

## Frozen Star 89

### Chapter 89: Shadows and Crossed Gazes

[POV Liselotte]

The afternoon in Kreston moved slowly, painted with an amber glow filtering through the guild's tall windows. After the bustle and euphoria of the tournament's first rounds, the atmosphere inside the building had changed notably. The roar of the crowd still echoed in the surrounding streets, but in the great common hall reserved for the participating teams, the air was heavier, charged with tension, like the prelude to a storm that had yet to break but that everyone could feel drawing near.

The guild, aware of the magnitude of the event, had opened an annex hall with long solid wooden tables, benches worn by years of use, and a central fireplace that remained unlit, for the summer heat made fire unnecessary. There, the victorious teams from the first round could rest, exchange impressions or, at least in theory, coexist under a temporary truce until the gong once again summoned them to the next battle.

We entered quietly, still bearing the visible marks of our recent fight. My gauntlets bore fresh scratches, Leah's sleeves were slightly scorched, and Chloé carried a faint trace of dried blood on her muzzle. No one turned immediately toward us; the groups already settled seemed too engrossed in their own dynamics and evaluations of one another.

We chose a discreet corner, sheltered by a wide stone column. From that strategic position, without drawing attention, we had a clear view of everything happening in the room. We had decided, without needing to speak it aloud, that the wisest course at that moment was to observe rather than expose ourselves unnecessarily.

—“This place reeks of contained tension,” murmured Leah in a low voice, placing her pouch of magical components beside her. “As if the tiniest spark would be enough for everyone to leap at each other’s throats right now, without waiting for the arena.”

Chloé growled softly, the sound resonating in our minds more than in the air. —“That is exactly what it is. A pack of predators gathered in the same pen, each showing their fangs to measure the others before deciding to strike.”

It didn’t take long for us to understand exactly what she meant.

At the central table sat the Iron Brothers. Their presence was imposing even at rest. Four figures—three men and one woman—all clad in gleaming black armor, perfectly polished after the fight. They wore it as if it were a second skin, showing no discomfort. They sat straight-backed, synchronized even in the way they drank water or broke bread. They spoke little, exchanging only short phrases, enough to understand each other. They needed no further display; their crushing victory that morning had already spoken for them eloquently enough.

At the opposite table, almost like an antagonistic shadow, were the Three Shrouded, the black-robed mages inscribed with violet runes we had seen in action. Their very presence seemed to chill the air around them. They did not laugh, nor speak aloud, only leaned toward each other to murmur unintelligible phrases. Their eyes, hidden under their deep hoods, moved with surgical precision, analyzing each group in the room as though they were pieces on a giant chessboard. One of them constantly toyed with an amulet shaped like an eye carved from dark bone, spinning it between long, skeletal fingers.

The contrast between both teams was brutal: one was steel discipline and methodical physical force, the other, field control and perfectly synchronized dark magic. And yet both radiated the same aura of inevitability, as if destined to clash at some point in the tournament—an encounter everyone sensed but no one dared to mention aloud.

Further away, near the unlit fireplace, the remnants of the Reddish Group tried to hide the shame of their earlier defeat. Some lingered in the hall out of wounded pride, others because the inn was not yet ready to receive them. They laughed too loudly, with the excess of those who try to drown humiliation in mugs of cheap beer. Their leader, still with his forehead bandaged, spouted boastful claims about how the referee had been unfair or how they had fought at a numerical disadvantage. No one in the hall seemed to truly pay him any mind.

But the noisiest group at that moment were the so-called Bronze Crows, a quintet of hardened mercenaries who had advanced to the next round with a dirty victory, more through brute endurance than refined technique. Their leader, a man with a square jaw and fresh scars on his arms, slammed his fist against the table as he openly mocked the Reddish ones and hurled provocative jabs toward the Iron Brothers.

—“Come on, come on,” he said in a hoarse voice, raising a foamy mug over his head. “What good is armor that polished if you don’t have the guts to face real men? I say those Brothers are nothing but iron statues with a stick shoved up their—”

The metallic thud resounded before he could finish the offensive phrase. One of the Iron Brothers, the tallest, broadest-shouldered of them, had set his massive shield against the ground with a dry crash that made the nearby tables quake. He uttered no word, didn’t even raise his gaze toward the Crows. The silence that followed was far more eloquent than any verbal response could have been.

The Bronze Crows laughed nervously, some too loudly, others with uneasy glances darted toward the walls. The leader tried to maintain his defiant grin, but the tension was visible in his clenched jaw and in how his fingers gripped the handle of his mug.

Leah leaned toward me and murmured, barely moving her lips. —“That silence is worth more than a thousand verbal threats.”

I nodded slowly. I had felt it too—that kind of warning that requires no words because it is already written in the cold gaze of someone who knows they can crush you if they wish, and who has no need to prove it with bluster.

Meanwhile, the Three Shrouded observed the entire scene with the disturbing stillness of vultures waiting for another animal to die so they could feed on the remains. Their thin lips curved just slightly in what could have been an ironic smile or one of disdain, but they made no move to intervene or take sides.

—“They’re measuring the ground,” said Chloé in our minds, her tone laden with an almost instinctive certainty born of her lupine nature. “They want the others to wear themselves down emotionally before they have to lift a single finger in the arena.”

The gathering continued with a succession of small provocations, all wrapped in false laughter and looks heavy with intent. The Crows hurled constant barbs at anyone who crossed their line of sight. The Reddish ones tried to regain prestige by boasting of past battles no one seemed to believe. And the Iron Brothers maintained their glacial silence, imposing respect with each minimal, calculated gesture.

In that charged atmosphere, no one dared provoke the Shrouded directly. It was as if some primal instinct advised everyone present not to tempt those who had shown they could manipulate living shadows with a mere whisper and a flick of the hand.

From our sheltered corner, we took mental note of every significant detail.

—“Look at how they drink,” Leah pointed out in a low voice, her eyes fixed on the Iron Brothers. “None of them overindulge in alcohol. Just a measured sip, enough to hydrate. That means they never let their guard down, not even here in apparent rest.”

I nodded, following her line of analytical thought. —“And the Crows do the exact opposite. They drink too much, laugh too loudly. They try to project confidence and carefreeness, but in truth they’re only showing their vulnerability. They’re nervous and hide it poorly.”

Chloé let out a low growl, audible only to us. —“The Shrouded are different still. They do not eat, they do not drink, they scarcely seem to breathe. As though their fuel is not human, not earthly. That kind of discipline... or corruption... is unnatural.”

Her words sent a shiver down my spine. And yet, it was impossible not to acknowledge the real threat they posed to any team fated to face them.

Suddenly, the leader of the Bronze Crows stood up, swaying from the drink he had consumed, and pointed a trembling finger directly at the Shrouded.

—“And you lot,” he shouted, his voice bolstered by artificial courage fed by alcohol. “Too important to join the conversation of common mortals? Or is it that you only know how to hide behind cheap tricks and black smoke?”

The entire hall froze in that instant; all conversations ceased simultaneously.

The Shrouded lifted their heads in unison, as though connected by a single consciousness. Their eyes, barely visible under the depth of their hoods, gleamed with a disturbing violet glow that made the very air seem heavier and denser around them. The eye-shaped amulet one of them had been toying with stopped spinning and hung suspended in the air for several seconds, as if floating on its own.

The Crow audibly swallowed, his hand still trembling with the accusatory finger extended. He tried to hold the mages' gaze, but it was like colliding with a wall of living ice. At last, he lowered his arm with a forced, false laugh, pretending it had all been nothing more than a tasteless joke.

The Shrouded returned to their unintelligible murmurs as though nothing had happened, as though the provocation hadn't even deserved their sustained attention. The threat had been clear and overwhelming, and they hadn't needed a single offensive move to convey it.

Leah exhaled beside me, her breath shaky. —“I don't want to face them... not now, not yet.”

Neither did I. And yet, I knew deep in my heart that it was inevitable. At some advanced point in the tournament, fate would put us before them, and we would have to meet those cold, gleaming eyes without flinching, without showing our inner fear.

The evening dragged on a while longer, with tension barely concealed beneath the surface. Some teams began to withdraw discreetly, others lingered to keep testing each other with carefully chosen words and calculated gestures. We remained in our observational corner, in protective silence, taking mental notes of every exposed weakness, every faint crack in the others' emotional armor.

When we finally left the guild for the outside, the night air greeted us as tangible relief after the stifling atmosphere of the hall. The city's constant bustle had diminished considerably, replaced by scattered murmurs and torches flickering faintly over the nearly empty cobbled streets.

—“Today we've learned as much as in a full day of physical training,” I finally said, breaking the comfortable silence that had grown among us along the way.

Leah nodded firmly. —“Not only how the others fight, but how they think, how they react under social pressure. That is just as important as knowing their combat techniques.”

Chloé, walking at our side with the solemn dignity that always characterized her, let her final warning of the day fall into our minds. —“The tournament is not decided only within the physical arena. Here too, in these rooms filled with crossed gazes and veiled provocations, another parallel battle rages—the battle of the mind, of patience, of psychological endurance. And it will be won by the one who observes without being observed, who understands without needing to explain.”

And with that final certainty etched into my chest, we continued our path toward the inn, knowing that the shadows and crossed gazes of that hall had been as revealing, as instructive, as any direct duel beneath the burning sun of the tournament arena.