

## *The Crown of Moonlight Excerpts*

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### Excerpt One (616 words)

#### **FLORA**

My knees shake as I crouch beside the nearest Ever, and a hot flush of magic ripples across my skin. More magic than I've ever felt. But that's not the only shock. Although the ancient tales talk about the beauty of the Everfolk, seeing it in front of me makes my breath catch.

The Ever is handsome in a way that explains the warnings in the ancient stories—the blinding, dangerous sort of beauty that's said to make humans lose their will and descend into madness. His features are too eerily perfect, his black hair has the gleam of raven's wings, and the blue eyes that look unseeingly into the sky catch the light like layers of stained glass, revealing more colours the deeper I look.

His sightless stare unnerves me, and I brush my fingers across his lids to close them. The skin is still warm. I flinch from the contact, and my hand grazes a pale-blue crystal set in a ring on his right hand.

A jolt of pure power jars me as I touch it—so hot and bright that it pulls an answering flare from the ember of magic that burns inside me. Snatching my hand away, I wait for the sensation to ebb. But I miss it when it's gone. My magic misses it, which makes no sense since my magic isn't Ever magic. Careful not to touch the ring again, I bend closer to examine the crystal set within it. There's movement inside, gold threads of magic dancing like lightning behind a thin haze of cloud.

The movement is mesmerising, holding me captive a moment too long after Ari snorts and stomps his foot. By the time the thud and the jingling of his bridle finally register, his muscles are braced as he uses his back to pull harder against the reins that tie him to the tree.

Then a twig snaps somewhere close. Behind me? To the left?

I spin around, searching. But there's nothing. No one.

Well, I refuse to play this game.

"Who's there? Come out and show yourself instead of hiding like a coward."

The Wood falls unnaturally still. Then shadows stir beneath an oak tree to my left.

"I know you're there," I say, gripping the dagger tighter.

A voice answers me from the shadows. "Careful, little one. Taunt the things you fear, and you might just prove you were right to be afraid."

The voice is male—slow and resonant, pitched between a growl and a cat’s deep purr. A predator’s voice, claws barely sheathed.

A shiver of awareness ripples down my spine. I draw on the cool, gritty power of the earth and fuse it with the fire that burns inside me. Needles of magic rake through bone and tissue as I force it outward, pouring it into the dagger. The blade groans, lengthening and thickening until it becomes a perfect replica of my father’s sword and rests cold, heavy, and steadying within my grasp.

An Ever steps forward, his figure cloaked in gloom, footsteps whispering over the frost-crusted moss. He’s larger than the bodies behind me seemed, taller and broader, his features carved in bold strokes beneath gilded hair that’s tied half-up in a warrior’s knot and reveals a widow’s peak. He looks gaunt, worn down, though power and command still radiate from him. He’s every bit as beautiful as the others—and devastatingly *male*.

He watches me with a faint, treacherous smile. “You can put that illusion away,” he says. “You’re lucky I didn’t mistake it for a threat.”

“The sword is no illusion,” I say, “and the threat is no mistake.”

## Excerpt Two (605 words)

### **FLORA**

The fire crackles around the last remnants of the Ever’s bloody bandages and clothing, acrid smoke curling into the shadows. I blink away exhaustion as dawn approaches. Chyr teeters beside the bed, one hand white-knuckled on the chair for balance while I lace him into the bodice of Catriona’s dress. The wool stretches over bandaging and bare skin, his fevered heat seeping into my fingers.

Given that I’ve practically carved him apart like a joint of beef and stitched him back together, only his willpower and stubborn strength keep him upright. If I can get him back to the keep alive, let alone pass him off as a believable companion for my mother, it will be a miracle.

On the bright side, being half-dead has made him accept the indignity of the disguise with less argument than expected.

For a warrior, it must be a true humiliation. The sheep’s fleece rolled over the bandaging gives him a bosom nearly as large as Catriona’s, and elsewhere, he fills the dress out by being wide and hard where she is softly padded. Overall, the fit isn’t as bad as I feared, apart from being a foot too short. As a final touch, I arrange the shawl low over his forehead in the way pious old women wear them to church.

“There.” I tuck the ends of the shawl under the bodice. “Now stay seated, hunched over, and quiet, and you’ll be drab enough to pass as a giant’s spinster aunt.”

He shoots me a look that promises retribution. “If this is subtle revenge for all that Siorai have done to you, your mind is devious.”

“My idea of revenge would be more painful, trust me. This is self-preservation. Dunhaelic has no men left of fighting age. You’d stand out a mile if anyone saw you.”

"Then I'll hide so no one sees me."

"There's nowhere safe in your condition. Dressed as a lady's companion, you'll be invisible in plain sight. No one would imagine a Rider stooping to disguise himself in a dress."

"Why would they?" the Ever asks. "Wearing a skirt would make it damned difficult to intimidate, much less kill, someone. And that's literally half my job."

"You're welcome to change back into trousers as soon as you're strong enough to kill again. Or whenever your magic is back and you can do better."

"A dress won't fool anyone. Look at me."

I let myself look. His stained-glass eyes shift from honey to gold to brown and green as I look deeper. They glitter with fever, and the soft drape of the shawl only highlights the strength of the jaw and the straight, sure nose, the harsh perfection of his features.

Even half-dead and wearing a dress, Chyr is more treacherously male than any warrior I've ever met. Every movement hums with coiled strength, tempered by intelligence and command. He's a predator, a hunter. Every sensible part of me wants to run.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing. You'll be fine. Your face is pretty enough," I say too honestly.

"Pretty?" he repeats. Then he smiles—a slow, wide grin made slightly crooked by a thin silver scar at the corner of his mouth. The imperfection only makes the rest of his face more dangerously beautiful. His eyes light with amusement, and a wicked spark hooks low and deep inside me. I turn away with an unfamiliar ache drying out my throat.

The smile is trouble. It's the first unguarded expression he's given me, and I don't know what to do with the part of me that wants him to give me more.

Bloody stupid Evers.

### Excerpt Three (636 words)

#### *CHYR*

Her eyes are closed in concentration. Then her hands press against the soaked linen of my shirt and the bandages over my wound. Her magic rises again—a surge pushing into me then tugging at the dark, alien agony that's been sitting in my chest.

Smoke rises from her skin, thicker and darker than the two times she's healed me before. She pulls harder, and the cold darkness claws outward through my flesh. My muscles clench, every instinct fighting that pull. Then something loosens, and the sensation is gone.

My chest throbs, but it's a dull, dry ache instead of an insistent scream. Yet she's still pulling, shaking with the effort of it.

"Flora, stop. That's enough!" I push to my feet and back away, and it's only once I'm standing that I realise I shouldn't have the strength to do that. She gave me the strength.

Her eyes meet mine, and she knows. Those grey eyes are alive with the awareness of what she's done, and a small, astonished smile hovers on her lips.

I'm gripped by an insane impulse to kiss her, but she's trembling like a rabbit, and I want to pull her into my arms and hold her until it stops. I want...

But she draws a deep, shaking breath and turns away.

"What were those things?" she asks, her voice hoarse.

I wipe the blade of my sword on a clump of moss. "They're called Ravenhounds, and there may be more of them. We need to go." I catch her hand in mine and kiss her palm. "Thank you. You keep saving me."

"You keep doing your best to die. Please stop."

The laugh that spills up my throat sounds rusty. How long has it been since I laughed?

Flora goes still at the sound, her eyes finding mine. Something shifts in her expression—surprise first, then a softening, and something more...I want to stay in that look, to deserve the feeling behind it, however fleeting.

Then I spot the beast she killed, and she sees me note it. Her expression hardens.

The hound's carcass lies a few feet away, its abdomen cleaved by Flora's sword that rests discarded on the ground beside it. The blade is covered in the black, treacly gore that lives between the bones and shadows of Vheara's Ravenhounds. The most important aspect of the sight registers only slowly.

The sword is still a sword—not a dagger.

Illusions disappear when they're no longer fed with magic. Yet the sword is there, gleaming in the wet light, coated with the dark blood of the Ravenhound she killed to save me.

"That's not an illusion. *Your sword is real.*" The words come out more like an accusation than I intend, and I clear my throat and start again. "That shouldn't be possible. There's not enough metal in the dagger for that—not to make a blade strong enough to use."

She tilts her head. "What's the point of a useless sword? And I told you it wasn't an illusion. I can't help it if you didn't believe me."

I close my eyes at her innocence and my own blindness, shaking my head as I hurry back inside the hut to strap on the rest of my weapons and gather our things so we can leave.

She did tell me. I assumed that she was bluffing.

She's *human*. Is this the sort of magic the ancient queens were able to summon? Few Siorai are powerful enough to draw metal from the earth, if that's what she's done. Created something from nothing. Even now, I don't think she grasps how impossible that should be.

Few Siorai can call tremors from the earth. Or heal as Flora heals.

None of it should be possible for her, but Flora excels at impossibilities.

## Excerpt Four (780 words)

### *CHYR*

Her scent comes to me as I pull in a deeper breath, and when she tilts her face to look up at me, I wonder how it would feel to touch her. To be held.

I have no right to think such things, but the sting of loneliness is sharper as death approaches. The Riders are the closest thing to a true family I have ever had. Watching Tuirse and Oran die, being left behind in these woods, it feels too much like my childhood spent in beautiful rooms empty of warmth or kindness.

I expect that's what draws me to this woman. Fear of death, a need for connection after all the blood and sorrow of the past twelve months.

She studies the spreading stain of blood on the bandage around my chest. A small dimple forms at the corner of her mouth as she frowns.

"Are you strong enough to ride behind me if I help you into the saddle?" she asks.

I nod, more out of determination than agreement. Her stallion is a magnificent beast, but hardly steady in temper.

"You can lean on me. We won't go far." She steps beside me and slips her arm around my waist.

I suck in a ragged breath.

"Did I hurt you?" she asks.

"Not at all. But we should probably introduce ourselves if we're going to share a saddle."

"It's not that sort of ride," she snaps, then she blushes as she realises what she's said and how it sounds.

I bite back a laugh. "My name is C oirneach. That's my true name, but to my friends, I'm Chyr."

I can never be what she would call a friend, but she is helping me. If I can't be as honest with her as I would wish, as honest as she deserves, then I can at least be honest with the name I give her. My true name is the one thing I have that's mine alone. A small measure of recompense for all the things I am oath-bound not to say.

Her lips part, and she swallows, a flicker of caution passing through her. She suspects a trap.

"It doesn't have to be your true name," I add more gently. "All I need is something to call you. I swear on my sword, on my honour, and the Father of Light, I won't use it to betray you. Compelling humans violates the Compact. The treaty between Tirnaeve and Alba Scoria prohibits Siorai from exploiting mortals."

Her chin tips up, and her eyes bore into mine. "I know what the Compact was meant to prohibit. That died along with the last true queen when she was murdered by an Ever."

"The Compact isn't dead. Not to the Anvar'thaine. Our oaths still bind us to uphold it, and none of the crimes Fionn or Vheara committed—that Vheara continues to commit every minute she is free to spread her corruption—will change that. We're still bound to stop her."

The woman studies me as though she'd like to pull the truth out through my entrails, but I mean every word I've said. I *will* uphold every clause in the Compact, not because I fear eternal punishment in the Pit, but because I still believe in honour.

Whatever the woman sees in me eventually seems to reassure her. Her shoulders drop a fraction as some of her tension rolls away. "My name is Flora," she says. "And my clan is Domhnall—as you know already."

Among mortals, a name is a seemingly simple thing. Among Siorai, a true name is the most dangerous gift one person can give another: the key to the soul, a thread that can unravel. I gave

her mine freely, and I haven't done that in centuries. But if I can't give her full honesty, I can at least give her the one truth that's mine to give.

That she returned the gesture—this woman, now—feels like a gift I have not earned. A small bit of forgiveness I don't deserve.

Flora means flower, but like her flame-coloured hair paired with those cool grey eyes, the name is a contradiction. There's nothing soft or flowery about Flora Domhnall. She's quietly fierce, a rose with daggers disguised as thorns.

I can tell myself that intrigue is all I feel, yet I've lived long enough to recognise that contradictions are often warnings. Flora Domhnall may be willing to help me, but her kindness is likely to cost us both.

The air stills and the temperature drops, as if either my fevered body or the universe wants to argue. Or perhaps the gods themselves have decided to pay attention.

## Excerpt Eight (882 words)

### *CHYR*

The heat of our bodies releases the smell of wet wool and hints of old smoke, but that doesn't drown out the faint scent of rosemary and bog myrtle soap that still clings to her clothes and skin.

She lies unnaturally still, her every shallow breath brushing my back, her spine curved, and her muscles as taut as bowstrings.

Does she feel any of the pull I feel between us?

The thought that she would throw herself away on a man who doesn't love her—on a man who could hurt her, control her, try to take away her fire and spirit—sends anger clawing at my chest.

I roll over onto my back and stare at the granite slab above our heads. "You're not actually thinking of marrying someone your Clan Council chooses for you, are you?"

"Dunhaelic is my home. It's my responsibility. How do I walk away from my people and trust that whoever comes in will treat them well? Dughall wouldn't." Her voice sounds flat, as though she's already given up. Then she rolls over, too, and lies on her back beside me. "I know my limitations, Chyr. I can keep good accounts and raise fast, sturdy horses, but I'm no warrior. Dunhaelic needs strength now more than ever. More strength than I can offer. Look what happened at Aknacaery."

"What happened at Aknacaery is all the more reason you shouldn't betray yourself," I say. "Your life is too fragile to waste it on someone you do not love."

Her answer is slow in coming. "That's survival," she finally says, "not betrayal."

"It's madness, and you deserve better."

"What do you know about what I deserve?" She pushes herself up on one elbow to look at me, her breath coming faster. "You don't know me. You don't know us. You know nothing about having your choices stripped away, because *you're* the ones who've stolen them from us."

She's right, but she's also wrong. She's prey caught in the cage of her circumstances, but I'm trapped just as surely by the layers of oaths that bind me.

"What I know is that marriage should be sacred, and that keeping Dunhaelic will take more than strength. Leadership isn't defined by the sword alone. Don't regard yourself so lightly."

"Don't pretend that Siorai never marry for convenience. The Compact required the true queens to take Riders as companions. That wasn't about love."

My oathbands flare a warning.

"I'm aware of the oaths I took, believe me."

"If those oaths still follow the Compact, then you agreed to marry without love, if need be. To make a personal sacrifice for something greater, something you believe in. You have no right to judge me for doing the same."

Her voice cracks on the last word, and her face begins to crumple towards tears. Something cold and bleak settles in my chest, but she catches herself and smooths her expression back to a semblance of calm as though the mask had never broken. I've seen it now, though, and I recognise what that control must cost her.

I've worn that same sort of mask my entire life, never letting anyone see that there's something vulnerable underneath. Showing weakness only gives your enemies the ammunition to defeat you.

My breath hitches, and my hands ball themselves into fists. It's all I can do not to curse. Or to close the short distance and kiss her until we both forget. The silence draws out between us until eventually, I'm forced to admit the truth.

"I'm not judging you," I say. "I'm angry for you. I'm *breaking* for you." *I hate the idea of you with someone else.*

She exhales, watching me with her eyes nearly black, the pupils blown wide open. Her breath is a whisper against my cheek, the long braid of her hair a rope of silk against my arm.

I want her to say something, to break the tension. To give me permission.

A long moment. Neither of us breathes.

Instead, she turns away.

I can't blame her. I'd be a fool to expect she wants me.

We lie back-to-back again in the heavy silence as the sun climbs higher outside. I feel every gossamer breath Flora takes, every minuscule shift of her body. It's a sweet and bitter torment.

Then she clears her throat, her body tensing even more.

"Would you...could you roll over?" she asks, her voice so soft I'm afraid I heard her wrong. But it unravels everything I've tried to hold together.

I turn and pull her against my chest, my arm sliding around her waist as though it knows where it belongs. I would scarcely need to move at all to claim her lips. She can't be so innocent that she doesn't know she's tempting me.

"Does that hurt?" She tilts her head back to look at me, and it takes a moment to realise that she's asking about my wound.

"No," I say, and it's not a lie because it's not my injured flesh that pains me.

Flora isn't mine. She never can be, and I can't allow myself a single lapse of self-control. There's too much at stake.

Lying still, I count her heartbeats until their rhythm slows and my hunger has become a steady ache.