

## Frozen Star 38

### Chapter 38: Hunt in the Fog

[POV Liselotte]

The mission board of the Northern Flames breathed its usual scent: melted candle wax, dry ink, and the rancid leather of old parchments. But today, it smelled different to me. After the mission at Olren's farm, the bronze badge with the engraved "F" on my chest was no longer just a mark of a novice. It was a small trophy. Earned, not given.

My eyes scanned the notices pinned up in desperation or haste. "Package Delivery to South Village." "Lost Goat Search (Reward: 1 bucket of milk)." Until a parchment with still-wet ink caught my attention.

"HUNT: LONE DUSKFANG. Area: Eastern Forest, Glarien. Rank F. Reward: 80 Coppers + Game Meat. WARNING: Aggressive. Attacks livestock and dogs. Wounding it will enrage it."

A crude drawing showed a wolf-like silhouette, massive, with fur dark as wet charcoal and ears torn by old fights.

"A wolf?" Chloé's voice echoed in my mind, laced with a mix of sharp curiosity and deep, instinctive dislike. "Do they really want me... to hunt a distant cousin?"

"It's not a cousin, Chloé" I replied silently, my gaze fixed on the word "aggressive." "If it attacks herding dogs and doesn't flee from farms... it no longer follows the laws of the pack. It's a threat. A rogue beast."

I signed with a decisive stroke. Naele, behind the counter, arched a perfect brow at the mission I had chosen.

"The Eastern Forest. Heavy fog at this hour. "She handed us a rough sketch map. Her gaze turned serious. "Remember: if you wound it and it's not a killing blow... it will become ten times more dangerous. Dusksfangs know no fear. Only rage."

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The Eastern Forest lived submerged. The fog was a living entity, thick and milky, swallowing the trunks of the pines ten steps away. Midday light filtered through in pale, diffused rays. Beneath our feet, a soft carpet of rotting leaves and moss muffled every step. The silence was oppressive, broken only by the constant drip of condensed moisture.

And the smell. A metallic, sweet stench that clung to the palate: fresh blood. Recent.

Chloé moved in the lead, a gray shadow of fluid motion. Her back low, her paws silent, her nose working without pause.

"Smells like... young deer. Torn apart. Not long ago. "Her mental report was cold, professional. "And him. Strong. Old. Like wet earth and rusted iron. He's smelled us. He's been following us since we entered. Stalking."

A shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold. I tightened my grip on my short sword. The wooden hilt was familiar, comforting.

"Let him stalk us "I whispered, the sound dying quickly in the dense fog. "That way we save time looking for him."

The warning was minimal. A faint crack, like a twig breaking under a stealthy paw, to our left.

The fog tore open.

The shape that emerged was more massive than the drawing suggested. The Dusksfang. It wasn't a wolf. It was a nightmare in skin. Its fur, black as pitch under the moon, absorbed what little light there was. It was crisscrossed with deep, white scars, maps of past battles. Its fangs, yellowed and as long as curved daggers, jutted from a muzzle drawn back in a perpetual snarl. But the worst were the eyes. Sickly amber. No fear. No human intelligence. Only pure, ancient animal hatred, locked directly on me.

There was no roar of challenge. No threatening stance. Only action. A spring of powerful muscles released. It leapt from the fog like a dark projectile, straight for my throat.

Time slowed. I rolled to the right, feeling the rush of air from its passing brush my cheek, the stench of rotten meat and wild beast filling my nostrils. The soft ground gave under my weight.

"Lotte!"

Chloé was already in motion. A silver lightning bolt interposing herself between the beast and me. Her solid body slammed into the Dusktfang's flank with a dull, powerful THUD, like two logs colliding. The dark wolf staggered back a few steps, surprised, panting with fury.

"Fast! Too fast!" Chloé's voice in my mind was a hum of maximum alert. Her golden eyes never left the enemy.

I saw it too. This wasn't the clumsy charge of a hungry beast. It was predator precision. Every muscle tense, every movement calculated to maximize damage and efficiency. It knew how to attack, how to exploit the flanks.

Before Chloé could regain her balance, the Dusktfang spun with unnatural agility. Its amber eyes found me again. It charged. A black bull of sharp teeth.

I raised my sword, arms firm. CLANG! The impact rattled my bones. The brute force pushed me back two steps, my heels sinking into the mud. A sharp pain shot through my arms. The beast snorted, its fetid breath slamming into my face.

Then, in the middle of the taut tension, I felt it. It wasn't a panic spasm like with the ratskorns. It was a decision. The cold in my core, that underground river of power, stirred. But this time, I didn't let it flow blindly. I guided it.

I focused all my will. I visualized the muddy ground right in front of the Dusktfang's forepaws. I imagined the moisture of the leaves solidifying. Freezing.

The mana responded. Not like an explosion, but like a directed current. I felt a cold tug from the center of my chest, down my right arm to the tips of my fingers. The air around my hand grew dense, frigid. A handful of leaves at my feet crackled, suddenly coated in a thin layer of shimmering, fleeting frost.

The Dusksfang, enraged, prepared its next lunge. Its powerful hindquarters tensed. It charged.

Its front paws struck the ground exactly where I had wanted it frozen. The mud, turned into an invisible slippery plate, betrayed its traction. The paws slid forward. The beast lost its balance with a snarl of furious surprise, its chest vulnerable for an instant.

Now. I didn't think. I acted. With a guttural cry born from my gut, I slashed diagonally with all my strength and the momentum of my body. The edge of my sword bit into coarse fur and flesh on its left shoulder.

A sharp howl, of pure pain and rage, tore through the fog. Dark blood, almost black, gushed in spurts, staining its fur and the ground.

But Naelle's warning rang in my ears: "Wounding it will enrage it." She was right.

The pain didn't break the Dusksfang. It transmuted it into blind fury. Its amber eyes flushed red. A low, vibrating roar rose from its throat, promising death. It shook itself, ignoring the wound, and launched again not at me, but at Chloé, who was trying to flank it.

"Right! He's circling you!" Chloé warned me, leaping back to avoid the fangs aiming for her throat.

The fight intensified. It was a brutal dance in the fog. Lightning strikes from the Dusksfang. Agile dodges from Chloé. Resonant blocks from my sword. We retreated, advanced, using the trees as shields, the fog as both ally and enemy. The wounded beast was a whirlwind of teeth and claws, but the blood it lost and our coordination slowly began to tell.

The opportunity came when the Dusksfang, perhaps weakened by blood loss, misjudged a leap at Chloé. It landed awkwardly, slipping in its own blood on the damp leaves. A moment of imbalance. An eternal instant.

Chloé didn't hesitate. She lunged like a silver bolt, her powerful jaws seeking the exposed neck. At the same time, I charged, sword high, and drove it with all my strength into the opposite side, aiming for heart or lungs. **CHUNK.**

A final, rough, bubbling growl escaped the Dusksfang. Its amber eyes went out, the hatred replaced by sudden emptiness. The dark mass collapsed onto the muddy ground with a dull thud. Silence returned, thicker than the fog, heavy with the scent of blood, beast, and hard-won victory.

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Dragging the Dusksfang's body back to the guild was an exhausting task. Cold sweat mixed with melting snow on my brow. In the delivery yard, a veteran hunter with a scar across his cheek examined the animal. He searched its left ear, finding an old, nearly worn notch.

"Old mark of the Raven Rift Pack "he murmured, with a respectful nod.

"Extinct years ago. This one was a survivor. A true lone wolf." He handed us a leather pouch with the 80 coppers, which jingled with a satisfying sound. And a large package wrapped in canvas.

"The meat. Good for stew. Strong."

The weight of the coins in my hand was comforting. Double the profit of Olren.

Back in the stillness of our room at the temple, I sat to clean my sword. The Dusksfang's blood was dark, sticky. The oiled cloth slowly restored its cold gleam.

But my mind wasn't on the blade. It was in the forest. In the fog. In that precise moment.

It hadn't been an accident. It hadn't been pure instinct. I had wanted the ice. I had guided the mana. I had felt the cold current flow where I wished it. The frost had been fleeting, just a whisper of winter. But it had been where I put it.

A tiny control. A modest victory against a beast, not a demon. But it was a seed. Small. Fragile. Yet planted in the fertile soil of effort and necessity.

I knew, with a certainty warmer than the fireplace, that next time... I could do it better. Stronger. More precise. The path to mastering the winter within me had just found its first clear milestone. And it smelled of blood, fog, and copper coins.