

## Frozen Star 82

### Chapter 82: The Price of the Miracle

[POV Liselotte]

Morning in Kreston dawned with a bustle unlike that of other cities I had visited. There was a palpable expectation in the air, a nervous energy that filtered through the cobbled streets as if every inhabitant intuitively knew that something extraordinary was about to happen within days. Street stalls opened their curtains earlier than usual, criers shouted rumors and official announcements with renewed urgency, and even the guards posted on the walls seemed more alert, their gazes scanning the horizon as if expecting the arrival of important visitors at any moment.

We headed straight for the central square after a quick breakfast. According to the constant murmuring of adventurers in the guild during dinner the night before, it was there that the famous teleportation circle was being prepared.

The square was wide and open, paved with gray blocks that reflected the morning sunlight like muted mirrors. At its exact center, surrounded by a provisional wooden palisade and well-armed guards at every corner, rose the circle itself. It was an intricate engraving on immaculate white stone, still unfinished in some sections, with runes that glowed faintly in bluish tones like embers half-hidden beneath a layer of ash. Robed mages wearing long cloaks and silver gloves moved with millimetric precision around the structure, adjusting each symbol, correcting every line with magical chalk that glowed brightly before permanently merging into the stone.

Leah stopped dead at the sight, her eyes wide open as if beholding a lost wonder that existed only in the oldest of legends.

"It's... impressive. I never thought such perfect and complex rune work existed anywhere on this continent."

Chlo  , on the other hand, stood rigidly at my side. Her mental voice came heavy with a grim warning.

“Beautiful or not, those lines reek of danger. This is not the work of common artisans. There is too much energy concentrated there, as if they were trying to force reality itself to bend to their will.”

I said nothing at first. The sight of the circle inspired an instinctive respect in me, but it also stirred within me an attraction difficult to put into words. It was a power so vast, so fundamentally different from any magic I had ever felt before, that a primal part of my being wanted to draw closer, to touch the runes, to test its limits. As if answering some ancestral call that should not exist.

We approached cautiously to the guarded entrance of the palisade, where a soldier in polished armor and professional demeanor intercepted onlookers with the inflexible courtesy of someone accustomed to repeating the same explanation dozens of times a day.

“Citizens and adventurers,” he announced clearly, his voice cutting through the murmur of the square, “it is officially informed that the teleportation circle will be inaugurated in exactly seven days. It will be available for use by civilians under strict safety conditions. The price for individual use will be one thousand gold coins.”

The words fell on my ears like the blow of a hammer.

“One thousand coins?” Leah gasped in a strangled whisper, bringing a hand to her mouth as if to contain a stronger outburst. “That’s... impossible for us. Not even in twenty well-paid contracts could we ever gather that much.”

I instinctively pulled out the small leather pouch I carried discreetly at my waist. The jingling of the coins inside sounded like a cruel mockery compared to the astronomical figure we had just heard. Later, in the privacy of a nearby alley, we counted them meticulously—fifty gold coins in total, barely enough to cover basic provisions, modest lodging, and minor expenses for a few weeks. The difference between what we had and what was demanded was abyssal, an ocean of impossibility.

I sat down on an abandoned wooden crate by a wall, feeling the weight of the world press down tangibly on my shoulders.

“With that outrageous cost... this isn’t made for adventurers like us. It’s meant for bored nobles, for merchants swimming in riches, not for those of us who sweat and bleed on the road for coins that barely keep us alive.”

Leah clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles whitened, her face twisted in frustration and helplessness.

“We were so close... so damn close to cutting a year’s journey down to seconds. And now it turns out our long road is still inevitable, sealed by a price we can never pay.”

Chloé, always the voice of pragmatism in our group, tried to soften the blow with cold logic.

“Better this way. What sense is there in rushing to Whirikai if we can’t even afford the price of entry? Perhaps it’s fate telling us we need the long road, that we must learn certain lessons before reaching your home.”

I couldn't reply right away. Frustration burned inside me with such intensity it nearly clouded reason, a bitterness that tasted like a lost opportunity, a dream postponed indefinitely.

Then, as if fate itself had decided to mock our despair, an official town crier appeared at the northern end of the square, accompanied by a drummer whose vibrant, rhythmic rolls captured the crowd's attention.

"Hear ye, adventurers and citizens of Kreston!" the man shouted with a booming voice that echoed across the square, raising a scroll sealed with the emblem of the local guild. "In honor of the inauguration of the great teleportation circle, a team tournament will be held in five days' time. The winners shall receive a unique and glorious prize—a free pass for use of the circle, valid for an entire group."

An electrifying murmur, charged with disbelief and greed, swept across the square from end to end. Adventurers who moments ago had been distracted or disinterested straightened like wolves scenting juicy prey. Glances crossed between rival groups, heavy with silent challenge and sudden ambition.

I myself felt my blood boil in my veins with renewed intensity, a mix of resurrected hope and fierce determination.

Leah, her face lit up by a hope she thought dead, turned to me almost immediately, her eyes shining like beacons.

"Lotte... did you hear that? If we win, we wouldn't need the gold! That ticket would take us straight to Lando... and from there Whirikai would be only a week away!"

Chloé let out a long, low growl, a deep sound that vibrated in my chest like a war drum.

“A tournament... the perfect method to lure in the ambitious and measure their strength before showing them the new toy. It reeks of calculated manipulation from where I’m standing.”

But despite her natural skepticism, I knew she was thinking the same thing I was. This could be our only real chance to drastically shorten our journey, to avoid an entire year of unpredictable dangers and hardships.

I drew in a deep breath, feeling cold, solid determination replace the hot helplessness that had consumed me moments earlier.

“Then we have no choice. We will participate. We will win that tournament no matter the cost. And that ticket will be ours—no matter who stands in our way.”

The murmur of the square kept rising in intensity, like the roar of a tide inevitably coming in. And I, my eyes fixed on the magical circle glowing in the distance with its own light, silently swore upon every scar and every memory that nothing and no one would stand between us and that prize.

Because now, more than ever, the path to Whirikai had a possible shortcut—and we were determined to take it, no matter the price.