

Frozen Star 73

Chapter 73: At the Village Gates

[POV Liselotte]

The seventh day of travel began with a different quality in the air, as if the world itself had decided to shift its hue to announce that we were approaching something new. The path we had followed for days—a hardened dirt road flanked by tall grasses and wildflowers—gradually widened until it became a firmer, better-kept road. Fresh tracks of wagon wheels and horse hooves grew more frequent, signs of regular traffic we hadn't seen in days. The distant murmur of human life filtered through the trees, a promising hum that we could not yet see but already felt.

Corcel moved forward with a steady, determined stride, his ears flicking to catch every new sound, his breathing calm but alert as if he too sensed the nearness of a well-earned rest. Chloé padded beside him, her silver fur gleaming under the morning sun, watchful but curiously at ease, her amber eyes scanning every detail of the road unfolding before us. Leah, seated at my side on the driver's bench, leaned forward with evident anticipation, as if trying to catch a glimpse on the horizon of what we all felt was drawing near.

And then, finally, we saw it: the low bell tower of a small chapel, built of white stone that glowed beneath the sun, peeking above the distant treetops. Thin columns of smoke rose in gray spirals from chimneys hidden among the buildings, and the sunlight flashed against reddish tiled rooftops that dotted the green landscape like drops of coagulated blood.

"A village," Leah murmured, her voice carrying such palpable relief it was almost tangible.

"And not a small one," I added, noting how the low wooden palisade began to show between the foliage. "Big enough to have a decent market and maybe even a forge."

Chloé stepped ahead, lifting her muzzle to sniff the air intently. “I smell fresh bread, spiced roast meat, and... candied apples?” she conveyed with a touch of sly humor. “If this isn’t a village, then we’ve stumbled into paradise without realizing it.”

We both laughed, and without needing to say it aloud, quickened our pace toward the settlement that promised respite from the road.

The village welcomed us with a pleasant, orderly bustle, like a beehive running on content efficiency. Its cobblestone streets, well maintained though not perfectly even, were filled with people moving with purpose but without excessive haste. Women carried baskets of freshly harvested vegetables on their heads, men hauled tools or rolls of fabric, children darted between adults with the boundless energy of youth. Along the main street, makeshift stalls stood before houses of stone and timber, offering everything from ripe, gleaming fruits to necklaces made of carved wooden beads and golden-brown rolls whose aroma made my stomach tighten in anticipation.

What struck me first was the warmth in the gazes turned toward us. Unlike larger cities where strangers were met with suspicion or outright wariness, here greetings were frequent, accompanied by genuine smiles and open curiosity that never crossed into intrusion. It seemed a place accustomed to travelers, but not jaded by them.

“Should we stay here a couple of days?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

Leah nodded immediately, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Yes, please. Corcel deserves it after these days on the road, and us... well, we deserve a proper bed and a meal that wasn’t cooked over a campfire.”

We found a two-story inn near the main square, marked by a carved wooden sign depicting a watermill beside a winding river. The innkeeper, a stout woman with graying hair tied in a no-nonsense bun, greeted us with open arms and a voice that seemed to carry centuries of practiced hospitality.

“Welcome, travelers!” she said with a smile that crinkled her eyes kindly. “Looking for a place to rest those tired backs? I’ve got just what you need.”

She offered us two adjoining rooms on the first floor—small but undeniably cozy, with beds covered in thick, handwoven blankets patterned with geometric designs, and windows that looked out onto the main street, letting in the afternoon sun. The mattresses creaked softly as we collapsed onto them, and the rough wool against my skin was strangely comforting after days of sleeping in the wagon or on makeshift bedding.

“Two days here,” I murmured, closing my eyes for a moment, savoring the simple comfort of a solid roof over our heads. “Feels like a gift from the gods.”

“Two days to eat until we burst, sleep until the sun is high, and... eat some more,” Leah corrected, already dreaming of the provisions we had glimpsed at the street stalls.

Chloé, sprawled on the thick wool rug covering the wooden floor, let out a mental snort of amusement. “And I thought Leah’s ‘emergencies’ were exaggerated. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a human think this much about food.”

After ensuring Corcel was comfortable in the inn’s clean, well-stocked stables, we indulged in a little rest before setting out to explore the village properly.

Our first full day in the village was devoted to essentials: replenishing supplies for the journey that awaited us once this respite ended. The marketplace proved a feast for the senses, far more expansive than we had imagined from a distance. Row after row of colorful stalls offered everything from freshly baked rye loaves still warm to dried fruits packed in small cloth sacks, aged cheeses of deep and complex flavor, and exotic spices promising to turn even the simplest meat into a memorable feast.

Leah insisted on also buying honey sweets and roasted almonds, arguing with conviction that “morale on the road is just as important as nutrition, and these will raise ours considerably.”

For my part, I purchased a couple of sturdy travel journals and several jars of long-lasting ink, determined to keep a more organized and detailed record of our journey, of the people we met, and the lessons we learned along the way. Chloé, though she needed no provisions in the same sense as we did, thoroughly enjoyed sniffing through the stalls, particularly those devoted to cured meats and sausages. Some vendors, charmed by her elegant bearing and serene demeanor, even offered her small samples, which she accepted with lupine dignity.

That afternoon, we rested in the village’s central square, beneath the generous shade of an ancient oak whose knotted roots seemed intent on swallowing the cobblestones over time. We watched children play with wooden hoops and rag balls, elders argue over chess matches on crude but functional boards, and merchants seal deals with firm handshakes and wide smiles that spoke of mutual trust.

It was a simple world, without pretension, yet vibrant and full of life that seemed to flow with natural ease and contentment.

Our second day in the village was decidedly more tranquil. We allowed ourselves the luxury of sleeping late, waking only when the sun was already high in the sky. Breakfast was unhurried in the inn's common kitchen, where the hostess served us porridge with honey and nuts, fresh milk, and warm bread.

Leah spent a good while at the village forge, practicing precise fire-control techniques that helped the local blacksmith quickly light his furnace for the day's work. In gratitude and admiration, the man gifted her a handful of reinforced nails and a spare set of horseshoes for Corcel.

I took the morning to write in my new journal, seated by the open window of our room, letting the morning breeze bring me the sounds and scents of the village awakening. Chloé rested at my side, watching the street with calm but alert eyes, occasionally sending me mental impressions of the passersby: the baker whistling as he worked, the old woman scattering breadcrumbs from her balcony, the children chasing one another before being called to their chores.

By evening, we gathered once more in the square, where we bought a hearty dinner from one of the food stalls that multiplied at that hour: skewers of seasoned meat, flatbread brushed with herb oil, and cinnamon-baked apples that scorched our fingers but were worth every sting.

We sat on a stone bench near the central fountain, laughing at trifles, sharing bites of food, and simply enjoying the moment. For those precious hours, we weren't adventurers on a path to an uncertain destiny, nor bearers of secrets and powers we barely understood. We were just three travelers pausing in a kind village that offered us a breath of peace amid the unknown.

That night, as the village lights dimmed one by one and the stars took their place in the clear sky above, I allowed myself to think that perhaps these small moments of peace and normality were just as valuable

as any battlefield victory. That the journey was not only made of trials endured and hardships overcome, but also of shared silences, easy laughter, and the comforting certainty that as long as we were together, we would always find a place to feel at home—even if only for a couple of days.