



**TALES  
OF A  
MINSTREL**

**TALA BAR**

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To my editor and publisher, Mark Givens, who had first published some of my stories in his online magazine MungBeing, and now is producing this book; without him I would not have been able to make the product of my mind presentable.

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## **DRAGON'S FLARE**

"I don't believe in dragons!" cried a young man of the audience, after the minstrel had finished his tale.

Finbar laughed, wryly, "Neither do I, really. It's just a tale, my young friend. You should enjoy hearing it, not necessarily believe in it." A few minutes later he followed his hostess to her house, where he would spend the night before continuing on his way.

The morning lighted on a pleasant autumn day, and he was all set to travel the short, day trip to the next village. Finbar was in a good mood, and nothing was going to disturb it for him! As relations between the two villages were cordial, there was a clear path to walk on. The area was hilly and slightly rocky, with a few trees growing sparsely here and there, their leaves getting colorful red, brown and yellow before falling; the grass underfoot was yellowing as well, after a relatively dry summer.

The minstrel was whistling to himself as he walked, his sack on his back and his coat on top of it, his long staff in his hand, being sometimes used to lean on, but now he waved it in the air in rhythm to the tune he was whistling. He was looking around him gaily and curiously, when he suddenly stopped. Up above, at the top of one hill higher than others, a strange rock reared its oddly shaped form. It was quite uneven, serrated with protrusions here and there, giving the overall impression of the head of a dragon...

Dragon! Finbar inhaled, closed his eyes then opened them and looked again. It really looked like a dragon, though he was sure he had never seen a dragon in his life. Nor, as he assured that young man in the village, did he really believe in their existence. But here Finbar felt the need to be a little careful. He indeed had encountered some strange creatures on his roaming ways that he hardly believed existed outside his own tales and songs. Now, dragons, surely...

By now, the thing's shape had changed. It moved, and it grew taller, as if the dragon was standing up; a pair of enormous wings appeared on both sides of the strange head, moving and flapping with a great noise. The rocky creature then took off, flew up and circled a few times, then started going down – down – getting closer and closer to Finbar and becoming huge in the process.

The Minstrel was standing, nailed to the ground, unable to move. The dragon hovered for a few minutes above his head as if studying his appearance; then, slowly and gradually, it folded its wings and landed, right beside Finbar. The Minstrel, who had held his breath until then, emitted a long breath and breathed in again, deeply.

“So, you are Finbar,” he heard a rumbling voice emitted from the direction of the dragon.

He was now forced to look at the monster, just to be polite. It was so big that Finbar was unable to grasp its whole figure at once. It was certainly bigger than the largest animal Finbar had ever seen, perhaps twice as high, much wider and very long between the tip of its head and the end of its tail. The latter was moving restlessly to and fro, giving the minstrel the feeling of immediate danger and he tried to move away from it. In these few moments Finbar had a chance to look at the dragon's appearance, and was amazed to notice that, though it was scaly according to the best of stories, its scales, which looked as if they were made of copper, did not lie flat but were standing on edge, seemingly bristling. Each of these coppery bristles reflected the low rays of the rising sun, and Finbar was not sure if it made the dragon more or less frightening. It certainly gave it a look of unexpected, bizarre beauty. In addition, from among the spiky scales on its head shone a pair of the clearest green eyes he had ever seen. They reminded him of a woman he had met some time ago, in very different circumstances, which he could not recall at that moment.

The Minstrel felt the need to be polite, at least for the purpose of averting danger, so he asked in his gentlest voice, "Did you speak?"

"I was just making our acquaintance," the rumbling voice resumed, and the minstrel noticed a light orange-tinted smoke flaring out of the monster's nostrils.

'It is breathing fire,' Finbar thought, fleetingly, his heart racing, and answered in a trembling voice, "Yes, I am Finbar; and you are?"

"We'll leave that for later. Right now, I have come to help you in your coming trouble."

"What trouble?" The idea made Finbar less aware of the danger emanating to him from the dragon itself.

“Here it comes. Just step behind me and you’ll be all right.”

“Why should I step behind you when I see nothing in front of us?” Finbar resisted the suggestion. But then, he saw it too. From behind a hilly fold in the ground, a row of flickering spear points appeared. Behind them, rose helmets that shone in the sun, and soon a whole body of marching soldiers were seen, advancing right on Finbar and the dragon. The beast spread its wings and rose in the air, looking like a mass of shining copper points.

“Don’t worry, I’m here with you!” the rumbling voice sounded like drums in the minstrel’s ears, as the body diminished in size. Finbar turned his eyes from the dragon toward the approaching soldiers who, in quite a short time, stood before him.

“Hey, man, what are you doing here, all on your own? Aren’t you afraid? There is a war going on, and you are right in the middle it!” A man addressed him, a big body mass, heavy and strong, a head taller than Finbar. This must have been the commander who, instead of a spear, was carrying a large club, with a short sword hanging from his belt. Finbar had met military men before, as individuals, but never in such threatening circumstances.

“I haven’t heard of any war,” Finbar answered. As a wandering minstrel, he knew his way around people and had never been afraid even of the strongest and most violent of them. But he had never met them in such a mass that made them look like an enormous monster, no less intimidating than the dragon. He lifted his eyes for a second to see where the creature was.

“Some baron is going to war, and you should join one side or the other to keep safe, and not find yourself between two warring armies.”

“But I am a minstrel!” he protested. “I wander about and do not belong to any baron, nor am I interested in fighting.”

The commander laughed, with his men joining him in a roar. “Interested? Who is asking you? You’re coming with us, to become one of us and fight for our baron, and if you do not come willingly, you’ll come by force.” He signed to the men, and two of them stepped forward. “Take him!”

They just stretched their arms at the minstrel, as a great roar sounded from above, and a mass of coppery spikes fell on the men. Finbar could not say they were frightened away, because a shower of spears flew at the dragon. But the dragon shook these off and started spewing flames, scorching the soldiers. They were lucky to be wearing helmets, Finbar thought, before he felt arms seizing him just the same, using his body as protection against the monster. But the dragon waved his enormous wings, and his spiky scales hit at the men, forcing them to drop the minstrel and scatter away. The dragon roared and rumbled again, throwing flames after the escaping soldiers, until none of them were left around. Then the monster lifted and was gone, and for a few moments Finbar was alone among the rocky hills.

He shut his eyes for a moment and fell to the ground, catching his breath. “Did you get a good fright, then?” he heard a laughing, clear voice that did not belong to the scene he had just experienced. He opened his eyes and immediately rose to his feet.

“Where did you spring from?” He asked the lovely woman standing before him. She was dressed in a copper armor made of spiky scales, and under her copper helmet, from among a bunch of coppery curls shone the loveliest pair of green eyes he had ever seen...

“But you must know me as I have just saved you from a fate worse than death,” she laughed.

“Worse than death... Well, I wouldn’t argue, but thank you all the same. Still – what about the dragon?”

“Well, it’s useful, don’t you think? I could not scare them away in this form, could I?”

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