

No Crown May Enter
Episode 1
No Crown May Enter
Chapters 1-4

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TABLE OF CONENTS

Epigraph

Episode One: No Crown May Enter

Chapter One — The Basil Dies

Chapter Two — Opaline's Box

Chapter Three — The Road to the Gathering

Chapter Four — Crimson

Epigraph

*“For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all
the members of that one body, being many, are one
body...”*

— 1 Corinthians 12:12, KJV

Episode One: No Crown May Enter

Chapter One — The Basil Dies

I knew Violet's magic was failing when the basil died beneath her fingers. It didn't wilt or brown at the edges from too much sun or too little water. It died. One moment the plant stood green and fragrant in its blue clay pot on the kitchen sill, its leaves fat from summer and the room filled with the sharp, peppery scent that always clung to Violet's hands after she worked with herbs — the next, its stems folded in on themselves. Black spread through the leaves like spilled ink. Violet snatched her hand away. For a heartbeat, neither of us spoke.

Outside the open window, a cart rattled along the village road. Somewhere across the lane, Brindle Mason's hammer rang against stone in a steady, familiar rhythm. Bees moved lazily among Aunt Sienna's lavender beneath the sill. Everything in the world continued exactly as it had been.

Except the basil.

Violet stared at it. "Perhaps I overdid it."

Her voice was too light. I looked at her instead of the plant. She had always been thinner than I was, all narrow wrists and long brown braids, but lately there was a delicacy to her that I did not like. Her skin had lost some of its warm color. Faint shadows rested beneath her eyes. She caught me looking and straightened.

“I’m fine, Cera.”

“You nearly killed a basil plant.”

“That is a rather dramatic interpretation.”

“It’s dead.”

“It might recover.”

I touched one of the leaves. It broke apart beneath my fingertip. A dry black smear streaked my skin. Violet frowned.

“Maybe that one won’t,” she admitted.

I gave her a look.

She gave me one back.

For sixteen years, my sister had been incapable of admitting weakness if there was even the slightest possibility that stubbornness might accomplish the same thing. Unfortunately, stubbornness was a family trait.

The kitchen smelled of bread, lavender drifting through the window, and the faint mineral coolness that always seemed to linger inside our house no matter how warm the day became. Aunt Sienna claimed it came from the stone foundation, laid by our grandfather with his own magic before either of us was born. Violet reached for the next pot. I caught her wrist.

“No.”

Her gaze dropped to my fingers. Then rose to my face.

“Cera.”

“No.”

“I only need to see whether—”

“We have established that today is not an especially good day for plants in your immediate vicinity.”

“I can still feel my magic.”

That quieted me. Violet’s expression changed. Beneath the irritation was fear. She turned her palm upward. Usually when Violet called Stone, the magic announced itself gently. A shimmer beneath the skin. A pulse in the air. Leaves turning toward her as if she were sunlight. But this time, nothing happened.

She swallowed. “Give me a moment.”

“Violet.”

“Just one.”

Her fingers curled. The pot on the sill trembled. A tiny shoot of rosemary leaned toward her. For one relieved instant, I thought she had done it. Then Violet gasped. Her knees buckled. I caught her before her head struck the table.

“Violet!”

Her weight hit me hard enough to drive my hip against the cupboard. A bowl toppled from the counter and shattered. The sound brought Aunt Sienna running. She came through the kitchen doorway with a smudge of flour on one cheek and both sleeves rolled past her elbows.

“What happened?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

That was a lie. I knew exactly what had happened. I just didn't know why. Together we lowered Violet to the floor. Her eyes fluttered open almost immediately.

"I am fine," she whispered.

Aunt Sienna's face went still. That frightened me more than Violet collapsing. Sienna Quartz had raised us both after our mother died, and in all those years I had seen her angry, exhausted, grieving, amused, exasperated, and once so furious with a tax collector that the paving stones outside our house had cracked beneath his boots. I had almost never seen her afraid. She was afraid now.

"Cera," she said, "fetch Mistress Amber."

I was already moving.



Our village, Mossmere, had no walls. It had never needed them. The Stone Lands rolled around us in long green folds, orchard hills to the west and the Stonewood rising dark on the northern horizon. Houses of gray and honey-colored rock lined the main road, most built low and broad beneath slate roofs. Ivy climbed nearly every wall I rushed past. Window boxes spilled over with herbs and flowers. In summer, Mossmere smelled of warm earth, cut hay, rosemary and horses and bread ovens.

Usually, I loved it. That afternoon the sweetness made me angry. I ran. People called after me. I ignored them. Mistress Amber lived three lanes over in a cottage nearly hidden beneath a variety of colorful climbing roses. I reached her gate breathless and almost tore it from its

hinges. She opened the door before I knocked. Amber Feldspar was small, silver-haired, and about as soft as boot leather.

“What?”

“Violet collapsed.”

She had her healer’s bag in her hand as soon as the words were spoken. We hurried back together. I noticed along the way that Amber did not ask what Violet had been doing. That bothered me. It bothered me enough that halfway home I said, “She was using her magic.”

Amber’s mouth tightened. “Was she?”

“You knew.”

“I know nothing yet.”

“Amber.”

“Run first. Interrogate later.”

She was nearly seventy and somehow managed to outpace me for the final stretch. By the time we returned, Aunt Sienna had moved Violet upstairs. Her room faced the orchard. Sunlight poured through gauzy curtains and painted the floorboards gold. Bundles of dried herbs hung from the rafters. Violet had kept jars of polished stones along the windowsill since she was little—agate, quartz, jasper, mica—arranged by color rather than value. She was sitting against the pillows when we entered.

“I said I was fine.”

Mistress Amber shut the door. “Then you’ll have no objection to proving it.”

Violet rolled her eyes. A good sign, I thought. I stayed near the foot of the bed while Amber examined her. Pulse. Eyes. Breathing. Hands. Then she placed one palm over Violet's sternum and the other against the center of her back.

"Call your magic."

Violet glanced at me.

"Do it," Amber said.

Violet closed her eyes. Nothing happened. Amber's face remained unreadable. Aunt Sienna stood beside the window with her arms folded so tightly across her chest that her knuckles had gone pale. Violet tried again. The stones on the sill trembled. A tiny green vine threaded through a crack in the exterior wall stirred. Then Violet made a small sound of pain. Amber withdrew her hands.

"That's enough."

"But—"

"Enough."

Violet opened her eyes. "What is wrong with me?"

The question broke something in the room. Even the breeze seemed to stop.

Amber looked at Aunt Sienna. Sienna looked away. I saw it.

"Don't," I said before I could stop myself. Three faces turned toward me. I pointed at them.

"Do not do that."

"Cera," Sienna said.

“No. No looks. No deciding what we should or should not hear. If something is wrong with Violet, we need to hear it.”

Violet shifted beneath the blanket.

Amber took a breath and pronounced, “This is not an illness I recognize.”

Violet’s face tightened. “But you have seen it before.”

Amber was silent. I knew before she answered. “Yes.”

The room seemed suddenly much smaller.

“How many?” I asked.

“Cera—”

“How many?”

Amber exhaled.

“Three.”

Sienna turned sharply.

“Here?”

“Not in Mossmere. Two in villages west of the river. One near Bracken Hill.”

“All Stone?” I asked.

Amber looked at me.

“No.”

That surprised me.

“One Stone. One Gale-born trader. One Ember woman traveling with a caravan.”

Violet stared at her hands.

“What happened to them?”

Amber hesitated. That was answer enough.

My stomach clenched. “What happened?”

“The first recovered somewhat.”

“Somewhat?”

“She can no longer call magic.”

Violet went white.

“The second is still ill.”

“And the third?”

Amber looked toward the window. The orchard leaves moved in the afternoon wind.

“She died.”

I heard Violet inhale. My entire body went cold.

“No,” I refused, shaking my head.

Amber looked at me. “You asked.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re right.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You said you don’t know what this is.”

“I don’t.”

“So, you don’t know that it’s the same thing.”

“No.”

“Then why are you telling us this?”

“Because pretending the possibility does not exist will not protect your sister.”

I hated her for that. Only for a moment. Then I hated myself for hating her. Violet said nothing. She was looking at the polished stones on her windowsill. The piece of amethyst I had brought her from the river market three years ago sat near the center. Her favorite. She lifted one hand toward it. I caught her fingers.

“Don’t.”

“I want to see if I can move it.”

“No.”

“Cera.”

“You collapsed trying to persuade rosemary to lean toward you. The amethyst can stay where it is.”

Her mouth trembled. She looked away before I could decide whether she was about to cry. Violet almost never cried. I wanted to burn the whole world down for making her want to. An inconvenient impulse for someone whose supposed Stone magic could barely persuade weeds to grow. Amber began pulling small bottles from her bag.

“I can give her something for the exhaustion. No magic for at least three days.”

“Three days?” Violet said.

“Seven if you argue.”

Violet shut her mouth. Amber gave her a grimly satisfied nod. Sienna moved closer.

“There must be something else.”

“There are stronger healers in the capital.”

Sienna’s expression hardened. “The capital.”

“Yes.”

“What would they do that you cannot?”

“Perhaps nothing.”

“Then—”

“But they have access to records we don’t. Royal archives. Old magical texts. The Warden’s physicians.”

At the word Warden, something shifted inside me.

Not hope. Not yet. But a spark — the promise of hope.

“The Heartwell,” I said.

Amber looked at me. Sienna did too.

Violet frowned. “What about it?”

Every child in the realm knew about the Heartwell. The source beneath Arden Keep. The ancient well of magic from which, according to every history we were taught, the elements had first spread into the world.

Stone.

Tide.

Gale.

Ember.

Four great powers held in balance by the Warden. The person chosen through the Ascendant Trials.

“They say the Warden can restore damaged magical cores,” I said.

“They say many things,” Sienna replied.

“But is it true?”

Amber’s silence told me it might be.

I stepped toward her. “Is it?”

“I have never seen the Heartwell.”

“That is not what I asked.”

“No healer outside the royal household knows exactly what it can do.”

“But there are stories.”

“Yes.”

“Of people being healed?”

“Yes.”

“Of magic being restored?”

Amber hesitated. “Yes.”

Violet stared at me. I could almost see her understanding where my mind had gone.

“No,” she said. She shook her head at me.

I ignored her. “When does the Gathering begin?”

Sienna’s voice turned sharp. “Cera.”

“When?”

Amber answered before Sienna could stop her.

“Registration closes in six days.”

Violet pushed herself upright. “No.”

“I’m only asking.”

“You are not only asking.”

Sisters were inconvenient that way. They knew exactly what shape your worst ideas took before you had finished building them. Sienna crossed the room.

“You are not entering the Gathering.”

I looked at her.

“I didn’t say I was.”

“You did not need to.”

“I barely have Stone magic.”

“Exactly.”

I looked back at Amber. “How many candidates die?”

Sienna swore under her breath. Amber studied me.

“Every Gathering is different.”

“How many?”

“Some years, none.”

I waited.

“Some years,” she continued, “many.”

“And the winner of the Trials becomes Warden.”

“The winner of the Trials becomes Warden,” Amber said.

“And gets access to the Heartwell.”

“Yes.”

There it was. An impossible road opening in front of me. I did not want it. That mattered. Perhaps later people would imagine that anyone entering the Gathering must have dreamed about it since childhood. That I had yearned for glory. That I had pictured myself carrying four Marks into Arden Keep while crowds shouted my name.

I had not. I had always thought people who voluntarily entered the Gathering possessed either extraordinary courage or an inadequate appreciation of death. Possibly both. I liked Mossmere. I liked our crooked kitchen table and the orchard behind the house. I liked knowing which baker burned his first batch every Monday and which path through the western fields flooded after heavy rain.

I had no particular desire to climb mountains, enter drowned cities, cross magical ruins, or compete against people who had spent their entire lives preparing for the Trials.

I looked at Violet. And understood with terrible clarity that desire had nothing to do with it. If a door existed, I would open it. If there was a road, I would take it. If there was even the smallest chance the Heartwell could save her, then the fact that the path to it might kill me became an obstacle rather than an answer. Violet knew me well enough to see all those thoughts run through my mind and the decision made at the end of it.

“Cera.”

“I’m asking.”

“You have that look.”

“What look?”

“The one you had before you climbed into the old quarry to rescue that dog.”

“He was trapped.”

“The quarry wall collapsed.”

“After I got him out.”

“The one you had before you followed those thieves from the autumn market.”

“They stole Aunt Sienna’s purse.”

“You followed three armed men into the woods.”

“Two armed men.”

Violet stared at me.

I sighed. “I’m not doing anything.”

Sienna said nothing. Her silence drew my attention. She was no longer angry. She had gone pale.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“No.”

“Everyone in this family is dreadful at lying.”

Sienna turned toward the window. The orchard stretched beyond it in neat rows, afternoon light shining through the leaves.

I studied her profile. “Sienna.”

She closed her eyes. It was the smallest reaction.

It frightened me. “What?”

She turned back. “Nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing.”

“You are not entering the Gathering.”

There was something different in the way she said it now. Not concern. Recognition. The thought came slowly. I did not like it.

“How do you know so much about it?”

“I live in the same realm you do.”

“That isn’t an answer.”

“Cera.”

“Were you there?”

“No.”

“Did you know someone who was?”

Silence. Violet stopped fidgeting. Amber became extremely interested in closing her healer’s bag. I looked from one woman to the other. A cold awareness slid down my spine.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Sienna’s expression became unreadable.

“Nothing that matters today.”

I laughed once. There was no humor in it.

“Of course it matters today!” I nearly shouted.

“Your sister needs rest.”

“My sister needs her magic back.”

“And you throwing yourself into the Gathering will not accomplish that.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes,” Sienna said. Too quickly.

The room went still again. I looked at her. She realized the mistake. I saw it in her face.

“What does that mean?”

“Cera—”

“How do you know?”

“I know the Gathering is dangerous.”

“That isn’t what you said.”

Violet was watching Sienna now too.

“Aunt Sienna?”

Sienna pressed her lips together. Then she shook her head.

“Not today.”

I stepped closer.

“That is not your decision,” I persisted.

“It is while this is my house.”

“I am twenty-two.”

“And still perfectly capable of making reckless decisions. While you’re under my roof, I will not give you permission to enter the Gathering.”

“I’m not asking permission.”

“Then for what are you asking?”

The answer came before I could stop it. “The truth.”

Sienna flinched. That frightened me more than anything else had. Even more than the basil. Even more than Amber saying someone had died. Because Sienna did not frighten easily. And somehow the Gathering frightened her. Not as an idea but as a memory. I knew it. I just did not yet know why.



By evening, Violet was asleep. Amber had gone. Sienna had spoken to me only when necessary. The sun lowered behind the orchard, staining the sky copper and mauve. Shadows stretched across the kitchen floor. I stood at the sink, washing black basil from beneath my fingernails.

The scent still lingered, sharp. The common, pleasant scent of it from just this morning now smelled wrong.

I stared through the window at the garden. Violet had coaxed half of it into being. The climbing beans along the fence. The mint beneath the pear tree. The lavender that had grown so thick around the house that summer bees became drunk on it. All of it seemed suddenly temporary. What happened when Stone stopped answering? What happened to people whose magic was not merely something they possessed, but something their bodies had grown around? The water in the basin rippled. I looked down. For a moment, a thread of pale light seemed to move beneath the surface. I blinked. There was nothing, only sunset reflected in the water. I dried my hands. Behind me, the old house creaked as evening settled into its stones.

I thought of the Heartwell. Of Arden Keep. Of the Gathering. Then I thought of Sienna's face. And of one question I had never asked because I had never imagined there was a reason to.

My mother had been dead for fourteen years. Her belongings were stored in a cedar chest beneath the eaves. I turned away from the sink. Upstairs, the house smelled faintly of beeswax, dust, and the dried lavender Sienna tucked into every linen cupboard. I climbed past Violet's closed door. Past my own and toward the narrow stair leading to the attic. I had gone halfway up when Sienna spoke from the darkness below.

"Cera."

I stopped. She stood at the foot of the stairs in the shadows. Only fading light from the landing window caught her face. I stopped moving and waited.

She knew exactly where I was going. That was obvious. For a long moment, neither of us moved.

Then she said quietly, "Leave your mother's things alone."

My heart began to beat harder. I looked toward the attic door. Then back at her.

"Why?"

Sienna's jaw tightened. "Because some doors are closed for a reason."

I almost laughed.

Instead I said, "You really should know me better than that."

Then I climbed the rest of the stairs. And behind me, Aunt Sienna whispered something I was not meant to hear.

“Your mother said the same thing.”