

The Demon King by Cinda Williams Chima

CHAPTER ONE: THE HUNT

Han Alister squatted next to the steaming mud spring, praying the thermal crust would hold his slight weight. He'd tied a bandana over his mouth and nose, but his eyes still stung and teared from the sulfur fumes that boiled upward from the bubbling ooze. He extended his digging stick toward a patch of plants with bilious green flowers at the edge of the spring. Sliding the tip under the clump, he pried it from the mud and lifted it free, dropping it into the deerskin bag that hung from his shoulder. Then, placing his feet carefully, he stood and retreated toward solid ground.

He was nearly there when one foot broke through the fragile surface and he went calf-deep in the gray, sticky, superheated mud.

"Hanalea's bloody bones!" he yelled, flinging himself backward and hoping he didn't land flat on his back in another mudpot. Or, worse, in one of the blue water springs that would boil the flesh from his bones in minutes.

Fortunately, he landed on solid earth, amid the lodgepole pines, the breath exploding from his body. Han heard Fire Dancer scrambling down the slope behind him, stifling laughter. Dancer gripped Han's wrists and hauled him to safer ground, leaning back for leverage.

"We'll change your name, Hunts Alone," Dancer said, squatting next to Han. Dancer's tawny face was solemn, the startling blue eyes widely innocent, but the corners of his mouth twitched. "How about 'Wades in the Mudpot'? 'Mudpot' for short?"

Han was not amused. Swearing, he grabbed up a handful of leaves to wipe his boot. He should have worn his beat-up old moccasins. His knee-high footwear had saved him a bad burn, but his right boot was caked with stinking mud and he knew he'd hear about it when he got home.

"Those boots were *clan made*," his mother would say. "Do you know what they *cost*?"

It didn't matter that she hadn't paid for them in the first place. Dancer's mother Willo had traded them to Han for the rare Deathmaster mushroom he'd found the previous spring. Mam hadn't been happy when he brought them home.

"*Boots*?" Mam had stared at him in disbelief. "Fancy *boots*? How long will it take you to grow out of those? You couldn't have asked for money? Grain to fill our bellies? Or firewood or warm blankets for our beds?" She'd advanced on him with the switch she always seemed to have close to hand. Han backed away from her, knowing from experience that a lifetime of hard work had given his mother a powerful arm.

She'd raised welts on his back and arms. But he kept the boots.

They were worth far more than what he'd given in trade, and he knew it. Willo had always been generous to Han and Mam and Mari, his sister, because there was no man in the house. Unless you counted Han, and most people didn't. Even though he was already sixteen and nearly grown.

Dancer brought water from Firehole spring and sloshed it over Han's slimed boot. "Why is it that only nasty plants growing in nasty places are valuable?" Dancer said.

"If they'd grow in a garden, who'd pay good money for them?" Han growled, wiping his hands on his leggings. The silver cuffs around his wrists were caked with mud as well, deeply embedded in the delicate engraving. He'd better take a brush to them before he got home or he'd hear about that too.

It was a fitting ending to a frustrating day. They'd been out since dawn, and all he had to show for it was three sulfur lilies, a large bag of cinnamon bark, some razorleaf, and a handful of common snagwort that he could pass off as maidenweed at the flatlander market. His mother's empty purse had sent him into the mountains to forage too early in the season.

"This is a waste of time," Han said, though it had been his idea in the first place. He snatched up a rock and flung it into the mudpot, where it disappeared with a viscous plop. "Let's do something else."

Dancer cocked his head, his beaded braids swinging. "What would you....?"

"Let's go hunting," Han said, touching the bow slung across his back.

Dancer frowned, thinking. "We could try Burnt Tree Meadow. The Fellsdeer are moving up from the flatlands. Bird saw them there day before yesterday."

"Let's go then." Han didn't have to think long about it. It was the hunger moon. The crocks of beans and cabbage and dried fish his mother had laid up for the long winter had evaporated. Even if he'd fancied sitting down to another meal of beans and cabbage, lately there'd been nothing but porridge. And more porridge with the odd bit of salt meat for flavor. Meat for the table would more than make up for today's meager gleanings.

They set off east, leaving the smoking springs behind. Dancer set a relentless, ground-eating pace down the valley of the Dyrnnewater. Han's bad mood began to wear away with the friction of physical exertion.

It was hard to stay angry on such a day. Signs of spring bloomed all around them. Skunk cabbages and maiden's kiss and May apples covered the ground, and Han breathed in the scent of warm earth freed from its winter covering. The Dyrnnewater frothed over stones and roared over waterfalls, fed by melting snow on the upper slopes. The day warmed as they descended, and soon Han removed his deerskin jacket and pushed his sleeves past his elbows.

Burnt Tree Meadow was the site of a recent fire. In a few short years, it would be reclaimed by forest, but for now it was a sea of tall grasses and wildflowers, studded with the standing trunks of charred lodgepole pines. Other trunks lay scattered like a giant's game of pitchsticks. Knee-high pine trees furred the ground and blackberry and bramble basked in sunlight where there had once been deep pine forest shade.

A dozen Fellsdeer stood heads down, grazing on the tender spring grasses. Their large ears flicked away insects, and their red hides shone like spots of paint against the browns and greens of the meadow.

Han's pulse accelerated. Dancer was the better archer, more patient in choosing his shots, but Han saw no reason why they shouldn't each take a deer. His always-empty stomach growled at the thought of fresh meat.

Han and Dancer circled the meadow to the downwind side, downslope from the herd. Crouching behind a large rock, Han slid his bow free and tightened the slack bowstring, trying it with his calloused thumb. The bow was new, made to match his recent growth. It was clan made, like everything in his life that married beauty and function.

Han eased to his feet and drew the bowstring back to his ear. Then paused, sniffing the air. The breeze carried the distinct scent of woodsmoke. His gaze traveled up the mountain and found a thin line of smoke cutting across the slope. He looked at Dancer and raised his eyebrows in inquiry. Dancer shrugged. The ground was soaked and the spring foliage green and lush. Nothing should burn in this season.

The deer in the meadow caught the scent, too. They raised their heads, snorting and stamping their feet nervously, the whites showing in their liquid brown eyes. Han looked up

mountain again. Now he could see orange, purple, and green flames at the base of the fire line, and the wind blowing downslope grew hot and thick with smoke.

Purple and green? Han thought. Were there plants that burned with colors like those?

The herd milled anxiously for a moment, as if not sure which way to go, then turned as one and charged straight toward them.

Han hastily raised his bow again and managed to get off a shot as the deer bounded past. He missed completely. Dancer's luck was no better.

Han sprinted after the herd, leaping over obstacles, hoping to try again, but it was no use. He caught a tantalizing glimpse of the white flags of their tails before the deer vanished into the pines. Muttering to himself, he trudged back up to where Dancer stood, staring up the mountain. The line of garish flame rolled toward them, picking up speed, leaving a charred and desolate landscape in its wake.

"What is going on?" Dancer shook his head. "There's no burns this time of year."

As they watched, the fire gathered momentum, leaping small ravines. Glittering embers landed on all sides, driven by the downslope wind. The heat seared the skin on Han's exposed face and hands. He shook ash from his hair and slapped sparks off his coat, beginning to realize their danger. "Come on. We'd better get out of the way!"

They ran across the ridge, slipping and sliding on the shale and wet leaves, knowing a fall could mean disaster. They took refuge behind a rocky prominence that pierced the thin vegetative skin of the mountain. Rabbits, foxes, and other small animals galloped past, just ahead of the flames. The fire line swept by, hissing and snapping, greedily consuming everything in its path.

And after came three riders, like shepherds driving the flames before them.

Han stared, mesmerized. They were boys no older than Han and Dancer, but they wore fine cloaks of silk and summer wool that grazed their stirrups, and long stoles glittering with exotic emblems. The horses they rode were not compact, shaggy mountain ponies, but flatlander horses, with long, delicate legs and proudly-arched necks, their saddles and bridles embellished with silver fittings. Han knew horseflesh, and these horses would cost a year's pay for a common person.

A lifetime's earnings for him.

The boys rode with a loose and easy arrogance, as if oblivious of the breathtaking landscape around them.

Dancer went still, his bronze face hardening and his blue eyes going flat and opaque. "Charmcasters," he breathed, using the clan term for wizards. "I should have known."

Charmcasters, Han thought, fear and excitement thrilling through him. He'd never seen one close up. Wizards did not consort with people like him. They lived in the elaborate palaces surrounding Fellsmarch Castle, and attended the queen at court. They served as ambassadors to foreign countries—purposefully so. Rumors of their powers of sorcery kept foreign invaders away.

The most powerful among them was named the High Wizard, advisor and magical enforcer of the queen of the Fells.

"Stay away from wizards," Mam always said. "You don't want to be noticed by such as them. Get too close, and you might get burnt alive or turned into something foul and unholy. Common folk are like dirt under their feet."

Like anything forbidden, wizards fascinated Han, but this was one rule he'd never had a chance to break. Charmcasters weren't allowed in the Spirit Mountains, except to their Council

House on Gray Lady Mountain, overlooking the Vale. Nor would they venture into Ragmarket, the gritty Fellsmarch neighborhood Han called home. If they needed something from the markets, they sent servants to purchase it.

In this way, the three peoples of the Fells achieved a tenuous peace: the wizards of the Northern Isles, the Valefolk of the valley, and upland clans.

As the riders drew closer to their hiding place, Han studied them avidly. The charmcaster in the lead had straight black hair that swept back from a widow's peak and hung to his shoulders. He wore multiple rings on his long fingers and an intricate carved pendant hung from a heavy chain around his neck. No doubt it was some kind of powerful amulet.

His stoles were emblazoned with silver falcons, claws extended in attack. Silver falcons, Han thought. That must be the emblem of his wizard house.

The other two were ginger-haired, with identical broad, flat noses and snarling fellscats on their stoles. They must be brothers or cousins, Han thought. They rode a little behind the black-haired wizard, and seemed to defer to him. They wore no amulets that Han could see.

Han would have been content to remain hidden and watch them ride on by, but Dancer had other ideas. He erupted out of the shadow of the rocks, practically under the hooves of the horses, spooking them so the three riders had to fight to keep their seats.

"I am Fire Dancer," Dancer proclaimed loudly in the Common speech, "of Marisa Pines Camp." He skipped right over the ritual welcome of the traveler and cut into the meat. "This camp demands to know who you are and what wizards are doing on Hanalea, as is forbidden by the Námning." Dancer stood tall, his hands fisted at his sides, but he seemed small next to the three strangers on their tall horses.

What's come over Dancer? Han wondered, reluctantly emerging from his hiding place to stand beside his friend. He didn't like that the charmcasters were trespassing on their hunting ground, either, but he was savvy enough not to go up against hex magic.

The black-haired boy glared down at Dancer, then flinched, his black eyes widening in surprise before he resumed his cool, disdainful expression.

Does he know Dancer? Han looked from one to the other. Dancer didn't seem to know him.

Even though Han was taller than Dancer, the wizards' gaze seemed to flow over him like water over rock, then back to his friend. Han looked down at his mudstained deerskin leggings and ragmarket shirt, envying the strangers' finery. He felt invisible. Insignificant.

Dancer wasn't cowed by charmcasters. "I asked your names," he said. He gestured toward the retreating flames. "That looks like wizard flame to me."

How does Dancer know what wizard flame looks like? Han wondered. Or is he just bluffing?

The boy with the falcon signia glanced at the others, as if debating whether to respond. Getting no help from his friends, he turned back to Dancer. "I'm Micah Bayar, of Aerie House," he said, as if his very name would put them on their knees. "We're here on the queen's orders. Queen Marianna and the Princesses Raisa and Mellony are hunting in the Vale below. We're driving the deer down to meet them."

"The Queen *ordered* you to set fire to the mountain so she could have a good day's hunting?" Dancer shook his head in disbelief.

"I said so, didn't I?" Bayar said, but something in his expression told Han he wasn't being exactly truthful.

“The deer don’t belong to the Queen,” Han said. “We’ve as much right to hunt them as she does.”

“Anyway, you’re underage,” Dancer said. “You’re not *allowed* to use magic. Nor carry an amulet.” He pointed at the jewel at Bayar’s neck.

How does Dancer know that? Han wondered. He himself knew nothing of wizard’s rules.

Dancer must’ve struck a nerve, because Bayar glared at him. “That’s *wizard* business,” the charmcaster said. “And no concern of yours.”

“Well, *Micah Jinxflinger*,” Dancer said, now resorting to the clan derogatory for wizards, “If Queen Marianna wants to hunt deer in summer, she can come up into the high country after them. As she always has.”

Bayar raised black eyebrows. “Where she can sleep on a dirt floor shoulder to shoulder with a dozen filthy *kinsmen* and go a week without a hot bath and come home stinking of woodsmoke and sweat with a case of the night itches?” He snorted with laughter, and his friends followed suit. “I don’t blame her for preferring the accommodations in the Vale.”

He doesn’t know *anything*, Han thought, thinking of the cozy lodges with their sleeping benches, the songs and stories told around the fire, the shared feasts from the common pot. So many nights he’d fallen asleep under furs and clanmade blankets with the thread of the old songs winding through his dreams. Han wasn’t clan, but he often wished he was. It was the one place he’d ever felt at home. The one place he didn’t feel like he was clinging on with his fingernails.

“Princess Raisa was fostered at Demonai Lodge for three years,” Dancer said, his chin thrust out stubbornly.

“The Princess’s clan-bred father has some archaic ideas,” Bayar replied, and his companions laughed again. “Me, I wouldn’t want to marry a girl who’d spent time in the camps. I’d be afraid she’d been ruined.”

Suddenly, Dancer’s knife was in his hand. “Repeat that, Jinxflinger?” Dancer said, his voice cold as Dyrnnewater.

Bayar jerked hard on his reins and his horse stepped back, putting more distance between him and Dancer.

“I’d say women have more to fear from charmcasters than from anyone in the camps,” Dancer went on.

His heart accelerating, Han stepped up beside Dancer and put his hand on the hilt of his own knife, careful not to get in the way of Dancer’s throwing arm. Dancer was quick on his feet and good with a blade. But a blade against magic? Even two blades?

“Relax, Mushroom Eater.” Bayar licked his lips, his eyes fixed on Dancer’s knife. “Here’s the thing. My father says that girls who go to the camps come back proud and opinionated and difficult to manage. That’s all.” He smirked, as if it was a joke they could all share.

Dancer did not smile. “Are you saying that the blooded heir to the throne of the Fells needs to be...*managed*?”

“*Dancer*,” Han said, but Dancer dismissed his warning with a shake of his head.

Han sized up the three wizards like he would his opponents in any street fight. All three carried heavy, elaborate swords that hadn’t seen much use. Get them down off their horses, there’s the thing, he thought. A quick slash to the cinchstrap would do the trick. Get in close where the swords wouldn’t do much good. Take out Bayar, and the others will cut and run.

One of the ginger-haired wizards cleared his throat nervously, as if uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. He was the elder of the two, and stocky, with plump, pale,

freckled hands that gripped his reins tightly. “Micah,” he said in the Vale dialect, nodding toward the valley below. “Come on. Let’s go. We’ll miss the hunt.”

“Hold on, Miphis.” Bayar stared down at Dancer, black eyes glittering in his pale face. “Aren’t you called Hayden?” the boy inquired in Common, using Dancer’s Vale name. “It’s just...Hayden, isn’t it? A mongrel name, since you have no father.”

Dancer stiffened. “That is my Vale name,” he said, lifting his chin defiantly. “My real name is Fire Dancer.”

“Hayden is a wizard’s name,” Bayar said, fingering the amulet around his neck. “How dare you presume...”

“I *presume* nothing,” Dancer said. “I didn’t choose it. I am clan. Why would I choose a jinxflinger name?”

Good question, Han thought, looking from one to the other. Some among the clans used flatland names in the Vale. But why would a jinxflinger like Micah Bayar know Dancer’s Vale name?

Bayar flushed red, and it took him a moment to muster a response. “So you claim, Hayden,” Bayar drawled. “Maybe you fathered yourself. Which means you and your mother...”

Dancer’s arm flashed up, but Han just managed to slam it aside as the knife left his hand and it ended, quivering, in the trunk of a tree.

Come on, Dancer, Han thought, hunching his shoulders against his friend’s furious glare. Killing a wizard friend of the queen would buy them a world of trouble.

The charmcaster Bayar sat frozen a moment, as if he couldn’t believe what had just happened. Then his face went white with anger. He extended one imperious hand toward Dancer, took hold of his amulet with the other, and began muttering a charm in the language of magic, stumbling over the words a bit.

“*Micah*,” the more slender Fellscat wizard said, nudging his horse up close. “No. It’s not worth it. The fire was one thing. If they find out we...”

“Shut up, Arkeda.” Bayar replied. “I’m going to teach this base-born mushroom-eater respect.” Looking put out that he was forced to start over, he began the charm again.

Try and be a peacemaker and see where it gets you, Han thought. He unslung his bow and nocked an arrow, aiming at Bayar’s chest. “Hey, *Micah*,” he said. “How about this? Shut it or I shoot.”

Bayar squinted at Han, as if once again surprised to see him. Perhaps realizing he would, indeed, be dead before he ever finished the hex, the wizard released his grip on the amulet and raised his hands.

At the sight of Han’s bow, Miphis and Arkeda pawed at the hilts of their swords. But Dancer nocked his own arrow, and they let go and raised their hands also.

“Smart move,” Han said, nodding. “I’m guessing jinxes are slower than arrows.”

“Even if you know what you’re doing,” Dancer added.

“You tried to murder me,” Bayar said to Dancer, as if amazed that such a thing could happen. “Do you realize who I *am*? My father is High Wizard, counselor to the queen. When he finds out what you did...”

“Why don’t you run back to Gray Lady and tell him all about it?” Dancer said, jerking his head toward the downslope trail. “Go on. You don’t belong here. Get off the mountain. Now.”

Bayar didn’t want to back off with his two friends as witnesses. “Just remember,” he said softly, fingering his amulet. “It’s a long way down the mountain. Anything can happen along the way.”

Bones, Han thought. He'd been ambushed often enough in the streets and alleyways of Fellsmarch. He knew enough about bullies to recognize the trait in Bayar. This boy would hurt them if he could, and he wouldn't play fair doing it.

Keeping his bowstring tight, Han pointed his chin at the wizard. "You. Take off your jinxpiece," he ordered. "Throw it down on the ground."

"This?" Bayar touched the evil-looking jewel that hung around his neck. When Han nodded, the other boy shook his head. "You can't be serious," he snarled, closing his fist around it. "Do you know what this is?"

"I have an idea," Han said. He gestured with the bow. "Take it off and throw it down."

Bayar sat frozen, his face going pale. "You can't *use* this, you know," he said, looking from Han to Dancer. "If you even touch it, you'll be incinerated."

"We'll take our chances," Dancer said, glancing over at Han.

The charmcaster's eyes narrowed. "You're nothing more than thieves, then," he sneered. "I should have known."

"Use your head," Han said. "What would I do with truck like that? I just don't want to have to be looking over my shoulder all the way home."

Arkeda leaned in toward Bayar and muttered in Valespeech, "Better give it to him. You *know* what they say about the mushroom eaters. They'll cut your throat and drink your blood and feed you to their wolves so no one will ever find your bones."

Miphis nodded vigorously. "Or they'll use us in *rituals*. They'll burn us alive. Sacrifice us to their *goddesses*."

Han clenched his jaw, struggling to keep the surprise and amusement off his face. It seemed the jinxflingers had their own reasons to fear the clans.

"I *can't* give it to them, you idiot," Bayar hissed. "You *know* why. If my father finds out I took it, we'll all be punished."

"I *told* you not to take it," Arkeda muttered. "I *told* you it was a bad idea. Just because you want to impress the Princess Raisa..."

"You know I wouldn't have taken it if we were allowed to have our own," Bayar said. "It was the only one I... What are *you* looking at?" he demanded, noticing Han and Dancer's interest in the conversation and maybe realizing for the first time that they understood the Flatlander language.

"I'm looking at someone who's already in trouble and getting in deeper," Han said. "Now drop the amulet."

Bayar glared at Han as if actually seeing him for the first time. "You're not even clan. Who are you?"

Han knew better than to hand his name to an enemy. "They call me Shiv," he said, fishing a name out of memory. "Streetlord of Southbridge."

"Shiv, you say." The wizard tried to stare him down, but his gaze kept sliding away. "It's strange. There's something... You seem..." His voice trailed off as if he'd lost track of the thought.

Han sighted down the shaft of his arrow, feeling sweat trickling down between his shoulder blades. If Bayar wouldn't give, he'd have to figure out what to do next. Just then, he had no clue. "I'll count to five," he said, hanging onto his street face. "Then I put an arrow through your neck. One."

With a quick, vicious movement, Bayar yanked the chain over his head and tossed the amulet on the ground. It clanked softly as it landed.

“Just try and pick it up,” the charmcaster said, leaning forward in his saddle. “I dare you.” Han looked from Bayar to the jinxpiece, unsure whether to believe him or not.

“Go on! Get out of here!” Dancer said. “I reckon you’d better think about how you’re going to put that fire out. If you don’t, I guarantee the queen *won’t* be happy, whether she asked you to start it or not.”

Bayar stared at him for a moment, lips twitching with unspoken words. Then he wrenched his mount’s head around and drove his heels into the horse’s sides. Horse and rider charged downslope as if he were, in fact, trying to catch the fire.

Arkeda stared after him, then turned to Dancer, shaking his head. “You fools! How is he supposed to put it out without the amulet?” He wheeled his horse and the two wizards followed after Bayar at a slightly less reckless pace.

“I hope he breaks his neck,” Dancer muttered, staring after the three charmcasters.

Han let out his breath and released the tension on his bow, slinging it across his shoulder. “What was all that about your Vale name? Have you met Bayar before?”

Dancer jammed his arrow back in his quiver. “Where would I meet a jinxflinger?”

“Why did he say what he did about your father?” Han persisted. “How does he know that...”

“How should I know?” Dancer said his face hard and furious. “Forget about it. Let’s go.”

Obviously Dancer didn’t want to talk about it. Fine, Han thought. He had no room to complain. He had enough secrets of his own.

“What about this thing?” Han squatted and studied the jinxpiece warily, afraid to touch it. “Do you think he was bluffing?” He looked up at Dancer, who was watching from a safe distance. “I mean, do you think they need this thing to put the fire out?”

“Just leave it,” Dancer said, shuddering. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Bayar didn’t want to give this up,” Han mused. “Must be valuable.” Han knew traders in magical pieces in Ragmarket. He’d dealt with them a time or two when he worked the street. A taking like this could pay the rent for a year.

You’re not a thief. Not any more. If he said it often enough it just might stick.

But he couldn’t leave it lay. There was something malevolent, yet fascinating about the amulet. Power emanated from it like heat from a stove on a cold day—it warmed his front, making the rest of him feel colder by comparison.

Using a stick, he lifted the amulet by its chain. It dangled, spinning hypnotically in the sunlight, a green translucent stone cunningly carved into a serpent wrapped around a staff. The staff was topped with a brilliant round-cut diamond larger than he’d ever seen, and the snake’s eyes were blood red rubies.

Han had dealt in jewelry from time to time, and he could tell the craftsmanship was exquisite and the stones were all prime quality. But the lure of the piece went beyond the sum of its parts.

“What are you going to do with *that*?” Dancer asked behind him, his voice overgrown with disapproval.

Han shrugged, still watching the spinning jewel. “I don’t know.”

Dancer shook his head. “You should pitch it in the ravine. If Bayar took the thing without permission, let him explain what happened to it.”

Han was unable to fathom pitching it away. It didn’t seem like the kind of thing you’d want to leave laying around for somebody—maybe a child from the lodges—to find.

Han fished a square of leather from his carry bag and spread it on the ground. Dropping the amulet in the center, he wrapped it carefully and tucked it in his bag. All the time wondering--how had it come to this? How had he and Dancer ended up in a standoff with wizards? What was the connection between Dancer and them?

Maybe it was just the latest in a long line of bad luck. Han always seemed to find trouble, no matter how hard he tried to avoid it.