

FINN
AND THE
CLOUD
EATER

NATHAN MICHAEL MILLER



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Finn and the Cloud Eater

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Design and content layout by Houseal Creative
Edited by Rivers Barber

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FINN DISOBEYS

“I will tell you about giants, my sons,” said Grandfather. His voice was as old as river stones, though not as smooth.

Finn and his father and his father’s father were sitting on the porch of their little cottage, watching the sunset. They lived in a small kingdom called Loft that was high up in the mountains, and their family had been shepherds as long as anyone could remember.

Finn tore his eyes from the scattered pink and orange clouds in the sky and looked at Grandfather.

Grandfather did not speak much these days—so Finn hung on to his every word.

“Giants are nasty creatures,” said Grandfather. “They are strange, too. Clever, yet narrow-minded. Powerful, yet petty.”

“Have you ever seen one?” said Finn.

“I believe I have,” said Grandfather. “From far away.”

“How tall was it?” asked Finn.

“Taller than any tree I’ve ever seen,” said Grandfather.

Finn shivered, though he was not cold.

“Giants live in many places,” said Grandfather. “They live in mountains. Hills. Lakes. Forests. Some people say they *are* the lakes and mountains.” He rocked in his chair for a moment, and Finn and Father waited for him to speak again.

When he did not, Father scratched his head and cleared his throat. “There are many stories of such creatures, it is true,” Father said in his low voice, which always reminded Finn of the rumble of heavy wagons. “Why do you tell us this now? What brought it to your mind?”

Grandfather was silent for so long that Finn thought he had drifted to sleep, but his eyes were still wide open and reflected the red sunset.

“I was troubled by dreams,” said Grandfather at last. “Strange dreams. Dreams about the Scáthán.¹ I felt I needed to warn you about the dangers of giants. Be careful, my sons, and do not trespass on their territory.”

1 Pronounced ‘SKA-han.’

“The Scáthán? That’s the lake just beyond our fields, right?” said Finn. “We never bring our sheep to drink there. I’ve always wondered why.”

“That’s right,” said Father. He turned in his chair and looked right into Finn’s eyes. “I have never liked the feel of the lake myself. That is why I always tell you not to go to the Scáthán. No swimming. No playing in the water. No skipping rocks.” Father ruffled Finn’s hair.

“Yes sir,” said Finn. And that was all they said about giants.

Finn had a hard time falling asleep that night, thinking about the forbidden lake. When he did, giants taller than trees filled his dreams.

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The next day, as they were letting the sheep out of the barn, Finn offered to take the sheep to the meadow to graze.

“You may,” said Father. “I must mend our flock’s shelter. It was damaged by the wind last night.” He looked deep into Finn’s eyes when he said this. “A shepherd tends to his flock, my son. You must take this job very seriously. Keep your eye on your flock, and do not wander off.”

Finn swallowed. “Yes sir,” he said.

He hoped his voice sounded normal. He hoped Father did not suspect what he was about to do.

Finn led the sheep to the farthest field. He chose this field for two reasons. The first was that it was out of sight from the house. Father, working on the shelter, would not see him; nor would Grandfather. The second reason Finn chose this field was that it was close to the Scáthán.

He watched the flock settle down and begin grazing in the field. After a while, Finn glanced in the direction of the house. He could not see anyone, which meant no one could see him.

He took a deep breath and slipped away from his flock. He had to be quiet and quick, or the sheep would notice him leaving and follow him. He passed through a handful of trees and bushes that separated their land from the lake. In a moment, he was on the shore of the Scáthán. He looked back, and could just barely make out a few sheep past the trees. Then he faced the lake.

The Scáthán's bright, cold water reflected the clouds above it like a huge mirror. Finn imagined a giant looking into the surface of the mirror and combing its hair or checking its teeth. He shook his head and made his way toward a tall bank ringed with reeds.

He stopped on the bank and held his breath. A mixture of fear and excitement made his heart pound. Surely the lake was the territory of a giant.

What had Grandfather said? That giants can live in lakes? A voice in the back of his head reminded him of his father's command to keep close watch over his sheep, but he pushed it away.

He leaned out over the water and looked into it. No giant. Finn could only see the blue sky behind the reflection of his head in the lake.

But was that his head?

For when he looked in the water, he knew something was not quite right. Was he really that tall? Was his hair that blonde—almost white? Finn gripped a handful of reeds at the edge of the water and leaned down towards his reflection to get a better look.

Baa-a-a-a!

A sheep bleated behind Finn, startling him. Finn turned his head quickly and saw a sheep standing behind him, chewing a mouthful of grass. It must have seen him sneak away and had followed him to the edge of the water.

Finn was already leaning too far over the water, and jerking his head around made him lose his balance. Finn's feet slipped off the edge of the bank and the reeds tore out of his hands.

As he fell, he closed his eyes and mouth and waited to splash into the water and feel its icy touch.

But there was no splash. And he felt no water.