



# THE GIRL AND THE LAST DRAGON

Mara Elizabeth Vest

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**The Girl and the Last Dragon**

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**Vest M.**

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The epic first book of a stunning fantasy trilogy. Morizelle is an ordinary 17-year-old girl, an outsider obsessed with drawing complex sketches of black dragons. Her life shifts forever when she falls through a hidden threshold and wakes up in the Endless Woods, wearing an elegant dark gown. Captured by Khasar, the fearsome Last Black Dragon who hides in human form, Morizelle discovers that the world she drew is real—and she is its lost queen. To save the dying magic from King Aerion's brutal mechanical legions, she must reclaim the stolen Heart of Elyria.

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# **Mara-Elizabeth Vest**

## **The Girl and the Last Dragon**

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Book

## Book

The charcoal always left a permanent, dark stain beneath my fingernails, a sharp contrast to the stark white paper of my sketchbooks.

It was a cold, misty Tuesday afternoon in October when the hum began. Nobody else in the modern city could hear it. To my mother, it was just another one of my anxiety attacks—the heavy, suffocating pressure in my chest that forced me to look for places where the concrete streets didn't look so grey. But to me, the hum felt like a physical wire pulled tight at the base of my skull, vibrating with a frequency that didn't belong to our world.

I sat on a mossy stone at the edge of Blackwood Park, my fingers moving with a frantic, automatic rhythm that I couldn't control. My blunt charcoal stick scratched aggressively against the paper.

Line by line, a massive, hyper-realistic wing emerged from the white void. It wasn't the wing of a bird or a bat; it was covered in heavy, interlocking obsidian scales, sharp as daggers, reflecting a storm-filled sky that I had never seen in reality. In the center of the drawing, coiled beneath old stone arches, was the shadow of a colossal black dragon, its eyes burning with a deep, ancient sorrow.

"Morizelle," I whispered my own name into the autumn fog, my voice shaking. "Why do you keep drawing things that don't exist?"

I blinked, and suddenly, the air around me changed.

The scent of dry city exhaust and wet asphalt vanished instantly. It was replaced by a thick, heavy scent that flooded my lungs—the ancient, suffocating smell of damp earth, crushing ozone, and centuries of pine and wild copper. The low hum in my head erupted into a deafening roar, like a thousand brass bells ringing deep underground.

The paper in my lap tore cleanly down the center. The ground beneath my boots simply ceased to be.

I fell. It wasn't a sudden, violent drop, but a slow, swirling descent through a thick, silver fog that felt as dense as cold water. The modern world—the grey park, the distant sounds of traffic, the familiar comfort of my ordinary clothes—melted away into nothingness.

When my feet finally hit solid ground a heartbeat later, the impact sent a soft, whispering shockwave through the soil.

I didn't open my eyes immediately. I could feel wool brushing against my bare ankles, but it wasn't the fabric of my old denim jeans. I reached down, my hands trembling as my fingers brushed against the heavy, elegant folds of a long, midnight-black gown made of silk so thick it felt like armor.

I opened my eyes, and my breath caught in my throat.

I was standing in the center of the Endless Woods.

The forest didn't look like any woods from my world. The trees were colossal, their smooth white trunks stretching hundreds of feet into a perpetual twilight sky, where three faint pale moons hung like silver coins. But the terrifying part was the movement. The roots beneath my dark boots were slowly twisting, shifting through the moss like sleeping snakes, and the heavy canopy above was breathing, expanding and contracting in a rhythmic, terrifying loop.

"This is the drawing," I muttered, my voice echoing through the silent white pillars. "I'm inside page forty-two."

A cold wind swept through the trees, making the massive white leaves hiss like a warning.

A few feet away from me, the ancient stone arches from my sketchbook stood buried in the living wood. They were cracked, covered in glowing blue veins of dying magic that pulsed weaker with every second.

Suddenly, the shifting roots behind the stone archway stopped moving. The silence became absolute.

From the absolute darkness of the deep thicket, a shadow stepped out. It was a man, tall and lethal, moving through the treacherous roots with a fluid, silent grace that didn't look entirely human. He wore a dark, heavy traveling cloak, but as the silver moonlight caught his neck, I saw it—thick, iridescent black scales covering his throat, shifting like armor plates beneath his collar. His hair was dark as ink, falling over a sharp, unreadable face, but his eyes were the most terrifying thing I had ever seen. They were wide, ancient, and the color of a winter storm.

It was Khasar.

He didn't speak. He didn't look surprised. He raised a massive, black steel broadsword, the tip pointing straight at my throat, his storm-colored eyes scanning my dark dress with cold, absolute hostility.

"The human cities are twenty leagues to the east, spy," Khasar said, his voice dropping like a heavy stone into the quiet forest, vibrating with a low, draconic growl that made the ground beneath my feet tremble. "Tell me who sent you to the cradle of Morizelle before I let the trees feed on your blood."

The heavy black steel of the broadsword didn't tremble. It was pressed so close to my throat that I could feel the freezing, metallic hum radiating from the blade.

"I will ask you one last time, girl," Khasar growled, his storm-colored eyes narrowing as his pupils suddenly slit like a reptile's. "Who gave you that dress? Which of Aerion's lords drew those maps in your hands? Speak, before I let the roots bury your secrets."

"Nobody sent me!" I gasped, my voice fracturing against the cold steel. I tried to step back, but a massive, shifting white root behind me rose from the moss, blocking my heels like a living wall. The Endless Woods were completely trapping me. "I don't know any King Aerion! I was just in a park... I was drawing. I don't belong here!"

Khasar let out a low, dangerous hiss, his grip tightening on the hilt of his weapon. The iridescent black scales along his neck rippled under the silver moonlight, shimmering like dark oil. "A poor lie. No human wanders into the cradle of Morizelle unless they carry a tracker or a curse. You wear the dark silk of the old courts, yet your hands are stained with the charcoal of an architect. You are a scout."

He lunged forward, using the flat of his blade to pin me roughly against the colossal white trunk of the breathing tree.

In my panic, I reached out, my fingers blindly scrambling for purchase against the dark metal of his sword. The sharp edge sliced cleanly through the palm of my right hand.

I cried out, dropping my torn sketchbook onto the damp moss.

Bright, crimson blood spilled from my palm, running down my fingers and dripping onto a massive, dead ironwood stump buried at the base of the white tree. The stump was black, charred from an ancient war, dead for a thousand years.

The moment my blood touched the dead bark, the forest went completely silent.

The rhythmic breathing of the canopy stopped. The shifting roots went frozen.

A sharp, electric gold light flashed deep within the cracks of the dead ironwood stump. A low, beautiful vibration—not a hum of anxiety, but a deep note of pure, ancient magic—echoed through the soil beneath our feet. Right before Khasar's eyes, the dead, blackened wood began to split. Fresh, green vines exploded from the charred bark, wrapping around his boots with terrifying speed. Within seconds, a cluster of brilliant, glowing white starlight-orchids burst into full bloom, illuminating the dark thicket with a soft, celestial radiance.

Khasar froze. The hostility vanished from his sharp face, replaced by a raw, paralyzing shock.

He slowly lowered the broadsword, his storm-colored eyes darting from the blooming flowers to the bleeding cut on my hand, and then finally to my face. The slit pupils in his eyes widened until they were completely human again.

He dropped to one knee on the moss, his massive hand trembling as his fingers hovered just an inch away from the glowing white petals.

"Impossible..." Khasar whispered, his voice losing its draconic growl, replaced by a hollow, breathless awe. He looked up at me, his gaze scanning my dark hair and searching eyes as if seeing a ghost. "The Ironwood hasn't bloomed since the fall of the first wall. The magic of the line... it was broken a millennium ago."

He reached out, his gloved fingers gently catching my left wrist—not to hurt me this time, but to pull my injured hand closer to the light.

"Your name," he demanded, his voice barely a whisper against the rustling leaves. "What did you call yourself, girl?"

"Morizelle," I panted, my heart hammering against my ribs as the forest around us began to softly breathe again, the white leaves singing a melody I felt I had heard before. "My name is Morizelle."

The glowing white orchids continued to cast their soft, celestial light over the dark moss, but the silence between us felt heavier than any darkness. Khasar didn't let go of my wrist immediately; his calloused thumb brushed against the skin right above my pulse, as if checking to ensure I was made of flesh and bone, not illusion.

Finally, he released me and stepped back. His storm-colored eyes never left my face as he bent down, his massive hand closing around the edge of my torn sketchbook.

"Don't touch that," I whispered, automatically stepping forward. "Those are just... they're just drawings."

Khasar didn't listen. With a slow, calculated movement, he flipped the charcoal-smeared cover open. The thick paper rustled under his gloved fingers. The twilight sky of the Endless Woods seemed to darken as three pale moons caught the reflection of the pages.

The first page showed the interlocking black scales of a dragon's wing—the very scales that were now rippling beneath Khasar's leather collar. He stared at it for a long, agonizing moment, his breath misting in the cold air.

Then, he turned the page.

It was a sketch I had drawn three months ago during a terrible midnight panic attack. It showed a massive, circular throneroom carved entirely from white stone, surrounded by towering waterfalls and ancient elven runes. In the center of the room stood a high throne made of twisted white wood, with a single crown of obsidian leaves resting on the seat.

Khasar's body went completely rigid. The slit pupils in his eyes returned with violent force, glowing with a dangerous, golden intensity.

"Where did you see this place, girl?" he demanded, his voice dropping into that deep, draconic growl that made the concrete bones of my chest vibrate. He stepped closer, holding the book right in front of my face. "This throneroom was buried beneath miles of solid earth and concrete a thousand years before your ancestors built their first stone city. No living human has ever looked upon the High Throne of Morizelle."

"I told you, I didn't see it anywhere!" My voice broke, tears of pure frustration stinging my eyes. "I just draw them. They come into my head when I can't breathe. I start writing lines, and my hand just moves by itself. I don't know what it means!"

Khasar flipped to the final page—the one that had torn down the middle when I fell through the portal. It showed a detailed blueprint of a hidden mechanical engine, a massive iron machine draining a glowing heart.

"You draw the ancient seals as if you were the one who carved them," Khasar muttered, his eyes narrowing as he closed the book with a heavy thud. He looked at my bleeding hand, where the cut was already starting to close, the skin healing at an unnatural speed. "Your blood brings dead

ironwood back to life. Your mind carries the layout of my extinct world. You are not a spy, Morizelle. You are something far worse."

"What?" I whispered, wrapping my arms around my dark silk gown, shivering from the cold forest wind. "What am I?"

Khasar hooked the sketchbook onto his leather belt, his hand resting on the hilt of his massive steel broadsword. He looked out into the deep, moving shadows of the Endless Woods, where the trees were whispering a melody that grew louder by the second.

"You are a living key," Khasar said coldly, turning back to me. "And King Aerion's soldiers are currently tearing down the western valley just to find you. We leave this thicket now. Before the smell of your royal blood brings the hunters straight to our heads."

The white trunks of the Endless Woods moved past us like a procession of silent ghosts. My feet, unaccustomed to the thick moss and the hidden trap-roots, slipped constantly, but every time I stumbled, Khasar's massive hand would catch my elbow with clinical, effortless precision.

"Keep your footing, Morizelle," he muttered, his storm-colored eyes never resting on one spot for more than a second. "The forest is alive, but it is also impatient. If you fall behind, it will stop trying to hide your tracks."

Before I could ask what he meant, a sharp, metallic whistle cut through the twilight air.

Khasar reacted instantly. He whirled around, throwing his body over mine and driving me down onto the damp moss just as a black-feathered arrow hissed through the empty air, burying itself deep into the breathing trunk of the white tree behind us. The tree let out a low, vibrant shudder, white sap leaking from the wound like blood.

"Show yourselves, scouts!" Khasar roared, his voice dropping into that terrifying draconic growl that made my teeth vibrate. The black scales along his throat rippled with defense-posture alignment. "Or I will let the fire consume this entire thicket!"

From the high canopy above, five figures dropped silently onto the moss. They wore leather armor lined with green pine-needles, their faces smeared with dark charcoal.

Their leader stepped forward, drawing a pair of curved hunting knives. He was young, fierce, with sharp features and messy dark hair. His eyes were wide with a wild, untamed energy. It was Raven.

"You have no authority here, Last Dragon," Raven hissed, his knives catching the faint light of the three silver moons. "You bring a human girl into the deep cradle? The human cities are choking our borders with smoke, and you bring their flesh into our sanctuary?"

"Look closer, Raven," Khasar said coldly, stepping aside to reveal my face.

Raven raised his knife, stepping closer, his fierce gaze locking onto my dark silk gown and then my eyes. The hostility on his face suddenly vanished, replaced by a sudden, breathless shock. He dropped his left knife into the moss, his hand flying to a leather pouch at his belt. He pulled out an old, faded piece of parchment—a copy of an ancient prophecy.

He looked at the drawing on the parchment, then back at my face.

"The flowing hair... the dark silk... the searching eyes," Raven breathed, his wild demeanor completely dropping. He looked at Khasar, his eyes wide. "It's her. The Queen of the Lines. The one who made the first pact before the magic died."

He turned back to his scouts, his voice urgent. "Lower your bows! Lower them now! Khasar, you don't understand the danger. King Aerion didn't just send scouts this time. His metal iron-clads have already crossed the Western river. They aren't hunting for border lines anymore. They are tracking her arrival."

The air grew thick and heavy, but it wasn't the clean ozone smell of forest magic. It was a suffocating, greasy stench—the smell of burning coal, cheap sulfur, and scorched iron.

"They're here," Raven whispered, his body crouching low as he signaled his scouts to melt back into the thicket. "The wind is carrying their exhaust."

A deep, rhythmic thumping shook the forest floor. It wasn't the natural, breathing vibration of the roots; it was a cold, mechanical cadence. \*Thump. Thump. Thump.\* Through the massive white trunks, a bright, unnatural orange glare pierced the twilight.

I peeked around a concrete archway and felt my stomach drop into a bottomless pit.

Three massive iron structures were marching through the trees. They were mechanical scouts—colossal bipedal iron walkers powered by screaming steam boilers strapped to their rears. Black, toxic smoke poured from their iron smokestacks, choking the ancient canopy above. At the front of each machine sat a heavy, rotating saw-blade made of rusted steel, chewing through the sacred white trees with a deafening, metallic screech.

"They are clearing the grid," Khasar hissed, his broadsword unsheathed, his knuckles turning white. "Aerion is using the steam-saws to blind the forest's defense system."

Suddenly, the lead iron walker stopped. Its mechanical brass head rotated with a loud \*clank\*, a giant, glowing amber searchlight lens focusing directly on the stone archway where I stood.

A loud, pressurized horn blasted through the woods, a deafening sound that made Lily's red drawing in my mind flash with terrifying clarity.

"TARGET CONFIRMED," a cold, metallic voice boomed from the speaker horn of the lead walker. "SUBJECT MORIZELLE IDENTIFIED. DEPLOY THE NAPALM BRAZIER." "

"Run!" Raven screamed, leaping forward and throwing a smoke bomb toward the walker's viewport.

A secondary pipe on the machine's arm hissed, and a jet of thick, chemical green fire erupted from its nozzle, bathing the ancient trees around us in a roaring wall of unquenchable flame. The sacred wood screamed—a high-pitched, physical sound of dying magic that echoed straight into my skull, causing a massive anxiety spike that made me fall to my knees.

Khasar grabbed my arm, lifting me effortlessly into his chest. "We cannot fight them here, Third—no, Morizelle! The iron-clads are immune to simple steel. We must move deeper into the canopy!"

The green fire was chasing us, eating through the moss like an acid tide. Behind us, the heavy iron walkers crashed through the burning trunks, their steel saw-blades spinning with lethal, relentless speed.

Khasar ran with me in his arms, his boots dodging the falling, flaming debris, while Raven and his scouts fired black-feathered arrows at the mechanical joints of the machines. But the arrows simply bounced off the heavy iron plating.

"They're closing the perimeter!" Raven yelled, dodging a blast of chemical steam that melted the moss near his boots. "The western escape path is cut off!"

My head was spinning, the ringing in my ears louder than the wailing corporate klaxons from my old nightmares. The pain was sharp, a burning fever behind my eyes. I looked at the white trunks burning around me, and I felt their agony—a physical, weeping sorrow that felt exactly like the anxiety attacks I used to have in the city park.

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