



Scatter Thou the Nations

Tent flaps fluttered as the young Desaix burst through them outside. His blue coat previously bleached from the African sun, edges frayed and buttons missing advertised his recently escaped British hospitality.

“Mr. Baptiste, I asked for Marengo, these are the wrong maps!”

An old soldier, who could have been Desaix’s own father had he been dressed better and of better birth jumped to attention mere seconds from getting his first spoonful of stew. The tricolor badge clung to his jacket faded and torn but impossible to ignore, especially alongside his garish trousers. This man stormed the Bastille a lifetime ago. A subject before he was a citizen.

“Marengo? But that’s Rivalta just over there your *Lordship*.”

Baptiste pointed across the horizon to the small Italian village, only its ancient church being clearly distinguishable from the hilltop the camp crowned.

“Please Baptiste, I know it is in good fun, but titles like that will wake up our minder from the Tribune. We are all Citizens now, and I ask for Marengo because it is where our First Consul is. I have a habit of cleaning up his messes, and I wish to be ready.”

Baptiste couldn’t help but let out a smile and glance at the soldiers beside him also at attention when Desaix mentioned their equality. Everybody knew who was in charge, same world, different titles. Before Baptiste could muster the correct maps, the flaps of the tent just to the right of Desaix burst open even more violently. A well-fed man in an immaculate green uniform unlike any of the others with hands behind his back and hat angled perfectly carried his voice over the entire camp.

“Citizen Baptiste, once you have retrieved the maps for Citizen Desaix you shall report to my secretary for a shift of rectification duty. Words matter Citizen.”

A dead silence fell over the camp. A silence which persisted as Baptiste gathered the requested maps and delivered them to his General. As he shuffled outside the circle of tents to the duty officer’s desk, he thought perhaps his next joke would be at Citizen Barras’ expense, and would not be limited to words as it had with his General. The silence was finally broken.

“As for Citizen Desaix I would speak with you in private.”

Desaix quickly turned around, about to enter his tent with his new maps to review. Barras followed after him. A table covered in maps, letters and writing supplies dominated the interior of the simple tent. Desaix laid out his new maps and peered over them, ignoring the jackal nipping at his heels until Barras spoke up forcefully.

“The only ‘mess’ our First Consul can ever be spoken of being related to is the one he saved us from in The Directory. I will not have one just so recently and mysteriously released from British custody speak this way about the one who saved the revolution!”

The General did not look up from his maps, and responded calmly once the tirade had ended.

“My release would not be a mystery to you Mr. Barras if you were a man of higher character or had any experience fighting for France. By our convention ending the First Consul’s failed adventure in Egypt I never should have been imprisoned in the first place. This is why I was released, not treason.”

Desaix, never taking his eyes off his maps, pulled out a compass from his jacket pocket, and calculated the distance to Marengo as he continued.

“As for messes, I have been with our First Consul before men like you gave him the title. Before him it was Moreau in Bavaria. I stopped the Mamluks under the pyramids so that our First Consul could declare victory. I suspect I will be with him again shortly

With a straight edge and pencil, the General began drawing lines and measuring firing arcs. Barras responded.

“You hate the man who saved our revolution yet here you are, still fighting for him.”

With eyes still married to his maps Desaix responded as if swatting a fly.

“Hate him? How could I hate the man who has achieved everything the generation of my father, and his father could not. But I do not fight for him, or for *your* revolution.”

“Then why do you fight Citizen Desaix? How do I know that when our First Consul calls, you will answer?”

“I fight Mr. Barras, because even if one battle is lost, we may still win another.”

Desaix stood up, hands at his hips and surveyed his work, a marching order for each of his regiments and units, all 6,000. A forest protected Marengo from his master’s army, and Desaix marked on the map positions for his cannon. Should a rash attack into the forest fail, these cannons would decimate any who emerge from the forest seeking to capitalize on it.

Desaix folded up the map and finally turned to face Barras. Loud rumbling suddenly pierced the sky and continued like a drumroll from the camp’s right in the distance. The General looked at the commissar right in the eyes and commanded.

“There is Napoleon calling us now. On your way-out Mr. Barras, call for my general staff to receive orders. And remember this Mr. Barras before you order my men around again, in any battle, any number of my men or even myself may die, but know that if they do, they do not die for men like you.

Barras stormed out of the tent. Desaix followed him, this time with his hat crowning his head. He boomed over the rumbling in the distance.

“France calls men and we shall follow the sound of the guns!”