

Chapter 28: Catherine Returns

The old woman in black came to the doors of Castle Tauna. She attempted to walk through the doors, but was pushed back by an invisible force. She did not seem surprised. “Talon!” she muttered to herself. “I might have known.” She took out her wand and uttered some incantations, and waved them at the door, but she still get not get through the invisible barrier at the doorway. “Talon’s gotten better,” she muttered to herself.

She walked around so that she was under the castle window, and then called out, “Carlyle! It’s me! Catherine! I have returned. Let me in! I want to talk to you.” She called this out repeatedly, and there were some sounds of running around by the castle windows, until finally the occupants of the Castle managed to summon King Carlyle was summoned, and put his head out through the window.

“Catherine!” he yelled, “What are you doing out there? You’re supposed to be being guarded by the witches in the mountains.”

“Well, they kept me for a good 20 years. That’s long enough, don’t you think? You didn’t expect them to hold me forever, did you? Now, Carlyle, let me back into the Castle. You and I have a lot to talk about.”

“Catherine, this castle is protected against your magic,” said King Carlyle. “Talon’s got the whole place protected by charms.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Catherine. “I actually thought something like this might happen, so I brought along a little bargaining chip.” Catherine thrust her hand into her pocket, but then the look on her face dropped when she discovered the pocket seam was undone. “Oh, drat.”

“What’s wrong?” asked King Carlyle.

“Oh, it’s my bargaining chip. I seem to have lost him. One of your boys. I shrunk him to the size of my thumb, and put him into my pocket. But he seems to have gotten lost somewhere in the forest.”

King Carlyle stared at Catherine for a second, and then called back into the Castle. “Benevois! Quick, make sure all the grandsons are okay.”

“Don’t worry, Carlyle, it wasn’t one of your grandsons. I would never harm one of my grandnephews. They’re my relatives too. It was a guest in the castle. A friend of Vivian’s son, I believe. He said his name was John..”

“John?” King Carlyle’s face looked disturbed. “I’m quite fond of that boy.”

“That’s what I thought. Now let me into the castle.”

“But you don’t have John.”

“I can find him again.”

“If you find him, Catherine, then we can talk. But you don’t have him at the moment. And he’s not from the forest. He’s from the human country of Mora. He doesn’t know how to survive on the forest floor. Especially not being 3 inches. Find him and make sure he’s safe, and if you can do that, I’ll think about letting you into the castle.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” said Catherine.

“Fine,” said King Carlyle. “I’ll let you into the Castle. But I want to see the boy safe and unharmed first. And change him back to his full size.”

Catherine took out her wand, waved it, and yelled out a spell, pointing it at King Carlyle. A blue light flew from the wand, but then bounced harmlessly off of the castle wall.

“Catherine, I already told you,” said King Carlyle, “the castle is protected from magic. Talon has put charms all around it.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I was testing to see if he remembered the windows as well.

“Catherine,” said King Carlyle carefully. “I know you’re very angry with me. I know you have good cause to be very angry with me. And perhaps deep down I always knew that this day would come. But I’m afraid the timing is not good. There’s something more important than you or me happening right now. The ancient monsters have not all died out. They are in a magical realm. And the door to that magical realm has been opened.”

“As the rightful queen of Castle Tauna, that is my problem to deal with, not yours,” said Catherine. “In fact with my abilities, I’m better equipped to handle it than you are.”

“You are no longer the rightful Queen of Castle Tauna,” said King Carlyle. “You forfeited your claim when you embraced dark magic.”

“You don’t get to decide that,” yelled back Catherine angrily.

“Catherine,” repeated King Carlyle calmly, “find John, bring him back safely to us, and I promise you, we will negotiate everything.”

And Catherine stalked off.

Back in the castle, King Carlyle stepped away from the window, and collapsed into a chair. “I don’t know what else can go wrong this week,” he said.

“What are you going to do about John?” asked Benevois.

“You heard,” said King Carlyle. “I told Catherine to go and find him.”

“We’re not going to just sit here and wait for her?” asked Benevois. “What if she can’t find him? Do we even trust her to look, or is she going to wander off back to the mountains and plot some more?”

“I think she’ll look for him,” King Carlyle said. “I made it very clear her entering the castle was conditional upon her finding John. And I know she wants to get into this castle.”

“I don’t trust her,” said Benevois. “We should be out there looking for John too.”

“We can’t,” said King Carlyle. “We’re safe from her magic inside this castle. But if we were to step outside of this castle, we’d be at her mercy. And if she finds one of my family members, she’ll try to use them as a hostage like she tried to do with John. If we were going in any other direction, we might be safe. But in order to find John, we need to go back up the same forest path that she’s gone on.”

“I wish you hadn’t sent her,” said Benevois.

“It was the best choice,” said King Carlyle. “She knows better than anyone where she met John, and where John might have hopped out of her pocket. She’s our best chance to find John again.”

“If she keeps her end of the bargain,” said Benevois. “Oh, isn’t there anyone we can send? Not one of the royal family, maybe, but somebody who can track things in the forest, and somebody who Catherine couldn’t use as a hostage against you.”

“Yes, yes dear,” said King Carlyle. “I know what you’re getting at. Fine. Send for Midor.”