



## NINE



### SILLA

After dinner, I retired up to my room to wait for Gram Judy to go to bed. Reese had gone for a run, and once he was back and Judy was asleep, I'd be able to tiptoe down the hall and drag him outside to prove the magic was real.

I waited, rereading the *Regeneration* spell and reciting the instructions to myself while pacing in a circle under the watchful eyes of the theater masks hanging on my walls. My own secret audience.

Reese came home, slamming the front door. He clomped up to shower, and at 8:37 p.m. Judy called up the stairs, "Night, kids!"

"Night!" I yelled back, and heard Reese's muffled *goodnight* through the coursing water. He finished, and I listened to him move down to his bedroom.

At my window, I pushed my forehead against the cool glass, blinking out at the dark front yard. Yellow light from the porch revealed our bare maple tree. Most of its leaves had fallen into scarlet piles. I imagined breathing life into them all, making them dance up like butterflies to reattach to the branches. A

fiery maple lasting until the springtime. It would be a bloody glow against the whites and grays of winter.

Waiting fifteen more minutes was like watching the moon rise.

Finally I pulled on my boots and sweater and gathered up salt, a half-dozen candles, and the spell book, and put them in a plastic sack. Safe in the back pocket of my jeans was the pocketknife.

Down the hall, I knocked quietly on Reese's door before pushing it open. The knock was worthless, though, given that he was stretched out on his bed with headphones totally covering his ears.

Before Mom and Dad died, I'd probably have found him hunched over a puzzle that sprawled in five thousand pieces across his desk. Something impossible, like the night sky or a beach with nothing on it. He'd have been playing games online with his friends in St. Louis, or reading a huge old science fiction paperback and grumbling at the bad physics.

Instead his face was drawn and still, eyes closed, and only his index finger moved, tapping out a frenetic drumbeat.

He'd torn all his posters down after the funeral, and every time I came in here I felt as empty as the walls. The only thing breaking up their vastness was the crater in the one a foot from the doorjamb, where Reese had punched through. I'd tried to help bandage his knuckles, and Gram Judy had nearly fainted at the huge noise. He was lucky he hadn't broken anything, that he hadn't hit a post.

Tonight, I had to make him believe in the magic. It would give him something new to sink his teeth into. A problem to

solve. He'd chew on it and dissect it until we understood it from every angle, inside and out.

"Hey," I said, touching his forehead.

Reese's eyes snapped open. For a moment, we just looked at each other. My practiced confidence fell away under his dark scrutiny until I flicked my gaze down to the iPod resting on his chest.

He swung his legs off the bed and sat. "What's wrong, bumblebee?"

"Nothing. I just want a favor." I met his eyes again. His eyebrows rose, and I rushed on. "Come out to the cemetery and let me show you the magic."

"I thought you'd given that crap up, Silla." His frown reminded me of Dad.

I shook my head. "I've been studying it. I want to show you."

"It's bullshit. Didn't we go through this?"

"It isn't!"

"This Deacon guy is just messing with you. With us. Probably a joker from school, or that asshole Fenley at the sheriff's station. He always hated me."

"Then how'd he get Dad's handwriting so good?"

"He stole something, I don't know."

"It works, though, the magic."

Reese pressed his lips into a line.

I raised my chin a little, daring him to call me crazy.

"Silla."

"Let me show you."

"Bumblebee—"

“No, Reese. Please.” I touched his hands, and he wrapped them around my freezing fingers. He didn’t want to look at the rings. “Let me show you. If you think I’m losing it an hour from now, I’ll do whatever you want. See Ms. Tripp at school every day, or even a real therapist in Cape Girardeau. Anything.”

His jaw remained clenched. I waited, saw the fear in his eyes, and wondered what he was thinking. Was he terrified that I was insane? Or just afraid that I wasn’t? Slowly, he nodded. “Okay. One hour.” His voice was strained and his hands tightened on mine.

Relieved, I immediately stood up. “Bring that.” I pointed at the sparrow skeleton he’d painstakingly put together his freshman year of high school, during his zoology phase.

“What? Really?” His eyes scrunched up.

“Yes.” Before he could protest again, I turned away and slipped out the door. On my way downstairs, I imagined a perfect mask. It needed to be fierce and dramatic: a black shimmer with red lips and a thick red slash across the eyes. It fit over my face like a second skin.



“This is ridiculous,” Reese grumbled as we crouched together in front of Mom and Dad’s graves. I’d fought for them to be buried together the way Dad had requested in his will, though everyone else thought Dad didn’t deserve it.

“Just wait.” Settling on the cold ground with my legs crossed, I presented the spell book. “Here, open it to the *Regeneration* spell at the end.”

Reese took it and cracked it open. “It’s messed up, Sil. Dad was messed up.”

“Or scared.”

“Like psychotics are scared people are out to get them.”

I shook my head and began setting out candles while Reese skimmed through the book again. The flares of the matches were tiny explosions against the darkness. When we were protected by the circle of flames, I opened the ziplock bag of salt and sprinkled a line of it in a circle all the way around Mom and Dad’s graves. The grains sparkled like diamonds against the dark earth.

A thin breeze kicked up suddenly, and I shivered as it snaked down my neck and under my jacket. “Did you read the stuff about sympathetic magic?”

“Yeah, and the elemental properties of the spell components. And the symbolism. Ribbons for binding, wax for transformation, a river-bored stone for easing pain—I’m telling you, it’s just folk magic. There’s no reason for it to work. Dad was probably writing a paper or something.”

“What about the blood? As a catalyst?”

“Ancient. Blood has always been seen as magical by less scientifically advanced people. Even in Christianity, for chris-sake.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t magical.”

“It does, Silla. Blood is just proteins and oxygen and hormones and *water*. If blood really had unique properties, we’d know. Somebody would have discovered it.”

“Like Dad. He discovered it.”

Reese shook his head, his face as much a mask as mine in the flickering candlelight. “It’s all symbolism. Unconscious

stuff, psychology. Focusing the will to get what you want—or to think you’re getting what you want.”

“How can you tell that just from flipping through the book a couple of times? You’re only seeing what you want to see in it.”

“And you aren’t?”

I clenched my hands together until my rings pinched and raised my chin. “I just didn’t know you knew so much about old folk magic.”

He didn’t answer, just clenched his jaw. Even in the poor light I could see the muscles working.

“Reese?”

He glared at me. “Dad had some books on it.”

I was quiet.

Wind rushed through the dying leaves in the nearby forest. The one surrounding Nick’s house. The breeze knocked leaves into the headstones around us, and the salt circle shivered but didn’t break.

“Reese,” I said, reaching to touch his hand. The knuckles stood out where he clenched the spell book. “It’s amazing, Reese. Not horrible. It feels like a warm tingle in your blood. Welcoming and . . . powerful.”

His frown deepened. “Sounds addictive.”

“Maybe.” I tugged his hand off the book and wove our fingers together. “Just come with me on this. Just for a few moments, let go of your anger at Dad. I know he deserves it, but this . . . let this be for us. For me. Please. Imagine the possibilities.”

Reese's eyes lifted to mine and I held his gaze even as it bored into me. I tightened my grip on his hand, which was as cold as mine. "God, you look just like him. That look, right now," he whispered. I didn't glance away, but felt nostalgia and sadness taint my expression. "Okay, bumblebee."

Relieved that the moment was over, I leaned back and briskly said, "Just—just put the bird in the center of the salt circle."

The skeleton was so delicate, positioned with its wings spread. I'd been wary of the large eye sockets when he'd first constructed it, until Reese had said, "*A skull is just like one of your masks. Only, this one lives under the face.*"

I set the small blue and gray feathers Reese had also grabbed around the skeleton. They'd belonged to the bird when Reese found it dead on the front steps. Maybe it would remember the feeling of wind ruffling them. *Sympathetic magic*, I hoped.

Moving to sit across the circle from Reese so that we faced each other over the skeleton, I flipped out the blade of my pocketknife and put it to my palm. Since this was no mere leaf, I probably needed more blood than a prick to the thumb could manage. I couldn't risk its not working for Reese. I bit the inside of my lip, readying myself for the queasy pain to come. This was the worst part. But I understood that you had to sacrifice for the magic to work. And I didn't want to hesitate in front of my brother.

I slashed.

Reese hissed through his teeth and stared at the blood pooling in my cupped palm.

It was so beautiful, dark and shimmering like the night sky itself oozing out of my hand. I pressed the blade against my skin to make the blood flow faster. Pain cracked up my wrist and curled around my forearm like hot barbed wire.

“Silla, hurry. We have to get that bandaged.”

“It’s okay, Reese.” I took a deep breath, pushing at the pain. Tears stung my eyes. The late October night smelled like burning leaves. I leaned over the bird and let a stream of my blood patter down over the yellowing bones. It splashed like thin paint, dark in the candlelight. I imagined the skeleton growing muscles and tendons and flesh and feathers. Imagined it bursting into life and singing for us. Then I whispered, “*Ago vita iterum.*”

Make it live again.

Bending so that my lips were inches from the bones, I breathed the imprecise Latin words over the skeleton again and again. “*Ago vita iterum. Ago vita iterum. Ago vita iterum.*”

With each phrase, another bulbous drop of my blood fell off my hand.

I felt the moment the magic began, buzzing through my palm and up my arm like a swarm of tiny bees. Hissing, I pulled my hand away from the skeleton.

“Silla.” Reese took my unwounded hand and squeezed. His voice was reedy and shaking.

The skeleton trembled. Its wings shuddered and extended outward, stretching like it would take off. Feathers suddenly sprouted out of the bones, rangy and thin, and a single eyeball bubbled up in the skull. I couldn’t look away, even as strips of muscle wove onto the bones and the feathers spread, becoming



fuller. Reese's fingers crushed mine. My heart expanded and I wanted to sing—to laugh and shriek in amazement.

*"Ago vita iterum!"* I cried at it. The candles sputtered and went out, and the tiny bird leapt into the air, flapping its wings frenetically. It wailed a song before vanishing up into the dark sky.

We were alone in the cemetery, covered in shadows.

"Whoa," Reese said, letting go of me. He leaned forward and skimmed his hand over the dirt where the bones had been. The scattered feathers were gone, too.

I shivered, suddenly dizzy, and clutched my hands together. The moon spilled down. My skin was cold in the absence of fire. But I laughed. Quietly, triumphantly.

"Oh my God." Reese relit one of the candles, then dug into the plastic bag for rags. "Here."

I only shook my head. Reese grabbed hold of my hand and pressed the cloth against it. "Jesus. You might need stitches," he said.

My palm tingled with warmth; pain teetered at the edge of magic.

But a dozen feet away, the bird fell from the sky. Its bones shattered, and feathers scattered out, dry as dead leaves.