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# Crimson Reign

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## Introduction

In the heart of Erenvale, the pulse of ancient magic and simmering ambition beats through lands divided by both history and fate. Eons past, the realms of light and shadow split the once-united kingdom, birthing a legacy of suspicion and conflict that now colors every interaction among its peoples. Great cities rise behind fortified walls, while forgotten villages cling to their hopes at the edges of wild frontiers. The world teeters on the edge of change, and the cost of peace—and of war—grows higher with each passing season.

The weary peace that binds Erenvale's fractured kingdoms is as fragile as glass, threatened by political machinations, secret alliances, and the ever-present lure of forbidden magic. Sorcerers known as Magisters wield their power as both shield and spear; noble houses maneuver for dominance, and rumors of war smolder in whispers carried by merchant caravans and wind alike. Yet beneath these grand machinations lie smaller stories—of quiet resilience, hidden hopes, and awakenings long deferred.

In a remote town called Windfall, nestled by the silent sweep of the Crimson Woods, the rhythms of life appear unremarkable. Here, far from the capital's intrigues and the Magisters' reach, Kaiya works as a humble tavern server, tending to weary travelers and dreaming only of her next day's meal. She has grown up believing herself to be ordinary, her past as unremarkable as the weathered stones that mark Windfall's boundaries. But destiny, it seems, lingers in the shadows of the mundane, waiting for the right moment to reveal itself.

An encounter with a mysterious, gleaming gem—deep crimson like freshly spilled blood—marks the end of Kaiya's quiet days. In an instant, the gem unlocks abilities she barely comprehends, awakening threads of magic that have lain dormant within her bloodline for generations. With her newfound power comes a tide of peril, as both those who would guide her and those who would see her destroyed converge on Windfall. The path ahead is shrouded in uncertainty and danger, and every step takes her further from the only life she has ever known.

As Kaiya's journey unfolds, so too does the greater saga of Erenvale—a realm poised at the brink of transformation. Old wounds are ripped open, secrets surface from the depths, and allegiances are challenged as the forces of light and shadow stir to action. The cost of truth proves steep, and Kaiya must grapple not only with her powers, but with what it truly means to shape the destiny of kingdoms.

This is a tale woven from the crimson threads of destiny, betrayal, and courage. Within these pages, the humble will rise, heroes will fall, and the fate of Erenvale hangs in

precarious balance. Welcome to the world of Crimson Reign.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Crimson Gem

The scent of stale ale and simmering stew was Kaiya's constant companion, a comforting, if not particularly glamorous, perfume. The Rusty Flagon, nestled like a grumpy old badger within the winding, cobbled lanes of Windfall, was her world. She moved through its perpetual dimness with practiced ease, a tray laden with frothing mugs and crusty bread balanced precariously on one hand, her mind often drifting to the sparse warmth of her cot in the attic room above. It was a life of simple routine, where the greatest drama involved a spilled drink or a particularly boisterous patron's rendition of a tavern ballad.

Tonight, however, promised a slight deviation from the norm. A storm, the kind that swept down from the jagged peaks of the Dragon's Teeth mountains with an almost personal vendetta, had begun to lash at Windfall. The wind howled like a banshee through the eaves, rattling the very foundations of the inn, and rain hammered against the thick glass of the windows. It meant fewer travelers braving the roads, but those who did arrive sought the Flagon's shelter with an uncommon desperation, their cloaks dripping puddles onto the worn wooden floor.

One such traveler, a man cloaked in travel-stained grey, had just entered, bringing with him a gust of cold air and the smell of pine and wet earth. He was tall, with a lean build and a hood pulled low, obscuring most of his face. He moved with a quiet efficiency that spoke of long journeys and a certain self-reliance. Kaiya watched him from behind the bar as she polished a tankard, a faint flicker of curiosity stirring within her. Most travelers were either boisterous merchants or weary farmers. This one felt different.

He took a seat at a secluded table in the corner, his back to the wall, surveying the room with eyes that seemed to miss nothing. When Kaiya approached, a polite smile plastered on her face, he simply raised a gloved hand. "Ale. Strongest you have." His voice was low, a rumbling baritone that carried a hint of gravel, like stones shifting in a riverbed.

She nodded, retrieving a tankard of the Flagon's infamous 'Dragon's Breath,' a concoction rumored to cure anything from a bad mood to a minor plague. As she placed it before him, her gaze snagged on something unusual at his belt. It was a pouch, not of common leather, but of a dark, shimmering fabric, embroidered with an intricate, unfamiliar pattern. A strange, almost magnetic pull emanated from it.

Dismissing it as an oddity, Kaiya turned to attend to another table. The hours bled into one another, filled with the clinking of tankards, the murmur of conversations, and the

occasional burst of laughter. The storm outside raged unabated, and the Flagon, for all its rustic charm, felt like a besieged fortress. The grey-cloaked man remained in his corner, largely silent, nursing his ale. He seemed less interested in the warmth of the inn than in observing its occupants.

It was well past midnight when the inn began to quiet. Most patrons had stumbled off to their beds, leaving only a few stragglers and Kaiya to clear up. The grey-cloaked man was gone, his table empty save for the half-finished tankard. Kaiya sighed, reaching for it, and then she saw it. Lying abandoned on the scarred wooden tabletop, glinting faintly in the dying lamplight, was the pouch.

Her heart gave a little skip. Travelers often left small things behind, but this pouch felt significant. Its shimmering fabric seemed to almost pulse in the gloom. Hesitantly, she picked it up. It was heavier than she expected, and a strange warmth radiated from it, a warmth that prickled her fingertips. A sudden gust of wind rattled the windows, and a loose shingle clattered on the roof, making her jump.

Curiosity, a rare luxury in her methodical life, gnawed at her. She knew she should simply put it aside for the traveler to reclaim, but something compelled her to investigate. The drawstring felt ancient, braided from threads that shimmered with an almost otherworldly gleam. With a gentle tug, the pouch opened.

Inside, nestled on a bed of dark velvet, lay a single gem. It was unlike anything Kaiya had ever seen. The size of her thumb, it possessed a deep, mesmerizing crimson hue, like a drop of solidified blood, yet it glowed with an internal light. Not a bright, glaring light, but a soft, pulsing luminescence that seemed to draw all the ambient light into itself. As she lifted it from the pouch, a jolt, like static electricity, ran through her hand and up her arm.

The sensation was not unpleasant, but intensely surprising. It felt as though a sleeping part of her had just been nudged awake. The gem was warm, impossibly so, fitting perfectly into the hollow of her palm. Its facets, invisible until now, caught the lamplight, throwing tiny, fleeting crimson reflections onto the rough wood of the bar. It hummed, a low vibration that she felt more in her bones than heard with her ears.

As she held the gem, a rush of images, fragmented and fleeting, flashed through her mind. Not memories, but something akin to a dream, vivid and disorienting. She saw towering spires of light reaching for a sapphire sky, then crumbling ruins shrouded in shadow. She heard a cacophony of voices, speaking a language she didn't understand, yet somehow recognized. A vast, ancient forest, impossibly green, shimmered before her eyes, then vanished.

Kaiya gasped, her breath catching in her throat. The gem pulsed faster, its warmth intensifying, almost burning against her skin. A strange energy, like liquid fire, began

to course through her veins. It wasn't pain, but an overwhelming surge, a feeling of being filled with something vast and powerful, something that had always been missing. Her fingers tightened around the gem, as if instinctively grasping onto this newfound sensation.

The world around her seemed to sharpen, colors becoming more vibrant, sounds more distinct. She could hear the faint scuttling of mice in the walls, the distant hoot of an owl in the Crimson Woods, the frantic beat of her own heart. A strange tingling sensation spread from her fingertips, up her arms, and into her chest. It felt as though her very atoms were vibrating, resonating with the ancient power contained within the crimson gem.

Suddenly, a faint, almost imperceptible shimmer radiated from her hands, a delicate, ephemeral light that pulsed in time with the gem's glow. It was subtle, barely there, yet unmistakably real. Her eyes widened in disbelief. She had never known such a thing was possible, never imagined herself capable of anything beyond pulling pints and scrubbing floors. Magic was the domain of the Magisters, cloistered in their distant academies, or the stuff of bardic tales.

A flicker of fear, cold and sharp, cut through the intoxicating rush of power. What was this? What had she stumbled upon? The grey-cloaked man, his strange silence, the unusual pouch – it all clicked into place. This was no ordinary lost item. He must have left it, perhaps deliberately, perhaps by accident. But the feeling of purpose, of destiny, that now surged within her suggested something far grander than a simple oversight.

She tried to push the gem back into the pouch, but her fingers, suddenly clumsy, fumbled. The crimson light intensified, illuminating her shocked face in its eerie glow. Her reflection in the polished surface of the bar showed wide, disbelieving eyes, and a faint, almost translucent aura around her hands. It was like looking at a stranger, a more powerful, more mysterious version of herself.

A sudden, sharp crack from outside made her jump, sending the gem tumbling from her grasp. It hit the worn wooden floor with a surprisingly soft thud, rolling under a nearby table. The moment it left her hand, the intense rush of energy subsided, leaving her feeling dizzy and strangely cold, as though a vital part of her had been abruptly withdrawn. The shimmering light around her hands vanished.

She dropped to her knees, frantically searching for the gem. Her heart hammered against her ribs, a frantic drumbeat against the sudden silence. The storm outside had momentarily lulled, leaving an unnerving quiet in its wake. All she could hear was her own ragged breathing and the distant drip of rain from the eaves. She stretched her hand under the table, her fingers brushing against dust and stray crumbs, until they closed around the smooth, warm surface of the gem.

As her fingers curled around it, the warmth returned, a gentle hum against her palm, but the overwhelming surge of power did not. It was as if the gem had simply offered a taste, a brief, tantalizing glimpse of what it held. She stared at it, a thousand questions swirling in her mind. This was no ordinary stone. This was magic, real and tangible. And it had found her.

A faint sound, like a whispered rustle, came from the back door, the one that led to the alley. Kaiya froze, the gem clutched tight in her hand. Her tavern keeper senses, honed by years of dealing with late-night mischief, immediately went on high alert. No one ever used that door, not unless they were trying to be discreet. Or nefarious.

Carefully, she slipped the gem into the front pocket of her apron, its warmth a small, comforting presence against her stomach. She stood, grabbing a heavy iron poker from beside the fireplace, her knuckles white as she gripped it. Her heart thumped a frantic rhythm, a mixture of fear and the lingering thrill of the gem's awakening. Her quiet life in Windfall, she realized with a jolt, was over. The crimson gem had seen to that.

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