

THE MONSTER THAT SWALLOWED THE MOON

by Renata Hopkins

Once upon a time, there lived a hero by the name of Finch. Finch wasn't a super-hero kind of hero, with muscles on muscles. Finch was more the everyday kind – the sort that does all they can and hopes it will be enough.

Finch lived with their mother and father on a small farm beneath a high mountain. The sun shone. The river ran clean and sweet. Life was good ... until it was not.

One fateful day, a cloud moved across the sky and blocked the sun. Then the river turned murky and sour before drying up altogether. Without water, the crops withered, and hunger filled every belly. Worst of all, Finch's mother became ill. Though her husband and child nursed her with care, she grew weaker by the day.

"Someone needs to find answers," Finch declared, "and I think that someone should be me." Early the next morning, they left a note and were gone before they could change their mind.





Before long, Finch's stomach was rumbling. They found a bush with small berries and were picking them when they heard a noise. Finch followed the sound and came upon a bird caught in a snare. The bird flapped and flailed, trying to escape.

"Be still," whispered Finch. "I mean you no harm." They gently untangled the bird from the trap, but it didn't fly away. Hoping food might revive it, Finch held out the berries.

The bird took one, two, three tiny pecks. "Thank you," it said.

Finch's mouth fell open.

The bird blinked its beady eyes. "Are you hoping to catch a fly?"

Finch shut their mouth, then opened it again. "Forgive me," they said.

"I've never met a talking bird."

"The world is full of mysteries," the bird replied.

Finch agreed. "In fact, I am hoping to solve one," they said. Then they explained their plan to start by climbing the mountain.

"Turn back," said the bird. "Your quest is certain death!" The bird told Finch that a monster lived on the mountain's peak – a dragon of endless greed. "It has dammed the mountain lake that fed your river. It cannot bear to share a single drop."

"How can I defeat this monster?" Finch said.

"Don't ask me," replied the bird. "I may be magic, but I can't see the future."

Finch thought of Mother, lying ill, and of Father, half-sick with worry. "Then I will do what I can and hope it's enough," they said before bowing politely and turning to go.

"Wait!" cried the bird. "You came to my aid. Now I shall help you."

The bird flew to a nearby tree. It returned with a green acorn, which it dropped into Finch's hand. Next, it pulled a feather from its wing and placed it beside the acorn. Finally, it flew to a wild rose bush and picked a thorn.

"Whenever the way is hard, speak the following words," the bird advised. "Tiny treasures, hear my plea. Show me all that you can be."

Finch thanked the bird, although they did not see how any of these small things could ever help.

"Size is not power," said the bird, as if reading Finch's mind.

"Remember that, and you might surprise yourself."

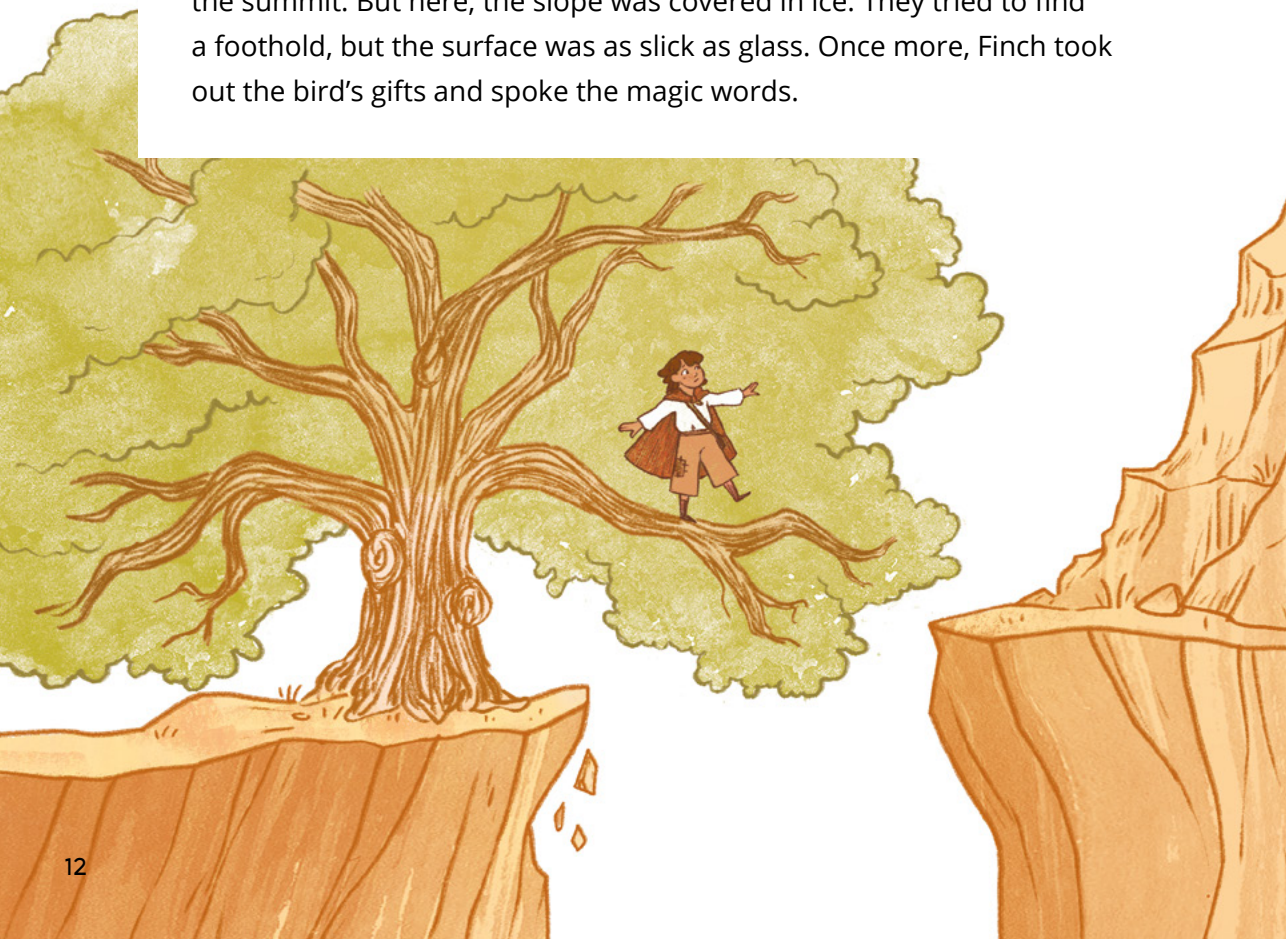
With a flash of wings, the bird was gone.



At midday, Finch reached the foot of the mountain. A wide chasm had been gouged in the earth to prevent people from travelling further. "That chasm is so wide," said Finch, "and so deep. I can't possibly get across." Then they remembered the bird's advice. They took the three gifts from their pocket and spoke the magic words. "Tiny treasures, hear my plea. Show me all that you can be."

The acorn quivered. It rolled off Finch's hand and burrowed into the ground. Instantly, a green shoot unfurled – and in the blink of an eye, the shoot grew from a seedling, to a sapling, to a mighty oak. One branch stretched right across the chasm. Finch climbed the trunk and teetered across. On the other side, the branch lowered them safely to the ground. Finch gave thanks to the magic oak and began to follow the mountain path.

Sure-footed as a mountain goat, it wasn't long before Finch neared the summit. But here, the slope was covered in ice. They tried to find a foothold, but the surface was as slick as glass. Once more, Finch took out the bird's gifts and spoke the magic words.



This time, the feather quivered. The sharp quill jabbed Finch's wrist. "Ow!" they shouted. Immediately, a second feather appeared beside the first – then another and another. The feathers spread until they reached Finch's shoulders, then they continued down their other arm. In moments, Finch had two fine wings.

Finch soared up the glittering wall of ice. "I'm flying!" they sang, looping and swooping. Overcome with wonder, they did not see the mountain moving. They did not see a fearsome head rise up, glaring with blood-red eyes – but when the giant mouth belched fire, Finch saw their magic feathers singe and shrivel. They saw the sharp rocks that surrounded the edge of a lake far, far below. Then they fell ... and were caught in a giant claw.

"Well, well," rasped the dragon.
"What have we here?"
"My n-n-name is Finch."
"Wrong," growled the monster.
"Your name is Dinner."

Finch tried to reach the last gift in their pocket, but their arms were pinned tight. As they struggled, the dragon's mouth opened wide. Poor Finch didn't want those sharp teeth to be the last thing they saw. Looking away, they glimpsed the round moon, reflected on the lake's surface. It gave them an idea.



"Wait!" they shouted. "I'm looking for the most fearsome dragon alive. Can you tell me where to find them?"

"Right here!" roared the dragon.

"But that cannot be," Finch cried. "Such a dragon wouldn't bother with a tiny morsel like me. Why, I imagine a truly fearsome dragon could swallow something truly ginormous."

"Name it!" bellowed the dragon, "and I shall prove my power."

"Could you swallow that moon, swimming in the lake?"

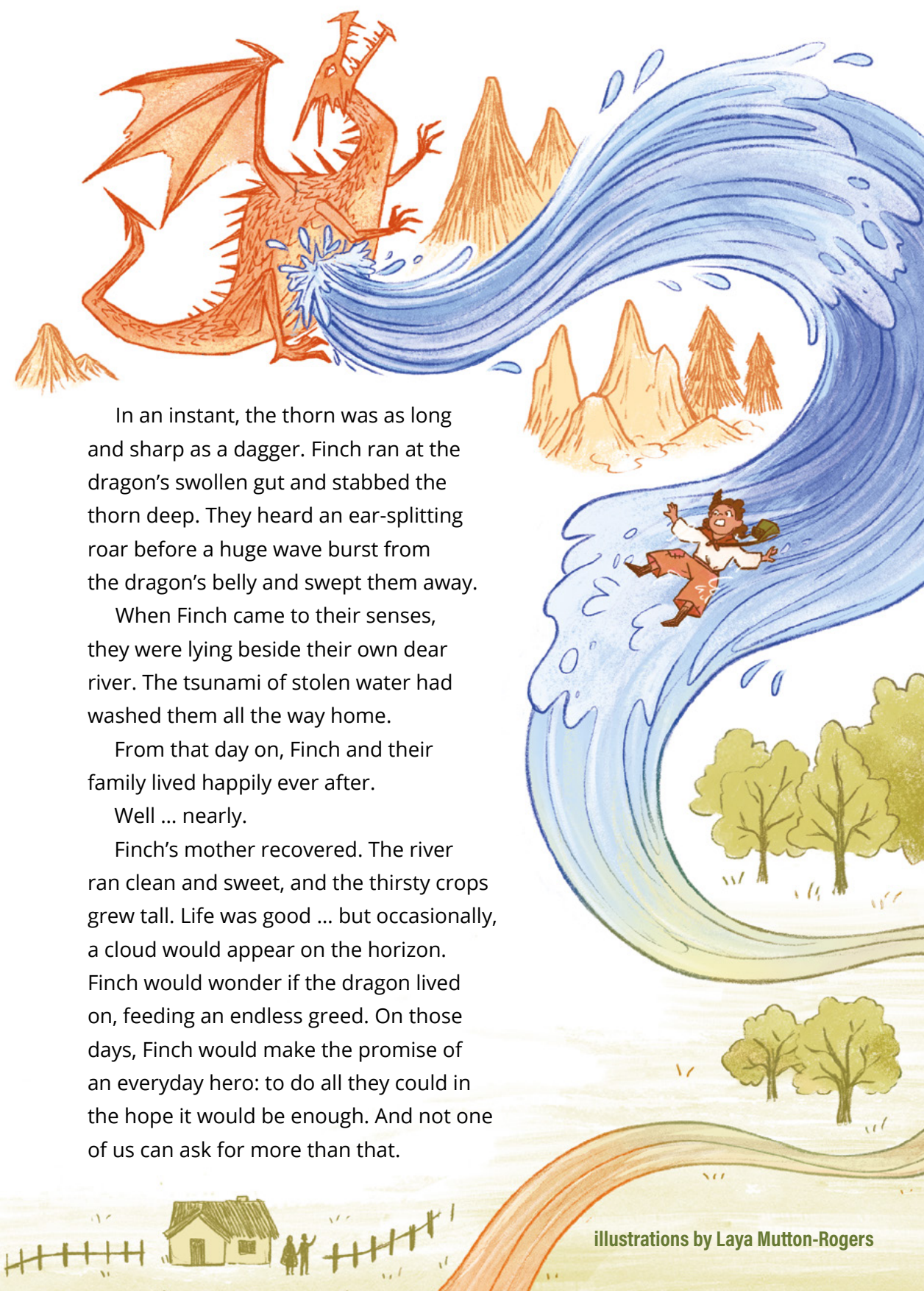
"Watch me." Gripping Finch tight, the dragon bent its snout to the moon's reflection. It took huge, gurgling gulps, only pausing for breath when half of the lake was gone.

"Good try," Finch said, pityingly. "I suppose the moon cannot be devoured, even by you."

The dragon saw the moon floating unchanged on the lake. It roared with fury and began, once more, to drink. The water sank. The greedy creature's belly swelled. When the lake was almost gone, it paused again.

"So close!" Finch said. "But alas."

Looking down, the dragon saw the moon's reflection, whole and round in the small puddle. As it writhed with rage, it loosened its grip. Sliding to the ground, Finch pulled the thorn from their pocket. "Tiny treasures, hear my plea. Show me all that you can be."



In an instant, the thorn was as long and sharp as a dagger. Finch ran at the dragon's swollen gut and stabbed the thorn deep. They heard an ear-splitting roar before a huge wave burst from the dragon's belly and swept them away.

When Finch came to their senses, they were lying beside their own dear river. The tsunami of stolen water had washed them all the way home.

From that day on, Finch and their family lived happily ever after.

Well ... nearly.

Finch's mother recovered. The river ran clean and sweet, and the thirsty crops grew tall. Life was good ... but occasionally, a cloud would appear on the horizon. Finch would wonder if the dragon lived on, feeding an endless greed. On those days, Finch would make the promise of an everyday hero: to do all they could in the hope it would be enough. And not one of us can ask for more than that.

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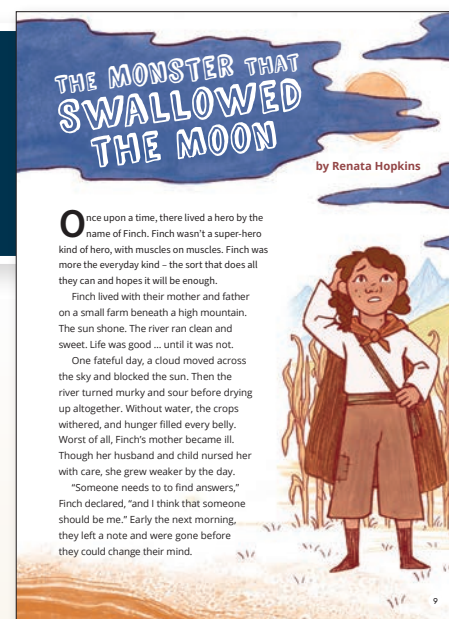
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