

FEBRUARY 2029

DRAGONS IN THE FOREST

The little girl sits in the dirt. She's been exploring the forest, but now her legs are tired and she doesn't want to walk anymore. Anyway, it's nice here. With all the stones and leaves and twigs around her, she could make a nest for birds, or a house for mice. Her fingers are busy—picking things up, putting them down, arranging them—and her mind's busy, too. She makes marks in the dirt with a stick—lines and circles—and her mouth moves as she sings herself the song that goes with her dust-pictures.

She hears the motorbikes before she sees them, a background whine that becomes a drone that turns into a roar. She holds her hands over her ears. She's never seen a motorbike before and now there are three, big and black and fast, belching out trails of dark smoke. The girl glimpses metal and rubber and leather between the trees.

"Dragons," she whispers, and the pupils in her blue eyes grow wide.

The motorbikes slow down. They stop. They're growling softly now, not roaring, but they're too near. The girl sits very still. She can see them. Can they see her? The dragon at the front takes off part of its head. There's a man inside. He scans the trees on either side of the road that cuts through the forest.

For a moment their eyes meet.

The man's face is pale, but his colors are dark, like his clothes and his dragon. A swirl of gray and purple and black. The girl doesn't like the colors. She's never seen people-colors like these before. And she doesn't like him looking at her. His eyes are dark, almost black, and they are hurting her.

She closes her own eyes quickly, and buries her face in her knees.

"Seen something, boss?"

"Just a kid. Let's go." His voice is hard and low.

The dragons' growl turns into a roar again, and then they're gone.

The girl squints through her eyelashes. There's nothing to show the dragons were ever there apart from a cloud of dust, which hangs in the air and then settles. Slowly she unwinds and leans forward, gathering in an armful of twigs and leaves, destroying her dust-pictures. If there are dragons here, she will need to build a big nest to keep the birds and the mice safe. Better make it big enough to keep *her* safe, too. She piles more and more stuff around her, snuggles in, and closes her eyes. Then she waits for the dreams to come—the colors and pictures that will send her to sleep.

She wakes when she hears someone shouting her name.

"Mia! Mii-aa! Where are you? Mii-aa!"

She doesn't move. She wants to see if her nest is a good one, if she can be found. She loves playing hide-and-seek.

"Mia! Mii-aa! Where are you? Where are you?"

The voice is getting closer. The girl curls in a tight little ball and buries her face in her knees again. It's fun, this game.

She hears footsteps crunching through the undergrowth. Closer, closer, closer . . .

"Mia! There you are!"

Feet are right next to the nest. Mia turns her head a little and peeks upward. The woman looks cross. The skin is creased between her blue eyes. Mia doesn't like it. She wants her to be smiling and laughing. But her colors are the same as always, a haze of blue and lilac around her, colors that mean one thing—Mummy.

Mia turns her head into her knees again. She doesn't want Mummy to shout at her.

Sarah bends down and grabs her daughter under her armpits. She lifts her up, still curled tightly in a ball, and holds her close.

"Mia," she says, "you must stay where I can see you. Are you listening?"

Mia puts her thumb in her mouth.

"I was just worried. I thought . . . I thought I'd lost you. I'm not cross."

Mia takes her thumb out of her mouth and looks up. Then she reaches forward to wrap her arms round her mummy. Everything's OK—there won't be shouting and tears this time.

"Dragons," she says. "Me see dragons."

Sarah looks toward the road. She heard motorcycles a few minutes ago. "Do you mean motorbikes?" she says, hugging her daughter close. She starts walking away from the road and back into the forest.

“Dragons,” says Mia. “Noisy.”

“Did you see wolves and bears as well?” Sarah says, smiling.

Mia shakes her head.

“Dragons,” she says again, firmly this time.

“Better get back to the camp, then. The dragons won’t come near our fire. We’ll be safe there.”

But Mia doesn’t feel safe, even now, holding on to Mummy.

The dragons she saw made smoke themselves. A fire wouldn’t frighten them away, she thinks. They’d *like* a fire.

Better to hide. Better to make a nest and hide from the man with the dark colors all around him.