

Frozen Star 81

Chapter 81: Rumors of a Portal

[POV Liselotte]

Dinner at the guild had reached its natural end. The constant bustle of the main hall was beginning to shift into a quieter, deeper murmur. It was that particular sound that lingers in the air when the mugs are half-empty. When bodies weary from travel and work begin to long for the rest of a decent bed.

Leah ran her hand through her blonde hair. It was still disheveled from days of travel and accumulated tension. She rose from the table with a lazy stretch that made her bones crack.

—“It’s time to look for the inn they assigned us,” — she said. She picked up her cloak and the provisions bag with a deeply satisfied sigh. —“If I stay here one more minute, I’ll end up falling asleep right on the table.”

Chloé was calmly, methodically licking her front paw. She had just finished a hearty dinner of bones with juicy scraps of meat. Her thought reached us, laced with lupine humor. —“Now that would be a sight worth remembering. The great Leah, tamer of fire, defeated not by nightmare demons but by the weight of her own food.”

Leah rolled her eyes toward the ceiling, but a complicit smile curved her lips in the silver wolf’s direction. She didn’t reply aloud, but her expression was answer enough.

I gathered my belongings with deliberately calm movements. I always make sure nothing is left forgotten on the table, that every item is in its place. That was when a nearby conversation irresistibly drew my attention.

It was three middle-aged men, with the relaxed air of merchants who had had a good day of business. They spoke loud enough that anyone at the nearby tables could hear them without effort.

—“...and they’re going to inaugurate it in exactly seven days,” — said one of them, his voice carrying almost childlike excitement. —“A teleportation circle, fully functional, straight to the capital of the kingdom of Lando. Can you imagine? From here to there in an instant. No exhausting weeks of travel. No constant dangers on the road.”

The second man let out a hoarse laugh that echoed in our corner. —“If it really works as they say, the carters and mule drivers of the whole region will be out of work overnight. Who in their right mind would want to cross half a continent on horseback if they could pay to step through a magic circle and arrive fresh as a daisy?”

The third man instinctively lowered his voice, but not enough to keep me from catching every word. —“They say the capital of Lando funded the construction directly. They want to use it as a public demonstration of power. To show the whole world their mastery of advanced magic. There’ll be royal guards, important nobles, and even representatives of foreign guilds invited to witness the event.”

A precise shiver ran down my back. It wasn’t exactly fear, but rather the sudden clarity carried by those casual words. Lando... The capital of that kingdom was barely a week’s journey from Whirikai, according to the detailed map Leah guarded like a treasure. A single teleportation leap would place us dramatically closer to our final destination. And all in a matter of seconds.

—“Lotte...” — murmured Leah, who had also caught every syllable of the conversation. Her blue eyes gleamed with a mix of deep exhaustion and renewed hope I hadn’t seen in her for far too long. —“Do you realize what this means? If we could use that circle... Whirikal would be almost within our reach. Much, much sooner than we ever dared to imagine.”

Chloé rose at once, her whole body alert. She shook her fur as if she had just detected a profoundly unpleasant scent. Her mental voice reached us, laden with warning. —“Nothing good ever comes from magical shortcuts. Portals always hide a hidden price. Who knows what kind of dark pact or corrupt energy fuels that circle?”

I looked at her, feeling indecision tear me in two. A part of me shared that instinctive distrust, that primal certainty that easy magic always exacts its toll. But another part, more pragmatic and grounded, couldn’t ignore the monumental opportunity unfolding before us. Traveling for an entire year to Whirikal was no small prospect. Every additional day on the road brought with it unpredictable dangers—encounters that could cost us our lives.

—“Maybe it is dangerous,” — I finally admitted, trying to keep my voice steady while my thoughts swirled like leaves in a storm. —“Maybe you’re right, Chloé. But at the very least, we should find out how exactly it will work. Who will be allowed to use it, and under what specific conditions.”

Leah nodded vehemently, her fingers nervously toying with the thick fabric of her cloak. —“You’re both right. We can’t throw ourselves blindly into the unknown... but we also can’t afford to ignore something like this. If in seven days a portal opens straight to the capital of Lando, we should be there to see it with our own eyes. Even if only to understand how real it is, what risks it carries.”

Chloé didn’t reply immediately. She remained silent for a long moment, but her golden eyes fixed on me with a seriousness she rarely showed. A depth of concern that went beyond her usual caution. —“Then we’ll go,” — she finally conceded, her mental voice grave like distant thunder. —“But we’ll watch with the utmost caution. Because if that circle is what I am beginning to suspect... it will not be an innocent shortcut. It will be a trap elegantly disguised as a miracle.”

Her words hung in the air between us, heavy and prophetic like stones cast into a still pond. As we gathered our last belongings and left the hall toward the inn they had assigned us, those phrases echoed in my mind.

Outside, the night in Kreston was surprisingly calm. Torches placed strategically on the corners lit the cobbled streets with patches of yellowish light. The city's constant bustle had faded into distant murmurs, into muffled laughter drifting from illuminated windows.

Yet as the three of us walked together under the star-studded sky, I felt with absolute clarity that this rumor overheard by pure chance had just irrevocably altered the course of our journey.

And that in exactly seven days, fate would place us before a magic circle that could bring us closer to Whirikai as never before—or drag us into a danger far deeper and darker than anything we had ever faced.

The balance tipped dangerously, and only time would tell to which side the scale would finally fall.