

The Fox 41

Chapter 41: The First Fateful Meeting

The day after their successful debut, Armand, Long, and the Rose Theater Company received several new performance invitations. Among them, one invitation stood out, not originating from a theater but from a member of the "National Convention" - Mr. Robespierre.

If Joseph had seen this invitation, he might have been taken aback, for Mr. Robespierre would later be infamous as the "Mad Killer." According to some accounts, during his rule in France, guillotines stood tall in every city square, and lampposts had "enemies of the people" hanging from them. Future generations even fabricated an epitaph for him: "I, Robespierre, rest here, passersby, do not mourn me, for if I were alive, none of you would be."

Joseph believed that after Robespierre's downfall, hardly anyone, from the Jacobins to Napoleon, would like this "Incorruptible, Defender of the People, Creator of the Nation's motto: 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'." So, it was almost certain that there would be mudslinging at him. Just as during the Bourbon Restoration, various entertaining stories were fabricated about Napoleon, portraying him as a blend of "Tartuffe" (the main character in Moliere's comedy) and "Don Juan" (a byword for a libertine in Europe). Therefore, most of the tales about Robespierre's erratic behavior and pleasure in killing were unreliable. However, one thing remained true: Robespierre did kill quite a number of people, many of whom had been comrades in the trenches with him. If he enjoyed killing, it was probably an exaggeration, but if he had a habit of "getting rid of people causing problems," that was likely not false. In summary, becoming Robespierre's enemy was extremely dangerous, but becoming his friend might not be much safer.

Armand, on the other hand, was unaware of these complexities, and at the time, Robespierre's reputation was at its peak. He had spoken over two hundred times during the Estates-General and the National Convention, ranking twentieth among the representatives. In his speeches, he supported universal male suffrage, opposed the king's veto, advocated for Jewish rights, called for the abolition of slavery and the death penalty, and opposed censorship. Yes, you read that correctly; "Mad Killer" Robespierre was once an advocate for abolishing the death penalty. Odd, isn't it? Well, it's not that strange; it's just an example of how one's position can influence their stance. When Robespierre was a proponent of abolishing the death penalty, the executioner's tool was still under the control of King Louis XVI, posing a threat to "troublemakers" like Robespierre. So, as a "troublemaker" himself, Robespierre naturally opposed it. But when that tool fell into Robespierre's hands, the situation naturally changed. At this time, King Louis XVI had just completed his one and only technical innovation in his lifetime - an improved design for the guillotine, making it more efficient. The ironic twist was that Louis XVI became the first user of this upgraded guillotine. As the poet Ronsard put it, "A wide face turns thin, heads roll more. Suddenly down, may he rest in peace."

Robespierre's suggestions were mostly not passed, but they earned him the moniker "Incorruptible." Now that Armand had received his invitation, he was delighted. Furthermore, the location Robespierre suggested was quite unique - the Royal Palace.

The Royal Palace was initially built for Cardinal Richelieu, the Prime Minister of Louis XIII, and was known as the "Palais-Cardinal." Later, it became the residence of the Duke of Orleans. In an attempt to win over the Parisian populace, the Orleans family opened it to the public in 1780. Since

then, this private garden palace gradually transformed into a public square for the people of Paris. Orleans's political ambitions were well-known at the time.

During the 1789 French Revolution, there were two political centers in Paris: Versailles, where the Estates-General was deciding France's fate, and the Royal Palace in the city center. During this time, it served as a barometer of Parisian political fervor. These were two seats of power, and after July 14, 1789, it was the Royal Palace that led France, as Versailles had no influence over it; on the contrary, the Royal Palace could control Versailles.

The Royal Palace was a grand palace that could accommodate tens of thousands of people. It was a place brimming with various political pamphlets, orators, audiences, and rumors. Since the Estates-General, people exchanged all kinds of information here, including news from Versailles, and spread it further. If Armand's play could be performed here, even just once, it would certainly make his name resound.

After a brief consideration, Armand accepted the invitation. That evening, he took the lead role, Louis, to visit Robespierre.

At that time, Robespierre was staying in an inn near the City Hall. He could have had a better residence; many members of the National Convention had accepted the generosity of the Duke of Orleans or the Marquis de Lafayette for safety reasons and moved into their properties. But the "Incorruptible" paid for a room in a regular inn. Nevertheless, his financial situation was good due to his past success as a lawyer, and the inn was decent. In addition to the bedroom, it had a small living room with a sofa.

Armand, along with Louis, was led to the third floor by a waiter. This was the top floor of the inn, relatively quieter than the first and second floors, likely one reason for Robespierre's choice.

The waiter brought Armand and Louis to a door and knocked gently.

"The door is open. Please come in," came a cheerful voice from inside.

The waiter opened the door and said, "Mr. Robespierre, Mr. Lavache and Mr. Saint-Just are here to visit."

Yes, Louis's last name was Saint-Just. If Joseph had known his last name when he met him earlier, he would have surely looked at this reticent, strikingly handsome young man in a different light. Though Joseph, a former engineering student, wasn't particularly well-versed in the history of the French Revolution, he had at least read Victor Hugo's "Ninety-Three" and learned from its footnotes about Saint-Just, the most loyal comrade of Robespierre, known as the "Great Angel of the Revolution" or the "Terrifying Angel."

"Please come in, gentlemen," Robespierre's voice sounded, but there was no one in the living room.

"I'm sorry, I'm in the middle of drafting a document, just a few more sentences to finish. Please wait on the couch for a moment. Henry, could you offer them some tea, please? Thank you," the voice came from the study.

The waiter ushered the two men into the living room, where they sat on the couch, and tea was poured. The tea was Indian black tea, although its quality was mediocre. Joseph knew that this era's low-grade tea leaves were often adulterated with copper to mask spoilage. Drinking this stuff had no health benefits.

Armand and Saint-Just, however, had no such concerns. They sat on the couch, picked up their tea, and sipped it.

After two minutes, the voice from the study said, "Finally done! I apologize for keeping you waiting."

With that voice, a young man stepped out. His face was slightly pale, perhaps due to consecutive sleepless nights, but he appeared serious. His lips were thin, and his gaze was calm. His cheeks twitched nervously at times, making his smile appear somewhat unnatural. Following the custom of lawyers, he had powdered his face, wore gloves, and his clothing was impeccable. His jacket had no wrinkles, and his buttons were neatly fastened. He wore pale blue upper attire with a decorative crisscross pattern on the front. Below, he had on beige trousers, white stockings, silver-buckled shoes, a high-necked tie, and a crotch decoration on the front.

"I'm sorry; I didn't expect you to be so patient," Robespierre extended his hand to shake hands with them. "I attended your premiere yesterday, and I couldn't sleep all night afterward. Your war song and Spadaccini's exhilarating speeches were in my ears the entire night. I even forgot about my work until not long ago when I remembered I have a speech to deliver in the assembly tomorrow. I checked the time and realized you might be an hour or two away, so I went ahead to draft my speech. I have a habit that once I start writing, I can't break it in the middle. So, I had to ask you to wait here. I hope you don't think I deliberately snubbed you."

"I understand," Saint-Just replied, almost instinctively. "I don't like to interrupt my tasks either when I'm working."

"Do you know the purpose behind inviting you to perform at the Royal Palace?" Robespierre asked directly.

"You hope to exert pressure on the king through this play," Saint-Just responded almost without hesitation.

Saint-Just's rapid response clearly caught Robespierre off guard. He hesitated for a moment and then said, "You're right; that is indeed one of our goals with this play. Obviously, there are political considerations behind our invitation, and if you accept, it may involve some political risks. I don't want to involve you in the political whirlwind without your knowledge. You know, the current situation is quite tense and dangerous."

Chapter 42: The Brittany Club

"Regarding this matter," Armand began, "our play itself carries strong political undertones. When I was creating it, I knew that staging this work involved political risks."

At this point, Armand paused and continued, "Moreover, we chose to perform it during such a time, which itself is a politically charged choice. We have already considered the political risks. Even if something does happen, it would be nothing more than a stint in the Bastille."

When people spoke of going to prison, it was generally called 'feeding the rats,' but Armand referred to it as 'eating rats,' a small linguistic difference that carried significant implications. Both Armand and Robespierre knew that because the Bastille was often used to incarcerate nobles, there was likely no other prison in all of France that could compare to its conditions.

"And I believe, if our king were even slightly intelligent, we wouldn't be at risk of going to the Bastille," Saint-Just chimed in. "If our king decides to suppress the people, he should use decisive measures, swiftly arrest all the representatives of the Third Estate, and send them straight to the guillotine. Although this may lead to some chaos, the rebels would be leaderless, and they can be picked off one by one."

At this point, Saint-Just, with his handsome features, allowed a faint, mocking smile to creep onto his lips. "Moreover, most of these representatives are wealthy individuals Mr. Robespierre, you're among the poorest among them, but even you, compared to most people in the Saint-Antoine district, are considered 'rich.' Some of them have hundreds of times more wealth than you. Eliminate these representatives, seize their assets, and use that money to recruit more troops and gain the loyalty of nobles and the impoverished who would support the king, and perhaps our king could survive this. Of course, such actions might lead to a civil war in France. He must be prepared for failure, like Charles I, who ended up on the guillotine. Nevertheless, considering the lack of leadership on the other side, I believe our king's position would be better than that of Charles I. If our king genuinely intends to do this, we'll likely be executed directly, and there will be no need for the Bastille."

With this, Saint-Just even lightly caressed his slender neck, exuding an air of "A fine head, who will sever it."

"Do you think the king would do such a thing?" Robespierre asked.

"He won't," Saint-Just said, his face wearing a scornful smile. "If the king had the audacity to be a tyrant, he wouldn't let that Austrian woman have her way. He also wouldn't come away empty-handed from the 'Assembly of Notables.' Overall, our monarch lacks both the courage of a despot and the wisdom of an enlightened ruler. He's not a king to be feared. So, I don't believe we're in any danger."

"Mr. Saint-Just," Robespierre praised, "you possess a remarkable level of composure and courage for someone of your age and appearance. Honestly, when I saw you perform as Spartacus just yesterday, I was quite surprised, but your performance was outstanding. I was astonished that someone as young as you could possess such strength. However, today's conversation has made me understand that a person's thoughts and abilities cannot be measured solely by age. Mr. Saint-Just, indeed, as you've said, our king lacks the audacity for tyranny. We are not fools, willing to let him have his way. These years of privilege and excess have drained the nation's treasury. The army is similarly starved of funds, rife with discontent. Moreover, the army is made up of the people of France. The army is composed of the people; it is not a soulless tool. If the king truly intends to take risks, he can only rely on mercenaries. However, if he can afford to pay mercenaries, he can certainly fund the French army. What do you think the French army would prefer? In fact, we are not entirely unprepared; many nobles and military officers are in contact with us. The king won't be able to hide any major actions from us. So, while your performance has its risks, they are not uncontrollable. After all, I invited you, and even if you didn't make the request, I would have considered your safety. So, you can rest assured; while there is some risk, the possibility of going to the Bastille is very small."

"Don't even mention the Bastille; we're not afraid of the guillotine," Armand said.

The group discussed the play further, and Armand and Saint-Just prepared to take their leave. Robespierre escorted them to the door but suddenly mentioned, "Oh, I almost forgot. We have a

club, comprised of good friends who hope to bring about reform. I believe our philosophies align, would you be interested in joining?"

"What kind of club is it?" Saint-Just inquired.

"The Brittany Club. Originally, it was a club for representatives from the Brittany region, but after the Third Estate convened, more people joined. They are all friends who support constitutionalism, so we are considering changing the club's name to 'Friends of Constitutionalism.' How about it? If you're interested, I can introduce you."

"Sure," Armand replied, "I have a friend who would be a great fit. You may have heard of him his name is Bonaparte, Joseph Bonaparte. He's a scientific genius."

"I've heard of him," Robespierre nodded. "Although I can't understand his writings. Well, can you wait for a moment? I will write an invitation letter and you can deliver it to him."

"We'd be happy to help," Armand said.

Robespierre went into his study to write the letter, while Armand and Saint-Just made themselves comfortable in the living room, sitting on the couch, waiting.

"Armand, do you think Mr. Bonaparte would be willing to join this club?" Saint-Just asked.

"Don't worry, I know Joseph and his political views. In fact, you know, many ideas in the script of 'Spartacus' come from him. He's definitely a progressive young man who supports constitutionalism," Armand replied, barely refraining from revealing that the song 'Slave's Song' was written by Joseph for him. He vaguely sensed that he might have made a mistake when Joseph handed him that song, considering Joseph's attitude at the time.

"I'm aware of that," Saint-Just said. "But I still have the feeling that Mr. Bonaparte may not be too eager to get deeply involved in politics. He seems more interested in his scientific pursuits. Well, I don't doubt his passion for constitutionalism, but I think he might love science more."

"Damn it! I didn't consider that," Armand shook his head. But then he immediately added, "This guy might really have that possibility. But it's just an invitation to a club, it shouldn't take up too much of his time. If he's really busy, he doesn't have to participate."

As they were talking, Robespierre returned from his study and handed a sealed envelope to Armand.

"I've written the invitation letter. I look forward to meeting this genius scientist at the club."

"Very well, Mr. Robespierre," Armand hesitated for a moment, then said, "Joseph has been busy with an important study lately, and it's been taking up a lot of his time... He might not be able to fully participate in the club's activities..." Armand hesitated.

Robespierre paused for a moment, then smiled, "Ah, Mr. Lavoisier, that's not an issue at all. It's just a club. No club expects all its members to be present all the time. After all, everyone has their own business, right? So, it's not a problem."

"If that's the case, then there should be no problem," Armand said.

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Leaving Robespierre's place, Armand looked at the sky and said to Saint-Just, "Louis, Joseph lives not far from here, just across the street. I think it's about time for him to return home. I plan to go to his place directly and deliver the invitation letter. Would you like to come with me?"

Saint-Just thought for a moment, then shook his head, "Time is running out for the next performance, I should go back and prepare."

So, the two parted ways at the street corner. Saint-Just took a hired carriage back to the theater troupe's location, while Armand walked to Joseph's residence.

When Armand knocked on Joseph's door, Joseph was having dinner with his two younger brothers. Typically, if a time-traveler from a big eating country found themselves in the West, they'd cook Chinese food whenever they could because, generally, they wouldn't find Western food very palatable. This was especially true for those unfortunate time-travelers who ended up in a country where all they could find was potatoes, eggs, and sardines. However, Joseph enjoyed a genuine Western meal bread and roasted lamb. This wasn't just because he was lucky to have ended up in a big eating country; it was because, in this era, the ingredients required for Chinese dishes were basically unavailable in France. Besides, Joseph had now achieved a certain status, and someone of his status was expected to avoid doing his own cooking. Furthermore, labor was cheap, so Joseph had hired a maid to help with the household chores.

Hence, when Armand entered and sniffed the air, he raised his eyebrows, deeply inhaled the aroma, and exclaimed, "Smells delicious! Is that roasted lamb? Well, Joseph, your life has improved significantly!"

Joseph inquired, "What brings you here at this time, Armand? Is there something you need?"

"Ah, I've come to deliver a letter, an invitation," Armand replied.

Chapter 43: The Brittany Club (2)

"I thought you were being pursued and seeking refuge here," Joseph chuckled, "but your timing is perfect. Let's have dinner together."

He ushered Armand inside and then called out to a maid busy in another room, "Sophie, please fetch a set of utensils for my friend."

Seated now, he looked at Armand and asked, "So, did you receive another high-profile invitation, or should I come and show my support?"

"I did indeed receive a special invitation to perform at the Royal Palace," Armand proudly boasted.

"Well, now you're truly making a name for yourself," Joseph remarked.

Sophie brought the utensils just in time. Joseph cheerfully said, "Sophie, please fetch the bottle of brandy from my cabinet. We need to celebrate."

"Of course," Sophie replied and went to fetch the brandy.

"However, Armand, I might not be able to attend your performance this time," Joseph expressed with a tinge of regret. The outbreak of the Great Revolution was imminent, and Joseph knew that during the turbulent period leading up to his younger brother Napoleon's rise in politics, the French political landscape would be chaotic. Today, they might hang nobles and royalists on lampposts, and tomorrow, they might do the same to merchants and traitors, and the day after that, it could be the

turn of commoners and rogues. In this tumultuous time, political changes were too rapid and perilous, so Joseph felt it best to keep a certain distance from political figures.

"No, no, Joseph, you've got it wrong," Armand replied. "I wasn't referring to the invitation for the performance. I know you're busy, and this isn't your debut, so I didn't prepare as many invitations for friends."

Joseph, with a sense of foreboding, asked, "Then what invitation are you talking about?"

"It's an invitation to a club," Armand said, handing him the letter.

Joseph took the letter, glanced at the envelope, and read, "Mr. Joseph Bonaparte, in person," signed with florid cursive, "Maximilien Franois Marie Isidore de Robespierre."

Joseph still hadn't quite figured out who that was when Sophie brought the brandy.

"Thank you, Sophie," Armand said, taking the bottle and pouring a glass for himself and a half-glass for Joseph.

"Maximilien Franois Marie Isidore de Robespierre... Robespierre!" Joseph finally understood. The surname at the end of that long string of names made him break into a cold sweat.

"Indeed, a representative of Robespierre, the Incorruptible," Armand sipped his drink while replying.

Joseph lowered his head and pulled the letter out of the envelope, using it to hide his shock.

"What's the matter, Joseph?" Armand somewhat noticed Joseph's unease and asked, "If you're too busy, you don't have to go. After all, it's just an invitation from a club, what's the harm?"

Joseph thought to himself, "Who wants to go if they can avoid it?" He knew that at this time, Robespierre probably wouldn't be too angry if he didn't attend due to being "busy with research." However, not making Robespierre angry now didn't guarantee he wouldn't be angry in the future.

Robespierre wasn't powerful enough to do anything to Joseph at the moment, but in the future, when he had wealthy cities at his feet and a powerful nation in his hands, when one word from him could send those who had offended him to the guillotine, would he still be as forgiving when he thought of this? Joseph had no way of knowing, because that was the infamous "Reign of Terror" Robespierre!

However, this invitation was to join the "Britannia Club," not the "Jacobin Club." (Joseph's historical education was given by a physical education teacher, so he had no idea that the "Britannia Club" was the precursor to the "Jacobin Club.") Joining it shouldn't be too much of a problem. Furthermore, not everyone who joined the Jacobin Club ended up on the guillotine. However, if you got on the bad side of the "Great Demon," the chances of avoiding the guillotine were slim.

"I can attend some of the meetings, at least," Joseph said. "Of course, I'm not like the representatives; I'm unlikely to attend every one of their gatherings."

"That's perfectly fine; it's not a problem at all," Armand said, not realizing the trouble he had caused Joseph by inviting him.

"Very well, I'm honored to receive this invitation," Joseph replied.

"Shall we have a drink then?" Armand never missed an opportunity to share a drink with someone.

"Alright," Joseph put on a smiling face and raised his glass.

After bidding farewell to Armand, Joseph couldn't help but mutter to himself, "Gosh!" This friend of his was certainly trouble-prone, and now he had even attracted the attention of the "Great Demon." This was...

However, cursing wouldn't solve the problem now. So, Joseph had to calm himself down first and then carefully consider how he should handle this.

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Soon, it was time for the appointment specified in the invitation. Joseph changed into appropriate attire, hopped onto a lightweight carriage, left Paris, and arrived near the Royal Tennis Court of Versailles. This was where the Constituent Assembly met, and the "Club of Constitutional Friends" now used one of the halls here as their meeting place.

Joseph got out of the carriage at the entrance of the Royal Tennis Court, handed the invitation to the gatekeeper, and shortly afterward, he saw a well-dressed young man approaching him.

"Are you Mr. Bonaparte? I'm the representative of the Constituent Assembly, Robespierre," the young man extended his hand to Joseph.

"It's a pleasure to receive your invitation," Joseph replied.

Robespierre then led Joseph inside the Royal Tennis Court. As they walked, he pointed out various buildings in the vicinity.

When the two of them entered the hall of the "Club of Constitutional Friends," it was already filled with people. Robespierre occasionally chatted with others, introducing Joseph to his friends. He appeared friendly, and there was no hint of his "Great Demon" aura.

"Ah, Bonaparte, I didn't expect to see you here," as Joseph was conversing with Robespierre and his friends, a voice called out.

Joseph turned to see the Duke of Orleans striding over.

"Your Highness, I'm surprised to find you here as well," Joseph greeted, bowing.

"No need for such formality; we've known each other for a long time," the Duke of Orleans said warmly, patting Joseph on the shoulder. "What brings you here? Finding it strange to see me at the Club of Britannia? There's nothing odd about it. I, too, support constitutionalism and am a member of the Britannia Club."

Indeed, the Duke of Orleans and Marquis de Lafayette, figures of the nobility, were both members of the Britannia Club. In fact, for the historical record, the Britannia Club, later known as the Jacobin Club, didn't become a radical left-wing organization until the trial of Louis XVI. Due to differences in their attitude towards the king, the Jacobin Club split, with Robespierre, who advocated the king's execution, being elected as the chairman. Those who supported the king left the club under Lafayette's leadership. After that, the Jacobin Club became the radical left-wing organization. The Duke of Orleans continued to be a member of the Jacobin Club, hoping to leverage the Jacobins' power to dispose of Louis XVI and make himself the king of France. But, things didn't go as planned, and he found himself on the guillotine.

"Joseph, let me introduce you to a friend," the Duke of Orleans said. "He's been eager to meet you for some time."

Then, he looked around and whispered something to a servant accompanying him, instructing him to bring Gilbert over.

The servant walked over to the left, and Joseph followed him with his gaze, noticing a tall middle-aged man wearing a wig engaged in conversation. After the servant relayed the message, the man finished his conversation and looked over in Joseph's direction. He had clearly noticed Joseph and smiled in acknowledgment before striding over.

"Gilbert, let me introduce you to a friend," the Duke of Orleans said. "This is our brilliant scientist, Bonaparte Joseph Bonaparte. You might know him as the one who accurately measured the speed of light."

Joseph, recognizing the name from his knowledge of the future, knew that Lafayette was a French general who had achieved victories in the war against the British during the American Revolutionary War. He had a high reputation in the military.

Joseph, showing respect, bowed and said, "It's an honor to meet you, Marquis."

Armand also made his greetings, and Lafayette responded with warmth.

Chapter 44: The Jacobins of the Royalist Party

"It's an honor to meet our young scientist. You know, all the glory and grandeur in life are but fleeting, and time will wash them all away. Even great emperors like Alexander and Caesar leave behind empty names. Only scholarship is truly immortal. Just like Greece and Rome, their most precious treasures for us are not their conquests but their knowledge and laws. You have the talent to explore what's truly eternal, and that's what truly commands respect and admiration," the Marquis de Lafayette replied with a smile.

"Just like the immortality of Rome, much like their laws. Your involvement now, Your Excellency, isn't it an equally immortal and enduring achievement for the ages?" Joseph replied with a smile.

"You make a valid point. What are your thoughts on the constitution?" the Marquis de Lafayette asked.

"I don't know much about politics," Joseph replied, "but I believe, just as ancient Greek geometry is built upon nine undeniable axioms and postulates, our constitution should rest upon similarly self-evident principles. Your Excellency, you've led in the American War of Independence. The logic in the Declaration of Independence is quite intriguing."

"Please continue," Robespierre urged.

"The Declaration states: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.' These two sentences serve as the foundation for the entire Declaration, and almost all arguments in the North American Declaration of Independence are built upon them. If we aim to create a truly enduring constitution, we need to identify its foundational principles. In my opinion, these two sentences from the North American Declaration of Independence can serve as the cornerstone of our constitution. Therefore, when

drafting our constitution, we should first define the rights it must protect and then build around how to safeguard those rights. Anything conflicting with this objective should be deemed unconstitutional and, subsequently, unlawful and invalid."

"That's an interesting perspective," the Duke of Orleans interjected. "But Joseph, when you said, 'Greek geometry is built upon nine undeniable axioms and postulates,' wasn't it supposed to be ten axioms and postulates? Do you also think we should expel the Fifth Axiom from the axioms' ranks?"

"Who wouldn't want to?" Joseph laughed. "Since ancient Greece, every mathematician dreams of proving the Fifth Axiom and elevating it from an axiom to a theorem. If I could truly solve such a problem, I'd undoubtedly gain fame, perhaps even as famous as Monsieur Lavoisier."

Here, when Joseph mentioned "Monsieur Lavoisier," he was, of course, referring to the eminent chemist Lavoisier. However, because of this surname, it triggered some additional thoughts.

"Monsieur Lavoisier?" Robespierre asked. "Well, Monsieur Lavoisier's academic achievements are commendable, and he is truly a shining light in French science. His nephew, on the other hand, is talented in the arts. His recent play gained fame, and some believe he might become a high playwright."

"His play 'Spartacus' is indeed a fine tragedy, but it's overly radical. Especially that 'Slave's War Song,' it completely denies the existing order," Lafayette seemed unenthusiastic about the play. He furrowed his brow and continued, "The current order does have many issues that need to be addressed, but this change should be a gentle and gradual reform rather than a catastrophic war, like a flash flood."

"We all hope to avoid such a deluge," Robespierre added. "However, our king is rather obstinate. Regarding this matter, I spoke with young Lavoisier. He agreed that reforming the current order, establishing an English-style monarchy, is more favorable than creating a North American-style nation, similar to the Glorious Revolution. But he said achieving such changes in France isn't easy. Sometimes, exaggeration is necessary to make an impact. It's like telling our king, 'Your room is too dark; we need to add more windows.' He refuses. So you say, 'Your room is too dark; I'll dismantle the roof.' Then, His Majesty might be willing to discuss how to add windows."

This analogy brought smiles to the group, and Joseph's borrowed metaphor from his previous life reading Lu Xun's works found its way into the conversation. Now, it seemed like Armand was using this metaphor, taken from Joseph, in his conversation.

"This idea makes sense," Lafayette said with a smile. "But I'm a bit concerned that this play is inciting the citizens, especially the underprivileged, to become more emotional. Once their emotions are stirred, they might not settle for merely adding windows."

"But if we don't, the king won't feel any pressure and won't agree to any reforms," the Duke of Orleans argued.

Lafayette raised his head, gazed intently at the Duke of Orleans, but didn't respond.

The Duke of Orleans continued, "Furthermore, Gilbert, you know that the king has mobilized the army, applying pressure on us. Damn it; you were the one who told me this. How can we not respond?"

"The French army won't turn against its own people. Our military is meant to protect the homeland, not slaughter its citizens," Lafayette replied.

"Can you guarantee that?" the Duke of Orleans pressed.

"Of course," Lafayette answered without hesitation.

"What about those mercenaries? Can you ensure they won't harm the people?" the Duke of Orleans inquired.

Lafayette remained silent.

"If those mercenaries open fire on the people, what will the French army do? Will they defy the king's orders and engage in a battle with the foreign mercenaries, or will they stand by and watch?" the Duke of Orleans continued to push for answers.

Lafayette still didn't respond.

"You know, the military is uncertain about how to proceed," the Duke of Orleans continued. "If the army battles the foreign mercenaries, it means war has begun. This is not what you want. If we allow them to massacre the people, I believe that's not what you want either. Besides, military interference in politics is not a good long-term solution. Once this precedent is set, it could lead to endless trouble."

Lafayette secretly agreed with the Duke of Orleans on this point. However, he couldn't bring himself to speak up because, although he had no desire to become king, he did have thoughts of sidelining the king, holding the kingdom's power tightly in his hands, and perhaps ascending to a position similar to Mazarin or Richelieu. So, tarnishing the king's reputation, turning the people against him, would also serve his interests. Thus, he couldn't argue against it but asked, "What kind of power can a play demonstrate?"

The Duke of Orleans smiled and said, "A group of slaves, if determined, can shake the mighty Roman Empire. Today, the French people are stronger than Roman slaves, but France is much weaker than Rome. At least the Roman legions would go all out to suppress the slaves, while our army won't. The king knows this. The only ones he can rely on are the highlanders and the German mercenaries. If our king is smart, he should grasp the message conveyed by this play. If he's willing to compromise, we can achieve constitutional goals."

"But what if the king remains unwilling to compromise?" Lafayette inquired.

"Then we arm the National Guard to create a balance of power against the mercenaries," Robespierre suggested. "The National Guard may not match the mercenaries in skill, but in numbers, they can easily outnumber them several times or even tenfold."

"Let's hope our king understands the message conveyed by this play. Does he really want to follow in the footsteps of Charles I?" the Duke of Orleans added.

Lafayette furrowed his brow. The Duke of Orleans had been quite explicit.

"It's as Shakespeare said, 'The nearer in blood, the nearer in bloody deeds,'" he pondered and then finally spoke, "Our king is not as stubborn as Charles I. He will adapt to the tide of the times and become a monarch respected by the people."

Chapter 45: Rumors and the National Self-Defense Militia (1)

At almost the same time, in the not-so-distant Palace of Versailles, King Louis XVI and his queen, Marie Antoinette, were engaged in a conversation about a similar topic.

"Your Majesty, do you know that there are people openly advocating rebellion?" his queen, Marie Antoinette, widened her beautiful eyes, staring at her husband.

"In the Palace of the Tuileries, when has there not been someone advocating rebellion?" Louis XVI responded indifferently.

Marie Antoinette shot her husband an exasperated look and continued, "Mr. Lavoisier's nephew has become a rebel! He performed a play at the Tuileries that promotes rebellion, especially that song in it. It not only promotes rebellion but even blasphemes the divine. Don't you think we should do something about it?"

Louis XVI raised an eyebrow, "What would you have me do? Should I order them arrested and ban the performance? Paris is already in chaos, and such actions could easily incite a real riot."

"Isn't the current situation already a real riot?" Marie Antoinette asked without hesitation.

"At least they haven't come to attack Versailles with weapons," Louis XVI replied.

"You are the king; how can you say such things?" Marie Antoinette was visibly upset by her husband's weak response.

"Your Majesty, we must face the reality," Louis XVI lowered his head, appearing somewhat ashamed of their predicament. "The Parisian police system is nearly paralyzed, and due to financial problems, our army hasn't received their pay for a long time. They are just as discontented with the kingdom as the rebels. Additionally, the Parisian-based troops have long been infiltrated by those opposed to us. We can't rely on them now. If something happens, it's hard to predict whom their weapons will be pointed at. The provincial armies are a bit more reliable. Currently, we lack the means to suppress these rebels."

"What about the mercenaries? The Swiss, the Germans? They've been paid; aren't they supposed to do their job? And aren't there more reliable provincial armies?" Marie Antoinette inquired.

"The mercenaries and more reliable armies are not fully in place yet. For now, they can only be used to protect us, not enough to quell the situation," Louis XVI explained.

"How long will it take for them to be fully in place, then?" Marie Antoinette asked.

"That's hard to say. It requires funds and we can't act too quickly, or it may provoke them to rebel. If they really take action, our existing forces won't be able to withstand them. The provincial armies are somewhat more dependable now. That's why we need to stay in Versailles," Louis XVI hesitated.

"But if we stay in Versailles, won't we become hostages?" the queen asked.

"Not to that extent, but our power here isn't dominant," Louis XVI admitted with a sigh.

"Then why are we staying here? Why don't we move to a place where our power is dominant, like the provinces? We could gather our strength there," the queen suggested.

"Because once we leave, it means there will certainly be a civil war. Even if we ultimately win, our country will be devastated by civil war. To avoid this, at least to prevent a destructive civil war, we must stay in Versailles," Louis XVI explained.

"But what can we achieve by staying in Versailles?" Marie Antoinette wondered.

"We need to stabilize them first, and then slowly shift our power here. We must lull them into complacency, not let them despair immediately. Until our forces are concentrated and we have an advantage," Louis XVI said.

"Perhaps..." the queen pondered. "Perhaps, if things escalate, I can contact my family."

"It's not necessary at the moment," Louis XVI replied. "Even your normal communication with your family should be cautious, neither increasing nor decreasing it."

"This is absurd!" the queen protested. "Are they going to inspect our mail now?"

"I didn't mean that, but messengers leaving Versailles will be closely watched by others. This could lead to rumors," Louis XVI furrowed his brow.

"Rumors," the queen scoffed. "Do you think such actions can dispel rumors? No, because rumors don't need facts. Your Majesty, the more you indulge them, the stronger they become. If you truly wish to buy time, then do not be too permissive."

However, Louis XVI merely shook his head.

"Your Majesty, if you continue to allow these actions, even the Church will be disappointed in you," Fersen, who had been silent, spoke up.

"In that case, issue the ban. But do not enforce it," Louis XVI decided.

"If it's not enforced, it might as well not be issued at all," the queen argued. "If we issue the order but do not enforce it, it will only make us look weak and encourage further unrest."

"If we enforce it, what if conflicts arise?" Louis XVI countered. "Should we send the Swiss Guard to suppress them? We do not have the force to quell them, and if conflict erupts, our weaknesses will be exposed. So for now, my queen, we must avoid any direct conflict, even if it means enduring humiliation, just like King Henry IV."

Henry IV was an emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in the 11th century. He had his excommunication order issued by Pope Gregory VII due to power struggles with the Papacy. During that time, the Holy Roman Empire was unstable, and after the excommunication, theoretically, all those who were loyal to him were no longer bound by allegiance. Some local nobles declared that if Henry IV did not receive the Pope's forgiveness, they would not recognize his authority.

In the midst of domestic and external crises, Henry IV had to bow before the Pope. He personally went to the castle of Canossa, where the Pope stayed, with his wife and son to repent and seek absolution. After enduring humiliation, he was forgiven by the Pope. Later, Henry IV managed to quell internal rebellions and, with his army, marched into Rome, expelled Pope Gregory VII, and appointed an antipope. This story was mentioned now to serve as an example for enduring humiliation in the present. After hearing this, everyone fell silent.

After a while, the queen said, "So, let's pretend we know nothing. I've heard that sometimes you either do something or not at all. If we take no action, at least it will make you seem mysterious. If we act but appear weak, people will look down on us."

Louis XVI quickly nodded, "I think the queen has a point."

"But, Your Majesty," the queen suddenly added with a mocking tone, "I've always been curious about one thing: where is your limit, Your Majesty?"

...

While King Louis XVI did not decide to ban the play "Spartacus," rumors that the play was about to be banned spread increasingly wildly. Initially, these rumors were merely about the king's intention to ban the play. Later, they claimed that the king had sent secret orders to arrest the author and all the actors. Subsequently, it was rumored that anyone involved in the play would be excommunicated. Various rumors emerged and evolved, keeping people on their toes.

During this time, Armand showed some of his uncle's wisdom. He regarded these rumors as free advertising. Leveraging the rumors, he used them to promote the play, claiming, "This may be the last chance to see it; if you don't watch now, you won't see it again!"

Just like Adam and Eve couldn't resist the temptation of the "forbidden fruit," their descendants always seemed to become even more interested in things with the word "forbidden." So the tantalizing headline "about to be banned" was indeed very effective. Now, the Dragon and Rose troupe's performances were consistently sold out, and other theater groups followed suit, staging the same play. It was due to this that the blasphemous song, "The Slave's Anthem," became popular throughout Paris.

Initially, when these rumors first emerged, the actors in the troupe were nervous. However, the packed audiences brought them increased earnings, which were particularly persuasive in a time when food prices were soaring. Therefore, the actors came to embrace the rumors and even started fabricating some themselves, such as an actor being attacked by unknown individuals.

As conflicts, both large and small, continued to occur in Paris, the rumor that the king was planning a massacre of the city's residents became more popular. The rumors manufactured by Armand and his group found many believers.

Chapter 46: Rumors and the National Self-Defense Militia (2)

Just as Armand had spread a new rumor himself suddenly gone missing, perhaps imprisoned in the Bastille, a more astonishing piece of news arrived: the King's finance minister, Necker, had been dismissed and expelled from the country.

Necker's departure was seen as a sign that the King was about to crush the Third Estate's resistance, as he had served as France's finance minister twice.

During his first term as finance minister, he gained widespread favor among the common people of the city for opposing free grain trade. (Free grain trade would lead to inevitable price hikes, particularly in the face of recurring natural disasters, greatly harming the interests of the poorest of the poor.)

He introduced a method of keeping the national finances running through debt rather than raising taxes, which also pleased the wealthier members of the Third Estate.

However, in 1781, to defend his fiscal policies, he shockingly published the financial report of the French government, revealing the budget deficit and the lavish privileges of the nobility. The disclosure of these two figures caused a political storm. The sight of the astronomical expenses, especially by Queen Marie Antoinette, who had spent seventy-six thousand six hundred francs just

redecorating her Trianon palace, and the Queen's gift of half a million francs to her favorite, Madame de Polignac, in just one year, angered the poor who had never even seen a single Louis coin in their lives, especially considering their empty rice bags.

So, Marie Antoinette, who had initially won the cheers of all of Paris when she became queen, was now called "Deficit Queen," and Necker, the cause of this uproar, was dismissed from his post.

However, as time went on, the fiscal deficit became more severe, borrowing became increasingly difficult (at the time, French government bonds had an interest rate as high as almost twenty percent, yet they still couldn't raise funds), and the debt repayment pressure became an insurmountable burden in the national budget. Meanwhile, the privileged class adamantly refused to pay taxes. (In this regard, it seems a bit similar to what's happening with the current government, doesn't it?) Louis XVI had no choice but to call back Necker. However, Necker was not a miracle worker; he couldn't just summon gold from thin air, and so they resorted to issuing assignats.

Necker had no choice but to propose taxing the privileged class. Then, the clergy and nobility used tradition as a shield, claiming that taxing the privileged class required authorization from the "Estates-General." The privileged class assumed that Louis XVI would never dare to convene the Estates-General, but they never expected that the desperate Louis XVI would indeed do just that.

In the Estates-General, Necker helped the Third Estate successfully increase their representation and gained the power to vote on fiscal matters according to the number of representatives, not by estate. To the people of Paris, Necker's dismissal meant that the King had decided to stand against the Third Estate. In their eyes, it was a signal that the King was preparing to suppress the people with force.

"We can't sit around and wait for the King's foreign mercenaries and those bandits to come slaughter and plunder us. We must stand up, take up arms, and wear our cockades for identification. We must defend ourselves, our wives, our children, and our property," a man delivered an impassioned speech in front of the Royal Palace.

"It's strange, isn't De Mran usually stuttering? How is he speaking fluently today?" The person speaking seemed to be familiar with the speaker, De Mran.

"Yes, De Mran always struggled with his speech. He would even prefer to write rather than speak. Let's listen to what he has to say today," another person remarked.

"This dismissal is a warning for the patriots who will face a Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre! And today, our friend Armand Lavache, the playwright who created the immortal 'Spartacus,' has disappeared! We all know what happened to him; he won't be anywhere else. He must have been captured by the King's spies and those hounds and taken to the Bastille!" the passionate De Mran continued, pulling out two pistols from his green coat pocket. "Follow me; we will arm ourselves!"

The crowd responded enthusiastically.

"Let's go, let's go together!"

So they went together.

Where did they go? To a weapons store, of course. De Mran led the people to the nearest weapons store. When the shopkeeper saw so many people approaching with such determination, he quickly

tried to close the door. But De Mran was faster; he took a step and reached the door, blocking it with the board that was about to close. Everyone rushed in.

"Are you a member of the Third Estate, a citizen of Paris?" De Mran asked loudly.

"Of course, of course," the pale-faced shopkeeper answered.

"Good! The tyrant is plotting to crush the Third Estate with force, to plunder and slaughter Paris! Shouldn't you use your strength to defend the people of Paris?" De Mran asked.

Everyone looked at the shopkeeper.

The shopkeeper, holding two pistols, looked around and replied in a shaky voice, "Of course... what you said... of course... I..."

"Good," De Mran patted the shopkeeper on the shoulder and turned to the others, shouting, "You see, this citizen understands the righteousness! He is willing to support us, to join us! Come on, let's all arm ourselves! We must fight for Paris, for freedom!"

So, they all grabbed the weapons in the store. One person took a shotgun, another grabbed a spear... The shopkeeper watched, wanting to stop them but not daring to, and then De Mran handed him a hunting knife. "Citizen, thank you for your generosity. Let's go, we will defend Paris together!"

The shopkeeper held the knife and, escorted by the others, headed towards the next block. After about half a street's walk, he began to realize something.

"Citizens, citizens! There's another weapons store to the right; many of us still don't have weapons. Let's go there to arm ourselves!" he shouted.

"That's right; we need weapons to stand against the tyrant! Open the door quickly!" someone yelled.

"Indeed, we must be armed to fight the tyrant! Open up!" another person added.

"I won't open today... This is all my hard-earned money; I can't just give it to you like this!" came the voice from behind the door.

"Are you siding with the tyrant, opposing the people?" someone scolded.

"Break down the door, we'll break it down!" another person shouted.

So, people started breaking the door down.

"Stop!" came the voice from inside. "If you don't stop, we'll open fire!"

However, the people didn't stop.

"Bang!" A gunshot sounded from inside, and one of the men trying to break down the door fell to the ground, clutching his leg.

The men immediately scattered.

"That damned fellow; he must be a supporter of the tyrant!" someone yelled.

"Kill such scoundrels!" more people shouted.

Several rifles were aimed at the door and fired haphazardly. The door was riddled with bullet holes. Someone sneaked around the side and gave the door a kick. The door was pushed open those earlier shots had damaged the door's lock.

Everyone rushed inside and saw a middle-aged man trembling, trying to load his rifle. But his hands were shaking so badly that the gunpowder spilled outside the barrel. Upon seeing the crowd burst in, he dropped the rifle and turned to run. However, a spear pierced through his back, pinning him to the wall.

"Damn henchman of the tyrant!" one man cursed as he charged forward, grabbing the man's hair and waving a knife. He aimed the blade at the man's neck, but his technique was lacking. The first strike didn't sever the spinal cord. So, he continued to hack at the man's neck, and it wasn't until several more blows that he finally decapitated him.

The man lifted the bloodied head, just like Perseus had held the head of Medusa, and proclaimed, "Look, this is the fate of the tyrant's lackeys!"

"That's right, this is how the lackeys of the tyrant should end!"

"His whole family should be killed!"

Somebody called out, "Over there, it seems there are more people!"

The crowd moved towards the inner room, but the shopkeeper stayed behind. He heard someone crying, "Oh God, save us!"

Then another voice shouted, "Among these lackeys, there are women and children!"

"Kill them all! They deserve it!"

The result was a series of screams, and several people emerged from the inner room, their faces smeared with blood, triumphantly shouting, "Arm yourselves, defend Paris!"

In truth, people don't necessarily need to be drunk to become fanatical; they just need to be part of a large group with a noble cause.

"These lackeys and their whole families deserve to die!" someone shouted.

"Exactly, this is how the tyrant's lackeys should be dealt with!"

As the crowd's fervor grew, somebody else yelled, "Over here, it looks like there are more people!"

So, they all moved forward, leaving the shopkeeper behind. He heard the cries for help, and then there was silence. The atmosphere was heavy with tension.

Chapter 47: Rumors and the National Self-Defense Militia (3)

Joseph stood by his window, gazing at the rising columns of smoke in the distance.

"Looks like something's burning over there," Lucien said, standing nearby.

"It's the Honorable Artillery Company," Joseph replied. "They say there are a lot of weapons there the revolution has already begun."

"Shouldn't we do something?" Lucien asked. Joseph turned to him, seeing the eager anticipation in his eyes.

"No, there's nothing we need to do right now," Joseph shook his head. "Lucien, remember, the first one to step onto the stage isn't necessarily the main character. The main character will only appear at the most opportune moment. It's too chaotic right now, and it's not our time to step in."

Indeed, it was incredibly chaotic at the moment. Almost all of Paris was in flames. Rumors of the impending Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre were spreading like wildfire, and almost everyone was busy searching for self-defense weapons. But Joseph lived in the military academy, so he was temporarily safe.

Even in the military academy, they were prepared for the chaos. Instructors had been allowed to carry firearms with them and, after paying a certain deposit, take these weapons out of the school to protect themselves at home. Joseph had placed four rifles and two handguns in his rented house.

Joseph had decided to keep his two younger brothers from going to school for the time being. Paris was too unsafe at this moment. The streets were filled with fervent and chaotic crowds, some genuinely filled with revolutionary zeal, while others were just taking advantage of the chaos. Moreover, in these two days, the Parisian police system had completely collapsed. The police officers were too scared for their own safety and refused to go outside. In these two days, quite a few "spies of the tyrant" had already been lynched from lampposts.

These police officers were generally disliked, but without them, Paris had descended into complete anarchy, and public safety had gone to hell. Walking on the streets now, being robbed or even killed suddenly was highly possible.

The neighborhood where Joseph lived had built barricades to protect against the mercenaries who might come to massacre and loot the Parisian people. In practice, the main purpose of these barricades was to protect the neighborhood in such a state of lawlessness.

On the barricade at the street corner, a dozen young men in blue uniforms stood guard with rifles. In front of them, there were makeshift chevaux-de-frise, and no one could enter the neighborhood except for the residents.

Because they acted quickly, the neighborhood was still relatively safe.

"Stay at home, and don't open the door to anyone," Joseph took out his pocket watch and told his two younger brothers. "Understood, you two. Don't worry; we're not helpless little rabbits. We won't let the big bad wolf in," Lucien said nonchalantly.

"Well, Lucien, you know how to handle firearms. I took you to practice not too long ago. You take good care of your little brother, but be careful not to accidentally fire a shot. I need to attend a meeting now and will be gone for an hour or two. You need to protect yourselves and your little brother."

Joseph put on his coat, donned a hat with a blue and red badge, and inserted two handguns into the holsters hidden under his coat.

"I don't need Lucien to protect me; I can handle a gun too," Louis chimed in. "I'm not worse than Lucien when it comes to shooting."

"You're still too young. Just listen to Lucien and behave yourselves. Don't cause trouble," Joseph said sternly.

"Yes, if something happens, I'll protect you. You can stay behind me and help me load bullets," Lucien said, clearly excited after Joseph's approval.

"Alright, I need to go now. Stay home and don't be reckless. If I'm late coming back, there's bread in the cupboard. Sophie is not here these days, so you can make sandwiches for yourselves."

Joseph was now dressed and picked up his cane. After a few more words of caution to his two younger brothers, he left the house.

He walked along the empty streets for a while until he reached the location of the meeting the house of the banker Charles.

Joseph approached the gate and showed his invitation to the gatekeeper, who then led him through the Louis XV-style courtyard to a large hall.

Joseph handed his cane to the servant and walked in.

The hall was already filled with a number of people. Most of them were familiar to Joseph, and they were the wealthiest residents of the neighborhood.

"Quiet down, everyone!" Banker Charles took out his gold pocket watch on a long chain and checked the time. He then shouted, "It's about time, and our people are almost all here. Let's not waste any time and get started!"

Everyone quieted down.

"Gentlemen, you all know what has been happening these days," Charles said. "Mr. Necker has been dismissed, which may signify a change in the king's stance and has brought a lot of uncertainty in the financial sector. Therefore, we've temporarily closed the stock exchange. You also know that Mr. Necker's dismissal has created too much uncertainty. Meanwhile, we've sent a representative to Versailles to gather information."

"How's it going?" someone asked anxiously.

Many of the people here were wealthy, and quite a few of them were creditors of the French government, more precisely, creditors of the French royal family. Over the years, a significant portion of the French government's expenses had been supported by loans. Now, everyone was concerned that His Majesty the King might default on his debts or forcibly lower the interest rates on the national debt.

"The dismissal of Mr. Necker has been confirmed. While the king's side claims there won't be any defaults or forced reductions of interest rates on the national debt, this statement was not made by the king himself, so its credibility is in question. Besides, he found out that there have been military movements near Paris."

This statement immediately caused an uproar below.

Charles seemed quite satisfied with everyone's reaction, and he observed for a moment before continuing, "Everyone, calm down. Don't panic. We've also consulted with the Marquis de Lafayette, who has revealed that the king indeed brought in a legion composed of mountain people, but it's for enhancing the security of Versailles. This legion is small in number and lacks heavy weapons; they are in no position to threaten Paris."

"But there are over twenty legions near Paris," someone shouted.

"The Marquis de Lafayette assures us that the French army will never lay a hand on Paris," Charles replied.

"Will they confront the mercenaries?" another person asked.

"That's highly unlikely," someone in the crowd replied. "Just yesterday morning, the Royal Guard of France retreated to the Place des Victoires. In other words, no matter what happens in Paris, they won't get involved."

"Yes," Charles said. "Considering the real dangers, not just the mercenaries, but also the lawless looters outside. You should also be aware that in these past two days, many legitimate businesspeople have been robbed or even killed by these hooligans. Almost every lamppost in the Saint-Antoine district has a grain merchant hanging from it. If these hooligans enter our neighborhood, it will be a nightmare."

"We've already built barricades and organized guards. Are we doing this just for a few hooligans?" someone disdainfully remarked.

"If we were only dealing with scattered hooligans, our current measures would be sufficient. But we also need to consider the possible presence of mercenaries. Furthermore, these hooligans might gather in groups. Therefore, we cannot rely solely on individual neighborhoods to confront the entire mob of Paris. Gentlemen, why can a single army easily defeat multiple hooligans and ruffians? It's because the army is organized. We need to organize our strength to form a genuine army. This way, we can protect our interests in these turbulent times."

"But where do we find military experts?" someone asked.

"The Marquis de Lafayette has suggested that during his time in North America, he gained experience in organizing militias. He can provide us with some assistance," Charles said.

Joseph listened and smiled slightly. It was clear that the Marquis de Lafayette held a significant influence within the French military, but his ability to command French troops was quite limited. If a militia force could be organized in Paris, given the size of the city, they could easily assemble forty to fifty thousand militiamen. If such a force could be controlled or at least made to appear under his control, it would undoubtedly bring him more political benefits.

"Now it's good; with the Marquis de Lafayette, we can rest easy," someone below commented.

"The Marquis de Lafayette also believes that we should unite with the respectable gentlemen from other neighborhoods and establish a unified National Guard. Only by pooling the strength of decent Parisians can we address various dangers and protect ourselves more effectively," Charles continued. "In line with his suggestions, our neighborhood's self-defense force can be organized into a company. As the largest sponsor, I am willing to assume the responsibility of commanding this company. Who agrees and who disagrees?"

Everyone remained silent.

Charles, satisfied with everyone's response, was about to continue speaking when suddenly, someone spoke up. "Charles, may I ask you a question?"

Charles looked and saw an elderly man named Orlandi. Charles knew that even though this man ran a tavern, he had connections to the House of Orleans. So, although he furrowed his brow slightly, he kindly asked, "Mr. Orlandi, do you have any questions?"

"Gentlemen, I greatly admire Charles's character and his dedication to our neighborhood. I just wanted to know if Charles has any military service experience. If it's about leading a company of Gold Louis, no one is more suitable than you, but leading in combat"

"So, Mr. Orlandi, do you have a suitable candidate?" Charles asked in return.

"I don't either," Orlandi said candidly. "I'm not against you becoming the company commander, Charles. I just want to recommend an advisor to you."

At this point, Orlandi turned to Joseph and said to everyone, "Mr. Bonaparte, could you come over here? Mr. Bonaparte, I believe you're familiar to all of us. He's an instructor at the military academy and an active-duty soldier. When it comes to military strategy, he has more experience than any of us. The fortifications we've built were designed by him. However, Mr. Bonaparte is an active-duty soldier and cannot hold a formal position in the militia. But I believe he should also contribute to our neighborhood, as a member of our neighborhood. Therefore, I'd like to invite him to be the military advisor to our neighborhood's National Guard company. What do you all think?"

Chapter 48: Rumors and the National Self-Defense Militia (4)

For this suggestion, Charles couldn't find any reason to oppose it. Even though Joseph wasn't a military instructor, everyone could sense that the military expertise of an instructor from a military academy far exceeded that of an amateur like himself when guiding the construction of barricades.

"Of course, there's no problem at all, as long as Mr. Bonaparte is willing, we would welcome your assistance with open arms," Charles smiled. "I wonder if Mr. Bonaparte is willing to help us?"

"As a member of the community, it's my duty. However, you all know I'm an active-duty soldier. If I receive military orders from above, I must prioritize those. As long as it doesn't conflict with those orders, I'm willing to contribute," Joseph replied.

"Well then, let us all express our gratitude to Mr. Bonaparte!" Charles said.

And just like that, Joseph became the military advisor to the National Guard in the district. They also agreed to start reorganizing the neighborhood militia into the National Guard and commence military training the next day.

However, this plan was almost immediately shattered because, in the middle of the day, new rumors started spreading.

This rumor claimed that the cannons of Montmartre Heights and the Bastille were already aimed at the heart of Paris. The royalist forces, loyal to the king, were about to launch an attack on Paris.

Of course, this was just a rumor, but the vast majority of Parisians believed it. What made it even more dangerous was that this rumor couldn't be easily dispelled. Not only because "it's easier to create a lie than to refute it" but also because, at this moment in time, refuting such rumors was a political mistake. Anyone attempting to disprove them would be seen as "henchmen of the tyrant" by the angry populace, and they would face severe consequences.

Since no one dared to refute the rumors, they only gained more credibility. The existing flaws in these rumors went unmentioned, and any discrepancies were quietly patched up during their spread. In any case, this rumor was widely believed by almost all Parisians.

In the past few days, a significant number of Parisians had armed themselves, especially after taking the unguarded Hotel des Invalides, where they found over 30,000 rifles and over ten cannons. However, there wasn't enough gunpowder to go around.

This led to another rumor based on the previous one: that the Bastille contained a vast supply of gunpowder. This rumor seemed "plausible" since, if the king planned to use the Bastille's cannons to suppress Paris, it made sense for them to store ample gunpowder there.

For the untrained militia in Paris, attacking the heavily fortified Montmartre Heights was a daunting task, but the Bastille seemed much more manageable by comparison.

The Bastille was built as a fortress outside the city gates during the Hundred Years' War between England and France. It had eight towers, each around 30 meters high, connected by 30-meter-wide, 3-meter-thick walls, equipped with 15 large cannons. It was surrounded by a 26-meter-wide, 8-meter-deep moat that connected to the Seine River, with only one drawbridge for entry. It was an impenetrable castle.

However, with the expansion of Paris, this fortress, once located outside the city gates, became an internal structure. Its military role was diminished, and it transitioned from a military fortress to a royal stronghold.

By the late 14th century, the Bastille was converted into a royal prison, housing the most important "prisoners of state," many of whom were political prisoners. Therefore, in the minds of the French people, this prison became a symbol of the absolutist monarchy.

The Bastille garrison consisted of 82 men, but in early July, 32 Swiss mercenaries were deployed to reinforce its defenses. Still, when it came to the number of defenders, the Bastille couldn't compare to Montmartre Heights. Moreover, due to neglect, the moat surrounding the Bastille had dried up. This further reduced the fortress's defensive capabilities, making the militia feel confident about taking it.

So, the next morning, an uncountable number of armed, disorganized citizens began to approach the Bastille. This development forced Charles to postpone his plans for organizing the National Guard in the district.

The Bastille was surrounded by tens of thousands of armed Parisian citizens, but those armed only with rifles had limited means to breach it. The fortress walls were too high, and the dried moat was still too wide and deep to cross easily.

But the Bastille's commander, De Launay, saw things differently. The seemingly impregnable Bastille, although a 14th-century fortress, had design flaws and concepts that had become outdated. In 1453, the siege of Constantinople had demonstrated that tall, vertical fortress walls were highly susceptible to collapse under cannon fire. Consequently, modern fortifications featured lower, thicker walls that sloped inward to prevent widespread collapse due to cannon fire. However, the Bastille lacked these improvements.

The Bastille's walls were 30 meters high, completely vertical, and just 3 meters thick. Such walls couldn't withstand cannon fire. Moreover, the lack of clear lines of sight due to surrounding buildings hindered the guards' vision.

So, De Launay had no certainty about defending the ancient fortress.

When the citizens started to approach the Bastille, De Launay ordered his soldiers not to open fire on the approaching crowd and asked for negotiations.

The citizens took some time to select representatives to enter the Bastille for negotiations. However, during the negotiation process, a new rumor began to spread among the citizens due to communication difficulties and the prolonged negotiations.

This rumor claimed that the representatives who had entered the Bastille had been ruthlessly killed by the "henchmen of the tyrant" in a cruel and heartless manner. This rumor immediately inflamed the tens of thousands of armed citizens outside. The crowd began to chant:

"Take the Bastille, kill those evildoers!"

"Kill them! Kill them!"

"Charge! Charge!"

Someone even started singing the "Song of the Slaves," initially just one or two people, but soon, more voices joined in, forming a roaring river of song, as they surged toward the Bastille. Tens of thousands of militiamen, armed with rifles, chanted, "In the old world, we'll conquer everything; slaves, rise up!" They inched closer to the Bastille, and some quick-thinking militiamen even crossed the dried moat, climbed to the drawbridge, and attempted to sever the chains holding it.

In the chaos, a Swiss guard, in a panic, fired a shot at a militiaman wielding an axe. This action immediately ended any prospects of peaceful negotiations, and the militiamen opened fire in response, resulting in a chaotic gunfight.

The battle didn't favor the militiamen; the Bastille, originally built as a fortress, offered significant defensive advantages. Guarded by defenders who had the higher ground, cover, and experience with rifles, they easily picked off many militiamen. Those with no training, despite their vast numbers, struggled to aim and shoot, with many never having held a rifle before. Their gunfire was sporadic and rarely hit the mark. While the scene appeared intense, they achieved very little. In the actual historical account, only one guard was lightly wounded until the Bastille surrendered. However, the effectiveness of the defense was much greater.

The following period saw an intense standoff. De Launay, the Bastille's commander, raised a white flag on multiple occasions, hoping to negotiate a ceasefire with the besiegers, but the citizens outside unequivocally rejected his gestures. They believed De Launay's actions were deceptive, and after his men opened fire on their own people, he had forfeited any right to surrender.

But rejecting negotiations was one thing; breaking into the Bastille was another. The militiamen attempted various methods, including some imaginative ones. For instance, they proposed using flaming tarred cloth to start a fire, even to burn the cannons. However, they soon realized they couldn't get the burning tarred cloth past the 30-meter-high walls.

Some also considered using cannons, as they did have cannons, but they lacked gunners. Their initial artillery fire from a safe distance was largely ineffective. Although, theoretically, the Bastille was a large target, they struggled to hit it. However, the militiamen, inexperienced in handling cannons, managed to avoid hitting the massive fortress in their multiple attempts. They fired several rounds, but not a single cannonball found its target on the Bastille's walls.

Chapter 49: The Arrival of a Great Era

The militiamen had limited gunpowder, and this kind of wastefulness couldn't continue for long. However, they had plenty of hot-blooded lives to spare, so wasting a few wasn't a big concern for

them. They decided to brave the enemy bullets and push the cannons close enough to Bastille, close enough that making the cannonballs fly required the skill level of a world-class Chinese soccer forward clearing the ball against the opposing goal, and then they'd open fire, shattering this "fortress of tyranny."

But ideals are plump, and reality is often quite bony. The cannon had only been pushed forward a couple of steps when it drew the attention of the defenders. Among the defenders, there were Swiss mountain men, armed not only with standard rifles but also with their hunting rifles with rifled barrels.

In fact, rifled firearms had been around in Europe for quite some time, and their advantages in accuracy were well-known. However, their slow rate of fire made it challenging for them to find a place in the military (during the firing line era, after the first volley, soldiers faced a thick battlefield fog, and they either had to charge with bayonets or quickly reload and fire another round of probabilistic shooting. In the first case, long range didn't matter; in the second case, rate of fire was more critical than accuracy).

So, these weapons were generally only useful in places where precision mattered, but speed was not a high requirement, such as hunting. Consequently, the military rifles of this era were mostly smoothbore, and the more high-end hunting rifles were often rifled.

Switzerland was full of forests and mountains, so rifled barrels were quite common among the Swiss. Swiss mercenaries often provided their own weapons, and many of them had rifled hunting rifles.

Several Swiss soldiers armed with rifled hunting rifles immediately opened fire on the militiamen struggling to push the cannon. The military quality of these Swiss soldiers in this era was actually quite good. Their shooting was quite effective, and they quickly brought down three or four militiamen. However, the rifled firearms of this era loaded very slowly. Compared to standard smoothbore rifles, they had a much slower rate of fire. So, while the Swiss soldiers were busy reloading, the militiamen pushed the cannon forward a bit more. Then, the guns fired again, and several more people fell.

The militiamen displayed true fearlessness. They positioned the cannon under the Swiss fire and loaded it with powder and the cannonball. With the help of trained gunners, the cannon's rate of fire was actually much higher than that of rifled rifles; in the hands of well-trained British Royal Navy crew, their rate of fire might even be faster than smoothbore rifles.

However, the problem was that the individuals controlling the cannon had never operated one in their lives. The majority of them had never touched a cannon before. So their loading process was naturally very slow, so slow that during the time it took them to load a cannonball, the rifled rifles on the opposite side fired three rounds, killing over ten people. Only then did they finish loading.

Then, when the cannon fired towards Bastille, the cannon burst open because they had packed double the amount of powder to ensure that it could collapse the walls with a single shot.

"We need real gunners, real gunners!" The militiamen cried out, "Anyone among you who has been a gunner before, please step forward! France needs your strength!"

However, no one stepped forward. Among the thousands of militiamen besieging Bastille, there were no gunners.

The situation had reached a standstill again. The militiamen continued to take cover behind buildings, shooting haphazardly at Bastille, while the defenders of Bastille remained calm, seldom returning fire but achieving significant results when they did. In the exchange of fire, it was the militiamen who were being hit, and the defenders remained nearly unscathed.

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The National Guard in Joseph's neighborhood did not participate in the siege of Bastille; instead, they strengthened their defenses. The leaders of the National Guard closely monitored the progress of the battle.

"Bastille is not that difficult to capture. The key is that the militiamen lack competent gunners. If a few cannonballs accurately hit the same spot at the base of the walls, it could lead to the collapse of the wall. Once the wall is no longer protecting them, what can a hundred defenders do? Unfortunately, the militiamen lack skilled gunners," said a plump shopkeeper-like man.

"Among the militiamen, there are indeed skilled gunners, but they are not among the common rabble," Charles said. While theoretically, everyone belonged to the "Third Estate," in practice, the people in this neighborhood, including Charles himself, had no respect for the militiamen currently besieging Bastille.

Joseph knew what Charles meant. There were indeed skilled gunners among the militiamen. These gunners had been part of the French royal army just a few days ago, but various circumstances had led to their dismissal, and they had immediately joined the militiamen. However, although they were also militiamen (just like Charles and his group), they were not the same as the militiamen currently besieging Bastille. They were part of the more organized National Guard.

Joseph also knew that these gunners were ultimately controlled by someone. A prominent figure in the army, who wielded great influence, controlled these genuinely combat-capable National Guard. In history, when the attack on Bastille reached a deadlock, it was this figure who brought a cannon to the scene and used continuous and precise artillery fire to force the defenders to surrender. It was this decisive action that allowed this figure to become the commander-in-chief of the Paris National Guard and a significant figure in the early days of the revolution.

This prominent figure was the Marquis de Lafayette.

"However, this time, Marquis de Lafayette might not get what he wants. Even without his support, the Duke of Orleans has other means," Joseph thought.

The Duke of Orleans and the Marquis de Lafayette were both nobles who supported constitutional monarchy. However, this didn't mean they were allies. The Duke of Orleans was of royal blood, and he aspired to become the suitable candidate for the monarch in the constitutional monarchy he hoped for. But the ideal candidate in the mind of the Marquis de Lafayette was not him. Perhaps the Marquis de Lafayette didn't particularly appreciate the locksmith (Louis XVI had an amateur hobby of making various high-difficulty locks), but he believed that any member of the royal family would be more suitable for the French crown than the Duke of Orleans. Because if the Duke of Orleans became king, with his power and influence, he would never settle for being a mere figurehead.

Therefore, the Marquis de Lafayette had always seen the Duke of Orleans as the "greatest threat to democracy." In the original history, after the Marquis de Lafayette came to power, he immediately used a combination of threats and bribes to exile the Duke of Orleans to England when the attack on

Bastille reached a stalemate. This decisive action allowed him to become the commander-in-chief of the Paris National Guard and a key figure in the early stages of the revolution.

But now, unlike in history, the Duke of Orleans didn't have artillery, but he possessed something that he didn't have in the original history: high explosive powder.

With Joseph's help, Lavoisier had created a relatively safe explosive by mixing diatomaceous earth with nitroglycerin. Of course, compared to the highly insensitive explosives of the future, they couldn't even be detonated by shooting, but they were much more potent than the black powder of the time. With this substance, they could create a straightforward and violent weapon to deal with various fortifications: a bomb.

The rate of fire of firearms in this era was quite limited, and the number of defenders at Bastille was limited. Even if they reached the base of the walls, regular militiamen wouldn't be able to do much against this 30-meter-high, 3-meter-thick wall. However, the Duke of Orleans' men were different. They had a weapon capable of instantly destroying this wall: the bomb.

At this moment, a group of National Guard soldiers passed through Joseph's neighborhood, pulling a cannon. Their well-organized equipment, precise steps, and the well-fed horses pulling the cannon indicated that they were a well-trained unit, not something the common rabble of militiamen could match.

"Marquis de Lafayette has already taken action," Joseph thought. "The Duke of Orleans' people should be taking action soon as well."

Just then, there was a massive explosion that caused the glass windows in the area to vibrate and rattle.

"Did a gunpowder magazine explode somewhere?" someone asked in panic.

"It seems to be coming from the direction of Bastille. Could it be that they've really blown up all that gunpowder?" Charles furrowed his brows.

It was rumored that there were tens of thousands of pounds of gunpowder in Bastille. Of course, this was a rumor; Bastille didn't have that much gunpowder. But earlier, when the warden of Bastille was negotiating for surrender with the besieging militiamen, he had threatened to ignite tens of thousands of pounds of gunpowder and take everyone with him. So now, everyone believed that there was a large amount of gunpowder in Bastille.

"It shouldn't be," Joseph gazed eastward and then shook his head. "If it were a gunpowder magazine exploding, we should be able to see thick smoke rising by now. The smoke we see is not significant enough."

The gunpowder of this era produced a lot of dense smoke when it exploded. So, this explosion was definitely not a gunpowder magazine.

"There isn't much smoke after the explosion, but it made buildings shake from this far away. This must be the Duke of Orleans' men using high explosive powder. It seems that Marquis de Lafayette's troops arrived too late. But with such a big shake, how much explosive powder did they pack in those bombs?" Joseph wondered.

Chapter 50: The Blunder

De Launay lay on the ground, his head ringing like a bell. He tried to get up but found his body limp, devoid of strength. He wanted to call for help, but the people around him were all lying on the ground, immobilized. And to make matters worse, he couldn't even hear his own voice.

"This is a disaster; the gunpowder magazine must have exploded," De Launay thought.

The Bastille's gunpowder storage certainly didn't contain enough explosive material to destroy the entire fortress, but the explosion of even the relatively smaller amount could be catastrophic.

"Damn it, I wonder if the walls have collapsed," De Launay pondered.

After some time, De Launay managed to regain some strength. He struggled to his feet, using a nearby table for support, and staggered to the city wall.

A long crack had appeared in the wall, wide enough to fit a fist. Most of the soldiers on the wall were still lying on the ground, with only a few attempting to climb to their feet, leaning against the battlements.

"What happened? What's going on?" De Launay shouted.

No one answered him, not even a soldier who had managed to stand up. They all gazed at him with puzzled expressions, unable to understand his words. De Launay realized that he couldn't hear his own voice; the explosion had damaged his hearing. In fact, he couldn't even hear himself speak clearly.

De Launay stumbled to the edge of the battlement and peered down.

Not far from the moat, there was a massive crater, and smoke billowed from it. Within a radius of about thirty to forty meters around the crater, all the buildings had been toppled. Even further away, on the streets and the rooftops of buildings that hadn't collapsed yet, people lay scattered.

"What... what is this? Did a meteor fall here?" De Launay's mind entertained such a bizarre thought.

It wasn't a meteor; it was the result of a collision between a large explosive package and a bullet.

Just moments ago, a group of people had arrived in a carriage, claiming to be followers of the Duke of Orleans. They had brought a "new type of explosive" purportedly used for mining.

"We're the Duke of Orleans' men, and this is the mining explosive we use. We've packaged the explosive, attached the fuse, and all we need is a brave soul, a true hero like Enomaie (a character from "Spartacus," who sang the "Slave's Anthem" on the cross). They need to brave the tyrant's bullets and ignite this thing under the city wall. It can blow a whole section of the wall sky-high," declared the person who arrived in the carriage.

"These things can destroy the walls?" someone questioned with disbelief.

"As long as there's enough explosive, even a mountain can be blown to pieces," the carriage driver replied.

At this point, a burly man approached, shouting, "I'll do it, I'll do it," as he reached for one of the explosive packages on the carriage.

"Is this thing too light?" he scoffed, raising an eyebrow. "Is there enough gunpowder in here for anything significant?"

"We have explosives inside, much more potent than gunpowder, and it's not that light. There's twelve pounds of explosive in there!" the carriage driver explained.

"Don't be stingy; give me more," the burly man insisted. "Who knows, it might take several of us to get this thing to the wall. If the power isn't enough, placing just one won't suffice, and we'll need to sacrifice even more people. So, the more powerful, the better, the more explosives we pack in, the better. How about we gather everything from these packages into one and send the entire Bastille into the sky at once? What do you say?"

The surrounding people responded in unison.

"Right on!"

"Send them all to the heavens!"

"Let them personally seek forgiveness from God up there!"

The burly man smiled, "All right, my brothers, no need to rehearse lines anymore; we've all got them down. If you have the courage, follow me. If I go down before reaching the city wall, you can take the explosive and torch from my hands and continue the fight in my place. Any objections?"

"None!" the scruffy-looking guy yelled loudly.

"Excellent! Let's go!" the burly man declared.

"Wait! Wait!" the carriage driver suddenly shouted. "You can't just charge in like that; you need cover. Let's get a few more people from different angles to distract the guards' attention. Others can start shooting at the Bastille to provide cover for them."

"Hey, your idea is good!" everyone shouted together. "Let's do it this way!"

"I'm charging too!"

"Give me a fake explosive; I can divert their attention as well!"

So, the militia began firing randomly at the Bastille, and a dozen people charged toward it.

The guards on the city wall returned fire, and the burly man, being a big target, had several rifles aimed at him. However, he ran so fast that bullets narrowly missed him, hitting behind him instead. The scruffy guy following him was not as lucky; he was struck by a stray bullet.

"Big guy, keep going!" the scruffy guy shouted as he fell.

But by then, the burly man had reached the moat and needed to slow down to jump safely. Just as he slowed down, a rifled shotgun was aimed at him.

"Bang!" The shotgun fired. In the Swiss soldier's eyes, the towering burly man resembled a large brown bear from the Alps. He expected that his shot would make the burly man fall over like the bears he had shot before, possibly even rolling a couple of times.

However, much to his surprise, the bear didn't fall over but exploded.

Yes, the bullet he fired hit the explosive package the burly man was carrying.

The explosive's tremendous power was unleashed in an instant. A massive visible shockwave swept through the area, and those who had been close to the burly man were torn to shreds and scattered in an instant. Following the shockwave, the surrounding buildings, in the face of the powerful

explosion, were dismantled as if they were card structures facing a super typhoon. When the shockwave reached them, the buildings were immediately shattered into fragments that scattered in all directions.

Next, this shockwave violently slammed into the Bastille's city wall. The massive wall shook violently, like a small boat in a stormy sea.

The soldiers standing on the wall were quickly overturned by the shockwave and were then stunned by the ensuing explosion.

If, at that moment, another group of militia warriors had charged forward, they could have easily cut the iron chains holding the drawbridge, smashed the gate, and entered the Bastille. However, the militia's condition was even worse than that of the defenders because they were closer to the explosion. They suffered greater casualties, and the buildings destroyed by the shockwave concealed militia members behind them. After the explosion, most of them were no longer standing.

Even those militia fighters further away had been shaken to their senses, making them unfit for immediate action. As for those even farther away, they had no idea what had just happened. The militia lacked a clear command structure, and at that moment, they were in disarray, with no thought of seizing the opportunity. Consequently, the chance slipped through their fingers.