

Chapter 3: Finn Departs

By noon, the three of them were exhausted. They came back to the house, went straight for the table, and collapsed into their chairs. Margaret came around and poured hot soup into their bowls.

Margaret had white hair, just like her husband Finn, but her face had aged much better than his. Her face still looked soft and beautiful. It was only her hands that showed her age. When she poured the soup out, the wrinkles and veins on her hands were visible.

After she had served them their soup and bread, Margaret sat down at the table to join in the meal.

At first, Catherine, Carlyle and Finn were too tired to talk, so they just sat and ate their food. Margaret let them eat in silence for a couple of minutes, but then she began asking questions.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

Finn grunted. "Finished. All the logs are sawed and in the cart."

"When will you leave?" Margaret said.

Finn wiped the soup off of his chin with his bread. "Brian should be coming around shortly," he said. "I'll leave when he gets here."

"And how long will you be gone this time?" Margaret asked.

"Same as usual. It should take us two days to get down into the forest. Then once we get to the forest, we'll need some time to sell the wood and buy the supplies. And then two days to get back up."

"Don't spend too long in the forest," Margaret said.

"Don't worry," Finn answered. "Believe me, Brian doesn't want to spend time in the forest any more than I do. If we're lucky, we should get all our selling and buying done in two days."

"I wish you didn't have to go," said Margaret.

"I know," said Finn. "But it can't be helped. Winter is coming, and we need the food."

"It's dangerous traveling with just the two of you," said Margaret. "You'd be safer with more people."

"If there was a bigger group, we'd have to split the money with more people. Besides, a bigger group would mean more characters to keep track of. I trust Brian, but he's one of the few people on this mountain that I do trust."

Carlyle chirped up. "I can come with you."

"No," said Finn flatly.

"But I've never seen the forest," Carlyle protested. "Besides, I'm old enough. I can help in a fight. And I can pull the cart," said Carlyle.

"Brian and I can pull the cart just fine," said Finn. "Besides, your mother and sister need you up here."

"We could all come," said Catherine.

"You'll stay here," said Finn. "And Brian's son, Alfred, will stay with you as well."

Catherine groaned loudly.

"What's wrong?" asked Finn.

"I hate it when Carlyle's friends stay over," said Catherine. "They give me a headache by talking nonsense the whole night. And Alfred is the worst of them."

"I'm sorry," said Finn, although his tone did not indicate any sorrow. "But it's already been decided. Brian can't leave his son alone up here on the mountain. It's too dangerous at night. And besides you three could use someone else in the house in case there's another attack. Alfred is old enough to help in a fight now, if he needs to."

Catherine rolled her eyes, but didn't argue further.

They all went back to eating their meal in silence for a while, and then Carlyle spoke up again. "There's one thing I've never understood," said Carlyle. "Why do the forest people always give you money in exchange for the wood? There are plenty of trees in the forest. Why don't they just cut their own lumber?"

"Because," said Finn, tearing off another mouthful of bread with his teeth, "You'd have to be crazy to kill a tree when you're down in the forest."

"What does that mean?" asked Catherine. But Finn ignored her question.

"Then why don't the forest people come up here to get their own wood?" asked Carlyle.

"Because the mountains are too dangerous for them," Finn answered. "The forest people aren't used to all the dangerous creatures. Plus they don't know the area. You remember the group that got mauled by the bears four years ago? Those were forest people. They came up here to cut down some trees, and they didn't realize how close they were to bear territory. And because they weren't used to watching for bears, they didn't notice it when the bears started to creep around them. And then when the bears did attack, they didn't know how to defend themselves."

"I remember you telling us about that," said Carlyle. "But you wouldn't let us see the bodies."

"You didn't need to see the bodies. Brian and I brought what was left of them back to the forest, and their families paid us something for our trouble. But ever since then, no forest people have come up here again."

"Somebody ought to do something about those bears," said Carlyle. "All the men on this mountain have swords. I'll bet if we all attacked at once, we could kill all the bears."

Finn sighed, and shook his head from side to side. "Carlyle, what have I always taught you?" he asked.

"I know," said Carlyle, "But--"

"Say it," Finn insisted.

"You always say that the key to surviving is avoiding any fights," said Carlyle.

"Any *unnecessary* fights," Finn corrected. "You must always avoid unnecessary fights. Otherwise you'll never survive in these mountains."

"But it is necessary," Carlyle insisted. "Every year someone we know gets killed by the bears. Why do we just sit back and let the bears pick us off one by one? We should bring the fight to them."

Finn looked around the table at Margaret, Catherine and Carlyle in exasperation, as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Then he looked back at Carlyle. "Do you think you can beat a bear in a fight? Have you ever seen a man fight an angry bear? Even with a sword, you only stand half a chance."

"I didn't say just me," said Carlyle. "But if all the men on this mountain got together--."

"The men who live on this mountain are treacherous lowlifes who would just as likely stab you in the back as fight alongside you. You would never want to go into a battle with a group like that."

"But we have to fight back somehow," said Carlyle.

"No, you don't," Finn insisted. "You can stay home and just eat your soup, and leave the bears alone. Then you have a one-hundred percent chance of surviving."

Finn was getting excited, and his voice had risen. Carlyle knew better than to argue with his father when the man was agitated, so he kept his mouth shut and went back to eating his soup.

"Finn, he's just talking," Margaret said after a bit. "You have to be more patient with him--with both of them."

"They should talk less and listen more," Finn growled. "They don't understand anything."

"Well, explain it to them then," Margaret said.

There was another minute of silence at the table, and then Finn spoke up again, this time in a much calmer voice. "Carlyle, I know you think I'm old and you think I don't understand. But I wouldn't have gotten so old if I didn't know how to survive on these mountains. How many other old men do you see on these mountain tops?"

"There's none as old as you," put in Catherine.

"Exactly," said Finn. "That should tell you something. I know how to survive. And I want you two to live to a ripe old age as well. That's why I'm always telling you what to do."

"But the bears won't leave us alone," Carlyle said.

"The bears aren't so bad," said Finn. "The problem is all the robbers that live in these mountains. The robbers steal from the bears all the time, and the bears can't distinguish between peaceful humans and the robbers. So when any human being gets too close to their territory, the bears attack."

"Well, somebody ought to do something about the robbers then," Carlyle shot back.

There was a nervous silence as both Catherine and Carlyle looked at Finn. They expected him to raise his voice again, but Finn just chuckled. **FROM HERE****

“Better men than you have tried to cleanse these mountains of the robber gangs. Many years ago, the forest people sent a whole army up into these mountains to try to get rid of these robbers. But there are too many caves and crevices in the mountains for the robbers to hide. Nobody could ever get rid of all the robbers in these mountains. And if by some miracle, somebody did manage it, more robbers would just come out of nowhere to take their places. The mountains are just too perfect a hiding place for them.”

There was a knock on the door. There was half-a-second of panic when everyone reached for their weapons, before they all remembered that Brian was coming. “That’ll be Brian,” said Finn. “Everybody relax.” Although even as he said this, Finn still kept one hand on his sword.

“It’s me, Finn,” came a voice from outside. “Open up.”

At the sound of this familiar voice, Finn took his hand off of his sword, walked over, undid the latch, and pulled open the door. Brian stepped into the doorway, and with him came a gust of cold air.

Brian had a healthy pink looking face, and a full head of brown hair, and a thick curly brown beard. With broad shoulders and a big chest, he fully looked the part of a mountain woodsman.

“Whoa! What is that smell?” Brian bellowed as he came into the house.

“You know what it is,” said Finn in a tired voice. “It’s the same smell as always--Margaret’s collection of plants and herbs.”

“Hello Margaret,” said Brian. “Glad to see you haven’t lost your touch. Still keeping your medicine cabinet fresh, I see.”

“Hello Brian,” Margaret replied. “Yes, I’m still collecting the useful herbs and roots. If you ever get sick, you know where to find me.”

Brian laughed. “I promise, you’ll be the first person I visit,” he said. “Hello Catherine. Hello Carlyle. My! You two are getting big. How old are they, Finn?”

“Fifteen this year,” said Finn.

“Getting old enough to finally help out around here,” said Brian.

“Getting old enough to bother me with a lot of questions,” said Finn grumpily. “How is Alfred doing?”

Brian stepped aside to reveal his son, who was standing behind him. “Fourteen this year. And getting strong and tough, just like his father.”

Alfred grimaced in embarrassment at this, but then he caught Carlyle’s eye and let out a small laugh as if to say, “How ridiculous that he’s embarrassing me this way” Carlyle laughed back, and pretty soon Brian joined in the laughter as well as he tousled Alfred’s black hair with his big hands. Alfred put up with the tousling briefly, and then slowly stepped out of his father’s reach.

Brian was slightly smaller than Carlyle and Catherine, but because he was constantly running around outside and getting into fights, he did indeed look strong and tough.

"Alfred, I appreciate you staying with my family," said Finn. "There shouldn't be any attacks this week. We gave them something to remember when we fought off the last attack. But just in case, Catherine and Carlyle will show you where the weapons are."

"Yes sir," said Alfred.

"Do you want any soup?" Finn asked Brian.

"No, the boy and I already ate," said Brian. "We should get going. It's past noon already."

Finn started stepping outside.

"Don't forget your coat, Father" said Carlyle, running after Finn.

"It's alright," said Finn, patting Carlyle affectionately. "It's actually not as cold at the bottom of the mountain as it is at the top. We'll be fine in the forest without coats."

"Bring it anyway," said Margaret. "Just in case."

Finn recognized the tone of voice, and knew better than to argue. "Yes dear," he said.

"I still don't understand why we can't all come," said Carlyle. "I want to see the forest."

"When you're older," said Finn.

"But why?" asked Carlyle.

"When you're older," said Finn again firmly, and he patted Carlyle on the back again. "Take care while I'm gone. You too Catherine. And take care of your mother, both of you."

"And stay inside if you can," Brian added. "Remember, watch out for the goblins."

"You be careful as well," Margaret called out to Finn and Brian.

"I'm bringing my sword, as always," Finn said.

"Don't worry, Margaret," Brian called back. "I'll look after Finn."

Finn and Brian walked to the cart. They each had a sword strapped to their back, which they then each threw onto the cart. As the two swords clattered on the cart, the difference between them was noticeable. Brian's sword was cheap and thin looking. Finn's sword was masterfully designed.

Brian noticed the difference, and looked at Finn's sword wistfully. "That's a very nice sword, Finn," he said.

"You've seen me use it before," Finn replied. "Remember last year when the ogres attacked?"

"In all the confusion of the fight, I don't remember getting a good look at it at the time," Brian said. "How does a mountain woodsman like you afford such a nice sword like that? That's not a woodsman's sword."

"No, you're right," said Finn. "That sword is a holdover from the old days. Before I became a woodsman."

"And what exactly did you do in the old days anyway," Brian asked.

"I'll tell you some other time," Finn answered. "Come on, let's go. We need to get to the first station before dark." Then they each grabbed one of the shafts, and with a great pull, set the cart in motion.

From the doorway, Carlyle, Catherine and Alfred watched their fathers pull the cart down the mountain. As they left the house, at first they traveled over a bare mountain slope that was mostly covered by stone, mountain grass, and scattered trees. But as Finn and Brian journeyed down the mountain slope, the trees became more frequent. Eventually, as the trees eventually became frequent enough to constitute a wooded area, and at the beginning of this wooded area, Finn and Brian came to the mouth of a path. This was what was referred to as the Mountain Road. Finn and Brian entered the road, and soon disappeared out of sight.

"Right," said Alfred. "Who wants to go exploring?"