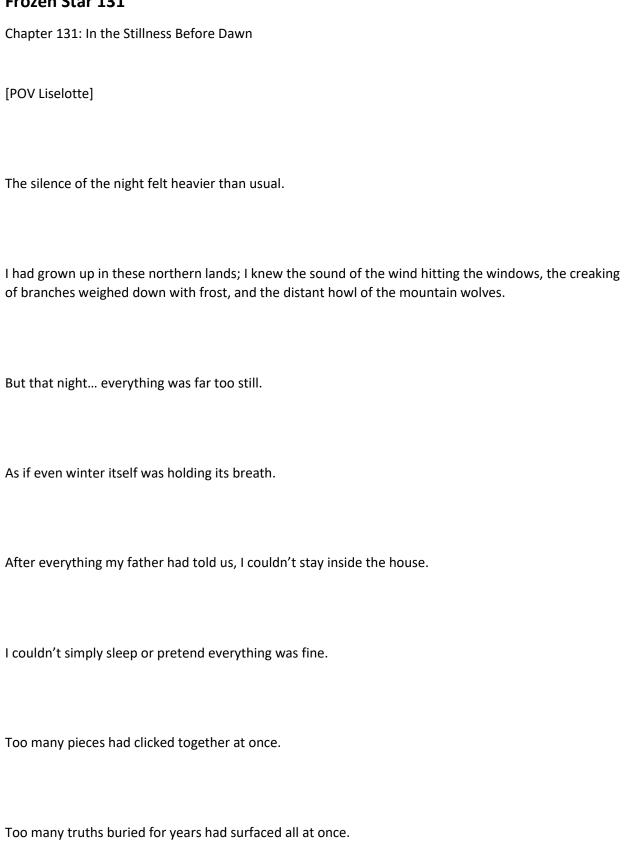
## Frozen Star 131



| So I stepped out onto the porch, wrapping myself in a blanket and letting the icy air sting my cheeks. The sky was clear, sprinkled with stars that seemed sharper than ever. The kind of sky that only appears when the whole world is bracing for something big. |
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| Something it doesn't fully understand but fears deeply.  |
| I heard soft footsteps behind me.  |
| Leah.  |
| "Can't sleep?" she asked, leaning against the railing beside me.   |
| "No," I admitted without hesitation. "You?"  |
| "Me neither."  |
| We stayed like that for a while. Staring at the sky, listening to the weight of our breaths settle over the snow.  |
| Finally, Leah spoke, her voice so gentle it almost blended into the wind:  |

| "What your father said it's still echoing in my head."  |
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| I nodded.   |
| "Mine too."   |
| Leah pressed her lips together.   |
| "I didn't know my kidnapping caused so much chaos. I didn't know the demons moved because they took me."                  |
| I placed a hand on her shoulder.  |
| "It wasn't your fault."   |
| She looked at me, her eyes shining with a mix of pain and a quiet recognition.  |
| "Maybe not. But I was the cause. Even if I didn't choose it, even if I had no control, my existence shifted the balance." |



| "Then let's walk them together," I said without thinking too much.   |
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| She blinked, surprised.  |
| I surprised myself too. But I didn't take the words back.  |
| I couldn't.  |
| They were true.  |
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| We went back inside quietly. Chloé was asleep by the fireplace, one paw twitching as if chasing a rabbit in her dreams. Claire was on the couch, hugging a blanket Mom had knitted years ago.  |
| But neither of them woke up.   |
| Leah took my hand without saying anything. It was a soft gesture, almost timid, as if she were asking for permission without using words. I squeezed her hand in return. I didn't know whether she sought comfort or strength. Maybe both. |

| We climbed to my room and closed the door gently. Moonlight spilled through the window, covering the floor in a cold bluish glow.  |
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| We sat on the edge of the bed, silent.   |
| "Lotte" Leah said, looking straight at me, "do you think the ritual is truly necessary?"   |
| A question with too many layers.   |
| Too many implications.   |
| Too much history behind it.  |
| "If they do it" she continued, "they'll bring people from another world. People who didn't ask to come. People who might not know how to fight. People who could die before they understand why they're here." |
| Her words made my chest ache.  |
| Because I had thought the same.  |

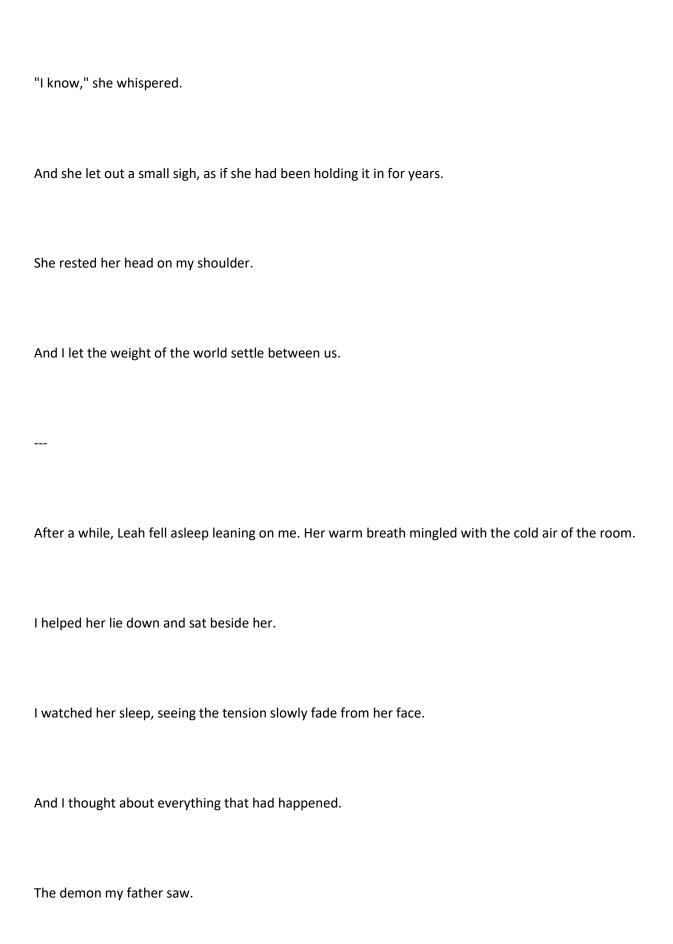
| "If they were in danger" I murmured, "wouldn't you do the same? Wouldn't you try to get help from wherever you could?" |
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| "Yes," she whispered.  |
| Then she understood.   |
| It wasn't a desire.  |
| It was a necessity.  |
| The world was changing too fast to stand still.  |
| Leah held her head in her hands.   |
| "I feel like everything is moving too much. Too fast. Like we're being pulled toward something inevitable."            |
| "We are," I replied. "But that doesn't mean we can't move forward with our eyes open."                                 |

| I watched her.  |
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| Leah's gaze was distant, as if she were reliving every memory, every scar, every shadow.  |
| "When Kaelen trained me," she said suddenly, "he always said the world isn't divided between those who are prepared and those who aren't but between those who take one more step, even while shaking. I think I finally understand what he meant." |
| I moved closer.   |
| "And you? Are you shaking now?"   |
| "Yes," she murmured. "But I'm not alone."   |
| Her honesty cut straight through me.  |
| Her vulnerability, her strength, her fear all of it was real.   |
| And I couldn't let her carry it alone.  |

| I stood slowly and walked to the window. Snow was still falling, soft and lazy. A calm snowfall the kind that announces a change of season.                                  |
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| Leah joined me.  |
| "Do you know what scares me the most?" she asked.  |
| I looked at her. She kept her gaze on the snow, as if searching for answers in the pale reflection of the moon.  |
| "I'm afraid something will drag me away from all of you," she whispered. "From you. From Chloé. From this house. From the life that I'm only just starting to feel as mine." |
| A strong heartbeat thudded in my chest.  |
| "I won't let that happen," I said, not hesitating for a second.  |
| Leah smiled, but her smile was laced with sadness.   |

| "I know. But there are things not even you can stop alone."  |
|--|
| "Then I won't do it alone," I replied. "That's why I'm here."  |
| She looked at me with an intensity that made me forget the cold outside.   |
| "Lotte" she whispered.   |
| "Yes?"   |
| "Thank you."   |
| No "thank you" had ever carried so much weight, or meant so much.  |
|  |
| We stayed there for a while, watching the snow fall. The silence was warm, intimate. We didn't need words. We had said too many already tonight. |

| And yet there was something I needed to say.  |
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| Something I had felt from the beginning, but never had the courage to admit.  |
| I took a deep breath.   |
| "Leah"  |
| She turned to me.   |
| I gathered all the strength I had.  |
| "No matter what comes. No matter the ritual, the demons, the prophecies, or the king. No matter if the world falls apart or changes forever. No matter if heroes from another world arrive or never do. |
| I'm going to stay with you."  |
| Leah looked at me with an expression I'll never forget. A mix of surprise, relief, fear, and a brightness that seemed to melt even the harsh winter frost.  |



| The attacks of thousands of troops.                                       |
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| The ritual that would change history.                                     |
| The prophecy announcing the end of an era.                                |
| I thought about all that  |
| And still, for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel fear.         |
| I felt something different.   |
| Something stronger.   |
| Something that burned like a small fire but one impossible to extinguish. |
| Determination.  |

| The world was a year and a half away from breaking.                    |
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| But we weren't going to break.   |
| Not while we were together.  |
| Not while our steps moved as one.                                      |
| Not while the snow kept falling over the house that still held warmth. |
| Dawn was still far away.   |
| But its promise already lingered in the air.                           |
| And I was ready to face it.  |
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