

## Frozen Star 90

### Chapter 90: Echoes of the Unknown

[POV Liselotte]

Dawn arrived slowly over Kreston, painted in shades of gold and crimson that lit the city with an almost unreal glow. From the windows of our inn, the streets already boiled with the same intense bustle that had accompanied the beginning of the tournament. Street vendors offered banners and souvenirs, children ran about with crudely carved wooden figures representing their favorite teams, and a constant sea of human voices merged into a persistent murmur of collective expectation.

We headed early toward the main coliseum, still carrying the vivid memory of the palpable tension from the previous night at the guild. We had barely managed a few restless hours of sleep, but just feeling the growing murmur of the crowd was enough to make the adrenaline rush instantly back into our veins. Leah walked at my side in concentrated silence, mentally reviewing arcane formulas—I could see her lips moving slightly, murmuring nearly inaudible runic sequences. Chloé advanced with her characteristic lupine dignity, though the restless swish of her tail back and forth betrayed an inner unease she would never express openly.

The main entrance to the coliseum was noticeably more crowded than in previous days. The matches scheduled for this day promised confrontations between teams that had already earned a certain popularity, and people crowded at the gates as if each individual duel were about to decide the very fate of the entire continent.

We soon found our reserved competitor seats in a raised side gallery, close enough to the arena to distinguish every significant detail, but far enough apart not to mix directly with the general bustle of the crowd.

The bronze gong boomed deeply, solemnly announcing the start of the day's first match.

Two teams descended from opposite ramps toward the central arena, greeted by deafening cheers that seemed to shake the foundations of the coliseum. I recognized one of them immediately—the Dawn Warriors, a well-known group for their frontal and clean combat style, composed of two skilled swordsmen, a devout cleric, and a mage specialized in hydromancy. They were particularly popular with the general public because they represented the classic image of the honorable adventurer, strong in principles and spectacular in techniques.

The other team, however, made us frown simultaneously. They were five figures dressed entirely in gray outfits without insignia or distinctive adornment, armed with weapons so disparate they seemed improvised or gathered at random—a short, thick mace, several hunting knives of different sizes, a splintered staff that looked as if it had been found on the roadside, even rusty chains that hung heavily. Their faces were completely covered with smooth, white masks without defined features. They neither greeted the expectant audience nor showed any emotion at the cheers; they simply walked to their assigned positions with identical, rigid steps, as if they were grotesque puppets guided by the same invisible puppeteer.

A low, unsettling murmur rippled through the stands, notably quieter than the usual enthusiastic shouts. Even among the generally festive crowd, the appearance of that particular group seemed to drop the ambient temperature of the coliseum several degrees.

"Who are they?" Leah whispered, leaning toward me with a worried expression.

Before I could formulate any response, a deep and serene voice interrupted us from behind.

"They call themselves the Faceless."

We turned almost in unison to find an older man in the dark blue uniform worn only by veteran guild supervisors. His eyes carried an ancient and profound weariness, as if he had witnessed too many battles in his lifetime. He sat quietly beside us on the stone bench, never taking his piercing gaze off the arena where the fight was about to unfold.

"Do you know them personally?" I asked cautiously, studying his wrinkle-lined face.

The man shook his head slowly, the gesture heavy. "Not exactly. No one in the guild really knows them. No one knows for certain where they come from or how they managed to formally register in the tournament. They appeared here in Kreston about a month ago, paid all the required fees in complete silence, and from that moment on... every one of their recorded fights has ended in exactly the same disturbing way."

"What way, specifically?" Leah pressed, her tone laced with growing distrust.

The veteran visibly clenched his jaw before responding, as if the words themselves cost him physical effort. "Their opponents don't die in battle... but they never get back up on their own. They remain completely unconscious for entire days, some even for weeks. Several of their previous opponents still haven't woken up in the guild infirmary."

A sharp shiver ran down my back under the armor. "And the guild authorities let them keep participating after that?"

The man looked directly at us then, for the first time since he had joined us. His gray eyes reflected something close to professional helplessness. "The guild has not been able to gather concrete proof that they are explicitly breaking any written tournament rules. The most experienced healers find no visible wounds nor detectable traces of poison or conventional curses on the victims. Only... a profound

absence, a void. As if something essential had been ripped away, something that cannot be seen or touched by conventional means."

The gong sounded again then, marking the imminent start of the fight, and our conversation was suspended in the charged air.

The Dawn Warriors deployed in formation with their usual confidence—the two swordsmen advanced to the front keeping perfect guard, the cleric immediately began a low protective chant, and the mage quickly traced glowing runes in the air to summon a translucent shield of pure water.

The Faceless, in stark contrast, remained completely motionless in their positions, their masked heads slowly turning in perfect synchronization toward their rivals. The silence emanating from them was so absolute that even the constant cheers of the crowd seemed to suffocate beneath an invisible blanket of psychic pressure.

Then they moved for the first time.

They didn't charge forward or shout battle cries. They simply advanced with perfectly synchronized steps, as if all shared the same artificial heartbeat. The one carrying the rusty chains cracked them sharply in the air, and the metal links lengthened unnaturally, like living snakes, quickly entangling around the cleric's magical shield. He tried to resist the grip with all his power, but a second Faceless appeared abruptly before him, moving with speed that defied normal perception, and struck him with an open palm square in the chest. The man instantly collapsed to his knees, his eyes losing all brightness of consciousness within seconds.

The water mage screamed an order, immediately unleashing a powerful torrent of elemental water that violently swept two of the hooded figures. But instead of being dragged by the current, the affected

Faceless remained completely upright, unmoving like stakes driven deep into the arena floor. The water engulfed them completely and then vanished into nothing, leaving no visible damage.

The Dawn swordsmen then attacked in unison, their well-kept blades gleaming under the sun with techniques refined by years of practice. But each precise slash was received by the Faceless with a strange, unsettling passivity. They didn't dodge the blows, didn't block with weapons—they simply absorbed every physical strike without flinching. And then, with minimal, economical movements, they countered: a light touch on an exposed arm, a quick tap on a sweaty forehead, a dry push to an unguarded abdomen. And each of these touches, no matter how simple or insignificant they seemed, immediately dropped a Dawn Warrior as if their inner life force had been suddenly extinguished.

One by one, they fell with no real chance of resistance.

In less than five minutes, which seemed to unfold in slow motion, the entire Dawn team lay scattered across the arena, all breathing shallowly but completely inert, their bodies sprawled like dolls abandoned by bored children.

The silence of the crowd was now absolute and heavy. No triumphant cheers, no applause of recognition. Only a growing murmur of collective fear and incomprehension rose from the stands.

The guild veteran beside us spoke again, his voice now weighed with solemn gravity. "Do you see it clearly now? There are no open wounds, no blood spilled. Only existential emptiness. That is precisely what makes them infinitely more dangerous than any other participant in the tournament. No one knows exactly what they steal from their victims, nor how they manage to do it without leaving physical trace."

I kept my gaze fixed on the arena, aware that my knuckles had turned white from unconsciously gripping the hilt of my sword.

Leah was visibly pale, her eyes wide with contained horror. "What they do doesn't resemble any known elemental magic, not even a common curse from forbidden grimoires..."

Chloé crouched instinctively beside us, her golden eyes glowing with restrained, primal fury. "That is not honorable combat between warriors. It's a systematic hunt, an emptying of souls."

The final gong resounded, marking the official end of the match. The Faceless left the arena with the same mechanical calm with which they had arrived, completely ignoring the stunned audience, ignoring the healers who rushed desperately to the fallen bodies. Not a single word spoken, not a single gesture of triumph or acknowledgment.

I turned fully to the guild veteran, seeking answers in his experienced face. "Why are you telling us all this specifically?"

He sighed deeply, his voice barely audible above the disturbed murmur of the stands. "Because sooner or later, if you continue advancing in the tournament as you have so far, you will inevitably face them. And when that critical moment comes, I need you to know what you will truly be facing. They are not ordinary opponents, nor conventional rivals. They don't play by the same unwritten rules as the other participants."

He rose slowly with visible effort and left without adding another word, leaving us with a chilling emptiness in our chests that had nothing to do with the ambient temperature.

I looked intensely at Leah, then at Chloé. Neither of them needed to speak a word in that moment; our faces expressed the same grim understanding.

The Faceless were not simply another rival within the tournament. They were a dark and tangible mystery, a sinister omen of something much greater hidden behind the white masks.

And deep in my chest, with a certainty that froze my blood, I knew it irrevocably, facing them directly was not a possibility—it was an inevitability drawing closer with every match we won.