

# **The Little Conqueror**

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# Exile

The air in the hall trembled with anticipation. Courtiers and nobles had gathered in a semicircle, ready for what was to come. Queen Elara sat on her throne. She wore a long, royal blue dress, studded with sparkling diamonds. On her jet-black hair, which was pinned up in an intricate braid, sparkled a silver crown inlaid with sapphires. Her face was one of classic beauty, with high cheekbones, a straight nose, and full lips. But it was her eyes that made the most impression. Light blue, with a stern, impressive gaze that no one in their right mind would dare ignore.

She turned her head toward a dark corner next to her throne and nodded. The room filled with lights that danced in the air like fireflies. The almost golden colors reflected off the columns and illuminated the faces of the spectators. Out of nowhere, roses, purple and yellow tulips, and pink and white lilies appeared. They danced with the lights as if they were old friends. As if that weren't special enough, fairies also appeared, fluttering their wings. Those present stared with open mouths and eyes full of wonder. Everyone seemed enchanted by this magical spectacle. The queen, however, soon seemed to have had enough of this enchantment. With an elegant gesture, she raised her slender hand in the air: "That's enough, Felhim."

A high, soft voice sounded from the same dark corner. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

A figure stepped forward from the corner. He was small, like a child, with a hunched back and crooked legs. His face was long and triangular, with gray, pockmarked skin. His bulging eyes, beneath bushy eyebrows, were large and brown and twinkled constantly. He had a crooked nose that arched over his wide mouth, behind which yellow teeth were visible.

Wild tufts of red hair stuck out from under a pointed hat, as did two large, pointed ears, on which small pink warts grew here and there. Although his appearance was grotesque, his clothing was not. A long, sumptuous silk cloak in deep purple and midnight blue hung over his shoulders, decorated with gold embroidery that glistened like stars. He also wore canary-green velvet trousers held up by a gold belt. On his feet he wore purple shoes with intricate patterns. Around his neck hung an amulet with a shiny gemstone that emitted a soft light. He raised his hand, a hand with long fingers and sharp nails, and made a

small gesture. At that moment, all the lights, the various flowers, and the fairies disappeared into thin air. Then it became silent.

Felhim stood before the queen. A shiver ran through the room, and the faces of the courtiers and nobles changed instantly. Amazement turned to disgust, as if he were a filthy animal—like a rat—that they wanted to remove or even kill immediately, without thinking about how it must feel for the rat to be hated.

He was used to it by now, but it still irritated him. Even though he had just given them an excellent performance, a performance that some in the country could only dream of, it did not change how they looked at him. Why? he thought. I am so talented, so well-known in the world of magic, of tricks, of art, but no one ever looks beyond my appearance.

He knelt before the queen and bowed his head. His mistress looked down at him with friendly courtesy.

"Thank you for your performance, Felhim," she said. "Your magic is still as wonderful as ever. You remain useful."

He looked up with a grateful smile, but there was fear in his eyes. It sounded almost like a threat. As if he was only valuable as long as he did his job well, and that if this ever changed, he would be discarded like a useless tool. Useful as long as it functioned, but worthless once it was worn out. That thought not only frightened him, but also filled him with sadness. Is that all I am to her? A tool, nothing more?

He quickly bowed his head again before she could notice the mixture of fear and sadness in his eyes. "No, thank you, Your Majesty," he said in an almost trembling voice. "It is an honor to continue serving you." As he kept his gaze fixed on the stone floor, the queen exchanged a meaningful glance with one of her courtiers. She smiled coolly and turned her eyes back to the bowed creature before her. "You may go," she said.

Felhim turned, gathered his spell books, and hurried toward the large wooden doors. Halfway there, he hesitated for a moment. He wanted to ask her how much he meant to her. He didn't, but continued walking silently until he reached the doors and left the hall.

As he lugged his books along, Felhim was once again stared at by the

disapproving glances of the guards. He did his best to avoid eye contact with them, but there were so many. At every turn, there seemed to be more, so he could do nothing but focus on his books. And even then, he was not entirely safe from the uncomfortable feeling that crept over him. Occasionally, he caught soft murmurs about how unbearable his presence was, or heard mocking laughter about how ridiculous it was how that "little gnome," that freak, that monstrosity, walked. Although they thought he couldn't hear them, the words, the murmurs, the gossip sounded as if they were standing right next to him. As if he were telepathically picking up what was being thought, said, the energy, the hostility, the lovelessness. A flame burned in his chest. He wanted to turn around and turn them all into pigs, ready to be slaughtered that very day. He had visions of their armor heating up, so that they would have to spend the rest of their lives with severe burns. But then, of course, he would have gotten into trouble. Being the only person in the palace who masters the art of magic is not as fun as it seems. As soon as something strange or unpleasant happens, you are immediately designated as the culprit. If the harvest was poor or if it rained on an important day, he was blamed. So he decided to ignore them and keep walking.

Finally, in a hidden corner of the palace, he climbed the spiral staircase and reached his room. The door creaked familiarly as he closed it behind him. He breathed a sigh of relief. At last he was back in his sanctuary, safe from all those disapproving looks and whispers. The room was small, barely larger than a broom closet. He could barely stretch his arms in it. The walls were made of gray stone. The floor was ebony, which creaked even under Felhim's small feet. In several places, wooden beams supported the rotten ceiling, which was covered with thick cobwebs.

On the right side of the room was a small bronze bed, intended for a child. On the left was a round wooden table with an armchair next to it. Both were gracefully shaped, which he himself had carved with a knife to make them look more attractive. On the table was a bowl of shiny apples, above which were sketches of forests, landscapes, and open fields.

It had been so long since he had been outside the castle walls.

This was his only way to see a little of the outside world. But his memories of these places were so vague, the trees in the forests were crooked, the landscapes almost undulating like the sea, and the open fields resembled gloomy graveyards more than beautiful fields where some people ate.

In the middle of the room stood a desk with a chair in front of it, just high enough for him to reach the top of the desk with his head.

On the desk stood a candlestick, its wax dripping onto the old wood of the desk. Above it was a stained-glass window, its colors dull and muted.

He walked to the desk and put his books down with a sigh. He did so carefully. He didn't want to damage them. They were his most precious possessions. Not only did they give him the knowledge to perform all kinds of miracles, but they also kept him company. They didn't look at him angrily, whisper or laugh behind his back, and they were always there when he needed help devising or combining spells. It seemed that they also appreciated his company, because according to some, spell books often flew away and did not return if they did not like their owner.

He walked to the window and pressed his head against the colored glass. Not far below was the large market. It seemed very busy today, with hundreds of people buying their vegetables, meat, or tools. There were also street musicians with their instruments and magicians performing their tricks. Many children were also playing tag and running through the streets and past the market stalls. Even behind the glass, he couldn't help but hear the chatter of people, the laughter of children, and the voices of market vendors touting their wares. His heart ached as he took it all in. It all seemed so lively. Even if only for a moment, he longed to know what it was like to walk through that market, talk to the people, and enjoy the music.

But he knew what would happen if he went down; the queen had made that clear to him. According to her, he was a secret and had to remain hidden from the people, no matter what. She had told him that he would frighten the masses if he revealed himself to them. It was certainly unfair, and he had always thought so, but he preferred

to obey rather than lose everything he now had.

A roof over his head, a clean bed, and a purpose in life, all as a result of breaking the rules.

Just as he was about to turn away from the window, his gaze fell on a boy down in the market. He looked thin and wore old, dirty rags. He appeared to be alone, without parents or supervision. Felhim's heart softened at the sight. Not only because the boy was alone and hungry, but also because he was leaning on a crutch.

He was crippled, and Felhim suspected that this was the reason why he had been abandoned by those who should have been caring for him.

His gaze drifted to the bowl of apples and without thinking he picked one up, opened the window a little and dropped the apple down. The apple fell right in front of the boy, and he picked it up. He looked up in surprise, but Felhim had immediately closed the window and retreated behind the wall. He looked down cautiously as the child bit into the apple. He smiled, and for the first time that day, he felt satisfaction, something like real joy. He had meant something to someone without using magic, even though he had to hide. But the familiar pain returned.

He had done something good, and yet he had to hide.

With this painful thought, he walked back to his desk and sat down. Powerless, he bowed his head and wept bitter tears. To distract himself, he picked up paper, ink, and a quill pen. His hand moved involuntarily, sketching something, perhaps a beautiful valley he had crossed years ago. The quill moved frantically across the paper. He no longer knew what he was drawing; even to him, it seemed to mean nothing. He grabbed the pot and threw it across the room, where it shattered against one of the beams. The world disappeared, time stood still. For a moment, everything around him was red.

All kinds of thoughts raced through his head like mice. If only I could do something to bring about change. But what? Enchant her and make her change the rules? No, I wouldn't do that. She is my mistress, my queen, to whom I have sworn allegiance. I could never live with myself if I went against her.

All he could do was wait for change to come. Maybe one day she would die from a seed in her apple, and a new queen or king would take her place. And who knows, maybe that person would set him free and force everyone inside and outside the castle to love him, punishing those who didn't. The red slowly faded and disappeared. Yes, that would be a wonderful day. Until then, I will continue to play my role as the secret wizard. He took a deep breath and picked up another sheet of paper. This time his hand was calm and steady. He now knew what he had to do.

As the evening sun cast long shadows across the palace, Felhim made his way once more to the throne room with his spell books. As always, the room was filled with courtiers and nobles waiting for the performance. Once again, all faces turned away from him. The scorn, the venom, the loathing, the disgust dripped from them. Some even held a cloth to their noses. Felhim hated it, but ignored it and walked silently to his place next to the throne.

Shortly afterwards, the large wooden doors opened and Queen Elara entered the hall, followed by two maids who held up the ends of her blue dress to prevent it from getting caught on anything.

Everyone stepped aside and bowed as she walked to her throne without having to look at anyone.

What would that be like? Felhim wondered. Everyone bowing to you out of respect, without you having to look at them? Having power is something special. Deep down, he longed to experience it someday. The queen took her place on the throne. It was completely silent, then she nodded to him. "Go ahead," she said.

Felhim bowed, raised his hands, and moved his fingers gracefully through the air, filling the room with images of deer leaping through the grass. The audience watched the spectacle with fascination. It was spectacular. The deer's coats glistened in the orange glow of the evening sun. Their footsteps, the rustling grass, everything was so lifelike you could almost hear it. However, no one paid any attention to Felhim. That didn't surprise him; it had always been that way. Still, he clenched his fists and gritted his teeth. Can't anyone just look at me? Compliment me on how beautiful my art is? Wave at me, even if it's just a small gesture?!

The queen raised her hand. "Enough," she said.

This is strange, Felhim thought. I've only just begun. Is something wrong? Doesn't she like it? Or did she perhaps see that I was boiling inside?

Felhim made a small movement with his hand and the deer and grass disappeared. Silence fell again.

Felhim wasn't sure what she was going to say. The queen stood up and began to applaud. "What a wonderful performance!" she said. "Don't you agree?"

Felhim didn't know what he was hearing. Then suddenly the whole audience burst into applause. He looked around. People were cheering him and looking at him gratefully. He didn't know what to think, except that it was strange that these very people, who had always looked at him with disgust, were now applauding him. He didn't care. Where once a fiery rage had burned in his chest, he now felt a soft, warm glow of dignity, something he had never experienced before.

The queen raised her hand again. The room fell silent. "It's just a pity," she said, her voice now sounding slightly deeper, "that such a hideous creature carried it out."

Felhim looked at her in surprise. "Your Majesty?" he said.

The queen jumped off her throne, grabbed him by the throat, and pulled him forward so that the audience could see him.

"Look at this face!" she said. "It looks like a piece of rotten cheese, full of bumps, spots, and pimples. When I look at him, my stomach turns! I vomit at this creature."

Trapped in her grip, Felhim looked desperately at the audience. No one seemed to feel sorry for him. They watched with amusement, like children watching an outdoor theater performance in which a villain is beaten with clubs. Then it dawned on him. They had only been pretending. It had been a game.

But why? What's happening?

"And then there's that smell," continued the queen, wrinkling her nose. "Like a dead animal rotting in a cellar. Yuck."

At that moment, she let go of him, as if he were something filthy, the lowest of the low. He fell to the ground and rubbed the spot where she had held him. Why is she doing this? Why is she saying such