

THE FOX OF FRANCE

Chapter 8: Becoming a Translator

"What is this?" Joseph furrowed his brow and asked. When it came to unknown substances, Joseph didn't have much of an appetite for trying them. It was clear that he wasn't one to indulge in extravagant feasts, even before his time-traveling adventures.

"Let me tell you, this crystalline liquid is the ambrosia that the Goddess of Youth, Hebe, served to Zeus, the Thunder God, during their time. It's the divine nectar bestowed upon His followers by the Muse. Try it; it can bring you various dreams and inspirations, making you forget all your worries," Armand replied in an exaggerated tone, reminiscent of a Shakespearean performance.

"Come on, Armand, you're not on stage, and you're not reciting 'The Aeneid.' Just tell me plainly, what is this stuff?" Joseph's tone grew impatient.

"Ah, you ordinary mortal, endless treasures lie before you, but you lack the eyes to see them," Armand continued with a melodious voice, "Do you love gold? With this, you could open the treasures of Ali Baba and Alexander the Great before your very eyes. Do you cherish fantasies? Drinking this elixir, the boundless cosmos and deep oceans will open their arms to you. Do you covet power? Sip it, and you'll become Caesar, Augustus, or Alexander. Isn't that enticing enough?"

"What is it, really?" Joseph furrowed his brow. He was aware that this era was marked by the widespread abuse of various psychoactive substances.

"Have you heard of hashish?" Armand asked.

"Of course, I have, and I know about the Assassin's Creed too," Joseph thought, then said, "Certainly, I'm familiar."

"Then you should know the old man from the mountains who wanted to assassinate Philip Augustus. Legend has it that he ruled over a prosperous valley between towering mountains - that's where his legendary name comes from. It's said that in that mysterious valley, he had a garden where he cultivated a sacred herb. His followers, the Assassins, believed that consuming it could transport them to heaven prematurely. After experiencing the joys of paradise, they all believed that serving that old man would secure their place in heaven forever. So, whoever he commanded them to kill, they did, no matter how far they had to travel or how much suffering they had to endure. They feared nothing because they saw it as a means to rejoin the heaven they had briefly experienced. My friend, the key to this heaven is right in front of you."

"Indian hemp!" Joseph exclaimed.

"Yes, that's it!" Armand replied with an exaggerated smile. "So, do you want to give it a try?"

"No, no, no," Joseph hastily responded. "Armand, you know, I've always been resistant to these unusual things when it comes to consumption."

"Well, Joseph, how much joy you miss in your life because of that! But maybe you don't need it, considering you're never short of sparks of inspiration. Besides, your attitude toward food is somewhat similar to my uncle's."

"Well, what's wrong with my father?" Joseph said sadly. "But the doctors suspect he has a tumor in his stomach, causing constant ulcer bleeding. It's very dangerous, and the doctors have almost no way to treat it. They think he might not have long left. I might have to leave school soon and go back to Corsica."

"Will you come back?" Armand asked.

"I hope to come back," Joseph replied. "Who would want to leave Paris? But you know, I have several siblings. My sisters are fine, but my brothers are all in school, and that's a considerable expense. If something really happens to my father, as the eldest in the family, I'll have to step up and take on the family's responsibilities."

"Joseph, you're not even fifteen yet," Armand said. "Even if you wanted to work, it's too early. You're still a year away from graduation. If you drop out now, it would be a pity, and the salary you can get by going to work directly after graduation will be much less. Your family is noble, well, I know there's a big difference between Corsican nobility and French nobility. I mean, I'm talking about the economic difference, not the other aspects. But, noble is noble, even if it's relatively less prosperous compared to other nobles. So, I think your family can find a way to support you for one more year."

Joseph shook his head and said, "My friend, our family's financial situation is much worse than you imagine. The impoverished nobility you're talking about is the French impoverished nobility. But the impoverished nobility in Corsica is even poorer. You know, Corsica has just gone through a war, and war wreaked havoc on our wealth. Additionally, at the beginning, France didn't recognize Corsican nobility as noble. Even though they later conditionally recognized it, obtaining that recognition required a lot of money, a lot of money that nearly drained our family. So, now, we're much poorer than you imagine."

"Alright, alright," Armand said. "But I still think... By the way, how's your English?"

"It's pretty good, maybe even a bit better than my French," Joseph replied. "Why do you ask?"