

A CROWN OF DUST



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His short story “A Crown of Dust” received an Honourable Mention in the 2025 NYC Midnight Short Story Competition (Fairy Tale / Fool’s Paradise / A Housekeeper) — a recognition that marked his emergence as a voice in modern fantasy.

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Once upon a time, a devoted housekeeper named Feyla tended to the expansive halls of Lord Edran's grand estate with quiet diligence. From dawn until night, she moved unseen through its twenty-four rooms, scrubbing marble floors until they gleamed like moonlight, dusting the towering shelves of the great library, and polishing silverware until it sparkled like starlight.

A woman of quiet grace, Feyla's movements were precise from years of labour. Of average height with a sturdy frame, her sun-kissed skin and calloused hands bore the marks of tireless work. Her dark chestnut hair, often bound in a simple braid, framed storm-grey eyes filled with unspoken yearning. Dressed in a faded gown of earth tones, with an apron scented of lavender and fresh linens, she moved like a ghost through Lord Edran's halls, unseen, unheard, yet present in every polished floor and dusted shelf.

Her days were long, her work relentless, yet she never grumbled.

She glided through the estate like a ghost, unseen and unheard, yet her presence lingered in every immaculate corridor and tended room. The kitchen's warmth, the scent of aged parchment, and the soft patter of Lord Edran's hounds framed the rhythm of her days. Though bound to service, she discovered quiet contentment in its familiarity.

Yet, in the hush of evening, she would pause, gaze beyond the estate's towering walls, and wonder if something more lay beyond the only world she had known.

As she dusted the highest shelves one night, her eyes caught something unusual, a forgotten door in the far corner. Unlike the estate's grand oak and iron doors, this one was silver, polished so finely it shimmered like liquid moonlight. There were no carvings or noble crests, just a smooth handle waiting.

Even though no one else was in the vast, dimly lit library, a whisper, as soft as a sigh, brushed against her ears.

"Step inside, Feyla. Everything you've ever desired is waiting."

Her breath hitched. With hardly a flicker, the candle flames lit up the still-warm room. A chill prickled down her spine.

"I have never seen this door before."

Every day, she went to the library and brushed away cobwebs in every corner. But she had never seen this strange, sparkling door. Yet she felt an irresistible pull. An electric charge was in the air, reminiscent of the moments just before a thunderstorm, but without the sound or flash. Its source was somewhere hidden in the surrounding vastness.

As she reached out with trembling fingers and grasped the handle, it felt cold against her skin, though not excessively so. To her touch, it seemed alive.

Resistance-free, the door swung open to reveal a world unlike any she had ever known.

A gasp escaped her lips.

Feyla had felt a flutter of nervousness as she crossed through the silver door. The air was unnaturally sweet. Flowers arched without wind, and rivers glittered eerily stagnant. The beauty

before her was mesmerising, but too perfect to be real.

The sky blazed with molten gold, meadows bursting with impossible colours, and an incense-flavoured breeze heated with the warmth of an everlasting sunset. From afar, a castle of pearls and diamonds rose, its gilded gates opening to a silent welcoming.

Feyla's heart raced in her chest as she took a few steps forward. The silver door whispered again behind her.

"Welcome home."

She hesitated, her brows knitting together.

"Home?" she echoed, her voice barely more than a breath.

"No... my home is—"

She turned, glancing behind her, but the silver door had vanished, leaving nothing but the vast, endless meadow. Her pulse quickened. She swallowed, facing the palace once more.

"What is this place?" she murmured, though no one was there to answer.

Before she stood a palace of pearl and diamond, its towers shimmering beneath a sky filled with floating golden lanterns. A glass bridge arched over a silver lake, reflecting endless ripples of colour. As she drew closer, the enormous doors creaked open on their own like an enchanted choir.

Feyla paused at the threshold, clutched the sides of her dress, and stared into the grand hall.

"Is someone here?" she called out.

Her voice caught and was lost in the vastness around her. She found a feast spread out for her inside.

“Who prepared this?” she whispered, taking a step closer. “For me?”

The only thing distracting her from all the food was the flickering light of a dozen lanterns hanging above, casting fantastical shadows on the never-ending spread laid out for her.

When she stepped forward, an unfamiliar sensation gripped her. Her modest garment became moonlight, rising and spiralling effortlessly around her. Sunset-coloured jewels draped her fingers. A crown of gold sat atop her head, as light as a whisper.

Feyla drew in a sharp breath as she lifted her hands, staring down at the jewelled fingers that no longer seemed like her own.

“What... what is happening?” she whispered, running a trembling hand over the delicate fabric of her gown.

The sensation was intoxicating and unfamiliar. Her voice wavered as she moved forward, and the gown flowed like liquid light around her.

“I don’t understand. Why am I dressed like this?”

The grand hall echoed with a voice, smooth, knowing, and firm.

“You won’t need to toil anymore, dear Feyla. Here, you rule as Queen.”

Beneath its warmth lay something heavier, a quiet insistence, a binding force.

“Queen of Elyndria, the Eternal Realm,” it continued, its words thick with honey.

A shiver crawled up Feyla’s spine. The lanterns flickered, their glow faltering. *Had they always done that?*

“You belong here.”

It should have been reassuring. It wasn't.

Feyla lifted a trembling hand, brushing her fingertips over the golden crown. It was light, yet she felt its weight.

“I'm no queen,” she murmured, shaking her head. “This isn't mine. It never was.”

The palace whispered in return, its voice unfurling through the walls, a thousand breathless murmurs. *“You are Queen of Elyndria.”*

Feyla's breath caught. “Elyndria?”

The name felt both foreign and achingly familiar, as though it had been waiting for her to claim it.

She hesitated, scanning the opulent chamber. *Was this magic? A trick?*

Her doubts wavered as she lifted a goblet to her lips. The nectar was sickeningly sweet, warmth spreading through her like an embrace.

This was real, and hers.

Weeks blurred in this timeless paradise, where Feyla danced in crystal halls, wandered silver gardens, and summoned music with a thought. Each indulgence erased a piece of her past, the weight of work, the ache of effort, until only emptiness remained.

One evening, she stopped before a silver-framed mirror. A woman stared back—draped in gold, radiant, untouchable. Yet something was wrong.

Feyla leaned in, fingers grazing the cold glass. The eyes that

met hers were hollow—dark wells without memory.

Her stomach twisted. “That’s not me,” she murmured. “Who are you?”

The reflection only smiled. Then, behind it, something flickered—the silver door.

Her breath hitched. She spun around. But the door was gone.

“No,” she whispered, pulse-pounding. “I saw it. It was there.”

The woman in the glass remained still.

Panic gripped her.

Had there been a door? Had she imagined it?

She breathed shallow gasps as she searched the vast, golden halls. No door or passage led back to the world she had abandoned. Only endless beauty stretched before her—beauty that now felt suffocating, like a gilded cage.

She turned back to the mirror, her pulse drumming in her ears. “Where did it go?” Her voice trembled, edged with desperation.

The reflection did not answer.

Feyla pressed her palms against the glass. “This isn’t right. This isn’t—” Her breath stuttered. “I don’t belong here.”

A flicker in the mirror. A shadow behind the golden woman.

Feyla took a step back.

“Who are you?” The question barely left her lips before the lanterns flickered, the silver frame humming with an energy that made her skin prickle.

The woman in the mirror smiled again.

Feyla did not.

A whisper, soft yet insistent, coiled around her like silk.

“Why think of yesterday, dear Feyla? Significance is found only in tomorrow.”

She shuddered, wrapping her arms around herself. Beneath its honeyed tone—warm, gentle, and soothing—she sensed something sinister. A terrible emptiness stirred within her. Something was absent. She was absent.

Her name—her true name—felt distant, like an echo fading into silence. How long had she genuinely been there? The memory of her arrival was like mist slipping through her fingers every time she tried to grasp it—her past, her service, her work—all melting away like a sun-bleached tapestry.

Surrounded by countless marvels, a discovery caused her blood to run cold. By herself, she was utterly alone.

The palace was silent—no servants, no laughter, only a feast untouched and music with no musicians. Feyla had danced and dined, but with whom?

A scream clawed at her throat, yet no sound emerged.

Had she eaten? Had she slept?

Her heart raced as she ran, tearing through endless, gilded halls. Each door she flung open revealed only more suffocating beauty, more golden cages.

She pressed her palms against the cold, smooth surface as if the walls concealed some hidden truth. The door had to be here. She had to find it.

Frantic steps drove her forward, memories flickering with every

stride: the scent of lavender, the weight of the broom in her hands, the echo of Lord Edran's laughter.

Something stirred. At the edge of her vision, a flicker—the silver door.

She lunged for it. But before her fingers could reach the handle, it vanished into the palace's golden glow.

A whisper curled through her thoughts: *Remember who you are.*

Soap and old books. The ache of long days. The warmth of the kitchen hearth. Small, simple things—but they were hers. They were real. Her fingers clenched as if holding onto something unseen. Her life had not been grand nor perfect, but it had been hers. And that was enough.

Then—

The silver door flickered to life like a mirage, causing relief and desperation to catch in her throat. It was real, but it was fading.

Whispering, “No,” she surged forward, fingers stretching for the handle.

But through the door, darkness came, subsiding in the golden haze. With a frantic smack, her palm collided with the cold silver only moments before it threatened to disappear. And the world trembled as she touched the door.

The golden sky deepened to dark as its infinite radiance broke into black bands. The floating lanterns sputtered and winked out like dying embers. A shrieking wind whipped through the air, and the blooming gardens shrivelled, their petals crumbling to dust and blowing off like ash.

The music, once soft and welcoming, twisted into a wailing, discordant cry. The voice that had caressed her with warmth now cut like a blade.

“Why leave, Feyla? Here, you shine. Beyond this place, you are nothing but a shadow.”

The words coiled around her, tightening like unseen chains. An invisible force wrenched her from the door—from the truth that had just unbound her. Her heart slammed against her ribs, fear and determination clashing as one.

Tears burned her eyes, but she stood firm. The truth was clear now—the palace, its beauty, its perfection—none of it was real, merely an illusion. A gilded cage designed to erase her past, her identity, and, in time, herself.

She whispered, her voice steady, “I’d prefer real nothingness over empty power.”

She gripped the lock, and she wrenched the door open. The moment she stepped outside, cold air smacked her in the face, stirred with the smells of home — wood smoke, mud and the faint sweetness of fresh bread. The force that held her held her back howled in fury, but it was already too late.

Stepping forward, she entered the darkness past the silver door and found the truth.

Feyla collapsed onto the icy stone floor of the library, gasping as the chill seeped into her bones. Her simple housekeeper’s dress clung to her damp skin, and her breath came in ragged bursts. Her hands, rough with callouses once more, shook as she pressed them

against the familiar ground. Behind her, if only for a moment, loomed the silver door.

When she turned, she watched the door crack, its gleaming surface tarnishing before crumbling into dust. In its place, only a bare wall remained—the last trace of the illusion had vanished.

She was at home and felt an unprecedented level of thankfulness.

Upon entering, the library remained unchanged—the scent of aged parchment, dust dancing in candlelight, and endless shelves of ancient books. The world had not shifted. But she had.

The illusion had promised everything, yet in its perfection, it had nearly erased her. She had been lost, tempted, and almost consumed, but she had chosen the truth.

Slowly, she straightened, her fingers tracing the handle of her broom—worn, familiar, real. A faint draft stirred, carrying the scent of parchment and candle wax. No enchanted florals. No air of eternal sunsets. Just the quiet, honest world she had nearly forgotten.

She pressed her palm against the polished surface of the desk, feeling the wood's uneven grooves and the tiny imperfections that no illusion could ever replicate. She had nearly lost this—the weight of small things, the reality of imperfection, the quiet rhythm of an honest life.

Her gaze flickered to where the silver door had once stood, now only a stretch of empty wall. There was no lingering shimmer, no sign it had ever been there. And yet, Feyla knew.

She inhaled deeply, grounding herself in the scent of dust and ink. The world had not changed. But she had. And that was enough.

What was once a burden now felt grounding. As she lifted it, quiet awe settled in—it was no sceptre, no symbol of power, just her own. With each sweep, she cleared away dust and the illusions it held.

The empty promises of a gilded cage no longer held meaning. The steady rhythm of work soothed her, guiding her back to the life she had nearly forgotten—Lord Edran, the other staff, the quiet joys of the estate. The crackle of a winter fire. The simple, honest satisfaction of a job well done.

Having been offered paradise, Feyla chose to reclaim herself—not the Queen of Elyndria nor a goddess of illusion, but the housekeeper who wore a crown of dust with quiet dignity.

Just Feyla.

And that was enough.