, said Lebrun. Not merely packers. Men capable of assessing the condition of each work before and after it is taken down. If a canvas shows lifting of the painted layer, one does not take it down before consolidation. Otherwise

one arrives in Paris with a damaged painting that cannot be exhibited and that will be a source of controversy.

— Barbier can send two of his restorers, said Thouin. Joris the Fleming, and Renard who worked on the Rubenses over the winter. They are the best available.

— Can they leave within six weeks? asked Lakanal.

— If you request it officially, yes. Barbier will protest because he needs them at the Museum for work in progress. But if it is a Committee order, he will comply.

Lakanal noted further. Hassenfratz watched the list lengthen — restorers, packers, carpenters, zinc for the crates, Japanese tissue paper for the drawings, Flemish felt for the paintings, treated hemp rope for the lashings. An operation that was looking less and less like a cultural mission and more and more like a military campaign with its own logistical requirements, its own supply chains, its own vulnerabilities.

That was not a bad comparison, in the end.

It was Grégoire who posed the question, and he posed it in a way that made clear he had prepared it — not in the sense of a calculated provocation, but in the way of someone who has thought long about something and is waiting for the appropriate moment to say it.

— We have been speaking for two hours about Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna. We have been speaking of transportable paintings, dimensions, weights, custom crates, Alpine passes. All of that is necessary. But there is a question we have not asked, and it is the only one that counts. Are we going as far as Rome?

No one replied. Lakanal set down his pen.

— The decision belongs to the Directory.

— I am not speaking of the military decision. I am speaking of the decision in principle. Does the Italian commission have a mandate to go as far as Rome, or does it stop at Bologna?

— The mandate is Italy, said Lebrun. Rome is in Italy.

— Rome is in the Papal States. That is different from a duchy subdued by military force. The Pope is a spiritual sovereign with authority over Catholics throughout Europe, including France. Attacking Rome is attacking something that goes beyond Italian politics.

— The Directory is not sensitive to the religious argument, said Berthollet.

— The Directory may be sensitive to the political argument. A hundred thousand French soldiers are Catholic. Their families are Catholic. Confiscating the Vatican's treasures is an act that Robespierre himself had not dared to commit.

— Robespierre had no army in Italy, said Denon.

Grégoire nodded — not to concede the point, but to indicate he had heard it.

— I am not saying one must not go to Rome. I am saying one ought to know what one is going there to do before going. Because Rome poses problems that Milan, Parma and Modena do not.

— Which? asked Monge.

III — The Roman Question

— One takes what can be transported, as everywhere.

— Yes. But what can be transported in Rome is not the best of Rome. The best of Rome is in the walls, in the domes, in the ceilings. The *Apollo Belvedere* can be transported. It is an antique sculpture on a plinth, two metres twenty in height, Parian marble, estimated weight eight hundred kilos. The *Laocoön* can be transported. Three marble figures, a sculptural group, more complex dimensions, but feasible. The Vatican's painting collections can be partially transported — the movable paintings of the Pinacoteca, certain tapestries from the Stanze. But Raphael

remains in Rome. Michelangelo remains in Rome. And what Raphael did in the Stanze and what Michelangelo did in the Sistine is of an order of magnitude above everything we can take away.

— What you describe, Lebrun replied with a slight impatience, is the situation of all frescoes in Italy. The *Last Supper* remains in Milan. *The Assumption* remains in Parma. We have known this from the start. It does not prevent us from going.

— No. But it should prevent us from claiming that Paris will be the new conservatory of humanity. If Raphael remains in Rome, if Michelangelo remains in Rome, if the *Last Supper* remains in Milan, then what we assemble in Paris is not the totality of Western art. It is a part — considerable, but a part. And it seems important to say this, here, before we leave, rather than to discover it afterwards.

Outside, the March light had changed — the sun had moved during the day and now illuminated the maps pinned to the walls differently, giving the tracings of roads and cities a slight depth they had not had in the morning.

It was Denon who replied, and his reply surprised Hassenfratz by its precision.

— You are right about the fact. You are wrong about the conclusion. Paris will not be the universal conservatory. That is an untenable pretension and everyone here knows it. But Paris can become the place where the greatest accessible concentration of major works exists at any given moment. That is not equivalent to possessing everything. It is possessing enough for coming to Paris to be indispensable to anyone who wishes to understand Western art. And that is achievable. Even without Raphael in the Stanze.

— Accepting that Rome remains Rome, said Grégoire.

— Accepting that Rome remains Rome. Yes. And ceasing to pretend that one can empty it.

— Bonaparte will not accept that easily.

— Bonaparte will accept what physics imposes on him. He has not yet tried to move a twelve-metre fresco. When he tries, he will understand. Or his commissioners will explain before he tries.

Hassenfratz intervened.

— There is a second problem that Grégoire did not mention and that is perhaps more serious than the first. The diplomatic problem. Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna — these are militarily conquered cities or duchies subdued by armistices. The law of war is clear in those cases: the victor imposes conditions, the vanquished complies. The legal framework is morally debatable, but it exists.

— And Rome? asked Lakanal.

— Rome is different. The Pope is a sovereign with a legitimacy that is not merely military or political. It is spiritual — recognised by ancient international treaties, integrated into European diplomatic relations for centuries. If we take the Vatican's treasures by force, we create a precedent that concerns not Italy, but all of Europe. Spain. Austria. The German Catholic states. All the sovereigns with relations with Rome will have reason to oppose us.

— Spain and Austria are already opposed to us, said Berthollet.

— Yes. But there is a difference between military opposition and a moral opposition that outlasts the current conflict. If we treat the Vatican as we treated Modena, we give our enemies an argument that will survive the war. In ten years, in twenty years, when the peace treaties are being negotiated, the question of the pontifical treasures will be on the table. And the jurists of the enemy powers will have a very solid dossier.

— Van Reyn had a solid dossier on Flanders. It did not change much.

— Flanders was a territory at direct war. The Pope's status is another matter. Rome is not Milan. One cannot enter with the same methods.

Lakanal placed his hands on the table.

— Diplomatic strategy belongs to the Directory and to Bonaparte. Not to the commission. Our role is to define what we want to take and how to take it. The question of whether we negotiate with the Pope or impose conditions on him is a political question that is beyond us.

— It is not entirely beyond us, Grégoire objected. The artistic commissioners are the ones who enter the collections. They are the ones the custodians see. They are the ones that European opinion will associate with the requisitions. If we go to the Vatican, it is Monge, Berthollet and Denon who will open the display cases and take the cameos and manuscripts. Not Bonaparte. Bonaparte will be at his headquarters thinking about his next battle. We are the ones who will represent France in the pontifical libraries and museums.

— That is already the case in Milan and Parma, said Lebrun.

— Yes. But in Milan, the duke is Austrian and the population is not unanimously hostile. In Rome, the Pope is the Pope. The situation is not comparable.

Denon intervened.

— I have a proposal. For Rome, we proceed differently than for the rest of Italy. We do not arrive behind the army with lists and crates. We enter into direct negotiation with the Vatican's representatives before the armies arrive. We identify what the French Republic wishes to obtain. We propose compensation — not financial, but diplomatic. Recognition of the Pope's rights over his remaining territories. A guarantee of non-interference in French ecclesiastical affairs. Things the Directory can offer at little cost to itself, but which have value for Rome.

— The Directory will offer nothing of the kind, said Berthollet.

— The Directory will offer what Bonaparte recommends it offer. And Bonaparte is pragmatic. If he understands that negotiating with Rome costs him less than subduing it militarily — politically, diplomatically, in French and European public opinion — he will negotiate.

— Do you believe Bonaparte capable of that calculation? asked Grégoire.

— I believe Bonaparte capable of all calculations, said Denon. That is what makes him unpredictable. He can be brutal and subtle on the same day. He can sack Pavia and propose an honourable peace to Turin the following week. He acts according to what is useful at the moment, not according to fixed principles. Which means one can influence him, provided one presents the arguments in the right terms.

— The right terms being?

— Efficiency. Not morality. Not law. Efficiency. Showing him that negotiating with Rome yields more than entering as a conqueror. In terms of political stability, diplomatic relations, public opinion in France where Catholics are still the majority.

Grégoire looked at Denon with particular attention — the attention he gave to people who said true things for the wrong reasons, or debatable things with a lucidity that commanded respect.

— You are cynical.

— I am realistic, said Denon. There is a difference.

— Sometimes, said Grégoire. Not always.

Hassenfratz looked at the map of Italy. Rome was at the bottom, at the centre of the peninsula, surrounded by the tracing of the Papal States. A city nine hundred kilometres from Milan. Six weeks' march for a loaded army. Much more for a convoy of crates over roads of which no one in this room had recent military engineers' reports.

— There is a third problem. A practical one. The roads between Lombardy and Rome. The stretch between Bologna and Florence passes through the Apennines — not the Alps, but passes that can be difficult in autumn and that are unknown to our transport teams. And Florence itself is an open question. The Grand Duchy of Tuscany is governed by a Habsburg, cousin to Austria. Will he be in our camp or Vienna's?

— He will be on the side of the victor, said Denon. As always.

— That leaves us a corridor toward Rome via the Tyrrhenian coast or the Via Emilia. Two routes for which I do not have load data. I do not know whether they can support heavy convoys. I do not know where the bridges are. I do not know what the capacity of the inns along the route is for lodging a military escort of a hundred men.

— You will have the military engineers' reports as soon as Bonaparte has secured the Romagna, said Lakanal. It is too early to resolve these questions.

— It is too early to resolve them and too late not to begin asking them. If we wait until Bonaparte is in Rome to start planning the transport of the Vatican works, we will have two weeks to organise an operation that requires six. That is what happened in Flanders in Ghent. We ran short of time and it showed in the results.

Lakanal nodded.

— I will ask the general staff for the available reports on the roads between Bologna and Rome. As soon as I have them, you will.

— And what about Tuscany? asked Monge. Florence has considerable collections. The Medici assembled for two centuries what is perhaps the greatest collection in Italy after the Vatican. The Uffizi. The Palazzo Pitti. The Tribuna with the antique sculptures.

— Florence will be handled separately, depending on how the military situation evolves. For now, let us concentrate on what is certain. Milan, Parma, Modena, Bologna. The rest will come in due course.

— And Rome? asked Grégoire.

— Rome will come if Bonaparte goes there. And Bonaparte will go if the Directory permits. And the Directory will permit if political conditions allow. It is a chain of conditionals.

— A chain that leads to the Vatican.

— Probably.

The meeting ended at five in the afternoon. Nine hours of discussion. Hassenfratz had not counted, but he felt the time in his shoulders and his eyes — that fatigue of days when one has thought intensely without moving. The others gathered their papers with the slowed gestures of men who have given everything they had to give for the day and have little in reserve.

Lebrun rolled his maps carefully, tied them, slid them into their leather case. Thouin closed his register and put it in his satchel with his customary precision — the same gesture Hassenfratz had seen him make in Ghent, Antwerp, Valenciennes, at every stage of the Flemish mission, as if the way one filed one's notes were a form of continuity between missions, a thread of method running through the years and different places.

Berthollet and Monge left together, continuing in a low voice a conversation that had begun during the meeting about a question in materials physics — the properties of felt as a thermal insulator compared with carded wool, a subject that would have seemed absurd in any other context and which here was pertinent.

Grégoire remained seated for a moment after the others had risen. He looked at the map of Italy, which no one had taken down — it would stay there until the next meeting, the pins marking cities like points of a constellation whose complete figure had not yet been found. Hassenfratz caught this out of the

corner of his eye as he buttoned his coat. There were silences of Grégoire's that asked to be left in peace.

He paused for a moment in the doorway. Grégoire had not moved. He was still looking at the pins in the map — those small metal points driven into paper as if one were planting flags in real cities, which was exactly what one was doing. Hassenfratz thought he could have stayed, that perhaps Grégoire had something to say that the others would not have heard in the same way. Then he heard Denon in the corridor and the moment passed, as these things pass when one lets them.

Denon waited for Hassenfratz in the corridor.

— Do you have a moment?

— A moment, yes.

They went down together. In the street, the March cold had strengthened since morning — a wind from the east, dry and direct, making shop signs clatter and forcing passers-by to bow their heads. They walked for a moment without speaking, side by side, at a pace that adjusted naturally without needing to be decided.

— I wanted to speak to you about Bonaparte, said Denon.

— I guessed as much.

— You have never met him.

— No.

— I have met him twice. Once in Paris in January, once in Nice in February when he was taking command. He is not a man one can describe in a sentence. But there is one thing one must know to work with him: he cannot bear to be contradicted in public. In private, he listens to objections if they are formulated with precision and if the interlocutor knows what he is talking about. In public, before his officers or before local authorities, the slightest resistance is intolerable to him.

— What you describe is a problem for us if our packing deadlines conflict with his military timetables.

— That is indeed the problem. The clause that Monge obtained in the instructions — the right to refuse a convoy departure if the packing is unsatisfactory — is real on paper. In practice, if Bonaparte wants the crates to leave tomorrow morning and we tell him it will take three more days, the clause will be worthless if he contests it before his generals.

— So how do we proceed?

— We never contradict him before his generals. We obtain direct access. We speak to him alone or with a trusted interlocutor — Berthier perhaps, his chief of staff, who is a reasonable man and who understands logistical questions. We present problems as technical questions with technical solutions, not as refusals. And we always give him something. If we tell him we need three more days for the Correggios, we announce at the same time that the Bruegels are leaving tomorrow as planned. He accepts a partial delay more readily than a global one.

Hassenfratz reflected for a moment.

— Have you done this before? Managed this kind of man?

Denon smiled briefly.

— I was a diplomat in Naples under the Ancien Régime. I worked with Ferdinand IV, who was unpredictable in a different way from Bonaparte, but just as difficult to manage daily. And I spent three years in Italy navigating between the courts of the various duchies, each with its own unwritten rules, its sensitivities, its blind spots. It is not the same as Bonaparte, but it gives useful reflexes.

— Grégoire will pose problems.

— Grégoire asks questions — that is not the same thing. Bonaparte respects people who ask precise questions about subjects he does not master. What he does not respect is moral obstruction: refusal on principle without an alternative proposed.

Grégoire tends to stop at the problem without proposing a solution. If one can teach him to formulate his objections in terms of alternative solutions rather than abstract principles, he will be useful. Otherwise he will be sidelined.

— Grégoire will not change the way he speaks to satisfy Bonaparte.

— No. But perhaps he will not speak to Bonaparte. Perhaps he will speak to Monge or to you, and it will be you or Monge who reformulate for Bonaparte.

Hassenfratz considered this proposal. It was pragmatic to the point of cynicism — turning Grégoire into a relayed, filtered, translated voice in a language Bonaparte would hear. It was not wrong as a strategy. But it reduced Grégoire to a role he had not accepted.

— We will see on the ground.

— We will see on the ground, yes. That is generally what one says when one does not know and does not want to admit it.

— It is generally what one says when one is right not to decide in advance what cannot be decided in advance.

They stopped at a crossroads. Denon turned right — he lived that way, toward the Palais-Royal. Hassenfratz turned left.

— One last thing, said Denon. What you said about deadlines. About Flanders and what happened when we ran short of time. It was well put and it was right. Keep formulating things that way — in terms of concrete consequences, not principles. That is the only language that will work with him.

— I habitually formulate things in terms of concrete consequences. It is my training.

— I know. That is why I wanted to speak to you.

Hassenfratz walked back to the École des Mines. It took him three-quarters of an hour — he took this route often, by habit and because walking allowed him to think without interruption.

Grégoire had remained alone before the map after the meeting. Hassenfratz had watched him for a moment from the corridor before leaving. Italy would be different from Flanders on almost every point: the distances, the collections, the diplomatic complexity. Bonaparte in place of David. Better because he understood logistics, more difficult because his will had a force of inertia that nothing in the commission could genuinely counter.

Entering his office, he found on his table two letters that had arrived during the day. One from Thouin, a note written that morning before the meeting, signalling that the stock of Flemish felt at the Museum was insufficient to cover the needs of the Italian mission and that an order must be placed with Ghent before the end of the month if it was to arrive in time. The other from the general staff — a preliminary report on the roads of Piedmont and Lombardy, drawn up by the engineers who had reconnoitred the terrain in preparation for the campaign. Forty pages of data on road widths, bridge load capacities, maximum gradients practicable by loaded carts.

He sat down, lit his lamp, opened the staff report.

The Lombard roads were better than he had feared. But the report stopped at Lombardy and Piedmont. The Romagna, Umbria, the Latium remained grey zones. One was planning in darkness for everything south of Bologna.

He took a sheet and began noting the unanswered questions. The bridges over the Apennines. The roads between Bologna and Florence. The carpenters in Parma and Modena. The thermal differential between the Italian plain and the Alpine passes for wooden panels.

He wrote for an hour, alone in his office, by lamplight, while Paris gradually darkened and quieted around him. At one point he stopped, set down his pen, and remained for a moment without writing or thinking about anything specific, simply

conscious of the silence, the lamp, the black window behind which the March night was complete.

In six weeks perhaps, Bonaparte would cross the Alps.

In eight weeks, if the campaign moved quickly, Milan would be taken.

In ten weeks, the first commissioners would enter the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana.

And he would be somewhere between Paris and Milan.

He picked up his pen and continued his list. That same day, in Nice, nine hundred kilometres to the south, General Bonaparte was taking command of the Army of Italy.

IV — Bonaparte Takes Command

Nice, 31 March 1796

He arrived in Nice by a mountain road that dispatch riders had taken two days to cover from Paris. The horse was tired. He did not appear to be. General Schérer, whom he had come to replace at the head of the Army of Italy, handed over command in two hours: the reports, the troop strengths, the maps, the engineers' reports on enemy positions. Schérer was a cautious man, exhausted by a campaign that had led nowhere in eighteen months. He looked at this twenty-six-year-old successor with something that was not quite contempt, but close to it — the suspicion of a professional soldier for a man who has not yet proved his worth.

Bonaparte took the maps and dismissed Schérer.

He spent the night studying the terrain. Not the infantry reports — the maps. The relief lines. The passes. The rivers. The roads between the Piedmontese and the Austrian positions. He was looking for one precise objective: the point where the two enemy armies touched, the articulation between them, the exact place where sufficient pressure might separate them before they could

mutually reinforce each other. He found it around three in the morning. It was near Montenotte, in the Ligurian Apennines, where the Austrian dispositions presented a lateral weakness that no one had exploited because no one had sought to attack in sixteen months.

The following morning, he summoned his divisional generals.

Augereau — legendary physical brutality, twenty campaigns behind him. A man who wore his violence as others wore their rank. Masséna — a Nice smuggler turned soldier, tactical intuition that disconcerted his superiors. Sérurier — an aristocrat converted into a republican general. No genius, but of absolute reliability. La Harpe — a Swiss in French service, a textbook officer who bore the rigidity of textbooks.

They entered the room where Bonaparte was waiting, standing before the map spread on the table.

They looked at him. What they saw: a man of small stature — one metre sixty-eight, which was not exceptional but which made him appear smaller than he was because he was thin, almost gaunt, without the physical mass that gave Augereau his natural authority. An angular face, the yellowish-grey complexion of someone who slept little and ate irregularly, long flat hair tied negligently in a queue at the nape. Grey eyes that looked at the map and not at his generals, as if the map were the important thing and they a secondary complication.

He spoke without preamble.

— Here is our situation. The Piedmontese hold the Apennine ridge line from Ceva to Millesimo. The Austrians cover their right flank from Montenotte to Dego. Between the two, there is a gap — here. Not wide. Two leagues perhaps. But sufficient. If we strike at that point with enough force and speed, we cut communication between them. After which we defeat them one by one.

Sérurier intervened, cautiously, with the tone of someone raising a matter of principle rather than actual resistance.

— General, our strength is thirty-eight thousand. The Piedmontese and Austrians together represent seventy thousand men. The attack assumes a concentration on one point that leaves our flanks exposed.

— That is the risk. I accept it because the risk of not attacking is greater. An army that does not eat, that is not paid, that is deserting by the hundreds each week, ceases to exist in two months. We attack now or we never attack.

Masséna was looking at the map. He said nothing, but Bonaparte saw that he grasped it — that he recognised something in this plan, a logic that corresponded to his own way of reading terrain.

— Speed is needed, said Bonaparte. That is the only advantage we have over them. They outnumber us, but they are on a sixty-kilometre line. We are concentrated. If we move faster than they expect, we can strike at Montenotte before the Piedmontese at Millesimo have had time to reinforce the Austrians. Then we turn. Three days for the Austrians. Two days' march. Two days for the Piedmontese. It is feasible.

Augereau shook his head.

— The men have been suffering from hunger for a month. Some companies have lost a third of their strength to desertion. We are asking them to march at night and fight the next morning.

— We are asking them to win. That is not the same. When one tells them that they are heading for the Lombard plain, that there is food, money, positions to take — they march. Men march when they understand where they are marching toward.

He looked at each of them in turn, quickly, as if evaluating something in each face.

— In ten days. The 10th of April. Questions?

There were none. Not because the generals were convinced — they were not yet — but because there was in the way Bonaparte

expressed himself something that made questions difficult to formulate. No arrogance, no condescension: simply a certainty in the voice that gave the impression that doubts were already-resolved problems rather than real obstacles.

They dispersed.

In the ten days that followed, Bonaparte slept no more than four hours a night. He visited each division personally — not the staff officers, the men. He entered the billets unannounced, at any hour, looked at the state of the weapons, the state of the boots, questioned the NCOs. What he was looking for was not order in the formal sense, but something more difficult to measure: he was trying to know what the men thought, how far they could go, what was missing that could be repaired in ten days and what could not.

What could be repaired: the artillery dispersed in small batteries along too extended a front. He concentrated it. Nine batteries grouped in three positions instead of scattered over sixty kilometres — a decision that went against received doctrine, but corresponded to what he had understood of the terrain. Concentrated artillery at one point creates a pressure that no defensive line organised in depth can absorb.

What could not be repaired in ten days: the hunger. The uniforms. The boots. Hassenfratz, in Paris, had lists of logistical problems; Bonaparte, in Nice, had barefoot men looking at the Apennines knowing they would have to cross them. He promised them the Lombard plain. He told them that victory was closer than defeat.

He said it with a conviction he genuinely felt — this was not a commander's rhetoric, but an inner certainty, founded on analysis of the terrain and enemy positions rather than on optimistic principle. His plan could work: he had calculated every step and found no flaw.

On the 10th of April 1796, at dawn, the offensive began.

Masséna's division took position on the Apennine ridge before the Austrians under General Beaulieu understood what was happening.

Six thousand French against two thousand Austrians, on a narrow front that the massed artillery batteries had prepared. In three hours, the Austrian flank was broken. Beaulieu retreated east, toward Dego.

On the 13th of April, Augereau struck the Piedmontese from the Bormida valley — a frontal attack from the west while Masséna encircled from the north. The Piedmontese held for two hours then fell back in disorder toward Ceva. Augereau took two thousand prisoners, including General Provera.

On the 14th of April, Beaulieu, having regrouped his forces, attempted to re-establish contact with the Piedmontese at Dego. Bonaparte struck before they had finished regrouping. Two assaults repelled, the third decisive. The Austrians left five hundred dead and retreated toward Acqui.

The link between the two enemy armies was severed.

Bonaparte turned on the Piedmontese. Mondovì, the 22nd of April. The road to Turin was open. Victor Amadeus III understood he could no longer hold.

The Armistice of Cherasco was signed on the 28th of April 1796. Eighteen days after the start of the offensive. Piedmont ceded Nice and Savoy to France, opened its fortresses to French troops, withdrew from the coalition. A purely military agreement, without a cultural clause. Bonaparte reserved the artistic demands for later — for the richer territories, whose collections merited being specifically identified in a treaty rather than requisitioned in the confusion of a defeat armistice.

In Paris, the Directory received the news with surprise that was not feigned. An unknown general had been sent to command an army of wretches in impossible mountains. In eighteen days, he

had separated two enemy armies and taken Piedmont out of the war.

The Austrians retreated toward Lombardy. Bonaparte followed without giving them time to reconstitute — that was the principle he applied: never give the adversary time to recover between two blows. Speed as the primary weapon, movement as a form of pressure no less effective than brute force.

On the 10th of May, the Austrians held the bridge at Lodi over the Adda.

It was a stone bridge, two hundred and thirty metres long, ten metres wide. At the far end, fourteen thousand Austrians with thirty cannon in battery trained on the axis of the bridge. Beaulieu was no longer there — he had retreated toward Mantua — but General Sebottendorf had positioned everything he had to cover the retreat.

Bonaparte brought his artillery forward. Twenty pieces in battery on the left bank, in a duel with the thirty Austrian pieces on the right bank. The cannonade lasted three hours. Neither artillery could silence the other.

He ordered the assault on the bridge.

It was Masséna who led the head column — elite grenadiers, six hundred men in column of four, who ran across the bridge under the fire of the Austrian battery. The front ranks fell. The column reformed on itself and continued. It would later be estimated that the Austrian fire had killed or wounded two hundred men in under eight minutes. The survivors reached the right bank, outflanked the batteries, opened a breach into which the cavalry poured.

The Austrians retreated.

Bonaparte lingered on the bridge after the battle. The wounded were still there in the positions where they had fallen — some on the parapets, some in the gaps between the stones, a few in the

river below. The smell of gunpowder had not yet dispersed. The abandoned Austrian cannon were still smoking in the evening air.

An old thought returned to him — from his early days at Auxonne, when he was still an artillery lieutenant, devouring Caesar and Alexander and wondering whether great battles really resembled what was written about them, or whether historians rearranged after the fact a reality more confused and more brutal.

He now thought that both things were true at once. That war was confused and brutal, and that something greater than the confusion nevertheless happened within it. Something one could not see from the inside, but that men who had passed through it recognised in what they read.

His grenadiers had been calling him the little corporal since Lodi — not in mockery, but in affection, in that way soldiers have of reducing what surpasses them to a familiar dimension. He was not their corporal. But he understood what the nickname meant: that he had been on the bridge with them, not behind them.

On the 15th of May 1796, he entered Milan.

The city spread across the Lombard plain like a dense stain of bell-towers and tile rooftops, surrounded by its sixteenth-century Spanish ramparts that no one had maintained for a century and that were crumbling in places under their own weight.

Two hundred thousand inhabitants — the most populous city in northern Italy after Turin, the centre of Lombard commerce, silk, manufacturing. Two centuries of Austrian domination marked in stone as much as in customs: the palaces on the Corso di Porta Romana built to Viennese models, the Habsburg coats of arms on the facades of official buildings that no one had yet had time to remove. And the white uniforms of the garrison officers, now replaced by the blue of the French army.

Part of the population welcomed the French with what resembled enthusiasm — Lombard patriots who had been reading the revolutionary gazettes since 1789 and saw in

Bonaparte's arrival the beginning of liberation from the Austrian yoke.

Others watched from their windows with the cautious neutrality of people who had learned on several occasions that liberators resemble occupiers once they have settled in. The most clear-sighted of both groups would understand fairly quickly that the reality of the French occupation was not very different from the reality of the Austrian occupation as regards contributions, requisitions and the administration of decisions made elsewhere.

Bonaparte installed himself in the Palazzo Serbelloni, on the Corso di Porta Orientale, a patrician residence of the previous century whose high, cool rooms suited a headquarters. He summoned Berthier, his chief of staff, and organised in two days what Schérer had not managed to organise in eighteen months: a military administration of the conquered city that functioned, that imposed calculated contributions, that requisitioned with a method sufficiently visible to be intimidating and orderly enough not to degenerate into anarchic looting — which Bonaparte did not want. Not from moral scruple, but because anarchic looting destroyed discipline, and discipline was what distinguished an army from a gang.

Fifteen million francs in war contributions, payable in hard currency within fifteen days. Requisition of provisions for a hundred thousand men for thirty days. Requisition of horses and carts for the supply train. Appointment of French commissioners to supervise the municipal authorities. All of this in forty-eight hours.

And the works of art.

On the 17th of May, he dictated to Berthier a letter for the Directory. The central phrase was brief and precise: *We shall soon have everything of beauty in Italy, with the exception of a few objects in Turin and Naples*. This was not a vague promise — it was a programme. He had had time, during the weeks of campaigning, to think about what victory should produce beyond the armistices.

Paintings and sculptures had a political value that money did not: they were visible, they could be transported to Paris, displayed in a museum where two thousand people a day would see them and understand without being told that France was henceforth the centre of a reality that transcended military power.

He had read Lebrun's lists — the ones the commissioner had prepared in Paris. He knew the names: the *Codex Atlanticus*, the Bruegels of the Ambrosiana, the Correggios of Parma. Not with a specialist's knowledge, but with the knowledge of a man who had understood what these names represented politically and symbolically. He had asked Denon to write to him about what there was in Milan. Denon had replied with precision.

On the 19th of May, Monge, Berthollet and Thouin arrived in Milan from Paris with their dossiers, their measuring instruments, their crate specifications. Hassenfratz had preceded them by a day, having come from the north via the Simplon route. The commission was in place.

V — Milan: The Inventories

Milan, 19 May 1796

Bonaparte received them in his study at the Palazzo Serbelloni — the Castello Sforzesco, more accessible to carts, would house the crates — standing before a map of Lombardy on which the cities had been annotated: Parma, Modena, Bologna, Ferrara. Not distances. Collections.

Monge, Berthollet and Thouin arrived together at ten in the morning. Hassenfratz had entered the previous day, three days behind the planned schedule because of a broken axle at Varenna on the shore of Lake Como. He was there too, standing near the window with his notebook, the journey's notes still fresh in the pages. Denon joined them five minutes later.

Bonaparte did not keep them waiting. He was reading something he set aside when they entered.

He looked them over without speaking.

— Gentlemen. You know your mission. I will set out my way of envisaging things and you will point out any obstacle I may have overlooked.

He moved round the desk, approached the map.

— The army leaves in fifteen days. Mantua is besieged. The Austrians will try to relieve it. That is their only strategic option at this stage. When they attack, I will need all my divisions. I cannot leave troops in Milan to escort art convoys while I am fighting on the Adige. So the Milan convoy leaves in fifteen days or it waits until autumn. And autumn means Alpine passes under snow and risks to the works that you will not want to take.

— Fifteen days to inventory Milan, pack and load, said Hassenfratz. That is feasible provided the packing is simple. If we want the triple-walled reinforced crates I planned for the wood panels and the manuscripts, we need at least ten days for the major crates alone.

— Then we do the major crates first and the others in parallel. Do you have carpenters here?

— I have identified a workshop via Broletto, said Thouin. A master carpenter who works for the great Milanese families. I saw him yesterday. He understands what we are asking and has the dry timber we need in stock.

— Good. So the packing is not the problem. The problem is the inventory. How long?

— For the Ambrosiana alone, three days minimum, said Monge. There are hundreds of pieces. One cannot identify the priorities without having seen everything at least once.

— Three days for the Ambrosiana, two for the main churches, one for the ducal reserves. Six days of inventory. Nine days of packing in parallel from the second day. That fits in fifteen days.

He spoke as he drew lines on a map — calculating deadlines, distances, constraints, with the same way of reducing complex

problems to their essential variables and drawing a conclusion that seemed simple in retrospect, though it had not been beforehand.

— What I want from the Ambrosiana: the *Codex Atlanticus* as absolute priority. Twelve volumes of manuscripts. Denon wrote to me about this in January and I read what he sent. It is the most important acquisition in Milan, perhaps of the whole campaign. The Bruegels — the Elements series and the *Virgin with a Garland*. The Caravaggio, if it is truly a still life from his hand. For the other pieces, you choose — that is your domain, not mine.

— The *Codex Atlanticus* will pose a problem with the curator, said Denon. I have had information about Argelati. He is a man of principle, not a man of accommodation. He will resist.

— He will resist within the limits of what the armistice allows. The armistice stipulates the handover of works of art. If he refuses to cooperate, you inform me and I send Berthier. That should suffice.

— And the frescoes? asked Grégoire.

Bonaparte turned toward him.

— Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* at Santa Maria delle Grazie. Wall painting. Untransportable. I know. I asked two military engineers whether one could cut out the wall and both said no. The load-bearing wall would collapse, and the painting with it. So we leave the *Last Supper* alone. We note in the report to the Directory that this work cannot be moved. That is all we can do.

— And if the same situation arises in Rome — the Sistine, the Raphael Stanze?

— We will answer Rome when we are in Rome. For now, we are in Milan.

Grégoire indicated he had heard — not to approve, but to signal he would return to it.

Hassenfratz intervened.

— There is one thing I want to clarify on deadlines. In Flanders, we had situations where pressure on timetables led to hasty packing decisions that nearly cost irreplaceable works. Here, if a work requires additional time to be properly conditioned — consolidation of a lifting painted layer, drying of a freshly applied varnish, manufacture of a custom crate that cannot be shortened — I need that time to be granted without my having to justify it before the general staff.

Bonaparte fixed him for a moment.

— You are telling me you need autonomy on technical questions.

— I am telling you that damage to works during transport will be a source of controversy in Paris and in Europe. Paintings that arrive cracked or with flaking from the painted layer are a weapon for those who wish to demonstrate that the requisitions are vandalism. That is in no one's interest.

— Formulated that way, it is reasonable. So: if you need additional time on a specific piece, you come to see me personally and you explain in two minutes why it is necessary and how long it takes. I decide. Is that acceptable?

— That is acceptable.

— Good. Anything else?

The argument had worked. The technical argument — the one about damage to the works and the Parisian controversy. It was a good argument. It was also, in part, false. The works were not at greater risk here than in Flanders if normal precautions were taken. What he had negotiated was time. Time during which the custodians could copy, catalogue, prepare their formal protests. Time that would change nothing in substance but might change something in form.

— One last thing, said Bonaparte. These works go to Paris because Paris is now the centre of European civilisation. That is not a political declaration. It is a fact. After Montenotte, after Lodi, after Milan, no one in Europe can claim otherwise. Do this

work with awareness of what you are transporting. Not war trophies. Works that will belong to everyone because they will be visible to everyone. That is the difference between what we are doing and what kings did when they filled their cabinets of curiosities.

On the morning of the 20th of May, the commissioners began their inventories.

First destination: the Pinacoteca Ambrosiana — library and art gallery founded in 1609 by Cardinal Federico Borromeo.

The curator, Doctor Carlo Argelati, was waiting for them in the entrance hall. White hair, an emaciated face. He knew every work in the collection. Their provenance. Their history. Their significance.

He greeted the commissioners in silence. No salutations. No courtesy. Just a glacial look and a gesture toward the staircase.

— Follow me.

They climbed to the second floor. The rooms of the Pinacoteca opened in enfilade. High ceilings. Natural light from large windows. Paintings hung in two tiers.

Argelati indicated the first room.

— Here is what you have come to steal.

Monge flinched at the word "steal." But he did not protest.

The collection was remarkable. Dozens of Flemish and Italian paintings. Primitives. Renaissance works. Baroque paintings.

Thouin drew out his register. Began noting. Title. Artist. Dimensions. Condition.

First major work: the *Virgin with a Garland* by Brueghel and Rubens, as Lebrun had described it in Paris — though the original made a different impression than the engravings.

— This work, Argelati murmured in an extinguished voice, was given to the Ambrosiana by Cardinal Borromeo himself in 1621. It was his favourite painting. He contemplated it every day.

— Dimensions?

— Eighty-four centimetres by sixty-five. Oil on canvas.

Thouin noted. Marked a red cross in the margin. Piece to be taken.

They passed into the next room. There were the Elements by Brueghel — the four paintings on copper that Lebrun had spoken of in Paris.

— *The Earth* and *The Air* are the most finished. *The Water* and *The Fire* are slightly less accomplished.

Thouin examined the four paintings. Noted the two best. Red cross.

— We take *The Earth* and *The Air*.

Argelati lowered his eyelids for a moment. Two of four. At least that much. The series would be broken, but at least two would remain in Milan.

Next room. A *Madonna* by Bernardino Luini. Delicate sfumato. Soft colours. The Virgin's face of infinite grace.

— Luini painted this around 1520. It is one of his most accomplished works. It belonged to the Borromeo family for a century before entering the Ambrosiana collection.

Thouin noted. Red cross.

Then a *Holy Family with Saint Anne* by Luini. A sacred group of Leonardesque sweetness — the Virgin, the Child, Joseph and Saint Anne forming a human pyramid bathed in subtle chiaroscuro.

Berthollet approached and examined the painting.

Thouin noted. Red cross.

The inventory continued all day. Room after room. Painting after painting. Argelati followed the commissioners, his face a mask. Sometimes, when Thouin marked a red cross, he flinched. But he did not protest. What use would it be?

At five o'clock they arrived in the manuscript room. There, in a glass cabinet, reposed the twelve volumes of the *Codex Atlanticus*.

Brown leather bindings. Monumental format, sixty-four centimetres by forty-three. One thousand one hundred and nineteen sheets containing drawings and notes by Leonardo da Vinci. Machines. Anatomical studies. Architectural projects. Scientific observations. The genius of Leonardo concentrated in these volumes.

Monge approached the cabinet. Remained silent for several minutes, contemplating these treasures.

— This is the most important collection of Leonardo manuscripts in the world. Cardinal Borromeo acquired it in 1637. Since then, the Ambrosiana has been its guardian. Scholars from all over the world come here to study these pages.

— We are taking them, said Monge.

Argelati turned very pale.

— You cannot. This is the heart of our collection. It is the raison d'être of the Ambrosiana. Without the *Codex Atlanticus*, we are nothing.

— We are taking them, Monge repeated more firmly. Those are General Bonaparte's orders.

In the following days, while the carpenters began manufacturing the crates for the selected works, Monge and Berthollet visited other Milanese churches to complete their inventories.

At San Marco they examined several altarpieces. At Santa Maria delle Grazie — where they stopped long enough to confirm in person what they already knew from Paris — Berthollet raised his eyes to the refectory wall.

— This is the greatest loss. The Paris Museum will never have the *Last Supper*.

— We will have the *Codex Atlanticus*, Monge replied. That is already considerable.

From Santa Maria delle Grazie they went to Sant'Ambrogio. The fourth-century early Christian basilica opened onto a courtyard with Romanesque arcades — a double-galleried atrium of squat columns, Corinthian capitals worn by fifteen centuries of weather, uneven paving stones polished by pilgrims since Ambrose himself. The priest who received them was called Don Fermo Vassalli — a calm man, without Argelati's hostile rigidity or the calculating caution of the Milanese notables encountered since their arrival. He guided them without commentary through the main nave, then descended by a narrow staircase into the crypt.

The crypt of Sant'Ambrogio was low-vaulted, lit by smoking oil lamps. Don Vassalli stopped before a recess in the north wall.

The sarcophagus was there.

Luna marble, blue-grey veined with white. Two metres twenty in length, sixty centimetres in height, sixty in depth. Set into a masonry niche that had held it in place since at least the fifth century, perhaps since the crypt's foundation, whose exact date was unknown. The reliefs carved on the three visible faces depicted scenes from the Old Testament: on the central panel, the crossing of the Red Sea, with Moses standing on the right bank, his arm extended, and Pharaoh's chariots engulfed under waves stylised in spirals. On the left panel, the sacrifice of Isaac — Abraham with folded knees, the knife raised, the angel descending diagonally from the upper right corner with the precision of a bird in a dive. On the right panel, Daniel in the lion's den, standing among lions lying at his feet with that iconographic placidity characteristic of early Christian art, which sought not animal realism but symbolic legibility.

The sculpture was of exceptional quality — not the quality of the great classical Roman workshops, but something more taut, more narrative, where the figures had a physical presence that imperial sarcophagi did not always have. The transition between late Roman art and Christian iconography was visible in every

detail: the draperies still classical, the compositions already frontal and hieratic. A transitional object, belonging to two worlds simultaneously and resembling nothing else in either.

— Dimensions and estimated weight? he asked Don Vassalli.

— I do not know the weight, said the priest. No one has ever moved it since I have served here. For the dimensions, you have your eyes.

Hassenfratz measured with the ruler. Two metres twenty-two in length. Fifty-eight centimetres in height. Fifty-four in depth. Estimated wall thickness six centimetres. He calculated. For Luna marble, density of approximately 2.7 tonnes per cubic metre. Approximate volume of marble: around a hundred and seventy litres. Weight: approximately four hundred and sixty kilos, perhaps five hundred with variations in thickness.

— To extract it, the niche must first be cleared. The setting mortar is several centuries old. It has hardened beyond what one can see. If one strikes too hard to free it, one cracks the marble. If one is too cautious, one makes no progress.

— We need a stone-cutter, said Thouin. Not an ordinary mason. Someone who knows how to work old marble without breaking it.

Don Vassalli, who had listened to this exchange without a word, then intervened — quietly, without raising his voice, in a way that was not a protest but a question.

— This sarcophagus contains, according to the tradition of our church, the relics of fourth-century martyrs. Gervase and Protase. You know the story. Ambrose himself discovered them and deposited them here. If you take the sarcophagus, the relics go with it. Or you leave them. But then you open the lid, which is a profanation I cannot authorise without the Archbishop's agreement.

Hassenfratz looked at Thouin.

— We do not touch the relics. We take the sarcophagus with its contents, deliver it to Paris as it is, and the French ecclesiastical authorities deal with the question of the relics with their Milanese counterparts. That is not our decision to make.

— Archbishop Visconti will protest, said Don Vassalli. Officially, in writing, to Bonaparte and the Directory.

— That is his right, said Hassenfratz. We will document the condition of the sarcophagus before displacement. If the relics are present and intact on arrival in Paris, they will remain so.

Don Vassalli nodded — not to signify agreement, but to express that he had understood and would keep his word to note the exchange. He had the same way as Argelati of transforming his powerless resistance into an act of testimony. As if what mattered was not preventing what was going to happen, but ensuring a trace would remain.

Two days later, a Milanese stone-cutter named Giacomo Ferrario spent six hours in the crypt clearing the sarcophagus from its niche with chisel and mallet, millimetre by millimetre, tapping on wooden wedges inserted between the marble and the masonry. On the evening of the 23rd of May, the sarcophagus rested on the crypt floor, free of its niche for the first time in millennia. In the cleared masonry there remained the exact imprint of its shape — a hollow absence, clean, that would remain there.

Hassenfratz brought in six soldiers and a pulley block. It took four hours to get the sarcophagus out of the crypt via the narrow staircase — three centimetres of clearance on each side between the marble and the staircase walls, a continuous tension throughout the ascent, a twenty-minute halt when one of the soldiers slipped on a step and nearly let go. The priest watched from the bottom of the staircase, saying nothing.

In the nave, in the daylight entering through the high windows, the sarcophagus no longer had the same presence as in the crypt. The blue-grey marble took on a slight pinkish hue in the

afternoon light. The reliefs were more legible — the nervousness of the lines, the way the sculptor had treated the waves of the Red Sea with almost graphic chisel strokes, very different from the softness of late classical workshops.

Don Vassalli came up in his turn and stood before the sarcophagus without speaking. Then he said:

— It was here since Ambrose. For fourteen hundred years. Now it goes to Paris.

No one replied.

The workshop at Via Broletto began operating on the 24th of May. Bastiani already had dry timber in stock. He built triple-walled crates of poplar and oak, each wall separated by Flemish felt and carded wool. Of the sixty planned crates, Thouin rejected seven that he judged badly made. Bastiani remade them without complaint. The municipal council of Milan sent a delegation to Bonaparte; he received it, replied that the terms of the armistice had been respected, and dismissed the delegation.

On the 28th of May, *The Earth* and *The Air* — the two Brueghel Elements — were packed. The following day, the *Codex Atlanticus* — twelve volumes in their silk boxes and absorbent clay sachets — was sealed in crate no. 58, triple-walled, red wax seal. Seal of the Republic. Stencilled inscription: *Fragile.*

On the 30th of May, the last day of packing. Argelati came to watch the operations. He stood in a corner of the room, arms at his sides, face a mask.

On the 1st of June, final inspection. Bonaparte himself verified that everything was ready. He walked the rows of crates aligned in the courtyard of the Castello Sforzesco.

— How many in total? he asked Monge.

— Sixty crates.

— The *Codex Atlanticus*?

— Crate number 58. Triple-walled. Sealed three days ago.

— The Brueghel-Rubens Virgin?

— Crate number 1. Same protection.

Bonaparte smiled, satisfied.

— Excellent work. These works will be the pride of the Paris Museum. Italy thus contributes to the glory of the French Republic. That is justice.

Monge was thinking of Argelati. Of Sommariva. Of all those Italians watching their treasures leave and who spoke not of justice, but of theft.

On the eve of departure, after Bonaparte's inspection, Moreau encountered Thouin in the warehouse of the Castello Sforzesco where the crates were lined up.

Captain Julien Moreau had commanded supply convoys throughout the campaign — ammunition, provisions, powder, reserve cannon. He knew what it was to move materiel on mountain roads, to manage broken axles and exhausted horses, to maintain a schedule when everything conspired to derail it. But he had never transported something that could not be replaced.

— Monsieur le commissaire, I need to know what we are transporting. What is most fragile? What is heaviest? What requires the most precaution? The planned route?

Thouin answered his questions before unrolling a large map on an upturned crate laid flat between them.

— Milan, Como, Chiavenna, the Splügen Pass — two thousand one hundred and thirteen metres altitude — Chur, then descent toward the Valais, Martigny, Geneva, Lyon. Total distance: approximately six hundred kilometres. Estimated duration: six weeks if all goes well.

Moreau studied the map with furrowed brows.

— The Splügen in June? It is still under snow at that altitude. And the gradients are steep — twelve, fifteen per cent in places. With carts of this load, it will be extremely difficult.

— We have no choice. The Simplon is held by the Austrians. The St Gotthard is impractical with these loads — too narrow, too steep. The Mont-Cenis would take us too far south. The Splügen is our only reasonable option.

— Then we will go very slowly. Very carefully.

On the 2nd of June at dawn, sixty crates were aligned in the courtyard of the Castello Sforzesco. Numbered. Inventoried. Sealed.

Twenty carts waited. A hundred soldiers as escort, commanded by Captain Moreau. Six draught horses per cart for the heaviest crates. Four for the others.

Loading. The heaviest crates at the bottom of the carts. The lighter ones on top. Lashing with thick ropes. Checking of every knot.

At eight o'clock, the convoy was ready to leave.

Thouin checked every cart. Every lashing. Every crate.

— It is perfect, he told Moreau. You can leave.

Moreau gave the order. The convoy moved off. Wheels grated on the cobblestones. The horses pulled heavily.

The convoy left Milan through the Porta Comasina. Direction north — toward Lake Como, then the Alps.

A few Milanese had gathered near the gate to watch the convoy leave. Most continued to walk on, apparently indifferent — the way people signal their disapproval without formulating it.

Moreau had the horses put to walking pace through the narrow lanes. The wheels grated on the uneven cobblestones. The crates, lashed with braided hemp rope, did not move.

Thouin walked beside the first cart — the one carrying crate number one and crate number fifty-eight. He walked at the

horses' pace, one hand resting on the side of the cart, for no precise reason, out of a kind of physical vigilance that could do little, but that seemed necessary to him all the same.

At the Porta Comasina, the convoy halted while the guard checked the passes. The officer commanding the post was young — twenty years old perhaps, no more — and he checked each document with an application that revealed his lack of experience rather than any real suspicion. He returned the papers to Moreau and signalled them through.

The convoy passed through the gate.

VI — The Alpine Convoy

Bonaparte did not attend the departure — he had rejoined the army toward the south the previous evening. Berthier had come to sign the last documents.

The first day was relatively easy. A flat road along the Naviglio to Monza. Twenty-two kilometres covered in seven hours, the horses advancing at a regular pace, a halt every two hours to check the loads, tighten the ropes, rest the animals.

That evening, bivouac at Monza. Moreau had the most precious crates installed at the centre of the camp in a defensive square. Four men on permanent guard, rotation every two hours.

On the 3rd of June, the terrain began to rise. Approaching the first Alpine foothills, the road following Lake Como. The road narrowed — in places three metres wide, a rock face on the left, a drop toward the lake on the right, no parapet. The drivers walked beside their horses, holding the reins firmly, speaking to them in low voices in the tightest passages.

At noon, an incident. Cart number 7 lost a wheel in a pothole that no one had seen. The shock was brutal. The cart sank. There was a cracking sound from the crate it carried, then the noise of breaking glass.

Thouin rushed over.

— Stop everything. No one moves.

The convoy halted. Ten men lifted the crate and set it on a grassy verge. Thouin knelt, examined it from every angle. The outer wall was split over thirty centimetres. Inside, a faint tinkling with every movement.

— What is it? asked Moreau.

Thouin consulted his register.

— Crate 7: *Holy Family with Saint Anne* by Procaccini. Oil on canvas, one hundred and ten centimetres by eighty-five. One of the most precious Lombard pieces in the convoy. We must open it.

Ferrario, the Milanese stone-cutter Thouin had brought along in the convoy, removed the nails one by one — fifteen minutes for ten nails. Thouin lifted the lid.

The painting was wrapped in three layers of cloth. Thouin unfolded them one after another. The canvas appeared. Intact. No new cracking, no lifting of the painted layer.

But the old gilded frame had broken into several pieces — the corners had given way. The thin glass placed before the painting to protect it had shattered. That was the noise that had been heard.

— The painting itself is undamaged, said Thouin. But the frame is lost. And we have no more protective glass.

— Can we continue?

— Yes. We remove the pieces of frame and glass, wrap the canvas alone very carefully, close the crate with additional reinforcement and double the straw packing around it.

The operation took two hours. Meanwhile, the soldier-carpenter repaired the wheel: dismount the axle, remove the broken wheel, make a new one from wood requisitioned at a nearby farm. The convoy set off again late in the afternoon. Moreau ordered them to slow down further: two kilometres per hour maximum, a man

as scout ahead of each cart signalling potholes and stones, the other soldiers at the wheels on the inclines. That day the convoy covered only fifteen kilometres.

On the 4th of June, rain. A fine, persistent rain that turned the road into a quagmire. The wheels sank in. Six horses per cart were needed instead of four, and they advanced metre by metre. At noon, cart 15 bogged down completely — wheels mired to the hubs. Moreau had the crate unloaded. A medium-sized painting, approximately a hundred kilos, which twenty men carried fifty metres to firmer ground. Then they came back, slid planks under the wheels, attached additional ropes, and twelve horses pulled while forty men pushed. The cart emerged from the rut centimetre by centimetre. They reloaded, moved on. That day the convoy covered eight kilometres.

On the 5th of June, the convoy reached Chiavenna, at the foot of the Splügen pass — a small town of three thousand inhabitants nestled in a narrow valley at three hundred metres altitude. The pass reached two thousand one hundred and thirteen metres. They had to climb eighteen hundred metres of elevation with carts loaded to several hundred kilos each.

Moreau made a complete three-day halt to prepare the ascent. He requisitioned thirty additional horses from local peasants, against payment — the Republic bought, at a price it set, but it paid. He recruited six guides who knew the pass from having crossed it dozens of times and who detailed the hazards: residual snow above fifteen hundred metres, gradients of twenty per cent on certain sections, passages too narrow for two carts abreast, risk of rockfall on the north face. He had chains made for the wheels. The blacksmith of Chiavenna worked two nights in succession — sixty chains in total, one per wheel, indispensable on the snowy slopes. He had every cart checked: axles, wheels, suspension, brakes. Everything had to hold. The slightest mechanical problem in high mountains would have no easy solution.

Thouin, meanwhile, opened all the crates to check the condition of the works after four days on the road. The *Virgin with a Garland* was intact, as were the two Brueghel Elements. The *Codex Atlanticus* — he checked each of the twelve volumes — reposed in its silk, dry, without a single sheet having moved.

— Everything is fine for now. But the real test begins tomorrow.

On the 8th of June at dawn, the ascent began.

The Splügen road had been recently improved by the Austrians — it was no longer a mule path but a proper carriage road, four metres wide in places, paved on certain stretches. It remained hard: average gradient ten per cent, thirteen in places, with residual snow above fifteen hundred metres.

The first cart — the one carrying crate 58, the *Codex Atlanticus* — left at six in the morning, pulled by six horses, two guides ahead inspecting the road, Moreau and Thouin on foot behind, ten soldiers at the wheels. One kilometre per hour, sometimes less. On the steepest sections they stopped every hundred metres, horses and men catching their breath in the cold air. By noon, five kilometres covered since departure, eight hundred metres altitude, thirteen hundred metres still to climb. The other carts followed at intervals, one every hour, to allow individual intervention if a problem arose.

At three o'clock, cart number 18 broke an axle in a tight bend — the wood had yielded under tension, the cart tilted dangerously to the left. Ferrario assessed the damage.

— Repairable. Three hours, and solid wood.

Two men were sent to fell a young oak in the nearby forest. A new axle was hewn, the old one replaced. Five hours of work in total — the cart set off again at eight o'clock, with torches to light the road.

On the 9th of June, the cart transporting the Sant'Ambrogio sarcophagus — crate 52, nine hundred kilos — refused to climb at mid-slope. Altitude twelve hundred metres, fifteen per cent

gradient, packed snow on the road. The six horses pulled with all their strength. The wheels, despite the chains, slipped. The cart began to slide back.

— Block it, said Moreau. Before it rolls down.

The soldiers slid chocks under the rear wheels. The cart stopped. But it would not climb.

— We unload it. We carry the sarcophagus by hand.

Thouin protested.

— It weighs nine hundred kilos.

— We use sixty men. If we force the horses, they collapse. If we unhitch them to lighten the load, the cart rolls down despite the chocks. Do you prefer to lose the work?

The sarcophagus was unloaded. Six ropes slipped under the marble, ten men per rope. Sixty men carrying fifteen kilos each — feasible. They advanced step by step. Muscles trembled. Sweat ran despite the cold. One kilometre thus, a hundred halts, ten hours of work. At five o'clock they reached a level area where the empty cart had been able to climb on its own. They reloaded, tightened the chains, checked three times. The convoy moved on.

Three soldiers collapsed from exhaustion — nothing serious according to the surgeon, muscular exhaustion and hands abraded by the ropes. One of them, Dupont, had bloody palms. The surgeon bandaged his hands.

— All that for a piece of stone, Dupont muttered.

Thouin heard him and approached.

— This piece of stone is fourteen hundred years old. It was carved in the fourth century by an artist whose name we do not even know. It has survived invasions, the wars between Italian city-states, the lootings. And today it has also crossed the Splügen.

Dupont did not reply.

On the 12th of June, the convoy reached the summit of the pass. Two thousand one hundred and thirteen metres. The soldiers stopped. Some collapsed on the sparse grass; others remained standing, looking at the snow-capped summits as far as the eye could see in the still air. Moreau called a six-hour halt. Fires were lit with wood brought up from the valley, eau-de-vie was distributed, wounds were tended.

— We have completed the ascent. Now comes the descent. Equally dangerous, but differently so.

The descent began on the north face, the same gradient as the south face. The danger was no longer that the carts refused to climb — it was that they would run uncontrolled. Moreau had thick ropes attached to the rear of each cart, ten men holding the ropes as human brakes, regulating the speed step by step. One cart at a time descended, the others waiting upstream, chocks under their wheels. A cart took two hours to descend a kilometre.

On the 13th of June, cart number 9 picked up too much speed on a particularly steep section. The ropes slipped through the men's hands, burning their palms. The cart accelerated, the horses broke into a gallop to avoid being crushed, the driver pulled on the reins without result. The cart was doing at least forty kilometres per hour.

One of the guides, Giuseppe, threw himself in front of the horses, waving his jacket. The animals swerved left. The cart left the road, drove into a gently sloping grassy field and stopped fifty metres on. The driver had fallen, bruised but without fractures. The horses trembled. Thouin opened the crate — a *Madonna* by Luini. The painting had moved in its packing, but the canvas had suffered no damage.

Giuseppe refused any reward. He shrugged, picked up his jacket and walked away without looking back.

Thouin reopened every crate in daylight. He was looking for new cracks, lifting of the painted layer, tears in the canvas, anything

the eye would not have caught in the semi-darkness of the pass. He found nothing.

— We have succeeded.

— It is not a miracle, replied Moreau. My men carried nine hundred kilos of marble up a kilometre of slope. They held back carts that were rolling downhill. They hewed axles in open mountain. That is the French army doing its work.

From Chur, the road descended toward Lake Constance then turned west. Swiss then French roads — wide and well-maintained, incomparably better than the Alpine tracks. The carts resumed a pace of forty kilometres a day. On the 18th of June, crossing of Lake Constance on three successive ferries — twenty loaded carts on the water, a six-hour operation. On the 22nd of June, the French frontier crossed near Geneva. The soldiers cheered. On the 25th of June, Geneva, where Genevans gathered to watch the convoy pass.

— What are you transporting? someone asked.

— Italy, replied a soldier.

On the 30th of June, the convoy entered Lyon. The works were unloaded and stored in the Army of the Rhine depots, Rue de la République — a dry, well-guarded building — awaiting the final transport to Paris.

That evening, Moreau wrote his report in an inn. He noted the facts in order: sixty crates transported, the Splügen pass crossed, five carts damaged and repaired, twenty-three men with minor injuries, one driver bruised, zero loss of works, the incidents in their chronology — the wheel of cart seven, the broken axle at mid-pass, the sarcophagus carried by hand up a kilometre of fifteen per cent slope, cart nine which had nearly run away — the names of those who had distinguished themselves, including the guide Giuseppe and the former carpenter whose exact name he had forgotten. He reread it, judged it satisfactory, signed.

VII — Parma: The Correggios

Bonaparte had not stopped in Milan. While the first crates were travelling toward Paris, he was pursuing his lightning campaign through northern Italy. Pavia had fallen. Then Piacenza. Then Parma.

Parma possessed numerous collections, but above all Correggio frescoes of inestimable value. The cathedral housed that *Assumption of the Virgin* painted between 1526 and 1530 whose reputation extended throughout Europe, and Monge was impatient to see it.

The Armistice of Parma had been signed on the 9th of May 1796, six days before Bonaparte's entry into Milan — Ferdinand had capitulated in advance, without waiting for the outcome of the Lombard campaign. Duke Ferdinand de Bourbon-Parma had first tried to remain neutral. Son-in-law of the King of Spain, he enjoyed powerful protection. His court was renowned for its refinement: musicians, painters, architects stayed there. Ferdinand himself drew and engraved. He had enlarged the ducal gallery, acquired paintings, commissioned copies of the great masters to form the taste of local artists.

But when the French army approached, he understood he had to submit. Retreat was impossible. The Austrians had been routed since Montenotte, the road north cut. To resist meant seeing Parma sacked. He negotiated therefore, hoping to limit the damage.

Bonaparte left him no margin. The armistice stipulated a contribution of two million francs — an enormous sum for a small duchy. Plus "twenty paintings at the Republic's choosing, with express mention of the masterpieces of Correggio."

That last precision was telling. Bonaparte left nothing to chance.

Ferdinand protested. Twenty paintings was already considerable. But to demand "the masterpieces of Correggio" was to empty

the gallery of its chief pieces. It was to destroy in a few lines what four generations of dukes had patiently assembled.

Bonaparte swept aside his objections. The treaty was signed on the 9th of May. Ferdinand returned to the ducal palace, sickened, knowing he had just surrendered his dynasty's heritage.

Monge arrived in Parma on the 16th of June 1796, accompanied by an enlarged team of restorers and packers. The Milanese experience had shown that additional personnel were needed to handle large formats and fragile works.

The curator of the ducal gallery, Count Affò, was waiting for them. Ireneo Affò was a respected scholar. Author of several volumes on the history of Parma and its artists, he had devoted his life to the study of the ducal heritage. He was a frail old man with eyes still keen, wearing a black frock coat worn at the elbows.

He received them in the gallery, surrounded by his assistants. No welcoming speech. No courteous formulas.

— Monsieur, I know why you are here. I have been informed of the operations in Milan. I assume you will proceed in the same way here.

— That is correct, Count Affò. We must select twenty works in accordance with the armistice.

— Twenty works. Out of more than a thousand that our gallery possesses. You could be moderate in your choices.

— We will take what the Paris Museum lacks. The finest pieces, naturally.

Affò appeared unsurprised.

— Then come. Better to finish quickly.

He guided them through the rooms. It was a Renaissance building of rational layout, with large windows allowing optimal lighting. The paintings were hung by schools: first the local primitives of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, then the

sixteenth-century masters, finally the seventeenth-century Baroque works.

The Correggio section occupied two entire rooms. There were monumental altarpieces, preparatory studies, devotional paintings. Monge stopped before the gallery's masterpiece — a large canvas of two metres thirty-five in height by one metre forty-one wide, known here as the *Madonna of Saint Jerome*, or more familiarly as *Il Giorno*.

— This is the painting that Bonaparte himself designated as "the masterpiece of Correggio," said Monge. He expressly requested that it be among the first pieces dispatched to Paris.

Count Affò made an imperceptible recoil.

— This painting was commissioned around 1525 for the Bergonzi Chapel in Parma. The entire city holds it dear. And you are taking it.

Monge noted the painting on his list. The softness of Correggio's characteristic sfumato — those imperceptible transitions between light and shadow — the monumentality of the composition and the quality of the golden light flooding the entire scene made it a first-rate piece.

— Show me the other Correggios.

Affò led him toward the adjacent canvases. There was a *Madonna with a Bowl — La Madonna della Scodella* — of familiar, intimate grace. The Virgin, seated in an outdoor landscape, holds a silver cup, the scodella that gives the painting its name. The Christ Child, standing between her and Joseph, takes the hand of each. Joseph, dominating the right half of the composition, gathers dates from a bent palm. At the top, a choir of angels spirals in the light. The diagonal linking the three protagonists gives the whole a graceful animation.

— This one too, said Monge.

Then a *Mystic Marriage of Saint Catherine*. The same golden softness bathed the Virgin, the Child and the kneeling saint.

— This one as well.

Affò clenched his fists but said nothing. Monge continued the inventory, selecting three more Correggios: a *Virgin and Child* of smaller format but extreme delicacy, a *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* of serene gravity, and a *Christ in the Garden of Olives* of dramatic intensity.

In total, six Correggios. More than had ever left Parma on a single occasion.

But the paintings were only part of the wealth. There were also the frescoes. And those posed a major technical problem.

The following day, Monge went to the cathedral to examine the *Assumption*. He had spent the night studying engravings and descriptions. Now he wanted to see the original.

The cathedral of Parma was a twelfth-century Romanesque building. Massive. Austere on the outside. But the interior had been transformed in the sixteenth century by Correggio's frescoes.

Monge entered, his eyes raised toward the dome.

And stood transfixed.

Sixty metres above the floor, the Virgin ascended toward heaven at the centre of a swirl of clouds, angels, saints. Everything turned, everything rose in a vertiginous spiral movement. The bodies were painted in violent foreshortening — arms extended, legs bent, torsos twisted — which resembled nothing when seen close up, but ordered themselves when seen from below.

It was a technical tour de force. Correggio had calculated each figure according to a complex perspective so that it appeared to float above the viewer. The clouds spilled beyond the limits of the dome, giving the impression that the architecture truly opened onto the sky. The illusion was perfect. One was seized by vertigo looking at this celestial ascension.

He stayed a long time under the dome, alone. Thouin joined him.

Then, with Thouin, he climbed through the attic spaces to the base of the dome, to verify with his own eyes what Denon had described in Paris. Denon had not lied.

Thouin examined the painted surface, ran his hand over the plaster, probed the joints.

— This is true fresco. Painted *a fresco*, on fresh plaster. The paint penetrated the plaster as it dried. It is an integral part of the wall. One cannot detach it without destroying everything.

— Could one cut out a section of the wall?

— Look at the surface. At least twelve metres in diameter. And it is a curved surface. The weight would be several tons. A monumental scaffolding would be needed to cut it, support it during descent, transport it. And even if one managed, how would one reinstall it? The dome is designed to be seen from below, at sixty metres. In a museum, one could never recreate that distance. The illusion would be lost.

Monge had to concede defeat. The *Assumption* would remain in Parma.

He also examined the frescoes in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista — another Correggio masterpiece. Same conclusion. These monumental works could not be moved. They were integral to the architecture. To take them would mean destroying them.

Bonaparte received Monge's report on the frescoes before the final list of paintings was even settled.

They met in Milan, in the Palazzo Sforza that Bonaparte had turned into a headquarters. The general sat behind a desk cluttered with maps and reports. He read Monge's document, frowning.

— What do you mean, impossible? I have conquered Italy in two months. I have defeated four Austrian armies. And you tell me one cannot move a painting?

— General, Monge explained, it is not a question of will. It is a question of physics. The fresco is integral with the wall. To tear it out would destroy the work. We would be destroying what we wish to preserve.

— Then find a solution! Have copies made! Hire painters!

— Copies will never replace the original. And the scale is too great. A dome twelve metres in diameter...

Bonaparte cut him off with a wave of his hand.

— I don't care about your technical problems. If you cannot take the frescoes, compensate with the mobile paintings. Double the requisitions. Triple them. I want Parma to deliver what it possesses that is finest. Understood?

Monge did not reply. He knew this register. When Bonaparte spoke in that tone, arguing was pointless.

Monge returned to Parma three days later. This time he did not confine himself to the ducal gallery. He visited the churches, the convents, the private collections. If Bonaparte wanted more paintings, he would find them.

In the church of the Steccata, he discovered a cycle of frescoes by Parmigianino. The frescoes themselves could not be taken, but the church possessed several easel paintings by the same artist. Monge selected two.

At the Palazzo della Pilotta, a secondary ducal residence, he found a collection of Flemish and Dutch paintings — Rubenses, Van Dycks, Rembrandts acquired in the seventeenth century by Duke Ranuccio II. Monge chose four.

In the Palatina Library, he requisitioned forty-five illuminated manuscripts. Books of hours from the fifteenth century of extraordinary fineness. The miniatures depicted biblical scenes, astronomical calendars, fantastic bestiaries. Every page was a work of art in itself.

In total, Monge took thirty-four works from Parma rather than the twenty stipulated in the armistice.

When Affò saw the final list, he went pale.

The packers came to take down *Il Giorno*. Affò approached. He placed his hand on the frame. Not on the canvas — on the wood. For a moment. Thouin acted as if he had not seen. The packers too.

Duke Ferdinand formally protested to Bonaparte. He received a curt reply: "The terms of the treaty have been respected. If Your Serene Highness disputes our interpretation, we can renegotiate the armistice in its entirety. With less favourable conditions."

Ferdinand understood the message. He ceased to protest.

The crates were prepared over three weeks. Thouin took personal charge of packing the six Correggios.

On the 20th of July 1796, everything was ready. Thirty carts waited in the courtyard of the ducal palace. Two hundred soldiers as escort, commanded by a captain whom Bonaparte had designated personally.

Affò came to attend the departure. He stood in the shadow of a portal, wearing his black frock coat, his face closed. He watched the crates being loaded one by one. Each crate bore a label: "Central Museum of the Arts, Paris."

When the convoy moved off, Affò remained there, motionless, until the last cart disappeared at the end of the street.

Monge did not wait for the convoy's departure. He had already taken the road for Modena.

VIII — Modena and Bologna

Modena fell in May 1796, a few days after Parma. Duke Ercole III d'Este submitted without fighting. He had no army worthy of the name. His Austrian protectors had just been defeated. To resist meant seeing his capital sacked. He preferred to negotiate.

The armistice was signed on the 17th of May 1796. Bonaparte dictated his terms: a war contribution of seven million francs,

delivery of provisions and horses for the French army, and — the now-standard article — "cession of twenty paintings and manuscripts at the choice of the French Republic."

Ercole signed. But in signing, he knew what he was surrendering. Four centuries of accumulation. The Este treasures.

The Este family had ruled Ferrara and Modena since the thirteenth century. Generation after generation, they had assembled one of the finest galleries in Europe.

But in 1746, Ercole III, pressed by financial difficulties, had sold the finest jewel: Correggio's *Madonna of Saint George*. The King of Saxony had bought it for a fabulous sum. It had gone to Dresden.

Now, fifty years later, the French were coming to take the rest.

Monge and Berthollet arrived in Modena on the 28th of July 1796. They were accompanied by Hassenfratz and a team of fifteen assistants — restorers, packers, draughtsmen charged with documenting each requisitioned work.

The curator of the ducal gallery, Girolamo Tiraboschi, was waiting for them.

He received the French commissioners in the great gallery of the ducal palace with glacial courtesy.

— Gentlemen, I am at your disposal. You will find here what remains of our collections after the unfortunate sale of 1746.

— We know you lost the Correggio, said Monge. But according to our information, you still retain major pieces.

— Indeed. Titians, Veroneses, Tintorettos. The Ferrarese school is well represented too: Dosso Dossi, Garofalo, the primitives. And our library possesses illuminated manuscripts of great value.

— Show us, said Berthollet.

They stopped first before the *Portrait of Alfonso d'Este*. Painted around 1523, it depicted the duke in armour, holding his baton of command. A martial figure with an intense gaze, dressed in dark armour heightened with gold.

— Dimensions? asked Thouin.

— One hundred and eighty centimetres by ninety. Oil on canvas. Excellent condition.

He inscribed it on his list.

Tiraboschi led them into other rooms. There was a second Titian: the *Portrait of a Man with a Melancholy Gaze* — a mysterious figure with a melancholy look. Then a *Portrait of Gian Giorgio Trissino*, humanist and poet, depicted three-quarters in a dark robe, his hand resting on an open book — a scholar's portrait of that Venetian sobriety characteristic of Titian's maturity.

— Two additional Titians, said Monge.

— Three Titians, gentlemen? protested Tiraboschi. You are emptying our Venetian collection.

— We are applying the treaty. Twenty works. We have selected only three so far.

Tiraboschi sighed and led them toward the section devoted to the Ferrarese school. It was there that the collection's most singular works were to be found — paintings one saw nowhere else.

Dosso Dossi first. Giovanni di Niccolò de Luteri, known as Dosso Dossi, court painter to the Este in the sixteenth century. His style was unique: dreamlike landscapes in shimmering colours, mythological figures in fantastic settings, an atmosphere of waking dream.

He stopped before a *Jupiter, Mercury and Virtue*. Jupiter enthroned among the clouds, Mercury carrying his caduceus, Virtue standing between them in a magical golden light. The sky was an unreal blue. Everything bathed in the waking-dream atmosphere peculiar to Dosso.

— Dosso was Alfonso I's favourite painter, said Tiraboschi. He loved these legendary atmospheres. These imaginary worlds where mythology came to life.

— This one, said Monge.

He also selected a *Holy Family* — a sacred composition in a wooded landscape of golden tones, a collected figure characteristic of Alfonso I d'Este's favourite painter.

Then came Garofalo. Benvenuto Tisi, known as Garofalo — another Ferrarese master. More classical style than Dosso, but of refined elegance. Monge chose a *Virgin and Child* and a *Nativity*.

Finally, the fifteenth-century primitives. Cosmè Tura, Francesco del Cossa, Ercole de' Roberti. These painters had developed a strange, almost hallucinatory style — angular figures with broken draperies, fantastic architectures, a nervous tension in every composition.

— All the more reason to take them, replied Berthollet. The Museum must be universal. It must represent all schools.

They continued the inventory. A monumental Veronese: *The Adoration of the Magi* — a large composition four metres wide showing the Adoration in a palatial setting of Venetian architecture, a crowd of figures in sumptuous costumes, brilliant light.

— This painting was acquired by Duke Cesare d'Este in 1657, Tiraboschi explained. It came from a private commission for a palace in Emilia.

— Dimensions?

— Four hundred and ten centimetres wide by two hundred and twenty tall. It is a monumental piece. Transport will be delicate.

— We have transported larger still. We will take this one.

Monge added to his list a Tintoretto — *The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple*, a large canvas of three metres by two painted for the Scuola Grande di San Marco.

But the paintings were not all. There was also the library.

The Este Library, founded in the fifteenth century, contained thousands of manuscripts. The Este had been great bibliophiles.

They had collected medieval codices, incunabula, rare editions, illuminated manuscripts.

Berthollet, who was interested in the sciences too, visited the library accompanied by the head librarian. They examined the collections for two days.

Berthollet selected forty-five illuminated manuscripts. The Este had collected codices of remarkable diversity: breviaries in gold letters on blue ground, astronomical treatises illustrated with armillary spheres, collections of court poetry adorned with portraits of troubadours. Each volume had been fashioned for a princely gaze.

There were also portolan charts — sixteenth-century sea charts decorated with sea monsters and ships. Illustrated herbals showing medicinal plants with their properties. Alchemical treatises adorned with mysterious symbols.

The head librarian protested. Berthollet listened, then continued his inventory.

Tiraboschi drafted his own registers, night after night, noting the provenance and circumstances of each requisition. What he could not keep, he at least wanted to have written.

The Modena crates left for Paris on the 15th of August 1796. Forty carts loaded, three hundred soldiers as escort. The convoy took four weeks to cross the Alps.

Duke Ercole watched the departure from a palace window. Four centuries of family collection were leaving for France. The Titians that Alfonso I had commissioned. The Dosso Dossis that Ercole II had loved. The manuscripts that Alfonso II had brought from Ferrara.

Ercole III died seven years later, in 1803.

But in Paris, the Modena treasures were integrating into the collection of the Central Museum. The Titians joined the other Titians pillaged elsewhere. The Dosso Dossis created a unique

Ferrarese section. The illuminated manuscripts enriched the Bibliothèque Nationale.

This was what Grégoire, in Paris, had tried to formulate without succeeding. What was called the preservation of humanity's heritage had been built, here, on the destruction of particular heritages. He had not found how to write this without it resembling an accusation or an absolution. So he had not written it.

Bologna capitulated on the 19th of June 1796. The city was the seat of a famous university — the oldest in Europe. It was also a major artistic centre where the Bolognese school had flourished in the sixteenth century: the Carracci, Guercino, Guido Reni.

The armistice was signed on the 23rd of June. It stipulated the usual conditions: financial contributions, delivery of provisions, and "the cession of works of art and scientific objects." One hundred pieces in total. Paintings, manuscripts, instruments.

Monge arrived on the 25th of June, accompanied by Berthollet and an enlarged team of fifteen assistants — restorers, packers, experts. The system was becoming routine. Everyone knew their role. Efficiency was increasing.

They were received by Senator Aldrovandi, representing the municipal authorities. From a great Bolognese family, he had spent his life in the city's service.

— Gentlemen, Bologna submits. We will pay the contribution. We will deliver the requested works. But we do so under constraint. Let that be clear. You do not persuade us. You compel us.

— We take note of your position, Senator, Monge replied. Now facilitate our access to the collections.

— I will facilitate access, yes. But I will not facilitate the looting. You will have what the treaty stipulates. Not one painting more.

Monge knew he would take more. Bonaparte had said it without ambiguity: "Take everything that has value. Treaties are made to be interpreted."

Aldrovandi led them to the Pinacoteca Nazionale, installed in the Palazzo Poggi. The director, Marcello Oretti, was waiting for them.

He was a meticulous enthusiast who had catalogued for thirty years every work of art in Bologna. His registers were models of precision.

All his life he had served his city's art. Unlike Aldrovandi, he was not certain that serving it today meant opposing it.

— Gentlemen, commissioners. I have prepared my catalogues. You will find in them everything you need to identify the works. I assume you will begin with the Carracci.

— Indeed, said Monge. They are the key pieces.

— Follow me.

They walked in silence to the first room. Monge expected the coldness he had met everywhere else since Milan. It did not come.

— You are surprised that I collaborate so readily, said Oretti, unprompted. Senator Aldrovandi protests, and he has his reasons. As for me, I have spent thirty years cataloguing these paintings in a city where half the private collections remain closed to the public, where a scholar come from Naples waits three weeks for permission to see a Carracci. If Paris displays them to everyone, with no letter of introduction, no favour to beg, I am not certain that is a pure loss.

— Do you truly believe that? asked Monge, who had not heard this argument from the mouth of any curator since leaving Paris.

— I believe it most of the time. The rest of the time, I think I am telling myself a story to bear what I cannot prevent. Perhaps both are true at once.

The gallery occupied an entire floor of the palazzo. The paintings were hung by schools and periods: first the fourteenth-century primitives, then the Quattrocento masters, finally the great painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The section devoted to the Carracci was the most important. Annibale, Agostino and Ludovico — the three cousins who had revolutionised Italian painting at the end of the sixteenth century in reaction to Mannerism.

Oretti indicated a monumental painting.

— *The Apparition of the Virgin to Saint Hyacinth* by Ludovico Carracci. Three metres seventy-five by two metres twenty-three. Painted in 1594 for the church of San Domenico. Composition against a background of Roman architecture: the Virgin in glory, borne on a cloud of angels, appears to the saint kneeling in the shadow of the foreground. Look at the contrast between the celestial light and the earthly darkness. It is the entire spirituality of the Carracci concentrated in this opposition.

Monge examined the painting. The monumentality of the composition, the perfect balance between realism and idealisation, the mastery of chiaroscuro — everything confirmed the Carracci's reputation.

— This one.

Oretti briefly closed his eyes.

— It is our major piece by Ludovico.

— All the more reason.

They moved to Annibale Carracci. An *Assumption* — an imposing Baroque machine. The Virgin ascending to heaven in a spiral of angels and clouds, the apostles below with arms raised. Then Agostino Carracci's *Communion of Saint Jerome* — more sober: the dying old man receiving the Eucharist in a silence of monks and gentle light.

— Both, said Monge.

They moved on to Guercino. Oretti stopped them before a *Saint Sebastian Tended by Saint Irene*. A nocturnal composition of troubling sensuality — the light came from no identifiable source; it seemed to emanate from the bodies themselves.

— An early work, said Oretti. 1619. Look at the light.

— This one too.

— You are taking everything of value.

— We are taking what the Paris Museum lacks.

Oretti noted in his register — the writing dense and rapid. Every painting that left would be documented. Every loss recorded. He also noted that Guercino's *Saint Petronilla* — a massive altarpiece of over seven metres in height, once commissioned for Saint Peter's in Rome and transferred since 1730 to the Quirinal Palace — was in Rome.

— That one you will not be able to take here, he said to Monge. But I assume your colleagues will deal with it when they go to the Vatican.

He took note. Rome would be the next stage.

Then came Guido Reni. Oretti stopped before a *Pietà*. The Virgin held the dead body of Christ on her lap. A triangular composition of absolute simplicity — no setting, no accessories, just two figures in an empty space, the colours reduced to the white of Christ's skin, the blue of Mary's robe, the red of the drapery. The emotion arose from this paring down.

— This one.

He added to his list a *Saint Jerome in Meditation*.

But Bologna also possessed treasures of another order. The university housed remarkable scientific collections.

The physics museum contained eighteenth-century instruments of incomparable precision and variety: telescopes, microscopes, reflecting compasses, electrostatic machines, air pumps.

There was an herbarium containing thousands of carefully catalogued botanical specimens. Celestial and terrestrial globes of remarkable craftsmanship. Mineralogical collections.

Bonaparte had expressly requested that these collections be requisitioned too. Italy should not merely supply paintings. It should contribute to every domain of knowledge.

Berthollet took charge of this part of the mission. He visited the physics museum accompanied by Professor Luigi Galvani — the very man who had discovered animal electricity.

Galvani had devoted his life to the University of Bologna. Now he watched his instruments leave for France.

— Monsieur, he said to Berthollet, these pieces are not works of art. They are educational tools. Without them, our teaching is gravely compromised.

— All the more reason to bring them to Paris. They will be used to train French engineers and physicists. Your university can order replacements.

— With what money? Bologna has just paid fifteen million in contributions. Our coffers are empty. It will take us years to reconstitute these collections.

Berthollet continued his inventory, noting the dimensions, the condition, the educational value of each instrument.

He selected twenty instruments in total. Air pumps for experiments on vacuum. Lens sets for optics. Precision balances. Chemistry apparatus.

He also took celestial and terrestrial globes — magnificent painted wooden spheres mounted on copper armatures. And mineralogical and botanical collections.

Galvani watched the packing of his instruments, silent. He had spent his life measuring, weighing, verifying. He knew the difference between what one can demonstrate and what one can only endure.

Berthollet also visited the university's anatomy theatre. Built in 1637, it was a small amphitheatre in carved wood where professors dissected cadavers before students.

The room also housed anatomical wax models by Ercole Lelli — organs, nervous systems, foetuses — which Berthollet wanted for the Paris School of Medicine.

Berthollet was already packing them.

But the requisitions did not stop at paintings and instruments. There was also the university library.

Founded in the thirteenth century, enriched continuously for five hundred years, it contained thousands of medieval manuscripts and precious incunabula. Bolognese professors had deposited their works there. Copyists had transcribed ancient texts there. Illuminators had decorated books of hours there.

Berthollet visited the library with Father Anselmo Costadoni, a Benedictine who had spent his life cataloguing its holdings. The manuscripts were shelved in large oak wardrobes. The smell of old parchment floated in the air. Costadoni brought out the most precious pieces: a twelfth-century *Codex Iustinianus* with gilded initials, a thirteenth-century Latin *Canon medicinae* by Avicenna, fifteenth-century books of hours with still-vivid miniatures — lapis lazuli blue, gold leaf, vermilion red — an *Almagest* by Ptolemy, a fourteenth-century illustrated herbal, a treatise on geometry by Euclid with diagrams traced in red ink. Berthollet took, set aside. There was no discussion.

In total, thirty manuscripts were selected.

— Thirty manuscripts, said Costadoni, his voice strained. You are decimating our library.

— You still have thousands. These will go to enrich the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris.

— Where no one will consult them! In Paris, who takes interest in Bolognese manuscripts of Roman law? Here they are alive, used, taught!

— In Paris they will be preserved, catalogued, accessible to scholars from all over the world.

— Accessible does not mean used. These manuscripts will die of indifference in your Parisian reserves.

Berthollet knew that Costadoni was partly right. Many manuscripts taken from Italy would end up in the reserves of the Bibliothèque Nationale, rarely consulted, gradually forgotten.

He told himself, as he had done at every stage since Flanders, that he felt no misgivings about these missions, that it was work like any other, technical, free of moral question. This time the phrase would not take. He stood a moment without noting anything, his gaze on the empty cabinets, before collecting himself. Bonaparte wanted to enrich Paris. These manuscripts would leave. There was work to be done.

The inventory lasted twenty days. Twenty days of covering the collections, the libraries, the reserves — assessing, weighing, measuring, deciding.

On the 15th of July 1796, Monge and Berthollet presented their final list to the Bolognese authorities: eighty paintings, twenty scientific instruments, about ten Lelli wax models, thirty manuscripts, mineralogical collections and various sculptures — a hundred and eighty-seven pieces in total, for a treaty that stipulated a hundred.

Senator Aldrovandi convened an extraordinary session of the Senate of Bologna. Before the assembled gathering, he read the list of French requisitions.

— I protested, replied Aldrovandi. Commissioner Monge told me that the paintings constituted the "principal objects." The other categories did not count toward the quota.

The Senate voted a formal protest. An official document was drafted, signed by all senators, addressed to General Bonaparte.

Bonaparte's reply arrived a week later. A three-line letter:

"The treaty says a hundred works of art AND scientific objects. The paintings are the works of art. The others are the scientific objects. If you are not satisfied, I can take more. The choice is yours."

Aldrovandi understood the message.

While the crates were being prepared, Oretti was writing. He opened his register at the day's page and noted: "15 July 1796. Annunciation by Guercino. Oil on canvas, 248 × 197 cm. Taken down at 2 p.m. by two soldiers. The frame remained." That was his form of resistance — not denunciation, but exact testimony: the date, the measurement, the bare fact.

The Bologna crates left for Paris in August 1796. Thirty loaded carts, two hundred soldiers as escort. The road north would take four weeks.

Oretti and Aldrovandi attended the departure, side by side in the palazzo courtyard, motionless, watching the carts move away.

On every lid, the same stencilled inscription: "Central Museum of the Arts, Paris."

When the last cart disappeared at the end of the street, Aldrovandi turned to Oretti.

— They took everything. The Carracci. The Guercino. Guido Reni. Galvani's instruments. Lelli's wax models. Everything.

— Not everything, replied Oretti. I kept the catalogues. I kept the descriptions. I kept the memory.

Aldrovandi nodded. Then they each went home.

For Bonaparte was turning his eyes toward Rome.

While the crates from Parma, Modena and Bologna were travelling toward Paris, Bonaparte was pursuing his military campaign. The Austrians had not given up. They were reconstituting their armies. They were preparing a counter-offensive.

The summer and autumn of 1796 were marked by a series of decisive battles. Castiglione on the 5th of August — a French

victory against the Austrians commanded by Wurmser. Bassano on the 8th of September — another victory, the Austrians pushed back northward. Arcole in November — three days of fierce fighting on a narrow bridge, Bonaparte himself nearly killed.

Then came Rivoli, on the 14th of January 1797. The decisive battle. Bonaparte crushed the Austrian army commanded by Alvinczi. Twenty thousand prisoners. The Austrians were definitively losing northern Italy.

Nineteen days later, on the 2nd of February 1797, Mantua capitulated. The city had resisted for eight months. Besieged, starved, ravaged by typhus, it had held on. But after Rivoli, resistance was meaningless. The Austrian commander Wurmser surrendered.

With the fall of Mantua, all of northern Italy passed under French control. The duchies were subdued. The Austrians defeated. Venice, neutral but terrified, did not move.

Only one target remained. The greatest of all.

CHAPTER III: ROME AND VENICE (1797)

I — Entry into the Eternal City

Monge and Berthollet arrived in Rome on the 25th of February 1797. The city impressed them in spite of themselves. They had seen Milan, Bologna, Parma. But Rome was different. It was the Eternal City. The *caput mundi*. One knew it before arriving.

They stepped from the coach near the Capitoline Hill. The hill, political heart of ancient Rome, dominated the forum. Ruins stretched as far as the eye could see: broken columns, triumphal arches, collapsed temples, basilicas overrun by vegetation. Among these vestiges of Antiquity rose Baroque churches, Renaissance palaces, monumental fountains.

Rome was a palimpsest. Every age had left its mark: the pagan past, the Christian Middle Ages, the humanist Renaissance, triumphant Baroque — all coexisting in a unique mixture.

Monge contemplated this spectacle. All these civilisations layered one upon another, all these centuries accumulated in the same space.

— Impressive, murmured Berthollet at his side.

— More than that. It is overwhelming. You feel the weight of History. All these civilisations superimposed. All these centuries accumulated.

— All the more reason to take what has value. We are going to save these treasures. Preserve them for future generations.

They installed themselves in a requisitioned palace near the Vatican. From there, they could radiate out toward the various collections: the Vatican with its extraordinary museums, but also the Capitoline with its antique collections, the Borghese, Barberini, Farnese palaces and their painting galleries, the innumerable churches housing frescoes, sculptures, altarpieces.

Where to begin? The embarrassment of riches was real. Rome contained more artistic treasures than all the cities visited up to now combined.

Bonaparte settled the matter. He wrote to Monge on the 27th of February: "Concentrate first on the Vatican. I want the *Apollo Belvedere*. I want the *Laocoön*. I want the two Brutus busts. Begin there. Then you will see about the rest."

On the 28th of February, they went to the Vatican. They were received by Cardinal Doria Pamphilj, Secretary of State of the Holy See, and Ennio Quirino Visconti, curator of the pontifical museums.

The cardinal belonged to one of the greatest Roman families. The Doria had served the papacy for generations, supplying cardinals, diplomats, administrators. Cardinal Doria incarnated that Roman aristocracy intimately bound to the Holy See.

He received the French in a room of the apostolic palace. Sober, elegant, decorated with sixteenth-century frescoes. Portraits of popes adorned the walls. An atmosphere of ancient power, of millennial tradition, floated in the air.

— Gentlemen, your presence here is an offence. An offence to Christendom. An offence to the Church. An offence to God himself.

Monge replied calmly.

— Your Eminence, we have not come to offend. We have come to execute the clauses of a legally signed armistice. Article eight stipulates the transfer of a hundred works of art. We are here to identify those works.

— An armistice signed under duress! Your armies were at the gates of Rome! This is not a free agreement — it is extortion!

— The legal form remains valid, Your Eminence. A signed treaty is a signed treaty.

The cardinal was about to reply when Visconti stopped him with a gesture.

— Your Eminence, allow me. I think we are losing time in sterile discussion. These gentlemen have their orders. They will execute them whatever we say. Better to concentrate on the practical aspects.

Visconti was an aristocrat. His father, Giovanni Battista Visconti, had been curator of the pontifical museums before him. Visconti himself had published several volumes cataloguing the antique sculptures. He knew every piece, every detail, every history.

He was also a pragmatic man. He understood that the French could not be stopped by protests. The only thing one could do was to ensure the works were handled with care — that they would not be damaged during transport.

He turned toward Monge and Berthollet.

— Gentlemen, I assume you have a list. Works you particularly wish to see.

— Indeed, Monge replied, handing over a document.

Visconti read it through. His face grew progressively darker.

— The *Apollo Belvedere*. The *Laocoön*. The *Torso Belvedere*. The Brutus busts. You want to take everything. You want to empty the Vatican of its most precious treasures.

— We are taking what is stipulated in the armistice. A hundred works.

— But not just any works! The hundred finest! The hundred most important! It is calculated to humiliate us. To show all of Christendom that Rome is vanquished, stripped, brought low.

Visconti was right. Monge could not contest it. That was the objective. Bonaparte wanted symbols. Tearing the Apollo from the Vatican was tearing from Rome its status as capital of the arts. Installing the Apollo in the Central Museum of the Arts was transferring that status to Paris.

— Let us begin with the Museo Pio-Clementino, said Berthollet. We wish to see the antique sculptures.

Visconti rose stiffly.

— Follow me.

They passed through a series of galleries and courtyards. The Vatican was a labyrinth: endless corridors decorated with frescoes, monumental staircases, immense rooms. Everywhere, the accumulation of centuries of wealth and power.

The Museo Pio-Clementino occupied a wing of the palace. It had been created by Popes Clement XIV and Pius VI to house the antique sculptures. The collection was extraordinary — the popes had accumulated over the centuries the marbles found in the excavations of Rome: Greek and Roman statues, busts of emperors, carved sarcophagi, mosaics. Everything that two thousand years of history had bequeathed.

Visconti guided them through the rooms, explaining the origin of each piece. He spoke with passion, but also with growing sadness.

They entered the Room of the Muses. A circular room whose walls, covered with niches, contained statues. At the centre, on a pedestal, stood the *Torso Belvedere*.

It was a fragment of sculpture. A male torso without head, without arms, without legs. Just the trunk and part of the thighs, the man seated on an animal skin draped over a rock of Pentelic marble. Height: one metre fifty-nine. Estimated weight: eight hundred kilograms. But what a torso. The musculature was rendered with extraordinary power. Every muscle visible, tensed, ready for action. One felt the force contained in this fragmented body. The slightly curved back suggested a twisting movement. The abdominals formed a pronounced relief. The pectorals were massive.

— Greek sculpture of the first century before Christ, explained Visconti in a flat voice. Signed Apollonios, son of Nestor, of Athens. The signature is engraved on the rock that serves as the

base. Michelangelo studied it for hours. He refused to restore it, considering that adding limbs would be a sacrilege.

He stroked the marble with tenderness.

— This work has influenced all Western sculpture since the Renaissance. The ignudi on the Sistine Chapel ceiling draw directly from it. This torso shaped Michelangelo's conception of the body in tension. The *Day* from the Medici tombs in Florence, the *Victory* of the Palazzo Vecchio. Every sculptor who wished to represent power and contained energy studied this torso. It was called Michelangelo's school.

Thouin was examining the marble, assessing the weight, thinking about the logistics of transport.

— Transport possible, but delicate. A padded crate will need to be built. Any impact must be avoided. The marble appears sound, but one never knows. An invisible crack could reveal itself during the journey.

— We are taking it, Berthollet decided, noting on his list.

They passed into the next room. The Cabinet of the Apollo. And there, in a niche specially designed to display it, stood the statue. The *Apollo Belvedere*. Monge stopped dead. He had seen reproductions, engravings, plaster casts. The original stupefied him.

The statue stood on a red marble pedestal. Two metres twenty-four in height, not counting the base. Parian marble of dazzling whiteness. The polish was perfect. In the light falling from the high windows, the marble seemed almost translucent.

Apollo was represented as a young man, barely past adolescence. Nude. In a pose at once relaxed and dynamic. The body's weight rested on the right leg. The left leg was slightly bent, the foot placed behind. The left arm was extended, having held a bow. The right arm lowered, the hand having held an arrow now vanished.

The head was turned to the left, as if the god were looking into the distance — perhaps at an enemy he had just felled, perhaps at a landscape he was contemplating. The expression was serene, almost distant. No violent emotion. Just a tranquil nobility.

The hair was arranged in complex curls held by a band. A few locks fell on the shoulders.

The body was of absolute anatomical perfection. Ideal proportions. Every muscle in its place, neither over- nor under-developed. The transitions between the different parts of the body were fluid, natural. It was the perfect balance between force and grace, power and elegance.

— A Roman copy of a lost Greek original, said Visconti. Probably made in the second century after Christ. The original was a fourth-century bronze sculpture, likely before Christ, attributed to Leochares, sculptor at the court of Alexander the Great. But all of this is hypothetical. The original has disappeared. Only this copy remains.

He approached the statue.

— It was discovered in 1489 on the lands of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, probably at Anzio. The cardinal Giuliano della Rovere bought it on the spot. It was he who, having become Pope Julius II, installed it in the Belvedere courtyard where it had stood ever since.

Visconti turned toward Monge and Berthollet.

— Winckelmann wrote that it represented "the highest ideal of art among all the works of Antiquity that have escaped destruction." Mengs spent months drawing it. Canova comes to contemplate it. It is not merely a sculpture. It is the canon. The absolute model. The ultimate reference.

— All the more reason for it to go to the Central Museum of the Arts, replied Berthollet. A work of this importance cannot remain locked away here where only a few privileged individuals may see it.

— A few privileged individuals? Visconti protested. The Vatican is open! Any artist with a recommendation can come to study our collections! We have a tradition of hospitality going back to the Renaissance!

— A recommendation, precisely. One needs to know someone. To have connections. It is not open to the people. At the Central Museum of the Arts, anyone may enter. Without a recommendation. Without privilege. That is the difference between the Ancien Régime and the Republic.

Visconti was about to reply, but restrained himself. What use was discussion? The French had decided. The Apollo would leave.

Thouin examined the statue from all angles. He assessed the weight, checked the fixation points on the base, looked for possible weaknesses.

— Approximately nine hundred kilos, he estimated. Very dense marble. No visible cracks. The arms are Renaissance restorations. One can see the joints. The right leg too, partially. But the trunk and the head are antique.

— Do these restorations pose a problem for transport?

— They are well done. Fixed with bronze pins. They should hold. But one will need to handle with precaution. If an arm detaches during the journey, it will be catastrophic.

— Then make sure nothing detaches.

Visconti listened to this exchange with disgust. These men were speaking of the *Apollo* as if it were an ordinary object. They calculated its weight. Assessed the risks of transport. They did not see the work of art. They saw only a block of marble to be moved from point A to point B.

— You do not understand. You cannot understand. This statue is not a simple object to be moved at will. It has a context. A bond with the place that houses it. To tear it from here is to kill it spiritually.

Monge replied gently.

— Monsieur Visconti, the Romans took Greek statues and brought them to Rome. No one reproaches them today. On the contrary, one thanks them for having preserved these works.

— The Romans were brutal conquerors who pillaged shamelessly. You claim to be different. You speak of civilisation, progress, education. But you act as they did. You are pillagers who assuage their conscience with fine speeches.

— Perhaps. But the result is the same. These works will be in Paris. They will be seen. Studied. Admired. Is that not what matters?

— No. What matters is respect. Respect for those who possess these works. Respect for their bond with their place of origin. All of that you are trampling.

The discussion went in circles. Finally, Monge decided.

— Monsieur Visconti, we respect your positions. But our orders are clear. The Apollo will leave for Paris. As will the *Laocoön*, the *Torso*, and the other works on our list. Nothing you say will change that.

— Then why discuss? If everything is decided, why this masquerade of dialogue?

— Because we need your expertise. To pack the sculptures. To ensure they are not damaged during transport. You may refuse to cooperate. But in that case, we will do the work ourselves. With all the risks that entails.

Visconti understood that he was being blackmailed. Either he helped the French and the sculptures had a chance of arriving intact in Paris. Or he refused and they risked being damaged by incompetence.

— Very well. I will cooperate. Not to help you, but to protect the works. That is my duty as curator. Even in these circumstances.

— We appreciate your devotion.

— I do this under constraint.

— As you see fit.

They passed into the next room. The Cabinet of the *Laocoön*. At its centre stood the sculptural group.

The *Laocoön* represented the Trojan priest and his two sons attacked by serpents sent by the gods. Three figures entwined in a desperate struggle. The father at the centre, muscular body tensed with effort, head thrown back, mouth open in a cry of pain. The sons on each side, younger, also caught in the coils of the serpents. The sculpture measured two metres forty-two in height. Parian marble. It had been discovered in 1506 in the ancient imperial apartments at the foot of the Esquiline Hill, near the Colosseum. Pope Julius II had immediately purchased it and placed it in the Vatican.

— Masterpiece of Hellenistic art, Visconti explained. Probably sculpted in the first century before Christ by Agesander, Polydorus and Athenodorus of Rhodes. Three sculptors working together. One sees their collaboration in the composition: each figure is treated differently, but the whole forms a unity.

He indicated the details.

— The father occupies the centre. That is the focal point. His body is the most developed, the most muscular. He is actively fighting, trying to tear away the serpent that encircles him. His muscles are strained to the extreme. One can see the veins standing out. The skin creasing at the joints.

He pointed to the head.

— The expression is remarkable. The open mouth. The furrowed brows. The eyes raised toward the sky as if asking why the gods punish him. It is the tragic pathos. Human suffering before ineluctable fate.

Then he pointed to the sons.

— The two boys are treated differently. That on the left, the elder son, still struggles: his body resists, his muscles contract. That on

the right, the youngest, already seems vanquished. His body slackens. His strength is leaving him. One feels the gradation: the heroic father, the resistant elder son, the succumbing youngest.

Visconti approached the sculpture.

— This work has influenced all of the Renaissance. Michelangelo saw it the very day of its discovery. He ran across Rome to admire it. It changed his conception of sculpture. The *Moses*, the *Slaves* — all derive from it.

He touched the marble delicately.

— But beyond the artistic influence, there is a deeper intention. This sculpture speaks of the human condition. Of useless suffering. Of the silence of the gods before the agony of the innocent.

Monge listened, fascinated despite himself. Visconti was transforming the sculpture into philosophy. He was not merely describing the technique. He was revealing the meaning. The human import of the work.

Berthollet, more pragmatic, interrupted.

— Monsieur Visconti, these considerations are interesting. But we must press on. This sculpture is also leaving for Paris. How is it fixed to the base?

Visconti sighed.

— The group is composed of several assembled blocks. The father's body is monolithic. But the arms, the legs, the sons are separate blocks. They are joined by bronze pins and cement. One could dismantle the whole to facilitate transport.

— Excellent. We will dismantle it. It will be safer.

— Dismantle the *Laocoön*..., murmured Visconti. Separate the figures. Break the unity of the composition. It is... it is a sacrilege.

— A necessary sacrilege. Better to dismantle cleanly than to risk breaking everything during transport.

Visconti had no reply. He remained there, before the *Laocoön*, as if seeing it for the last time. Monge dismissed Visconti. The workers began.

II — The Inventory and the Looting of the Vatican

The following days were devoted to the systematic inventory of the Vatican collections. Monge, Berthollet and their team worked from dawn to dusk, visiting room after room, examining sculpture after sculpture.

Visconti accompanied them everywhere. He had agreed to cooperate, but that cooperation was painful. Every selected work drew from him a commentary tinged with melancholy. He recounted the history of each piece as one recounts the history of a friend one is about to lose.

In the Gallery of the Candelabra, they examined immense marble chandeliers found in the ruins of Hadrian's villa at Tivoli. Two metres fifty in height. Sculpted with delicacy: vegetable garlands wound round the shafts, mythological figures danced on the bases, griffins guarded the summits.

— These candelabra date from the second century after Christ, Visconti explained. They adorned Hadrian's villa. The emperor had had them carved in Pentelic marble imported from Greece. They bear witness to the refinement of Roman art at its apogee.

Berthollet noted: "Two antique candelabra. Medium priority."

In the Gallery of the Statues, they inventoried dozens of sculptures. Roman emperors: the young Augustus, serene and idealised face. The philosopher Marcus Aurelius, bearded and pensive. The brutal Caracalla, with his hard gaze. Each portrait revealed the sovereign's personality — Roman sculptors excelled in this psychological realism.

Gods too. Jupiter thundering, arm raised to hurl the thunderbolt. Juno majestic, draped in her peplos. Minerva helmeted, holding lance and shield. The adolescent Bacchus crowned with vine

leaves. Each divinity represented according to the iconographic canons fixed by tradition.

— How many sculptures in this room? asked Monge.

— Fifty-three, replied Visconti. All catalogued. All documented. I have published seven volumes describing these collections. Now you are going to disperse them.

— We are not dispersing. We are concentrating. In Paris, all these sculptures will be reunited. They will form a more coherent collection than here where they are scattered across different rooms.

— A coherent collection? You call it coherence to tear works from their millennial context in order to pile them in a modern museum? You pervert the meaning of words.

Berthollet intervened curtly.

— Monsieur Visconti, we appreciate your erudition. But your commentary slows our work. Confine yourself to providing the technical information we need. Dimensions. Weight. Condition. The rest does not interest us.

Visconti stiffened.

— I see. You want me to become a simple machine. To forget that these works have a history. A significance. A soul.

— Works of art have no soul. They are material objects. Very beautiful. Very precious. But objects all the same. You are projecting your own emotions onto them.

— And you reduce them to their pure materiality. Who is right? The curator who loves the works, or the pillager who sees them as plunder?

— I am not a pillager. I am a commissioner of the French Republic charged with a legitimate mission.

— Legitimate! Theft becomes legitimate when committed in the name of the Republic?

Monge intervened to calm the tensions.

— Gentlemen, we will make no progress if we argue. Monsieur Visconti, we understand your position. But we have work to accomplish. Help us to do it properly. That is all we ask.

Visconti breathed deeply.

— Very well. Let us continue. But let my silence not be interpreted as consent. I cooperate under constraint. Nothing more.

They passed into the Room of the Busts. Visconti guided them through the collection. Monge interrupted him.

— The Brutus busts. The Armistice of Bologna mentions them specifically. They are at the Capitoline, if I understand correctly.

— Indeed, Visconti replied, with a new dryness. They are pieces from the Capitoline Museums, not ours. You will need to go there separately.

— We will go. But first show us what you have here that is comparable.

Visconti led them before several busts of the Vatican collection. It was at the Capitoline Museums, two days later, that Monge and Berthollet went to take the two pieces specifically named in the Armistice of Bologna.

The bust of Junius Brutus was in bronze. Forty centimetres tall. An austere representation of a mature man with a severe face. Short hair. Incipient beard. A straight and inflexible gaze. It was the image of the uncompromising republican, the founder who had expelled the kings and established the Republic.

— This bust dates from approximately the third century before Christ, explained the Capitoline curator. But the identification with Junius Brutus is hypothetical. We have no certainty. It could be any Roman notable of the republican era.

— No matter, replied Berthollet. The armistice names it specifically. So this is the one we take.

The bust of Marcus Brutus was in marble. Larger: sixty-five centimetres. A representation of a young man with a noble but tormented face. Brows slightly furrowed. Lips pressed together. An expression of determination mixed with doubt.

— Marcus Brutus, the assassin of Caesar, Monge commented in a low voice. Symbol of republican resistance against tyranny. But also a symbol of moral ambiguity. Brutus killed his protector. Was his act heroic or criminal? Tyrannicide or simple murder? The Romans themselves were divided on the question.

Bonaparte had wanted these two busts for obvious symbolic reasons. Junius Brutus who had founded the Republic. Marcus Brutus who had defended it against Caesar. Two figures who legitimised the French Republic and, by anticipation, the assassination of tyrants.

Monge contemplated the two busts at length.

— These busts will leave for Paris. To celebrate the French Republic.

He said it in a firm voice, but something in him stumbled on the sentence. Junius Brutus had driven out a king. Marcus Brutus had killed a man who fancied himself one. And now their faces were being carried off, by force, in the crates of an army that imposed its terms on an old state without asking its opinion — to celebrate, precisely, the right to resist the powerful. Monge wrote none of this on his list. He closed his notebook and resumed his walk.

The inventory continued for two weeks. Beyond the sculptures, Monge and Berthollet visited the Vatican's painting galleries.

The Room of the Signature, decorated by Raphael between 1508 and 1511, contained four magisterial frescoes representing the domains of human knowledge: theology (*The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament*), philosophy (*The School of Athens*), poetry (*Parnassus*), and law (*The Cardinal and Theological Virtues*).

These frescoes were impossible to move. They were integral with the walls. Any attempt to detach them would destroy them. Monge and Berthollet had to resign themselves to leaving them.

But the Vatican also possessed mobile paintings by Raphael.

Their list began with an absolute masterpiece: *The Transfiguration* — which the French commissioners had just had removed from its altar in the church of San Pietro in Montorio, on the Janiculum, where it had stood since 1523. A monumental work. Four metres ten by two metres seventy-nine. It was Raphael's last. Painted in oil on a wood panel, it had been begun in 1518 for Cardinal Giulio de' Medici, future Pope Clement VII. Raphael had died in 1520 before finishing it. His pupil Giulio Romano had completed the lower portions.

The composition was audacious. It juxtaposed two Biblical scenes: at the top, the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, surrounded by Moses and Elijah; below, the powerless apostles attempting to heal an epileptic child.

The contrast was striking. Above: divine serenity, light, transcendence, Christ floating in a golden aura. Below: earthly agitation, shadow, anguish, the gesticulating apostles, the murmuring crowd, the convulsing child.

This duality created dramatic tension. It posed the fundamental theological question: how does the divine intervene in the material world? Raphael's answer was clear: only through Christ's direct presence. Without him, even the apostles are powerless.

Technically the work was remarkable. The upper portion, completed by Raphael, showed his absolute mastery. The figures of Christ, Moses and Elijah were of an ineffable grace. The colours were luminous: brilliant whites, gleaming golds, celestial blues. The composition balanced despite its ascending movement.

The lower portion, completed by Giulio Romano, was darker. Earthy colours — browns, greys, dark greens. And heavier, less

idealised figures. Romano had respected his master's style without attaining its transcendent lightness.

— This painting must not travel, said Visconti. It is too fragile. The wood panel is old. It may have warped, perhaps cracked beneath the surface. Transport risks causing irreparable damage.

Berthollet examined the painting carefully. He saw the crackle in the painted layer. The deformations of the panel. The old restorations that were flaking.

— It will be examined and consolidated before transport. Our restorers are excellent. They will stabilise the panel. Reinforce the wood joints. Then we will transport it in dry weather, avoiding impact.

— You do not understand. This panel cannot be consolidated in a few weeks. It would take months. And even with the best treatment, the journey remains dangerous. Wait at least a year. Give us time to prepare it properly.

— We do not have a year. General Bonaparte wants the Roman works to arrive in Paris before summer. We leave in six weeks. With or without prior consolidation.

Visconti understood that every objection was useless. *The Transfiguration* would leave. Whatever the risks.

— It will not be destroyed. It will be saved. Preserved.

Beyond *The Transfiguration*, they selected other paintings.

A *Deposition* by Caravaggio from Santa Maria in Vallicella. A dramatic composition showing six figures gathered around the body of Christ being lowered toward the tomb. Nicodemus and John carrying the body, the Virgin and two other grieving women behind them, Mary of Cleophas raising her arms toward the sky. Caravaggio's brutal realism transformed the religious scene into a universal human drama. The bodies were heavy, weighty. The flagstone of the tomb occupied the foreground, underscoring the materiality of death.

Visconti stopped for a long time before this work.

A *Christ at the Column* in marble of burning expressivity, taken from the Vatican reserves. Then a series of antique bronzes: imperial busts, votive statuettes whose exact provenance had been lost over the centuries. Nameless pieces, almost without history, but whose quality of execution was unmistakable.

Several Peruginos — Raphael's master — illustrating Umbrian fifteenth-century painting. Pinturicchios of delicate colours. Fra Angelicos of luminous piety.

In total, twenty-three paintings were selected. Plus the hundred and seven sculptures already chosen. Plus the manuscripts from the Vatican Library that Berthollet was in the process of inventorying.

The Vatican Library was one of the richest in Europe. Officially founded in 1475 by Pope Sixtus IV, it had accumulated over the centuries manuscripts from every provenance: Greek and Latin codices, illuminated Gospels, Arabic scientific treatises, antique palimpsests.

The Treaty of Tolentino required five hundred manuscripts. Berthollet spent an entire week selecting them, assisted by the prefect of the pontifical archives, Monsignor Borgia.

Borgia had devoted his life to the library. He knew every manuscript, every incunable, every rarity. Now, at the end of his life, he watched the edifice he had patiently built collapse.

— Here is the *Codex Vaticanus*, he said, showing a Greek manuscript. Fourth century after Christ. One of the oldest witnesses of the biblical text. It contains almost the entire Bible in Greek. It is a capital textual source for establishing the original text.

Berthollet examined the manuscript. Yellowed parchment. Greek uncial script. Seven hundred and fifty-nine leaves. Fifteenth-century binding.

— This one we will note for a subsequent convoy.

— No! Borgia protested. This is our greatest treasure! Without it, our Biblical studies are compromised!

— Copies exist. You will be able to work from copies.

— Copies do not replace the original! Every detail counts! Every marginal correction! Every deletion! One can only establish a critical text by examining the original manuscripts!

— In Paris, French Biblical scholars will be able to examine it. Your loss is their gain.

Borgia lowered his head, defeated.

Berthollet continued his selection. A fifth-century Virgil — one of the oldest manuscripts of the Aeneid — containing exceptional miniatures. A ninth-century Terence with marginal drawings illustrating the comedies. A thirteenth-century Ptolemy with illuminated geographical maps.

Scientific manuscripts too. A sixth-century Dioscorides describing medicinal plants with botanical illustrations. An Archimedes palimpsest where the Greek text had been scraped away and covered with Byzantine prayers, but where the original mathematical treatises could still be discerned. Twelfth-century Latin translations of Aristotle.

Carolingian Gospels with splendid illuminations. Every page was a masterpiece in itself: gilded initials, narrative vignettes, vegetable borders. The ninth-century miniaturists had achieved a perfection rarely equalled.

Five hundred manuscripts. Five hundred witnesses of two thousand years of written culture. Five hundred irreplaceable pieces that were leaving Rome for Paris.

Borgia attended all of this in silence. He recorded every requisitioned manuscript in a register he kept for himself alone.

On the 15th of March 1797, the inventory was complete. Monge and Berthollet presented their final list to Cardinal Doria: a hundred and seven sculptures, twenty-three paintings, five

hundred manuscripts. Plus some fifty miscellaneous objects: medals, cameos, antique vases, bronzes.

The total far exceeded the hundred works stipulated in the treaty. But Bonaparte had developed his usual justification. The hundred "principal" works were the major sculptures — the Apollo, the Laocoön, the Torso, the Brutuses. The other sculptures were "secondary." The paintings constituted a distinct category. The manuscripts yet another. The miscellaneous objects did not count toward the total.

It was an obvious legal sophism. But who was going to challenge it? The Pope had just been humiliated militarily, forced to sign a disastrous treaty. He could only accept the French interpretation.

Cardinal Doria formally protested. Sent a diplomatic note. Asked that the number of works be reduced in accordance with the treaty. Received a stinging reply from Bonaparte: "If His Holiness is not satisfied with the terms we apply, we can renegotiate the entire treaty. With conditions even less favourable to the Holy See."

The Pope had to yield.

The packing began on the 18th of March. Visconti supervised every operation. He had mobilised all the Vatican's restorers and craftsmen. Carpenters built custom crates. Blacksmiths manufactured reinforcing metal frames. Weavers prepared protective cloth.

The sculptures were treated first. They were the most delicate. One impact, one fall, and centuries of art could be annihilated.

The Apollo was lowered from its pedestal on the 20th of March. A system of pulleys and tackle had to be built to raise it without risk. Ten men manoeuvred, guided by Visconti who shouted instructions.

Slowly, millimetre by millimetre, the statue rose. The ropes tensed. The marble left its base. For a few terrifying seconds, the Apollo floated in the air, suspended from the rigging.

Then it was gently lowered onto a padded cart, laid horizontally, immobilised by straps.

Visconti minutely examined the statue. Looked for the least crack. The least chip. Nothing. The operation had succeeded.

The cart transported the Apollo to the packing workshop installed in a Vatican courtyard. There, a special crate waited. Double wall of oak. Straw and cloth padding fifteen centimetres thick. Leather straps to immobilise the statue. A lid screwed with bronze screws allowing easy opening for inspection.

The statue was delicately placed in the crate. Visconti verified that the padding was uniform, that no pressure point existed, that the statue could not move a millimetre.

Satisfied, he authorised the closing of the crate. The lid was screwed on. The crate was ready for transport.

Visconti remained for a long time before the closed crate. Inside slept the Apollo. Invisible now. Reduced to a rectangular block of wood. One could no longer see the beauty. The perfection. Just a crate like any other.

The *Laocoön* was treated next. Unlike the Apollo, which was monolithic, the group was composed of several blocks. It was decided to dismantle it to facilitate transport.

The operation took two days. The bronze pins that assembled the various parts had to be removed. The father's torso separated from his arms. The two sons detached. The serpents isolated.

Each piece was packed in its own crate. Seven crates in total for the *Laocoön*. They would be reassembled in Paris.

Visconti attended this dismemberment with horror. To see the sculptural group separated into pieces was like seeing a body cut apart. The artistic unity was broken. The *Laocoön* no longer existed. There were only fragments of marble in crates.

— You are destroying the work, he said to Thouin who was supervising the operation. This group was conceived as a whole. To separate it is to kill it.

— We will reassemble it as it was. With the same pins. In the same positions. No one will see the difference.

— You do not understand. It is not a question of seeing. It is a question of being. The *Laocoön* will never be what it was again.

Thouin shrugged.

— I do logistics. My job is to transport these marbles to Paris without breaking them. If to do that I must dismantle them, I dismantle them.

The other sculptures followed. The *Torso Belvedere* in its padded crate. The Brutus busts wrapped in cloth. The Roman emperors, the Greek gods.

The paintings posed different problems. Some were painted on wood panels, like *The Transfiguration*. Others on canvas. Each medium required specific treatment. *The Transfiguration* was removed from its frame. The wood panel was consolidated with reinforcing crosspieces, then wrapped in oilcloth.

The manuscripts were simpler to pack. Each was wrapped in tissue paper, then in cloth, then placed in an individual box. The five hundred manuscripts occupied twenty large crates.

On the 2nd of April 1797, everything was ready. A hundred and thirty-seven crates aligned in the Vatican courtyard. They contained the artistic heart of Rome. Two thousand years of accumulation. The treasures of emperors, popes, cardinal collectors.

And all of it was leaving for Paris.

The convoy formed in the morning. Twenty-three carts for the first crates — the heaviest, the sculptures. An escort of three hundred soldiers commanded by General Miollis. Workers to help with loading and unloading. Restorers to check the condition of the works en route.

Visconti came to attend the departure. He stood on the steps of Saint Peter's, watching the carts being loaded one by one.

Monge approached him.

— Monsieur Visconti, I wanted to thank you for your cooperation. Without your expertise, we could never have packed these works so carefully.

Visconti looked at him coldly.

— Do not thank me. I did not do this for you. I did it for the works. So that they survive your theft.

— I understand. But all the same, your attitude commands respect.

— Keep your respect. Keep our works carefully. Restore them. Preserve them. For one day, we will come back for them. When France is defeated. When Europe revolts against your arrogance. On that day, we will reclaim what belongs to us.

— Perhaps. The future will tell.

— Not perhaps. Certainly. History has its cycles. Empires fall. Balances of power change. You are victorious today. You will be defeated tomorrow.

He extended his hand to Monge. Not in friendship. But in formal courtesy.

Monge shook the extended hand.

The convoy set off at noon. The carts traversed Rome. The sound of wheels on the cobblestones echoed through the narrow streets. Romans came out onto their doorsteps to watch the procession pass.

Some wept. Others hurled curses. A few spat on the ground when the French soldiers passed. The atmosphere was heavy, threatening. The military escort remained vigilant. A riot could have broken out at any moment.

But nothing happened. The Romans watched their treasures leave in silence.

The convoy left Rome through the Porta del Popolo. Took the Via Flaminia northward. Destination: Paris. Twelve hundred kilometres.

Visconti remained on the steps of Saint Peter's until the last cart disappeared. Then he went back inside the Vatican. Into his office. Sat at his table. Opened his register.

And he began to write. He noted every work that had left. Its exact provenance. Its history. The circumstances of its requisition. He wrote with care, forming each letter distinctly. The precision of the gesture compensated for nothing, but he continued.

Meanwhile, Rome was mutilated. The Vatican stripped. The Eternal City diminished.

Five hundred leagues from Rome, in the northern lagoons, another capital was awaiting its turn.

III — The Fall of Venice and the Horses of Saint Mark's

Bonaparte continued his campaign. Austria was defeated, but not yet definitively subdued. Peace negotiations were dragging. Vienna was seeking to limit its territorial losses. Bonaparte was demanding massive compensation.

In the meantime, he was attending to Venice. The Serene Republic, an independent state for a thousand years, had tried to remain neutral during the war. But its neutrality leaned toward Austria. Bonaparte was looking for a pretext to intervene.

The pretext presented itself in April 1797. Anti-French riots broke out in Verona. French soldiers were killed. Bonaparte denounced the complicity of the Venetian government. Demanded apologies. Reparations. Heads.

The Venetian Senate, an oligarchic government composed of nobles, did not know how to react. Some wanted to resist. Others to submit. Indecision paralysed the institution.

Bonaparte did not wait. On the 1st of May 1797, he declared war on Venice. His troops occupied the *terraferma* — the continental territories of the Republic. On the 12th of May, they reached the shores of the lagoon, facing Venice itself.

The city was impregnable by land. Built on islets, it could only be conquered by a fleet. And Bonaparte had no fleet. The French navy was blockaded by the English.

But he did not need to conquer Venice militarily. The mere threat sufficed. On the 12th of May 1797, under French pressure, the Venetian Senate voted its own dissolution. A thousand years of Republic collapsed in a single day.

The last Doge, Ludovico Manin, abdicated. He removed his ducal bonnet, handed it to his valet saying: "I shall have no further need of this." Then he went home, broken by the shame of having presided over the end of the Serenissima.

Bonaparte installed a provisional government. The Venetian Republic was replaced by a democratic municipality controlled by the French. The symbols of the ancien régime were systematically destroyed.

The lions of Saint Mark's — emblem of Venice — were torn from public facades. One of them, the winged bronze lion, was lowered from its column. A spectacular operation requiring scaffolding and pulleys. The lion, millennial symbol of Venetian power, now lay on the flagstones of the piazza.

The Venetian coats of arms were hammered everywhere they appeared. Inscriptions glorifying the Serenissima were scraped away. The Imperial Habsburg eagle sometimes replaced the lion, for Bonaparte had already decided to hand Venice over to Austria as part of the peace negotiations.

It was a cynical betrayal. Bonaparte had claimed to be defending liberty in order to overthrow the Venetian government. Now he was selling Venice to monarchical Austria. Liberty had been only

a pretext. The real reason was strategic: to obtain concessions from Vienna in Germany in exchange for Venice.

But before ceding the city to the Austrians, Bonaparte was going to loot it.

The orders arrived in Paris at the beginning of June. A new artistic commission was to leave for Venice. Mission: to take the Venetian masterpieces before the city passed under Austrian control.

The Directory looked for volunteers. Monge refused categorically. He had participated in the Milanese and Roman missions. That was enough. He no longer wished to be involved in these operations. Let someone else be found.

Berthollet accepted without hesitation. He had, or so he believed, no moral qualms about these missions. For him, it was a job like any other. Organise. Inventory. Pack. Dispatch. Technical tasks that, he thought, raised no moral question.

He left in early July with a reduced team: Thouin for logistics, Wicar and Gauffier as experts, six specialist packers. Bonaparte had given them a month. He wanted the Venetian works to have left before the official cession of the city to Austria.

Berthollet arrived in Venice on the 15th of July 1797. The city stunned him. He had seen Milan, Rome, Bologna. But Venice was unique. Built on water. No streets. Only canals and bridges. Palaces rising directly from the lagoon. An impossible architecture that defied the laws of physics.

The city was in mourning. The French occupation had ended a thousand years of independence. The last Doge had abdicated two months earlier. The Grand Council had dissolved. The symbols of the Serenissima were being systematically destroyed.

The Venetians wandered along their canals like ghosts. Their pride was broken. Their history effaced. Their future uncertain. Some collaborated with the occupier. Others passively resisted. Most endured, resigned.

Berthollet installed himself in a requisitioned palazzo on the Grand Canal. From there, he could easily access the principal collections: the Doge's Palace with its treasures accumulated over the centuries; the Academy of Fine Arts with its collection of Venetian primitives; the *Scuole* — religious confraternities — housing narrative painting cycles; the innumerable churches adorned with altarpieces, sculptures, goldwork.

But above all, there was the Basilica of Saint Mark's. And on its facade, dominating the main piazza, the four bronze horses.

The Horses of Saint Mark's were legendary. In the eighteenth century they were believed to be of Greek origin, works of the fourth or third century before Christ. But modern scholars now inclined toward a Roman dating: second or third century after Christ. They had a turbulent history. They had probably adorned the hippodrome at Constantinople. In 1204, during the Fourth Crusade, the Venetians had looted the Byzantine capital, bringing back immense plunder. The four horses had been part of that plunder. Since 1204, they had dominated the facade of Saint Mark's. Installed on the terrace above the main portal, they were the very symbol of Venice — of her maritime power, her wealth, her glory.

Now Bonaparte wanted them. He wanted these horses for Paris — to install them on the triumphal arch he was planning to build, or perhaps on the facade of the Central Museum of the Arts. The exact location mattered little. What mattered was to tear them from Venice. To transfer this symbol of power from the lagoon to the Seine.

Berthollet went to Saint Mark's on the 16th of July. He was received by the curator, Filippo Farsetti. The Farsetti had served the Republic for generations. Now that Republic no longer existed. And Filippo had to witness the looting of the basilica he had served for thirty years.

— Monsieur Berthollet, I know why you are here. You have come for the horses.

— Indeed. General Bonaparte has ordered their transfer to Paris.

— These horses are Venice. They have been here for five hundred and ninety-three years. Taking them is tearing out the city's heart.

— Monsieur Farsetti, allow me to remind you of something. These horses are not native to Venice. Your ancestors took them from Constantinople. That was already a looting. Now we are doing what Venice did six centuries ago.

Farsetti went pale.

— How dare you? To compare the glorious conquest of Constantinople by our crusaders with your sordid looting? The Venetians liberated these horses from the decadent Byzantines. They honoured them. Preserved them. You are stealing them for your personal glory.

— The difference in perspective is interesting. When Venice loots, it is glory. When France requisitions, it is theft. But the result is the same: the horses change hands.

— There is a fundamental difference. Venice conquered Constantinople after a heroic siege. You obtained Venice by treachery. You exploited our divisions. You manipulated our factions. You forced our Senate to dissolve.

— The political details do not interest me. I have orders. I carry them out. The horses will leave for Paris. Now, give me access to the terrace. I must examine them.

Farsetti had to yield. He conducted Berthollet and Thouin to the terrace by a narrow staircase inside the basilica. They emerged in full sunlight on the platform overlooking the Piazza San Marco.

And there stood the four horses.

Each measured two metres thirty-three in height. Gilded bronze of extraordinary quality. The anatomy of the animals was rendered with great minuteness: tensed muscles, prominent veins, curling manes. The heads were turned in different directions, creating a dynamic movement.

Originally these horses had probably drawn a quadriga whose remainder had disappeared. They were designed to be seen from the front, in motion, embodying power and speed.

The state of conservation was remarkable. Five and a half centuries of exposure to the Venetian elements had caused only minor damage. The green patina on the bronze protected the metal. Some cracks were visible, but nothing structural.

Thouin examined the horses from every angle. He took precise measurements. Calculated the weight. Studied the fixing systems.

— Approximately nine hundred kilos per horse, he estimated. Total: over three and a half tons. They are fixed to the terrace by bronze plates bolted through. They can be detached relatively easily. The problem will be the descent.

— What height? asked Berthollet.

— Twenty metres from the ground of the piazza. A system of pulleys and scaffolding will need to be built. It is feasible, but delicate. If a horse slips, it crashes below and we with it.

— How long do you need?

— A week to manufacture the equipment. Then three days for the descent itself, taking one horse at a time. If all goes well.

— And if it does not go well?

— The horses smash on the piazza and become shapeless masses of bronze.

— Then make sure it goes well. Bonaparte is extremely attached to these sculptures. If we lose them, he will hold us responsible.

Farsetti, who had been listening to this exchange, intervened.

— If a horse breaks, Venice will have only three left. And you will have nothing but fragments of bronze. Think about that before rushing things.

Berthollet shrugged.

— The horses will leave. That is all that matters.

Months of preparation were needed. Negotiations with the provisional government. The wait for the definitive authorisation from Paris, tied to the Franco-Austrian negotiations on the cession of Venice. The manufacture of special lifting equipment that the Arsenal's blacksmiths had to study for several weeks. The operation began on the 29th of November. Carpenters built a massive scaffolding against the facade of Saint Mark's. Blacksmiths forged chains and hooks capable of bearing the sculptures' weight. Ropemakers braided specially reinforced cables.

The news spread through Venice. Crowds came to watch the preparations. Some wept. Others hurled imprecations. A few irreconcilables called for armed resistance. The French garrison had to reinforce security. Soldiers stood guard day and night to prevent any sabotage.

On the 3rd of December, everything was ready. They began with the first horse, at the far left. It first had to be detached from its base. The bronze bolts that had fixed it since 1204 were corroded. Several broke when one tried to unscrew them. They had to be sawed through — a delicate operation taking hours.

Finally, around noon, the horse was freed. Chains were passed around its body, attached to the pulley system. Then the descent began.

Twenty men pulled on the ropes to control the speed. Thouin supervised, shouting instructions, adjusting the tension. The horse descended slowly. Its hooves grazed the facade. Several times it swayed dangerously. Alarming creaking sounds came from the scaffolding.

Finally, around four o'clock, the horse touched the ground. Intact. The operation had succeeded.

But this technical success in no way mitigated the feeling of violation. The Venetians had seen their most sacred symbol torn

from its millennial position. Lowered like an ordinary object. Laid on the piazza flagstones.

Weeping rose. A woman first, then several, then the whole crowd. No one was shouting. No one was speaking. Only those sobs rising from everywhere at once, mingled with the creaking of the ropes.

The other three horses were descended in the following days.

On the 11th of December, the four horses were aligned on the Piazza San Marco. Berthollet had them examined by restorers. The sculptures were in good condition despite the perilous descent. A few superficial scratches.

— Touch nothing, he ordered. No cleaning. We will ship them as they are. In Paris, the specialists will decide on the appropriate treatment.

The horses were packed individually in enormous padded crates. Each crate weighed over a ton.

On the 13th of December, the convoy left Venice. Four carts transporting the horses. Two hundred soldiers as escort. Workers to help at difficult passages. The journey would be long — several months via Ancona, Toulon and the Rhône — before the horses finally rejoined Paris.

On the facade of Saint Mark's, four empty pedestals remained. An open void. A visible mutilation of the city.

Venice had lost its independence. It had lost its millennial government. It had lost its place in the concert of nations. And now it was losing its horses. Its symbol.

The Grand Council had dissolved on the 12th of May. Since that day, Venice no longer existed as a Republic. It still existed as a city — the palaces, the canals, the bell-towers, the Rialto markets, the crowds on the Riva degli Schiavoni — but what made a city a political entity had disappeared with the vote of 512 voices for abdication and 20 against. The longest Republic in Western history had put an end to itself in half an hour of session, under

the threat of French cannon positioned at the entrance to the lagoon.

Berthollet had taken up his functions in Venice in July. He had been working for three weeks when he met Morosini for the first time.

The meeting had been convened by the provisional municipality, the Jacobin and patrician organ of government that the French had installed after the dissolution of the Grand Council. It was held in a room that Doge Manin had left two months earlier, setting down the *corno ducale* — the horned bonnet that symbolised his charge — without a word to the crowd gathered on the Piazzetta. The room was still furnished as it had been in the time of the Republic: working tables, a silver candelabra, a portrait of a doge from the previous century on the wall. No one had yet decided what would be done with it.

Morosini represented the municipality. Two other men accompanied him — a jurist named Querini and an archivist whose name Berthollet did not retain. Thouin sat at Berthollet's side.

— The Treaty of Campo Formio, Berthollet declared, assigns to France the works of art designated by the commission. We are here to establish the list and to organise the requisitions according to the rules.

— According to the rules, Morosini repeated. Yes.

There was no irony in his voice. Only perfect neutrality — the tone of a man who has decided to have no more opinions about anything.

— We will begin with San Giorgio Maggiore, he went on. Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*.

— The *Wedding at Cana* belongs to the Benedictine community, said Querini. Not to the Republic. The dissolution of the Grand Council does not affect the property rights of religious institutions.

— The treaty applies to the whole Venetian territory and its institutions, replied Berthollet. The commission has authority over all collections, public and private.

— We begin tomorrow morning. San Giorgio Maggiore. I will ask you to be present.

— I will be there, said Morosini.

IV — San Giorgio Maggiore: the Wedding at Cana

The following day, Berthollet crossed the lagoon in a gondola. The morning mist covered the water. The island of San Giorgio Maggiore emerged slowly, Palladio's campanile detaching itself from the white sky. Nothing resembled this in any of the cities he had visited.

He entered the convent by the side door. The prior, Brother Giambattista, led him to the refectory without a word.

He entered the room.

He stopped.

The canvas occupied the entire far wall in its full length — nine metres ninety-four wide, six metres seventy-seven tall. Veronese had painted it between 1562 and 1563 for this refectory, for this precise wall, on commission from the Benedictine monks who had required that it occupy the wall in its entirety. The contract stated it without ambiguity: *of the same width and the same height as the wall opposite, occupying it wholly*. Veronese had honoured that commitment. The canvas was not a decoration placed on a wall. It was the wall.

The *Wedding at Cana*: a hundred and thirty people at the banquet, Christ at the centre, the Virgin at his side, the newlyweds relegated to the far left as if they were merely incidental to their own celebration. The Venetian life of the sixteenth century in all its splendour around them. Musicians on a dais in the foreground, servants carrying jars, ladies in shimmering silks, turbaned figures from the East, a parrot, dogs at the foot of the

table. Palladian architectures rising toward an azure sky, their colonnades extending those of the real refectory, creating a spatial continuity between the inhabited building and the represented banquet. The monks had eaten in silence for two centuries facing this wall, and Christ's meal was simultaneously unfolding before them, in a fictional space that was the exact replica of their own.

Berthollet advanced to the centre of the room and stopped. At this distance — some twenty metres, the distance from which Veronese had calculated his perspective — the illusion worked fully. The painted colonnades in the upper third of the canvas seemed to rise above the real wall. The azure sky seemed open. The hundred and thirty figures seemed alive.

He then approached to within two metres of the surface.

Veronese's technique was visible at this distance. He had worked in oil on canvas, applying successive layers of translucent glazes over a light ground. The whites of the tablecloths — lead white heightened in places with Naples yellow — had been modelled by successive scumbles to create the folds and shadows. The reds of the draperies, obtained by superposition of vermilion and lake, radiated a depth that the engraved reproductions did not render. The greens — characteristic of Veronese, a cool green tending slightly toward blue — vibrated differently according to the angle of vision, changing in value with the natural light falling from the lateral windows. It was this natural light for which Veronese had calculated his values. To remove the canvas from this space was to remove the canvas from its light.

He identified the figures one by one.

At the absolute centre of the composition, Christ — golden halo, white robe, calm face turned toward the viewer. The Virgin immediately at his right, recognisable by the dark veil. A veil of mourning, some had said — a prefiguration of the Passion in the joy of a wedding feast. The newlyweds, relegated to the extreme left of the table, were only witnesses at their own celebration.

Around them, the apostles and guests in sixteenth-century Venetian dress, mixing Western and Eastern costumes as one saw in the ports of the Serenissima.

In the foreground, a dais of musicians occupied the central position below Christ. According to tradition, the four musicians represented the great masters of the Venetian school: Veronese himself in white, holding a viola da braccio; Titian in red at the violone; Tintoretto and Jacopo Bassano completing the quartet. The resemblance to the known self-portraits of these painters was insufficient to affirm this with certainty. But the hypothesis had a logic: Veronese summoning into his own canvas an entire generation of painters, a whole school representing itself at the apogee of its glory. On the musicians' table, an hourglass. The time of Christ's mission had just begun, but it was counted.

At the foot of the table, two greyhounds attached by the same leash. A dwarf in jester's costume looked at the viewer with a slightly disconcerting fixity. A servant was carving meat on a terrace in the background. Six stone jars in the foreground — those that Christ had asked to be filled with water. Water changed to wine. The miracle that Veronese had chosen not to represent directly (no thaumaturgic gesture, no visible transformation), but to leave implicit in the discreet stupor of the steward tasting his glass.

Berthollet had seen the canvas only in reproductions. The original overwhelmed him.

Thouin noted the dimensions. He approached and said in a low voice:

— Nine metres seventy. It cannot be transported flat. Too rigid to be rolled on an ordinary drum. One cannot make a crate of this dimension.

Berthollet did not reply immediately. He continued to look at the canvas. Brother Giambattista had remained on the threshold, his hands buried in the sleeves of his robe.

— We cut it, said Berthollet.

Silence in the room.

— In how many strips? asked Thouin.

— Seven. Each strip can be rolled separately. They will be re-glued in Paris.

The monk had heard. He took a step forward, then stopped. There was nothing to say. Berthollet had pronounced "we cut it" with the same voice he would have used for "we load it."

Three men arrived with their equipment — thin-bladed knives, metal rulers, white chalk for tracing the guide lines. They laid their tools on the stone floor of the refectory without a sound. They had already worked in Milan, Parma, Bologna. They knew their task.

Brother Giambattista had entered meanwhile. He had positioned himself against the lateral wall, arms at his sides. A younger brother stood behind him. Neither spoke while Thouin finished his calculations in a low voice.

Thouin approached the canvas with his metal ruler, explaining the cutting plan as if presenting an engineering problem.

— Seven strips of approximately equal width, about one metre forty each. The height of six metres seventy-seven will allow rolling on a drum without excessive strain on the painted layer, provided the drum's diameter is sufficient — sixty centimetres minimum. The original seams in Veronese's canvas already exist in the linen: he painted on several widths of linen assembled together. Two or three can be followed without damage. For the four remaining incisions, lines will be chosen passing through areas of sky or architecture, where the break will be least visible at re-gluing.

He was indicating the zones with the tip of his pencil, without touching the painted surface.

— The central cut line passes between the Christ group and the musicians' dais.

Berthollet looked at the indicated spot. Between Christ at the centre and the musicians who were playing. Between the sacred and the profane. The cut would pass through this precise boundary.

It was then that the prior spoke.

— Berthollet.

Berthollet turned. Brother Giambattista said nothing more for a moment. He was looking at the imaginary lines that Thouin had mentally traced on the canvas.

— This canvas was painted for this refectory. Veronese calculated his perspective in relation to the distance between this wall and the other end of this room. He calculated his values in relation to the light from these windows. Removed from here, cut in seven pieces and re-glued elsewhere, it will no longer be what it is.

— It will be at the Central Museum of the Arts, replied Berthollet. Tens of thousands of people a year will be able to see it.

— They will see a canvas cut in seven pieces and re-glued, torn from the space for which it was conceived, from the light for which it was painted.

— They will see Veronese.

The prior lowered his eyelids. He had no more receivable argument. The Republic no longer existed. There was no longer a government to complain to, no tribunal to appeal to. What remained was protected by nothing other than the good will of the man who stood before him. And good will, here, had its own laws.

— We have no objection to formulate. We no longer have the right to formulate objections.

He signalled to the first restorer.

The man knelt and traced in chalk a first vertical line thirty centimetres from the left edge of the canvas, passing through the painted sky above the colonnades. The white line crossed Veronese's sky from top to bottom, clean and precise, indifferent.

The younger brother, the one who had stood behind the prior, left. Brother Giambattista remained.

The first knife-stroke into the canvas produced a brief, almost delicate sound. The linen resisted at first, then yielded under the blade. The restorers worked as a team of four — two holding the canvas extended on each side of the incision while the fifth guided the blade along the chalk line. Each centimetre separated for ever what Veronese had conceived as a unity. The incision progressed downward, regular, mechanical.

Thouin was taking notes. Dimensions of the first strip, condition of the painted layer at the edges of the cut, tension of the linen.

Brother Giambattista watched, motionless.

After the first strip was detached — Christ and the Virgin on one side, musicians on the other, the white chalk line become a clean cut in the flesh of the canvas — the restorers carefully rolled the section onto a wooden drum. Then they resumed position for the second.

After the first strip, Berthollet went out into the convent courtyard. The lagoon air was cool. He remained there a moment, his eyes closed.

He did not watch the rest.

The following day, Berthollet crossed the Piazzetta in the early morning. The Doge's Palace ran along the San Marco basin along its entire southern facade. Venetian Gothic — two tiers of open arcades bearing a solid upper storey of white and pink marble lozenges, the lightness of the lower portion supporting the opacity of the upper, an inversion of the ordinary logic of

construction that belonged only to Venice. Morosini was waiting for him under the arcade of the main entrance.

Ludovico Morosini was the last official that the provisional government had designated to accompany the French commission in its inventories. A man of good patrician family who had served the Republic in various administrative roles and who now found himself conducting the foreigner through the rooms of what had been the centre of Venetian power. He did so with perfect correctness and a total absence of visible emotion.

They climbed the Golden Staircase — white stucco and gilding, commissioned by Sansovino under the dogeship of Priuli — and entered the institutional rooms of the second floor.

The first room that Berthollet examined seriously was the Council of Ten's chamber. The Council was the most feared organ of the Republic. A permanent body charged with State security, possessing powers of inquiry and judgment that nothing limited, functioning by anonymous denunciation — the lion's-mouth slots set into the city's walls receiving citizens' reports. The State within the State. The room had been decorated accordingly: a ceiling with nine compartments designed to signify the Council's power and the legitimacy of its judgments.

The central compartment was an oval composition by Veronese, painted between 1553 and 1556: *Jupiter Hurling Thunderbolts at the Vices*. Berthollet examined the ceiling.

Jupiter occupied the centre of the composition, seated in the clouds, the thunderbolt raised. Around and below him, figures in fall — Heresy, Lust, Corruption, Rebellion — precipitated out of the sky by the god's will. The composition was oval, designed to be seen from below. Veronese had calculated his foreshortening accordingly: the falling bodies appeared to plunge toward the viewer, their limbs twisted in a movement of disarticulation creating a vertiginous impression. The colours — sky blues, luminous flesh tones, draperies of a warm red — were

those of Veronese at his fullest, without any of the Roman Mannerist heaviness.

The message was of unambiguous clarity: the vices that the Council of Ten punished were the vices that Jupiter himself struck with thunder. Venetian justice and divine justice were one.

— Dimensions? Berthollet asked Thouin.

Thouin measured. The oval composition was approximately two metres forty in length. Portable. The frame was in gilded wood, fixed to the coffered ceiling by suspension systems. Recoverable with care.

— We take it.

Morosini looked at the oval composition for a moment, then turned his eyes toward the lateral compartments that would remain — two Veroneses would stay in place, *Juno Pouring Out Her Gifts on Venice* and an allegory with youth and old age. What would leave was the centre, the focal point, the figure that gave meaning to the whole. What would remain would be the margins of a composition whose heart had been carried away.

— There will be a copy.

— Yes, said Morosini. There will be a copy.

The Anticollegio was the antechamber where foreign ambassadors and delegations waited to be received by the Collegio — the executive organ of the Republic, composed of the Doge, the Savi and the Signoria. The room was of modest dimensions, which made it all the more intense: works were seen close up, in a confined space that amplified their presence.

On four walls, Tintoretto had painted four mythological compositions, each approximately two metres tall. Berthollet examined them one by one.

Mercury and the Three Graces: Mercury descending toward the three goddesses whose nude bodies wound around each other in a movement of remarkable fluidity. Tintoretto had treated the flesh with his characteristic luminosity — pearlescent whites

emerging from deep, almost velvety shadows. The allegory was political: Mercury, god of commerce, coming to bless the Three Graces representing the virtues that founded Venetian prosperity.

The Forge of Vulcan: the lame god at work in his forge, surrounded by cyclops, muscles tensed with effort. A dark composition, with embers red and smoke black — very different from the airy lightness of the Graces.

Minerva Driving Mars away from Peace and Abundance: the goddess of Wisdom repelling the god of War, while in the background Peace and Abundance — female figures serenely seated — represented the ideal of the Republic. The iconographic programme was transparent: Venice preferred diplomacy to war, commerce to conquest.

Ariadne, Venus and Bacchus: the most airy of the four. Bacchus descending from the clouds toward the abandoned Ariadne, Venus hovering above them in a luminous sky. Bodies suspended in space, draperies floating weightlessly. Tintoretto here deployed that capacity to abolish gravity that was uniquely his.

— These four? asked Thouin.

Berthollet reflected. Four major Tintorettos, transportable, in excellent condition. Each approximately two metres tall by two metres wide. Rollable without cutting.

— These stay.

Morosini closed his eyes for a second. Then opened them. He had not misheard.

— These four canvases form a cycle, he said after a silence. They were painted together, for this room, for this precise arrangement. Separated from their context, they lose their iconographic coherence. It is the very walls of the Anticollegio that give them their meaning. Without the ambassadors waiting, without the protocol of audience, without the progression from

one room to the next, they are nothing but four mythological paintings.

Thouin made a note. There were Tintorettos elsewhere. The Scuola di San Rocco, San Giorgio Maggiore. Isolated pieces, without this charge of diplomatic representation that made these inseparable from their place.

Morosini said nothing. It was the first time, since the beginning of the inventory, that a room had been spared by an argument other than physical impossibility.

The Sala del Collegio was the most representative of the Republic's decorative ambitions. It was there that the Doge officially received ambassadors, that the Collegio held its plenary sessions, that decisions of State were formally pronounced. Accordingly, its decoration had been entrusted to Veronese alone, who executed it between 1575 and 1582.

The ceiling was divided into eleven compartments of varied formats — alternating rectangles and lozenges — each containing an allegory. Veronese had painted the virtues that founded the Venetian ideal of government: Faith holding the chalice and cross, Justice with sword and scales, Temperance pouring water into wine, Peace crowned with olive, Moderation, Vigilance — the last recognisable by the crane holding a stone in its raised foot, according to the traditional iconography. The female figures floated in luminous skies, their draperies shimmering in the greens and silvers characteristic of Veronese's late manner.

Thouin measured the ceiling compartments.

— The ceiling panels are set into a worked wood structure — mouldings, cornices, frames integrated into the framework. To dismantle them without damage, a scaffolding would need to be built, the fixings unscrewed one by one, each panel lowered flat. The wood of the frames is old. The risk is real at every stage.

— Estimated time?

— For the eleven compartments: three weeks minimum. With the risk of losing panels if the wood gives.

Berthollet calculated. Three weeks was a third of the time remaining before Bonaparte's deadline. And the eleven compartments represented Veronese, but allegorical Veronese — virtues without identifiable faces, without the narrative pageantry of the great compositions. There were more accessible, more representative Veroneses at San Sebastiano.

— We leave the ceiling.

Morosini, this time, did not close his eyes. He looked at the ceiling in silence for a long moment — the virtues of the Republic floating in their luminous skies, immutable, indifferent.

— It is our history. Not an allegory. Our history.

— Every collection is made of other people's history, replied Berthollet. That is the principle of a universal museum.

Thouin noted. The restorers were summoned.

V — The Looted Churches

In the following days, Berthollet visited the Venetian churches. They overflowed with masterpieces. Venice counted more than two hundred churches, many of them possessing altarpieces and paintings by the masters.

From his arrival in July, Berthollet had begun the inventory of the Venetian collections. Bonaparte wanted far more than the horses. He wanted the finest paintings of the Venetian school. The Titians, Veroneses, Tintorettos that made the glory of the Serenissima.

Venice possessed a pictorial tradition unique in Italy. Whereas Florence privileged drawing — *disegno* — and Rome monumental composition, Venice had developed an art of colour — *colore*. This specificity was not accidental. It was explained by the city's history and geography.

The church of Santa Maria della Salute, a Baroque basilica erected at the entrance of the Grand Canal, had been built as an ex-voto after the great plague of 1630. Its circular architecture had dominated the lagoon for one hundred and ten years. Berthollet reached it by gondola, going up the Grand Canal at dusk.

He entered the sacristy. Three large Titian canvases adorned the ceiling: *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, *Cain and Abel*, *David and Goliath*. Works of his full maturity, painted in the 1540s for the church of Santo Spirito in Isola and later transferred here in 1656. Compositions of dark, deep colours, of gripping dramatic force — the violence of the Old Testament rendered with a severity that had nothing of the luminous grace of the Frari *Assumption*.

— These Titians are untransportable, explained the guardian priest. They are fixed to the ceiling, designed to be seen from below. Detaching them would take weeks and risk destroying them.

Berthollet looked upward. Indeed, the three paintings were set into the coffered ceiling, calculated for a below-angle view.

— These stay, he decided.

An imperceptible relief crossed the priest's face. At least the sacristy Titians would be spared. At least something would remain.

Berthollet felt almost irritated. In Milan, in Rome, the curators had fought. Had argued. Protested. Testified. Here, in Venice, there was resignation. Passive acceptance.

But perhaps this difference was explicable. Milan, Rome, Bologna still existed. They were occupied, humiliated, but they survived as political entities. Venice had disappeared. The Republic no longer existed. The government had dissolved. The city was awaiting cession to Austria. It was a political corpse. Why would a corpse defend itself?

At Santi Giovanni e Paolo — the immense Gothic church where twenty-five doges were buried — Berthollet examined Giovanni

Bellini's polyptych. Nine panels representing saints and martyrs framing a Virgin in Majesty. An old painting, of the first Venetian generation, still marked by late Gothic.

Bellini was the founder. The one without whom none of what followed — Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto — would have been possible.

Thouin measured. Calculated. Examined the fastenings.

— The frame has been bolted into the apse masonry since the fifteenth century. The bolts have rusted into the stone. To unseal the whole would require demolishing part of the wall. And the wood panels are too rigid to be separated without risking cracking.

Berthollet looked at the polyptych for a few moments. The work had undeniable quality. But other pieces were waiting, and time was short.

— We pass on. There are more accessible Bellinis at the Academy.

The prior of Santi Giovanni e Paolo, who had observed the scene without daring to intervene, closed his eyes. Force prevailed over right.

At San Sebastiano — the church entirely decorated by Veronese in the years 1555–1565 — Berthollet took four paintings. Not the ceiling frescoes — untransportable — but mobile canvases representing Old Testament scenes. *Esther Crowned by Ahasuerus* showed Venetian splendour: monumental architectures, sumptuous costumes, shimmering colours.

Berthollet began with the Doge's Palace. It contained cycles of historical paintings celebrating the greatness of the Serenissima. The immense rooms — the Grand Council chamber, the Sala del Collegio, the Senate room — were entirely decorated with frescoes and monumental paintings.

The palace curator, Alvise Morosini, came from one of the oldest families of the Venetian nobility. He had devoted his life to the

Serenissima. The fall of the Republic in May had broken him. Since then, each day had brought a new humiliation. He had reluctantly agreed to supervise the collections in an attempt to preserve what could still be preserved.

— Monsieur Berthollet, I know why you are here. You have come for the paintings, as you came for the horses.

— Indeed. General Bonaparte has ordered a complete inventory of the Venetian collections. The most important works will be transferred to Paris.

— Humanity! I suppose you are going to explain that you are acting in humanity's name. That the works will be better off in Paris. That access will be universal. That we should congratulate ourselves on being looted.

Morosini wore the black robes of his rank with a dignity nothing seemed able to shake. His gaze expressed a cold sadness — not anger — the sadness of someone who has already lost everything.

— Paris is the capital of the first European Republic, replied Berthollet. The city where the rights of man were proclaimed.

— Venice was a republic long before France, Morosini replied. Since the eleventh century. A thousand years of republican tradition. But it was an aristocratic republic, so it does not count in your eyes. Only your Republic counts. The one that pillages, oppresses, destroys.

— Monsieur Morosini, show me the collections. I have a list of works we wish to examine. The sooner we begin, the sooner we finish.

Morosini yielded. He no longer had the strength to argue.

They stood in an anteroom of the Doge's Palace. Through the window, the lagoon glittered in the July sun. Gondolas glided silently on the water. Venice was living in slow motion, as if asleep in its grief. The French occupation had drained the city of its energy. The Venetians went about their daily occupations, but

without joy, without pride. Like automata performing gestures emptied of meaning.

Berthollet did not let himself be moved by these considerations. He had heard the same arguments in Milan, Bologna, Rome. Always the same objections. Always the same incomprehension. These Italians did not see the progress represented by the concentration of works. They remained attached to their local particularisms, incapable of conceiving the general interest of humanity.

Morosini led him through the rooms. The Grand Council chamber first. An immense space fifty-four metres long by twenty-five wide, where the Maggior Consiglio sat — the assembly of Venetian nobility, counting up to two thousand members. It was one of the largest rooms in Europe, perhaps the vastest unsupported space in the world.

The walls were entirely covered with paintings celebrating the history of Venice. Naval battles. Receptions of ambassadors. State ceremonies. Every painting told a glorious episode of the Serenissima. The whole formed a gigantic visual narrative of a thousand years of Venetian history.

Tintoretto's *Paradise* occupied the entire far wall. Nearly seven metres fifty high by twenty-four metres fifty wide. The largest painting on canvas ever made.

A splendid composition showing Christ and the Virgin at the centre, surrounded by five hundred figures: saints, angels, the blessed, prophets, patriarchs. All arranged in concentric circles creating a swirling movement — a mystical vortex drawing the eye toward the divine centre.

— Tintoretto worked on this work from 1588 to 1592, Morosini explained. He was seventy when he began it. Seventy-three or seventy-four when he finished. It is his artistic testament. The synthesis of his entire career. Look at the composition: it whirls.

Every figure is linked to the others by gestures, gazes, draperies. The whole creates a cosmic movement. A celestial dance.

Berthollet was examining carefully. The canvas was gigantic. Impossible to move. The frame itself was integral with the wall — integrated into the room's architecture. Any attempt at dismantling would take months and would probably destroy the work.

— This one stays, he decided after examination. It is untransportable. We will take other Tintorettos elsewhere.

But other works in the room were mobile. On the lateral walls, paintings by Veronese and Palma the Younger represented naval battles, allegories of the Republic, historical scenes. Each measured approximately three metres by two. Imposing dimensions, but transportable with appropriate means.

Berthollet stopped before a *Battle of Lepanto* by Andrea Vicentino. The work celebrated the great Venetian naval victory of 1571 against the Ottomans. The Christian fleet commanded by Don John of Austria had crushed the Turkish fleet in the Gulf of Corinth. That victory had stopped Ottoman expansion in the Mediterranean.

Vicentino had represented the battle with documentary precision. Venetian galleys with swollen sails occupied the foreground. Soldiers in gleaming armour fought on the decks. Cannon spat fire. In the sky, allegories of Victory and Faith sustained the Christians. The colours were sumptuous: deep greens of the sea, brilliant reds of the banners, shining golds of the armour.

— This one, said Berthollet, noting on his list — we take it.

— No, Morosini protested. This battle is our pride. Our last great victory. After Lepanto, Venice began its decline. But for two centuries we celebrated that day. This painting is part of our collective memory.

— It should therefore go to Paris. It perfectly illustrates Venetian historical painting. Composition, colour, movement — everything is there.

— Your history will survive in books, chronicles, memory. The painting, it will be better preserved in Paris. Our restorers are excellent. Our conservation conditions optimal. This work will live longer in the Central Museum of the Arts than here in this damp room.

Morosini did not reply. It was not that he was wrong on his own terms. It was that he was exhausted from defending ground where no one in this room had come to listen.

They continued the inventory. Berthollet selected eight paintings from the Grand Council chamber. Veroneses, Palma the Youngers, Bassanos.

They then visited the Sala delle Quattro Porte. This antechamber served as passage between various State rooms. Despite its secondary function, it was richly decorated. On one wall, a Titian represented Doge Antonio Grimani kneeling before Faith. An allegorical painting commissioned in 1555 to celebrate the Doge's election.

Grimani was represented in profile, in ceremonial dress, kneeling before a monumental female figure incarnating the Christian Faith. The saint held a cross and a chalice. Behind her, Venice personified — recognisable by her lion — observed the scene. In the sky, angels bore the attributes of ducal power.

The work measured three metres sixty in height. Imposing dimensions, but transportable. The frame was fixed to the wall but could be dismantled. The state of conservation appeared good despite the two and a half centuries since its creation.

Berthollet studied this painting. Magnificent composition. But it was a portrait of Doge Grimani, a major political symbol. The Grimani family was still influential. Taking this painting would create unnecessary tensions.

— This one stays, Berthollet declared. The political complications are not worth it.

— A symbol of our history that remains in Venice, Morosini murmured with relief. Doge Grimani was one of our greatest leaders. He restored Venetian power after difficult years.

— We already have enough Titians, he added, noting on his list.

In total, twelve paintings were selected in the Doge's Palace. Not a massive requisition compared to the hundreds of works the palace contained. But the twelve were among the most important. The most symbolic. Those that best embodied Venetian greatness.

VI — The Frari and San Sebastiano

Berthollet spent the following days criss-crossing the city.

Unlike Rome, where works were concentrated in the Vatican and a few great palaces, in Venice they were dispersed throughout the entire city. Every neighbourhood church, every religious confraternity, every convent possessed its treasures.

This dispersion reflected Venetian history. The Republic had never had a centralised court like Florence or Rome. Power was distributed among the great noble families. Each family had its chapel, its reference church, its artistic commissions. This decentralisation had created a diffuse but immense artistic wealth.

The church of Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari, commonly known as the Frari, was one of the most important in Venice. A great Gothic basilica built by the Franciscans in the fourteenth century, it served as a pantheon to several doges and great families. Its dimensions were gigantic: a hundred and two metres long, thirty-two metres wide under the nave, twenty-eight metres in height under the vaults.

The Frari housed two major Titians. *The Assumption of the Virgin* dominated the high altar. A monumental altarpiece six metres

ninety tall by three metres sixty wide. A pyramidal composition in three registers: below, the apostles raising their arms toward the sky; in the centre, Mary rising, borne by musician angels; at the top, God the Father appearing in a golden glory to welcome his Mother.

This work, painted between 1516 and 1518, had revolutionised Venetian painting. Before Titian, Venetian altarpieces still largely followed Byzantine conventions: hieratic figures, static compositions, gold grounds. Titian had introduced movement, emotion, drama. His *Assumption* created an irresistible ascending dynamic. The eye followed Mary toward the sky, swept along by the momentum of the angels.

The colours were brilliant. The red of Mary's mantle vibrated with extraordinary intensity. Titian used pure cinnabar — an expensive pigment, but unmatched for reds. He mixed it with madder lake to create different shades. Applied the whole in superimposed glazes over an orange-red undercoat that increased the luminosity. The result was a red that seemed to emit its own light.

The golds shone like real metal. Titian did not use gold leaf like the primitives. He painted the golds with pigments — orpiment, lead-tin yellow — to which he sometimes added real gold powder to increase the glitter. These painted golds had more depth than flat gold leaf. They created more subtle light effects.

The blues of the sky were deep and luminous. Pure lapis lazuli for the most intense areas. Less expensive azurite for secondary parts. Smalt — cobalt-coloured glass — for certain glazes. Each blue had its function, its shade, its role in the general harmony.

Berthollet remained before this altarpiece. Even he, who was not an art expert, could perceive its power. The work dominated the entire church. It drew the eye from the entrance, at a hundred metres' distance. The figures seemed alive. Mary was truly floating in the air. The angels were whirling around her. The whole created an illusion of movement, of transcendence.

— This painting is untransportable, explained the Frari's prior, Fra Benedetto. It was painted specifically for this position. Titian calculated the dimensions in relation to the perspective from the nave. Seen from here, from the main entrance, the altarpiece creates an illusionist spatial effect. Mary appears to rise truly toward the dome. If you move the work, this effect disappears. It becomes a simple painting. It loses its magic.

Fra Benedetto, a Franciscan with an emaciated face and greying beard, had gnarled hands accustomed to manual labour. He wore the brown habit of his order, patched at the elbows.

Berthollet examined the altarpiece from every angle. It was immense. The frame was integrated into the architecture of the apse. Sculptured columns framed it. A monumental cornice crowned it. Dismantling the whole would take weeks. And how to transport a seven-metre canvas? A special cart would be needed. Passable roads. Extraordinary precautions against rain, wind, shocks.

— This one stays, he decided after a few minutes' reflection.

Fra Benedetto murmured a prayer of thanks. At least the *Assumption of the Virgin* would be spared. That was already miraculous. A small victory against the general disaster.

— Now show me the other works of your church.

He conducted Berthollet through the church. In the sacristy, a Giovanni Bellini triptych represented the *Virgin and Child* surrounded by saints. A fifteenth-century painting of exquisite delicacy. The three panels had been commissioned for this precise location — the Franciscan sacristy where the brothers prepared for liturgical ceremonies.

Bellini represented the first generation of the Venetian school. Before him, in the fourteenth century, Venice still largely followed the Byzantine style: golden mosaics, hieratic figures, symmetric compositions inherited from the Orient. Bellini had introduced the innovations of the Renaissance. He had studied

the Florentines — Masaccio, Donatello, Brunelleschi — who were revolutionising art in the early fifteenth century. He had learned perspective, anatomy, naturalism. But he had assimilated them in the Venetian manner: by softening them, by melting them into the particular light of the lagoon.

Where the Florentines favoured precise drawing, Bellini developed a more atmospheric painting. He softened contours. Created subtle transitions between figures and background. His light was diffuse, enveloping, almost liquid, as if the figures bathed in the golden clarity of the Venetian lagoon.

This different approach was explained by geography. Florence was a continental city, with a dry climate and clear, contrasted light. There, objects were sharply outlined. Shadows were crisp. Reality was precise. Venice was built on water. A light mist constantly rose from the lagoon. The light was diffuse, changing, reflected by the water. Contours blurred. Colours shifted according to the hour and the season. Forms dissolved into the atmosphere.

— This triptych dates from 1488, Fra Benedetto explained. Bellini was fifty-eight. He was at the summit of his mastery. Look at the Virgin: her face expresses a perfect serenity. An inner peace that nothing seems able to trouble. And yet one senses the melancholy. The awareness of suffering to come. Bellini achieved something extraordinary: making a contradictory feeling visible. Joy and sorrow simultaneous.

Berthollet contemplated the triptych at length. Then he shook his head.

— It is set into this altar? he asked Thouin.

— Entirely. Dismantling it would risk damaging the panels. The wood is old. The joints are fragile.

— We leave it, Berthollet decided. We have enough Bellinis on our list. We will not take this one.

Fra Benedetto bowed his head. Another infinitesimal triumph. Imperceptible. But real.

In the choir of the church, a funerary monument of Doge Giovanni Pesaro, who died in 1659, was decorated with Baroque sculptures. Monumental allegorical figures flanked the sarcophagus. Chubby-cheeked angels carried attributes of power. Moorish heads — reference to Venetian victories against the Ottomans — supported the sarcophagus.

These sculptures were less remarkable artistically than the paintings. Seventeenth-century Venetian Baroque was less inventive than the Roman. But they represented an era, a style, a tradition. Berthollet noted them all the same. The Museum had to be complete — representing all periods, all styles.

He had already visited Santi Giovanni e Paolo, the Dominicans' rival church. The Bellini there had drawn him, then put him off: the bolts of the frame, rusted into the masonry since the fifteenth century, had thwarted his intentions. He returned today to complete the inventory of the other rooms.

The prior, Fra Paolo, was waiting for him on the threshold of the central nave. His tone was more resigned than during the first visit — less combative.

Fra Paolo did not protest further. He had understood, before Berthollet even opened his mouth, that nothing would change. He conducted the inventory in silence, indicating dimensions and fixings in a neutral voice, as if dictating a report. The Tintorettos of the Rosary Chapel were noted, measured, condemned.

At San Sebastiano, Berthollet discovered a unique ensemble. Veronese had spent ten years adorning this parish church. He had painted the ceilings, the walls, the organ, the sacristy. Everywhere, his luminous style transformed the ecclesiastical space into a celestial palace.

The nave ceiling represented Old Testament scenes: *The Story of Esther* in three large panels. Esther crowned by Ahasuerus. The

Triumph of Mordecai. Esther Accusing Haman. Sumptuous compositions showing the splendour of an imaginary Oriental court. But in reality Veronese was painting his own city. The architectures were those of the lagoon. The costumes were those of the Rialto patricians. The faces were those of his contemporaries. He transposed Biblical narratives into his immediate world.

This transposition was characteristic of the Northern school. Unlike the Florentines who sought archaeological exactitude, or the Romans who privileged classical idealisation, the painters of the Serenissima represented their own world. They did not try to reconstruct ancient Judea or imperial Rome. They placed sacred narratives in familiar settings because for them, their city incarnated civilisation itself.

Such an attitude reflected a very particular pride. The Republic considered itself the equal of the great empires of the past. The heir of Rome. A new Christian Jerusalem. To place Biblical scenes in settings on the Grand Canal was not anachronism. It was an affirmation: their city was as great as Jerusalem. As powerful as the Persia of Ahasuerus.

— These ceilings are untransportable, explained San Sebastiano's parish priest, Don Marco. They are painted directly on the vault. Not on canvas like some ceilings. Veronese worked in fresco, or rather in tempera on plaster. Impossible to detach without destroying them.

Don Marco was younger than all the guardians encountered so far. He had not yet the resignation of the old. He still had anger. But anger served nothing. Berthollet listened to the end, looked at him, and noted the four Veroneses on his list.

In the sacristy of San Sebastiano, other Veroneses decorated the walls and ceiling. Smaller, more intimate scenes. A *Virgin and Child*. A *Christ in the Garden of Olives*. A *Resurrection*. Veronese had treated the sacristy as a private setting — less spectacular than the nave, but more recollected.

Berthollet noted them on his list. Eight Veroneses in total from San Sebastiano. The greatest requisition from a single church so far. San Sebastiano would be stripped of almost all its mobile paintings. Only the untransportable ceilings would remain.

— You are mutilating this church, said Don Marco. Veronese is buried here. His tomb is here, before the high altar. He wished to rest surrounded by his works. Now you are tearing them away. You are desecrating his memory.

— We honour his memory by preserving his works. In Paris they will be restored if necessary. Veronese himself would be happy to know that his art serves humanity.

Don Marco conducted Berthollet to the exit. In the nave, a few parishioners were praying. Elderly women telling their rosaries.

Their looks expressed a mute hostility. But no one said anything. No one dared to protest openly. Fear was too strong. French soldiers patrolled the streets. Any resistance would be suppressed.

VII — The Scuola Grande di San Marco and the Academy

The Scuola Grande di San Marco stood on the north flank of the Campo dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, facing the Dominican basilica whose majesty it seemed to contest by the sheer magnificence of its facade.

This facade — in white marble and green porphyry, designed by Pietro Lombardo and completed by Mauro Coducci at the turn of the sixteenth century — was one of the most beautiful in Venice, perhaps the finest after that of the Basilica of Saint Mark's itself. Trompe-l'œil bas-reliefs represented recumbent lions that seemed to surge from an illusory depth. Corinthian colonnettes framed niches. The lunette of the central portal showed Saint Mark in glory surrounded by kneeling confraternity members. Latin inscriptions recalled the Scuola's benefactions toward the poor of Venice. The entire building expressed that

peculiar Venetian pride — at once pious and worldly — which had managed, for five centuries, to reconcile Christian charity with aristocratic ostentation.

Berthollet paused for a moment before the facade before entering. He had been in Venice for eighteen days. He had visited the palaces, the churches, the convents. He had seen masterpieces in every corner of the city. He had made hundreds of decisions — selecting, setting aside, weighing, calculating. He had developed, over these exhausting days, a kind of carapace that allowed him to look at works without being swept away by them. To evaluate them. Classify them. Decide their fate with the necessary detachment.

But before the Scuola Grande di San Marco, something resisted this voluntary numbness. He noted the effect without dwelling on it, and entered.

The guardian was waiting for him in the atrium.

Alvise Zorzi's face bore the marks of a life devoted to registers and archives rather than the open air: fine skin, very pale blue eyes behind round spectacles, hands with long, precise fingers. He had served the Scuola since the age of twenty-seven. He knew its every document, every inventory, every acquisition record. He had spent thirty-five years cataloguing, conserving, protecting. And now he was witnessing what he had no word for, no category, no prepared procedure.

— Monsieur Berthollet, he said in French with a strong accent but in a perfectly mastered language. I was expecting you. I am ready to show you our collections. I have no intention of resisting, protesting, or wasting your time with pointless argumentation. I ask one thing of you: act with the same care for our works that we have applied for two and a half centuries.

— It is also in my interest, replied Berthollet. Damaged works are worthless to the Museum.

— Good. Then we understand each other.

There was in this tone neither warmth nor hostility. A cold precision, almost clinical. As if Zorzi had decided, before the French even arrived, that dignity was the only form of resistance still accessible — and was maintaining it with the same rigour as his registers.

The Scuola's atrium was punctuated by ten columns set on exceptionally tall pedestals, whose alignment suggested a solemn procession. The walls bore stone reliefs — scenes from the life of Saint Mark, arms of great Venetian families, commemorative inscriptions. Light entered through high pointed windows and struck the marble flagstones in long luminous diagonals. The whole created an atmosphere midway between palace and sanctuary — which was precisely what the builders had intended: a house of God built with merchants' means.

— The Scuola Grande di San Marco is one of the oldest of the six great Venetian confraternities, Zorzi began as he conducted Berthollet toward the ceremonial staircase. Founded in 1260. Suppressed by your authorities a few weeks ago. Five centuries of the institution's existence. That is what this visit signifies, to be precise.

— I know what this visit signifies, said Berthollet.

— Good. Then, let us not speak of it further.

They climbed the staircase. The ceiling of the stairwell was decorated with stuccos and small seventeenth-century paintings — allegorical scenes representing the virtues of charity, prudence, justice. Zorzi had not paid attention to them in years. They were the décor of his daily existence, as invisible as the walls of his own house. But this morning, he was looking at them. He was looking at them as one looks for the last time at what one knows one is about to lose.

They entered the *albergo* room.

This was the oldest room, the first to have been decorated after the reconstruction following the fire of 1485. The walls bore

early sixteenth-century paintings by various hands — Palma il Vecchio, Paris Bordone, anonyms of uneven quality. On the ceiling, carved and gilded coffers dating from 1495, made by Pietro and Biagio de Faenza, constituted one of Venice's unrecognised marvels. Interlaced acanthus leaves, medallions with portraits of saints, eight-pointed stars cut from wood and applied on gold ground. Work of a fineness that few visitors noticed, attention being naturally drawn to the mural paintings.

Berthollet examined the ceiling. He noted. He measured. He calculated.

— The coffers are fixed to the building's structure, said Zorzi. The entire ceiling would need to be dismantled to take them. And they would probably break in the operation. The wood is old. Fragile.

— I see. The mural paintings, on the other hand—

— Transportable for the most part. The dimensions are reasonable.

There was in Zorzi's voice something strange: a precision, almost an efficiency, that resembled complicity but was not. It was rather resignation pushed to its most elaborate degree — that point where one ceases to fight the inevitable and begins to accompany it in order to limit the damage.

Berthollet stopped for a long time before the room's major work: *The Presentation of the Ring* to the Doge, by Paris Bordone, painted between 1534 and 1535. The canvas measured three metres seventy tall by three metres wide. The subject was a Venetian legend: a fisherman receives in a dream an order from Saint Mark to deliver to the Doge a ring symbolising Venice's dominion over the sea.

Bordone had represented this scene against a backdrop of great architectural richness. Monumental columns of coloured marble framed the composition. A gilded coffered vault occupied the entire upper portion. The crowd of officials and nobles in

Venetian ceremonial dress — the red robes of senators, the silk gowns of procurators, the gilded clothes of the Doge — composed a spectacle of splendour comparable to what Veronese would achieve later. The fisherman at the centre, a humble figure in a blue tunic, knelt to present the ring, surrounded by this patrician magnificence that did not crush him. And in the background, behind the columns, one could glimpse the lagoon, the boats, the city's horizon. Venice entered its own painting.

— Paris Bordone, Zorzi explained, articulating the name with deliberate slowness, as if pronouncing it distinctly enough could anchor it in reality and prevent its erasure. Born in Treviso in 1500. Trained in Titian's workshop before finding his own way. The dimensions correspond exactly to the height available between the floor and the cornice. He calculated his proportions taking into account the perspective from the entry door. Seen from here, from the spot where you are standing, the composition opens perfectly. The painted columns align with the real columns of the atrium. It is an intentional architectural continuity. Transfer this canvas elsewhere, and you break that dialogue. The work will survive physically. But it will lose half its meaning.

Berthollet did not reply immediately. He remained before the canvas, arms crossed, his gaze resting on the fisherman in the blue tunic kneeling at the centre. What Zorzi had just said was not false. The painted columns extended the real columns of the atrium. The architectural space and the painted space communicated according to a logic that Bordone had calculated for this unique place. To transport the canvas was to dismantle an equation of which one term — the room itself — could not travel.

— This one stays.

Zorzi froze. His expression did not change. But his hand, which held the register, stopped for a second, then noted.

— I note your decision. The Bordone remains.

There was in this tone an unusual hesitation — not relief, for Zorzi had imposed on himself to feel nothing more, but a cold recognition: the argument had been heard. This was not a gesture of generosity. It was a calculation. But the result was the same.

Berthollet turned toward the rest of the room. There were other works to examine. The Bordone would remain in Venice. It would be the only painting of the Scuola Grande that the French would not take.

They passed into the great capitular hall.

Berthollet stopped on the threshold.

The walls of this room — more than seven metres high, fourteen metres wide — bore a cycle of paintings devoted to the miracles of Saint Mark. On the south wall, dominating all the space since its installation in 1548, was the canvas that had launched the career of Jacopo Tintoretto and changed the course of Venetian painting: *The Miracle of the Slave*.

The canvas measured four metres fifteen tall by five metres forty-one wide. It had been painted when Tintoretto was not yet thirty years old — by a man who wanted to prove something, who wanted to prove that he was the equal of Titian, the equal of Veronese, perhaps their superior — and who had succeeded beyond what he could himself have hoped.

The composition was of absolute audacity. At the centre of the canvas, a nude slave lay on the ground in a vertiginous foreshortening, his body offered to the executioners whose instruments of torture — hammers, spikes, pincers — were miraculously breaking in their hands. Around him, a dense crowd of soldiers, spectators, women and children expressed various emotions: stupor, terror, disbelief, morbid fascination. To the right, the slave's master — an Oriental notable in a red turban, seated on an elevated throne — looked down at the scene with

an expression that mixed anger with something indefinable, a sort of beginning of doubt.

And at the top of the composition, bursting from the sky in an absolutely stunning foreshortening, head downward, arms extended, Saint Mark plunged like a divine bomb toward the slave's body. The saint's figure was not represented with the usual serenity of celestial intercessors. It had a violence, an urgency, an energy that contradicted all previous iconographic conventions. This Saint Mark was not an impassive judge dispensing grace. He was a combatant rushing into the fray.

The light came from several sources at once. From the left, natural lighting. From the saint's aureole, a supernatural golden radiance. From the depths of the scene, a cold clarity that accentuated the shadows. These contradictory lights created an atmosphere of instability, of imminence — as if the physical world itself were wavering at the contact with the miracle.

Berthollet stopped. For a very long time. Longer than usual.

— How old was Tintoretto when he painted this? he finally asked.

— Twenty-nine or thirty years. The commission had been attributed to him in 1547. The confraternity had noticed his talent. He had already made a name for himself in Venetian circles, despite his youth. When the painting was completed in April 1548 and installed on this wall, it was an immediate triumph. Aretino himself wrote a letter praising the work. Even Giorgio Vasari, who was not fond of Tintoretto's painting, later acknowledged the "extraordinary charm" of the *Miracle of the Slave* and its "magnificent foreshortening."

— This canvas opened every door in Venice to him. It was thanks to it that he obtained the commission for San Rocco a few years later. It represents the precise moment when an ambitious young painter became a recognised genius.

Berthollet approached the canvas to within a few centimetres. He examined the brushwork. Wide strokes, applied with speed and assurance. The flesh of the slave rendered in a few light scumbles that created an impression of almost sculptural volume. The draperies treated as rapid masses, without unnecessary detail, but of remarkable decorative effectiveness. The architectural backgrounds — a courtyard surrounded by vaguely Oriental colonnades — sketched with an economy of means that gave all their force to the figures.

He stepped back one pace. Then another. Returned to the distance from which he had looked for the first time, and stood there, motionless, arms crossed.

Thouin, who had been watching him from the entrance of the room, approached without a sound.

— Five metres forty-one wide, he murmured. Four metres fifteen tall. We have no transport cylinder of this dimension. And even if we had one built, the canvas is too rigid to be rolled without risk of splitting. A flat crate of more than six metres would be needed. The convoy is not equipped for that.

— Have the crate built.

Thouin paused.

— Here? In Venice?

— The Arsenal's carpenters are still working. Find two of them. Give them the exact dimensions. A flat crate, reinforced, with interior supports to prevent any flexion of the canvas during transport. We need ten days. We have twelve before the convoy's embarkation.

Zorzi, from the entrance to the room, had heard. He took note in his personal register — his own.

— The two large canvases by Domenico Tintoretto selected, the Rangone portrait, Berthollet counted. And the *Miracle*. How many in total?

— Seven, said Zorzi.

Zorzi stopped on the threshold as they were about to leave.

— Monsieur Berthollet!

Berthollet turned round.

— Monsieur Berthollet, I would like to ask you something. Not to change anything — I know that is impossible. To satisfy an intellectual curiosity.

— I am listening.

— When you were looking, what did you see? I am not asking for the official justification. I am asking what you, Berthollet, felt before this canvas.

The question caught Berthollet off guard. No one ever asked him this kind of question. His interlocutors protested, pleaded, argued, cursed. But asking what he felt — no one had ever done that.

— I see a composition of exceptional audacity for a man of thirty. A mastery of foreshortening that may never have been equalled in European painting. And a quality more difficult to name — an energy, a tension, a way in which light and movement together create an impression of imminence. As if the moment represented were not frozen, but on the verge of occurring.

— That is what Tintoretto wanted, said Zorzi. He called it the fury. The ability to paint not a moment, but the moment that precedes the moment. The instant when everything is still possible and already irreversible.

— I understand.

— And yet you are taking it.

— Yes.

A single word. But there was in that word an unusual frankness. No justification. No rhetoric about humanity or progress. Just the bare acknowledgment of an act accomplished in full awareness of what it was.

— I bear you no personal ill will, Monsieur Berthollet. I want you to know that. You are doing what you have been ordered to do, with the competence your mission requires. But what you are taking is not merely a canvas of four metres by five. You are taking the living proof that a young man of thirty, in this city, in 1548, knew how to invent something that no one had seen before him. You are carrying away the birthplace of a genius. And that birthplace will not travel with the canvas. It will remain here, empty.

Berthollet did not reply.

He signalled to his clerks, who entered the Scuola with their tools and prefabricated crates.

Zorzi remained on the threshold. He watched the technicians disappear into the atrium. He heard their voices, their footsteps, the clatter of a crate being opened. He remained there for a long time, hands behind his back, his gaze fixed on the facade of the Basilica of Santi Giovanni e Paolo opposite — its Gothic facades, its marble portal, its lancet windows. That church where twenty-five doges were buried. That pantheon of the Serenissima that had survived everything and would survive this too, but differently.

The campo was almost empty at that hour of the morning. Two children were playing near the central well. A woman was hanging laundry at a second-floor window of a house opposite. Ordinary life continued, indifferent to what was happening in the Scuola behind him.

That was the most difficult part, Zorzi thought. Not the brutality of the thing — there was something expected, almost logical, in the fact that victors took the treasures of the vanquished: wars had always functioned thus. No. What was difficult was the world's indifference all around. The campo that continued. The sky that remained blue. The lagoon water that continued to lap against the foundations. As if nothing were happening. The disappearance of a masterpiece that had taken two hundred and

fifty years to find its place in this room was not an event — merely one fact among others in the ordinary unfolding of things.

He went back into the Scuola. He still had a role to play: to supervise the dismantling, to ensure that the French technicians acted with the care they claimed to bring. That was his last function as guardian — to protect, to the very end, the works he had guarded. Even in their departure.

The construction of the large flat crate took nine days. The Venetian carpenters worked without interruption, guided by Thouin's instructions.

The dismantling of the *Miracle of the Slave* took an entire day. Thouin recorded the exact dimensions, the condition of the painted layer, the visible cracks, the areas of overpainting. The whole was placed in the large crate, then closed, nailed, banded with metal.

The two Domenico Tintoretto canvases and the Rangone portrait had been packed in the preceding days. The *Miracle of the Slave* was the last to leave.

Zorzi noted in his register: "*The Miracle of the Slave*, Jacopo Tintoretto, 1548. Taken on 8 August 1797 for the Museum of Paris."

The great capitular hall presented a desolating spectacle. No visible destruction, no apparent damage — the walls were intact, the ceilings intact, the floor intact. But the lighter rectangles on the walls — where the canvases had rested for decades, protecting the surface behind them from the yellowing of the air — told their own story. Ghosts of works. Absences of precise and documented form. And on the south wall, the largest rectangle of all: that of the *Miracle of the Slave*, now as pale as the others, as empty.

Zorzi was in the room. He looked at the walls.

— It is strange. These light rectangles. The walls have the same memory now. The walls know it.

Berthollet looked at the walls.

— In a few months, the light and the dust will have uniformised the surface. One will no longer see anything.

— Yes. In a few months. But during these few months, all who enter here will know what has been taken. The precision of the loss will be visible. Dimensioned. Located. It is a loss one can measure with a ruler.

Zorzi remained a few more minutes in the empty great capitular hall. He looked at the walls — the walls he had known for thirty-five years, the walls that no longer had the same eyes tonight as they had had this morning. Then he took his register, noted the hour and the date, and wrote at the bottom of the last filled page: *Inventory of the losses of the Scuola Grande di San Marco, August 1797. Drafted by Alvise Zorzi, guardian. May this document serve as testimony.*

He closed the register. Set it on his desk. And went to put out the lamps.

The following day, Berthollet went to the Academy of Fine Arts.

It possessed a collection of Venetian primitives and masters of the Venetian school accumulated since its founding in 1750. Narrative Carpaccios telling legends of saints. Cima da Coneglianos bearing witness to Venetian technical perfection. Psychological Lottos exploring the interiority of portraits.

The Academy's director, Giovanni Battista Mengardi — painter and academician — received Berthollet with dignity.

Now that Venice was dead, Mengardi was witnessing its final looting.

Mengardi conducted Berthollet through the Academy's rooms. The building, a former convent converted into an art school, contained works from every Venetian period — from fourteenth-century Gothic primitives to seventeenth-century Baroque. A didactic collection showing the evolution of the Venetian school.

In the main room, on the picture rails, works from the fifteenth century constituted the core of the academic collections — those Venetian primitives that Mengardi had spent his life assembling and cataloguing, and which represented for Berthollet so many pieces to evaluate.

A Vivarini first caught his attention. Antonio Vivarini, contemporary of the young Bellini, had painted this polyptych in the first half of the fifteenth century: gilded panels, hieratic figures, that Gothic rigidity which Bellini would dissolve in light and colour. The polyptych was complete, in excellent condition. Reasonable dimensions for transport.

— Vivarini. Co-founder, with his brother-in-law Giovanni d'Alemagna, of the workshop of the same name. Before Bellini, before Carpaccio, it is he who laid the foundations of Venetian painting. These panels date from approximately 1440.

Berthollet examined the figures. Stiff, certainly. But of great quality of execution. The gilded grounds. The precision of the draperies. These works would show the Parisian public the origins of a pictorial tradition that it knew only in its late fulfilment.

— This one. The complete polyptych.

Mengardi noted. His hand did not tremble. He had decided, from the first morning, that his hands would not tremble.

A Cima da Conegliano then detained Berthollet. A *Virgin and Child* of seventy-one centimetres by forty-eight, of exquisite sweetness. The Virgin held the Christ Child in her arms, both looking at the viewer with an expression of serenity.

— Cima da Conegliano. Giovanni Battista Cima, born at Conegliano in the province of Treviso around 1459. One of the best heirs of Bellini. Intimate format, but superior quality.

— This one too, Berthollet decided.

He showed Berthollet other works. Portraits by Lorenzo Lotto. This sixteenth-century Venetian painter had specialised in

psychological portraits, seeking to reveal personality, doubts, inner ambitions. A *Portrait with a Letter* showed a gentleman holding a missive, his gaze lost in the distance. Anxiety? Hope? Regret? Lotto excelled in these psychological ambiguities. Berthollet selected three Lottos. They would complement the Museum's portrait collection, showing a different facet of Venetian art: psychological introspection rather than decorative glorification.

In total, five works were selected at the Academy. A Vivarini polyptych. A Cima da Conegliano. Three Lottos. First-rate pieces that would considerably enrich the representation of the early Venetian school at the Museum.

Mengardi accompanied Berthollet to the exit.

VIII — The Final Embarkation

On the 25th of August 1797, the Venetian inventory was complete. Eighty-six works selected. Plus the four horses already departed. Total: ninety pieces to join the Central Museum of the Arts.

This was not the greatest requisition of the Italian campaign in absolute numbers. Rome had provided a hundred and seven works. Bologna a hundred and eighty-seven.

The Venetian crates were loaded onto barques to cross the lagoon. Then onto carts for the land journey to Paris. A convoy of twenty-six vehicles escorted by two hundred soldiers. Planned departure: the 1st of September.

Morosini came to attend the final embarkation. He stood on the quay near the Piazza San Marco, watching the crates being piled onto the barques. In these wooden boxes slept the Titians, the Veroneses, the Tintorettos, the Bellinis.

The weather was grey that morning. Low clouds covered the lagoon. A light mist rose from the water. The atmosphere was damp, oppressive.

Berthollet approached Morosini to say goodbye.

— Monsieur Morosini, I wanted to thank you for your cooperation. Without your help, the inventory would have been more difficult.

— I did not cooperate, Morosini replied in a low voice. I limited the damage. An important distinction that you probably do not understand.

The first barque was full. It moved away from the quay, gliding silently on the grey water. The gondolier rowed with precaution. The crates were heavy. One wrong movement and the barque could capsize. Centuries of art would sink into the lagoon.

Morosini followed it with his eyes until it disappeared into the mist.

— I served the Serenissima all my life. I saw these works as a child, a young man, a mature man. They were as much a part of me as of these walls. But today, at this precise moment, I would give everything — my reputation, my fortune, the years remaining to me — to prevent this convoy from leaving. To bring these works back to their churches. To give back to Venice what you are tearing from her.

— But you cannot.

— No. I cannot. No one can. You are too strong. We are too weak. That is the law of the jungle. The law of the strongest. And you apply it shamelessly despite all your fine speeches about civilisation.

A second barque filled. Then a third. The process took time. The crates had to be arranged carefully to balance the weight — to prevent the barque from tilting to one side. The Venetian gondoliers worked. They accomplished their task mechanically, without looking at the French soldiers supervising the operation.

The last barque was loaded around noon. Twenty-five barques in all, transporting the eighty-six crates. They formed a long line gliding across the lagoon toward the mainland.

From there, the carts were waiting for the land journey to Paris.

On the 1st of September 1797, at dawn, the convoy set off.

Twenty-six covered carts. Two hundred soldiers as escort. A sergeant-major named Dupont who had crossed northern Italy for eighteen months and knew the roads, the inns, the pitfalls. And in the iron-banded wooden crates, packed in straw and oiled paper, lashed with doubled ropes — the eighty-six works of Venice.

The convoy left Mestre before sunrise. The horses advanced on the paved road, breathing in the cool morning air. The cart wheels made a regular, almost musical sound on the stones. The soldiers marched in column on either side of the convoy, muskets on their shoulders, eyes fixed ahead.

Berthollet rode at the head. He did not look back at Venice. He had acquired the habit, over the months, of never looking back.

The Brenner route was the only option for crossing the Alps at this season. The Mont-Cenis pass, further west, was already threatened by the first high-altitude snowfalls. The Brenner, lower, more practicable, would allow the carts through until early October.

The first days passed without incident. The convoy made progress — some twenty kilometres a day. The weather was mild, autumn gentle, skies overcast without rain. The Veneto plain was flat, the roads wide, the carts rolled without jolts.

Berthollet occupied his evenings re-reading his inventories. He wanted to ensure everything was in order before the Alpine crossing. That every crate bore its number and corresponded to the list established at the time of packing. That the works were indeed those that had left Venice.

He checked. He recalculated. He cross-referenced the numbers.

Everything was in order.

But this mechanical work was insufficient to occupy his entire mind. Mengardi's words returned. Morosini's words. Zorzi's

phrase noted in his register as a statement of fact: *Taken on 8 August 1797 for the Museum of Paris.* That neutrality of tone which was perhaps the most effective form of protest — more effective than tears, more effective than curses. Just the dry recording of what had taken place. Zorzi had meant to say: I note. I bear witness. History will know.

Berthollet closed his notebooks and blew out his candle.

IX — The Convoy: The Alpine Route

Berthollet climbed into his carriage without looking back.

The following morning, the convoy resumed its road northward.

At Trento, they halted for two days. The horses needed rest before the Alpine crossing. Blacksmiths checked the horseshoes, the axles, the bolts. Soldiers slept in barns. Cart drivers repaired torn canvas covers.

Berthollet went down into the streets of Trento. An Italian city under Austrian domination, midway between two worlds. Italian and German were spoken there, sometimes both in the same sentence. The cathedral was Baroque, the houses with their painted gables, the fountains decorated with noble coats of arms. A city that had known its hour of glory two and a half centuries earlier, when the Council had convened there to define the dogmas of the Counter-Reformation, and which since had lived in the memory of that event as in a house too large.

He entered the cathedral. The interior was cool, silent. A few kneeling faithful. A priest reciting his breviary in a corner. Seventeenth-century frescoes on the walls — saints with broad gestures, skies open on glories of clouds and angels. Average quality work. Not the kind of thing the Paris Museum could have wanted.

He went back out into the afternoon light.

An elderly man was sitting on the steps, facing the piazza. He watched the convoy from his position — the cart covers visible

at the end of the street, the soldiers coming and going. He watched Berthollet come out of the cathedral, then asked in Italian, without preamble:

— Are those the paintings from Venice?

— In part, replied Berthollet. And besides, not only that.

— I had heard. Everyone has heard.

— Heard what?

— That you are taking everything. The paintings. The sculptures. The books. That nothing remains where it was.

The old man continued, without hostility, with the tranquillity of one who has passed the age at which events can still surprise him.

— My father told me that the Venetians did the same to Byzantium. Long ago. They took the bronze horses and put them on their basilica. Now you take the bronze horses from Venice. That is how history works.

— That is how history works, Berthollet repeated.

— But it does not mean it is right. It means it repeats itself.

Berthollet lingered on the cathedral steps. Then he went back to check his inventories.

The crossing of the Alps began on the 8th of September.

It was the most delicate part of the journey. The road climbed progressively from Bolzano, winding between rock faces that drew closer as one approached the pass. The carts had to be driven with absolute precision — one wrong movement, one wheel slipping on the edge of a stone, and a crate could topple into the void. The drivers held their horses close, spoke to the animals gently, advanced by careful fits and starts. The soldiers walked alongside the wheels, ready to chock, push, hold.

The summit of the pass was reached on the 11th of September, late in the morning. The view from up there was immense — the Alps in every direction, the summits already under snow, the deep valleys in shadow. The air was cold, dry, luminous.

Dupont assembled the convoy at the summit and called the roll of crates.

— Eighty-six crates at departure, he said to Berthollet. Eighty-six crates at the summit. We descend.

The descent toward the Inn valley was faster, but no less perilous. The carts tended to gather speed on the slopes, and one had to brake constantly — wooden clogs applied to the wheels by soldiers walking alongside, a hand gripped on the brake, muscles tensed to hold the load. Two carts had to be doubled with ropes attached to trees on the steepest sections, the soldiers taking turns holding and slowly letting out.

Innsbruck.

The Austrian city still bore the marks of the French presence — the Campo Formio negotiations were nearing their end. Peace would be signed in a few days, on the 17th of October, but the French troops had not yet evacuated all their positions. The inn where the convoy lodged for two nights was run by a tight-lipped Tyrolean who served food in silence and took the money without a word.

Berthollet ate supper alone in the common room. At the next table, two French cavalry officers were talking about the peace, the Directory, Bonaparte. News was arriving from Paris in disorder — letters, ten-day-old newspapers, rumours transmitted by dispatch riders. Bonaparte had returned to France. He was being fêted as a triumphator. The Directory feared him as much as it needed him.

He ordered wine and did not sleep well.

The convoy entered Paris on the 27th of October 1797.

It was seven in the evening. Night was falling. The streets were still lively — merchants closing their shops, cabs crossing each other, groups of citizens heading home from work. No one looked at the covered carts making their way toward the Central Museum of the Arts. No one knew what they were transporting.

Berthollet had warned the Museum the previous day by letter. The guards were waiting with lanterns. The carriage gate of the Central Museum of the Arts courtyard was opened as the convoy arrived, and the carts filed one by one into the inner courtyard, finding silence and relative darkness after the noise of the city.

Dupont made the final roll call.

— Eighty-six crates in Venice. Eighty-six crates in Paris. The convoy is complete.

— Good, said Berthollet.

That was all he said.

Monge was there.

Berthollet had not expected it. He caught sight of the scholar's silhouette in the shadow, near the central courtyard fountain, his coat turned up against the October coolness. Monge had arrived alone, without telling anyone of his coming. He had learned the hour of arrival from the Museum's guards and had come.

— Gaspard.

— Claude.

They did not shake hands. It was not their habit. They stood side by side and watched the soldiers begin the unloading — the crates descending from the carts, carried by four men each, set on the courtyard's paved floor in an order that Dupont was supervising with his customary precision.

— Everything arrived?

— Everything.

— Damaged?

— No. Apart from some packing adjustments en route. Nothing serious.

Monge nodded. He watched the crates align. Dark wooden rectangles in the lantern light. Anonymous, closed. Nothing indicated what was inside.

— You know what is in there, he murmured, almost to himself.

— I know.

— So do I, partly. I read your preliminary reports. The Tintorettos. The Veroneses. The Titians.

— And the others. The Bellinis. The Lottos. The Academy primitives.

— The Bellinis, Monge repeated.

There was in those words something that was not satisfaction and not quite melancholy. Something intermediate that Berthollet did not try to define.

— The restorers begin tomorrow morning. The hanging in three weeks if all goes well.

— And then?

— Then the public. The rooms will be open in December.

The last crates were descending from the last carts. Dupont was putting his notebooks back in his satchel, releasing the escort soldiers, exchanging a few words with the head of the Central Museum of the Arts guards.

— I received a letter from Visconti, Monge said at last.

The Vatican curator who had commented on everything with a scholar's precision and the pain of a man watching his life stripped away.

— What does he say?

— He has asked to come to Paris. To see the sculptures. He would like to ensure that the *Apollo* and the *Laocoön* are in good condition. And he has a project: to write a scientific catalogue of the antique works transferred to the Museum. He thinks this work is necessary — for science. For memory.

— For memory, Berthollet repeated. Like Zorzi with his register. Like Mengardi with his warnings.

— Perhaps. Or perhaps truly for science.

— The two are not mutually exclusive.

— No. The two are not mutually exclusive.

The courtyard was now empty of carts. The eighty-six crates were arranged on the flagstones. Guards remained on watch between them. Night had completely fallen, and the lanterns cast long shadows on the walls of the Central Museum of the Arts.

— Are you hungry? asked Monge.

— I have not eaten since this morning.

— There is a table at my house. Nothing remarkable. But something warm.

They left the Museum courtyard through the carriage gate. Outside, Paris lived in the noise of the evening — voices, wheels, the cries of belated street sellers. The city was indifferent. It did not know what the crates in the courtyard contained. It did not know the names of Venice, Verona, Bologna. It did not know Morosini and his tears, Zorzi and his register, Mengardi and his sixty-five years.

Paris lived. Paris was always alive. That was perhaps the only certain thing in all this story.

The following weeks were those of work.

The restoration workshop of the Central Museum of the Arts received the crates one after another. The restorers — a team of eight, led by a Fleming named Van der Berg who had worked in Brussels before the Revolution — opened each crate. The packing first, cut layer by layer. The straw removed by hand, straw by straw on the delicate corners. The oiled paper unrolled slowly. And the work finally appearing in the light of the workshop — painted surface, chassis corners, canvas edges.

Van der Berg examined each work with a magnifying glass. He noted the condition, dictated to his assistant, decided on the necessary interventions — here a consolidating varnish, there a chassis reinforcement, elsewhere a light retouching on a zone where the paint had cracked during the journey.

Berthollet participated in all the openings. He wanted to be present at the moment when each crate revealed its content. It was a form of final inventory — verifying that what arrived in the workshop corresponded to what had left Venice.

Everything corresponded.

Tintoretto's *Miracle of the Slave* was the first large canvas to be deployed. Van der Berg had planned time for this operation — the canvas measured more than twenty square metres, rolled on a five-metre wooden drum. It required six men to manoeuvre it, an hour to unroll progressively.

It was intact.

Van der Berg turned toward Berthollet.

— Remarkable conservation. The rolling worked well. Not one new crack. The reinforcing canvas maintained the tension uniformly. Your packing teams did exemplary work.

— Dupont did exemplary work, Berthollet corrected.

— How so?

— The sergeant-major who commanded the convoy. He maintained the transport conditions. He and his soldiers.

Van der Berg waved off the objection — this detail did not interest him — and continued his inspection.

Berthollet looked at the spread Tintoretto. The overturned slave. The executioners with their broken tools. The stupefied crowd. And at the very top, plunging into the composition from the sky like a comet — Saint Mark come to the rescue of his servant. The divine figure upside down, arms extended, cape flying in the movement of the celestial fall. That audacity that Zorzi had evoked: a foreshortening that no one before Tintoretto had dared, and that no one since could look at without feeling something shift within them.

Zorzi and his register. That close handwriting, the quill held without trembling while the crates went out one by one.

What Zorzi had said in the empty great capitular hall came back to him without precise reason: *These light rectangles. The walls have the same memory now.*

He tore himself from this thought and went to check the next crate.

On the 15th of November 1797, the installation work began in the new Venetian rooms.

The Central Museum of the Arts was expanding. The rooms of the royal palace, converted into exhibition rooms for several years, were no longer sufficient to contain the flows from successive campaigns — the Flemish works of 1794, the antique sculptures from Rome, and now the Venetian paintings. Additional credits had had to be requested from the Directory, authorisation obtained to use two new rooms in the north wing, new picture rails installed, ceilings repaired, lighting set up.

The hanging was a science. Paintings were not nailed up haphazardly. The Museum's commissioners had worked out principles: group by school, by period, by theme; alternate large and small formats to avoid visual overcrowding; provide sufficient clearance around major works for the eye to rest without distraction.

Berthollet was not a Museum commissioner. But he had been asked to attend the discussions on the arrangement of the Venetian works, as the person responsible for the requisition. He knew each painting, each sculpture about to be hung. He could say where it came from, in what context, in what condition.

He came. He listened. He answered questions.

And when the first canvases were hung on the white walls of the new rooms, he remained to look at them for a moment in the silence of the afternoon, when the workers had taken their break and the commissioners had gone to lunch.

Veronese's *Wedding at Cana* occupied the far wall of the great room, facing the door. As at San Giorgio Maggiore, where it had

faced the refectory door since 1563. The format was different, but the idea remained the same: the first thing the visitor saw on entering. That canvas which invaded the field of vision before one even had time to prepare to receive it.

Berthollet stopped on the threshold.

He did not see the seven reglued strips. He did not see the joins. He saw the canvas as Veronese had wanted it — a mass of life, colour, movement; two hundred people gathered for a banquet, and yet each one distinct, each one present, each one bearing in his face a particular story that the painter's eye had known how to seize and fix for ever.

He stood for a long time.

Then he left the room without turning back.

The doors of the Venetian rooms opened to the public on the 1st of December 1797.

From the first hour, visitors streamed in. The opening had been announced in the papers. The rumour had been going round for weeks that the treasures of Venice were to be exhibited. Curious citizens, artists, students, professors, bourgeois in Sunday dress, workers who had taken an hour from their day — all came to see.

Berthollet slipped among them, incognito. He wanted to see how the public looked. How they reacted.

He watched.

A group of young men — students, to judge by their clothes — had stopped before the *Miracle of the Slave*. One of them, a tall thin man with hollow cheeks, was staring at the figure of Saint Mark in foreshortening. He said something in a low voice. His friends drew closer. Words exchanged — composition, perspective, foreshortening — technical words, words learned in painting classes. But in the tall thin man's eyes, beyond the vocabulary, there was something else. A shaking. An unnamed emotion.

A woman was alone before Bellini's *Virgin and Child*. She looked without moving. For a long time. Her hands were clasped before her, as in a church. She was not speaking, she was not reading the leaflet distributed at the entrance. She was looking. And in that look, Berthollet read something he recognised without being able to name it.

A father and his two sons — ten years, twelve years perhaps — stopped before Veronese's *Wedding at Cana*. The father read the leaflet, explained the scene, pointed out details. The children half-listened, their eyes drawn by the colours, by the sumptuous architecture of the background, by that servant off to one side whose simple tunic contrasted with the magnificence of the guests' dress.

— Why is he dressed so plainly? asked the younger one.

— Because he is a servant, said the father. A man of the people.

— And is he right and are they wrong?

— Look at the painting. What do you think?

The child looked. For a long time. Then he said:

— I think yes.

Berthollet moved away.

He left the Central Museum of the Arts in the cold December light. The quays were deserted. The Seine flowed grey between its banks. Barges went upstream, loaded with wood for the winter. Paris was cold, alive, noisy — that particular energy of cities that never stop.

He thought of the child before the Veronese who had said: *I think yes*.

Two truths impossible to reconcile, and yet both true.

He went home.

Tomorrow, the rooms would reopen. And other people would come to look. And other children would ask their questions.

And in Venice, the walls would remain marked with their pale rectangles.

CHAPTER IV: THE EGYPTIAN PROJECT (1797–1798)

On the 5th of December 1797, Bonaparte returned to Paris after his Italian triumph. The crowd acclaimed him in the streets. Women threw flowers. Men shouted his name. The conqueror was back.

But what he saw in the Rue de la Victoire disgusted him. Joséphine had transformed their house into a permanent salon — dozens of hangers-on, courtiers, flatterers, profiteers, all crowded into the rooms like flies on honey, all wanting to approach the victorious general, shake his hand, get a word, a smile, something to recount the next day.

He threw everyone out.

— Out! Everyone out! This house is not a circus!

Joséphine protested feebly — she liked entertaining, shining, being admired. But Bonaparte was inflexible, and she ended by shrugging her shoulders with that nonchalant grace she had for capitulating without appearing to do so. He wanted calm, silence, concentration.

He had projects. Plans. Ambitions.

I — The Obsession with Movement

Bonaparte woke at ten o'clock. Late. Too late for a man who, in Italy, led his armies into combat at dawn. But here, in Paris, in this sumptuous bedroom in the Rue de la Victoire, what else was there to do but sleep?

Joséphine was still asleep, buried under three feather eiderdowns. The previous evening she had danced until four in the morning at Barras's. Bonaparte had left her at midnight, pleading fatigue. In reality, he could no longer bear these Parisian salons, these gossips, these intrigues, these powdered women and men who spoke only of their own importance.

He went down to his study without waking Joséphine. The room still reeked of cigar smoke. He had smoked until three in the morning reading military reports from the Army of the Rhine. Mediocre reports. Incompetent generals. Ill-equipped soldiers. Botched operations. Nothing like his Army of Italy.

His secretary Bourrienne entered at half past ten, carrying three piles of correspondence. He set the bundles on the desk with care. He knew that the slightest disorder in the morning could earn a reprimand.

— Good morning, General. The Directory requests your presence this afternoon. Meeting at three o'clock at the Luxembourg. Subject: England.

Bonaparte grumbled without raising his eyes.

— England again. They think of nothing else. As if one could invade England with three longboats and soldiers who vomit the moment they see water.

He seized the first pile of correspondence. Invitations. Twenty-three invitations to dinners, balls, receptions. All Paris wanted to see him. To show him off. To boast of having received him. He looked through them, brow furrowed, before throwing the pile aside, weary.

— Refuse everything.

Bourrienne hesitated.

— General, some invitations come from important personages. Madame de Staël insists very much. She is organising a dinner at which...

— I don't give a damn about Madame de Staël! Bonaparte cut him off, slapping his palm on the desk. That insufferable chatterbox who thinks that talking is thinking! Refuse, and don't mention her to me again.

Bourrienne noted without flinching. He knew his master. Useless to insist.

— The second pile, General?

— Tell me.

— Requests for employment. A hundred and seventeen letters from people who want a post, a favour, a pension.

Bonaparte made an impatient gesture.

— Sort them. Keep those from my Italian officers. The rest, in the bin.

— Very well. And the third pile?

— Give it here.

— Military reports. State of the armies. Strengths. Equipment.

Bonaparte seized the pile and began to read. His face darkened with every page, jaw clenched, eyes growing harder.

— The Army of the Rhine lost four thousand men in September, he finally said, as if he had trouble believing what he was reading. Desertions. Disease. Combat. Four thousand men! With my Army of Italy, I could have conquered the whole of Germany with four thousand extra men!

He threw the reports on the desk with a sharp clap.

— These generals are incompetents. Jourdan, Moreau. All incompetents. They don't know how to manoeuvre. They advance like oxen. The enemy sees them coming three days' march away.

Bourrienne remained silent. Speaking ill of other generals before witnesses was dangerous. The Directory was watching. Spies were everywhere.

Bonaparte went to the window. The Rue de la Victoire was coming to life in the grey morning — merchants calling out, carriages passing, Paris living. He was bored.

He remained motionless for a long time, hands behind his back, looking without seeing.

— Bourrienne, I am going to go mad.

The secretary thought he had misheard.

— General?

— Mad. I am going to go mad if I stay here doing nothing. Reading reports. Refusing invitations. Listening to Barras and his colleagues debate for hours without ever deciding anything.

He turned abruptly and struck his fist against the wall with a violence that made Bourrienne jump.

— I am twenty-eight years old! Twenty-eight! I conquered Italy! Defeated four Austrian armies! Imposed peace on Vienna! And now they ask me to sit in Paris playing the salon politician!

Bourrienne chose his words with care before replying.

— The Directory fears you, General. They prefer to have you under their eyes rather than far away with an army behind you.

— I know they fear me! And they are right to fear me! But that changes nothing. I shall rot here if I do not find something to do.

He went back to sit behind his desk, crossed his arms, and fixed his secretary.

— I must leave again. Soon. Six months at most. A new campaign. A new conquest.

— Where will you go? Bourrienne asked quietly.

Bonaparte smiled — that slow, mysterious smile he reserved for moments when his mind had already completed a full circuit that others had not yet begun.

— I don't know yet. But I will find somewhere. There is always a place to conquer for those who know how to look.

The Luxembourg Palace housed the Directory — a sumptuous building, the former palace of Marie de' Medici, converted into the seat of republican power. Bonaparte arrived there at three o'clock precisely, escorted by two aides-de-camp, his uniform immaculate and his expression closed.

The conference room was already full. The five Directors and several ministers — including Talleyrand at Foreign Affairs and Schérer at War — were seated around the great table.

Bonaparte saluted with a nod and sat without waiting to be invited.

Barras took the floor with the unction of someone who believes he is conferring a favour.

— General Bonaparte, thank you for coming. We wished to consult you on the situation with England.

— I am listening, said Bonaparte, his eyes fixed on Barras with an intensity that made the Director look away.

— Continental peace is achieved, Barras continued. Austria has signed Campo Formio. Spain is our ally. Prussia is neutral. England alone continues the war. Her squadrons blockade our coasts. Her gold finances every coalition against us. She must be struck.

— Agreed. How?

Barras hesitated. Reubell took over.

— A direct invasion. Fifty thousand men landed in England. March on London. We impose peace on Prime Minister Pitt.

Bonaparte looked from one to the other with deliberate slowness, as if seeking to determine whether they were serious.

— A direct invasion of England, he repeated. With what ships?

— We will build longboats, said Reubell. A thousand longboats. Capable of carrying fifty men each.

— A thousand longboats, Bonaparte repeated, savouring the absurdity of the number. And while we build these thousand longboats, what does the Royal Navy do? It possesses two hundred ships of the line, fifty frigates, and hundreds of smaller vessels. They patrol the Channel day and night. Our thousand longboats will never cross those thirty-five kilometres of water. Three-quarters will sink before reaching the English coast.

La Révellière-Lépeaux leaned forward with the air of someone who thinks he has found a counter-argument.

— We will choose the right moment. A foggy night. A storm. The English will see nothing.

This time Bonaparte could not quite restrain an incredulous smile.

— A storm? You want to send fifty thousand men on longboats during a storm? They will all drown before they even see the English, Citizen Director.

It was Talleyrand who intervened, from the end of the table, in his suave, almost lazy voice.

— General Bonaparte is right. A direct invasion is impossible under these conditions. Other means must be found to strike England.

Barras turned toward him with slight irritation.

— What means, Talleyrand?

The Minister of Foreign Affairs took his time, as was his habit, letting the silence work for him before replying.

— Her distant possessions. Her trade routes. Her colonies. England is rich because she trades. Cut her routes, destroy her commerce, and we will strangle her more surely than by any naval battle imaginable.

Bonaparte looked at Talleyrand with new interest. The man was devious, corrupt, cynical to the marrow — but possessed of an intelligence that was difficult not to respect.

— Do you have a specific place in mind? he asked.

— The Orient, Talleyrand replied without hesitation. The eastern Mediterranean. The route to India. That is where the true British wealth lies, and that is where the blow must be struck.

Reubell immediately raised his voice.

— The Orient? That is too far! Too risky! Our fleets cannot even leave Toulon without being harassed by the English!

— All the more reason to try, Talleyrand replied, imperturbably. If we succeed, the impact will be considerable. If we fail, we will have lost only a distant army.

Bonaparte barely heard him. A truth had just appeared to him with the clarity of the obvious: the Directory did not truly want to defeat England. It wanted to get rid of him — Bonaparte. To send him far away, with an army, on a dangerous adventure from which he might never return.

But that was precisely what he wanted. To leave. To conquer. Far from Paris, far from these tedious salons, far from these mediocre politicians who imagined they held him.

— I am ready to study this option. The Orient interests me. It always has.

Barras smiled — a satisfied smile, that of someone who thinks he has placed a piece where he wanted it.

— Excellent. We are going to appoint you commander of the Army of England. Officially, you will prepare the invasion. Unofficially, you will study other options. The Orient, for example.

— Very well. In that case, I want full powers: choice of officers, organisation, equipment. Everything, without exception.

— You will have them.

— And an unlimited budget.

Barras considered, seeking with his eyes to negotiate with his colleagues.

— Unlimited is a great deal...

— If you want to strike England seriously, you need serious means, he replied curtly. Otherwise, we might as well stay here doing nothing.

The Directors exchanged glances. It was Barras who first gave a nod of assent.

— Agreed. Unlimited budget. But you keep us regularly informed.

— Regularly, said Bonaparte.

The meeting continued for another hour — administrative details, appointments, financing. Bonaparte listened with half an ear, responding in monosyllables, nodding at the right moment. His mind was already elsewhere.

The Orient. The Mediterranean. Egypt perhaps. Or Syria. Or even further — India. Marching in Alexander's footsteps. Absurd. Certainly dangerous. He was aware of it.

II — The Egyptian Project

The following day, he summoned Monge to the Rue de la Victoire. Nine o'clock in the morning. The scholar arrived punctually, carrying a heavy satchel stuffed with documents which he set carefully on the neighbouring chair before sitting.

— Good morning, Gaspard. Coffee?

— With pleasure.

A domestic served two cups. Bonaparte waited until they were alone, then came around the desk and leaned against it, arms crossed, in that familiar posture he adopted when he wanted to speak frankly.

— Gaspard, I need you.

Bonaparte used *tu* easily. For him it was a way of marking a certain intimacy. And also a certain dominance. In return, very few dared reciprocate.

— I am at your service. Of what nature is the mission?

— Not for the sciences this time. At least, not directly. For politics.

Monge raised an inquiring eyebrow.

— The Directory has appointed me commander of the Army of England. The pretext: prepare the invasion of England. The real project: something else.

Monge hesitated for a moment.

— The Orient?

Bonaparte smiled — that brief smile that signified both surprise and approval.

— You guess quickly. Yes, the Orient. But I don't yet know where. The options must be studied.

He straightened and unrolled on his desk an immense map covering the eastern Mediterranean as far as the shores of India. Monge instinctively moved closer to see better.

— Look. This entire zone is weakly controlled. The Ottoman Empire is decomposing. The Mamelukes rule in Egypt, but without any real authority from the Sultan. Persia is divided. Mughal India is collapsing. Everywhere, a vacuum. Everywhere, opportunities.

Monge studied the map in silence, his brow slightly furrowed.

— And England, in all of this?

— England trades with India. Millions of pounds each year. If we cut that route, if we threaten their Indian possessions, we strike them in the purse. More effective than all the naval battles in the world.

— Egypt would be the logical base, said Monge after a moment's reflection. A central position. Control of the land canal between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. Agricultural riches. A large population.

— That is what I think. But I want your scholar's opinion, not just a strategist's. Egypt — what is it really?

Monge took time for a long breath before replying.

— One of the cradles of civilisation. Three thousand years of uninterrupted history. The pyramids. The temples. The

hieroglyphs that no one in Europe can read. A mine of knowledge buried for centuries, which no one has yet had the means to explore.

Bonaparte's eyes lit up.

— A mine of knowledge. Precisely. And what if we made it a double conquest? A massive expedition. Military men and scholars together. We conquer Egypt by arms, and simultaneously we explore it through science. We measure everything. We draw everything. We document everything. We create a monumental *Description of Egypt* that will make France the foremost scientific nation in the world.

Monge looked at him. Bonaparte was standing, his eyes bright, his hands gesturing over the map as if he could already see the armies on the march.

— It is ambitious, said the scholar, with a restraint that did not quite hide his interest.

— Of course it is ambitious! Small projects don't interest me! I want to mark History!

Bonaparte sat down, and his tone changed — more measured, more precise.

— And there is something else, Gaspard. The Central Museum of the Arts.

— The Central Museum of the Arts?

— On the 27th of July, you saw the triumph. Paris now possesses the finest collections of Italian art in the world. But why stop at Italy? Why not also have the finest collections of Egyptian art?

Monge suddenly understood, and felt something tighten in his chest.

— You want to requisition antiquities in Egypt. As you did in Italy.

— Massively. Everything that can be transported. Statues, stelae, sarcophagi, mummies, papyri. The Central Museum of the Arts

must become the premier universal museum in the world. The art of every civilisation.

— It will be even more difficult than in Italy, Monge objected. The transport, the heat, the weight of Egyptian monuments. Some of these colossi weigh dozens of tons.

— I know. That is why I need you. You and Berthollet. You will organise the scientific commission. Recruit the best scholars. All volunteers. All capable of enduring difficult conditions. Geometers, draughtsmen, naturalists, chemists, orientalists, physicians, engineers.

— How many men?

— At least a hundred and fifty. Perhaps two hundred. I want a commission that makes an impression — that shows the world France does not only make war.

Monge was at once enthusiastic and uneasy. Enthusiastic by the scientific scope of the project. Uneasy by what it implied morally. More spoliations. More requisitions. Italy first. Egypt now. When would it stop?

Bonaparte had decided. And when Bonaparte decided, things happened.

— I will begin the recruitment.

— Good. Gaspard, one last instruction...

Monge looked up.

— Absolute discretion. The Directory must know nothing of the extent of my plans. Not yet. Recruit the scholars by telling them it is for a scientific expedition. Don't mention Egypt. Don't mention the requisitions. Just this: scientific expedition, destination to be specified, departure in six months.

— Understood.

Monge took his satchel. At the door, he hesitated briefly, as if he wanted to add something, but he did not, and left in silence.

Bonaparte returned to his maps. Egypt lay spread before him: Alexandria, Cairo, the Nile, the desert routes. He took a pencil and traced a line from the coast to the pyramids.

Bonaparte was elected a member of the National Institute, Section of Mechanics. What mattered was the image — general and scholar, conqueror and intellectual, Alexander and Aristotle in one person.

The installation ceremony took place on the 4th of January 1798. A sumptuous room. A hundred academicians present. Laplace, Lagrange, Monge, Berthollet, Fourcroy, Volney — all there.

Bonaparte mounted the tribune in uniform. Not civilian dress. He wanted to be remembered: soldier first.

He read a prepared speech. Pompous. Hollow. But well-turned — references to Antiquity, Alexander encouraging Aristotle, Augustus protecting Virgil, Caesar writing his *Commentaries* between battles.

Polite applause.

Laplace replied. A flattering speech on mathematics and the military art, ballistics, fortification. A great general needed to be a mathematician. Bonaparte was one.

More applause.

After the ceremony, Monge presented a paper on developable surfaces. Bonaparte listened. He understood half of it — not enough to follow, enough to nod at the right moments.

At the end of the session, several academicians came to surround him. Volney particularly approached with that calculated discretion of men who want to appear to have prepared nothing.

— General, I have heard it said that you are contemplating an expedition to the Orient.

Bonaparte let a few seconds pass before replying, his gaze resting on him without blinking.

— Who told you that?

— Rumours, nothing precise. But if it is true, I would be very interested in taking part. I have published a *Voyage to Syria and Egypt* which may still carry authority. I have travelled those regions. I might be useful to you.

Bonaparte assessed him — a small, lean man, keen and intelligent gaze, an orientalist recognised throughout Europe. He would be useful.

— If I were to organise such an expedition, I would need first-rate orientalists. You would be on my list, Citizen Volney.

— I would be honoured, General.

Other academicians approached in the minutes that followed. Fourier, Jomard, Conté — all interested, all ready to leave for a destination whose name had not yet been pronounced aloud. Bonaparte was making mental notes. Recruiting among academicians gave prestige, showed this was a serious, scientific expedition, not a mere military adventure.

He left the Institute satisfied. The election consolidated his image. Everything was falling into place.

III — The Recruitment of the Commission

The weeks that followed were those of implementation.

Monge installed himself in an office at the École Polytechnique and began the recruitment. Bonaparte had given him a free hand, an unlimited budget, no restrictions. The commission had to be assembled. The best scholars.

The task was titanic. Where to find a hundred and sixty-seven men ready to leave for an unknown destination, in six months, for an indeterminate period, with considerable risks?

Mathematicians were needed for astronomical and geodetic calculations; naturalists to study the fauna and flora; chemists to analyse minerals and waters; engineers to build roads, bridges and fortifications; draughtsmen to document every discovery;

physicians to treat the troops; orientalists to understand languages and customs; architects to measure the monuments; printers to distribute proclamations and newspapers.

Monge began with the easiest: his own colleagues from the École Polytechnique. Young. Enthusiastic. Competent.

Fourier, a brilliant mathematician. A fervent revolutionary during the Terror, imprisoned then pardoned. A professor at the École Normale since recently, he still carried in his eyes that slight feverishness of men who have known death closely and have not given up living fast. Monge summoned him to his office one January morning.

— Joseph, I have a proposal for you. Listen before answering.

Fourier sat down and crossed his arms with an attentive air.

— I am listening.

— A scientific expedition. Distant. Dangerous. Fascinating. Destination secret for now — you will learn it at Toulon. Departure in six months. Duration indeterminate. Double pay. And if you survive, a glory that will outlast you. Interested?

Fourier did not deliberate long — barely the time for Monge to finish his sentence.

— Yes.

Monge smiled. He had hoped for this answer without being certain of it.

And until departure, not a word to anyone.

— Understood, said Fourier, extending his hand. When do I learn where we are going?

— At Toulon. Not before.

Fourier left.

And went back toward his lecture room holding his step in check.

Conté was a special case. A genius engineer, inventor of the lead pencil, capable of repairing, building, improvising anything with

three tools and good sense — indispensable to any expedition that intended to function far from civilisation.

Conté was bent over a mechanism he was dismantling with a surgeon's patience. He looked up at Monge's entrance without interrupting his gesture.

— Nicolas-Jacques, said Monge, I need you for an extraordinary mission.

— In what sense, extraordinary? asked Conté, setting down his screwdriver.

— Scientific and military expedition. Difficult climate, scarce materials, unreliable supplies. Everything will have to be made on site. Scientific instruments, tools, machines, spare parts. You are the only man capable of doing this in such conditions.

Conté swept his workshop with his eyes as if to pack it in his luggage.

— I will come. But I am bringing my tools.

— Obviously.

— All my tools, Conté specified. Including the portable forge.

— Whatever you wish.

Conté extended his hand, and the matter was settled in under a minute.

The recruitment progressed. But not all were as easy to convince.

Dolomieu — a mineralogist of European reputation, specialist in rocks and crystals, Knight of the Order of Malta. A man of principle who did nothing without knowing why. Monge summoned him to the sitting room of his apartment in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain.

— Déodat, the expedition cannot manage without you. The mineralogy of the desert, geological formations that no one has yet studied.

Dolomieu took his time before replying, as was his habit.

— What is the destination?

— I cannot tell you at present.

— Then I refuse, said Dolomieu quietly. I do not leave for an unknown destination for unknown reasons in the service of interests I am ignorant of.

— It is Bonaparte who commands this expedition.

The name produced its effect. Dolomieu grimaced. Bonaparte — the conqueror, the ambitious one, the man who used science as he used his generals, for his own glory. He had no particular esteem for that man.

— I will come. But let things be clear: I will not stay indefinitely.

— You will stay as long as necessary, said Monge with a firm gentleness. And you will do work that will count.

Dolomieu accepted reluctantly with a gesture of the hand, without enthusiasm, but he accepted.

Berthollet was an altogether different matter. An eminent chemist, a cautious and reflective man, little inclined to adventure and still less to hasty decisions. Monge preferred to have Bonaparte himself take charge of convincing him.

Berthollet entered Bonaparte's office with the dignity of one whose name commands respect.

— Claude-Louis, you are coming with us to the Orient.

Berthollet stopped short.

— To the Orient?

— To Egypt, probably.

A silence followed during which he seemed to weigh the proposal as one weighs a dangerous reagent — with care, without haste.

— But I am fifty. The Egyptian climate under such conditions...

— You are coming, Bonaparte cut him off. I need you. Not only for the chemistry. For the organisation, for the prestige, for

giving this expedition the scientific weight it deserves. You are a member of the Institute. Your name on this commission is worth ten names of young unknowns.

Berthollet remained silent for another moment, hands resting on his knees.

— And my family?

— You take her with you if you wish. Or she stays in Paris and you send her money. That is your choice, not mine.

He reflected again, then raised his eyes.

— I accept. But on one condition that I state clearly.

— Which?

— That this expedition truly serve science. Not merely the political ambitions of someone, however brilliant they may be.

Bonaparte looked at him for a moment with that expression he sometimes had, between amusement and respect.

— Both, my dear Berthollet. Science and politics. It is this alliance that will make this expedition exceptional in the eyes of the world. Neither you nor I will ever find anything better.

Berthollet accepted the argument without appearing to, and took his leave.

The recruitment advanced, but met with growing resistance. Many scholars refused — too risky, too remote, too uncertain for men who had families, chairs, ongoing research.

On the 15th of March 1798, Monge appeared in the Rue de la Victoire with a report he was in no hurry to deliver.

— We have a hundred and twelve acceptances. Fifty-five are still lacking.

Bonaparte frowned.

— Why do they refuse?

Monge took a breath.

— Various reasons. Fear, first. Family. Health. Some are unwilling to abandon research in progress that has taken years. Others simply fear dying far from France.

— Offer them more money.

Monge shook his head.

— It is not a question of money. These men are not poor. It is a question of courage. Or, to be fair, of reasonable calculation between what they have and what they risk losing.

— Then find men with courage. I need them in six weeks. It falls to you to find the right argument for each one.

Monge went back to recruiting. He widened the circle — no longer only the Polytechnique and the Institute, but provincial schools, workshops, drawing offices. He recruited Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, a naturalist specialising in zoology; Savigny, a zoologist passionate about insects; Delile, a botanist; Costaz, a civil engineer; Chabrol, a cartographic engineer; Villiers du Terrage, an engineer; Gratien Le Père, a military engineer. All young. All brilliant. All avid for glory and discovery.

But more experienced men were also needed. Recognised scholars. Names that would impress Europe.

Monge widened the circle. Ventura, a cartographic engineer, accepted without hesitation — mapping Egypt had been the dream of his life. Dutertre, a painter-engraver, accepted when Monge promised that his drawings would appear in the great publication that would crown the expedition.

For the interpreters, he turned to De Venture de Paradis, an orientalist who spoke Arabic, Turkish and Persian fluently, who had been awaiting this invitation for months. He assembled a small team: Marcel, Arabist; Bracevich, a Dalmatian who spoke Turkish; Ellious, a Syrian Christian; Venture's son, trained by his father.

For the last places, Monge resigned himself to taking very young men. Jollois — barely twenty, fresh from the Polytechnique —

accepted while trying not to jump for joy. Villiers du Terrage, twenty-three, replied with a simple:

— Good. I will be there.

No exclamations, no superfluous questions. Monge appreciated that.

On the 15th of April, Monge deposited a complete list on Bonaparte's desk.

— We have a hundred and sixty-four confirmed scholars. Three are still lacking.

— Find them, said Bonaparte.

— We are searching actively. But the profiles we still need are rare. The best have already accepted or definitively refused.

Bonaparte dismissed the argument.

— Then take what you find. This is not about filling prestigious positions. Hands to carry the crates are also needed, and eyes to copy the inscriptions.

Monge thus recruited three last men: an assistant naturalist without great reputation but serious, a draughtsman of average talent but willing and resilient, and a young chemist with no experience but eager to acquire some.

On the 20th of April 1798, he was finally able to knock on Bonaparte's study door with something resembling relief.

— We have a hundred and sixty-seven scholars. The commission is complete.

Bonaparte smiled. Something sincere — rarer than usual.

— Perfect. Have them converge on Toulon before the 10th of May. They must speak to no one of the destination. The English have spies in every port and every salon.

— Understood. Is that all?

Bonaparte hesitated a second, then said in a slightly different voice:

— Monge?

— Yes?

— Thank you. Without you, this expedition could not have been organised. Not like this.

Monge bowed. He left with a thought he did not voice aloud: this scientific commission was his work, his child. And he knew, with a calm and painful certainty, that many of these enthusiastic young men would never return.

IV — The Embarkation at Toulon

At the same time, Bonaparte was organising the army.

Thirty-eight thousand men were needed — the best, the most battle-hardened, the most disciplined, capable of enduring heat, thirst and forced marches in a desert none of them had ever set foot in.

Bonaparte summoned his generals one by one. Berthier first — chief of staff, faithful as a shadow, meticulous to excess, indispensable to any large-scale operation.

— Alexandre, said Bonaparte, receiving him standing, you are coming with me to the Orient. Probably Egypt.

Berthier did not hesitate for an instant. Where Bonaparte went, he followed, without asking questions about the reasons.

— Very well. When do we leave?

— Mid-May. Start preparing the staff immediately. I want the best officers. No slackers, no incompetents who have slipped through on the strength of connections.

— Understood. You will have a list for your approval by next week.

Desaix next. A divisional general, courageous with a regularity his soldiers took for invulnerability, intelligent and loved by his men with an affection that good generals know how to earn without seeking it.

— Louis, said Bonaparte, you are accompanying me to the Orient.

Desaix smiled.

— With the greatest pleasure. What exactly is the mission?

— Conquer Egypt. Cut the Indian route for the English. And perhaps, if circumstances permit, march toward India afterwards.

Desaix settled comfortably in his chair, visibly at ease with grand ideas.

Kléber was of another nature. An Alsatian, a giant of just under two metres, a general of incontestable brilliance but of a difficult character — critical, grumbling, jealous of his independence — who had not for Bonaparte the blind deference of Berthier nor the warm friendship of Desaix. Bonaparte summoned him one morning without seeking to soften the approach.

— Jean-Baptiste, you are coming to Egypt with us.

Kléber raised an eyebrow.

— Egypt? For what purpose?

— To conquer the country. Establish a permanent French colony. Put England in a difficult position on her trade routes.

Kléber made a face.

— It is far. It is hot, by all accounts. And the risks are considerable.

— That is correct, said Bonaparte without seeking to contradict him. But it is glorious. And you will be a divisional general, with your own division under your exclusive command.

Kléber reflected. He did not like Bonaparte, found him too ambitious, too manipulative, too quick to sacrifice men for the image. But refusing was impossible: Bonaparte never forgave refusals, and Kléber still had years of career ahead of him.

— I accept.

Lannes — a Gascon, impetuous, courageous to the point of recklessness, the friend Bonaparte consulted least but whose company he enjoyed most. Bonaparte received him standing, without ceremony, as one speaks to a brother.

Lannes — a Gascon, impetuous, courageous to the point of recklessness, the friend Bonaparte consulted least but whose company he enjoyed most — accepted before even hearing the destination: "Wherever you want, whenever you want" — and asked only for the right to bring his division, the veterans of Arcole and Rivoli.

Murat — an exceptional cavalryman, as handsome as an engraving and vain in proportion to his beauty, but fearless as a lion, which redeemed everything — asked only one question: "With horses?" — and went off to organise the embarkation of his entire cavalry, saddlery and forage included, with the confidence of one who has never missed a rendezvous with glory.

Menou, finally — a mediocre general on the tactical level, but a republican of almost mystical fervour, strange, eccentric, with something unpredictable that made those around him slightly nervous. Useful for administration, however, and sufficiently disinterested for responsibilities to be entrusted to him without fearing he would abuse them for personal ends. Bonaparte received him at the end of the day.

— Jacques-François, you are accompanying me to Egypt.

— Egypt, Menou repeated with a kind of meditative slowness, as if weighing the word.

— Yes. To conquer, administer, civilise.

— I accept. And I may convert to Islam on site.

A silence followed during which Bonaparte visibly sought to determine whether the other was joking.

— I beg your pardon?

— Islam is a monotheist religion, rational, compatible in its foundations with the principles of the Enlightenment. If I convert, the Egyptians will trust us more. It will facilitate the administration.

Bonaparte looked at Menou for a long moment. The man was mad. But with a useful madness — he truly believed it, and that made him more effective than ten cynics.

— Do as you please with your conscience and your religion. As long as you obey my orders.

— Of course, General, said Menou with the deference of someone who has no intention of disobeying on anything important.

These individual summonings were spread throughout April. Then came the moment to bring everyone together. On the 25th of April 1798, Bonaparte assembled all his generals in a large room of the Ministry of War. Twenty divisional and brigade generals — Berthier, Desaix, Kléber, Lannes, Murat, Menou, Bon, Rampon, Vial, Verdier, Dugua, Reynier and others — installed themselves around the horseshoe tables without a word. Something important was about to be said.

Bonaparte mounted the dais and looked at them for a moment before speaking — which for him was a sign that the words to follow had been weighed.

— Gentlemen, we leave in under a month. Destination: the Orient. Objective: to establish a foothold, break English domination of the route to India, and lay the foundations of a Mediterranean empire.

A stupefied silence swept the room.

— Egypt is the richest country in the world after India. The Nile has irrigated fertile land since time immemorial. The population is large. The cities are prosperous. All of this will belong to France, to the Republic. This expedition will be difficult. Very difficult. Crushing heat. Constant thirst. Diseases unknown to

our physicians. Combat against the Mamelukes, perhaps against the Turks, perhaps against the English. Many of you will die. I tell you this because you are soldiers, not children. But those who survive will have conquered the Orient. Their names will endure.

— We embark at Toulon on the 19th of May, Bonaparte continued. Thirty-eight thousand men. Thirteen ships of the line. Six frigates. Three hundred transport ships. A hundred and sixty-seven scholars. This is the largest French fleet ever assembled. No King of France has done better.

Kléber raised his hand from the back of the room.

— Nelson's English fleet is patrolling the Mediterranean. How do you plan to avoid him with three hundred and forty-seven ships?

— We will sail at night as much as possible. We will take unexpected routes. The English are looking for us near the Italian coasts — we will pass in the open sea. We will arrive in Egypt before they understand where we are going.

— And if we cross them despite everything? Kléber insisted.

— We will fight, said Bonaparte with absolute simplicity. And we will win.

Kléber nodded, without conviction.

— Gentlemen, Bonaparte concluded, prepare your divisions. Select the best. No sick men, no weaklings, no men who will be a burden to their comrades. Report to Toulon on the 15th of May. Dismiss.

The generals dispersed in small groups, exchanging words in low voices that Bonaparte did not try to hear. Some were excited. Others anxious. All aware that they were participating in something extraordinary.

Or catastrophic.

On the 4th of May 1798, Bonaparte left Paris for Toulon. Five days on the road at a gallop. Post relays every two hours, fresh

horses at each stage. And he arrived on the 9th of May in the early morning, his eyes red from dust and insomnia, already at work in the carriage before he had even climbed out.

Toulon. A military port. An immense arsenal. Naval yards, supply warehouses, barracks terraced on the bare hills behind the city. Everything was there. Everything was ready. Almost.

Admiral Brueys was waiting for him on the quay. François-Paul Brueys d'Aigalliers, an experienced sailor, a royalist who had rallied to the Republic by conviction rather than opportunism. Commanding the Adriatic fleet, he had arrived at Toulon on the 2nd of April with his ships and had been organising the preparations since then with the dogged minuteness of an old sea dog.

Bonaparte stepped from the carriage and shook his hand without ceremony.

— Brueys. Good to see you. I want to inspect everything today. Ships, arsenals, strengths, provisions, water. Take me.

The admiral bowed.

— Where do you wish to begin?

— With the harbour. I want to see the fleet with my own eyes before examining the figures.

They walked along the quays. The spectacle was grandiose. Dozens of ships were swinging at anchor in the roads in the morning sun — majestic ships of the line whose pierced sides were reflected in the dark water, slender frigates, transport ships squat and low in the water under the weight of their loads. Everywhere activity boiled: sailors running in the rigging, soldiers coming aboard in tight files, dockers loading crates at arm's length, blacksmiths hammering anchors in a shower of sparks, sailmakers crouching repairing the great grey cloths.

Bonaparte let his gaze run from one end of the roads to the other before speaking.

— How many ships in total?

— Three hundred and forty-seven, the admiral replied, with a sobriety that did not entirely conceal his pride. Thirteen ships of the line, six frigates, a corvette, twenty-seven various fighting vessels, and three hundred transport ships.

Bonaparte whistled softly between his teeth.

— Three hundred and forty-seven ships. An entire army on the water.

— Indeed. Even Louis XIV, in his best years, never assembled so many ships in a single place.

They entered the arsenal offices — a vast room cluttered with unrolled maps, stacked registers and interminable lists covered in columns of figures. Naval officers were busy there, quills in hand, without raising their eyes at their entry.

Brueys unrolled a map of the Mediterranean on the great table and placed his index finger on it like a man who knows every nautical mile of that sea by heart.

— Here is our route. We first follow Corsica to remain out of range of the English patrols, then we rendezvous with the squadrons that have left separately from Genoa, Ajaccio and Civitavecchia. The assembled fleet converges on Malta. The island will not hold long — the Order is at the end of its strength. Then we sail due east for Alexandria.

Bonaparte studied the map, his eye hard, his finger following the traced route.

— And Nelson? He is somewhere in these waters.

— He is patrolling between Corsica and Sardinia, according to our latest intelligence. But he does not know our destination. His spies report that we are preparing an attack on Naples, perhaps Sicily, perhaps even Constantinople. He is chasing shadows.

— Good. We must keep him there as long as possible. What is the total distance to Alexandria?

— Five hundred sea leagues by the route I propose. Perhaps more depending on the winds — the Mediterranean rarely lets itself be crossed without whims.

— And the estimated duration?

— Forty days if all goes well. Say six weeks to have a reasonable margin.

Bonaparte appeared satisfied, then asked bluntly:

— And if we cross Nelson en route?

The admiral hesitated — not from cowardice, but because he was a man who told the truth even when it was uncomfortable, and he was looking for the right formulation.

— We will fight if we must. But I will conceal nothing from you: our chances are poor.

— In plain terms, we would lose.

— Probably. At least under normal conditions of naval combat.

Bonaparte nodded. Brueys was telling the truth. The French Navy was no longer what it had been under Louis XVI — the best officers had emigrated, the crews lacked training, the ships were poorly maintained.

— Then Nelson must be avoided. At all costs.

— That is my intention. Speed and discretion are our best weapons.

Bonaparte spent the afternoon inspecting the arsenal. An immense complex: workshops where ropes were made by braiding hemp fibres over interminable lengths, yards where sails were sewn by hand, forges where anchors were hammered, carpentry shops where hulls were repaired, warehouses where provisions, ammunition, powder and cannonballs were stacked in a meticulous order smelling of resin and saltpetre.

A quartermaster accompanied him in small, nervous steps — a thin little man, registers wedged under his arm, announcing

figures in a precipitate voice as if afraid of being interrupted before finishing.

— We have stored the following provisions: two million pounds of biscuit, five hundred thousand pounds of salt meat, three hundred thousand pounds of rice, a hundred thousand pounds of beans, fifty thousand litres of wine, twenty thousand litres of eau-de-vie, ten thousand pounds of coffee, five thousand pounds of sugar.

Bonaparte calculated, his eyes in the middle distance.

— Sufficient for how long?

— Three months, General.

— And the water?

The quartermaster coughed.

— Fifteen thousand barrels. One month's consumption.

Bonaparte stopped dead and turned toward him.

— That is not enough. In Egypt, without water, the army dies. I need double.

The quartermaster went pale — a pallor that started at his forehead and descended to his collar.

— Double? General, that is impossible in the current state. We have no more barrels available in the entire port!

— Have them made. Buy them. Requisition them from the surrounding area. I don't care about the method. I want thirty thousand barrels of water embarked before the 19th of May.

— Very well, General, said the quartermaster in a voice that betrayed resignation more than conviction.

Bonaparte continued his inspection. The powder magazine first — a hundred tons of gunpowder carefully stored away from any flame, in a cellar-like coolness, under the permanent guard of two soldiers. A fire here would destroy the entire arsenal and half the port with it. Then the cannonball magazine — thousands of cast-iron spheres stacked by calibre, twelve-pound, twenty-four-

pound, thirty-six-pound, in regular pyramids that rose to the vaults. Then the arms magazine — forty thousand muskets in bundles, ten thousand sabres, five thousand pistols, two hundred dismantled cannon whose tubes waited on sawhorses.

Everywhere, soldiers loading, carrying, stacking, sweating in the May sun, cursing under their breath while bent under loads.

Bonaparte hailed a group of soldiers struggling to hoist a cannon onto a cart, their faces crimson, feet slipping on the cobbles.

— You! he cried to one of them. What is your name?

The soldier straightened sharply, at attention despite the sweat running into his eyes.

— Sergeant Dubois.

— Where are you from?

— The Army of Italy.

— Where did you fight?

— Arcole, Rivoli, Mantua, General.

Bonaparte looked at him for a moment — that weathered face, that body thin yet strong, that direct gaze that sought neither to please nor to avoid.

— A good man. You will see combat again soon, but in Egypt this time.

The sergeant smiled — a wide smile, without calculation.

— We are ready, General. The lads too.

Bonaparte clapped him on the shoulder and continued on his way. On the evening of the 9th of May, he went aboard the *Orient*.

V — The Orient and the Fleet's Preparations

Flagship. A hundred and twenty cannon. The largest French warship, the jewel of the Navy — a floating fortress with a hundred-and-eighty-foot mast whose mass dominated the entire roads.

Captain Casabianca welcomed him on deck with the sober ceremony of a man who disliked effusions but held to protocol.

— General, welcome aboard the *Orient*.

— Captain, he said, letting his gaze run over the immense deck, show me my ship. Everything. Down to the last detail.

Casabianca guided him without haste, with the pride of a captain who knows every plank of his vessel. The upper deck first — two hundred and twenty-five feet long, fifty-six feet wide, three gigantic masts whose mainmast rose a hundred and eighty feet above the water, visible for leagues at sea in clear weather.

— How many crew?

— Twelve hundred normally to operate this ship in good conditions. But we have only eight hundred at present, Casabianca replied with a frankness that was not without embarrassment.

— Four hundred short? Why?

— Recruiting is difficult, General. Rumours are circulating in the ports. Many sailors are afraid of this expedition. No one knows exactly where it is going, and uncertainty breeds mistrust.

Bonaparte reflected for a second.

— Double the pay and promise significant bonuses on return. Do what is needed to convince, but I want twelve hundred sailors on this ship before the 19th of May. Not eleven hundred and ninety-nine.

— I will do everything possible, General, Casabianca replied, without promising what he was not certain he could deliver.

Casabianca then led him toward the batteries, in the gloom of the lower decks that smelled of wet wood and powder. The cannon were ranged in line, open-mouthed and turned toward the closed gunports, in a silence that had something solemn about it.

— First battery, he said, placing his hand on the nearest gun carriage. Thirty-two cannon of thirty-six pounds. The heaviest artillery in the fleet.

— Range?

— A thousand fathoms in flat fire. Two thousand in curved fire if the angle is well set.

— Rate of fire?

— One round every two minutes at sustained combat pace. One round per minute if the crew is perfectly trained and the gun crews don't exhaust themselves.

Bonaparte indicated agreement. He knew artillery — it was his original profession, his first language. But naval artillery was another matter: a ship moved, pitched, rolled in the swell, and aiming under those conditions was less a question of technique than of a kind of instinct that only hardened sailors truly possessed.

— It is not enough.

Casabianca agreed. He had been of the same view from the start.

— I know, General. But the holds are full. There is not an inch of free space. See for yourself.

Bonaparte looked. Casabianca was not wrong. The holds were encumbered to the point where one could no longer walk through them straight.

— Reorganise everything. Optimise the volumes. Pack more tightly. But find space for a hundred additional barrels.

Casabianca showed a moment's hesitation.

— General, with all the respect due to you...

— It is an order, said Bonaparte without raising his voice.

— Very well.

They went back up to the deck. Night had fallen over the roads, and the port had been transformed — hundreds of lanterns now

glowed on the ships, on the quays, and in the arsenal buildings, drawing in the darkness a constellation at water level.

Bonaparte leaned on the gunwale and breathed deeply the marine air — iodised, salty, laden with tar from the hulls and hemp from the rigging. He said nothing for a moment.

— This ship is magnificent.

— It is the finest in the French fleet, said Casabianca, without false modesty. And one of the most powerful in the world.

— It will remain so. And in a few weeks, it will be moored before Alexandria.

On the 10th of May, the troops continued to converge on Toulon. Division after division, regiment after regiment, the soldiers arrived along the roads of Provence in columns that raised clouds of white dust. They camped around the city — in the fields, in the olive groves, on the hillsides — everywhere there was space and shade.

Bonaparte reviewed them, beginning at dawn with Desaix's division.

Five thousand men. Battle-hardened infantrymen, veterans of Italy. Bronzed, lean, hard — bodies that seemed carved from dry wood by years of campaigning. Desaix stood before them, his gaze calm with the look of those who have already seen everything.

— Louis, said Bonaparte, approaching, are your men ready?

— Ready, said Desaix. They fought at Rivoli, Mantua, Arcole. They will fight in Egypt with the same ardour, perhaps more, because this time they will be marching toward something none of them has yet seen.

Bonaparte moved through the ranks, inspecting, observing, noting. The uniforms were worn, patched, faded by the Italian sun. But clean. The weapons were well maintained — oiled muskets, sharp bayonets, honed sabres. These men took care of what allowed them to survive.

He turned and planted himself before the line.

— Soldiers! he cried in a voice that carried far in the morning air. You have vanquished Austria! You have conquered Italy! Now you will conquer the Orient! You will march in the footsteps of Alexander the Great!

The acclamation rose at a single stroke — hurrahs, vivats, shakos tossed into the air in the flash of the sun.

Bonaparte moved on to Kléber's division. Six thousand men, the Alsatian giant at their head, standing before his ranks with that physical presence that intimidated even those who liked him.

— Jean-Baptiste, are your men in condition?

— Ready, said Kléber in his deep voice.

Bonaparte smiled.

— They will understand when we are there. When they see the pyramids, the Nile, the temples. Things no European soldier has seen since the Crusades.

Kléber frowned. He had learned to let Bonaparte have the last word on grand questions.

Bonaparte continued his inspection. Bon's division, Menou's, Reynier's, Lannes's, Murat's. Everywhere the same picture: tired soldiers, worn uniforms, but intact morale and total confidence in their general — that particular confidence that shared victories create and which resembles nothing else.

At the end of the day he had reviewed twenty thousand men. Eighteen thousand remained to be seen. But he was satisfied. This army was ready. Or nearly.

On the 11th of May, Bonaparte summoned Monge and Berthollet to his improvised office in the arsenal.

The two scholars arrived together. Monge carried under his arm the sheaf of lists that had not left him for weeks. Berthollet had the calm of men who have accepted something difficult and do not go back on it.

— Gentlemen, said Bonaparte, gesturing to them to sit, coffee?

A domestic served three cups. Bonaparte waited until they had closed the door behind them before speaking.

— I received news from Paris this morning. Works of art continue to arrive at the Central Museum of the Arts.

Monge and Berthollet exchanged a brief glance. The spoliations again.

— Which works this time? asked Monge.

— From Bologna, Raphael's *Ecstasy of Saint Cecilia*. The commissioners requisitioned it from the church of San Giovanni in Monte. It was one of the most venerated works in the city for three centuries. The Bolognese protested, even wept in the streets. But treaties are treaties, and Bologna lost the war.

He paused a moment, then continued.

— Also from Bologna, Guido Reni's *Massacre of the Innocents*. Seized from the church of San Domenico. A monumental painting. Terrifying. Sublime.

Berthollet set down his cup.

— These works were in places of worship, General. Sacred spaces that have nothing to do with military treaties. Is that not a form of...

— Of theft? Bonaparte cut in with a sharpness that admitted no discussion. No. It is war. Italy lost. France won. The victor takes the spoils. That is how it has been since the dawn of time, since the Romans emptied Greece to fill their temples.

He resumed his letter.

— From Mantua, Mantegna's *Virgin of Victory*, taken after the city's capitulation in February 1797. From Perugia, several altarpieces by Perugino, torn from their altars despite the protests of the local clergy. And we also have works by Correggio from Parma — Nativities, Madonnas of unequalled grace. Paintings by Annibale Carracci and Ludovico Carracci from Bologna, masters

of the Baroque. Works by Guercino. More than five hundred paintings in total since the beginning of the Italian campaign.

Monge remained silent, his hands flat on his knees. These spoliations made him profoundly uneasy — not that he denied the reality of the treaties or the logic of war booty, but because he knew the human cost of this stripping. The works were conserved, restored, exhibited. But the Italian resentment was immense, and it was now expressed in a proverb circulating from city to city: *Not all Frenchmen are thieves, but a good number certainly are.*

Bonaparte set down the letter and fixed his two interlocutors.

— The Central Museum of the Arts is becoming the foremost museum in the world. Rome possessed the masterpieces of Antiquity. Now Paris possesses them. Rome had the masterpieces of the Renaissance. Now Paris has them too.

— And Egypt comes next, said Berthollet quietly — less a question than an observation.

— Egypt will be the next stage, Bonaparte confirmed. We will take statues, stelae, sarcophagi. We will empty the temples. We will explore the tombs. The Central Museum of the Arts will possess the art of every civilisation and every era.

Monge sighed — a long, controlled sigh that said a great deal without formulating anything.

— General, I understand your vision, and I do not contest it in its broad lines. But allow me to remind you that we are also scholars. Not merely collectors in the service of a museum. We must document, study, understand — not only tear away and carry off. The knowledge we bring back will be worth as much as the objects, perhaps more.

Bonaparte smiled.

— Gaspard, that is precisely why you are all here. You will document. You will study. You will understand. And then you will carry things away. The two approaches are not incompatible.

On the contrary, they complement each other, and each gives the other a legitimacy it would not have alone.

He rose and went to the window. That movement signified the discussion was closed.

— In eight days, we leave. Verify that every commission member is ready. Instruments, notebooks, everything needed to document Egypt.

On the 12th of May, the embarkation of the scientific equipment began on the quays in an organised disorder that would have dismayed an ordinary observer, but which Caffarelli mastered with the precision of an orchestra conductor.

Caffarelli du Falga, general of the engineering corps, had lost a leg in Austria during a previous campaign and had since walked with a wooden leg that clacked on the port cobblestones like a metronome. His reduced mobility in no way prevented him from supervising every detail. He had drawn up interminable lists, counted every crate, weighed every instrument, checked every book, and his register never left him.

Bonaparte found him on the main quay, standing despite the heat, his register open in his hand, watching every movement.

— Caffarelli, where do we stand?

Caffarelli leaned on his cane and ran his finger through his pages.

— General, we are embarking at this moment the precision instruments: twenty theodolites for geodesy, thirty astronomical telescopes, fifty barometers and thermometers, a hundred compasses, fifteen microscopes, ten telescopes, twenty sextants, ten octants, fifteen graphometers. For chemistry: twenty precision balances, fifty retorts and alembics, a hundred test tubes, hundreds of flasks, acids and bases that Berthollet himself selected.

— The library?

— Five hundred volumes. History of Egypt, geography, ancient and recent travel accounts, natural sciences, mathematics,

astronomy. Everything we could assemble on the Orient in four months.

— The printing press?

— Complete and operational. Presses, Arabic type, French and Greek type, inks, paper in sufficient quantity for two years. We will be able to print proclamations, newspapers and posters in Arabic and French from the first days.

— And the crates for the antiquities?

Caffarelli set down his register.

— A hundred empty crates — solid, watertight, capable of containing statues of several hundred pounds. We also have all the necessary tools. Saws of every size, hammers, chisels, pickaxes, levers, ropes, pulleys. Everything needed to detach from their bases monuments that millennia have fused to the stone.

Bonaparte examined an open crate on the quay, filled to the brim with tools gleaming in the sun.

— With all that, one could dismantle a pyramid.

— Almost, General, said Caffarelli with an amused gravity. Almost.

On the afternoon of the 12th of May, the scholars began arriving in Toulon in numbers — by dozens, in small tired groups, some having come from Paris in five days by diligence, others from the provinces, all with their trunks and instrument crates, all excited and anxious at once, all aware of participating in something whose scope still exceeded them.

Fourier arrived among the first — hat askew and jacket dusty from travel — with that slightly feverish energy that never left him. Monge was waiting on the quay and caught sight of him from far off.

— Joseph! Over here!

Fourier approached, zigzagging between crates and soldiers.

— Gaspard! At last!

They shook hands warmly.

— Where are the others? asked Fourier.

— Jomard arrived this morning. Conté too. He took the Provence diligence with a crate of tools three times his size.

Fourier stopped and looked around him. The port was in an agitation he had never seen — an anthill of thousands of men, horses, cannon, crates, ships piling up to the horizon.

He thought of Egypt. The land of the pharaohs, the pyramids, the buried temples. He had read Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus of Sicily. Fascinating accounts, but fragmentary, lacunary, often contradictory. Until now.

On the evening of the 12th of May, Bonaparte assembled in a large arsenal room all the scholars present — about eighty, the others would arrive in the following days. He mounted an improvised dais made of crates covered with a plank, and waited.

— Gentlemen, welcome to Toulon. In seven days, we embark. In eighteen days, we leave France. In two months, we will be in Egypt.

The scholars listened, captivated — some standing, others seated on crates, all eyes fixed on this uniformed man who spoke of Egypt as of a certain appointment.

— You have been chosen to participate in the greatest scientific expedition in the history of humanity. Not merely a military conquest. An intellectual conquest. A cultural conquest. Something that will still be spoken of in a thousand years when the battles of Italy are forgotten.

He swept the gathering with his gaze.

— You are going to document a country that Europe knows poorly. You are going to measure what has never been measured. Draw what has never been drawn. Study what has never been studied. You will create a monumental *Description of Egypt* —

twenty volumes, perhaps thirty — with thousands of drawings, maps of unequalled precision, exhaustive studies of everything: agriculture, architecture, astronomy, botany, chemistry, geography, geology, history, languages, mathematics, medicine, mineralogy, zoology. Absolutely everything this country contains, from the surface to the most buried stones.

Applause broke out, mingled with some nervous laughter.

Bonaparte raised his hand to silence them.

— But I owe you the complete truth. The heat will be crushing — far beyond anything you have known. The diseases will be unknown to your physicians. Some of you will die. But those who survive will have accomplished something that no scholar has accomplished before them.

The silence that followed had a particular quality — not anxiety, not enthusiasm, but a gravity that Bonaparte recognised from before battles.

— You will not be merely observers, he resumed. You will also be collectors. You will take the finest antiquities that Egypt conceals — statues, stelae, sarcophagi, mummies, papyri — everything that can enrich the Central Museum of the Arts and make Paris the cultural capital of the world.

Bonaparte descended from the dais before anyone had time to formulate an objection.

— Prepare yourselves. Check your instruments. Reread your books. Rest as much as you can.

The scholars dispersed in the hubbub of conversations in low voices. Some excited, others silent, all aware of the scale of what awaited them.

On the 13th of May, Bonaparte spent the morning inspecting the facilities for the horses. The expedition was taking fifteen hundred. For the cavalry and for the artillery. Transporting horses by sea was a complex, dangerous and costly undertaking.

Bonaparte examined the facilities, the responsible officer walking at his side.

— How many horses per ship?

— Fifty, General. Beyond that, the conditions would be untenable — the animals would injure one another.

— And the feed during the crossing?

— Hay, oats, water. We have calculated for one month.

— Will that be enough if all goes well?

The officer took a second before replying.

— If we do not encounter storms. If the horses do not fall ill. If everything proceeds as planned.

Bonaparte appeared persuaded. Too many uncertainties. But there was no choice — the army needed horses, and the horses needed to cross.

On the afternoon of the 13th of May, Bonaparte assembled his generals for the last major coordination meeting before the embarkation.

— Gentlemen, said Bonaparte, taking his seat, let us review. Berthier, the figures.

The chief of staff consulted his notes with an accountant's precision.

— Thirty-eight thousand soldiers divided into five divisions: Desaix's division, five thousand men; Kléber's, six thousand; Reynier's, five thousand; Bon's, four thousand; Menou's, four thousand. Cavalry under Murat, three thousand. Artillery, two thousand. Engineering corps, one thousand. General staff and services, eight thousand.

— Equipment?

— Forty thousand muskets, five thousand sabres, two hundred cannon, ten million cartridges, a hundred thousand cannonballs.

— Provisions?

— Three months — biscuits, rice, salt meat, wine, brandy.

— The water?

Berthier showed a slight hesitation.

— One month for the moment. But you requested double. The supply services are working on it actively.

Bonaparte turned toward Kléber.

— Jean-Baptiste, your men?

— Ready, Kléber replied with that restraint which was for him a form of candour.

— They will understand on the ground. Desaix?

— My division will embark at Civitavecchia as agreed. Everything is ready.

— Lannes?

— Ready.

— Murat?

Murat straightened.

— My cavalry is ready. But I am concerned about the horses. The conditions on board will strain them severely, and many will not survive the crossing.

— I know, said Bonaparte. We will buy others in Egypt. The Mamelukes have excellent Arabian horses. Lighter, better adapted to the desert than ours.

He unrolled a map of Egypt on the table, and the generals drew closer.

— Gentlemen, here is our objective as I conceive it. Alexandria first. We disembark, we take the city — two days if all goes well. Then we march on Cairo. Three hundred kilometres through the desert. Heat, thirst, combat against the Mamelukes all along the route. It will be hard. Very hard. But we will prevail.

Kléber stepped back from the map.

— Let us not underestimate the Mamelukes. They are excellent horsemen, trained from childhood, and their charges are terrifying for infantry that has never faced them.

— We will defeat them with our infantry squares and our artillery. Discipline against courage. Organisation against chaos. We did it in Italy against far more numerous armies. We will do it again in Egypt.

The meeting continued, descending into tactical details, logistical questions, embarkation plans by squadron. At the end, Bonaparte concluded in an unarguable tone.

— Gentlemen, in six days we embark. Make sure everything is ready. Men, arms, equipment, provisions, water. Everything, without exception. No error is permitted at this stage. Dismissed.

The generals left without a word.

VI — The Final Adjustments

On the 14th of May, Bonaparte received a dispatch from Paris. A letter from the Directory. Dry, administrative, cold in tone.

"Citizen General,

The Directory approves your preparations. The expedition must leave no later than the 20th of May. All of France is counting on your success. Do not disappoint us.

Signed: Barras, Reubell, La Révellière-Lépeaux, Merlin, Treilhard."

He had known it from the start.

He folded the sheet in four and slipped it into his pocket. On the table, the maps were waiting.

On the morning of the 16th of May, Bonaparte summoned his generals to a large arsenal room whose high windows overlooked the roads. It was the last great meeting before embarkation, and everyone knew it.

They were all there. Berthier, Kléber, Desaix, Lannes, Murat, Menou, Caffarelli.

Bonaparte was waiting, standing before an immense map of the eastern Mediterranean spread on an oak table. He did not let them settle.

— Gentlemen, in three days we embark, and I want a complete report on every division. Berthier, begin.

The chief of staff opened his large leather-bound notebook and read with the clarity of someone who does not tolerate approximation.

— Desaix's division: five thousand two hundred men, embarkation planned at Civitavecchia, thirteen ships assigned, simultaneous departure with the main fleet. Kléber's division: six thousand four hundred men, all present at Toulon, seventy transport ships assigned. Reynier's division: five thousand men, fifty ships. Bon's division: four thousand three hundred, forty-five ships. Menou's division: four thousand men, forty ships.

Bonaparte turned toward Murat.

— Your cavalry?

Murat squared his shoulders — a gesture so habitual in him that his men no longer noticed it.

— Three thousand cavalrymen, fifteen hundred horses embarked. The rest will be purchased in Egypt. The ships cannot transport more without risking compromising their stability in the first storm. That said, we will capture the Mamelukes' Arab horses after we have beaten them. They are better than ours for warfare in the desert.

— That is my calculation too, said Bonaparte. Caffarelli, the artillery.

The engineering general rose, leaning on his cane.

— Two hundred cannon embarked: a hundred and seventy field pieces, thirty siege pieces. Ten thousand cannonballs. Five hundred tons of powder. For the engineers: a thousand sappers, five hundred miners, three hundred pontonniers, with all the material to build bridges, fortifications and trenches.

— Summary, Berthier.

— Forty thousand two hundred men on three hundred and forty-seven ships.

Bonaparte crossed his arms — that posture he adopted when he wanted his words to carry more weight.

— Gentlemen, this fleet is the largest France has ever assembled. Larger than that of Louis XIV, larger than the Invincible Armada: at once our strength and our weakness. Our strength, because we are transporting an entire army with everything it needs. Our weakness, because we are an enormous, slow, visible target for leagues around. If Nelson finds us before we reach Egypt, we are lost. Our ships are overloaded, our crews inexperienced. The English will sink us. But Nelson will not find us. We will sail by night, all lights extinguished. We will avoid the usual routes. And we will be fast.

Kléber intervened from the back of the room with that forthright directness he brought to all meetings.

— Do we have recent news of the English fleet? Precise news, not port rumours?

Bonaparte made a gesture. Berthier unrolled a second map covering all the western Mediterranean, annotated in red ink.

— Nelson left Gibraltar ten days ago with fourteen ships of the line. He is currently patrolling between Corsica and Sardinia. His spies have informed him that a large fleet is preparing at Toulon, but he does not know where we are going. His reports suggest Naples, or Sicily, perhaps even Constantinople.

— And if he finally works out our real destination? Kléber pressed.

— If he finds us, he will destroy us, said Bonaparte with a frankness that cut short any commentary. That is precisely why everything depends on speed and discretion. We must reach Egypt before he understands where we have gone.

He sat down.

— Return to your divisions. Check everything. I want no surprises once at sea. Dismiss.

The generals left. All except Berthier, who remained behind and waited until the door was shut.

He stood there, notebook in both hands, and Bonaparte understood he had something to say that he would not have said before the others.

— This expedition is mad. We are throwing forty thousand men across the Mediterranean toward a country we know poorly, against an enemy of whom we have almost no precise tactical information, with a fleet inferior in quality to the English one.

Bonaparte let him speak. This was not the objection of a coward. Berthier was not cowardly. It was the voice of a man who had spent the night with his figures and had looked directly at what the figures said.

— All great enterprises seemed mad to those who lived them from the inside, he continued. Caesar crossing the Rubicon. Alexander attacking Persia. Hannibal crossing the Alps in winter. They succeeded because they dared what no one else dared. So shall we.

— And if we fail?

— We will not fail.

Berthier closed his notebook, saluted, and left.

On the afternoon of the 16th of May, Bonaparte went to the printing workshops installed at the back of the arsenal, in a former wood store whose smell of resin now mingled with that of fresh ink. The presses were running day and night, producing the proclamations to be distributed to the Egyptian populations on the day of landing.

Marc Baurel, the head printer — his fingers perpetually stained with black ink to the first knuckle — supervised the work with a typographer's vigilance, for a printing error in Arabic, in a

proclamation intended to convince Muslims of French good faith, could have unpredictable consequences.

— Citizen General, we have prepared three proclamations. In French, Arabic and Turkish.

He handed the first sheet to Bonaparte, who read it aloud.

— "*Peoples of Egypt, you will be told that I have come to destroy your religion. Do not believe it. Reply that I have come to restore your rights, to punish the usurpers, and that I respect, more than the Mamelukes do, God, His Prophet and the Quran.*"

He raised his eyes toward Baurel.

— That is good. But add after this passage: *"We are the true Muslims. Have we not destroyed the Pope, who said one must make war on Muslims? Have we not destroyed the Knights of Malta, who pretended that God wished them to fight Muslims?"*

Baurel noted quickly, the quill scratching on the paper.

— How many copies do you wish, Citizen General?

— Ten thousand in French, ten thousand in Arabic, five thousand in Turkish. Twenty-five thousand copies in total — all printed before our departure in three days.

Baurel showed not the slightest anxiety at the deadline. It was his trade to work fast.

Bonaparte took from a crate of Arabic type set on a workbench and examined it for a moment — those sinuous, elegant letters whose forms changed according to their position in the word: initial, medial, final — according to a logic that no one in his entourage yet fully mastered.

— These characters are correctly composed?

— They have been checked three times by Venture de Paradis himself, said Baurel. Every letter, every diacritical mark. He gave his agreement in writing.

— Perfect. Continue.

Bonaparte left the printing shop and returned to the quays. Everywhere the same scene, everywhere the same silent urgency.

Bonaparte watched a transport where soldiers were straining to load a cannon onto an inclined ramp, the ropes taut in their hands, their feet slipping on the wet wood.

That evening of the 16th of May, Bonaparte dined with Monge, Berthollet and a few scholars in a modest port inn. A simple table, mediocre food, wine that smelled of the barrel — but the conversation was of another quality than in all the Paris salons.

Bonaparte listened more than he spoke, which was rare. These men knew so many things, and in a way so different from the generals'. A way of thinking that sought to understand rather than to decide.

He raised his glass.

— Gentlemen, to Egypt. To the immortality we are all about to earn.

— To immortality! the scholars repeated, raising their glasses.

On the morning of the 17th of May, the final embarkation began.

A gigantic operation, coordinated to the minute, whose logistics had occupied Berthier and Caffarelli for weeks. Kléber's division embarked first — six thousand four hundred men on seventy transports in eight hours, a continuous flow of blue uniforms mounting the boarding ladders under Kléber's own commands, standing at the edge of the quay, stentorian voice, watching every man who passed before him.

— Go! Faster! We don't have all day and Nelson won't wait!

The soldiers climbed — packs on backs, muskets on shoulders, shakos on heads. A young soldier slipped on a wet ladder and fell into the water between the hull and the quay. He was fished out in thirty seconds, drenched but unharmed. A sergeant leaned over him while he was being hoisted up.

— Idiot! Do you want to drown before you've even left the port of France?

Laughter ran along the quay — nervous, brief — and fell silent at once.

Bonaparte observed from a distance, arms crossed, face closed. Berthier was at his side.

— The embarkation is proceeding without major incident, said the chief of staff. The pace is good.

— How long to embark everyone?

— Two days. Perhaps three if we encounter difficulties with the heavy material.

Bonaparte shook his head.

— We don't have three days. Nelson can appear at any moment. We must accelerate the pace on all the quays at once.

At two o'clock, an alarming report arrived. English vessels had been sighted off Corsica by a reconnaissance dispatch boat. Bonaparte summoned Brueys immediately to the arsenal offices.

The admiral arrived in three minutes, his expression preoccupied but his step firm.

— Admiral, said Bonaparte, Nelson is too close for us to allow ourselves to continue at this pace.

Brueys unrolled a sea chart on the table and pointed a spot on it with his finger.

— According to our scouts, he is cruising here, roughly fifty leagues away, with twelve ships of the line.

— In which direction?

— North-west. He may be heading for Toulon.

Bonaparte went pale — that rare pallor which in him signalled not fear but the urgent reassessment of a situation.

— Then we must leave before he comes into sight.

— That is impossible this evening, said the admiral, with the frankness that the situation imposed on him. There are still ten thousand men to embark and several tons of material, including part of Caffarelli's engineering corps. To embark them in the night, in haste, is to risk serious accidents — ships badly loaded that capsize, powder crates badly stowed.

Bonaparte placed his fist on the table.

— Then double the teams and work through the night. Lanterns, torches, everything needed to light the quays. I want everything embarked tomorrow evening before sunset.

— Tomorrow evening...

— That is an order, Admiral.

Brueys saluted and left without another word.

The night of the 17th to the 18th of May, the embarkation continued without interruption. Hundreds of torches and lanterns transformed the quays into an illuminated stage — an orange, leaping light that made the shadows of masts and soldiers dance on the arsenal walls. Soldiers came on board by the hundreds. Crates were hoisted by the thousands. Horses embarked in groups, nervous in the unaccustomed noise and light, their legs refusing the planks, the grooms whispering to calm them.

Throughout the port, the same silent urgency — the sailors knew Nelson was approaching. No one spoke of the English aloud, but every man who looked toward the open sea was thinking the same thing.

Bonaparte did not sleep. He spent the night on the quays, going from point to point, encouraging, pressing, unblocking material bottlenecks, resolving situations with a few words or a quick decision.

— Faster on the North quay. These commission crates can wait. The cannon first.

At three in the morning, Bon's division was entirely embarked. At five o'clock, Reynier's. At seven o'clock, the last cannon slid into the holds of the transports, and the crane teams finally stopped.

The sun rose on a transformed port — almost silent, almost empty, almost ready.

Bonaparte came aboard the *Orient* in the morning light. Casabianca was waiting on deck with the look of a man who had also spent the night awake, but who would not show it.

— The ship is ready. The crew is at full complement. We recruited the last sailors this very night in the port taverns. The provisions are embarked. Everything is in order.

— Can we weigh anchor?

— Whenever you give the order.

Bonaparte approached the gunwale and looked at the port one last time — the three hundred and forty-seven ships at anchor in the roads, all loaded, all oriented toward the mouth of the channel, as if they too were eager to leave.

— Captain, prepare yourself. We weigh anchor tomorrow at dawn.

He went below to his cabin, lay down fully dressed on his bunk, closed his eyes.

Tomorrow, the adventure would begin.

Tomorrow, this unprecedented fleet would put to sea.

Tomorrow, Egypt.

But first, sleep for a few hours.

He fell asleep almost instantly, and dreamed of pyramids.

VII — The Eve of Departure

Bonaparte woke at four in the morning on the 18th of May. He dressed in the darkness of his cabin, by the light of a small oil lamp, and went up on deck of the *Orient*.

The night was still black — moonless — but the sky riddled with stars cast over the sea that diffuse, cold light that resembles nothing else. The port was sleeping. The frantic embarkation of the previous night was over, and the silence was troubled only by the lapping of water against the hulls, the creaking of the rigging, the distant cry of a gull.

Bonaparte leaned against the gunwale and breathed. The air was cool — iodised, salty, laden with tar from the hulls and hemp from the rigging. In Corsica, he had grown up with the sea, but he had remained, paradoxically, a man of land. A general rather than an admiral. Someone who preferred pitched battles on plains to the uncertainties of naval combat where so many things escaped the one who commanded. This evening, the sea was calm as obsidian.

In a few hours, this silence would be broken by the drums of reveille, the shouted commands, the stamping of boots on the cobblestones. But for now, for these few minutes before dawn, everything was silent, and Bonaparte savoured this calm as one savours something one knows cannot be kept long.

He thought of Egypt. Not what he had read of it — the cold knowledge of books — but what it would be in reality, seen with his own eyes. In a few weeks, he would know.

Bonaparte remained alone. To the east, the sky was beginning imperceptibly to pale. He was thinking of Nelson somewhere out there in the Mediterranean — fifty leagues away, perhaps a hundred — searching for the French fleet without knowing where to find it. He was thinking of the dangers ahead: storms, flat calms, diseases spreading in the overcrowded holds. But he was also thinking of the glory awaiting them if they succeeded.

The Egyptian expedition would enter History. He was certain of it.

At six o'clock, the arsenal came alive in an explosion of sounds. Strident bugle calls, sharp drum rolls, hoarse cries of officers, and the stamping of thousands of boots on the cobblestones as the regiments assembled for the morning roll call.

Bonaparte went ashore by the captain's longboat and made his way to the arsenal offices. He found Berthier where he had left him the previous day, seated at his desk buried under stacks of registers — the difference being that the morning light now replaced the candle flames. The dark circles under his eyes indicated he had slept no more than two hours.

— Louis-Alexandre, said Bonaparte, approaching, do you never sleep? You will collapse before we have even left the port of France.

Berthier gave a weary smile that made no attempt to conceal itself.

— I will sleep when we are at sea. For now, too many things remain to be checked to waste time sleeping.

— Then give me the exact state. Where do we stand this morning?

Berthier took a deep breath, consulted several registers, and began his report with the methodical precision that made him an irreplaceable organiser.

— Soldiers: thirty-seven thousand nine hundred men embarked, three regiments arriving during the morning. Scholars: a hundred and sixty-four present and embarked. Three are missing from the hundred and sixty-seven expected — their diligence had a mechanical problem on the road from Paris.

— The material?

— Cannon embarked in totality, two hundred pieces. Muskets complete, forty thousand. Ammunition at ninety-five per cent.

Powder entirely embarked, five hundred tons. Provisions at ninety-five per cent. A few barrels of biscuit and wine remaining.

— The water?

— Twenty-eight thousand barrels embarked. Almost double what was initially planned.

— Good. The horses?

— One thousand four hundred and seventy horses embarked alive. We lost thirty during the operations. Some died of fractures caused by the harnesses, others suffocated in their panic during embarkation.

Bonaparte clenched his jaw. Thirty horses lost before even leaving port. These losses were inevitable, and Berthier knew it as well as he did.

— The ships?

— All ready except for three transports that had rigging problems during the night. Repairs will be finished before noon.

— Good. Transmit the order: everyone on board this evening without exception. Weigh anchor tomorrow at seven o'clock precisely.

— It will be done.

Bonaparte went out and made his way to the warehouses where the last crates were awaiting embarkation. Caffarelli was supervising operations from the quay, leaning on his cane, shouting his orders over the clamour of cranes and dockers.

— General, what remains to be loaded?

Caffarelli consulted his list without looking up.

— About fifty crates of scientific material, thirty barrels of wine, twenty crates of medicines, ten crates of books, a hundred sacks of coffee, and fifty barrels of eau-de-vie.

— How long?

— Six hours at most. Everything will be on board by noon.

— You have until noon, not a minute more.

Bonaparte seized an open crate of books on the quay. His curiosity drove him to plunge his hand in. He drew out a leather-bound volume, gold on the spine — Volney's *Voyage in Egypt and Syria*. He opened it at random and read a few lines in silence.

— *"Egypt was once the most flourishing country in the universe. Its monuments are falling in ruins. Its canals are silted. Its cities are depopulated. But perhaps one day, an enlightened nation will restore its ancient splendour."*

He closed the book and replaced it in the crate.

At nine o'clock precisely, a dusty diligence arrived at full gallop in the port, the horses covered in foam after five days on the road from Paris. The three last scholars stepped out with the visible stiffness of men who had slept too long in a carriage.

Dolomieu came out first. Déodat de Dolomieu, a mineralogist whose name was already immortalised by the dolomite he had discovered in the Alps. A face weathered by years of fieldwork, calloused hands of a man accustomed to the geologist's hammer. He raised his eyes toward the masts of the fleet pointing above the port rooftops, and something in his expression changed imperceptibly.

Monge, informed of their arrival, was already crossing the quay toward the diligence.

— Déodat! At last! We were beginning to consider leaving without you.

Dolomieu shook his hand with the gruff warmth of old friends.

— The road was appalling, Gaspard. Two broken axles, a wheel that came off forty leagues from Lyon, and a horse that died of exhaustion at Aix. But we are here.

— You arrive just in time. We leave tomorrow morning at dawn. A day's delay, and we would already have been at sea.

— I would have caught up by land as far as Sicily if necessary, said Dolomieu in a tone midway between a joke and the truth.

The other two scholars stepped down in their turn. Savigny — a zoologist specialising in invertebrates, small, dark, lively, with eyes that seemed to be taking notes constantly. Delile — twenty-two years old, a botanist passionate about exotic plants, more reserved and composed, looking around him with the calm of those who observe before speaking.

Savigny approached Monge with a smile that overflowed all over his face.

— Citizen Monge! We are ready! Show us this fleet that everyone has been talking about since Marseille!

— Follow me. But I warn you: it has a particular effect the first time.

He conducted them to a height overlooking the roads, and when they discovered the spectacle, the two men stopped dead, mouths slightly open. Hundreds of ships stretched as far as the eye could see — a forest of close-set masts above the dark water, the ships of the line dominating the whole like floating cathedrals, the frigates rocking between them with their slender grace, the transports crowded everywhere there was space, each bearing the tricolour flag snapping in the morning breeze.

— Good God, murmured Delile, who was not a man to swear.

— Three hundred and forty-seven ships, said Monge. Forty thousand people. The greatest maritime expedition France has ever launched.

They remained there several minutes without speaking, then Monge brought them back toward the quays.

— Come. We must find you cabins before this evening. You are both on the *Franklin*, with me.

On the afternoon of the 18th of May, under a May sun beating hard, Bonaparte made a final inspection of the embarkations. He

wanted to see with his own eyes that the fifty crates of scientific material were properly loaded onto the *Franklin* without damage.

He watched them go up one by one, lifted by the creaking cranes, handled with a surgeon's precautions by dockers whom Caffarelli had previously warned: these crates contained irreplaceable fragile instruments once in Egypt. The wine barrels followed, rolled along the quays by teams of four men. The medicine crates were embarked under the supervision of a certain Desgenettes, who checked each crate on his list. These medicines would constitute the army's only serious defence against diseases: dysentery, typhus, scurvy, plague perhaps. The coffee sacks came next, to the great relief of the scholars who did not consider them a luxury. Berthollet in particular, who consumed enormous quantities of very strong black coffee, had made known without ambiguity that he would not answer for his temper without sufficient supply.

At noon precisely, as Caffarelli had promised, the last crate was hoisted on board. The quays of Toulon were empty.

On the evening of the 18th of May, as the sun was declining over the Mediterranean, casting on the water those golden and pink lights of May sunsets, Bonaparte assembled his generals for the last meeting before departure. They gathered in the same arsenal room they now knew by heart, but this time the atmosphere was different — more tense, more silent — for everyone knew it was the last meeting in France.

Bonaparte stood at the head of the table.

— Gentlemen, we leave tomorrow at dawn. Full stop. Berthier.

Berthier left his seat and opened his register.

— Forty thousand two hundred persons embarked in their entirety. Scientific commission complete since this morning.

— Perfect. Brueys, the route.

The admiral leaned over the map.

— Departure from Toulon, heading south-east toward Corsica. Rendezvous with the squadrons from Genoa, Ajaccio and Civitavecchia, which will bring our fleet to approximately four hundred ships. Formation in three divisions: centre under my command with the *Orient* at the head, right wing under Villeneuve, left wing under Decrès. Direction due south toward Malta. One week if the winds are favourable. Attack and capture of the island in two or three days. Then south-east toward Alexandria, about two weeks. Total duration: thirty-five days if all goes well, fifty if we must manoeuvre to avoid Nelson.

— Precisely. Where is he this evening?

Brueys pointed to a spot north of Elba on the map.

— Latest news this morning: he is cruising here with fourteen ships of the line. He is looking for our fleet. He has questioned every neutral ship he has met. But he does not yet know where we are going. The British Admiralty believes we are attacking Naples, or Sicily, or Constantinople.

— How long can we still keep him in this uncertainty?

Brueys reflected for a moment.

— Perhaps a week, perhaps two. But he will eventually work it out. A fleet of nearly four hundred ships cannot cross the Mediterranean without leaving traces.

— And if he finds us en route?

Brueys replied bluntly.

— Our chances are almost nil in that case. Our ships are overloaded and poorly manoeuvrable. Our crews lack training. Our gunners fire one broadside where the English fire three. If Nelson intercepts us at sea, he will sink us.

— Then everything rests on speed and discretion. We sail by night as much as possible, all lights extinguished, avoiding the frequented routes. And we pray for favourable winds.

He looked at his generals.

— Last inspection this evening. Everyone on board by midnight without exception. Weigh anchor tomorrow at seven o'clock. Anyone not on board remains in France. Questions?

Kléber half rose.

— Why Malta? Why not go directly to Egypt and save time?

— Several reasons. First, Malta occupies a strategic position in the centre of the Mediterranean. Whoever holds it controls all the maritime routes. Next, the island possesses considerable riches accumulated by the Knights over centuries — gold, silver, works of art — which will finance the rest. Finally, we will take on fresh water and additional provisions there, since our reserves will be depleted after two weeks at sea.

Menou intervened with the air of someone who has been meditating a question at length.

— It is said that the Knights of Malta are formidable warriors. That the fortress is virtually impregnable.

— They were, in the time of the Crusades. Today they are rentiers living off their investments in palaces. We will take the island in two days. Perhaps one, if they have the wisdom to surrender without fighting.

He rose.

— Gentlemen, this is the last time we meet in France. The next time will be at sea, at Malta or in Egypt. Do not disappoint the Republic, France, or myself. Dismiss.

VIII — The Order

At ten o'clock in the evening, after dinner, Bonaparte went back aboard the *Orient*. The port was still illuminated by lanterns and torches — the final preparations were continuing. Soldiers were still coming aboard certain ships, sailors were checking rigging, a few isolated crates were still being lowered into holds.

Casabianca was waiting on deck, impeccable despite the hour.

— General, the ship is ready in every respect. Twelve hundred sailors at their posts. Provisions for three months. Water for one month. Ammunition complete. Cannon in battery. Sails ready to be hoisted. We await your order.

— Tomorrow at seven o'clock. Not one minute earlier, not one minute later.

Bonaparte inspected the deck. Gunners by their pieces. Topmen in the rigging. Helmsmen by the wheel. Officers at their posts. Twelve hundred men — all ready, all tense, all awaiting the signal to depart.

He went below to his cabin. A massive desk covered with maps, a bookshelf of books on Egypt, a narrow sailor's bunk. He took the map of the Mediterranean and contemplated it. Toulon. Corsica. Malta. Alexandria. Two thousand kilometres. Forty days perhaps. And Nelson somewhere, searching, hunting.

He folded the map, put it away, and lay down fully dressed.

Joséphine crossed his mind. Stayed in Paris, unfaithful probably. He closed his eyes and thought of Alexandria, which he had never seen.

He finally fell asleep.

Outside, in the port of Toulon, the last preparations were completing. The last soldiers were coming aboard. The last crates were being hoisted. The last barrels of water loaded.

At midnight precisely, as Bonaparte had ordered, no one remained ashore. Forty thousand two hundred persons were all on board the three hundred and forty-seven ships swinging at anchor in the sleeping port.

The fleet waited in silence.

In two hours, at the rise of day, the order would be given.

And the adventure would begin.

The night of the 18th to the 19th of May was a sleepless night for almost all. No one could sleep. Excitement, anguish, hope

and fear mingled in a state so particular that it forbade any true rest. Thousands of men lay awake in the dark, stretched in their hammocks or sitting on deck, wondering whether they would ever see France again, praying to the Gods in whom they still believed despite the Revolution.

Bonaparte woke at two in the morning. He lay for a moment with his eyes open in the dark of his cabin where a small nightlight cast a trembling gleam on the wooden bulkheads. His mind refused to be silent. He finally got up, dressed slowly in the darkness, and went up on deck without a sound.

The moon was full. It cast over the sea and ships a silvery light that transformed everything into an almost unreal landscape — hundreds of masts rose toward the sky like a petrified forest, their black silhouettes outlined against the slightly lighter background of the starry sky. A few lights still glowed on certain ships: officers checking their lists, sailors preparing material for the departure manoeuvres, sick soldiers groaning faintly in makeshift sick bays.

Casabianca was already on deck. Bonaparte was not surprised — he had come to know this meticulous captain who left nothing to chance.

The captain saluted on seeing him approach.

— A fine night for our last night in France.

— A fine night, indeed, said Bonaparte, leaning on the gunwale. Everything is in order for tomorrow morning?

— As ready as possible, General. The sails are furled but can be hoisted in a few minutes. The anchors are ready to be weighed. The crew knows their posts by heart. We await your order.

— And the wind? Will we have wind at sunrise?

Casabianca raised his head toward the sky, sniffed the air, observed the surface of the sea in the moonlight for a moment.

— I would not promise anything with certainty, General. Meteorology remains more an art than a science. But I would say

that we will probably have a north-westerly breeze around six or seven o'clock, when the land begins to warm faster than the sea. It will be light at first, then strengthen during the morning. Conditions should be good for leaving the port.

Bonaparte appeared satisfied. The meteorology, at least, was not betraying them — for now. No one could know what would happen once in the open sea: the Mediterranean was renowned for its sudden moods, the flat calms that immobilised fleets for days, the storms that surged without warning. But for this departure, the elements seemed favourable.

A long silence passed, the two of them contemplating the sleeping port.

— Captain, said Bonaparte at last, I wanted to tell you that I have complete confidence in you to command this ship and lead us safely. I know what you are worth. But I also know that the task is immense and that Nelson is somewhere out there looking for us. If we meet him at sea...

— If we meet Nelson, General, we will do our duty as we have always done. We will fight if we must fight, we will flee if it is better to flee, and we will sacrifice ourselves if need be so that the transports may escape. The *Orient* is the flagship of this fleet. A flagship does not surrender.

Bonaparte placed his hand on the captain's shoulder — a gesture he reserved for very few.

— I know, Captain. That is precisely why I chose you to command this ship.

They remained on deck for a long time more, conversing in low voices about the sea and its mysteries, the winds, the currents, everything a sailor must learn to know in order to survive.

The seconds ticked away.

Six fifty-nine and thirty seconds.

Forty seconds.

Fifty seconds.

Seven o'clock.

Bonaparte opened his mouth to give the order that would change everything.

The order did not come immediately.

Bonaparte remained motionless on the poop deck of the *Orient*, his mouth half open, his gaze fixed on Casabianca who waited with the patience of sailors accustomed to the silences of commanders. For several seconds that seemed to those watching from the deck or from neighbouring ships to last an eternity, nothing happened. Nothing moved.

Then Bonaparte closed his mouth without having pronounced a single word. He turned toward the port of Toulon and contemplated it with an expression that no one could have entirely deciphered. Casabianca frowned — this hesitation was unexpected in a man reputed to make his decisions quickly and without turning back.

He waited a moment longer, then:

— General, it is past seven o'clock. The crews are waiting. Meteorological conditions are perfect for the moment, but they could change. Must we begin the departure manoeuvres?

Bonaparte turned toward him.

— No, Captain. Not yet. A few more minutes.

Casabianca waited.

— I need to measure one last time what we are about to do, Bonaparte murmured. Egypt will change all of us, those who survive at least. We will no longer be the same men on our return. And I wanted to carry with me a final image of this city, a final impression of France, before everything begins.

He paused.

— Do you know what I was thinking these last few minutes, Captain? I was thinking of Alexander the Great, who left

Macedonia more than two thousand years ago to conquer the Orient. He was twenty when he began, twenty-four when he conquered Egypt. I am twenty-eight — four years behind. But I will accomplish what he accomplished, and more. He only conquered. I will also civilise. I will bring science, the Enlightenment, the progress of modern reason.

Casabianca listened.

It was rare that Bonaparte gave himself away thus, allowing a glimpse behind the mask of cold efficiency of the thoughts that truly agitated his mind.

— Alexander died at thirty-three, Bonaparte continued. Probably poisoned, or exhausted. He never saw Macedonia again, nor his mother, whom he loved nonetheless. His entire adult life was war and the march toward new horizons. Is that the fate awaiting me?

Casabianca hesitated — he did not quite know how to respond to questions of that kind.

— You are still young. You will accomplish everything you wish to accomplish. But to do that, you must first leave. You must give the order that will set this fleet in motion.

Bonaparte looked at him for a moment, then gave a nod of assent.

— You are right, Captain. But give me a few minutes more.

Casabianca stepped forward.

— General, he said, with a note of reproach in his voice that he hardly sought to disguise, conditions remain favourable for the moment. But the breeze is beginning to slacken. If we wait further, we risk finding ourselves in a flat calm that would immobilise us for additional hours.

— I know, Captain. I needed a final moment alone. Now I am ready.

— At last, murmured Casabianca, with a relief so evident he did not take the trouble to conceal it.

He turned toward his first officer.

— All hands! All men to their manoeuvring stations! Ready to weigh anchor!

The orders echoed from deck to deck, transmitted from one voice to another to the extremities of the ship. Sailors ran to their posts. Topmen climbed into the rigging, ready to release the sails on the signal. The capstan men gathered around the enormous wheel. The helmsmen took position at the wheel.

On the other ships of the fleet, identical scenes were repeating — the lookouts had transmitted the information that the departure manoeuvre was finally about to begin.

Bonaparte mounted to the poop deck, crossed his arms in that posture he adopted at important moments, and observed what was happening around him. Berthier stood at his right, his eternal register in hand even though there was nothing more to note now that the hour of action had come.

On the main deck, Casabianca was directing the manoeuvres.

— Ready to weigh anchor!

— Ready! answered in chorus the twenty men around the capstan.

— Weigh!

The men began pushing on the bars, turning the enormous wheel that wound in the cable. Exhausting work, requiring the coordinated strength of all, pushing to a rhythm of song that one of them chanted. Sweat appeared immediately on their foreheads despite the morning coolness. The cable progressively tensed, creaking under the enormous tension as it lifted the anchor from the muddy bottom of the port.

— The anchor is dragging! cried the lookout at the bow.

The men redoubled their efforts. A few metres more.

— The anchor is apeak! The anchor is clear! The anchor is out!

A roar of satisfaction rose from the deck — weighing the anchor of a ship of this size was always a difficult and dangerous operation, and the fact that it had passed without incident was a good omen.

Casabianca turned toward Bonaparte.

— General, the anchor is weighed. We are free. We can hoist the sails whenever you give the order.

He took a deep breath and felt the sea air fill his lungs for the last time before a long while.

Then he opened his mouth.

And the words came out at last — those words he had almost spoken so many times during the past hour, those words that were going to set everything in motion.

— Captain Casabianca, you may hoist the sails. We are leaving for Egypt.

END OF VOLUME I