

Frozen Star 74

Chapter 74: Whispers Between the Roads

[POV Liselotte]

The third day of our stay in the village coincided with the weekly fair, an event that completely transformed the main square into a vibrant spectacle of colors, aromas, and sounds that seemed to defy the very idea of normality.

Where there was usually space for the regular vendors and neighbors chatting quietly, now dozens of temporary stalls rose beneath fabric awnings in vivid, cheerful tones—reds like fresh poppies, blues as deep as the evening sky, and yellows that gleamed like gold coins under the sunlight.

The air was saturated with a whirlwind of scents intermingling in an irresistible aromatic dance: freshly baked bread that crackled when broken, roasted meat seasoned with exotic spices, honey sweets dripping over wooden molds, and the unmistakable aroma of toasted corn crackling in makeshift braziers, creating little clouds of fragrant smoke.

Musicians with simple but lively instruments—vibrant-stringed lutes and reed flutes—played quick melodies that invited feet to dance, while children dashed between stalls with colorful paper balloons in their hands, their laughter weaving a sonic layer over the general bustle.

“I can’t remember the last time I saw something so full of life,” I said, unable to contain a genuine smile as I watched the crowd moving like a single, happy organism.

“I call this heaven on earth,” Leah replied, her eyes sparkling with excitement as she spotted a stall displaying a tray of pastries stuffed with bright fruits. “And I plan to try at least three of those before the day ends.”

Chloé walked beside us with her characteristically elegant bearing, drawing curious and admiring glances from the villagers. Some braver children tried to approach to pet her, but stopped halfway, held back by a mix of shyness and instinctive respect. Amused by the reaction, she sent me a mental thought laced with playful irony.

“If they knew I could speak with words, they’d already be bombarding me with questions instead of staring at me like I’m some particularly furry statue.”

We advanced slowly between the stalls, allowing ourselves the luxury of tasting every tempting food that crossed our path. Bread filled with melted cheese that still steamed and stretched in golden strands when broken, apples coated in reddish caramel that stuck to our fingers but burst with intense sweetness in the mouth, and a thick soup of vegetables and meat served in rustic clay bowls, whose intoxicating aroma was enough to make Leah’s stomach growl even before her first bite.

“Naele would kill us if she saw us spending our coins on indulgent food like this instead of practical provisions for the road,” I said with a laugh, licking sticky caramel from my fingers.

“Let her try,” Leah retorted with her mouth still half full, her tone unmistakably defiant. “This is worth every coin and every possible scolding!”

We stopped before a spice stall where an elderly man, his face lined with deep but kind wrinkles, offered aromatic powders and grains in little muslin pouches.

While Leah curiously examined a jar containing a substance that glimmered like golden sand under the sunlight, my attention was irreversibly captured by a conversation happening just a few steps away, between two men with rugged looks and the practical clothing of local farmers or hunters.

“I’m telling you it was real,” said one, his deep voice heavy with a concern that seemed to weigh physically on his shoulders. “Demons on the northern road, less than half a day’s travel from here.”

“And what if it’s just another drunken tale of shadows mistaken for trees?” the other replied, though the doubt coloring his voice was obvious even from where I stood.

“Drunks who see shadows with glowing red eyes? Who hear laughter that isn’t human in the middle of the night? No. This is different. And the village chief knows it. That’s why he sent some of his best men to investigate three days ago.”

A heavy, almost tangible silence fell between them like an oppressive cloak. The first lowered his voice even further, turning it into a whisper that barely managed to reach me. “None came back. Not a single trace of them. As if the earth had swallowed them whole.”

A shiver ran down my spine, utterly unrelated to the warmth of the day or the joy surrounding us. The fair continued to pulse vibrantly around us—the crystalline laughter of children and the cheerful melodies of the musicians clashing grotesquely with the grim seriousness of those words, creating a contrast so unsettling that for a moment I felt disoriented, as if I were seeing two superimposed realities refusing to merge. Leah had heard it too; I knew by the sudden rigidity in her shoulders and by the way her hand unconsciously tightened around the jar of spices she still held.

Chloé leaned closer to us, her fur bristling slightly though her expression remained calm. Her voice resonated in our minds, clear and grave, cutting through the bustle like a sharp knife. “If those rumors

are true, this village is far less safe than it appears. And if grown, likely armed men sent to investigate never returned, whatever stalks those roads is no minor threat we can ignore.”

I bit my lower lip, glancing around with new eyes. The fair went on relentlessly—people laughed, ate, bought, and sold as if no one else had heard of the shadow looming over them, or as if they had collectively decided to bury fear beneath layer after layer of music, colors, and sweets. But I could no longer enjoy the seductive aromas or the vibrant colors, because now every laugh sounded forced, every cheerful glance seemed to hide worry.

There was a shadow on the road, a threat that had silently swallowed a group of men and now prowled less than a day’s travel from where we stood, laughing and eating caramel apples. And sooner or later, we too would have to face it, because our path would inevitably take us in that direction.

The contrast could not have been crueler: the fleeting joy of the fair against the sinister echo of a road that had swallowed whole men without leaving a trace. And in the middle of it all, us—with sticky caramel fingers and stomachs full of street food, but hearts chilled by the premonition of what might be waiting for us beyond the apparent safety of this village.