

Frozen Star 104

Chapter 104: Preparations

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn in Kreston arrived accompanied by cheerful bells and an unusual bustle that spread through every alley. The entire city still seemed immersed in the sweet hangover of the previous night's celebration. The streets were adorned with golden ribbons and garlands of fresh flowers that released a light fragrance into the morning air. Merchants shouted their offers with renewed energy, knowing that hundreds of visitors were still wandering the city, all extending their stay thanks to the lingering excitement of the tournament.

The three of us walked through the crowd with a clear and defined purpose. We needed to prepare meticulously for our next departure. The tournament prize included something far more tangible than fleeting glory. Three free uses of the Royal Teleportation Circle awaited us. It was an opportunity far too valuable to waste on rushed preparations. And before undertaking any journey through that ancient and powerful magical artifact, we had to be completely ready for any eventuality.

"Food, bandages, potions, and blankets," Leah listed, reading quietly from a small note she held with a concentrated look. "Only the essentials. Nothing unnecessary that weighs too much."

"That's easy for you to say," Chloé retorted mockingly, her voice echoing clearly in my mind. "But I already saw you eyeing those candy stalls we just passed."

Leah pretended not to hear, though a treacherous smile curved her lips involuntarily. "Sweets are a legitimate source of quick energy—scientifically speaking."

“Of course,” I murmured through a soft laugh. “And the three different cakes you ate last night were also for purely scientific reasons, weren’t they?”

“Exactly,” she replied with such exaggerated seriousness that I had to suppress the laughter threatening to escape.

Our first stop was a grocery stall run by an elderly woman with a kind face and hands wrinkled from work. Her wicker baskets overflowed with dried fruits, long-lasting travel bread, and strips of spiced cured meat. Leah personally handled the price negotiations with skill I admired, while I carefully selected bags of clean water and Chloé sniffed curiously at each wooden barrel of dried meat, emitting approving or disapproving grunts.

When we finished our shopping, Leah sighed in satisfaction as she pocketed the remaining coins. “That covers the basics for survival. Now we urgently need spare clothes. I refuse to cross half the kingdom wearing this same battle uniform, torn and stained with dried blood.”

“Is that out of genuine need for replacement clothes or just an elaborate excuse to go shopping?” I asked, raising a suspicious eyebrow.

“Both,” she replied without hesitation, flashing a mischievous grin.

Before I could protest or suggest an alternative, Leah had already grabbed me firmly by the arm and was dragging me determinedly toward a particular establishment whose carved wooden sign read: ‘The Dawn’s Needle — Clothing for Adventurers and Ladies of Style.’

Inside the shop, the strong scent of new fabrics and floral perfumes hit me immediately. Endless rows of mannequins displayed everything from elegant silk dresses to light hardened-leather armor. It was a place that seemed to exist between two different worlds.

“Perfect,” Leah exclaimed with a mischievous glint in her green eyes. “Let’s try some new things on you, Lotte.”

“Try on? Me?” I asked, feeling panic start to rise in my chest.

“Yes, you,” she insisted firmly. “You’ve basically worn the same outfit for weeks. You need to allow yourself a change, even a small one.”

“I’m perfectly fine with my usual coat and boots, thank you,” I argued, desperately seeking an escape route.

“That’s non-negotiable,” Chloé interjected from the doorway, where she had settled to watch the spectacle. “I vote entirely in favor of this plan. I have a genuine curiosity to see how ridiculous current human fashion can make you look.”

I sighed deeply, accepting my inevitable defeat. “Fine, fine. Bring whatever you want. But I want it on record that I refuse to parade around like a living mannequin.”

Leah was already enthusiastically rummaging through the packed racks. The first outfit she triumphantly pulled out was... a full maid uniform. With exaggerated frills. And a lace-trimmed apron.

“Absolutely not,” I declared immediately.

“Just try it on, for curiosity’s sake,” she pleaded, pouting.

“Leah, seriously,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Please, just for a minute,” she begged, smiling in that way she knew was my weak spot.

Five minutes later, I was standing in front of a full-length mirror, dressed in a black and white outfit with a ridiculously short skirt, holding an empty silver tray as an integral part of the ensemble. Leah was nearly doubled over laughing, leaning against a column, while Chloé —through our mental link— wouldn’t stop projecting uncontrollable laughter directly into my head.

“If you make one more comment, I swear I’ll freeze your boots solid for an entire week,” I muttered without looking at either of them.

“I’m just saying,” Leah replied between stifled giggles, “that if we ever decide to stop fighting monsters and demons, you could make an honest living serving tea with distinguished elegance.”

“Elegance is not exactly the word I’d use to describe this situation,” I grumbled, feeling my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

The next outfit was a full suit of heavy plate armor. It was polished steel, almost mirror-like, with absurdly large pauldrons and a closed helmet that weighed nearly as much as I did. I could barely move inside that metallic sarcophagus.

“How is anyone supposed to fight efficiently wearing this thing?” I complained while struggling to lift an arm that refused to cooperate.

“With lots of practice and zero common sense,” Leah answered, visibly amused. “Although I must admit you look... well, imposing in a way.”

“I’d say you look more like a decorative statue about to fall off its pedestal,” added Chloé bluntly.

Getting that cursed helmet off turned out to be a longer and harder battle than any we’d fought during the entire tournament.

“No more experiments with metal,” I declared, panting once I finally freed my head. “I want to try something that won’t kill me from heat exhaustion or restrict every vital movement.”

Leah, still laughing but sympathetic, nodded in agreement. “Fair enough. Then try this more sensible outfit.”

She handed me a practical travel set. It consisted of snug soft-leather trousers, a sky-blue linen blouse, and a short cloak lined with high-quality white fur. When I looked at myself in the mirror wearing these new garments, I had to silently admit... it didn’t look bad at all. It was comfortable, light, and allowed complete freedom of movement — plus, it had strategically placed pockets.

“That one,” Leah said with genuine satisfaction. “It’s perfect for you. Elegant but practical — just like you.”

“I agree,” murmured Chloé, this time with sincere approval. “Now you actually look like a seasoned traveler, not a festival mannequin.”

After several more laughs and a few additional jokes about “heroic fashion,” we finally left the shop carrying three new practical outfits and several bags full of essential supplies.

Our next and final destination was the Royal Teleportation Circle, located at the very heart of Kreston, inside an imposing white marble structure guarded by veteran guild magi. As we approached the building, the characteristic city noise began to fade behind us. The air grew denser, heavier — charged with arcane energy that made the skin faintly vibrate.

The portal itself glowed intensely at the center of a domed circular chamber, a massive ring engraved with ancient runes pulsing rhythmically with electric blue light. Its surface resembled liquid glass that mysteriously reflected the sky without any natural illumination.

“Are you ready for this?” Leah asked, adjusting the straps of her backpack with a gesture of restrained nervousness.

Chloé nodded solemnly. “I’ve eaten my fill, slept reasonably well, and currently no one is actively trying to kill us. So yes, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be.”

I stared at the portal, fascinated, feeling that familiar mixture of caution and awe. “It never ceases to amaze me... to think that a single step through that threshold can literally take you anywhere in the known world.”

Leah looked at me with a calm, reassuring smile. “Then let’s take that step together, as we’ve done with everything so far.”

We held hands tightly, the three of us forming a small circle in front of the glowing portal.

The air around us vibrated palpably. The floor beneath our feet began to shine with blinding intensity. The runes of the portal lit up all at once, and a cold, supernatural wind enveloped us completely.

I felt the familiar pull of mana flowing through my body — that unique sensation of falling and floating at the same time that always came with teleportation.

And just before the light swallowed us whole, I heard Chloé’s amused mental voice:

“Lotte, for our next adventure I’m making you try on a princess dress — accessories included.”

“Not in your wildest dreams,” I managed to reply before the world disappeared.

The portal closed behind us with a final flash that illuminated the entire chamber.

And our new journey, full of mysteries and promises, officially began at that very moment.