

Chapter 1

It burns and burns and burns, a pain he can't salve, a fire he can't extinguish. White, yellow, red, orange. Shades of pale blue sometimes, but then white again. Always white. White hot. Pure white. White for wedding gowns and babies' diapers and clean sheets on a crib. White. Like blank paper. And then it burns. Brown giving way to black, which comes from the yellow and orange and red and pale blue; flame creeping like spilled blood, spreading like a stain.

The land rolls downward from his chair, baked and dry, empty. But also full, if only one knows how to look at it. The rising swirls of red dirt. Red-tailed hawks wheeling on splayed wings. Jack rabbits and coyotes, watchful and tense, death and survival hanging between them. The sky is too clear -- not a cloud, nothing to break the monotony of blue so bright it makes his eyes tear. Except low, to the east, where the blue mingles with brown, like dirty, worn jeans.

That's how he is. Muddied. Clouded. Enveloped in a haze. He feels the hot wind moving over his skin, and he waits for it to clear the air around him. But it never does; instead, dust stings his eyes, and grit crunches between his teeth like slivers of glass. He wants a cup of water, but his legs feel leaden and the trailer seems so far. So he sits, shielding his eyes with a shaking hand, listening to the flapping of the tarp over his head.

She winks into view before him, wearing a simple dress. One of his favorites. Cornflower blue, as soft as the sky is hard. She flashes that familiar crooked grin, cocking her head to the side, honey brown hair dancing around her face. The boy is there, too. Suddenly. Dropped into the scene as if by sleight of hand. Shorts and an ASU t-shirt, his hair the same color as hers, but

wild with curls and the wind, so young, so oblivious to it all: the phasings that await him, the dark sadness that lurks behind his mother's smile, the betrayal masked in those gorgeous blue eyes. He's wept for her until the tears run dry, like a desert river in late summer. But he can still cry for the boy; the boy who has become a man so much like his father that it breaks the old man's heart.

Ghosts. Both of them, though only the one is dead. He shifts his gaze, follows the flight of a plane as it carves across the sky, leaving a stark white scar. He refuses to blink, until his eyes ache with the effort. When at last he checks again, the woman and child are gone.

But if he closes his eyes they're back, the images seared onto his mind, like blotches of light after he has stared too long at the sun. They were never here, of course. Not on this land. He knows that. The trailer, the tarp, the chair -- all are new.

New. The boy would laugh at that. None of it is new. But she never saw any of it.

He opens his eyes again, shakes his head, sits up straighter. One of those days. The haze. The confusion. The hallucinations. He's had it all before. The secret is not giving in to it, fighting the pull. But when it gets this bad it's like climbing a mountain of sand; with every step up, he feels himself sliding backwards. Sometimes it's the visions. Violent, bloody, horrible images, so vivid, so familiar. They might be echoes of old phasings or they could be things he really saw and did. He can't remember anymore. Other times it's no more or less than the relic of younger emotions -- love, jealousy, rage, grief -- as vague as the scent of sage riding the desert wind, as sharp as a razor. And on some days, like today, it's all of those, and it's none of them. It defies description or understanding, and he's left to stumble alone, as though lost within that muddy cloud draped over the Phoenix skyline.

There are pills. He's supposed to take them if it gets too bad. The boy has left them out on the counter, where he'll see them. But they don't help; not enough. They bring clarity of a sort. They wake him up, like a dousing with ice water. It's not him, though; it's not anyone he recognizes. He's spent hours staring at that grizzled, slack face in the mirror, peering into those eyes, pale gray, like his own, but flat and dead and nothing like the eyes he remembers from his youth, or those he sees now in the boy. That's the drugs. As opposed to the Drug, the one the doctor won't talk about in front of him.

He laughs at the distinction, startling himself with the sound. They give him these drugs -- their drugs -- to fight off the damage he did by refusing to take the other, by clinging to his magic and subjecting himself to the cruel moon. They whisper about it to the boy, not wanting him to hear, fearing that it will awaken the old visions, or send him into a fit of rage, like in old movies. As if their whispers can guard him from the memory, as if he doesn't curse his magic every goddamned day of his life, as if it isn't already too late for him.

No, he might be screwed up, but he's not that screwed up. He's not completely beyond reality. Even on those days when he can't put together a coherent thought, when the boy sits beside him, concern etched on his face, which is so like his mother's that it makes the old man's chest ache. Even when it seems that he's too far gone to see or hear or understand anything, he knows who and what he's become. That might be the worst part. If he was so far gone that he didn't remember it all -- if dementia carried with it the comforting numbness that everyone thinks they see in him -- then they could whisper and conceal, and smile their false reassuring smiles, and he wouldn't care. But he knows. *He knows.*

That's the slow death. That's the torment. That's the price he pays for ancient sins. Better

to have nothing left. But when did the moon ever care what was better for him?

He sees the boy wrestling with the same demons, and he prays for him. Yes, he prays. He hasn't prayed for anything else in almost fifty years, not since he was a kid. Not even when he was on the job, going into Maryvale or the worst beats of South Mountain or Cactus Park with nothing more than an old service revolver in his hand and his partner watching his back; not even that time when a kid so jacked up on dust that he seemed to be doing everything with his eyes closed put four bullets in him; not even when he found her dead beside her lover, his pain an amalgam of humiliation and heartache and debilitating grief.

Even then he didn't turn to God. The Great Unbeliever. A cop to the core. A man of reason and evidence and laws. Utterly earthbound.

But for his boy, he prays. Not that it'll do a damn bit of good.

The moon is a goddess unto herself. She's as merciless as time, as unforgiving as memory. She laughs at prayers. No, the boy has to fight this battle on his own. The old man can only hope that the kid has more of his mother's strength than his father's weakness.

He wonders if the boy will be coming today, until he remembers that he was here yesterday, or maybe the day before. It's hard to keep track sometimes. The days all blend. Hot, sunny, slow. When things are good, and he keeps busy, he can follow the progression. But not in recent days. Or weeks. It's hard to keep track of time.

It's this burning. A new kind of invasion, an assault on his mind that even the phasings couldn't match. The sorrow and remorse and shame and loss are melted together into some glowing alloy that flows in his veins, scalding him throughout. Everything hurts. The sunlight scorches his eyes. The wind stings his skin. Every breath is agony. Every movement makes him

wince.

And he knows that this means something. He is a scrying glass. Shining, smooth -- a blank surface on which others might glimpse the future. For years, the powers of the world have ignored him, seeing in him no more than is there: a disgraced former cop, an empty, burned-out old sorcerer. But now, for some reason, they've taken notice of him again. With all the crafting he used to do, scrying was the one type of magic he truly hated. There was too little certainty, too little control. But this is different. Others are doing the crafting now. He can't see them. He doesn't know who they are, or what they want of him. But they're all around him. Setting him ablaze, flaying his body with their power, watching him for signs of what is to come.

If he sees her, if he sees the boy, do these others see them, too? Are his visions his own or someone else's? Why would they care about her? The boy is one thing. He has power of his own now. He matters. But what is she, beyond a memory that warms him and plagues him and leaves him longing for something he no longer believes was real? Why should his torment interest these others?

He has no answers. Questions lay siege to his mind, assailing him from all sides. And he has nothing to offer in response. He sits, watches the sky, frowns at the brown haze, envies the grace of the hawk, waits for the coyote to make his move. The wind blows, an occasional cloud slides past, the sun tracks a slow circle above him, shadows grow longer, gold suffuses the light, the air cools a little.

He can feel their eyes upon him; he senses their impatience. They want portents, but he has nothing to offer. He is glass, or perhaps stone. Fate is reflected off his life. Or so they seem to believe. He doesn't know if they're right, or if they imagine in him more than is there. He just

sits.

And still it burns and burns and burns.

Chapter 2

The image flickered in my scrying stone, like a candle guttering in the wind, before becoming more fixed, more substantial. I hadn't been sure the spell would work, but there he was -- "he" being Mark Darby, an employee at Custom Electronics, in Mesa, who had been stealing computers, phones, stereo equipment, and pretty much anything else you could think of. He was by the loading dock at the rear of the store, shoving boxes into the back of a beat-up old Subaru wagon.

"Gotchya," I whispered, still peering down at the stone.

Darby's bosses had known for some time that someone on their staff was robbing them, but they didn't know who; only that he or she had been clever enough to avoid detection for the better part of four months.

Until now.

Not that the magical vision I'd summoned to the stone was proof, at least not the kind that I could use in any court of law.

"No, your honor, I don't have any surveillance tape. But I cast a seeing spell and saw him in this shiny piece of agate . . ."

Right.

But now that I knew for certain who the thief was, I had no intention of letting him get

away.

I got out of the Z-ster, my silver 1977 280Z, which was parked along a side street near the store, closed the door with the care of a burglar, and began to limp toward the loading dock.

If someone had told me a year ago that getting shot could be a good thing, I would have said that person was nuts. And I know nuts. I'm a weremyste, which means that for three nights out of every month -- the night of the full moon, and the nights immediately before and after -- I lose control of my mind and my magic. It also means that eventually, the cumulative wear-and-tear of those monthly phasings will leave me permanently insane. As they have my Dad.

But this is about the risks of my profession, as opposed to the dangers of my runecrafting. I'm a private investigator, owner and president of Justis Fearsson Investigations. And not so long ago I was shot -- twice, as it happens -- by a powerful sorcerer named Etienne de Cahors, who was known here in Phoenix as the Blind Angel Killer. He didn't survive our encounter, mostly because I had help from Kona Shaw, my old partner on the Phoenix police force.

Bringing down the bastard responsible for the Blind Angel murders, a killing spree that had terrorized the Phoenix area for the better part of three years, was enough to make me a hero. Ending up with a couple of bullets in me was icing on the cake and it got me in the headlines. Business, which was slow before then, had been booming ever since. Except that for the first several weeks I had one arm in a sling and my leg bandaged from hip to knee, and so I couldn't do much more than sit on the couch in my home and answer the phone. People were lining up to hire me, and I was every bit as eager to get to work. But for more than a month I had no choice but to decline more jobs than I had worked in the previous year.

I still miss being a cop -- losing my badge about killed me -- but if I can't be on the force,

working as a PI is the next best thing. Despite the reward money I'd collected for killing Cahors, I didn't want to sit on my butt catching up on the latest in daytime drama; I wanted to do my job. So about ten days ago, when I was cleared by the doctors and my physical therapist to start working again, I took the first offer that came my way. The doctors and PT told me to take it easy, and I really have tried to be good. But it's not like there are volume settings for investigative work. You're on or you're off. Despite my limp, and the lingering twinge in my arm, I was on again, and I was glad.

I reached the back of the building, and peeked around the corner to get some sense of how far I was from the loading dock. Pretty far, it turned out. Custom Electronics was one of those huge warehouse stores that seem to go on for miles, and so I was still at least one hundred yards from Darby and his wagon. But the old floodlights shining high over the loading area were strong enough for me to see him. They would also be strong enough for him to see me when I stepped around the corner.

I ducked back out of sight and hesitated, unsure as to whether I could pull off the spell I had in mind.

I had spent a good deal of my recovery time honing my casting -- my runecrafting, as Namid would call it. There was nothing like almost dying at the hands of a renegade runemyste to motivate a person. Namid, who oversaw my magical training, had taught me a number of new spells, including the variation on a standard seeing spell I had used to track Darby. Two nights ago, we had worked on camouflage spells, which, in theory anyway, would make me virtually invisible to the man. I'd practiced such spells before, and I was growing more comfortable with them. Problem was, I had never used one out on the street, when it really mattered, and I had no

confidence that I could pull it off on my own, without Namid instructing me each step of the way.

Then again, I didn't have any better options. If I could have made myself fly, or given myself superhuman speed, I would have. But magic doesn't work that way, at least not for weremystes who still have way too much to learn about runecrafting. I had my .40 Glock 22 in a shoulder holster beneath my bomber jacket, but I didn't think Darby was armed, and I wasn't aiming to hurt the guy. My goal was to catch him in the act with enough clear evidence to convince his employers of his guilt. Those employers had impressed upon me that they didn't want to involve the police in any way, for fear of embarrassing the company.

The most simple of the spells I cast required three elements; this one would require more. Seven probably. Certain numbers carried more power than others: three, seven, eleven. I'd never managed to cast a spell with eleven elements; I had trouble keeping track of all of them. But I could handle seven.

Darby, me, the wall of the building, the dim light of those floods, the cement under my feet, the chain link fence and bushes behind me, and Darby again. Seven elements. The truth was, it didn't matter what those elements were, so long as I could keep them fixed in my mind long enough to cast the spell.

I recited the litany to myself six times, and on the seventh go-round, I released the magic that had been building inside me. I felt the spell settle over me, as light as mist, as reassuring as a blanket.

I took a long breath, and then I eased around the corner, keeping my back to the building wall, and placing each step as softly as I could. Darby didn't notice me. I sidled toward him,

wondering as I did what spell I ought to try next. Mark was bigger than I had thought -- maybe six foot four, and nearly as wide as he was tall. He was soft around the middle, and with his shaggy curls and thick features he bore more resemblance to a pastry chef than to a linebacker, but still he had at least six inches and sixty pounds on me.

Most times I might have been able to take him anyway. I was wiry and I kept myself in shape. But my muscles had atrophied a bit in the past few weeks. For this evening at least, I was hoping to rely on magic rather than brute force. That said, I was doing all right. My physical therapist had warned me that my leg might start to hurt if I tried to do too much, but for the moment it felt good. Too good.

Overconfidence in a sorcerer -- or in an investigator for that matter -- can be deadly. In this case it wasn't that bad; it was just stupid. As I drew closer to Darby and the car, I slid my lead foot into an empty bottle that had been left by the side of the building. It fell over with a clinking sound, rolled in a circle and bumped up against the building again.

Darby spun. "Who's there?"

He sounded scared, and his eyes were wide. But he was looking bigger by the moment, and in the time it took him to whirl in my direction, he had pulled out a .380 -- in that light I couldn't tell what brand. Not that it mattered.

He was staring at the bottle, and still had given no indication that he could see me. But I didn't like the way he was holding his weapon; I half expected him to fire off a few rounds in my general direction, to be on the safe side.

I cast another spell, three elements this time. My fist, his jaw, and an impact that would rattle his teeth. It was a simpler conjuring, and I didn't have time to wait for the magic to build. I

cast, and an instant later, he reeled. I charged him, the leg that had been shot going from “fine” to “crap that hurts!” in about two strides. If I survived the night, my PT was going to kill me.

Darby must have heard my footsteps, even though he still couldn’t see me. He straightened, aimed his weapon -- straight at my chest as dumb luck would have it. I knew I wouldn’t reach him in time. I wasn’t moving well and the distance was too great. I tried to recite that same three-part spell again, desperate to do anything I could to knock him off balance.

But I didn’t have time even for that. I saw his finger move. An image flashed through my mind: me lying on the filthy pavement, still shrouded in my camouflage spell, bleeding out because no one could see me. Until I died, at which point my casting would cease as well. Spells die with the sorcerer; it’s one of the fundamental rules of magic.

I’m a dead man.

Flame belched from the muzzle of his weapon, three times. The reports roared, echoing off the building. And in that scintilla of an instant -- not even the blink of an eye -- I thought I sensed a frisson of power ripple the air around me.

Then it was gone.

All three shots should have hit me. The distance between us wasn’t great, and Darby appeared to know how to handle a firearm.

But he missed. Somehow, incredibly, he missed.

He stared, not really at me, since I remained camouflaged, but at the spot where he’d been aiming. Then he glanced down at his pistol.

For a moment, I could do little more than gape myself, amazed at the mere fact that I was still upright and breathing. But he was still armed, and I didn’t feel like trusting to good fortune a

second time.

I went back to the fist spell, staggering him again. And before he could recover, I closed the distance between us, hammered a real fist into his gut, and knocked him to the ground with another blow that struck high on his temple. The pistol clattered on the pavement and I kicked it beyond his reach.

He stirred, but before he could push himself up, I planted a foot in the middle of his back, forcing him back down to the ground. For good measure, I pulled out my Glock and pressed it against the nape of his neck.

“Don’t move, Mark.”

He stiffened.

“I’m feeling twitchy, and I’m a little pissed at you for taking shots at me. So I’d suggest you do exactly what I tell you to.”

“Who the hell are you?”

I pushed harder with the pistol. “Shut up.”

He gave a quick nod.

“Now, I want you to put your hands out to the sides where I can see them. Slowly.”

He stretched his arms wide. He had turned his head to the side and I could tell he was trying to get a look at me.

Casting the camouflage spell had been complicated; getting rid of it was easy. Three elements: Darby, me, and my appearance, warts and all. Not that I have warts . . . As I said, there’s nothing inherently magical about the elements themselves; more than anything, having them in my head, reciting them a few times, helps me focus my conjuring. Other conjurers might

have used other techniques, but this one worked for me.

One second he couldn't see me, the next he could.

"Whoa," he said, breathing the word. "How'd you do that?"

"Do what? Kick your ass? It wasn't that hard."

"No, I mean--"

"You're going to answer some questions for me." I pulled a small digital recorder from the pocket of my bomber.

"The hell I am. I know my rights."

"I'm not a cop, and you have no rights."

"If you're not a cop--"

"I'm a PI. I was hired by Nathan Felder to find out who's been robbing his stores." I switched on the recorder. "What's your name?"

No answer. I smacked the top of his head with the butt of my pistol -- just hard enough to get his attention -- and then pressed the barrel against his neck again.

"What's your name?"

"Mark Darby," he said, his voice low enough that I wasn't entirely confident the recorder would pick it up.

"How long have you been stealing goods from Custom Electronics?"

"I don't know what--"

I smacked him again.

"Ow! About four months."

That matched what Felder told me when he hired me.

“Who are you working with?”

He clamped his mouth shut.

Before I could ask him again, I heard a siren wail from not too far away. I listened for a few seconds, long enough to know that it was coming in this direction. Felder would not be happy.

“That’s your fault, Mark. If you hadn’t shot at me, no one would have called the cops.”

“I guess I have rights now, don’t I?”

“Yeah, smart ass, you have the right to go to jail. Felder would have been happy to fire you and be done with it. But you took shots at me, which makes this armed robbery. You’ll probably wind up doing ten years at Lewis or Florence.”

“Shit,” he said in a whisper.

“No kidding. Of course, if you tell me who you’ve been working with, maybe Felder will decide not to press charges. And maybe I’ll be willing to forget about those shots you fired off.”

The police car came around the corner with a squeal of rubber on pavement, the siren dying away. Doors opened on either side of the car and two uniformed officers got out, both holding shot guns, both using their doors for cover.

“Drop your weapon!” one of them shouted.

I placed my Glock on the pavement where Darby couldn’t reach it.

“Now, lie down and put your hands on the back of your head.”

“Your word against mine, PI,” Darby said, as I followed their instructions.

I couldn’t see his face, but I knew he was grinning.

“Not quite, asshole. I didn’t fire any shots. You did, and the lab can confirm that. And

that's your car filled to the ceiling with stolen goods.”

“Quiet, both of you.”

By now the cops stood over us, their shotguns no doubt aimed at our heads.

“What's going on here?”

“My name is Jay Fearsson,” I said, before Darby could answer. “I'm a private investigator, and I used to be on the job. My license is in my wallet. I was hired by the owner of Custom Electronics to find the employee who's been stealing from them since February. That would be the moron lying next to me: Mark Darby. I caught him in the act, and he fired three shots at me. Missed all three times. His weapon is on the ground, a few feet to the left of him. And that's his Subaru pulled up to the loading dock.”

One of the officers, a short, barrel-chested white guy, bent and picked up my Glock. “Did you fire your weapon?”

“No.”

I heard him sniff at the barrel. He retrieved the other weapon and sniffed at that one as well. I couldn't see him well in the darkness, but I thought I saw him nod once to his partner.

“All right, Fearsson,” this second cop said. “You can get up.”

I climbed to my feet and pulled out my wallet. The other cop checked my ID before handing me my pistol and walking over to the wagon.

The second officer, a young, light-skinned African-American man, kept his shotgun aimed at Darby, but he was watching me. “You're the guy who caught the Blind Angel Killer, aren't you?” At my nod, he said, “That was nice work.”

“Thank you.”

“And now you’re back doing grunt work like this?”

I grinned. “That’s the job, right? I still need to earn a living.”

“I hear that.”

The other cop, who was still by Darby’s car, let out a low whistle. “There must be twenty grand worth of stuff in here. Maybe more.”

I walked over to Darby. “Your word against mine, eh?”

He raised his head fractionally. “Screw you.”

They cuffed Darby and read him his Miranda rights, and then they took a statement from me. I made sure to mention my suspicion that Mark was working with at least one of his fellow salesmen. While I was still answering questions, a second police cruiser showed up. A few minutes later, so did Mister Felder, driving a BMW, dressed in a suit I couldn’t possibly afford, and flinging himself out of his car very much like a man who had been called away from a social occasion he didn’t want to leave.

One of the cops explained to him what had happened. Felder eyed the loading dock and Darby’s car as the cop spoke to him, but when they were finished talking, he walked straight over to me.

He shook my hand, a tight smile on his tanned, round face, but there could be no mistaking his tone as he said, “I thought we agreed that we were going to handle this matter without involving the police.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, not flinching at all from what I heard in his tone. “But then Darby took a few shots at me with a .380. Someone heard the shooting and called it in. It wasn’t my decision.”

“He shot at you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Felder huffed. “Then I suppose it couldn’t be helped.” A pause, and then. “You’re all right?”

“Thanks for asking. Yes, I’m fine.”

Even as I spoke the words though, a memory stirred. Not of the shooting itself; I’d have nightmares about that -- the flare of flame from the muzzle, the deafening pop! pop! pop! of the shots.

Rather, I recalled -- as I should have long before -- that fraction of a moment during which I felt magic all around me, charging the air like an impending lightning strike.

“Mister Fearsson?”

I roused myself with a small shake of my head and faced Felder again. He was watching me, expectant; I assumed he’d asked me a question.

“I’m sorry, sir. What did you say?”

“I asked if Darby did all this alone.”

“No, I don’t think he did. The police showed up before I could get a name out of him. But I have some experience with these things: he won’t hold up long under questioning. If he had a partner, you’ll know it soon enough.”

“Fearsson!”

I turned. The African-American officer was striding our way.

“Sorry to bother you, man, but Darby is claiming that you assaulted him. He says you hit him with your weapon.”

I glanced off to the side, exhaled.

“Did you?”

“It was hardly an assault,” I said. “I was asking him some questions, and he was having trouble remembering stuff. I was trying to jar the memories loose.”

The cop laughed; even Felder allowed himself a chuckle.

“But officially,” I said, “I never hit him.”

“Good enough for me,” the cop said. “You can go. If we need you for anything else, we’ll let you know.”

“Hey, wait a minute!” Darby called from the back of one of the squad cars.

“His word against yours, Darby,” the officer said. He gave me a wink.

Darby swore loudly.

“Come by tomorrow, Mister Fearsson,” Felder said. “I’ll cut you a check.”

“I will. Thank you.”

I walked back to the Z-ster, favoring my bad leg, conscious as well of a dull ache in my arm. I guess this is what the doctors had in mind when they warned me about trying to do too much.

Still, I was pleased. Sure, the police had shown up, but Felder hadn’t been too angry. And given how the evening could have ended -- with me in a body bag -- I couldn’t have asked for a better outcome.

Again, I thought of that frisson of magic. I hadn’t cast a spell, and I was certain that Darby was incapable of casting. Had I imagined it? Everything had happened in such a rush -- it could have been a sensation of panic and desperation. But how else could I explain the fact that

Darby had missed me?

I needed to have a conversation with Namid'skemu of the K'ya'na-Kwe clan, the Zuni shaman who had been my runemyste for the past seven years, and who had been dead for close to eight centuries.

Chapter 3

The runemystes were created by the Runeclave centuries ago, their collective sacrifice an act so courageous, so selfless that it boggles the mind. Essentially, they were once weremystes, like me -- sorcerers who had devoted their lives to the mastery of runecrafting. Thirty-nine of them were sacrificed by the Runeclave, the governing body of their kind, their spirits granted eternal life so that they could be guardians of magic in our world. They were essentially ensorcelled ghosts, although I'd learned over the years that they didn't like to be referred to as such.

As I understood it, Namid and others like him were tasked with training new generations of weremystes, and keeping watch on those who might turn to the darker elements of runecrafting. In all but the most extreme circumstances, they were forbidden from acting directly on our world, but through their instruction and training of weremystes, they could help to keep wielders of dark magic from doing harm to either the magical community or the non-magical population. The renegade-turned-serial-killer I mentioned, Cahors, was one of the original thirty-nine. But he chafed at the limits placed on his powers by his fellow runemystes, and he found a way to escape their controls and assume corporeal form once more. More, by committing murders each month on the night of the first quarter moon, he was able to keep himself young and powerful. If Kona and I hadn't killed him, he would have gone on murdering for as long as he wished to live.

But Cahors was dead, and the runemystes now numbered thirty-eight. In the weeks since

we'd killed him, I'd often wondered if Cahors had been training runemystes the way Namid did. Were there sorcerers out there who for years had been learning the darkest secrets of our craft?

I could have asked Namid about this, but he tended to be tight-lipped when it came to answering questions about the runemystes. To be honest, he was that way about everything, which at times made him an exasperating teacher. And tonight I had other questions that were more urgent.

I drove to my home in Chandler. It was a drive of no more than eight miles, and at this hour it took only a few minutes. At rush hour, which these days in the Phoenix-Scottsdale area stretched from dawn to dusk, it might have taken me three-quarters of an hour.

It had been a scorching day -- July in Phoenix; go figure -- and it was still hot in the house. But the night had cooled off considerably, as nights in the desert often did, and so I opened every window and changed into gym shorts and a t-shirt.

"Namid," I said, pitching my voice to carry over some distance. I probably could have whispered it and he would have shown up just as soon, but I liked to maintain the illusion that I had some small measure of privacy.

Within seconds, he began to materialize before me, shimmering with the light of my reading lamps like the surface of a mountain lake reflecting the moon.

In life, Namid had belonged to the K'ya'na-Kwe clan of the A'shiwi or Zuni nation -- the water people, as they were known. His clan was extinct now, and had been for centuries. I didn't know if Namid's appearance was his way of honoring their memory, or if it was simply the natural, or perhaps magical, manifestation of his tribal heritage. Whatever its origins, Namid always appeared to me as a being made entirely of water. He had the build of a warrior: tall,

broad-shouldered, lean, muscular. On this night he was as clear as a woodland stream and as smooth as the ocean at dawn, but one could read his moods in the texture of his liquid form the way a ship's captain might gauge the weather by watching the sea. His eyes were the single exception: they always glowed, like white flames within his luminous waters. I would never have said as much to him -- I didn't want to give him the satisfaction -- but he was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen.

"Ohanko. It is late. You should be asleep, and I should not be summoned at such an hour."

He was also the most infuriating.

He'd been calling me "Ohanko," which, as far as I could tell, meant "reckless one," for so long that I couldn't remember when he had started. And he had been talking to me as if he was my mother, telling me when to sleep and what to eat, for even longer.

"I'm sorry I called for you," I said, "But I can't sleep yet. I need some answers first."

He regarded me for the span of a heartbeat before sinking to the floor and staring up at me, those gleaming eyes seeming to ask why the hell I was still standing. I sat opposite him.

"You conjured tonight."

"Yes, I did. But that's not--"

"What spells did you cast?"

Did I mention that he could be infuriating?

"I used a seeing spell--"

"Using the techniques we have discussed?"

"Yes, and--"

“Did it work?”

“Yes, it worked fine.”

“Good. What else?”

“I cast a couple of . . . well, I call them fist spells.”

His watery brow furrowed. “Fist spells,” he repeated, his voice a low rumble, like the rush of distant headwaters.

“They act like a punch, but I can cast them from a distance.”

He nodded. “Crude, but effective. What else?”

“A camouflage spell,” I said. As impatient as I was to discuss other matters, I couldn’t keep a hint of pride from creeping into my voice.

Namid’s eyebrows -- such as they were -- went up a fraction of an inch. “That is high magic, Ohanko. Your casting was successful.”

“Yeah, it worked great. That is, until I tripped over an empty beer bottle.”

His expression flattened. “Have I not told you that you must tread like the fox, that you must act at all times with great care?”

“You’ve told me,” I said. “And I try. This time . . .” I shrugged. “What can I say? I screwed up.”

“You are fortunate that your carelessness did not carry a greater cost.”

I’m a grown man -- thirty-three years old. My Mom has been dead for close to twenty years, and my Dad has been crazy for almost as long. In many ways, Namid was the closest thing to a parent that I had, and his scoldings still stung like cold rain. But at that moment, his disapproval was the least of my concerns.

“So you weren’t aware of all this,” I said. “You didn’t see me cast the spell, or knock over the bottle. You weren’t there for what happened next.”

Namid had a way of going still; it almost seemed like he turned from water to ice, and most of the time I thought it was very cool. Not now. Seeing his face harden, his body tense, I shivered, as from a winter wind.

“Tell me,” he said.

“I’m not sure exactly what happened. I was trying to sneak up on a guy, and when I kicked over the bottle he raised his weapon and fired at me. Three times. I couldn’t have been more than ten feet from him, and though he couldn’t see me, he aimed right at my chest. I . . .” I took a breath. “I should be dead.”

“Why are you not?”

“I don’t know. But in the instant that his finger moved I was almost sure that I felt a spell. I--I thought that maybe you had intervened.”

“You know that I cannot.”

“You did, not that long ago.”

“The circumstances were different. Cahors was our . . . screw up.” The phrase sounded odd coming from him. “I cannot keep you safe in the normal course of your life. My responsibilities lie elsewhere.”

I would have liked to ask him about that, too. Another time.

“Maybe I imagined it, then.”

“Is it possible that you cast without intending, without even knowing that you did it?”

I grinned. “I’m not sure how to answer that.”

“I am not sure how you could, either,” the myste said, his tone wry. “But you understand the point I am making.”

“Yes. But I don’t think that’s what happened. I was scrambling to cast a different sort of spell. I should have cast a warding, but it all happened so fast.” I shook my head. “Maybe he missed, plain and simple, though I don’t see how he could have. Is it possible that another of your kind has taken an interest in me?”

“Another of my kind?”

“Another runemyste.”

“I have told you, Ohanko: it is against the laws that govern my kind to interfere in your world. Another of my kind would be bound by the same prohibitions that bind me. And where you are concerned, another runemyste would not chafe at those prohibitions nearly as much as I do.”

I made no effort to mask my surprise; he wasn’t usually prone to such kindnesses.

“Thank you, Namid. That might be the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

His translucent hand flicked out in annoyance. “I mean simply that others have not invested so much time and energy in your training. They would not be inconvenienced by your death the way I would.”

That was more like the Namid I had come to know over the years.

“Still, I’m touched.”

Namid frowned, but I could tell that my questions had piqued his curiosity. Or maybe it was more than that. Maybe he was scared.

“If it was someone else,” I said, “a weremyste or a runemyste who’s less bound than you

are by arbitrary rules, it's all right. He or she saved my life. It's like I have a guardian angel."

This deepened the myste's scowl. "There are no guardian angels, Ohanko. There are sorcerers and mystes, and they rarely act out of altruism."

"So you believe that someone wants me alive for a specific reason?"

"I do not know what to believe. I will have to think on this at greater length." He started to fade from view. "Tread like the fox, Ohanko. Do not screw up anymore."

I chuckled. "Thanks, ghost."

I heard another rumble, like the whisper of approaching thunder. A moment later he was gone.

I stood, stretched my back, and crossed to the answering machine, which was a relic from a time when devices like this used tiny little cassette tapes. I had several messages, most of them from prospective clients. One was from Billie Castle, who was, for lack of a better term, my girlfriend.

"Hey, Fearsson, it's me." I couldn't help the dumb grin that spread across my face every time I heard her voice. "I know you're working, and I know we have plans for Friday, but I was wondering if you had time for lunch tomorrow. Nothing fancy -- I was thinking the burrito place on Main, near the mall. Call me in the morning."

I made a note to call her, and jotted down numbers and names from the other messages. Then I dragged myself back to my room and fell into bed, too tired even to bother pulling down the shades.

I woke with the sun, went for a run and showered, and then called Billie to confirm our plans. After grabbing a bite to eat, I got in the Z-ster and drove out to Wofford, west of the city,

where my Dad lives in an old trailer.

I go out to see him most Tuesdays. I bring him groceries and other supplies. Sometimes I cook for him. Sometimes I do no more than sit with him and listen to him ramble on and on about God knows what. Every once in a while -- maybe one week in five, if I'm lucky -- I catch him on a good day and we sit for hours talking about baseball and stuff in the news and police work; he was a cop, too, until his mind quit on him and he lost his job.

Today was Thursday, but I hadn't liked the way he looked or sounded a couple of days ago, and I wanted to check in on him again. It was a slow drive out of the city -- there weren't any quick drives left in Phoenix -- but by nine o'clock I was on U.S. Sixty, following a lonely stretch of road past sun-baked telephone poles and dry, windswept desert. Reaching the rutted dirt road to my father's place, I turned and steered the Z-ster past the stunted sage, a plume of pale red dust billowing behind me.

I could tell before I reached him that Dad was no better off today than he had been the last time I saw him. He sat slumped in the lawn chair outside his trailer, beneath the plastic tarp I had set up for him a couple of years before. He had his eyes trained on the horizon, and his old Leica binoculars rested in his lap. He wore dirty jeans and a threadbare white t-shirt; they might have been the same clothes he'd been wearing on Tuesday. His sneakers were untied; he didn't have on socks.

The same way I could judge Namid's moods by how roiled his waters were, I could tell what state my father was in by the care with which he dressed. When he didn't change his clothes or bother with socks or shoelaces, it meant he was out of it, and had been for a while. I hoped he'd been eating. Hell, I hoped he had slept in his bed rather than in that old chair.

I parked and got out, squinting against the glare and the dust.

“Hey, Dad,” I called, raising a hand.

He didn’t respond, or even turn my way. I could see that he was muttering to himself. Every few seconds he seemed to wince, as if he were in pain. He hadn’t shaved since the last time I saw him; his slack cheeks were grizzled, making him appear even more haggard than usual. His white hair, unkempt and probably in a need of a washing, stirred in the desert wind.

I walked to where he sat and kissed his forehead. He stank of sweat and his breath was rank. His gaze found mine for a second or two but then slid away again, back to the horizon and the mountain ranges that fell away in layers until they were lost in the brown haze hanging over the city.

“How are you doing, Dad?”

He didn’t take his eyes off the desert, but he shook his head. “Not so good,” he said, his voice strained, the words clipped.

As interactions with my Dad went, this was better than it could have been; at least he had responded to my question, which meant that he was communicative and aware of my presence. Sometimes I didn’t even get that much from him.

I pulled out a second lawn chair and placed it beside his. Sitting, I leaned forward, peering into his eyes. Like mine, they were a soft, smoky gray, and today they appeared glazed, sunken.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him. “Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“It Tuesday already?”

“No, it’s Thursday. But I was worried about you when I left the other day, so I thought I’d

come back.”

He answered with a slow nod, his gaze following the flight of a hawk.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

“It’s this burning,” he said, whispering the words. “It’s . . . The burning. I can’t make it stop.”

I laid the back of my hand against his forehead, checking for fever. His skin felt cool and dry.

“What burning?”

“They’re burning me, like brands, searing my skin, marking me as theirs.” He shook his head. “I don’t know why, but look at me. Look!” He held out his arms, the undersides bared to the sky, his hands trembling. “Look!” he said again. A tear slipped from his eye and wound a crooked course down his lined face. “So many burns!”

Hallucinations like this one were a common element of my father’s psychosis. A doctor would have told me not to be too concerned: this would pass, and this state was as normal for him as any other. Hell, doctors had told me exactly that on other occasions when his behavior bordered on the bizarre and unsettling.

But as relieved as I was by his lack of fever, and the absence of wounds on his arms, I couldn’t help feeling that this particular delusion was taking a greater toll than others I’d seen him endure.

“Who’s doing this to you, Dad? Who’s burning you?”

“I don’t know,” he said, the words thick with tears, his eyes still fixed on the slack, unmarred skin of his forearms. “They think I matter still. Again. They think I matter, but I don’t.”

He swiveled toward me. “You do. You matter. You be careful, boy. They’ll come for you before long. But me . . .” He shook his head again. “I don’t know what they want, or why they think I matter. But they’re here, and I want them to go. I don’t like this.”

“You do matter, Dad.”

“No!” he said with sudden ferocity. “This isn’t the time for sentimental shit! I. Don’t. Matter. But they don’t know it! They don’t! They don’t! They’re searing me with their brands and their torches. They’re poking and prodding and hurting and pushing just to see how far they can take me, just to . . . Just because.”

“When was the last time you ate?”

“I . . .” He closed his eyes, still wincing every few seconds. “A long time,” he said. “I’m hungry.”

“Good. What can I fix for you?”

“Ice cream.”

“Dad--” I stopped myself. The doctors would have told me that when my father was like this, getting calories in him was the most important thing. He was sixty-four. He didn’t have to eat his peas and carrots before he had dessert. “Sure,” I said. “I’ll get you some.”

No response.

I stood, stepped into the trailer. Usually, with my father in such a state, I’d expect to find his kitchen an utter disaster. But it wasn’t. It was worse: it remained exactly as I had left it Tuesday afternoon. I would have bet every dollar in my pocket that he hadn’t eaten since the lunch we’d shared then.

I packed a bowl with mint chocolate chip -- his current favorite -- and got him a tall glass

of ice water as well. Returning to his side, I gave him the water first.

He took it, glanced up at me, eyed the water again. He took a sip, closed his eyes once more. Then he tipped the glass back and drained it in about six seconds.

“You want me to get you more?”

He nodded.

I handed him the ice cream and went back inside. I was out again in mere moments, and already the bowl was mostly empty. He still flinched again and again; whatever was bothering him hadn't gone away. But in these few minutes his color had improved and his eyes had grown clearer.

“They don't like this,” he said, pointing at the bowl with his spoon, a knowing grin lifting the corners of his mouth. “Not even a little.”

“Who don't?”

“They can't burn me as easily when I have this in me. And the water. That, too. They like that even less.”

“Who's burning you, Dad? Can you tell me now?”

He sobered and shook his head, his gaze holding mine as he took another mouthful of ice cream.

He finished that first bowl a few minutes later, and I went back and got him a second. And when he finished that one, I brought him half a sandwich, which he bolted down as well.

Sometimes, getting some food into my Dad brought him around a bit, helped him reconnect with reality. Not this time. He continued that odd wincing, and he went on and on about being prodded and burned. I'd been with him through a lot of a different hallucinations,

but again I couldn't shake the feeling that this one was different.

His skin had lost that sallow quality, though, and once he'd had enough to eat, I managed to convince him to shower, shave, brush his teeth, and put on fresh clothes. By the time I was ready to leave, he was back in his chair, staring at the horizon. I could tell he was hurting still, but I didn't know what else to do for him.

"I have to go for a while, Dad. But I'll come back later, all right?"

He didn't so much as glance at me.

"Dad--"

"If you're here, they'll know where to find you, and then you'll be in trouble, too."

"I'll take my chances. I'll see you in a few hours."

He didn't argue the point further. I kissed his forehead, got in my car, and headed back into the city to keep my lunch date with Billie. She would have understood if I had asked her for a rain check, but I wanted to see her, and I also wanted to get my check from Nathan Felder.

Once I was back on the road and close enough to Phoenix to get a decent signal on my ancient cell phone, I called my Dad's doctor to ask him about what I had seen and heard. He didn't have much to say, at least not much that was helpful. But he did end our conversation with this gem:

"The truth is, Jay, your Dad is getting older, his condition is worsening, and it will continue to worsen. Trying to define what's 'normal'" -- I could hear the air quotes -- "is almost pointless, because normal for him is always changing; it's always deteriorating. What you've described for me is no worse than what I might expect for any patient with his history. I'm sorry, but that's the unvarnished truth."

And because you're a sorcerer like your old man, and because you go through the insanity of the phasings month in and month out, full moon after full moon, this is your future as well.

He didn't have to say that last; we both knew he was thinking it.

I thanked him and ended the call.

The moonrise was still hours away -- tonight's moon would be a waxing gibbous. We were four nights from the full, three from the first night of July's phasing. And already I felt the moon tugging at my mind, as insistent as a needy child, as unrelenting as the tide.

In another few days, even before night descended and the moon rose to begin the phasing, it would start to dull my thoughts and influence my mood. Right now it was a distraction and not too much more. But at the mere thought of those nights to come, I shuddered.

I wasn't insane yet; Namid still held out some hope that with time, and with hard work, I could learn enough about casting to mitigate the effect of the phasings and perhaps put off what I had always assumed was my inevitable descent into madness. But flirting with lunacy, even if just for a few nights, still terrified me. I spent those nights alone. Always.

I wanted to believe that I had no choice in the matter. Even as a weremyste loses control of his mind, he also loses control of his magic, the power of which is augmented by the phasing. In other words, at those times when I'm least able to reign in my runecrafting, it's most likely to boil over, endangering anyone who's near me. Still, during our years together on the force, Kona had offered many times to stay with me and keep me from hurting myself or others. Last month, Billie had done the same; it occurred to me that she might have intended to again this month. For all I knew, that was why she wanted to see me.

I would tell her exactly what I had told Kona repeatedly: “I’m afraid I’ll hurt you.”

But both Kona and Billie were too smart to be fooled by that, even if I was content to go on deceiving myself.

What I really should have said to them was, “I’m ashamed to let you see me this way.”

I had seen my father at his worst, on days when he was far, far less lucid than he had been today. I knew what moon-induced madness looked like; it was ugly, messy, humiliating. I didn’t want to share it with anyone. I could barely stand to see it in my old man, much less in myself.

So I drove back into Mesa, to Solana’s, the little burrito place Billie and I had gone to so many times that it was fast becoming “our place.” And along the way, I tried to find the words to refuse the offer I knew was coming.

She was already seated when I got there. The lunch rush had started, but I assumed she had ordered for me; I always got the same thing: chicken and black beans, extra guac and pico, no sour cream.

Reaching the table, I stooped and kissed her lightly on the lips. Then I sat.

“You ordered?”

She nodded. “And paid. That’s two in a row. You owe me.”

In spite of everything, I smiled, glad to see her, happy to be distracted from my Dad.

Billie and I had met less than two months ago, while I was working on the Blind Angel murder case, and we hadn’t exactly hit it off at first. She was a journalist, the owner of a blog site called Castle’s Village. As a cop, I had developed a healthy distrust of journalists, and the first time or two we spoke I had Billie pegged as a typical reporter: nosy, ruthless, interested in nothing but the story, and completely unconcerned with those who got in her way as she went

after it.

I was wrong. She was smart as hell, and, yes, she could be relentless in her pursuit of a story. But she cared more about getting it right than getting it first, and I had seen her go to incredible lengths to double and triple-check her facts before posting an article to her site. She was also warm, funny, and caring. She had these amazing emerald green eyes, and ringlets of brown hair that cascaded over her shoulders and back. And, most remarkably, she seemed to like me every bit as much as I liked her, which was quite a lot.

Watching me watch her, she took my hand, concern furrowing her brow.

“What’s the matter?”

“What makes you think something’s the matter?”

She gave me her “Are-you-really-that-stupid?” look. “You have a lousy poker face, Fearsson. I’ve told you that.” She leaned in, her arms resting on the table. “Is it something with your case?” she asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

That was another thing I liked about Billie: she considered my work exotic and exciting, even when I was doing nothing more than tracking down the Mark Darbys of the world.

“No. The case is solved. In fact, I need to get my check from Mister Felder when we’re done with lunch.”

“Wow, Fearsson. That took you all of one week. I’m impressed.”

“It was ten days,” I told her. “And that matters because I get paid by the day.” I waved off the compliment. “Anyway, I wasn’t exactly dealing with a criminal mastermind.” I took a long breath, my gaze dropping to our interlaced fingers. “It’s my Dad. He’s not doing so well.”

She frowned. “I’m sorry. Something specific or . . . ?” She trailed off, allowed herself a

small self-conscious smile, even as her brow remained creased. “I’m not sure how to ask the question.”

“I know what you mean. And I don’t really have an answer. It seems different to me. Worse than it’s been. But the doctors tell me it’s part of the normal downward spiral.”

She winced, reminding me of my Dad. “Not what you want to hear.”

“Not at all.”

Before I could say more, my phone buzzed. I pulled it from the pocket of my bomber and checked the incoming number. Kona, at 620, which is what we called Phoenix Police headquarters in downtown Phoenix.

I flipped open the phone -- yes, I still have a flip phone. “Hey, partner. What’s up?”

“Justis, I am having a day. You busy right now?”

“I’m having lunch with Billie.”

“Tell her ‘Hi’ from me. How soon can you get away?”

“Seriously?” I said. “You want me to tell her ‘Hi,’ and then you want to know how quickly I can ditch her?”

“Pretty much,” Kona said, seeming to find little humor in the situation. “I’ve got a dead body here, and I think I need for you to take a look at it, if you know what I mean.”

“You think he was killed with magic?” I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

“Yup. So how soon can you be here?”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the airport, terminal three. And that’s the other thing you ought to know. We think there was a bomb on this guy’s plane.”