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opening extract from

The Last Elf

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published by

Bloomsbury Publishers

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CHAPTER ONE

HE RAIN had been falling for days. The mud came up to his ankles. If it didn't stop raining, even the frogs would drown in this world that was now one enormous bog.

The little elf would certainly die if he didn't find a dry place to stay very soon. The world was cold. His grandmother's fireside had been a warm place. But that was a long time ago. The elf's heart ached with longing.

His grandmother said that if you dreamed hard enough, things came true. But his grandmother couldn't dream anymore. One day his mother had gone to the place from which you didn't come back, and from then on his grandmother

hadn't been able to dream at all. And he was too little to dream. Or perhaps he wasn't.

The little elf shut his eyes for a few seconds and dreamed as hard as he could. He felt a sensation of dryness on his skin, the feeling of a blazing fire. He felt his feet warming up. He felt as though he'd had something to eat.

The little elf opened his eyes again. His feet felt even colder than before, and his stomach seemed even emptier. He hadn't dreamed hard enough.

He straightened his soaking cap on his soaking hair. He was wearing the yellow cap that elves wear. His coarse, woven yellow cape was heavy and rough, and it didn't keep anything out. More water ran down his neck and began trickling beneath his jacket to his trousers. All his clothes were yellow, rough, soaking, dirty, and worn.

One day he would have clothes soft as sparrows' wings and warm as duck down, the color of dawn, the color of the sea.

One day he would have dry feet.

One day the shadows would lift, the frost would retreat.

The sun would come back.

The stars would shine again.

One day.

The dream of food filled his thoughts once more. He imagined the flatbreads his grandmother had made, and again his heart ached from longing. His grandmother had made flatbreads only once in the little elf's life. It had been at the last feast of the new moon, when even the elves

had been given half a sack of flour, when the moon had still shone.

Shading his eyes with one hand, the little elf tried to peer out beyond the rain. The light was fading. Soon it would be dark. He would have to find a place to stay before nightfall. A place to stay and something to eat. Another night sleeping in the mud, on an empty stomach, and he wouldn't make it through till morning.

His big eyes narrowed with the strain, and his gaze wandered among the gray shades of the trees. Then he closed in on a darker shadow, just visible in the distance. His heart leaped. Hope was reborn. He hurried as fast as he could, his tired legs sinking up to the knees, his eyes fixed on the shadow. For a moment, as the rain grew heavier, he was afraid it might be nothing but a darker patch of trees. Then he began to make out the roof and the walls. Submerged among the trees, choked by climbing plants, was a tiny building made of wood and stone.

It must have been a shepherd's shelter, or a charcoal burner's.

Grandmother was right. If you dream hard enough, for long enough, if you allow faith to fill you up, your hopes will become reality.

Once again the elf dreamed of a warming fire. Thoughts of smoke, heat, and the scent of pine resin filled his head and warmed him up for a few seconds. But the furious barking of a dog startled him awake, and he looked around. He had been mistaken. This was no dream. The smoke, the heat, and

the smell of pinecones were really there. He had come close to a fire that belonged to some humans.

Daydreams can kill.

The barking of the dog exploded in his ears. The little elf started to run. He might be able to make it. Otherwise the humans would catch him, and a cold, hungry, peaceful death would become an impossible dream. One of his feet caught on a tree root, and he fell face-first into the mud. The dog was on top of him. It was over.

The little elf couldn't even breathe.

Moments passed.

The dog's breath was on his neck, it was holding him down, but its teeth still hadn't sunk into any part of him.

"Leave him," said a stern human voice.

The dog backed away. The little elf started breathing again. He looked up. The human was extremely tall. On its head it had yellowish hair coiled like a rope. It had no hair on its face. And yet his grandmother had been categorical about that. Humans have hair on their faces. It's called a beard. It's one of the many things that distinguish them from elves. The little elf concentrated, trying to remember, then it came to him.

"You must be a female man," he concluded triumphantly.

"The word is *woman*, fool," said the human.

"Oh, sorry, sorry, woman-fool, I be more careful, I call right name, woman-fool," said the little elf eagerly. The language of the humans was a problem. He wasn't terribly good at it, and they were always so touchy, and touchiness made

people fierce. On that point, too, his grandmother had been categorical.

"Boy, do you want to come to a bad end?" the human threatened.

The little elf was still puzzled. According to his grandmother, the absolute lack of any kind of logic, more concisely summed up by the term "stupidity," was the fundamental characteristic that differentiated the human from the elfish race; but, despite his grandmother's warnings, the stupidity of the question was so profound that he felt he had lost his bearings.

"No, I don't want, woman-fool," the little elf assured her. "I don't want come to bad end. That not on my agenda," he insisted.

"If you say 'fool' once more, I'm going to set the dog on you. It's an insult," the woman explained, exasperated.

"Oh, now I understand," lied the little elf, desperately trying to grasp the meaning of her words. Why had the human wanted to be insulted?

"Are you really an elf?"

The little elf nodded. Better to say as little as possible. He glanced anxiously at the dog, which snarled back at him.

"I don't like elves," said the human.

The little elf nodded again. Fear merged with cold. He started to shiver. No human liked elves. His grandmother had always said so.

"What do you want? Why are you here?" asked the woman.

"Cold." The little elf's voice was breaking. He started to tremble. "The shack . . ." His voice broke again.

"Don't try pretending that you're dying of cold. You're an elf, aren't you? You've got your powers. Elves don't suffer from cold or hunger. They can stop feeling cold or hunger whenever they want to."

The little elf took a long time to grasp what she meant, and then it sank in.

"Really?" he asked brightly. "I really can do those things? So how I do them?"

"How should I know?" snapped the woman. "You're the elf, not me. We wretched humans, stupid as we are, we're the ones who are made to suffer cold and hunger." The human's voice had developed an unpleasant edge.

Fear coursed through the little elf; it rose into his throat, dry as a desert, and up to his face. He started to cry, weeping without tears, sobbing in terror.

"What on earth have I done wrong?" the woman wondered aloud. The little elf went on crying. It was a heart-rending sound that pierced the soul. It contained all the grief in the world.

"You're a child, aren't you?" she asked.

"Born lately," confirmed the little elf. "Your human lordship," he added, after searching for a phrase that would not sound offensive.

"Do you have any powers?" asked the woman. "Tell me the truth."

The elf went on looking at her. Nothing the woman said made any sense. "Powers?" he asked.

"All those things you can do."

"Oh, that. Well, there are many things, let me see. Breathe, walk, see. I also can run, talk . . . eat when something to eat. . . ." The little elf's tone became wistful.

The woman sat down in the doorway of the shack. She lowered her head and sat there for a moment. Then she drew herself up.

"I couldn't live with myself if I left you out here. You can come in. You can sit by the fire."

The little elf's eyes filled with horror, and he took a step backward.

"Please, your human lordship, no . . ."

"What's wrong with you now?"

"Not the fire. I been good. Please, your human lordship, don't eat me."

"Eat you? What are you talking about?"

"With rosemary, I think. My grandmother tell me that, when she is alive. If you not good, then human come and eat you with rosemary."

"Your grandmother told you that? Very nice!"

The little elf grew excited at the word "nice." He knew that one. He felt he was on safer ground now. His face brightened and he smiled.

"Yes, it's true, that's right. Grandmother say, 'Humans also cannibals, that the only nice thing you can say about them.'"

He had got it right this time. He had managed to say the right thing. The human didn't get angry. She looked at him for a long time, and then she started to laugh.

"I've got enough to eat for this evening," the woman reassured him. "You can come in."

The little elf slowly dragged himself inside. If he'd stayed outside, the cold would be the death of him. What did he have to lose?

A fire of pinecones blazed in the grate, giving off a smell of resin. For the first time in days he found himself in a dry place. On the fire was a real corncob, roasting away. The little elf stared at it as though in a trance.

Then the miracle happened.

The human took out a knife, and rather than using it to skin him and chop him up, she cut the corncob in two and handed the elf a piece.

The little elf still had some doubts about the human. Perhaps it wasn't as bad as all that, but then again, she might just be fattening him up until she got ahold of some rosemary. But he ate the corn anyway. He ate it kernel by kernel, making it last as long as possible.

Night had fallen by the time he finished. He nibbled at the husk as well, then wrapped himself up in his rough, damp cape and went to sleep, curled up like a baby dormouse next to the dancing flames.