



The Last

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Twelve-year-old Jumi and her best friend Kippen have always dreamed of finding a fire dragon—one of the last magical creatures said to grant wishes from the heart. But when they finally set out on their adventure, things go terribly wrong. Cynocephalies attack, and though Kippen saves Jumi, he ends up falling into a deep chasm after it and vanishes.

Everyone else believes he's gone forever, but Jumi is sure he's still alive. So she steals a boat and sails off to find him, travelling through a world full of mysterious creatures—Cynocephalies, Will-o'-the-wisps, and maybe even dragons.



The Last: Excerpt

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12 Summers Earlier

A threatening growl came from the forest nearby. It seemed to be creeping closer and closer. The men and women watering a field in the blazing sunlight didn't notice. The snarls were only heard by a tiny baby lying in a woven birchbark cradle in the shade of a tree on the field's edge. As the growling drew closer, the little girl's babbling grew softer, then fell completely silent when a cynocephalus's hairy body rose above the cradle and its single eye stared at her intently. Only after the gigantic beast grabbed the infant's leg in its teeth and began running back towards the forest did she start to screech. That startled the cynocephalus with the head of a wolf and the legs of a human. For a second, it jerked to a stop.

The girl's father, who had been carrying water to the field with the others, took advantage of that second. He sprinted at the predator and jumped onto its back. The cynocephalus was twice the man's size. Saliva dripped from its huge fangs. The tiny baby dangled from its mouth like a rag doll. Grunting and shaking itself, the beast tried to get rid of its attacker. Then, it straightened up in sudden astonishment. It took a couple steps, swayed, and opened its jaws. The infant tumbled softly onto the moss as children always do, not getting hurt in the fall. At the same time, her father pulled the knife he always carried on his belt out of the beast's body.

The girl's mother arrived at the scene, too. She and the father crouched over the infant who lay bloody on the ground. He set his knife down and started to pick her up.

That was the last time the baby saw her parents. Moments later, the wounded but still outlandishly strong cynocephalus seized her parents in its paws and dashed off into the woods.

Later, after the baby was wiped clean of blood, it turned out that the cynocephalus had nearly bit off her right leg entirely. The leg fused together over time but was left slightly shorter than the other. A deep scar snaked down it.

Another scar that tiny Jumi received that day couldn't be seen with the naked eye. Yet, whenever a villager's gaze came to rest upon the girl, what they saw was an unlucky soul.

Departure

The sun's first rays fell upon the towering fortress on the hilltop, forcing night's darkness to retreat. In the shallow valley next to it, the village slept on. Thus, no one noticed when slender Jumi crept out through the fortress gates. She darted into the shadows of the bushes across the road to stay invisible to the guards on the fortress wall. Even so, she was spotted by a pair of sharp beady eyes watching from the crown of a nearby tree.

The scar that wound down Jumi's right calf made that leg shorter and forced her to walk and run with a limp. Beaverskin leggings that the girl wore in summer and winter alike protected her legs from both sun and cold but couldn't heal the hobble.

Jumi's mismatched legs didn't cause her any pain. The same couldn't be said for kids' jeers. They called her "Limp". Other times, it was "Soothead". Or another stupid insult. For in addition to having different-sized legs, she wasn't blonde and rosy-cheeked like all the other kids in the village. Jumi's hair was as dark as a winter's night, and her cheeks were as pale as snow. The villagers glared disapprovingly. She wore a boxy green sweater that her mother left behind and a long linen shirt beneath

it. The latter had belonged to her father. Jumi had cut some fabric from the bottom and used it to sew herself a pair of trousers. They turned out so wide that she had to wrap the leggings around and tie them with leather straps.

Everyone in the village knew that luck steered well clear of the girl. "It could be infectious," parents whispered to their kids and advised them to avoid her, too.

Jumi kept her distance from others, anyway. The older she got, the greater it grew. She learned how to conceal herself in plain sight.

That was easy with grown-ups. They usually paid no attention to the squirt as they hurried about their daily chores. Whenever they did happen to notice Jumi, they whispered a few protective charm words, snapped their fingers to ward off bad luck, and then ignored her completely.

Yes, things were easy with grown-ups. Kids, however, never allowed the girl to forget that she wasn't like them.

"It smells weird here," the blondest and rosiest-cheeked of them, Viu, sometimes said with a sniff when Jumi happened to be nearby.

"Like misfortune," another always added before they ran away, laughing. Jumi reckoned she smelled exactly like any other kid in the village: just a teensy bit unwashed, which was overpowered by the scent of fresh air and bonfire smoke. That didn't change a thing, though. They mocked her all the same.

The kids teased her a little less about the raven that followed her wherever she went. Before Jumi could even walk, the black-backed bird hopped right up to her where she'd been laid on a sunny patch of grass in the fortress ward. Its head cocked to one side, the bird studied the girl while she played. Ever since that day, the raven hadn't let Jumi out of its sight whenever she was outside. The bird didn't allow itself to be touched and wouldn't accept any morsels when offered, but was always wherever Jumi was to be found, watching solemnly from a few meters away. Jumi nicknamed it "Dipper" because of the ladle-shaped tuft of feathers projecting from its nape.

Once, Jumi forgot that other kids were in earshot and called out to Dipper. She quickly came to regret it.

"Birdy-girl, limpy-girl, dipper-dipper-aa," Viu mocked in singsong the next time Jumi passed by.

The raven, which otherwise never interfered in Jumi's business, swooped a couple threatening circles right above Viu's head. Its great, coal-black wings beat wind into Viu's face before releasing a massive splotch of faecal matter onto her shoulder and finally flapping away.

Jumi had scouted out various hiding spots, hidden paths, and passageways to avoid encounters with other kids. Her favourite secret nook was right in plain sight, however, and still no one had found it.

The fortress upon the hill was surrounded by a sturdy log fence. Right next to it, alongside a path that ran down the hill to the great water, grew a mighty oak. Its trunk was so wide that it would take ten people holding hands to form a circle around it. One of the lower branches jutted towards the ground, which allowed her to creep into the shadows and climb up.

Sitting in the crook closest to the trunk allowed one to observe everything that went on in the village and the fortress ward while remaining unseen. It was where Jumi went whenever kids were mocking her. As well as when she missed her parents so much that it felt like she was going to burst.

That early morning, Jumi climbed into her hiding place in the oak, pressed her back against the gnarled bark, and waited. Dipper had silently flown to the crown of the tree and perched there as well.

And Jumi waited.

And waited.

She waited for her only friend.

The sun was already climbing into sight above the great water. A rich, sweet scent filled the air, promising a warm day.

A rooster crowed at the far end of the village.

But Kippen was still nowhere to be seen.

"He hasn't forgotten that our departure is finally here, has he?" Jumi murmured to herself after a while.

At that very moment, a hand fell onto her shoulder. The boy, who had scaled the opposite side of the tree as quietly as a mouse, pulled Jumi into a clumsy sort of greeting. For a fleeting moment it almost felt like an embrace, which made both literally bounce away from each other. It took them quite a bit of effort to keep their balance.

"In Gaia's name! Why'd you creep up like that? I had no idea you were here!" the girl seethed. She didn't want to let on that he'd startled her. Or that she was so glad her friend had arrived. So, she continued in a grumpy tone. "Moss could grow on one's back, waiting for you! Let's go! We won't catch up to them anymore, even if we run. You oversleep or something, sleepyhead?"

Kippen, who was a few years older than the girl and halfway to becoming a man (far enough along to feel terribly awkward), shook his head. Dark circles ran around the glistening eyes in his honest face.

"I didn't sleep much at all last night," he admitted, climbing down the tree. He adjusted the quiver hanging from his bony shoulder and added, "You know the signs. Lead the way!"

The party of men that Jumi and Kippen started tracking that morning had left in the dead of night. The King's hunters didn't need daylight to travel. They knew every route through the plains and the forests alike.

Still, 'route' was a generous word for the footpath that Jumi and Kippen crept along. At least at first. It followed the fence surrounding the fortress, where the grass was trampled flat. People used it daily to farm a patch on the edge of the great wood, herd their livestock to feed on brush, and access the great water. Yet, Jumi turned off the path before long. She didn't have to explain the move to Kippen. All she did was point at a tiny, snapped branch.

The girl was an expert at reading such signs. She'd followed the King's hunters before and learned everything they knew about tracking by listening in on their conversations. Jumi's father had also been one of the King's hunters. The tallest and strongest of them, afraid of nothing.

Until a cynocephalus carried him off.

Whoever Doesn't Seek Will Find

Jumi and Kippen had dreamed of the expedition for as long as they could remember. They'd drawn up countless plans and always known that one day when the air was summery and warm, they'd set off.

Out to search for dragons.

To seek those wise and mighty creatures with whom humans had once lived side-by-side like brothers. Before something happened that wiped the dragons off the face of the earth. Not one had survived. People searched for them, of course, and some even perished in the process, but all that had ever been found was a giant horned dragon skull. It had hung in a place of honor in the King's chamber ever since the village of Westborough was founded. Some villagers also possessed dragon scales—a handful in total—the most powerful good luck charms. They usually hung above the owner's door and were rubbed for good luck when the person left to go about their business each morning. Scales were thought to repel evil and sickness

and deliver good fortune. Dragon relics were so prized that a family could get enough food for an entire winter in exchange for a single scale. They rarely changed hands, however, because no one dared to relinquish their household's talisman.

Sometimes when villagers were working together on the field or making hay for their animals, the village storyteller—old Weirdo-Deirdo—told tale after tale about three brothers who didn't believe that the dragons went extinct.

“The gentlemen went,
the dear ones went out,
beyond the seven seas,
sailing beyond the horizon,
walking the foreign ways,
bumbling by the bogs,
past a band of pixies,
the sirens, the sharp-toothed.
They wished to find the dragon folk
who long ago like brothers dear
were partners to mankind.
But the dragons disappeared,
the brothers did not see them,
though they called out in deepest woods
and shouted ‘cross the waters,
yelling beyond the horizon—
alas, the dragons were gone,’

he sang time and again in his trembling geezer's voice, regaling listeners about how the brothers sought dragons in the tall mountains, scouted the wide valleys, and swam in the deep waters. On their quests, the young men escaped the clutches of hordes of beasts. They tricked pixies who attempted to lure them into the deep, dark woods. They fought giant aurochs and bears, bantered with sirens until friendships were formed—but the dragons still refused to show themselves.

Naturally, one could never be sure how much truth was hidden in Weirdo-Deirdo's tales. Jumi pressed him doggedly to find out whether the three traveling brothers ever did encounter a dragon in the end, but as always, the old man answered in a riddle.

“Whoever seeks will find—truth is proud.
Whoever no longer seeks will find much more!”

That made the girl grumble. Couldn't he just answer with a simple yes or no!? Was that so much to ask? What did he mean by “whoever no longer seeks will find even more”? She and Kippen discussed it endlessly but still couldn't figure out the answer.

Their desire to find a dragon grew stronger all the while. Even back when they were tots, they knew that if you happen to run across a dragon and it was in a good mood, the benefits could be extraordinary.

Dragons, those powerful creatures, could help grant your deepest and most secret desires. Even the kind that might seem absolutely impossible to achieve. The topic came up in many of Weirdo-Deirdo's songs as well.

At first, Jumi planned to ask a dragon for better luck because she constantly ran into misfortunes. Then, she reckoned she'd ask it to heal her leg instead. Yet as she grew older and came to understand what had happened to her parents, she couldn't think of anything besides that. She intended to ask a dragon to bring her parents back from the realm of the dead.

Jumi and Kippen planned to track down a dragon even if meant delving deep underground. To begin with, they were going to follow the King's hunters along the

edge of the forest on a day's journey to a bear's den, which was occupied during hibernation but empty in summer. From there, the hunters intended to plunge deep into the woods—at least that's what they'd agreed during a feast in the fortress. Jumi and Kippen, on the other hand, planned to remain on the forest's fringes to search for and locate a dragon.

Kippen's Wish

They crept farther and farther from the fortress along the barely discernable path. Before long, their home disappeared entirely behind the trees. Only then did they dare to straighten their backs and continue upright. Jumi sighed. "Just think: what if we really do find it! One dragon should be enough to grant both our wishes, right? And if we don't find a whole dragon, maybe we'll at least spot a few scales somewhere! We'll split it and both be brimming with luck! A single scale could be worth an entire fortune! Though a living dragon would be much better, of course. We could get all our greatest wishes fulfilled. Or what do you reckon?"

Kippen didn't reply. Talking was usually Jumi's job. He wondered sometimes if the girl's mouth ever closed beneath those bangs of hers that jutted skyward. Jumi appeared to love talking just as much as she enjoyed listening to stories at every opportunity. Aside from Oodi, the firick whom Jumi had left locked in her summer pen, she didn't really have anyone to talk to. Well, Kippen, of course. Perhaps Jumi chattered so much when she was around him because she didn't have a single other friend her age.

Neither did Kippen. Jumi was his only friend.

Not that they ever spoke the fact out loud to each other. In fact, Kippen didn't dare to bring it up because he wasn't entirely sure if Jumi even saw him as her friend. Sometimes it felt that way, other times not.

And yet, the boy couldn't bring himself to tell the girl what his greatest wish was at that moment.

He'd only realized it the day before. It was still so fresh and powerful that it couldn't be shared with anyone yet.

Not even with a best friend.

Actually, Kippen himself couldn't quite put the wish into words.

But he did know what he didn't want!

Kippen didn't want to become king.

And yet, he had to.

That was what his father King Erk wanted. The boy was to become a soldier and then the king. A man who conquers foreign lands and brings back the wealth he finds. Just like his father had done. Just like all the fathers in his lineage had done since time immemorial.

Kippen grunted.

Every man in his family tree had been great and mighty. Men the size of wild bulls, muscular from head to toe.

Kippen, however, was slender and bony.

Every man in his family had loved to fight, go on raids, and fire arrows.

Kippen, however, loved music. Anything his fingers touched released a melody: he'd been berated by his father more than once because his bow string hummed a tune. Not to mention the straw and sticks that turned into whistles or the stumps that became drums. Kippen couldn't explain it, but the music he made seemed to come from within. It pulsed in his veins and gave him joy.

Kippen's father hated when the boy made music. He learned ways to hide it from his father but found it impossible to give up entirely. Lying on his mattress at night, his fingers moved like he was holding a whistle while he waited for sleep.

It didn't matter that there was no real instrument in his hand—Kippen could tell whenever a finger tapped the wrong place. Every morning, he rose before anyone else and crept outside to the farthest corner of the fortress ward to practice for real.

The taller Kippen grew, the more his father forced him to practice activities that he found unpleasant. Fencing. Archery. Target practice with a sling. His father King Erk pushed him to try harder and harder.

And Kippen, gritting his teeth, obeyed.

That is, until he stopped.

Kippen shook his head. He didn't want to think about the King or his plan to turn his son into a soldier anymore.

Luckily, Kippen had Jumi.

Jumi, who chattered nonstop in his company. The girl whom the fortress mistress Rute took into her care after what happened to her parents.

The girl who was Kippen's best friend.

With Jumi, forgetting the rest of the world was easy because something always happened in her company, leaving no time to think about anything else.

Many gossiped that she had absolutely no luck. That the squirt seemed to attract misfortune instead. So it had been since she was an infant, beginning in the summer of an extraordinary drought when hunger and thirst drove the cynocephaly from the depths of the forest. But the only human they attacked was teensy Jumi as she slept in her birchbark cradle on the edge of the field. The attack left her with a terrible scar and her father's handsomely ornate hunting knife. As soon as the girl realized that the dagger had belonged to her father, she carried it around in its scabbard everywhere she went. As she grew older, she also made herself a leather belt from which to hang it. The knife hung at her hip at all times.

Still, it didn't shield the girl from mishaps.

When a stone tumbled off the fortress bulwark, Jumi was the one whose toe was crushed—so badly that it swelled and turned purple like a ripe plum, and her toenail fell off.

When she and Kippen were playing hide and seek in the ward, the wooden cover over the prisoner pit broke beneath her, sending her tumbling downward. The fall gave her more bruises than anyone could count.

Whenever the King's hunters were practicing archery in the ward, the castle mistress Rute forbid the girl from going outside because a stray arrow once took the shawl from her head and left a bloody scratch on her ear. It also missed Dipper, who was flying in front of the girl, by merely a hair's breadth.

Yes, Jumi and luck—many believed the two avoided each other with persistence and determination.

Nevertheless, it seemed that everything Jumi lacked in terms of good fortune was made up for in courage. She constantly felt compelled to put herself to the test. Oh, how many times it'd ended with a fall, a blow to some part of the body, slivers, and torn clothing! There was only one thing that she wasn't brave enough to do: stand up to the other kids in the village. She never opened her mouth around them. Instead, Jumi fled and hid behind corners or in the scrub surrounding the village.

Rute sighed every evening as she bathed the girl and told her she'd need to find a helper when she grew up. Someone to comb out the tangles in her hair. The scarf tied around Jumi's head every morning was always gone by evening, her braids undone, her coal-black hair full of twigs and burrs.

At that moment, however, Jumi was picking handfuls of cherry blossoms and poking them into her braids as she walked ahead of Kippen. The air around the two smelled wild and sweet, just like the adventure on which they'd embarked.

Disgrace

King Erk lay on his belly in his dim chambers and glared at the grim shadows the flames in the fireplace cast across the floor. His leg, to which the witch had tied a compress of various wild herbs, hurt so badly that he could neither sit nor walk.

Even so, the pain in the King's heart was even stronger. And the witch had no cure for that. Not that Erk had asked for one. He didn't want to admit to anyone that he'd gotten into an argument with his son, his sole heir, the previous day.

On the morning of their great quarrel, King Erk and his soldiers returned from a successful raid upstream, bringing back treasures that the previous owners hadn't quite wished to surrender willingly. Yet, that's the way life goes: everything that can be traded is traded. And if there's something that you desire but that thing isn't for sale, you steal it. The people of that other fortress certainly weren't happy about it. They'd vehemently opposed the transaction, if truth be told, and defended their fortress bravely. Nevertheless, the blades of King Erk's swords were sharper and his men more skilled in battle than the victims of their raid. True, one of the enemy archers did loose an arrow with such speed and strength that it whistled its way to the raiding party as they departed and lodged in the back of Erk's calf. The King roared, seized the arrow with both hands, and jerked it out of his leg. Although he removed it in one piece, the tip seemed to have been laced with something poisonous because the wound wouldn't stop bleeding and its edges turned black.

As soon as the King's mighty boats pushed up against Westborough's shore, he ordered that the witch be summoned. She nodded solemnly when she saw his bloody leg.

"This requires the Tears of Gaia. The poison cannot be removed without them. It will take me some time to prepare the cure. You'll have to endure the pain until then," the witch remarked as she speedily cleansed the wound with a bitter poultice, then bandaged it with moss and a strip of clean cloth.

The recipe for the potion called the Tears of Gaia was handed down from one witch to another with great secrecy. No one apart from witches themselves knew its exact ingredients, only that the mixture was extremely precious and making it required immense luck and power. As well as the right time. It was rumored that to concoct the cure, witches sacrificed rat pinkies, maggots taken from a morgue on the night of a full moon, and three drops of bat's blood. That on top of other ingredients that no one knew. Or didn't dare to speak aloud.

The witch mumbled a few spells over the gaping wound in the King's leg. No one but her understood them. Then, she spilled a couple drops of a glistening yellowish liquid into his mouth from a birchbark cup. "This will numb the leg and keep the poison from spreading. Hopefully it will keep you alive until the potion is ready," she said bluntly before leaving. Her footsteps were accompanied by the rattling of beads sewn to her apron and the brisk tapping of her staff against the floor.

Erk accidentally shifted his leg and snorted. The medicine hadn't taken effect yet and pain shot mercilessly through his limb, making the man curse.

"Kippen!" he roared so loudly that the walls shook. After a while, the door swung open and the slender boy sidled in. The reddish shock of hair covering his head stuck straight up like his father's beard. Yet, that was where the similarities ended. Kippen felt incredibly scrawny next to his gigantic father. But the greatest difference wasn't in their appearances.

It was within.

"What took you so long to get here? You were lying around somewhere daydreaming again, weren't you?" Erk growled.

Kippen shrugged in response. He knew that when his father was in the mood for squabbling, there wasn't the slightest hope of pleasing him. No matter how hard you tried. The boy hid his blistered palms behind his back and held his tongue.

He'd been doing anything but lying around and daydreaming. If there was anything he'd dreamed of at all, then it was only Jumi giving him a bracelet for mastering the art of fencing. And perhaps, just a tiny bit, Erk finally noticing that his son was truly trying.

Trying to be a worthy prince.

Since the early morning hours, Kippen had been fencing among the straw figures set up along the bulwarks, jabbing them with his sword countless times until sparks showered from his wrists and the blisters on his palms turned bloody.

"How are we supposed to defeat our enemies when my leg is busted and all you do is daydream?" Erk continued ranting. His mind, which was usually so just, had been made fuzzy by the poison fever. The King didn't realize that his words injured the boy.

Kippen's head sunk even deeper between his shoulders, his back arched, and his eyes were bleary from the tears he was holding back. He swallowed as quietly as he could, unable to shape a single one of the thoughts flurrying through his head into words.

"Boy, when are you going to finally become a man? Daydreaming won't shape you into a leader. The sword and the bow will. It's your last chance to get your act together; otherwise, you'll be a disgrace to our household. My son cannot be such a disgrace," the King raved. He jutted his bearded jaw out forcefully and with that had spoken everything he intended to say.

Kippen stood there unable to move for several minutes. When he finally collected his wits and made it outside, the air rushed from his lungs with a whoosh as if someone had pulled the cork from a barrel of boiling mead.

"A disgrace!" he gasped breathlessly and kicked a barrel standing next to the door as hard as he could, making a loud boom and sending it bouncing down the boardwalk leading to the fortress gates.

"Boy, that's no toy! You go put it back this very instant!" the guard in the little shack above the gates yelled.

Everyone always had something to say to him, some lecture to give about what he should do and how he should act. If only they'd all shut up! Enraged, Kippen spat at the guard. And then towards his father's chambers. He would've liked to send a volley of curses flying after the glob of spit but not one came to mind. His head was strangely empty.

Only one word spun around and around there: disgrace.

A thought that Kippen had never dared to fully form before suddenly dawned upon him; an idea he'd always tried to drive away invaded the emptiness of his mind.

How much simpler life would be if he weren't a prince!

He'd be free to do whatever he pleased.

To practice the things he dreamed of.

To live his own life.

Just the way he wanted to.

He had to escape the King's house!