

Chapter Five: A Delicate Education

PARIS. JULY 13, 1789. EARLY EVENING.

After several turns, footsteps took up behind me.

The pace was easy. The man following me had no wish to hide. I allowed the rhythm to remain. At length, the footsteps closed.

"You have improved my afternoon," Morris said, coming alongside me, "and I find myself unwilling to let the matter end there."

He regarded me with open curiosity touched by amusement. He had the happy American habit of treating unrest as an introduction while it still observed the rules of conversation.

"You have a trade," Morris continued. "Or you pretend to one. Either way, it interests me."

"I am honored."

"No," he said. "You are careful. Honor may come later, if it proves convenient."

We walked on.

A group of men crossed ahead of us, moving too quickly for errands and too slowly for panic. One carried a length of iron beneath his coat and believed himself invisible.

Morris nodded toward the coat to draw my attention.

"Paris," he said, "has taken up parliament in the streets."

"It has done worse under a roof."

"True," Morris said. "Lock oaths in a tennis court long enough, and they learn to return the service."

A cry rose near the Palais-Royal, blurred by distance and repeated by men who had missed the first one.

Morris paused only slightly.

"You appear," he said, "to know where a man might go who prefers his education mixed with vice, noise, and practical company."

"I know several such places."

"Respectable?"

"Some in appearance."

"Good. Appearance is the tribute vice pays to society."

"That is a French sentiment."

"Then I withdraw it. I prefer to avoid borrowing from a bankrupt treasury."

I considered him.

In that moment, I understood how he might be used.

This was the first error.

A moment later, I understood that he was considering the same question regarding me.

That was the beginning of our acquaintance.

"Sir," I said, "Paris improves upon acquaintance."

"Then I am in your debt already," he replied.

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We walked on together.

Behind us, the garden emptied.

Ahead, the city gathered.

Tomorrow, men would say Paris had awakened.

The phrase would flatter them.

Paris had spent the night awake, waiting for permission to become visible.

By then Monsieur Morris had attached himself to me as a gentleman attaches himself to a promising vice: lightly, cheerfully, and with every intention of learning its price.

The Hôtel de Langeac had fallen behind us. Its order withdrew by degrees, first through gravel, then through gate, then through the polite fiction that a wall can protect conversation from history. Paris received us with wet stone, wheels, bread smells, green ribbon, and voices that had grown too numerous for grammar.

Morris's wooden leg struck the stones with a firmer report than his natural foot.

Flesh, wood, flesh, wood.

Each step declared that speed, in him, was less a grace than a decision.

"You walk like a man with an appointment," he said.

"I walk like a man who knows his direction and intends to arrive."

"An excellent principle. In politics, commerce, and other forms of misconduct."

The street had taken on that particular color that comes after rain, when filth rises, stone darkens, and every lamp appears lit inside a bruise. From the direction of the Palais-Royal came a roar that altered as it traveled,

breaking first into argument, then laughter, then a sound near enough to anger that several men turned their heads at once.

Morris turned as well, though he gave the impression of attending to weather. "Your city grows instructional."

"Paris instructs most brutally when men believe they have come for amusement."

Morris glanced toward the wall. "Then she and I shall deal honestly."

"You wanted education."

"I wanted practice. Theory has been abundant since my arrival. Every man with clean cuffs has explained France to me."

"And which do you trust?"

Morris looked back at me. "I trust their cuffs. They are the cleanest part of the argument."

That should have amused me less than it did. I had come from a boarding house whose rooms had once sheltered the convent's kept men, a pious little commerce of clean linen and crooked bargains. Paris had a talent for making sin look freshly laundered.

There are men whom pleasure makes foolish. Morris's pleasures made him more exact. Wine, women, scandal, wit, hazard, argument, and the public exposure of folly sharpened his judgment. They supplied it with evidence.

Saint-Just possessed brilliance, force, severity, and that cold beauty by which young men mistake refusal for purity. Morris possessed appetite joined to discipline. He liked the world too much to trust it.

That contradiction pleased me at once.

I should have distrusted it.

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Instead, I encouraged it.



We passed a shuttered silk shop where two apprentices were taking down the sign with more haste than ceremony. One glanced at Morris's coat, then at his hat, found it bare of ribbon, and made a small face of public disapproval.

Morris noticed. "What emblem is required for survival?"

"Green, for the moment."

"For Necker?"

"For men who discovered this week that approval is power and already wish to regulate it."

Ribbons had ceased to be decoration. They had become arguments worn where fists could read them. A man without the proper color might be merely careless in the morning and suspect by afternoon. Later, France would make an art of such visible loyalties: cockades, sashes, caps, colors displayed quickly enough to save the skull beneath them. The Revolution had begun teaching men to pin obedience to their coats.

A boy appeared almost immediately, as if summoned by political necessity. He carried strips of green ribbon wound around his wrist, damp from rain and frayed at the ends. He offered one to Morris with the gravity of a priest presenting a relic.

Morris accepted it. "How much?"

The boy named a price fit for silk, honor, and extortion.

Morris paid it.

The boy vanished into a ragged company of men farther down the street.

"A reasonable tariff on cowardice," Morris said, tying the ribbon to his hat.

"On prudence."

"Prudence is cowardice after it has found a tailor."

A man nearby saw the ribbon and gave Morris a comradely nod. Morris returned it with solemn republican warmth.

"There," he said. "I have joined the people. I trust they will inform me of their requirements before they alter."

"They may alter before you receive instruction."

"That is the first true thing I have heard about popular government in France."

A carriage came on too fast, its wheels striking water from a broken rut. A woman screamed at the driver. The driver cursed the crowd. Three men seized the bridle, more from opportunity than plan. For a moment, the horse reared, the carriage rocked, and the gentleman inside thrust his head through the window with the outrage of a man discovering that rank had ceased to govern traffic.

"What do they want?" Morris asked.

"His sword."

"He has one?"

"He has a coat that suggests one."

"That may suffice tonight."

It did.

The gentleman surrendered a small dress sword whose gilt handle had caught more salon light than blood. The men cheered as if they had taken artillery. The

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carriage moved on, stripped of dignity. Morris watched the sword lifted over the crowd, then lowered again as its new possessor discovered he had acquired an object more ceremonial than practical.

"France," Morris said, "has begun arming herself with metaphors."

"That one has a point."

"A poor one. Which may make it the better metaphor."

We turned before the crowd found another use for us.

Only then did he resume the thread he had carried from Jefferson's garden.

"You promised places where conversation pays less attention to virtue."

"I promised nothing."

"You implied."

"Implication is safer than contract."

"Good. Then I shall imply gratitude."

"The houses you want have little need of you. That is their charm."

"Every house has need of something."

"Money, protection, information, novelty, silence, or an American who can be displayed before being trusted."

"I may supply at least three."

"You overestimate yourself."

"Constantly. It saves others the labor."

This was already the rhythm between us: thrust, parry, concession disguised as insult, delight disguised as correction. We were neither friends nor allies. Friendship requires time, and alliance requires declared purpose. What we possessed was more immediate and less respectable.

We recognized in one another a taste for rooms where men revealed themselves.



The first house stood off a narrow court where rain-water still ran from the eaves in threads. The door carried clean brass and a practical latch. That was discretion, not poverty. Poverty announces itself by damage. This house had merely chosen to avoid description.

A servant admitted us after studying my face, then Morris's ribbon.

"Green travels faster than letters of introduction," Morris observed. "It also requires less sealing wax."

"Tonight, yes."

"And tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow a ribbon may become evidence."

"Then I shall preserve it for the defense."

The servant led us through a passage smelling of wax, damp wool, and orange peel. Music sounded somewhere above, though the musician remained out of sight. That pleased Morris. Parisian elegance preferred its labor unseen.

The room beyond possessed fewer candles than a noble salon and better information. A table near the wall carried glasses, cards, opened letters, and a small dish of coins arranged with enough care to suggest gambling and enough neglect to suggest payment. Three women were seated near the fire. Two men stood with them, each pretending to command the room and failing in a different style.

The mistress of the house rose when she saw me.

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She was known as Madame B. in rooms where names served chiefly as future inconvenience. Her gown had been chosen for a formal evening and worn into an informal one with skill. A small smear of ink darkened the side of one finger. Morris saw it, then looked to the writing table, then back to her face.

She saw him see it.

"Your American has quick eyes," she said.

"He brought them himself," I answered. "I claim no credit."

Morris bowed.

"Madame, I would apologize for curiosity, but people forgive it more readily when one practices it openly."

"Only handsome men believe that."

Morris touched his chest lightly. "Then I accept the correction as a compliment."

She laughed once, with approval placed at a safe distance. "You are Mr. Morris."

"When practical."

"You helped make the American Constitution."

"I survived the making of it. Assistance is a matter of opinion."

"And now you inspect ours?"

"I inspect the inspectors."

"That is unwise."

"Less so than trusting them."

Madame B. turned to me. "He speaks well enough to become troublesome."

"He has already begun."

"Then he may stay."

Morris gave a little bow. "I am relieved. The street has become democratic beyond my constitution."

She looked toward the window. "The street has become hungry, monsieur. Democracy is the language hunger has found for the evening."

That silenced him for half a breath.

I noticed.

Madame B. noticed also.

Morris recovered first, with less brightness and more respect. "Then the evening has chosen a severe lesson."

"Paris has been studying it longer than gentlemen admit."

Morris's eyes moved over her with scandalous care and perfect courtesy, as if he had been asked to inspect a treaty and found the signatures unusually persuasive. "Madame, if France gives her constitution half your proportion, I may yet trust the country."

Her brow lifted. "Proportion, Mr. Morris?"

"The rare art," he said, "of placing severity exactly where ornament expected to govern."

She gave him the smallest smile.

I knew then she liked him enough to warn him. In Paris, a woman's warning often marked the place where amusement ended and accounts began.



Her room traded in two currencies.

The visible one involved cards, wine, flirtation, and rumors spoken loudly enough to suggest carelessness. The other moved beneath that noise. A clerk from the Ministry of Marine stood near the bookcase, pretending interest in a volume whose pages he had never cut. A

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woman in yellow listened to him while watching the mirror behind him. An officer of the Gardes Françaises drank too little and spoke too much. Two young men in green ribbons argued over whether loyalty to the king had become treason against the nation, then paused while Madame B.'s maid crossed the room with a sealed note.

Morris took a glass and left it nearly untouched.

"You drink like a magistrate," I said.

"I drink like a man who prefers his memory furnished."

"You disappoint the house."

"The night is young."

A card game opened near the fire. Morris declined at first, then accepted when the stakes became information rather than coin. He lost three hands by design, won the fourth by arithmetic, and offended no one because he explained victory as luck.

"Luck," Madame B. said, "is the apology clever men make to dull ones."

"Then I must apologize more often."

"You must apologize less charmingly. It will make you safer."

She dealt again.

The officer of the Gardes Françaises had begun speaking of muskets.

"We will never fire on citizens," he said.

"You may be asked to fire on thieves," said the clerk by the bookcase.

"Then the king must first decide who owns France."

A few heads turned at that. The officer realized his own words had outgrown him. He drank, and the woman in yellow rescued him with a laugh.

"What does a soldier know of ownership?" she said. "He rents his courage by the month."

Morris smiled into his glass.

Madame B. noticed. "You approve?"

"I admire precision."

"Then you must be miserable in Paris."

"Madame, I am never miserable where people are honest about dishonesty."

A shout rose below.

The room paused, then pretended the pause had belonged to the game.

Outside, men were repeating a phrase. No one inside agreed on the words. That made the sound more troubling. A crowd with a sentence can be answered. A crowd with a rhythm has already chosen movement.

The maid entered again. This time she crossed directly to Madame B. and whispered.

Madame B. moved only after finishing the hand, collecting two coins she had won, and turning toward the room.

"The Palais-Royal has overflowed."

"Into what?" someone asked.

She looked toward the window. "Everything near it."

Morris set down his glass. "Then I should see it."

Madame B. lifted a finger. "That is exactly how Americans get themselves killed in Paris. They hear a crowd and mistake it for a meeting."

"We are a young people."

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"You are an expensive one."

He smiled. "You value me already."

"I value anything that enters my house and may later be described by officials."

She turned to me. "Your American should be guided by alleys."

"He belongs to himself."

"For tonight, that is a precarious arrangement."

Morris looked pleased by this. "She has the advantage of both of us," he said.

"She usually does."

The pleasure I took in his company deepened there, carrying me beyond amusement into consequence. He made the city more legible. His wit gave things edges. His curiosity drew people into speech before they realized they had been questioned. A man wishing to learn Paris could do worse than walk beside a reckless American who made every room eager to correct him.

Saint-Just would have found such pleasure wasteful.

That was one reason it refreshed me.



We left by the rear stair.

That was Madame B.'s contribution to civic instruction. The stair dropped into a yard where broken crates had been stacked under a tarpaulin. From there, a narrow passage led between two walls damp enough to blacken a sleeve. Morris placed his wooden leg with care on the slick stones, though he refused my arm with a glance.

"I will ask when I require rescue."

"You may be too late."

"Then you may enjoy being right."

The passage opened into another street, lower, meaner, and more honest in its teeth. Here the shops had shut early. A cobbler worked behind a half-closed shutter, hammering a sole with the steady fury of a man striking the same nail for all France. A woman washed blood from a boy's brow in a doorway. The boy clutched a green ribbon as if it had defended him and might yet answer for its failure.

Morris slowed.

"Stone?"

"Probably."

"Thrown by whom?"

"Tonight, that question flatters the stone."

The boy looked up as we passed. Morris gave him the ribbon from his hat.

The boy blinked, then took it.

"You purchased safety," I said.

"I have now donated it to the wounded."

"A noble use of bad politics."

"I try to improve what I find."

We crossed toward the Rue Saint-Honoré, avoiding the greater press near the Palais-Royal. Even at a remove, the air carried the heat of it. Men shouted Necker's name, then Orléans, then arms, then bread, each word rising as though appointed leader for one breath.

Morris listened.

"The order is poor."

"The need is plain."

"Need is always plain to itself."

"You distrust crowds."

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"I distrust men when shouting together relieves them of thinking alone."

"That sentence would make you unpopular."

"My dear sir, I came to observe France, not to be elected by her."

"Then why come?"

He looked at me.

Rain shone on the brim of his hat. Mud crossed one boot. The ribbon had left a wet streak where it had been tied. His face, which wore mockery as naturally as other men wear caution, altered only slightly.

"To see whether men can make liberty survive admiration."

The answer had more gravity than I expected.

He saw that I had noticed and rescued us both.

"And, where possible, to dine well."

"There is the American I expected."

"There are always several. A republic encourages multiplication."

We reached a turning where three boys were scraping a royal emblem from a wooden sign. They worked with knives meant for bread, which gave the effort a domestic cruelty. One had climbed a barrel. Another stood watch. The third spat each time a flake came loose.

Morris paused only long enough to read the rhythm of the thing.

"They have begun erasing before they know what replaces it."

"That is common."

"It is also efficient."

The watchman boy saw us and stiffened.

Morris bowed to him as if to a sentry.

The boy, uncertain whether he had been mocked or promoted, let us pass.

"He will tell that story," I said.

"As will I," Morris replied. "His will improve faster."



The second house belonged to no one I have ever named, though several men paid to believe otherwise.

Its entrance lay behind a perfumer's shop that sold more bottles than fragrance and more privacy than either. The front room smelled of lavender, vinegar, and sealed correspondence. The woman at the counter recognized me and asked no question aloud.

"Two?" she said.

"For a short instruction."

"Instruction costs more after dark."

"Everything does."

She lifted the curtain.

Behind it, Paris changed professions.

The inner room had no music. Its business required sharper hearing. Maps hung on one wall under the pretense of decoration. Ship names appeared on slips of paper pinned beside ports. A table in the center had been scarred by knives, ink, candle wax, and the impatience of men accustomed to waiting for tide, payment, and lies to arrange themselves in usable order.

Morris took in the room and drew a long breath.

"At last," he said. "A chapel."

The woman at the counter smiled despite herself.

"To what god?" I asked.

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"To transaction. The oldest one with the fewest hypocrites."

At the central table sat a compact man with salt in his hair and a coat too plain for the watch he carried. He had the look of a captain who had discovered that land offered safer profits than weather. One finger bore ink near the nail. Another bore a pale scar where a ring had once been removed with difficulty or consequence.

The broker looked at me, then at Morris. "No names."

Morris bowed. "Then I shall answer to any accusation except Englishman."

The broker studied him. "American."

Morris inclined his head. "When well received."

"When badly?"

"Still American, but with better posture."

The broker almost smiled. "What does he want?"

"To learn how ports speak when ministers are elsewhere."

"Ports speak in fees."

Morris smiled. "I am fluent in several dialects."

The broker turned toward him fully. "L'Orient is watched. Brest has command. Bordeaux bargains. Nantes smiles. Le Havre grows nervous and calls it caution. The Dutch ask for papers they never mean to read. The Swedes read them and pretend otherwise. The English read everything twice and understand enough to make trouble."

Morris looked to the map. "And American bottoms?"

"When found, delayed."

"By whom?"

“Men who dislike surprises, and men who profit by discovering them.”

Morris tapped the map lightly. “That describes government and trade together.”

“It describes docks.”

The broker tapped the table once. “What cargo?”

“Tonight, inquiry,” I said.

“Inquiry has weight.”

Morris added, “And price.”

The broker gave him a hard look. “Books?”

“Volumes,” Morris said. “Respectable ones.”

“Respectable books sell worse than wicked ones.”

“These have other virtues.”

“The only book in my house is a Bible, and even that brings trouble when men start arguing over it.” He tapped ash from his pipe. “What are they worth?”

“More in New York than here.”

“To a buyer?”

“To a cause.”

The broker disliked that answer. Causes paid poorly, traveled badly, and left names behind.

A shout from outside reached even that inner room, reduced by walls to a tremor in the glass bottles beyond the curtain. Men of ports learn early that noise rarely changes tide.

The broker pulled a folded sheet from beneath a ledger. “These sailings have become uncertain.”

Morris leaned closer. “Because of Necker?”

“Because certainty costs more tonight.”

The broker opened the sheet only enough for us to see columns, figures, and names reduced to function. I saw

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Nantes, Rotterdam, New York, Philadelphia, tobacco, indigo, medicines, cotton, paper, household goods, books.

The last had been written small.

Too small.

"Jones." The broker touched the word. "Admiral Jones."

Morris's face shifted toward amusement. "The captain or the legend?"

"That is the difficulty."

"Usually the opportunity as well."

The broker examined him with new care. "American. Famous. Expensive. Men use his name when it opens a door, frightens the English, flatters Americans, or improves a story. Then come agents, ministers, fees, denials. Suddenly nobody packed him."

Morris nodded. "I know the reputation."

"Reputation opens some doors and brings men with seals to others."

"Then it behaves like a gentleman."

The broker ignored that. "British agents ask after him. Frenchmen praise him in rooms where nobody pays. Sailors invent him when the wine runs out."

Morris glanced toward the harbor marks on the map. "Can invention sail?"

"In port, monsieur, stories get aboard all the time."

"And after the harbor?"

The broker's expression lost its amusement. "After the harbor, a story needs a captain."

The answer settled over the table.

Morris had planted the principle in Jefferson's garden. Cargo could pass unnoticed if a louder reputation

entered the harbor ahead of it. Here, among port slips and men who made a profession of risk, the joke acquired rigging. It ceased to be wit. It began to smell of rope, tar, wet paper, and bribed hands.

Morris glanced at the slips pinned beside the ports. "Suppose one wished to move dull cargo through interesting waters."

The broker's eyes cooled. "Dull cargo rarely troubles me."

"Then suppose the waters were made interesting elsewhere."

"That costs more."

"So does delay."

The broker's attention moved between us.

Morris leaned a little nearer to the table. "A famous name draws attention."

"Famous names bring men with seals."

"Small names draw creditors. Every size has its inconvenience."

"Creditors can be paid. Seals must be answered."

"Only until they find someone eager to answer them."

The broker looked toward me. "You brought me an expensive American."

"I brought you a curious one."

"Curiosity looks cheap until the bill arrives."

Morris accepted this as praise.

The broker placed the folded sheet back beneath the ledger. "Jones's face is less known than his name. That much is true. Ports remember stories better than faces. A man seen at dusk may become whoever the morning needs."

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Morris's attention sharpened. "And the real man?"

The broker's finger touched the folded sheet. "The real man costs more. A name may be borrowed. A captain must be paid in coin he respects."

"And the English?"

"They prefer famous prey. It improves the report."

"Then vanity governs pursuit."

"Vanity governs everything after hunger."

The broker stood, which meant the consultation had reached its paid limit. "For papers, make them too dull to steal. For books, give clerks a better word. For captains, pay men who hate waiting. For famous names, sell the story. For the true Jones, bring command, money, and an enemy worthy of his vanity."

Morris bowed. "A complete account."

The broker gathered the ledger toward himself. "A beginning. Next time, bring coin before questions."

That was enough.

Too much, perhaps.

Morris stopped there.

That was how I knew he had understood more than he intended to confess.



We returned through the perfumer's shop.

The woman at the counter had begun packing small bottles into a straw-lined case. Her hands moved quickly. Too quickly for commerce.

"Leaving?" I asked.

"Only perfumes."

"Where?"

"To my sister."

"Where is she?"

"Wherever carts still move."

Morris watched her tie the case. "You expect trouble?"

She looked at him with open contempt. "Monsieur, trouble has been knocking all afternoon. I am merely sending the expensive things out the back."

He bowed. "A domestic principle with national application."

She decided against liking him, which was wise.

Outside, dusk had thickened. The lamps had become arguments with the dark and were losing in several quarters. Near a wine shop, men were passing a musket hand to hand, each taking possession long enough to demonstrate how badly he might use it. A woman stood on a doorstep with two loaves pressed to her chest while berating a man twice her size for tracking mud into her passage.

The man apologized.

Nothing in the street astonished me more.

Morris had fallen quiet.

"Your education disappoints?" I asked.

"On the contrary. It has become expensive."

"To whom?"

"To anyone who believes the surface still governs the city."

We walked as far as the next crossing.

He stopped there. "Do you return to your severe friend?"

I let the question pass.

He smiled. "Then yes. Back to severity."

"You assume much."

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"I read the bill. A man like you spends an evening on my improvement, then presents the receipt elsewhere."

"Perhaps I enjoy company."

"You do. That is the weakness in your discipline."

The remark touched nearer than I wished.

Morris mercifully turned his attention to the street rather than my face. "I shall remain among these practical sinners awhile. They remind me of Congress, but with better wine."

"You should avoid windows."

"Excellent advice. I shall ignore half of it."

"Which half?"

"The half that deprives me of a view."

A group passed between us, men with green ribbons, one carrying a chair leg like a club. By the time they moved on, Morris had adjusted his hat, recovered his cheer, and become again the man who made violence appear almost social.

"You will see me again," he said.

"That sounded more like a warning than a hope."

"I intended both." He turned toward Madame B.'s quarter.

I watched him go until he disappeared behind a cart loaded with sacks that may have contained flour, paper, household silver, or books relieved of their titles. In Paris that evening, each possibility had equal claim.

For a moment I stayed where I was, with the roar of the Palais-Royal behind one shoulder and Saint-Just waiting behind the other.

Morris had called enjoyment a weakness in my discipline. He had meant it lightly and struck deeper than he

knew. There was a kind of life in him that Saint-Just would have dismissed as dissipation because it refused to kneel before purpose. Yet I had learned more beside Morris in one evening of clubs, ribbons, rumors, and opened doors than I had learned from a dozen men who spoke of necessity with clean hands.

His joke had taught me the value of misdirected attention.

Ports, like drawing rooms, study the figure who makes the most noise. A celebrated man may enter a rumor before he enters a harbor. He may gather envy, curiosity, patriotism, insult, debt, admiration, and watchfulness simply by allowing his name to move ahead of him.

Jones could leave others convinced they had found the quarry while quieter cargo passed elsewhere.

But rumor could carry pursuit only so far. At sea, wind, sail, shoal, gun, and nerve would expose every fiction. The name could crowd the harbor. The man would have to command beyond it.

The broker had supplied the practical correction. To Morris, reputation suggested motion. To me, it suggested arrangement. To the broker, it meant seals, inspectors, missed tides, fees advanced, clerks made curious, creditors made impatient, and some name written down when blame required ink. Reputation might draw the eye; paperwork would decide what passed beneath it; seaman-ship would decide what survived after inspection gave way to chase. One was smoke. One was permission. One was command once water began.

Taken together, they began to look like a road.

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Morris had spoken in wit. The broker had answered in forms. Saint-Just would hear a device.

For Morris, the evening had been sport, inquiry, appetite, and warning. For me, it had become something more exacting.

Another delicate education.

Then I took the opposite street.

Saint-Just would be counting the hour.

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