

Chapter 5: Catherine Asks for Help

The night passed without incident, and in the morning Margaret served breakfast to the three teenagers.

As they sat at the table and ate their bread and stew, Margaret asked to see Alfred's arms.

"My arms don't hurt at all," Alfred said cheerfully. "Whatever you put in that salve, it really helped."

Margaret smiled. "I do what I can," she said. "I know you're feeling better, but I'm going to put on a bit more of the salve."

"Okay," Alfred said.

"And Alfred, we should get you a new shirt before you go outside. The sleeves on your shirt are ruined."

"It's okay," said Alfred. "I don't think it's going to be so cold today."

"Yes," said Margaret, "but you don't want to walk around with your bandages showing. Think of all the questions your friends will ask you."

"I don't mind," said Alfred. "I'll tell them all how you healed me."

"If you tell everyone the whole story, then you'll have to tell them how you couldn't beat Catherine in a fight," Carlyle reminded Alfred.

Alfred was silent as he contemplated this.

"I'm sure it was just a little quarrel between the two of you," said Margaret. "Quarrels like this are just best forgotten about. The rest of your friends don't need to hear about the little fight or your injury."

"I guess not," said Alfred. Alfred was momentarily quiet, as he thought about yesterday, and then he turned suddenly to Catherine. "Hey, Catherine, what happened yesterday anyway?"

Catherine just looked down at her breakfast and did not answer.

"The important thing," said Margaret in a firm voice, "is that whatever happened yesterday is over, and that your arms are healed now. Don't fight each other in the future, and it won't happen again."

"But it was so strange," said Alfred.

"Alfred, eat your breakfast," said Margaret. "And don't think about it anymore."

They finished their breakfast, and then asked permission to go out.

"Stay together, as always," said Margaret. "And remember, if you see even one goblin out, come home immediately. Don't wait for more to gather."

"We won't," said Carlyle.

"It's best if you stick with your group of friends," said Margaret. "They can tell you if they've seen any creatures out today."

"We will," said Carlyle.

They went out to try to find their friends, and they found a group of teenagers assembling on a rocky part of the mountainside near the woods. They immediately

recognized their group of friends. The boys, Lucas, Kevin, Marcus, Paul, and Shawn were grouped together talking, and not far away sat the girls, Stella, Gabrielle, Lucinda, Molly and Abby.

"Look who it is!" Shawn called out as they approached. "Where have you three been?"

"Oh, you know us," Alfred shouted back. "We've been here, there and everywhere. What are you guys up to?"

"Nothing yet," Shawn replied.

"We're thinking about starting some wrestling matches," said Kevin. "Do you want to join?"

"Not today," said Alfred. "I'm resting my arms."

Gabrielle burst out laughing when she heard this. "Resting your arms?" From the tone of Gabrielle's voice, it was evident she found this a ridiculous thing to say.

"I can rest my arms if I want to," said Alfred.

"Alfred, nobody has ever used that excuse before," Gabrielle insisted.

Alfred gave Gabrielle a shrug of the shoulders in reply, and then looked away from her to indicate that the subject was dropped.

But Lucas wouldn't let him drop it. "It's no good," said Lucas. "If you want to rest your arms, you can stay home. If you come here, you have to fight."

"Since when?" asked Alfred. "I can rest if I want to."

"Go and keep the old women company!" spat out Lucas, and he advanced toward Alfred. But before he got near Alfred, Carlyle launched himself at Lucas and tackled him around the waist. Lucas was knocked off of his feet, but even as he fell backwards, he started swinging his fists and hitting Carlyle. The two of them landed on the rocky ground, with Carlyle on top. Carlyle started immediately swinging his fists at Lucas's face. Carlyle was able to land a couple of good blows before Lucas brought his feet up against Carlyle's chest, and used his legs to push Carlyle back. In the brief moment that Carlyle was pushed backwards, Lucas leapt to his feet. Both Carlyle and Lucas looked at each other for a brief moment, and then they rushed forward to fight again.

By this time, a circle had formed around the two combatants, and everyone was cheering and yelling advice.

Molly was the first one to notice someone was missing. "Wait a minute," she said. "Where did Catherine go? Did she disappear again?"

As soon as the fighting had started, Catherine had stepped into the trees and disappeared.

Catherine didn't even glance around to make sure no one was looking at her. She knew that at the beginning of a fight, everyone's eyes would be drawn to the combatants.

None of them had any authority over her, but there was a standard rule in the mountains against wandering off by yourself. They would certainly have tried to stop her, if any of them had noticed.

Although Catherine and her family lived near the tree line, there were still large parts of the mountainside that were covered with woods. At this elevation, the woods were mostly pine trees. They gave off a sharp piney smell that hung on the cold mountain air. There was no clear path through the trees in this part of the mountain, so Catherine made her way as best she could. Sometimes she headed down the mountain slightly, but mostly she headed east. She had been this way a few times before, so she had a vague idea of where she was going.

Catherine, of course, knew very well the dangers of wandering around in the mountains. People who got separated from their group were vulnerable to getting captured or eaten. A few years ago, a member of their group, a boy named Jack, had gone for a walk by himself, and had never come back. But at the moment, Catherine wanted answers more than she was worried about the danger.

And it wasn't long before the danger came. At first, it was just a sense that something somewhere in the woods was moving. Then after a while Catherine thought she saw little glimpses of movement off in the distance. And eventually, she realized that a pack of wolves was tracking her movement.

Even though Catherine had known this mountain was dangerous, the realization that the wolves were closing in on her still gave her a sinking feeling in her stomach. Despite the cold, her forehead started to sweat. But she kept walking steadily. She didn't want to show that she was afraid.

As she walked, Catherine began to scan the ground for anything that she could use. Eventually she saw a large branch lying on the ground. She picked it up. It wasn't much, but any weapon would be better than nothing.

Catherine kept walking. The wolves kept getting closer and closer. They were closing in. Soon, she felt their presence on all sides. One of them stood directly in front of her. It had bright white fur, and red eyes. It bared its teeth and growled. "What's a little girl like you doing all alone in these woods?" it said.

"Walking peacefully, and troubling no one," Catherine answered. Her heart was beating fast, but she tried to hide her fear.

"You are troubling us," the white wolf answered. "These are our woods. Anyone who enters must pay a price."

"And we are very hungry today," came the voice of another wolf behind Catherine.

Catherine raised her hand and held the branch up.

“Do you expect to scare us away with that?” asked the white wolf. “We’ll tear your arm off before you can strike a single blow.” The wolf spoke in a growly tone, and Catherine shivered when she heard the menace in its voice. She felt the shiver travel down her spine, and up into her arms. And then, the shiver passed from her arms into her hands, and from her hand into the branch, and then, with a sudden popping noise, the branch burst into flame.

The wolves were startled, and every one of them jumped back suddenly. Catherine was equally startled, and she almost dropped the branch out of surprise. But somehow, she retained the presence of mind to keep holding on to it. She didn’t know what exactly had happened, but she knew that this was the same power that had hurt Alfred yesterday. Something was happening to her that she couldn’t control, and it scared her. Her heart beat even faster. And as her heart beat faster, the energy flowed throughout her body, and she could feel even more of it leaving her body and going into the branch. The fire grew bigger, until it engulfed the whole branch. The flames shot up into the air. It seemed strange that one branch could produce so much fire. And yet, even more strangely, Catherine’s hand was not hurt by the fire, even though it was also covered in the flames.

The wolves were now cowering before her, but the white wolf slunk cautiously back up to Catherine. “Are you one of them?” he asked. “We thought we knew all of them, but we have not seen you before.”

“I want to join them,” said Catherine.

This answer seemed to confuse the wolves. They looked at each other, and then the white wolf tried to clarify with a second question. “Are you under their protection?” he asked.

“I journey through these woods with their permission,” said Catherine. “I am under my own protection.”

It was a small lie, but it did the trick nicely. The wolves bowed their heads toward the ground. Their tails were tucked between their legs. “You should have told us,” said the white wolf, but now his tone was conciliatory, not accusatory. “We would never attack one of them.”

“We will not trouble you again,” said another wolf.

And the wolves scattered.

Catherine stood frozen, still holding the flaming branch, until the wolves had disappeared out of sight. Only then did she feel the relief wash over her.

But what then to do about the flaming branch? Catherine tried to will the fire to go out, but it would not. Apparently she had the power to start the fire, but not to put it out. Eventually she dropped the branch on the ground, and was only able to extinguish the flame by covering it with dirt.

Catherine's thoughts returned to the small lie she had told about permission. In truth, she did not have permission, she only had toleration. That is, they knew she had come before, and they had not explicitly forbidden her from coming again.

The last time she had come, they had seen her. Catherine had been too afraid to come forward at first, and had been hiding behind the trees. But one of them had seen Catherine, and had made eye-contact with her right before they all went back into their cave. Catherine had rushed forward once she had realized they were all going inside, but it had been too late. They had all disappeared into their cave, and Catherine knew that it would be foolish, perilous really, to go into their cave without being invited. So she had waited outside for them to come out again. She had waited several hours, but they hadn't come back outside. And then eventually Catherine had to leave and return home. It would have been fatal to have been caught outside after sunset.

This time, however Catherine promised herself that no matter what happened, she would talk to them. She had to know. She couldn't handle not knowing any longer.

The path to their cave was a little bit tricky. It was on another slope on the mountain range, so to get to it, Catherine had to go down the slope for a while, until she reached one of the troughs and the mountain began to rise again. Then she walked up the woods on the other side.

As Catherine walked up the mountain slope, she came upon a bobcat that was just about to devour a raven. Catherine didn't know how the bobcat had caught the raven, but she guessed it had snuck up and pounced on the poor bird when it wasn't looking. The bobcat had pinned the raven's wings to the ground with its claws, and it was about to chomp down on the bird's head.

Catherine knew that she shouldn't get involved. Finn's number one rule was not to get involved in anything in the mountains that didn't immediately concern you. But she couldn't stand idly by and watch the bird be killed. She ran up and kicked the bobcat.

The bobcat snarled as it was lifted into the air by Catherine's boots. Once it landed, it regarded Catherine furiously. "Who are you?" it demanded.

"Leave the birds alone," said Catherine. "Find some other food."

The bobcat was one of the smaller varieties. It was just a little bigger than a typical house cat, but it still hissed, and ran forward as if it were going to attack. Even though it was small, its sharp teeth and claws could have done Catherine some damage except that the raven flew over and started pecking the bobcat on the top of its head. The bobcat snarled again and turned around as it tried to catch the raven, but the raven kept just out of reach of the cat. Finally, the cat gave up and ran away.

The raven then flew to a tree branch nearby and looked at Catherine curiously. "Why did you save me?" he asked.

"I didn't want to see you get eaten," Catherine said.

"But no one in the mountains ever bothers with helping others," the bird. "Why does it concern you?"

Catherine shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I just felt sorry for you."

The bird bowed its head in gratitude. "My name," it said, "is Branoc. You have earned my eternal thanks. If there's ever anything I can do for you, just whistle for me." Branoc whistled a little tune. "Can you remember it?"

Catherine whistled the tune back.

"Good," said the raven. "Whistle that song whenever you need my help. I fly all around these mountains, and I hear and see many things. If you whistle long and loud enough, I or my children will be sure to hear it."

And then the bird flew away.

Catherine continued to climb up the mountainside, until she got close to where the cave was hidden.

The closer she got to their cave, the thicker the trees were. There were trees, but there was also a lot of other foliage. There were leafy green trees that obscured the sun, and green vines that hung everywhere. No other place in the mountains was like this, and Catherine wasn't even sure this kind of growth was natural at this altitude. But no one expected things to be natural here.

Several ravens cawed from the trees. There was a hissing sound from the ground, and Catherine noticed two snakes slithering across her path. Snakes were definitely unusual this high up in the mountains, but Catherine wasn't surprised.

And as she got closer, she saw one of them sitting outside the cave. It was the same woman who had seen Catherine before--a pretty woman with long black hair, and wearing a simple black dress. She had a basket with her, and she was filling the basket up with roots. She sang to herself as she gathered the roots. She had a pretty voice, but it was a haunting eerie melody that she sang. Catherine broke into a run, worried that if she waited, she might miss her chance again.

The woman heard Catherine running towards her, and looked up. When she saw Catherine, she brushed the dirt off of her hands, and stood up. "You've come here twice now," she said to Catherine. "Thrice will not be forgiven. Go away, and be not so foolish as to place yourself in danger again."

But the woman's words barely registered to Catherine. Catherine had rehearsed in her head so many times what she would say that now it just came babbling out. "I have come to ask for aid," Catherine began.

The woman stopped her abruptly. "Aid will not be given. We do not use our powers to solve the insignificant problems of the common mountain folk. If we gave aid to everyone who approached us, there would be no end to the disturbance."

"Then give me your counsel, and I will not ask for your aid," Catherine pleaded.

"Very well. You may ask me for advice this once, but then you must never return here."

"The past year, I have felt the growth of something inside me which is not part of my physical body," Catherine began. "It's some sort of energy that I can't control. And now I can no longer contain it."

The woman smiled grimly. "I see," she said. "So you think you're one of us?"

"This is what I want to be advised on," said Catherine. "For I am completely ignorant of what is happening to me. If I am one of you, how would I know?"

"If you were one of us, you would know from your parents. Magical abilities are always inherited. They never spring out of nowhere. Do either of your parents have magical abilities?"

"I don't think so. But there are many things they never tell me."

"They don't have to tell you. You would have seen it. You would have seen something. It cannot be contained. If magic isn't used, then it will leak out in unexpected ways."

"Yes," Catherine said excitedly. "Yes, that's what's been happening to me!"

"Your parents," the woman insisted. "Have you ever seen them do anything magical?"

"No. I--, wait, let me think." Catherine had never thought of her parents as magical, but now she searched her memory. Had she missed something? Had there been unusual events that might have been magic?

"Think particularly of your mother," said the woman. "It's usually passed from mother to daughter."

"I don't know. Everyone else on the mountain thinks my parents are very strange. They're the only ones who can read. And my mother is very good at making medicines. She understands things about herbs and roots and leaves that no one else does. She can make salves and draughts that can heal almost anything."

"Interesting," the woman said slowly. "So you think she's using magic to make her draughts?"

"It had never occurred to me," Catherine replied. "Until just now."

"It's possible," said the woman. "If her draughts and salves have a healing power that is not natural, she could be making them with magic. But it's also possible that she is just very learned in the art of healing."

"Who could she have learned it from?" Catherine said. "Nobody else in these mountains knows anything?"

The woman shrugged. "Why have you come here, at great peril to yourself, to ask me questions which you should be asking your own mother?"

"Can you help me?" asked Catherine. "I want to be able to control it. Or better yet, to be rid of it."

"If you do have it, you cannot get rid of it."

"Then teach me how to control it."

"I've already told you that aid will not be given. We do not train apprentices here. Only fully mature witches, who have already learned their craft, may join us."

"But how can I learn?"

"To learn, you must be trained. But it will not be from one of us. You must find your own teacher. In most cases, the teacher is a relative. If you have the ability, there must be someone in your family who can train you. If there is no one in your family, then you do not have the ability."

"Is there no other test?" asked Catherine. "Can't you use a spell to check and see whether or not I have the ability?"

The woman gave her another sad smile. "I already told you, we don't do magic on command. It would set a bad precedent if the mountain folk found out. And besides, what good would it do for you to know? You would still need to be taught how to control it. What you need to do is to talk to your parents. That is what you should have done before coming here and bothering me."

Catherine nodded meekly. She very much doubted that her parents would tell her anything, but she also realized that at this point in the conversation, it would be no use to argue with the witch. She didn't seem to understand, and she definitely didn't seem to care.

"Do not forget that it is forbidden for ordinary humans to approach the witch's coven," the woman continued. "You have been forgiven these two times now. I repeat, a third time will not be forgiven."

And Catherine realized that she was being dismissed. "I understand," she said bitterly, she turned to go. "Don't worry. You won't see me again."