

Frozen Star 37

Chapter 37: First Job. Between Teeth and Thorns

[POV Liselotte]

The mission board of the Northern Flames was a visual testament to the guild's relentless hierarchy. Weathered papers, some with scorched corners or stained with something dark and sticky, clustered together like dead leaves.

The promising jobs—escort missions through bandit-infested roads, exploration of frozen ruins, hunts for beasts that made your hair stand on end just by reading the description—bore bold seals: “Rank D or higher.” An invisible yet impassable wall.

Our badge, the humble, poorly-polished bronze F on our chests, confined us to the bottom edge of the board.

“PEST CLEANUP – RATSKORNS. Olren's Farm. Reward: 50 coppers + fresh bread. Urgent. Rank F acceptable.”

Naele, behind the dark oak counter, raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow when Chloé and I stopped in front of her. I pointed to the parchment.

"Is this one for us?"

The receptionist gave a lazy glance, a smile almost compassionate curling her lips. "Yes, dear. Giant rats in Olren's root crop fields. Nothing to inspire ballads, but excellent for getting your boots dirty, earning a few coppers... and most importantly, trust. The farmers' trust."

"Heroes. Rats. Fur matted with sticky mud and the smell of rotting beast. Yes, epic" Chloé's voice in my mind was a flat hum of sarcasm, accompanied by a vivid mental image of her splendid grey coat tangled and filthy.

"Think of it as... field training under adverse conditions" I replied mentally, while stamping my signature—a determined scrawl—in the acceptance log. The sound of the guild seal validating it was a definitive thump. Our first official step.

The road to Olren's farm wound between hills covered in dirty snow and groves of pines groaning under the northern wind. The air smelled of frozen earth, rancid straw, and, as we drew closer, a sour mix of rotting vegetation and something else... animal. Moss. Sour sweat. Old blood.

Farmer Olren waited for us at the edge of his land, a hunched figure against the cold like an old tree. His hands, gloved in worn leather, were furrowed with deep cracks and calluses like stones.

"The guild... sent... this?" he asked, voice hoarse as a rusty door. His gaze scanned my F badge with an expression that clearly said waste of time.

"Lotte and Chloé" I confirmed, keeping my voice steady, lifting the badge a bit higher. "Show us the problem."

He led us through fields that must once have been neat rows of vegetal hope. Now they were a landscape of desolation. Rows of carrots, turnips, and beets had been ravaged. Stalks gnawed down to the ground, roots torn out and half-eaten, leaving muddy craters. The smell of churned earth and vegetable rot was strong, but beneath it floated another, more insidious one: a musky, sour trace of burrow and dirty teeth.

"Ratskorns" Olren spat, as if the name burned his tongue. "Demons the size of a small dog, but with the malice of a starving wolf. Fur like old barbed wire, teeth that cut bone like butter. They move in packs, mostly at night, but now... now they don't even hide". He pointed with a trembling finger at a particularly ravaged patch of purple carrots. "There. They come from there. If I don't stop them today, tomorrow I've got nothing to sell. Nothing to eat."

Chloé was already moving. She advanced stealthily, nose pressed to the muddy ground, ears alert like radar dishes. "Smells... like a deep burrow. Here... She stopped beside a dark hole, barely visible among the ruined roots. It was wider than expected, the edge worn and dirty."

"Tunnels. Deep. Connected. Five... six distinct scent signatures. And... She lifted her head, ears taut toward the hole."

My heart thudded hard against my ribs. I drew my short sword, the cold steel reassuring in my hand. It wasn't an epic battle, but the urgency in Olren's eyes, the destruction of a man's livelihood... made it important. The goal was clear: drive them off, kill only if necessary for defense, reduce the threat. But with hungry, aggressive beasts, the line was thin.

We deployed with simple but proven tactics. Chloé, silent as mist, took position to the left of the main hole, ready to intercept any trying to flank or flee. I planted myself in front of the dark entrance, sword in one hand. I took a deep breath, ignoring the familiar twinge in my thigh, and struck the firm ground beside the hole with the tip of my staff.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The hollow sound resonated in the earth's bowels. It was the bell that started the dance.

The reaction was instant and chaotic. Five furry silhouettes, fast as poisoned arrows, burst from the darkness. Ratskorns.

Bigger than described, the size of a medium dog, with tiny, glinting eyes like jet beads filled with hate and hunger. Their fur was a tangle of coarse, bristling gray hairs like wire brushes. Their screeches were high-pitched, shrill, a mad chorus ripping through the cold air. The stench they brought—of excrement, rotting flesh, and sickly beast—was a physical wall that forced me to breathe through my mouth.

The first leapt straight at my throat, a torpedo of teeth and fury. Instinct and training fused. I twisted sharply, my injured leg screaming, and the edge of my sword slammed into its side with a dull thwack, not to cut, but to deflect. The creature yowled as it hit the muddy ground. Another lunged for my left ankle, aiming for the tendon. My staff came down like lightning, blocking the sharp fangs that snapped against the hard wood with a sickening sound.

To my left, Chloé was a whirlwind of lethal efficiency. A gray flash lunging, dodging, biting. She didn't roar. She worked in deadly silence. Her powerful jaws closed on the neck of a ratskorn trying to slip away, shaking it like a rag before hurling it into another emerging one. The impact was solid, bones cracking. Her paws, though large, made no sound in the mud; each movement was an economy of energy, the precision of a born predator.

One of the ratskorns, cleverer or simply more scared, broke ranks and bolted in a desperate sprint toward the back of the field, toward the relative safety of the nearby forest. Cursing my stiff leg, I ran after it. Each step sent a stab of pain through my thigh, slowing me down. The beast was gaining ground, its low body weaving through the remnants of crops.

And then, in the crucible of frustration and pain, I felt it. It wasn't a conscious decision. It was a visceral reflex, a response from the icy core sleeping within me, awakened by adrenaline and helplessness. The cold. Not the air's, but the one inside.

I extended my free hand—the one not holding the sword—toward the fleeing beast, picturing the ground before it... slippery.

The mana answered. Not with a torrent, but with an icy spasm. A gasp of frigid air escaped my lips. The air before me thickened for an instant, barely perceptible. And on the muddy ground, right in front of the ratskorn's hind legs, a thin layer of frost sprang from nothing, faintly glimmering under the grayish light. It was fleeting, just a blink of ice.

But it was enough.

The animal's paws lost traction on the suddenly glassy mud. It skidded awkwardly, its dash cut short with a squeak of surprise. That second of vulnerability was all I needed. With a grunt of effort, I hurled a stick like an improvised javelin. It flew in a straight, low line, striking the ratskorn square on the rump with a solid impact. The beast fell on its side, dazed.

"That!" Chloé's mental voice was a whip crack of surprise and a fierce flash of pride. "You did it!"

"It was... almost nothing" I panted, retrieving the staff as I limped toward the stunned beast, my heart still hammering from both the physical exertion and the magical jolt. But the feeling lingered. A faint hum in my veins, an echo of the cold that had flowed, not exploded. A thread of control, thin as frost itself, but real. "But it was... something."

The last ratskorn was taken by Chloé with a precise leap that killed it swiftly.

Olren approached, his skepticism replaced by a tired but genuinely grateful expression.

"Good work. Clean. Quick". He handed us a leather pouch that jingled with the metallic sound of fifty copper coins. And then, a small linen sack. When I opened it, the warm, comforting aroma of freshly baked bread filled the cold air, momentarily chasing away the stench of beast and mud. "It's not a treasure. But it's honest. And the bread... it's from my wife. With honey from our hive."

I accepted both with a nod. The weight of the coppers in my hand was tangible, the first fruit of our labor. The aroma of the bread.

That night, in the quiet refuge of our small room at the temple, Chloé devoured her share of bread with the deep satisfaction of a hunter who has earned her meal. I held my piece, still warm, gazing at the little leather pouch of coppers on the table.

My mind, however, kept returning to that instant in the muddy field. To the feeling of the cold answering my desperate will. To the fleeting frost, bright and fragile, that had been born under my hand.

It hadn't been a spell. It hadn't been control. It had been a spasm, a survival reflex of the power I carried inside. But it had worked. It had created a change in the world, small, almost insignificant, but real.

I bit into the bread. The honey, sweet and earthy, burst in my mouth. The taste of the first step. Humble. Dirty. Earned between teeth and thorns. But a step nonetheless. On the long road to Whirikai, to mastery, to answers... this was the first footprint in the frozen mud. And it tasted like the future.