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The Glass Fortune

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Introduction

The clatter of morning traffic in Paris was little more than a muffled presence behind the arched windows of Eva Laurent's atelier. Inside, the world shrank to the precise boundaries of her workbench—a sanctuary crowded with sun-bleached sketches, fragments of glass, and the heady scent of old varnish. Here, in the quiet ache of dawn, Eva coaxed color back to faded saints and battered angels, saving what could be salvaged and letting go of what was lost. This—her hands buffing unwieldy shards until they gleamed—was her peace.

As an art restorer specializing in stained glass, Eva had built a life defined by patience, discipline, and discretion. Behind her reputation for breathing life into broken masterpieces, she cloaked the sharp memories of another existence—one punctuated by secrets and escape. Most days, the past felt safely walled off, as if sealed behind one of the cathedral windows she so often mended. But there were cracks in every surface, and time had a way of finding them.

She was in the midst of teasing a centuries-old blue back to its former brilliance when a knock at the atelier door startled her. It was the kind of brisk, needy thump that carried the undertone of desperation—a sound that sent a shiver through her well-ordered world. Before she could muster a protest, the door swung open, flooding the room with pale winter light and a voice she hadn't heard in years.

Standing on the threshold was Luc—her younger brother, his expression carved by equal parts hope and fear. In his gloved hands, carefully wrapped in worn cloth, he held something precious: a battered fragment of stained glass that glowed with impossible, haunted colors. Eva's heart recoiled at the sight—not for what he carried, but for the way he looked at her, a silent plea in his eyes.

The story behind Luc's sudden reappearance unraveled quickly and unevenly. A shadowy organization, collectors with more money than scruples, and a legend whispered through the war-torn corridors of Europe: the Glass Fortune—a mystical artifact shattered and hidden at the end of World War II, now scattered across the continent in pieces as rare as they were dangerous. Luc's frantic confession was laced with half-truths, but one fact cut through the haze: she was no longer safe, and what he carried was only a single pane in a deadly mosaic.

Within hours, Eva's controlled existence splintered, compelling her onto a path she'd sworn never to tread again. As she gazed at the brilliant, enigmatic sliver of glass, Eva realized that her greatest challenge would not come from the shadows crawling after them in the Parisian night, but from the secrets she'd tried so hard to forget—and the

brother whose fate was now tied inexorably to her own.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shattered Reflections

Eva stared at the man on her doorstep, then at the wrapped parcel in his hands, and finally back at his face, trying to reconcile the dishevelled stranger with the ghost of her memory. Luc. Her brother. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been a gangly teenager, all sharp angles and defiant grins, promising to visit "soon." That had been twelve years ago. Now, his hair was longer, streaked with premature grey, and his eyes, once so full of mischief, held a haunted, almost desperate glint. He looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks, and the expensive, albeit rumpled, suit he wore seemed less a sign of prosperity and more an attempt to blend into a world he clearly no longer belonged to.

"Luc?" Her voice was a dry whisper, a sound she hardly recognized as her own. She hadn't dared to hope, not really, that he would ever reappear. After years of silence, a chasm had formed between them, one she'd gradually filled with the quiet precision of her work. Now, the gap felt jarringly real, wide enough to swallow them both.

He offered a weak, lopsided smile that used to charm their grandmother out of her most treasured sweets. "Eva. You look... exactly the same." He shifted his weight, and the package in his hands seemed to pulse with an almost imperceptible light. "Well, maybe a bit more... elegant."

She didn't return the smile. Elegance was a luxury she couldn't afford in her line of work, not when faced with shards of glass that could slice through skin as easily as they could tell a story. "What do you want, Luc?" The question was blunt, devoid of the warmth she might have expected, even after all this time. It wasn't a greeting, but a shield.

His eyes flickered to the street, then back to her, a nervous energy radiating from him. "I need your help, Eva. Desperately." His voice dropped, barely audible above the distant rumble of the Métro. "It's about this." He unwrapped the cloth, revealing the fragment of stained glass.

The light in the atelier caught it, transforming the dull, grey Paris morning into something extraordinary. It wasn't merely a piece of glass; it was a miniature cosmos. Deep, rich blues bled into fiery reds, shot through with veins of emerald and gold, the colors shifting and swirling as if containing their own internal light source. It was unlike any glass Eva had ever encountered, ancient and yet vibrant, almost alive. The craftsmanship was exquisite, far beyond anything she had studied in her textbooks, hinting at a lost art, a forgotten master.

A true artist could tell a story with light and color, and this fragment hummed with narratives untold. Her professional curiosity, long dormant for anything outside a commission, sparked to life. "What is it?" she asked, a step closer, drawn in despite herself.

Luc's gaze hardened, a flicker of something she recognized as his old intensity. "It's a piece of the Glass Fortune."

The name hung in the air, a whisper from old legends. Eva had heard it, of course. Every art historian worth their salt had. The Glass Fortune – a mythical stained glass window, said to bestow immense power upon its possessor, created by an anonymous medieval artisan, perhaps even a sorcerer. Supposedly, it had been broken into dozens, maybe hundreds, of pieces during the chaos of World War II, scattered across Europe like glittering seeds of destruction or salvation. Most considered it a charming, if far-fetched, fable.

"The Glass Fortune is a myth, Luc," Eva said, her voice laced with skepticism. "A romanticized folktale about a lost relic. People have been chasing it for centuries. It's a fool's errand."

"Not anymore," he countered, his voice firm, almost defiant. "It's real, Eva. And I have a piece of it." He held it out, reverently, as if it were a fragile bird. "I need you to tell me what it is. To verify it. To... understand it."

Eva reached out, her fingers hovering over the glass. It was cool to the touch, smoother than expected, almost silky. The light rippled through it, casting kaleidoscopic patterns on the grimy floorboards. There was an undeniable power within it, a resonance that defied logical explanation. It wasn't just old; it felt ancient, imbued with centuries of human ambition and fear.

"Where did you get this, Luc?" she demanded, her gaze sweeping over him, searching for clues in his worn clothes, his agitated movements.

He hesitated, a shadow crossing his face. "It's... complicated. I was pursuing a lead on a rare antiquity for a client, and I stumbled upon it. It's opened up a whole world I didn't know existed, Eva. A dangerous world." He glanced back at the street again, his jaw tight. "I'm being hunted."

Eva scoffed. "Hunted? What, by the Antiquities Police? Luc, what kind of trouble have you gotten yourself into now?" Her brother had always had a penchant for getting in over his head, for chasing grand schemes that invariably ended in disaster. This felt like another one of his elaborate cons, a dramatic plea for attention.

"No, not the police," he said, his voice dropping to a near-whisper. "Something far worse. There are people, Eva, who want this piece. People who will stop at nothing to get it. They've been following me for weeks. I barely got away from them in Zurich."

Zurich. That was a long way from the comfortable Parisian art scene. Eva's mind raced, piecing together the fragmented narrative. Luc, the mysterious client, a lost artifact, and now, shadowy pursuers. It sounded less like an art acquisition and more like a spy novel.

"Who are these people?" she pressed, her professional detachment struggling against a rising tide of concern. He was her brother, after all, and despite the years, a thread of affection still bound them.

"They call themselves the 'Conclave,'" he said, spitting the name out like a curse. "A secret society, centuries old, obsessed with collecting all the pieces of the Glass Fortune. They believe it's the key to... something. Immense power, control. They're ruthless, Eva. They've killed for this."

A shiver traced its way down Eva's spine. The casual mention of murder, the genuine fear in Luc's eyes - it wasn't an act. This wasn't one of his usual escapades. The playful glint in his eye was gone, replaced by a raw terror she'd rarely seen on him, not even when they were children facing their father's stern lectures.

"So you came to me," she stated, a cynical edge to her voice. "The art restorer. The one who cleans up messes. Why me, Luc? Why not go to the authorities?"

He winced. "Because they wouldn't believe me. And even if they did, the Conclave is too powerful. They have people everywhere. And besides," his voice softened, a flicker of the old Luc returning, the one who knew how to twist her arm, "you're the only person I trust with something this important. You understand art, Eva. You understand history. And you're good at keeping secrets."

The last part hit home. Eva had a past she guarded fiercely, a collection of choices and circumstances that had led her to the quiet life of an art restorer. She was good at keeping secrets because her own survival depended on it.

"And what do you expect me to do, Luc?" she asked, her voice tight. "Hide you? Help you sell it? This isn't a painting, it's a legend. And a dangerous one, if half of what you say is true."

"I don't want to sell it," he said, his eyes fixed on the glowing fragment. "I want to put it back together. All of it. Before the Conclave does." He looked at her then, truly looked at her, his desperation laid bare. "I need you to help me find the other pieces, Eva. Your expertise, your knowledge of art history, of lost objects... you're the only

one who can do this. You're the only one who can understand the clues hidden in plain sight."

Eva stepped back, shaking her head. "No. Absolutely not. My life is here. It's quiet. It's safe. I am not getting involved in some dangerous treasure hunt with a shadowy organization, Luc. You know my history. I'm done with that kind of life."

"You think you have a choice?" he retorted, his voice rising in urgency. "They know I came to you, Eva. They were probably watching me leave Zurich. They'll be here soon. If you don't help me, they'll come for you anyway. They'll assume you're involved, or that you know something. You're already in this, whether you like it or not."

His words hung in the air, a cold, undeniable truth. The carefully constructed walls of her life began to crack. Her quiet atelier, her safe routine - it all seemed fragile now, illuminated by the ominous glow of the glass fragment. Luc was right. If they knew he was here, if they knew he had brought her into the periphery of his madness, then her sanctuary was already compromised.

She looked at the glass again, its ethereal beauty a stark contrast to the ugliness Luc had brought with him. A single piece of a broken legend. A fragment of a life she had tried to forget. And now, the catalyst for a nightmare she had sworn to avoid.

"Show me," she said, her voice barely a whisper, defeat mingling with a grudging curiosity. "Show me what you know. Everything."

Luc's tense shoulders relaxed slightly, a glimmer of relief in his eyes. He knew her. He knew that beneath her layers of self-preservation, a flicker of the old Eva, the one who craved puzzles and embraced danger, still existed. He pulled a worn leather-bound journal from his inner jacket pocket, its pages filled with cryptic notes, sketches, and faded photographs. "It all starts here," he said, laying the journal next to the glowing fragment. "The legend, the clues, the first piece we need to find."

As Eva picked up the journal, the weight of it felt immense, like a history she was suddenly destined to rewrite. The scent of old paper and dust filled her nostrils, mingling with the faint, metallic tang of fear. Her world had just been irrevocably shattered, and in its place, a mosaic of danger and mystery began to form. She looked at Luc, her brother, the harbinger of chaos. A familiar, unsettling feeling settled in her gut. She was in. And there was no turning back.

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