By the end of December 1813, Crown Prince Charles John had King Frederick VI in a stranglehold and was prepared to deal him a final blow unless he opted to cede Norway voluntarily. The background to this dramatic turn of events was Napoleon’s defeats and expulsion from Germany. Charles John was among the allied victors in the recent battle of Leipzig on 16–19 October, which had all but sealed Napoleon’s fate as well as that of King Frederick, who by then was virtually the Emperor’s last ally. Siding with Russia and Great Britain in 1812 had thus proven to be a master stroke by Charles John, while Frederick had clung on to Napoleon for too long, at the cost, as it would turn out, of his Norwegian kingdom.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has left an image of King Frederick as a devoted and affectionate ally of the Emperor from Denmark-Norway’s entry into the Napoleonic Wars in 1807 almost up to Napoleon’s defeat and abdication in April 1814. Their alliance was marked by Denmark-Norway’s strict enforcement of the Continental Blockade – probably the strictest of all Napoleon’s allies – and by the deep aversion to Great Britain largely shared by the Danish-Norwegian king and Napoleon. Furthermore, Frederick gave Napoleon a helping hand on several occasions, such as when Danish troops routed the Prussian rebel Major Ferdinand von Schill and his so-called free corps in Stralsund in October 1809. Indeed, as if to emphasise his personal affection for Napoleon, King Frederick remarked in March 1811 that he was flattered by a number of favourable comments he had recently received from Napoleon, and that he would never join a coalition against Napoleon.¹
For reasons such as these Napoleon made repeated references to King Frederick as his most faithful ally and even remarked during his exile on St Helena that he regretted not having done more to help such a loyal ally. The view of King Frederick as a loyal Napoleonic ally was shared by many contemporaries, some of whom could not bring themselves to believe that the Danish-Norwegian king remained loyal to the Emperor even after his crushing defeats in 1812–13. Many later historians, too, have come to regard Denmark-Norway’s alliance with France as one based on the king’s personal loyalty to Napoleon. In the words of Eli F. Heckscher, Frederick VI was Napoleon’s ‘sincere collaborator’ – and eventually paid dearly for it.2

Such views, however, rather miss the point. Napoleon’s praise of Frederick at St Helena, for example, should certainly not be taken at face value. Ultimately, King Frederick’s loyal support of Napoleon was not due to unthinking devotion but because he had no option if he were to safeguard the territorial integrity of his state which, in the final analysis, only Napoleon could guarantee. This was the main difference between Frederick VI and several other European rulers who collaborated with Napoleon, such as Grand Duke Charles of Baden, King Maximilian I of Bavaria and King Frederick I of Württemberg. Unlike the Danish-Norwegian king, these monarchs were able to successfully switch sides in 1813 after securing allied pledges for the territorial integrity of their domains. And, in contrast to Charles, Maximilian and Frederick I of Württemberg, Frederick VI was sidelined by his opponents during the final struggle with Napoleon. Ultimately, King Frederick’s personal failings and the shortcomings of his absolutist rule made it impossible for him to ensure he had the same level of diplomatic manoeuvrability as many other monarchs allied to Napoleon, a manoeuvrability that made it possible for them to turn their backs on Napoleon and secure a place at the victors’ table.3

Napoleon’s ever-present threat to the duchies and Jutland was underpinned by Frederick’s recognition, and even admiration, of Napoleon’s military ability, but this should not be confused with affection. This is an important distinction, because it helps explain why Frederick clung on to his Napoleonic alliance for so long. He did not do so because he had anything in the vein of personal loyalty to Napoleon but because he regarded the Emperor as invincible. The fact that this view was shared by the Red Feathers influenced discussions in the king’s immediate circle and, not least, military planning activities at his headquarters.

This was why Napoleon’s defeat in Russia was a major shock to the king, but even then he can be forgiven for having doubted the possibility