

Frozen Star 84

Chapter 84: Echoes of the Arena

[POV Liselotte]

The day of the tournament dawned heavy with an anticipation that could be breathed in the air like a dense fog. From the first light of dawn, the city of Kreston boiled with a contained energy that seemed ready to overflow. Adventurers from all the nearby regions crowded the streets leading to the great guild arena, an imposing oval stone structure that rose like a silent colossus in the very heart of the city. Street vendors shouted their wares, offering good luck charms, ribbons with the emblems of different groups, and even makeshift bets on which team would ultimately emerge victorious.

As we pushed our way through the crowd toward the entrance reserved for participants, I could physically feel how every gaze that landed on us, every murmur caught by my ear, was steeped in that same mix of overflowing excitement and barely concealed greed. The prize of the teleportation circle was not simply coveted—it was almost a myth made tangible reality, a dream within reach for those willing to fight for it.

Chloé, walking at my side with her firm and elegant stride, sent a thought through her mental voice that struck deeply in my chest as a sobering reminder. “Look closely at those eyes watching us. These adventurers haven’t come here seeking fleeting glory or passing fame. They came because that circle represents pure gold, pure power, pure opportunity. And they won’t hesitate to crush anyone who stands between them and that prize.”

She was right—a truth that rang with bitter clarity in my mind. And though my heart pounded against my ribs, a cold knot of anxiety settled firmly in the pit of my stomach, reminding me of the rawness of what was about to unfold.

When we finally took our seats in the section designated for teams not yet called to fight, the true magnitude of the arena struck me with all its physical and emotional force. The central ground was of compacted yellowish earth, wide and clear like the palm of a giant's hand, completely surrounded by stone stands already vibrating with the echo of thousands of intertwined voices. Above the main entrance, the proud banner of the Kreston guild waved majestically, solemn and radiant, its colors shining under the morning light.

The master of ceremonies, a robust man with a voice so powerful it seemed to shake the very air around him, stood atop a stone platform built especially for him.

"Welcome, citizens, adventurers, and honorable outsiders! Today begins the grand tournament in honor of the soon-to-be inaugurated teleportation circle. Each team will demonstrate not only their individual strength, but their collective strategy and unbreakable unity. And at the end of this day, only one team shall rise with the ticket that opens the gates directly to Lando and the future that awaits beyond!"

The gathered crowd roared with a clamor so deafening I felt the sound vibrate in my bones. Leah, seated beside me on the stone bench, instinctively placed a hand over her chest, as if she needed to physically contain the quickened beating of her heart.

"I never imagined a simple tournament could have this magnitude, this intensity..." she whispered, her voice slightly trembling.

Neither had I, truth be told. This was not a simple clash between adventurers with common dreams. It was a carefully orchestrated spectacle, a public ritual of power where not only the participants' physical strength would be tested, but the very mettle of their souls under pressure.

The master of ceremonies raised a gloved arm and his voice thundered once more through the arena with authority.

“And for the first round of matches, facing each other in this field of honor... the Crimson Group against the Iron Brothers!”

The two teams entered from opposite sides of the arena almost in unison. The Crimson Group was made up of four relatively young adventurers, their mismatched armor clearly pieced together from various spoils, their confidence shown more in exaggerated gestures than in real combat discipline. They shouted to the crowd, raising their weapons in theatrical displays, clearly basking in the attention and cheers.

In stark contrast, the Iron Brothers entered in absolute silence that was almost unsettling. Three men and one woman, all clad in dark, perfectly maintained plate armor, each bearing identical shields that gleamed with a professional polish. Their entrance formation was closed and compact, their steps perfectly synchronized, their faces as impenetrable as stone masks. Every movement, every measured breath, spoke of methodical training and countless hours of practice together, eliminating even the smallest fissure in their coordination.

When the bronze gong resounded to mark the start of the battle, the abyssal difference between the two teams became as clear as the divide between day and night.

The Crimson Group charged immediately, screaming war cries, advancing in total disarray, each launching individual attacks with no visible coordination. One swung an axe far too heavy for his build, another hastily loosed short arrows without taking the time to aim, while the others simply struck with whatever strength they had, blindly trusting brute force to overcome their opponents.

The Iron Brothers, in contrast, did not flinch before the chaos unleashed. They needed no shouted orders, no elaborate signals. They simply advanced as a living moving wall, unshakable. Two shields held firm at the front, forming an apparently impenetrable barrier. The woman, strategically positioned behind, raised a metallic standard that instantly glowed with magical reinforcement runes. The last member circled their core with fluid movements, striking with near-surgical precision at any Crimson fighter foolish enough to come too close.

The desperate attacks of the Crimson Group crashed again and again against that perfectly coordinated human wall, like furious waves breaking uselessly against an indestructible cliff. The crowd roared with excitement at each resounding impact, each clash of metal on metal, but from my vantage point as an observer... the outcome had already been decided from the very first instant.

“This isn’t really a fight,” Leah murmured, her voice strangely subdued, as if she were seeing something deeper than a simple match. “This is a practical demonstration of absolute control, of discipline brought to its maximum expression.”

She was right—a painfully clear truth. Every time one of the Crimson fighters tried to circle around or find a weakness in the formation, the group’s shield immediately shifted to cover the gap, as though they could anticipate every enemy move seconds in advance. And when an opponent was momentarily exposed by a misstep, a single clean, efficient blow dropped him effortlessly—without needless spectacle or gratuitous cruelty.

In less than five minutes, which seemed to pass in a breath, the four members of the Crimson Group lay scattered on the arena floor, gasping for air, some already fully unconscious. The Iron Brothers, meanwhile, didn’t even seem to have broken a sweat; their breathing remained calm and measured.

The crowd's initial silence at the abrupt end suddenly erupted into a deafening roar of approval and awe. The Iron Brothers raised their shields in unison in a sober gesture of victory—no triumphant smiles, no displays of excessive pride. They didn't need them. Their impeccable method, their iron discipline, had spoken louder than any cry of victory.

Chloé let out a low growl that only we could hear amidst the overwhelming noise. "That is precisely the kind of enemy we cannot face while acting as mere individuals who happen to share a goal. If we allow even the smallest crack in our coordination, the slightest lapse in communication, they will crush us with the same cold efficiency with which they just dismantled those four poor souls."

I felt my hands involuntarily clench around the invisible hilt of my sword resting beside me. Watching that group in action had been like receiving a forewarning from fate itself, a stark lesson that this tournament would not be a parade of heroic improvisations or individual acts of valor, but a methodical battlefield where the disciplined, the patient, the ones who had honed their teamwork until it became instinctive, would inevitably triumph over the disorganized dreamers.

Leah drew a long, deep breath, her gaze fixed on the dust clouds still rising from the arena floor where the Crimson Group was being tended to.

"If they keep advancing cleanly through the rounds until the finals... without a doubt they'll become our most formidable obstacle, the wall we'll have to break down to reach our goal."

And I knew, with a certainty that sent a glacial shiver down my spine, that such a possibility was far more than a mere hypothetical "if." It felt inevitable, as though written in the very runes of destiny itself.

The Iron Brothers hadn't simply won an opening match. They had sent a clear, resounding message to every participant—a message of discipline, coordination, and lethal efficiency.

And we, sitting on those stone benches, had received it in all its terrifying, awe-inspiring force.