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The Glass Crown

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** Shards Beneath the Palace
- **Chapter 2:** The Queen's Reflection
- **Chapter 3:** Ember in the Glass
- **Chapter 4:** Thief in the Night
- **Chapter 5:** A Whisper of Prophecy
- **Chapter 6:** Masks at Court
- **Chapter 7:** The Sorcerer's Secret
- **Chapter 8:** Shadowed Alleys
- **Chapter 9:** Web of Lies
- **Chapter 10:** Betrayal at Dawn
- **Chapter 11:** Visions from the Crown
- **Chapter 12:** The Forgotten Throne
- **Chapter 13:** Echoes of Magic
- **Chapter 14:** The Trials Begin
- **Chapter 15:** Bonds and Oaths
- **Chapter 16:** Flames of Rebellion
- **Chapter 17:** The Queen's Decree
- **Chapter 18:** Blood on the Glass
- **Chapter 19:** Sins of the Past
- **Chapter 20:** Choosing Sides
- **Chapter 21:** Into the Heart of the Palace
- **Chapter 22:** The True Heir
- **Chapter 23:** Broken Mirrors
- **Chapter 24:** A Crown in Shadow
- **Chapter 25:** The Shattered Throne

Introduction

Beyond the veils of mist and legend, nestled between indomitable mountains and deep, whispering forests, lies Aerith—a kingdom of splendor and secrets. Once hailed for its craftsmanship and arcane wisdom, Aerith now staggers beneath the weight of a forbidden legacy. The death of King Marius and Queen Isolde left the throne to their only child, Celestia, whose beauty is matched only by her obsession with the dazzling reflection staring back from every polished surface. Under her rule, mirrors multiply even as coin grows scarce, and edicts ring harshly through marble halls: magic is outlawed, dissent is crushed with iron, and shadows gather in every alley.

The city of Midspire, Aerith's beating heart, throbs with a tension as fragile and sharp as the finest glass for which the kingdom is famous. Here, poverty gnaws at the edges of grandeur, and the forbidden art of magic lingers in secret, passed from trembling hands beneath the watchful glare of the Queen's Mirror Guard. In this world, dreams can shatter with a careless word—or a single, fateful spark.

Rowan, orphaned son of a forgotten artisan, answers each day by plunging his hands into the molten light of the glassworks. Behind a haze of ash and heat, he carves beauty from fragility, longing not for gold or glory but for a purpose. Raised among the ashes of lost hope, Rowan harbors no ambitions beyond survival—until destiny, in the form of centuries-old shards buried beneath the ruined palace, finds him. What he uncovers is not simply art, but a relic: a crown of glass, alive with unspoken power and the heartbeat of prophecy. It is a discovery that marks Rowan for greatness—or for ruin.

Meanwhile, rumor and rebellion coil like smoke beneath the city's surface. From gilded towers to humble taverns, voices rise in secret: those who remember Aerith's magic, those who have tasted its freedom, now chafe against Celestia's glittering tyranny. Unlikely alliances form between thieves bold enough to steal from the Queen herself, and sorcerers hiding their light from a world that has forgotten wonder. Together, they fan the flames of a resistance that could either save Aerith or tear it apart.

But power in Aerith is as dangerous as it is seductive. As Rowan steps into a world of shifting allegiances and looming war, he must decide whom to trust, and what sacrifices he is willing to make for a kingdom that has never once looked his way. With every choice, his reflection in the glass changes—beckoning him toward a destiny forged not from birthright, but from courage and conviction.

This is the world of *The Glass Crown*: a land where truth is refracted through jealousy and deceit, where love sears hotter than fire, and where even the humblest soul may

rise to shape the fate of kings. The journey will demand everything Rowan and his companions have to give—but only the bravest will discover whether the glass crown will shatter, or shine.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shards Beneath the Palace

The air in the Royal Glassworks was a humid, fiery beast, smelling of sand and ambition. Rowan, thirteen years of age and already possessing the wiry strength of a seasoned smith, wiped a bead of sweat from his brow with the back of a calloused hand. His dark hair, perpetually dusted with ash, clung to his temples. Above him, the master glassblower, old Elara, bellowed instructions, her voice a gravelly counterpoint to the hiss of cooling glass.

“Mind the flux, boy! We’re not making common window panes here, but a mirror worthy of the Queen’s Own Chambers!” Elara gestured with a long, iron rod, the tip glowing cherry red. Her face, etched with a lifetime of heat and precision, was a map of Aerith’s struggling artistry. Her eyes, however, still held the keen spark of a falcon, missing nothing.

Rowan nodded, his gaze fixed on the molten orb before him, a swirling nebula of liquid light. His task was simple enough in theory: gather the purest silica from the deep veins beneath the palace, blend it with the secret alchemical catalysts Elara possessed, and then, under her watchful eye, coax it into a flawless sheet. Easier said than done when the very ground beneath the glassworks felt like it harbored ancient whispers.

The Royal Glassworks wasn't just a workshop; it was a sprawling, subterranean labyrinth beneath the oldest wing of the palace. Legend said it had been a royal vault, then a forgotten dungeon, before King Marius, Queen Celestia's father, had rediscovered its unique thermal properties suitable for glassblowing. Now, it was a constant hum of heat and clatter, a place where the old world and the new clashed in the sparks of forging.

For weeks, Rowan had been tasked with excavating a new chamber, extending the silica mines deeper into the earth. The Queen’s demand for mirrors was insatiable, each one grander and more ornate than the last. It was a tedious, dirty job, chipping away at the earth, sifting through centuries of forgotten dust and debris. He preferred the dance with fire, the delicate art of shaping glass.

Today, however, was different. As his pickaxe bit into the stubbornly packed earth, it struck something unyielding. Not rock, but something with a curious resonance. He knelt, brushing away the dirt, and his fingers brushed against a smooth, cold surface. Curious, he dug deeper, his heart thrumming with an unfamiliar excitement.

What he unearthed was not a single object, but a collection of fragmented shards,

each one refracting the dim light from his miner's lamp with an otherworldly glow. They weren't common glass; these pieces hummed with a faint, almost imperceptible warmth against his skin. They felt alive. He carefully gathered them, each shard radiating a strange, muted energy, different from the inert silica he usually extracted.

Elara had taught him that true glass held memory, especially the ancient kinds. She spoke of glass that could hum with the echoes of a distant past, or even glimpse the future. Rowan had always dismissed these as old wives' tales, the ramblings of a woman too long immersed in the heat and solitude of the glassworks. But as he held these shimmering fragments, a shiver traced down his spine. This was different.

Back in the main chamber, the heat was a tangible entity, pressing in from all sides. He poured the newly unearthed shards into a crucible, along with the regular silica. Elara glanced over, her brow furrowed. "What's that, boy? New find?"

Rowan hesitated. "Just some unusually clear pieces, Master. Thought they might help with the Queen's mirror." He felt a prickle of guilt at the lie, but something about these shards told him to keep their origin a secret. He didn't know why, but a gut feeling, a rare occurrence for him, urged caution.

Elara grunted, unconvinced but too busy with her current task to probe further. As the crucible heated, the strange shards didn't melt as readily as common silica. Instead, they swirled and coalesced, their light intensifying, forming a luminous core within the molten mass. Rowan watched, mesmerized, as patterns shifted and reformed, like constellations dancing in miniature.

When it was finally ready, he dipped his blowing pipe into the shimmering pool. The glass, infused with the essence of the ancient shards, felt different. Lighter, yet impossibly dense. It flowed with an almost conscious will, yielding to his breath with an ease he'd never experienced. He began to shape it, not into a flat mirror as intended, but into a hollow, circular form. An impulse, an undeniable whisper, guided his hands.

He worked through the night, forgetting hunger, forgetting exhaustion. The form took shape, intricate and delicate, yet strangely powerful. It was a circlet, a crown, woven from strands of pure, clear glass, each segment shimmering with an inner luminescence. He etched tiny, almost invisible symbols onto its surface, ancient markings that seemed to appear under his touch, not from any conscious design of his own.

As dawn approached, a faint, ethereal glow emanated from the newly formed crown, casting dancing shadows on the grimy walls of the glassworks. It was unlike anything he had ever created, or even seen. When the final cooling complete, and the last of the heat faded, he held it in his hands. It was surprisingly light, cold to the touch, yet pulsing with a faint, steady beat, like a hidden heart.

Elara found him moments later, slumped by the furnace, the glass crown resting on the workbench beside him. Her eyes, usually so sharp, widened as she saw the artifact. She picked it up, her fingers tracing its intricate patterns. "Rowan," she whispered, her voice rough with awe. "What... what have you made?"

He shook his head, still dazed by the experience. "I don't know, Master. It just... came to me." He felt a profound sense of both wonder and dread. He had stumbled upon something monumental, something that felt as old as Aerith itself, and he knew, instinctively, that it was dangerous.

Elara's gaze was distant, thoughtful. "This isn't just glass, boy. This... this is something out of the old stories. The stories of the Glass Crown, the one that chooses the true sovereign." Her voice was barely a whisper now, filled with a mixture of fear and reverence.

Rowan scoffed, trying to dismiss the strange feeling gripping him. "Just a fancy bauble, Master. A mistake, perhaps." But even as he said it, he knew it was a lie. The crown hummed softly in Elara's hands, a silent refutation of his words.

Elara ignored him, her eyes still on the crown. "The legends say it was forged in the First Age, a gift from the Arcane Lords. Only the true heir could wear it without being consumed by its power. It vanished when the Age of Magic ended, when the last Queen chose to hide the kingdom's gifts."

Rowan felt a chill that had nothing to do with the cooling furnace. He had heard snippets of these old tales, dismissed as children's fables by the Queen's decree. Magic was forbidden, a myth, something banished from Aerith for the good of all. Yet, here it was, humming in his master's hands, born from the very earth beneath the palace.

Before either of them could speak another word, a heavy boot struck the door of the glassworks. "Open up! Royal Guard!" A voice, gruff and impatient, echoed through the cavernous space. Rowan's blood ran cold. The Mirror Guard rarely visited the glassworks, unless the Queen's demands were particularly urgent, or...

Elara's eyes darted to the crown, then to Rowan, a flicker of understanding passing between them. "Hide it, boy! Quickly!" Her voice was sharp, urgent. Rowan snatched the crown, tucking it into the folds of his tunic, the pulsing warmth against his skin a stark reminder of his discovery.

The heavy oak door splintered inward, revealing two hulking figures in polished steel armor, their helmets reflecting the furnace glow like distorted, watchful eyes. Behind them, a third figure, slimmer and cloaked, stepped into the light. Merek, one of the

Queen's favored Royal Sorcerers, though his title was hushed these days, magic being banned. He was usually found in the Queen's private library, a shadowy figure among ancient tomes.

Merek's gaze swept the room, pausing briefly on the crucible, then on Rowan. His eyes, keen and intelligent, seemed to pierce through the ash and grime, settling on the slight bulge beneath Rowan's tunic. A knowing, almost sorrowful expression flickered across his face before being replaced by his usual austere mask.

"Master Elara," Merek said, his voice smooth and cold, "Queen Celestia demands the immediate delivery of the Royal Mirror. And you, boy," his gaze fixed on Rowan, "you are to report to the palace vaults immediately. An urgent excavation has been ordered."

Rowan swallowed, his heart hammering against his ribs. The vaults. Where he'd found the shards. A cold dread seeped into him. They knew. Or they suspected. The crown, pulsing against his chest, felt like a lead weight, yet somehow, he also felt a strange, thrilling sense of power. His world had just been irrevocably shattered, and in its place, a destiny of glass and fire was beginning to form.

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