

THE FOX OF FRANCE

Chapter 6: On the Way

In the late afternoon, at nearly seven o'clock, the stagecoach arrived in Avignon. The distance from Marseille to Paris was almost two to three hundred "lieues" (a traditional French unit of length, approximately four kilometers per lieue), clearly not a journey the stagecoach could complete in a short time. In fact, there was no direct stagecoach from Marseille to Paris. Passengers heading to Paris typically had to change coaches at various stops.

In the twilight, the stagecoach passed through the towering city walls of Avignon, entering the ancient city. Once off the carriage, Joseph raised his head and saw the Papal Palace, perched on the hill, shrouded in the fading light. Avignon had been the residence of the Catholic Pope for a long time, and even though the Pope had long since returned to the Vatican, the city remained a direct territory of the Church. This special status would change only after the outbreak of the French Revolution.

"That's the Papal Palace," Alfonso, the priest, explained as he saw Joseph gazing in that direction. "Even though the Pope's throne is no longer here, this place remains sacred."

"Can I go inside and have a look?" Joseph asked.

"Oh, my child, I'm afraid that's not possible. That place is not open to just anyone," Alfonso replied. "I, as a messenger of the Church, have traveled between Marseille and Paris many times and always pass by here, but I can

only admire this sacred palace from a distance. Bishop Minio has been inside; if you're interested in what it's like, you can ask the bishop in the future."

Joseph shook his head and said, "I don't need to ask the bishop. I think I should be able to go inside myself in the future."

Alfonso interpreted Joseph's words as his ambition to become a bishop and smiled, saying, "The bishop has high hopes for you."

But Joseph's true intentions were different. He knew that the French Revolution would break out in a few years, especially during the Reign of Terror when the Catholic Church would be overthrown and trampled upon. Almost all churches would be seized and converted into "Temples of Reason." The religious icons in churches would be replaced with images of revolutionary leaders and historical heroes. The Papal Palace, as a symbol of reactionary power, would not be spared. By then, it would be easy to get inside.

Avignon remained a direct territory of the Church, and compared to other cities of similar size, it had a much less commercial atmosphere. The streets were not filled with noisy merchants, and most of the people were devout pilgrims.

Of course, Joseph understood that this was only a superficial façade. When it came to greed for money and business dealings, very few institutions in the world could match the Roman Catholic Church, which had even invented indulgences and could sell a chicken's feather as an angel's feather. But on the surface, they still had to maintain an appearance of sanctity.

After disembarking from the carriage, Joseph followed Alfonso along the streets for about a hundred "toises" (an old French unit of length, approximately 1.624 meters) and arrived at a dark monastery door. However,

Alfonso didn't go straight to the main entrance but turned to the right, approaching another dark, smaller door. He gently knocked on the door.

The small door didn't open; it had a small window with iron bars. The window was slid open, and an eye appeared.

"I am the messenger sent by Bishop Minio of the Corsican diocese to Paris. We'll be staying here for the night. This is the bishop's pupil, and he'll be going to Paris with me," Alfonso said, handing over a document.

The eye glanced at Alfonso and then at Joseph. A hand reached through the window to take the document, and then the small window was closed.

After a while, with a creaking sound, the rusty small door was opened. A man wearing a black robe with a hood covering most of his face stood in the dark hallway. He remained silent, but Joseph noticed that he had a slight limp.

Alfonso led Joseph inside, and the gatekeeper closed the door, locking it. He then reached for a lantern on the wall, holding it up as he walked ahead to guide them.

Inside the monastery, there were no windows facing the street, and even in daylight, the corridor was very dark, adding to the eerie silence. The only sources of light were the lantern and the gatekeeper's shadow as he walked ahead. The setting reminded Joseph of the dark underground passages in a video game, and the limping gatekeeper strangely reminded him of the "Diablo Wanderer." So Joseph couldn't help but look around with caution, fearing that red demonic imps holding torches might suddenly appear.

However, Joseph had to remember that he had crossed into a normal world, and there were no monsters suddenly springing up in the dark, whether impish or demonic. The gatekeeper was just a silent guardian, and wherever he walked, there were no sudden fires.

After walking a while, the gatekeeper stopped, took out a set of keys from his waist, opened a small door along the corridor, and then turned back, speaking in a low and disjointed voice, "You... tonight... here."

He then raised the lantern, bowed, and left. Alfonso and Joseph followed him inside. At this point, the gatekeeper had already lit the candles on a candelabrum in the middle of the room. The room was filled with a dim, yellowish light.

Having lit the candles, the gatekeeper left the room, and as he departed, he again bowed his head as he passed through the low doorway. Joseph noticed a long scar on his face.

Seemingly aware of Joseph's gaze, after the gatekeeper had left, Alfonso sat down at the table and sighed, "He used to be a captain in the king's army. He was wounded during those seven years of war and, after retiring, couldn't find anything to do. He eventually became a gatekeeper here."

He continued with another sigh, "These days are getting tougher and tougher. Healthy people struggle to survive, and what about someone like him? Fortunately, the Church won't forget those who fought for the Catholic cause. May God bless him, Amen."

"Amen," Joseph echoed.

The next day, just as the day was breaking, Joseph and Alfonso left the monastery, purchased two tickets for the stagecoach to Les Tuileries, and boarded. As soon as they stepped inside, they heard a surprised voice saying, "Father Alfonso? Young Joseph?"

They turned to see the same couple they had met on the carriage the previous day.

"Oh, it's you? Are you also headed to Les Tuileries?" Alfonso asked.

"Oh, we're going to Lyon," the husband said with a happy smile. "I found a job at a school there."

"That sounds like a good job," Alfonso said.

"Thank you," the husband replied.

They all started chatting as if they had forgotten the argument that had taken place in the carriage the previous day. However, when they reached Lyon and parted ways, Alfonso sighed and said to Joseph, "I never expected the influence of that heretic to be so great."

"What heretic?" Joseph asked.

"That's the one who was dragged down to hell by the devil just last year," Alfonso replied with an uncommonly harsh tone. "That damned heretic, Voltaire. It's said that he spoke blasphemous words even on his deathbed, saying that he wanted to be buried half inside a church and half outside. That way, if he somehow made it to heaven, he could enter from the church's half, and if—actually, it's not 'if' but 'when'—he's condemned to hell, he can escape from the outside half. Ha, where can he escape to when facing the eternal hands of the Lord? I'm sure he's quite cozy in that fiery pit now. Hahaha..."

"But Mr. Géricault didn't mention Voltaire just now," Joseph said. "And what he said didn't seem particularly unreasonable."

"You're right," Alfonso said. "He didn't directly mention that heretic. But many of his viewpoints, well, they might seem reasonable, even very logical to you, but they actually originate from that heretic. Joseph, you have to understand, that's the terrifying part of the devil."

"The devil will never reveal its true face to people. Instead, they masquerade as prophets, saints, using their seemingly radiant 'truths' to lure you onto the wrong path. That's what makes heretics, devils, false prophets, and antichrists the most frightening and dangerous. Child, you should know that Lucifer,

originally the most glorious archangel beside God, also possessed the deceptive brilliance. So, if we don't put our faith in the Church, we can easily be deceived by them. May God punish them, Amen!"