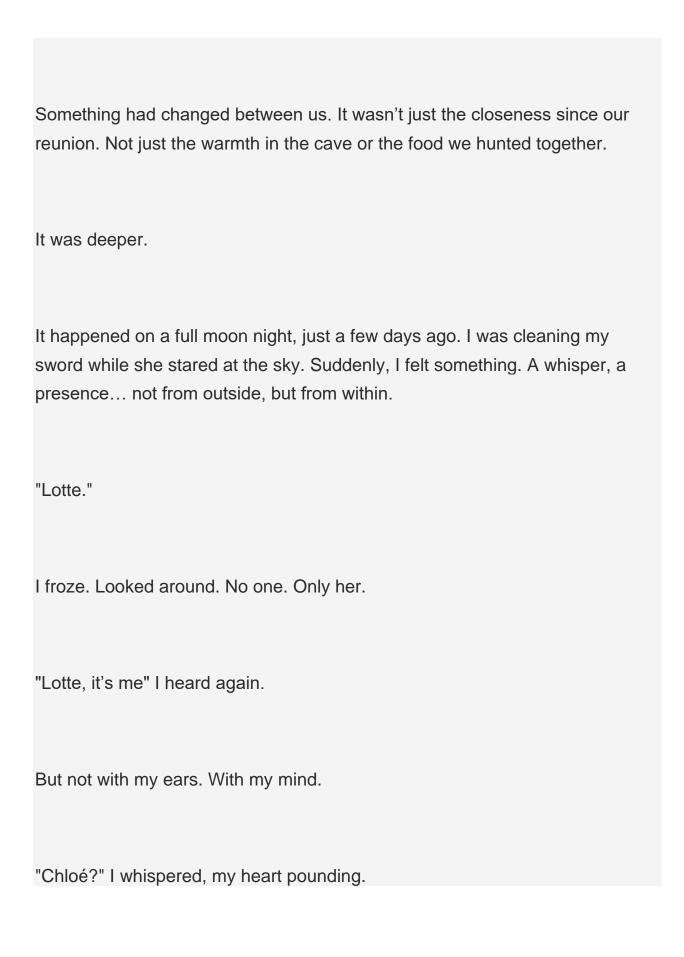
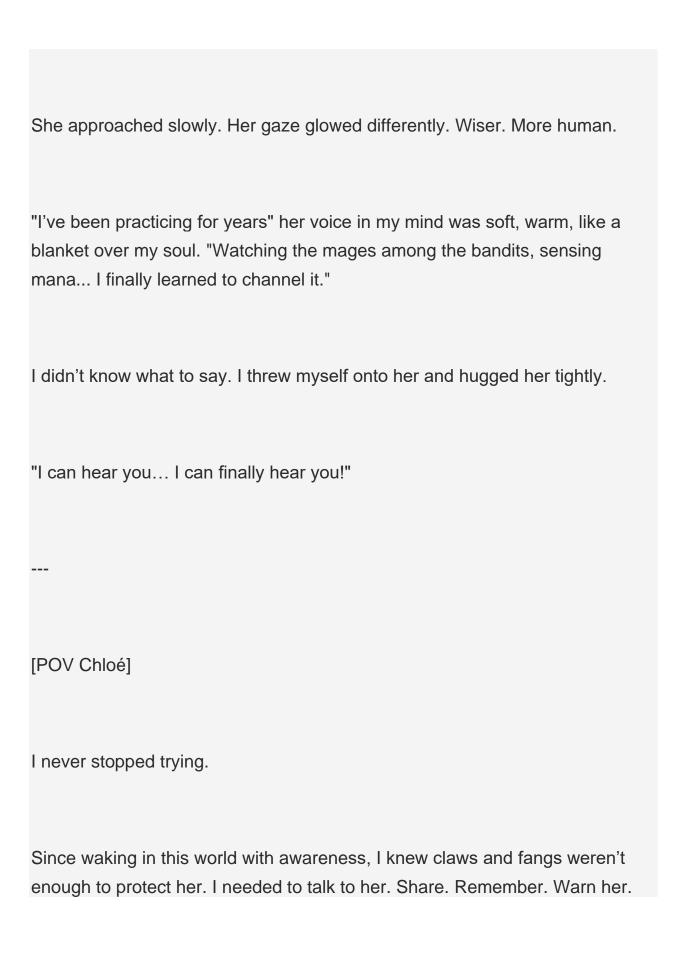
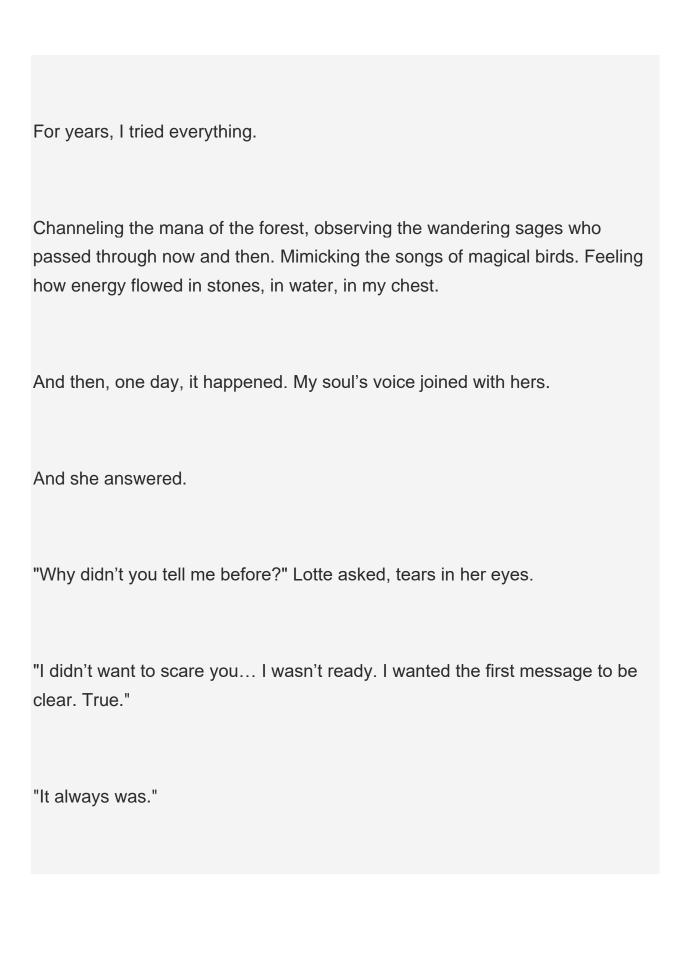
THE RISE OF A FROZEN STAR

Chapter 18: Wordless Voices, Strength Without Magic

[POV Liselotte]
Four years had passed since I arrived in this forest.
Four winters of relentless cold. Four springs of budding leaves and green promises. Four summers of scorching sun and unexpected rain. Four autumns where life seemed to bid farewell, only to begin again.
And through it all, she was with me.
Chloé.
She was no longer just my companion. She was my guardian, my family, my other half.

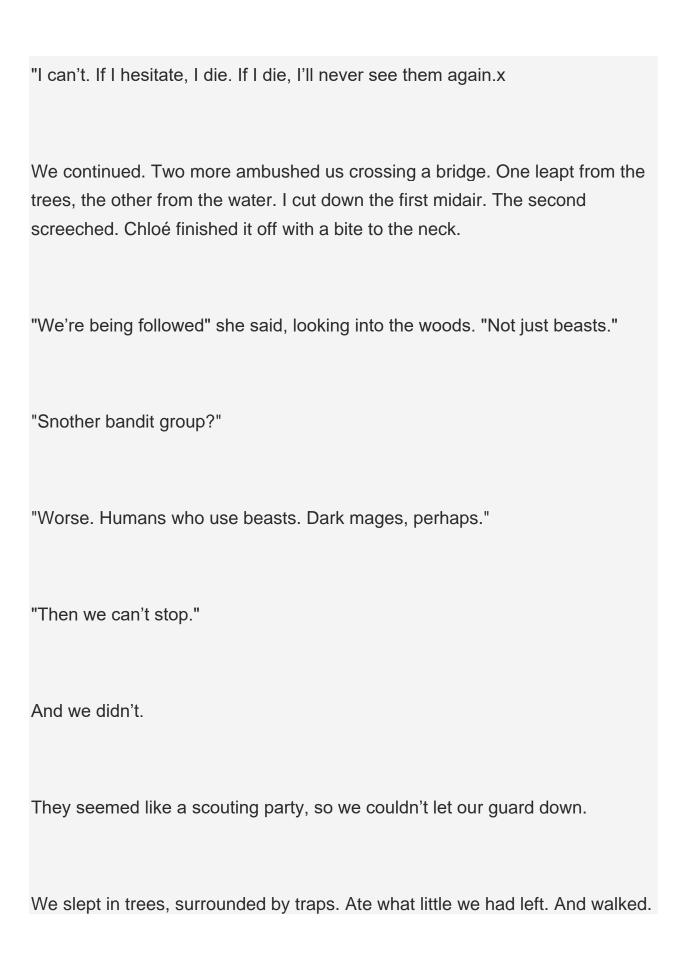


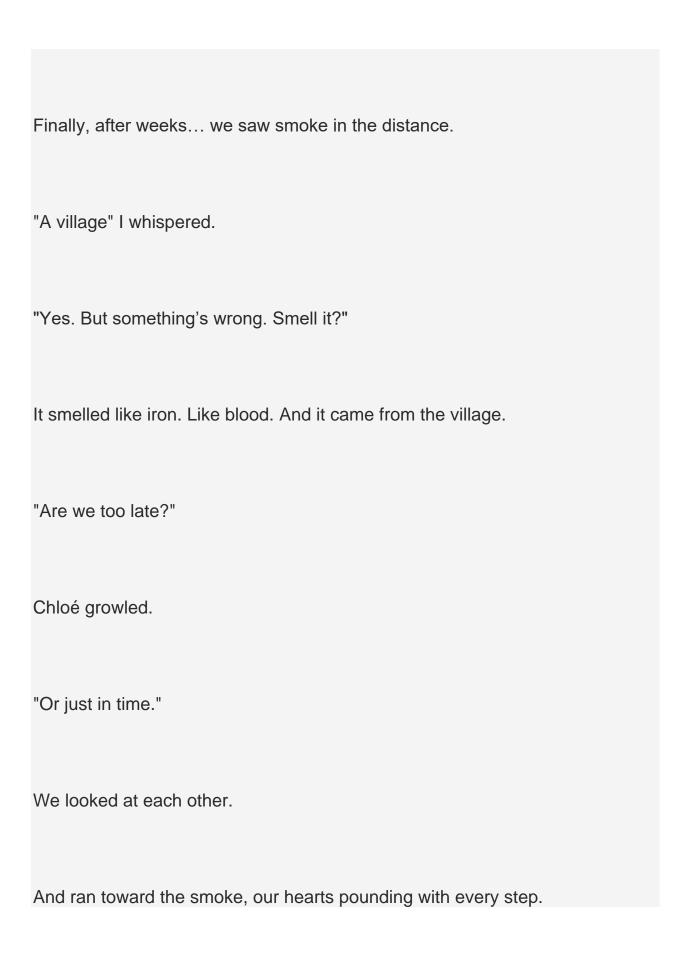


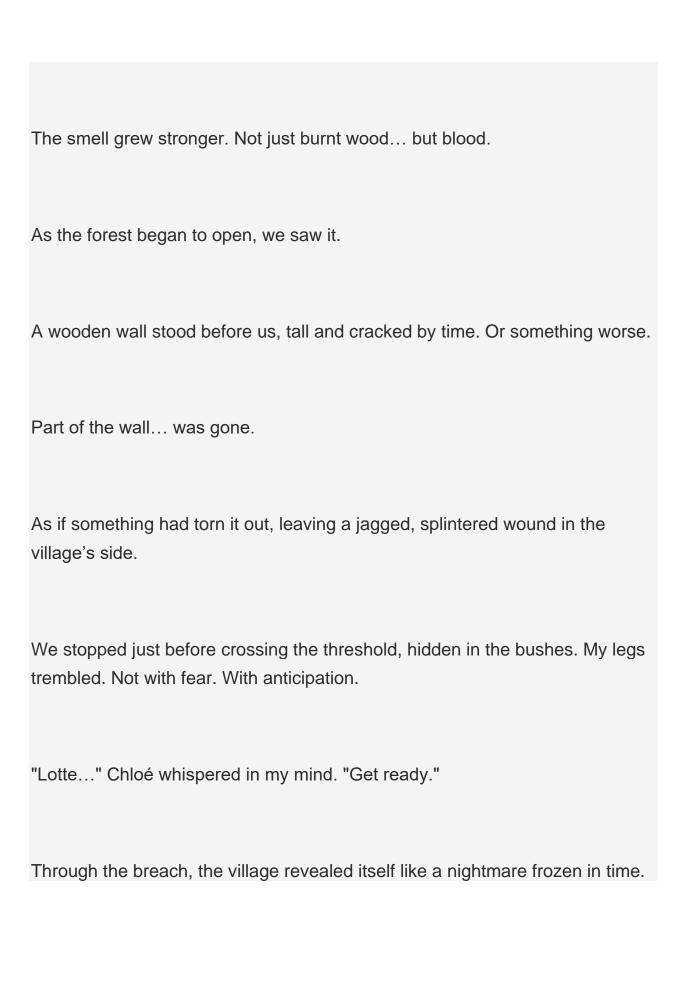


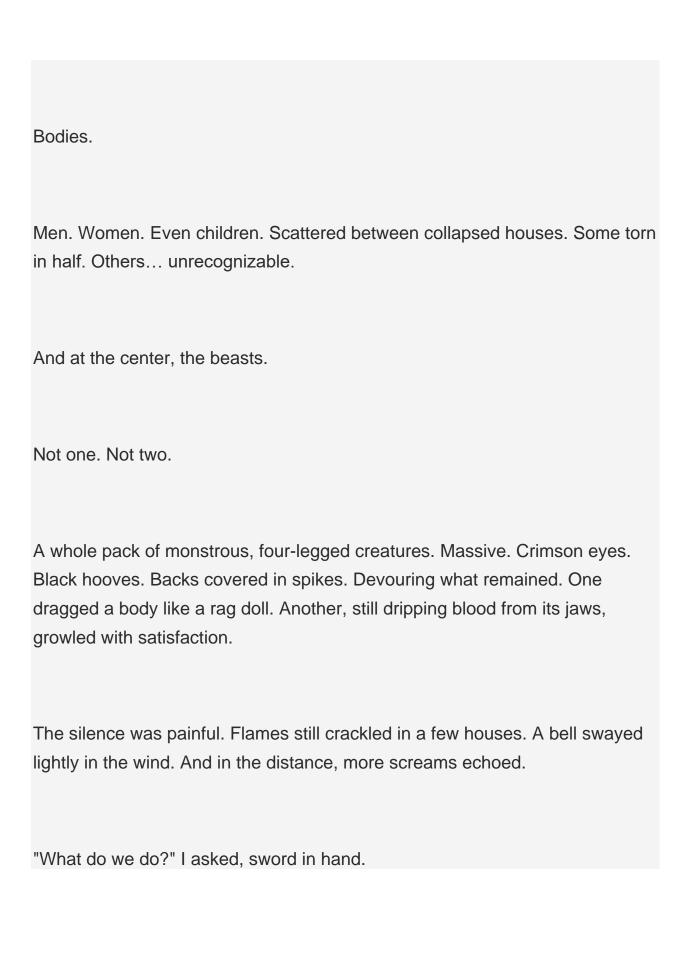
We stayed like that, silent, under the moon. Two souls bound by something beyond the physical.
The next day, we made a decision.
[POV Liselotte]
"It's time to go back" I said. "To find a village. A clue. Something that leads to mom, dad Claire."
"I'll support you, Lotte. But be prepared. This world is different from what we're used to."
"So am I."
And she was right.

I was no longer the frightened girl who had fallen here. I had no magic, but I had a sword. I had instincts, and now I had experience.
Half a day into our walk, the first monster appeared. A Corrupted One. As tall as a horse, covered in black thorns, eyes glowing like embers.
"Careful" warned Chloé. "It's not a common beast."
"Doesn't matter" I said, unsheathing my sword.
The monster roared. It hurled a huge rock. I rolled to the side. Ran at it. Jumped. My sword sank beneath its jaw.
A clean cut. Precise.
The Corrupted One collapsed, groaning.
"You didn't hesitate" Chloé said, impressed.









Chloé didn't answer immediately.
Then, with a voice low but clear, she said:
"We make sure… not a single one leaves alive."
And we stepped into hell.