




THE
**EXILED
QUEEN**


A SEVEN REALMS NOVEL

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HYPERION
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*For Linda and Mike—who shared a world
of make-believe and kick-butt Barbies.
Thanks for putting up with all the talking animals.*



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CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BORDERLANDS

Han Alister reined in his pony at the highest point in Marisa Pines Pass. He looked out over the jagged southernmost Queens toward the hidden flatlands of Arden beyond. These were unfamiliar mountains, homes to long-dead queens with names he'd never heard. The highest peaks poked into the clouds, cold stone unclothed by vegetation. The lower slopes glittered with aspens haloed by autumn foliage.

The temperature had dropped as they climbed, and Han had added layers of clothing as necessary. Now his upland wool hat was pulled low over his ears, and his nose stung in the chilly air.

Hayden Fire Dancer nudged his pony up beside Han to share the view.

They'd left Marisa Pines Camp two days before. The clan camp sat strategically at the northern end of the pass, the major passage through the southern Spirit Mountains to the city of Delphi and the flatlands of Arden beyond. The road that began as

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the Way of the Queens in the capital city of Fellsmarsh dwindled into little more than a wide game trail in the highest part of the pass.

Though it was prime traveling season, they'd met little trade traffic along the trail—only a few hollow-eyed refugees from Arden's civil war.

Dancer pointed ahead, toward the southern slope. "Lord Demonai says that before the war, the wagon lines ran from morning to night in season, carrying trade goods up from the flatlands. Food, mostly—grain, livestock, fruits, and vegetables."

Dancer had traveled through Marisa Pines Pass before, on trading expeditions with Averill Lightfoot, trademaster and patriarch of Demonai Camp.

"Now the armies swallow it up," Dancer went on. "Plus, a lot of the cropland has been burned and spoiled, so it's out of production."

It will be another hungry winter in the Fells, Han thought. The civil war in Arden had been going on for as long as Han could remember. His father had died there, serving as sell-sword to one of the five bloody Montaigne princes—all brothers, and all laying claim to the throne of Arden.

Han's pony wheezed and blew after the long climb from Marisa Pines Camp. The air was thin at this altitude. Han combed his fingers through the shaggy pony's tangled mane, and scratched behind his ears. "Hey, now, Ragger," he murmured. "Take your time." Ragger bared his teeth in answer, and Han laughed.

Han took a proprietary pride in his ill-tempered pony—the first he'd ever owned. He was a skilled rider of borrowed horses. He'd spent every summer fostered in the upland lodges—sent

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there from the city by a mother convinced he carried a curse.

Now everything was different. The clans had staked him his horse, clothing, supplies, food for the journey, and paid his tuition for the academy at Oden's Ford. Not out of charity, but because they hoped the demon-cursed Han Alister would prove to be a potent weapon against the growing power of the Wizard Council.

Han had accepted their offer. Accused of murder, orphaned by his enemies, hunted by the Queen's Guard and the powerful High Wizard, Gavan Bayar, he'd had no choice. The pressure of past tragedies drove him forward—the need to escape reminders of his losses, and the desire to be somewhere other than where he'd been.

That and a smoldering desire for revenge.

Han slid his fingers inside his shirt and absently touched the serpent amulet that sizzled against the skin of his chest. Power flowed out of him and into the jinxpiece, relieving the magical pressure that had been building all day.

It had become a habit, this drawing off of power that might otherwise pinwheel out of control. He needed to constantly reassure himself the amulet was still there. Han had become strangely attached to it since he'd stolen it from Micah Bayar.

The flashpiece had once belonged to his ancestor, Alger Waterlow, known by most people as the Demon King. Meanwhile, the Lone Hunter amulet made for him by the clan matriarch Elena Demonai languished unused in his saddlebag.

He should hate the Waterlow flashpiece. He'd paid for it with Mam's and Mari's lives. Some said the amulet was a black magic piece—capable of naught but evil. But it was all he had to show

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for his nearly seventeen years, save Mari's charred storybook and Mam's gold locket. They were all that remained of a season of disaster.

Now he and his friend Dancer were to travel to Mystwerk House, the charmcaster academy at Oden's Ford, and enter training as wizards under sponsorship of the clans.

"Are you all right?" Dancer leaned toward him, his copper face etched with concern, his hair twisting in the wind like beaded snakes. "You look witch-fixed."

"I'm all right," Han said. "But I'd like to get out of this wind." Even in fair weather the wind roared constantly through the pass. And now, at summer's end, it carried the bite of winter.

"The border can't be far," Dancer said, his words snatched away as he spoke them. "Once we cross, we'll be close to Delphi. Maybe we can sleep under a roof tonight."

Han and Dancer traveled under the guise of clan traders, leading pack ponies loaded with goods. Their clan garb offered some protection. That and the longbows slung across their backs. Most thieves knew better than to confront members of the Spirit clans on their home ground. Travel would be riskier once they crossed into Arden.

As they descended toward the border, the season rolled back, from early winter to autumn again. Past the tree line, first scrubby pines and then the aspen forest closed in around them, providing some relief from the wind. The slope gentled and the skin of soil deepened. They began to see scattered crofts centered by snug cottages, and meadows studded with sturdy mountain sheep with long, curling horns.

A little farther, and here was evidence of the festering war to

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the south. Half hidden among the weeds to either side of the road were discards—empty saddlebags and parts of uniforms from fleeing soldiers, household treasures that had become too much of a burden on the uphill trail.

Han spotted a child's homespun dolly in the ditch, pressed into the mud. He reined in, meaning to climb down and fetch it so he could clean it up for his little sister. Then he remembered that Mari was dead, and had no need of dollies anymore.

Grief was like that. It gradually faded into a dull ache, until some simple sight or sound or scent hit him like a hammer blow.

They passed several torched homesteads, stone chimneys poking up like headstones on despoiled graves. And then an entire burnt village, complete with the skeletal remains of a temple and council house.

Han looked at Dancer. "Flatlanders did this?"

Dancer nodded. "Or stray mercenaries. There's a keep at the border, but they don't do a very good job patrolling this road. The Demonai warriors can't be everywhere. The Wizard Council claims wizards *could* take up the slack, but they're not allowed and they don't have the proper tools, and that's the fault of the clans." He rolled his eyes. "As if you'd find wizards out here in the rough even if they were allowed to be."

"Hey, now," Han said. "Watch yourself. We're wizards in the rough."

They both laughed at the double joke. They'd come to share a kind of graveyard humor about their predicament. It was hard to let go of the habit of making fun of the arrogance of wizards—the kinds of jokes the powerless make about the powerful.

They reached a joining of trails from the east and west, all

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funneling into the pass. Traffic thickened and slowed like clotted cream. Travelers trickled past, heading the other way, toward Marisa Pines and likely on to Fellsmarch. Men, women, children, families and single travelers, groups thrown together by chance, or joined together for protection.

Loaded down with bundles and bags, the refugees were silent, hollow-eyed, even the children, as if it took everything they had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Adults and younglings alike carried clubs, sticks, and other makeshift weapons. Some were wounded, with bloodstained rags tied around their heads or arms or legs. Many wore lightweight flatlander clothing, and some had no shoes.

They must have left Delphi at daybreak. If it had taken them this long to get this distance, they were never going to make it though the pass by nightfall. Then it was two more days to Marisa Pines.

"They're going to freeze up there," Han said. "Their feet will be cut to ribbons on the rocks. How are the *lytlings* going to manage the climb? What are they thinking?"

One little boy, maybe four years old, stood crying in the middle of the trail, fists clenched, face squinched up in misery. "Mama!" he cried in the flatlander tongue. "Mama! I'm hungry!" There was no Mama in sight.

Pricked by guilt, Han dug in his carry bag and pulled out an apple. He leaned down from his saddle, extending it toward the boy. "Here," he said, smiling. "Try this."

The boy stumbled backward, raising his arms in defense. "No!" he screamed in a panic. "Get away!" He fell down on his backside, still screaming bloody murder.

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A thin-faced girl of indeterminate age snatched the apple out of Han's hand and raced away as if chased by demons. Han stared helplessly after her.

"Let it go, Hunts Alone," Dancer said, using Han's clan name. "Guess they've had a bad experience with horsemen. You can't save everyone, you know."

I can't save *anyone*, Han thought.

They rounded a turn, and the border fortifications came into view below—a tumbledown keep and a ragged stone wall, the gaps quilled with iron spikes and razor wire in lieu of better repair. The wall stretched across the pass, smashing up against the peaks on either side, centered on a massive stone gatehouse that arched over the road. A short line of southbound trader's wagons, pack lines, and walkers inched through the gate, while the northbound traffic passed unimpeded.

A village of sorts had sprouted around the keep like mushrooms after a summer rain, consisting of rough lean-tos, scruffy huts, tents, and canvas-topped wagons. A rudimentary corral enclosed a few spavined horses and knobble-ribbed cows.

Spots of brilliant blue clustered around the gate like a fistful of autumn asters. Bluejackets. The Queen's Guard. Apprehension slid down Han's spine like an icy finger.

Why would they be on duty at the border?

"Checking the refugees coming in, I can understand," he said, scowling. "They'd want to keep out spies and renegades. But why should they care who's *leaving* the queendom?"

Dancer looked Han up and down, biting his lower lip. "Well, obviously they're looking for someone." He paused. "Would the Queen's Guard be going to all this trouble to catch *you*?"

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Han shrugged, wanting to deny the possibility. If he was so dangerous, wouldn't they prefer he was out of the queendom rather than in?

"Seems unlikely Her Powerfulness the queen would get this worked up over a few dead Southies," he said. "Especially since the killings have stopped."

"You *did* stick a knife in her High Wizard," Dancer pointed out. "Maybe he's dead."

Right. There was that. Though Han couldn't really believe that Lord Bayar was dead. In his experience, the evil lived on while the innocent died. Still, the Bayars might have convinced the queen it was worth the extra sweat to put him in darbies.

But the Bayars want their amulet back, Han thought. Would they risk his taking by the Queen's Guard? Under torture, the history of the piece might just slip out.

Anyway, wasn't he supposed to be on the queen's side? He recalled Elena Cennestre's words the day she'd dumped the truth on him.

When you complete your training, you will come back here and use your skills on behalf of the clans and the true line of blooded queens.

Likely nobody'd told Queen Marianna. They'd be trying to keep it on the hush.

"We know they're not looking for *you*," Han said, shifting his eyes away from Dancer. "Let's split up, just to be on the safe side. You go ahead. I'll follow." That would prevent any heroics on Dancer's part if Han got taken.

Dancer greeted this suggestion with a derisive snort. "Right. Even with your hair covered, there is no way you could pass for clan once you open your mouth. Let me do the talking. Lots of

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traders pass through here. We'll be all right." Still, Han noticed that Dancer tightened the string on his bow and slid his belt-dagger into easy reach.

Han readied his own weapons, then tucked stray bits of fair hair under his hat. He should have taken the time to color it dark again, so he'd be less recognizable. Survival hadn't seemed especially important until now. Han slid his hand inside his shirt, touching his amulet. He wished for the thousandth time he knew more about how to use it. A little charmcasting might do them some good in a tight spot.

No, maybe not. Better if nobody knew Cuffs Alister, street thief and accused murderer, was suddenly a wizard.

Excruciatingly slowly, they worked their way toward the border. It seemed the guard was doing a thorough job.

When they reached the front of the line, two guards stepped out and gripped the bridles of their horses, halting them. A mounted guard with a sergeant's scarf angled his mount in front of them. He studied their faces, scowling. "Names?"

"Fire Dancer and Hunts Alone," Dancer said in Common. "We're clan traders from Marisa Pines, traveling to Ardencourt."

"Traders? Or *spies*?" the guardsman spat.

"Not spies," Dancer said. He steadied his pony, who tossed his head and rolled its eyes at the guardsman's tone. "Traders don't get into politics. It's bad for business."

"You've been profiting from the war, an' everybody knows it," the bluejacket growled, displaying the usual Vale attitude toward the clan. "What're you carrying?"

"Soap, scents, silks, leatherwork, and medicines," Dancer said, resting a proprietary hand on his saddlebags.

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That much was true. They planned to deliver those goods to a buyer in Ardencourt to help pay for their schooling and keep.

"Lessee." The guardsman unstrapped the panniers on the first pony and pawed through the goods inside. The scent of sandalwood and pine wafted up.

"What about weapons or amulets?" he demanded. "Any magical pieces?"

Dancer lifted an eyebrow. "There's no market for magical goods in Arden," he said. "The Church of Malthus forbids it. And we don't deal in weapons. Too risky."

The sergeant gazed at their faces, his brow puckered with puzzlement. Han kept his eyes fixed on the ground. "I dunno," the guardsman said. "You both got blue eyes. You don't look much like clan to me."

"We're of mixed blood," Dancer said. "Adopted into the camps as babies."

"You was stole, more like," the sergeant said. "Just like the princess heir. The Maker have mercy on her."

"What about the princess heir?" Dancer said. "We haven't heard."

"She's disappeared," the sergeant said. He seemed to be one of those people who loved sharing bad news. "Some say she run off. Me, I say there's no way she would've left on her own."

So that's it, Han thought, happying up a little. This extra care at the border had nothing at all to do with them.

But the bluejacket wasn't done with them. He looked around as if to make sure he had backup, then said, "Some say she was took by your people. By the copperheads."

"That doesn't make any sense," Dancer said. "The Princess

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Raisa's of clan blood herself by her father, and she fostered at Demonai Camp for three years."

The bluejacket snorted. "Well, she's not in the capital, they know that," he said. "She might come this way; that's why we're checking everybody who comes through. The queen is offering a big reward for anyone that finds her."

"What does she look like?" Dancer asked, like he was sniffing at that big reward.

"She's a mix-blood too," the bluejacket said, "but I hear she's pretty, just the same. She's small, with long dark hair and green eyes."

Han was ambushed by a memory of green-eyed Rebecca Morley, who'd walked into Southbridge Guardhouse and wrested three members of the Ragger street gang from Mac Gillen's hands. That description would fit Rebecca. And a thousand other girlies.

Since his life had fallen apart, Han hadn't thought of Rebecca. Much.

The sergeant finally decided he'd held them up long enough. "All right, then, go on. Better watch yourselves south of Delphi. The fighting's fierce down there."

"Thank you, Sergeant," Dancer was saying, when a new voice cut into the conversation, sharp and cold as a knife blade.

"What's this all about, Sergeant? What's the delay?"

Han looked up to see a girlie about his own age, bulling her horse through the crowd of foot travelers around the gate like she didn't care if she trampled a few.

He couldn't help staring. She looked like no girlie he'd ever seen before. Her mane of platinum hair was caught into a single

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long braid that extended to her waist, accented by a streak of red that ran the entire length. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were the color of cottonwood fluff, and her eyes a pale, porcelain blue, like a rain-washed sky. She was surrounded by a nimbus of light—evidence of unchanneled power.

She rode a gray flatlander stallion as blueblooded as she was, sitting tall in the saddle as if to extend her already considerable height. Her angular features looked familiar. It wasn't a beautiful face, but you wouldn't soon forget it. Especially when she had a scowl planted on it. Like now.

Her short jacket and divided riding skirts were made of fine goods, trimmed in leather. The wizard stoles draped over her shoulders bore the stooping falcon insignia, and a glowing amulet hung from a heavy gold chain around her neck. A falcon with a songbird in its talons.

Han shuddered, his body reacting before his slow-cranking mind. The stooping falcon. But that signia belonged to . . .

"I—I'm sorry, Lady Bayar," the sergeant stuttered, his forehead pebbled with sweat despite the cool air. "I was just questioning these traders. Making sure, my lady."

Bayar. That's who the girl reminded Han of—Micah Bayar. He'd only seen the High Wizard's son once, the day Han had taken the amulet that had changed his life forever. Who was she to Micah? She looked about the same age. Sister? Cousin?

"Take hold of your amulet," Dancer murmured to Han, sliding his hand under his deerskin jacket. "It'll draw off the power so maybe they won't notice your aura."

Han nodded, gripping the serpent flashpiece under his jacket.

"We're looking for a *girl*, you idiot," Lady Bayar was saying,

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her pale eyes flicking over Han and Dancer. "A dark, dwarfish sort of girl. Why are you wasting time on these two copperheads?" she added, using the Vale name for clanfolk.

The two guards gripping Han's and Dancer's horses hastily let go.

"Fiona. Mind what you say." Another wizard reined in behind Lady Bayar, an older boy with straw-colored hair and a body already fleshy with excess. His twin wizard stoles carried a thistle signia.

"What?" Fiona glared at him, and he squirmed like a puppy under her gaze.

He's either sweet on her or afraid of her, Han thought. Maybe both.

"Fiona, please." The young wizard cleared his throat. "I wouldn't describe the Princess Raisa as dwarfish. In fact, the princess is rather . . ."

"If not dwarfish, then what?" Fiona broke in. "Stumpy? Stunted? Scrubby?"

"Well, I . . ."

"And she is dark, is she not? Rather swarthy, in fact, due to her mixed blood. Admit it, Wil, she is." Fiona did not seem to take well to being corrected.

Han fought to keep the surprise off his face. He was no fan of the queen and her line, either, but he'd never expect to hear such talk from one of the Bayars.

Fiona rolled her eyes. "I don't know what my brother sees in her. Surely you're a more discerning judge of women." She smiled at Wil, turning on the charm, and Han could see why the wizardling was taken with her.

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Wil flushed deep pink. "I just think we should show some respect," he whispered, leaning close so the sergeant couldn't hear. "She is the heir to the Gray Wolf throne."

Dancer edged his pony forward, hoping to pass on by while the jinxflingers were embroiled in their debate. Han pressed his knees against Ragger's sides and followed after, keeping his head down, his face turned away. They were past the wizards, entering the gate, almost clean away, when . . .

"You there! Hold on."

It was Fiona Bayar. Han swore silently, then put on his street face and turned in his saddle to find her staring at him.

"Look at me, boy!" she commanded.

Han looked up, directly into her porcelain blue eyes. The amulet sizzled in his fingers, and some devil spirit made him lift his chin and say, "I'm not a boy, Lady Bayar. Not anymore."

Fiona sat frozen, staring at him, her reins clutched in one hand. The long column of her throat jumped as she swallowed. "No," she said, running her tongue over her lips. "You're not a boy. And you don't sound like a copperhead, either."

Wil reached over and touched her arm, as if trying to regain her attention. "Do you know this . . . *trader*, Fiona?" he asked, contempt trickling through his voice.

But she kept staring at Han. "You're dressed like a trader," she whispered, almost to herself. "You're in copperhead garb, yet you have an aura." She looked down at her own glowing hands, then up at him. "Blood and bones, you have an *aura*."

Han glanced down at himself, and saw, to his horror, that the magic blazing through him was excruciatingly apparent, even in the afternoon light. If anything, he was brighter than usual, power

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glittering under his skin like sunlight on water.

But the amulet was supposed to quench it, to take it up. Maybe, in times of trouble, he spouted more magic than the piece could manage.

“It’s nothing,” Dancer said quickly. “Comes of handling magical objects at the clan markets,” he said. “Sort of rubs off sometimes. It doesn’t last.”

Han blinked at his friend, impressed. Dancer had developed a talent for amusing the law, as they’d say in Ragmarket.

Dancer gripped Ragger’s bridle, trying to tug the horse forward. “Now, much as we’d love to stay and answer jinxflinger questions, we need to move along if we don’t want to sleep in the woods.”

Fiona ignored Dancer. She continued to stare at Han, eyes narrowed, head tilted. She sucked in a breath and sat up even straighter. “Take off your hat,” she commanded.

“We answer to the queen, jinxflinger. Not to you,” Dancer said. “Come *on*, Hunts Alone,” he growled.

Han kept his eyes fixed on Fiona, his hand on his amulet. His skin prickled as magic and defiance buzzed through him like brandy. Slowly, deliberately, he grasped his cap with his free hand and ripped it off, shaking his hair free. The wind pouring down through Marisa Pines Pass ruffled it, lifting it off his forehead.

“Take a message to Lord Bayar,” Han said. “Stay out of my way, or your whole family goes down.”

Fiona stared. For a moment she couldn’t seem to get any words out. Finally she croaked, “Alister. You’re Cuffs Alister. But . . . you’re a wizard. That can’t be.”

“Surprise,” Han said. Standing tall in his stirrups, he gripped

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his amulet with one hand and extended the other. His fingers twisted into a jinx as if they had a mind of their own, and magical words poured unbidden from his mouth.

The road bulged and buckled as a hedge of thorns erupted from the dirt, forming a prickled wall between Han and Dancer and the other wizards. It was chest-high on the horses in a matter of seconds.

Startled, Han ripped his hand free of the flashpiece, wiping his hand on his leggings as if he could rid it of traces of magic. His head swam, then cleared. He looked over at Dancer, who was glaring at Han like he couldn’t believe his eyes and ears.

Fiona’s tongue finally freed itself. She screamed, “It’s him! It’s Cuffs Alister! He tried to murder the High Wizard! Seize him!”

Nobody moved. The wall of thorns continued to grow, stretching spined branches into the sky. The bluejackets gawked at the trader who’d turned into a would-be murderer that pulled thorn hedges out of the air.

Dancer swung his arm in a broad arc, sending flame spiraling in all directions. The hedge smoked, then caught fire. Ragger reared, trying to shake Han off. The guardsmen flung themselves to the dirt, covering their heads, moaning in fear.

Han slammed his heels into Ragger’s sides, and the startled pony charged forward through the gate, followed closely by Dancer, flat against his pony’s back, hair flying. Ahead of them, travelers pitched themselves out of the way, diving into ditches on either side of the road. Behind them, Han could hear shouted orders and trumpets blaring.

Crossbows sounded, the guardsmen firing blindly over the gatehouse. Han pressed his head against Ragger’s neck to make a

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smaller target.

Fiona shouted, "Take him *alive*, you idiots! My father wants him alive!" After that there were no more crossbows, which was a blessing because the road between the border and Delphi was broad and gently sloping. Once their pursuers made it over or around Han's barrier, he and Dancer would make pretty targets.

Han looked back in time to see Fiona blast a ragged hole through the blazing hedge. The two wizards burst through, followed by a triple of unenthusiastic mounted guardsmen. The bluejackets likely had no desire to come up against anyone who could fling flame and thorns.

"Here they come," Han shouted, urging Ragger to greater speed.

"Guess they've decided to get in your way," Dancer called back.

Han knew Dancer would have plenty to say later. If there was a later.

The wizards were already gaining on them, eating up their lead. They'd eventually catch up, with a broad road before them and their long-legged flatland horses giving them the advantage of speed. There was no way he and Dancer could win against two better-trained wizards. Not to mention a whole triple of bluejackets.

What came over you, Alister? Han said to himself. Whatever faults he had, stupidity wasn't one of them. It might be tempting to confront Fiona Bayar, but he'd never entangle Dancer in a grudge match he was likely to lose.

Han remembered how the magic had felt coursing through him like strong drink. And like strong drink, it had made him lose

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his head. Likely it was because he didn't know what he was doing. Tightening his grip on his reins, he resisted taking hold of the amulet again.

"We got to get off this road," he shouted, spitting out dust. "Is there someplace we can turn off?"

"How should I know?" Dancer shouted back. He looked ahead, squinting against the declining sun. "It's been a while." They thundered on another half mile, and then Dancer called, "You know, there *is* a place up ahead where we might lose them."

Delphi Road followed a clear trout stream, sharing the valley it had carved through the declining Spirits to the south. Dancer looked off to the left, seeking a landmark. Han rode up beside him, trying to maintain their breakneck pace.

"Along here Kanwa Creek turns west and the road runs due south," Dancer said. "We can turn off and follow the creek and maybe lose them. It's a narrow canyon, rocky and steep. Made for ponies, not for flatlander horses. Look for a rock shaped like a sleeping bear."

The turnoff couldn't come too soon. As the sound of pursuit grew louder, Han turned his head and saw that the two wizards were now only three or four pony lengths behind them. When Fiona saw Han looking, she stood in her stirrups and dropped her reins. Fumbling at her neck, she extended her other hand.

Flame rocketed toward Dancer. Had Fiona not been on horseback, it might have struck true. At it was, it seared Wicked's shoulder. The pony screamed and veered to the left, crashing into Ragger and nearly launching all of them from the road.

Han struggled to keep his pony from going down, while Dancer wrenched Wicked's head back into the straight.

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The message was clear: Fiona Bayar wanted Han alive, but Dancer was fair game.

Han yanked his blade free, expecting to find their pursuers right on top of them. When he looked back, he was surprised to see Fiona and Wil falling behind, fighting to regain control of their rearing and plunging horses. The bluejackets bunched up behind them, trying to avoid colliding with the two wizards. It seemed their blueblood mounts weren't trained for riders launching flaming attacks.

"There it is!" Dancer pointed ahead to where a massive granite boulder bulked into the road, squeezing it from the left. It did, indeed, resemble a sleeping bear, its head resting on two massive paws. As if recognizing it as a sanctuary, Wicked surged forward, Han and Ragger following close behind.

The bluejackets and charmcasters must have got themselves sorted out, because once again Han could hear horses pounding after them.

Han and Dancer swerved around the promontory of rock, temporarily out of sight of their pursuers. Just on the other side, the ground fell away into dizzyingly steep rock terraces. Kanwa Creek plunged over a series of cascades between sheer stone walls and out of sight. The roar of falling water echoed up through the canyon.

"You mean to go down *there*?" Han looked around for other options. Ragger being his first horse, he didn't want to see him lamed his first week out. Not to mention stumbling and sending the two of them head over heels into the chasm.

Dancer urged Wicked down the first rock-strewn slope. "I've been this way before. I'd rather risk Kanwa Canyon than Lady

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Bayar."

"All right," Han said. "Ride ahead, since you can move faster. I'll catch up." Han reasoned that Fiona was less likely to fire if he brought up the rear.

The good thing was, nobody would come this way if they had any other choice. Especially on flatlander horses.

Dancer and Wicked disappeared around a curve in the canyon downslope, descending recklessly fast. Dancer and his pony had been together for two years. Han gave Ragger his head and let him follow after Wicked at his own pace, fighting the temptation to rush him forward. Han was keen to be out of sight before the wizards rounded Sleeping Bear Rock and began launching flame at them from above.

Ragger picked his way sure-footedly down the steep canyon, sending small stones sailing into the abyss below. The pony pressed so close against the stone wall that Han's right leg scraped against rock, ripping his leggings and taking off the top layer of skin.

When they reached creek level, the pony navigated a series of waterfalls, then splashed aggressively through the shallows after Dancer, eager to overtake his rival.

Han looked back and upslope. High above, he saw two riders at the top of the canyon, their wizard auras framing them against the brighter sky. They were arguing; their loud voices funneled down the canyon.

Han guessed that Fiona was insisting that they pursue Han and Dancer into the canyon, and Wil was arguing against it.

Good luck, Wil, Han thought, and heeled Ragger forward.

They descended through several more steep gorges, navigating ledges so narrow that Han felt like he was treading air. Don't look

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down, he thought, keeping his eyes fixed on the path ahead. They made frustratingly slow progress compared to what they could have done on the road.

Han looked back often, but heard and saw nothing of pursuit. After several hours they stopped in a grassy meadow to water the exhausted horses. The sun had disappeared behind the tall peaks, the gloom under the trees thickened, and it grew cooler again, despite the lower altitude. Han didn't look forward to navigating this trail in the dark.

It didn't matter. They'd crossed the border, and for now, at least, it seemed they'd lost their pursuers.

Han flopped down on his belly and cupped his hands, scooping water out of the creek to drink. The water was clear and stunningly cold.

"What came over you back there?" Dancer demanded, squatting next to him and dipping his canteen to fill it. "We were nearly clear, and then you had to ruin it. Slipping across a border unrecognized isn't exciting enough for you?"

Han wiped his mouth on his sleeve and settled back on his heels. "I don't know why I did that. I can't explain it."

"You couldn't keep your hat on?" Dancer recorked his canteen and splashed water into his face, rinsing away the road dust.

"It was like there was this backwash of power from the flash-piece," Han said. "I don't know if there's something wrong with the magic I put into it, or if it's because I don't know what I'm doing."

Demon-cursed, his mother had said. Maybe it was true.

The normally easygoing Dancer wasn't done yet. In fact, he was just getting started. "You couldn't keep your mouth shut? I'm

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calling you Glitterhair from now on. Or Talksalot."

"I'm sorry," Han said. He had nothing else to say. He couldn't blame Dancer for being angry. It had been an unnecessary, foolhardy stunt. Dancer had never seen this side of him. It was like he'd gone back to his death-wish days as streetlord of the Raggars.

"Where did you learn to fling jinxes?" Dancer persisted. "You said you didn't know anything about magic. You didn't even know you were a wizard until a couple of weeks ago. Here I've been trying to teach you what little I know, and then you go and conjure up a thorn hedge. Maybe you should be teaching me."

"I don't know how I did that," Han said. "It just kind of happened." Dancer must think he'd been holding out on him, that he didn't want to share what he knew. When Dancer said nothing, Han added, "I didn't know *you* knew how to throw flame."

"I don't," Dancer said, his voice tight with betrayal. "It just spurts out like that when I'm scared to death." He stood, smacking the dust off his leggings, and left to see to the horses.

Han pulled his amulet out of his neckline and turned it in his hands, examining it for clues. He had to learn how to control the thing. Otherwise, there was no guarantee this wouldn't happen again.

Now the Bayars knew he was a wizard, and that he was heading south. At least they wouldn't know what he was up to or where he was going. Han rather liked the notion of the Bayars wondering and worrying about where he'd surface next, and what he'd do when he did.