Our year begins…



Beneath the frozen ground life stirs,
dreaming of the light and warmth to come.



To Sarah Cronin,
and all who bring beauty
to the world.

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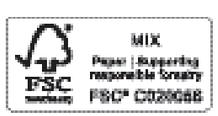
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A Year of Fairy Tales

SOPHIE ANDERSON

Illustrated by Elisa Paganelli



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JANUARY



The Bear and the Dragon

Once upon a starry night, there was a bear, a dragon and a girl.

The bear was walking over a great snowy plain, her white fur rippling in a crisp north wind. The dragon was sleeping on a jagged, ice-capped mountain, his silver scales gleaming beneath a bright full moon. And the girl, Hilde, was sat cross-legged on a downy bed, her two thick plaits shining in the warm glow of an oil lamp.

Hilde hugged her patchwork quilt around her shoulders to protect herself from the cold air drifting through the window beside her. She had opened the window to better see the view, which looked especially magical tonight.

The vast forest beside her home was blanketed with sparkling snow and, in the distance, the icy plains and frosted mountains

glistened in the night. A shooting star ran across the ink-black sky, leaving a long, glittering trail. Hilde gasped with delight.

"Sig! Come and see!" Hilde turned to her older sister.

Sigrid was lying in her bed on the other side of the small attic room they shared. She had a book in her hands, although she hadn't turned a page since she'd opened it nearly an hour ago. At the sound of Hilde's voice, Sigrid looked up, but it took her a moment to come out of her daze.

Hilde's brow furrowed with concern. Sigrid hadn't been herself for weeks – not since the snow first fell. Usually, her sister was cheerful and full of energy. Sigrid loved telling stories and making up games, and every winter she was excited to play with Hilde in the snow. But this year, when the sisters woke to a thick layer of fluffy white, Sigrid was eerily tired and listless, her thoughts in some faraway place. And every night since, Sigrid had seemed to drift further away.

Hilde's mother was worried too, and watched Sigrid with concern, but there seemed to be no explanation for her sudden change. Hilde felt it had something to do with the snow and ice, and one evening she had glimpsed a flash of silver between the trees that had made her feel she was on the brink of discovering some terrible secret… But that made no sense! Hilde wished she could reach her sister and pull her back to herself somehow.

"I saw a shooting star." Hilde nodded to the window. "Would you like to watch with me?"

Sigrid slowly put her book down, crossed the room and sat beside Hilde.

Hilde wrapped her quilt around Sigrid's shoulders too, and relaxed at the feel of her sister beside her. At least that was the same as always; Sigrid was soft and warm, and she smelled of the pine soap and violet water they made together every spring.

"Look! There's another!" Hilde leaned close to her sister and pointed at the sky. "And another!"

"They're beautiful," Sigrid whispered, but she was staring at the distant mountains, not the shooting stars.

Hilde followed Sigrid's gaze, and her breath caught in her throat as something huge moved near the top of the highest peak – a curve of dazzling silver that looked, for a moment, as if it had wings. "What's that?" Hilde asked, leaning forwards. The quilt slipped from her shoulders and goosebumps rose on her skin.

"Probably some ice shifting." Sigrid yawned. "I'm tired, Hilde. Do you mind if I get some sleep?"

Hilde's heart sank. Sigrid usually told a story before bed, often acting it out with some of their favourite knitted dolls, which made them both laugh. But seeing how tired Sigrid looked, Hilde shook her head. "I don't mind," she said.

Sigrid kissed the top of Hilde's head, then leaned over to close

the window and draw the curtains.

"Shall I read to you?" Hilde asked, not wanting to miss out on some kind of story.

Sigrid nodded as she slipped back into her bed, and Hilde picked up an old book of fairy tales from her bedside table. She skipped to her favourite story, about a girl rescuing a loved one from an evil troll. Sigrid fell asleep after a few pages.

Hilde tucked her sister in. There were shadows under Sigrid's eyes and her face seemed thinner. Hilde's concern heightened, along with her frustration at not knowing how to help.

If there'd been an evil troll, like in the fairy tale, then Hilde would have rescued Sigrid from it. But there was no troll. Hilde sighed. She blew out the oil lamp, slid back into her own bed and hummed her and Sigrid's favourite tune.

It was an old lullaby, about swimming through moonlight to reach the dawn, and Hilde and Sigrid always sang it together when they were scared or couldn't sleep. But it didn't sound the same when it was sung alone.

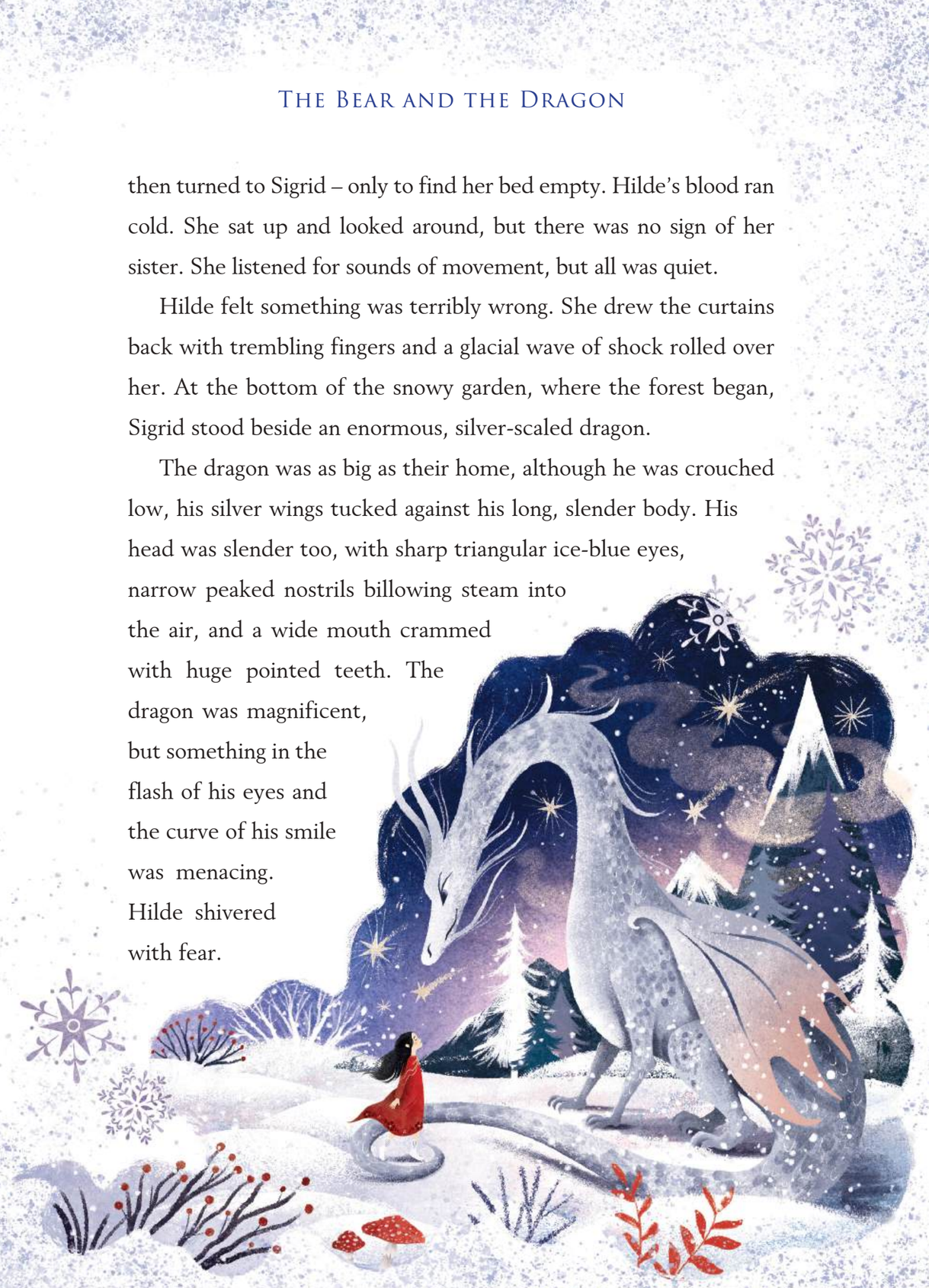
Hilde woke with a start, her heart racing in panic. She couldn't remember a nightmare, yet she felt something dreadful had scared her.

She nudged the curtains to let a little moonlight into the darkness,

then turned to Sigrid – only to find her bed empty. Hilde's blood ran cold. She sat up and looked around, but there was no sign of her sister. She listened for sounds of movement, but all was quiet.

Hilde felt something was terribly wrong. She drew the curtains back with trembling fingers and a glacial wave of shock rolled over her. At the bottom of the snowy garden, where the forest began, Sigrid stood beside an enormous, silver-scaled dragon.

The dragon was as big as their home, although he was crouched low, his silver wings tucked against his long, slender body. His head was slender too, with sharp triangular ice-blue eyes, narrow peaked nostrils billowing steam into the air, and a wide mouth crammed with huge pointed teeth. The dragon was magnificent, but something in the flash of his eyes and the curve of his smile was menacing. Hilde shivered with fear.



Sigrid's hand rested tenderly on the dragon's neck and there was a soft smile on her face, but her eyes were glazed over, as if she were under an enchantment. Hilde suddenly remembered a story from their old book of fairy tales, about an ice dragon who bewitched and stole the energy of children. A rush of understanding flew through her – this dragon was stealing Sigrid's energy, and had been every night since the snow first fell!

Hilde's hands flew to the window and she opened her mouth to shout to her sister, but the dragon turned and stared straight at her, and Hilde's throat tightened, trapping her words.

The dragon's smile widened and Hilde burned with anger. *I won't let this dragon bewitch my sister!* Hilde grabbed her dressing gown and raced down the stairs. She slid her bare feet into her winter boots, opened the garden door and ran into the cold night.

As she stumbled across the garden, her feet sank deep into the snow and her lungs stung in the icy air. She ran straight towards her sister, but the dragon lowered his head and whispered something to Sigrid in a voice like crackling ice.

Sigrid climbed onto the dragon's neck.

"Sigrid!" Hilde yelled, finally finding her voice. But Sigrid, captivated by the dragon, did not hear.

The dragon glanced at Hilde with cruel triumph in his eyes, then opened his wings and beat them powerfully. A thunderous boom shook the air, and snow lifted and flurried around Hilde. She raced

through the storm of flakes and reached for her sister. But Hilde's fingertips only brushed Sigrid's ankle before she was lifted away.

"No!" Hilde cried in anguish. She ran after Sigrid and the dragon, panic gripping her chest as they rose into the sky. The dragon flew over the forest and Hilde chased them along a path below. At first the path was wide enough for Hilde to clearly see the dragon above her, but it soon narrowed as the trees crowded in, and then Hilde veered off the path altogether as she tried to follow the dragon's swooping flight.

"Sigrid!" Hilde yelled again, but it was no use. The dragon flew further away, and Hilde lost sight of him and her sister completely.

Hilde stopped and the dark forest seemed to spin around her. Only the faintest shimmer of moonlight filtered through the trees. Her body was hot from running, but her skin was ice-cold. Tears stung her eyes. Sigrid was gone.

What can I do? Hilde wondered desperately. She would never catch up with the dragon now, and she would soon freeze out here in her nightclothes.

All she could do was go home to get help. Hilde thought of her mother, still sleeping and unaware of what had happened, and she longed for her strength and guidance.

Hilde turned and ran back, following the rumpled trail of her

footprints in the snow. Her legs ached, her chest burned and her eyes blurred with tears as she ran on, filling with more worries as she realized that nothing looked familiar.

Then she noticed a second trail of footprints crossing the one she was following. The prints in both trails matched. *How is that possible? Have I run in a circle?*

Hilde groaned in frustration and pulled her dressing gown tighter around her. She was cold, alone, lost and scared. She had thought she could rescue Sigrid, like in a fairy tale, but she had failed.

The treetops whispered in a breeze and Hilde looked up, hoping to see the stars through a gap in the canopy. Perhaps they might help her find her way home. But the snow-heavy branches hid almost every shard of sky.

Hilde took a deep breath and tried to push back her fear. This was the forest she had walked and played in with Sigrid all her life. These were the trees she loved. "If only you could help me now!" Hilde pleaded in despair.

The closest tree, a tall fir, creaked as it leaned down to Hilde.

Hilde stared at it in confusion.

The tree rustled and its soft, needle-like leaves whispered words that blew gently around her. "How can I help you, Hilde?"

Hilde inhaled a gasp of cold air.

"Are you lost?" the tree whispered. "Would you like me to show you the way home?"

"I want my sister." Hilde's words rushed out, forcing their way past her shock and awe. "A dragon enchanted her and carried her away. She's in danger."

The tree shivered. "The dragon from the jagged mountains. He will steal your sister's energy for himself."

"How can I save her?" Hilde begged. Her heart ached to have Sigrid back beside her.

The tree bent lower, reaching out two long branches, and something warm and soft fell over Hilde's shoulders. "This cloak offers protection from the dragon's magic."

Hilde looked down. The cloak was made of fir needles, green as the forest in spring, and dotted with the bright, smooth buds of snowdrops. "Will it free Sigrid from the dragon's enchantment too?" she asked.

"To break the enchantment on your sister, you will also need to use the light of truth." The tree lifted the cloak's hood over Hilde's head and, with a rush of panic, she fell into darkness.

Hilde screamed as she plummeted down. She felt as though she had stepped into a wide, deep hole. Cold air flew past her and she wondered how badly she would be hurt when she landed. But then she sank into a great mound of something soft and slightly prickly. *Fir needles?* It was too dark to be sure. She had no idea what was happening.

Hilde clambered out of the soft mound, stepped onto smooth, hard rock and waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. But they didn't. From the cold, damp air, she suspected she had landed in an underground cavern.

It was pitch-black and the only sound was Hilde's own echoing breath, rising in panic. "Hello?" Hilde's voice wavered as it bounced around her.

Whispers rose in response. They weren't like the fir tree's whispers, soft and gentle. These whispers were hoarse, like the voices of very old people. They were coming from straight ahead. Hilde edged forwards. "Hello?" she called again.

The whispers grew louder. There were so many that she could not make out the words. Some were chanting, others singing, and still more speaking in rich storytelling voices that felt comfortingly familiar.

Hilde was still cold, lost and scared. *But I'm not alone any more*, she thought. The whispers were guiding her. Perhaps they would help her reach her sister! Hilde pushed back her fears and walked on.

Soon the whispers formed into words that Hilde recognized from the songs and stories that she and Sigrid had loved most since they were young. One of the voices was even humming her and Sigrid's favourite tune – the old lullaby about swimming through moonlight to reach the dawn. Hilde could almost hear Sigrid singing it now, and it filled her with strength and hope.

A light appeared ahead, a faint golden glow. Hilde remembered the fir tree saying she would need the light of truth to save Sigrid, and she picked up speed. Her fir-needle cloak swished against the stone floor and her footfalls echoed around the cavern.

The light grew brighter, the whispers louder. They enveloped Hilde in a warmth that felt like being hugged in her patchwork quilt – the quilt that had been made by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother… Hilde suddenly realized the whispers were the voices of her and Sigrid's ancestors, of everyone's ancestors, passing on songs and stories that had comforted and emboldened people for thousands of years.



As Hilde drew close to the light, it took the shape of a smooth curved "U". *It's a small, hand-held harp!* Hilde stopped in front of it, mesmerized.

"Is this the light of truth?" Hilde asked.

"Yes," the whispers echoed from the harp's glowing body.

Hilde reached out and lifted the instrument. She ran her fingers across the strings and a shimmering run of music cascaded out.

The cavern shook. Hilde wobbled. Then, with the same rush of panic she felt when she fell into the cavern, she flew upwards. The whispers grew fainter and the air became fresher as she burst back up towards the forest.

Hilde landed in a mound of soft snow. The sky above was bright with stars and ahead, beyond a great snowy plain, a full moon hung over jagged, ice-capped mountains. Hilde clambered out of the mound of snow and looked up at the highest peak. She recalled seeing the curve of dazzling silver there, when she was watching the stars with Sigrid. That peak was where she would find the dragon. She would cross the great snowy plain and climb the mountains to save her sister.

The harp in Hilde's hands thrummed with the power of her ancestors, and the old lullaby that she and Sigrid sang together drifted faintly from it into the icy air.

Hilde took a deep breath and set off. Her feet sank so deep into the snow that it slumped into her boots, making her bare skin burn with cold. Hilde tried to ignore the sensation and focus her thoughts on Sigrid. *I must save her*.

Soon Hilde became aware of another shape on the snowy plain, moving towards her. It was an animal, the same colour as the snow, big and lumbering. When Hilde realized it was a bear, she stopped, wondering what to do.

Hilde knew bears could be dangerous, but there was no way to avoid the creature, so after a moment she carried on, giving the bear as wide a berth as possible.

The bear approached steadily. She was enormous, a rippling mass of thick fur and strong muscles, with dark eyes and long, black

claws. Hilde looked down at her feet, hoping the bear would pass her by. But the bear walked right up to her, until she was so close Hilde could feel the bear's hot breath filling the space between them.



Hilde trembled, but then glanced up and saw a kindness in the bear's sparkling eyes that stilled her fear. She remained in awe of the bear's size and power though, and bowed her head again nervously.

The bear bowed back. "What are you doing here, all alone in the cold night?" she asked in a deep resonant voice.

"I'm going to rescue my sister from the dragon." Hilde glanced up at the mountains and her heart sank as she saw how far away the peak still was.

"That's a long way to walk for someone as small as you," the bear replied.

Hilde straightened her spine and looked into the bear's eyes. "It's no distance at all for someone you love."

The bear smiled. "Would you like a lift?"

Hilde felt a warm rush of gratitude, then wondered if she should feel more wary. But her heart told her that she could trust the bear, and she needed to reach Sigrid as swiftly as possible.

The bear crouched down and Hilde climbed onto her back. She tucked the harp between herself and the bear, leaned forwards and put her arms around the bear's neck. Her fur was cold and coarse, but as Hilde's fingers sank deeper, they found softer, warmer fur beneath.

"Hold tight." The bear set off running towards the mountains.

The bear's muscles rolled beneath Hilde as she gripped on tightly with her arms and legs. Wind blew back her hood, cold air grazed her cheeks, and the bear's great paws kicked up icy snow that glittered in the moonlight.

A smile grew on Hilde's face as hope swelled inside her. *I'll soon rescue Sigrid and bring her home!*

The bear reached the mountains and raced up the steep slopes, jumping from rock to rock, zigzagging up the steepest parts. The air grew colder and thinner, and Hilde felt dizzy as the bear climbed higher. The moon looked huge and the stars close enough to reach out and touch. *I must be near Sigrid now!*

Finally, the bear stopped beside a wall of ice-covered rock with a high, narrow crack in it.

"You can reach the dragon's cave through there." The bear

nodded to the crack, which was just wide enough for Hilde to enter. "I shall wait for you here."

Hilde let go of the bear's warm fur, picked up the harp and slid down to the ground. She took a deep breath for courage, then stepped into the mountain.

The rock walls were smooth, coated with ice that shone gold in the glow of the harp. After a few steps, the crack widened, revealing all of the dragon's cave. It was enormous – Hilde's home could easily have fitted inside it, along with her garden too.

In the centre of the cave, the dragon lay curled, asleep. Leaning against his silver scales was Sigrid. Her eyes were glazed over under the dragon's enchantment, and a stream of glittering light flowed from her chest into the dragon's. Anger whirled inside Hilde. The glowing stream must be her sister's energy, being stolen by the dragon!

Eager to free Sigrid, and remembering that she must use the light of truth, Hilde ran her fingers across the harp's strings. The old lullaby the sisters always sang together rang out.

The harp dissolved into the air like mist, but its music drifted into the cave, carrying golden light that illuminated the icy walls, the silver dragon and Sigrid. The dragon stirred and Hilde held her breath. But the dragon let out a rumbling groan, then settled again.

The music echoed softly as its light gathered around Sigrid and enveloped her like a patchwork quilt. Then the light soaked into her body and Sigrid sat up with a gasp, her eyes bright as she blinked away the dragon's enchantment. But panic appeared on her face when she saw the glittering stream flowing from her chest into the dragon's. She clawed at it, but the line would not break, and she opened her mouth to scream.

Hilde ran forwards, skidding on ice as she waved for Sigrid's attention. Sigrid saw her and the panic ebbed from her face. Hilde swept off her cloak and draped it over her sister, hoping it would protect her from the dragon's magic.

As the cloak settled, the glittering stream broke and faded away. But then the dragon opened his eyes. The triangles of ice-blue blazed fiercely as he looked from Sigrid to Hilde, and he roared so loudly that both sisters fell to the ground.

Hilde grabbed Sigrid's hand and pulled her up and towards the narrow crack. The dragon rose behind them and snapped his teeth, tearing the fir cloak from Sigrid.

"Quick!" Hilde grabbed the cloak and tugged Sigrid out into the cold air. "Climb onto the bear!" she urged as the dragon roared again. Hilde climbed up behind Sigrid and the bear raced down the mountain like an avalanche.

Another roar sounded, shaking Hilde to her bones. She spun to see the dragon right behind them, his teeth glinting in the moonlight.

Hilde turned back to her sister, squeezed her eyes shut and willed the bear to run faster. The sound of the bear's paws drumming on the mountainside reverberated through her. Hilde tried to focus on them instead of the dragon's thunderous wingbeats.

The bear sprinted over the snowy plain while the dragon lurched forwards, snapping his teeth with a crack like lightning. Sigrid screamed in fright and Hilde held her tighter as the bear raced on.



Hilde sensed a change in light and peeped her eyes open. They were in the forest now, the bear swerving around trees. The dragon roared again and a shower of hailstones fell onto the canopy, but the trees leaned over to shield the sisters and the bear.

The bear ran onto a familiar path and Hilde's heart lifted as she realized they were close to home. But the dragon was still following.

"Your song," the bear said breathlessly. "It will make the cloak grow to protect your home."

Hilde began singing the old lullaby and Sigrid joined in. The bear reached the edge of the forest and Hilde jumped down and ran across her garden. The cloak trailed behind her and lifted high as it caught on a gust of wind. Hilde sang louder, and Sigrid's voice rose to meet hers.

The cloak swelled like chimney smoke in a breeze, becoming a great wave of green. Hilde lifted it higher still as she sang, and the cloak ballooned upwards and outwards, forming a barrier between her home and the incoming dragon.

The bear, with Sigrid still singing on her back, ran beside Hilde, taking shelter under the huge green canopy. The dragon roared in frustration and icicles drummed onto the cloak. Then he charged at the billowing green, his wings crackling. But the moment the dragon touched the cloak, he let out a piercing scream and scrambled backwards as if he'd been burned. Then the sound of his wingbeats grew quieter as he flew away.

Hilde shook the cloak again and it rippled upwards, before floating gently down as the sisters finished their song. Where the cloak landed, the snow melted into the bright-green fir needles. The smooth buds of snowdrops that had dotted the cloak stretched their stems into the damp earth and opened their delicate, bell-shaped flowers.

The bear smiled. "You're safe now."

Hilde glanced at the dragon, shrinking into the sky, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Sigrid slid from the bear's back and pulled Hilde close. "You saved me," she whispered.

Hilde hugged Sigrid tight, then reached out and put an arm around the bear too. "Thank you," she said.

The bear placed a great paw gently on Hilde's back. "It was your love, bravery and determination that moved me to help," she replied, before turning and padding into the forest. Hilde watched the bear leave, then whispered thanks to the trees and the ancestors who had helped her too.

Sigrid squeezed Hilde's hand. She looked tired, but there was a spark in her eyes that Hilde hadn't seen in weeks.

"Race you!" Sigrid ran towards their home. "First one to our bedroom gets to choose a story!"

Hilde beamed as she chased after her sister, and her boots kicked up spray from the melting snow that glittered in the first light of dawn.

