

☆☆☆ Exclusive Excerpt ☆☆☆

Slivering Curse

The Queen's Fayte Book 2

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Chapter One

Forget the fear. Forget the doubt.

I shoved back my sleeves and squared myself to my adversary. I'd saved Queen Victoria from a monster and nearly met my own demise for goodness sake. I wouldn't be defeated by a porridge.

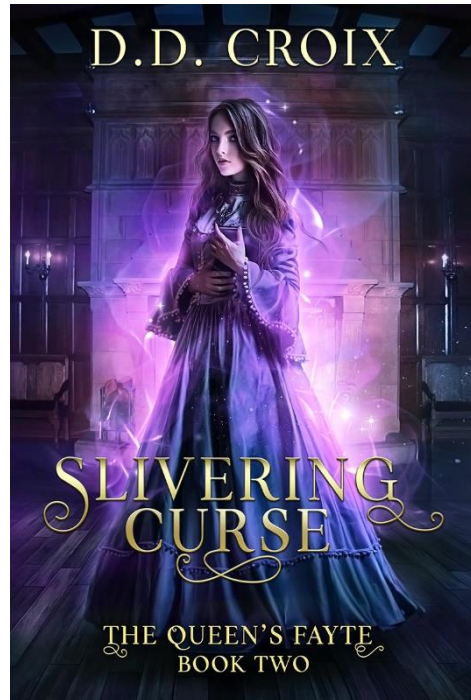
The lid rattled atop the copper pot as I paced beside the stove and gnawed my lower lip. Had I set the flame too high or allowed too much steam to escape? Mentally, I ran through the checklist of steps, then I did it again.

Finally, the cook overseeing my work in the Balmoral Castle kitchen gave me the nod, and I lifted the pot's top to peer inside.

Was it possible? Did I dare to hope? It had taken the better part of an hour, but the bubbling semolina porridge had reduced to an edible consistency, not too soupy and not a scorched ruin like every other attempt.

I pulled away the cover. "It looks ready. Do you agree, Miss Bellington?"

She left her bowl of freshly sifted flour to glance over my shoulder. "I wish you would call me Clara. We're not so fussy here, not like Windsor."



She pulled back and touched her lips. “I don’t mean *you’re* fussy. I mean everyone else. No, what I mean is—”

I waved off her flustered apology. “It’s all right. I know what you mean.” I turned back to the porridge so she wouldn’t see me suck in my cheeks to hide a smile. It wasn’t that I enjoyed her embarrassment, but I still wasn’t used to being someone who could fluster others, especially someone like Clara Bellington. She was only a few years older than I was, yet she’d already established herself as a cook in the royal kitchen. Granted, it was usually the morning cook for the serving staff, which numbered less than half that at Windsor, but she was a full-fledged cook, nonetheless.

One day I hoped to follow in those footsteps, although at the moment, I’d be happy to produce a decent porridge. After all, that’s why I was here: to help while the castle’s House Steward searched for a junior cook to fill a vacancy.

At least that was the official reason for my visit.

The true purpose had more to do with my recent initiation into the Order of the Fayte, an ancient society of royal guardians that has kept its existence secret for centuries by operating as ordinary castle servants while discreetly protecting Britain’s kings and queens. They manage it with the help of Druansha, an ethereal woman they call the Lady of the Fayte who, like the legendary fae, possesses mysterious talents and an ability to move between worlds.

Druansha can sometimes warn Fayte Guardians about potential threats to Her Majesty Queen Victoria, yet she herself had the misfortune of being trapped in dragonfly form for several years before I broke the curse her malicious brother had placed on her. Releasing her not only restored her as

the Fayette Guardians' oracle but prevented that brute from taking control of our Queen and her empire.

In appreciation for my efforts, the Order arranged to send me here, along with my friend Marlie for moral support, so I might search the Fayette records for information about my parents and how I came to be placed at Chadwick Hollow School for Orphaned Girls as a child. Since I have no memory of anything prior to my arrival at that institution, I have relied on the word of my mentor, Mrs. Crossey, that my ability to see visions means Fayette Guardian blood flows through me and that the answers to my forgotten past might be found here in the Scottish Highlands.

I might have passed on the opportunity if we hadn't been joined on our journey by Lucas Starwyck, an enigmatic young man who'd kept his true identity a mystery until just a few weeks ago because he'd been charged with the clandestine task of protecting the Queen from me because certain Fayette Guardians believed I was a danger to her.

In the end, he proved himself an ally and true friend. Until we reached Balmoral a week ago, I thought he might be more than that, but since we'd arrived, he's made himself so scarce, I no longer know what to think.

Right now, however, this confounded porridge required all of my attention.

Clara lowered her wooden spoon into the pot and stirred. Her lips pinched in disapproval. "It's nearly there. We still need to work on the clumping. Now let's see about the taste." She grabbed a clean teaspoon and dabbed it in the mixture. After a nibble, she tried to smile but coughed instead. "A bit too much salt, but otherwise it's coming along. It's definitely coming along. Let's try it one more time, then we'll call it a day."

I bit back my disappointment.

She glanced around, lowered her voice, and lifted a single eyebrow. “Tomorrow is *you know what*, but I could take you tonight, so you can have a look around.”

I pasted a smile on my face. “Thank you. I’d like that.” I turned back to my failed porridge before letting the false cheer slip away. Anyone who overheard us might assume she was referring to the castle, but I’d already seen plenty of that. We both knew she meant Balmoral’s Fayte Hall, which contained the archives I was sent to see.

Since my arrival, Clara was my only official connection to the local Order and would remain so until tomorrow’s New Moon, the time when Fayte Guardians gather for a Converging Ceremony to communicate with Druansha. Although Clara had already offered several times to escort me to the hall, I’d managed to make excuses each time.

My disinterest probably confused her, but my past no longer consumed me, especially not after the warm welcome I’d received here at Balmoral. Little more than a week had passed, but I was thinking more clearly now than I had after the Windsor ordeal, and I was no longer desperate for the validation I’d hoped to find in the archives.

I’d been drawn in by the claim made by Druansha’s brother, that horrible gargoyle of a man who called himself Krol, but now I saw the truth. He couldn’t be my father. It had been a desperate attempt to prey on my weakness, that was all. To be honest, I was embarrassed to have fallen for it, even for a moment.

So, I was in no hurry to visit their Fayte Hall, but I didn’t mind being excused from the kitchen early. For the first time in my life, I was eager to get to the Servants’ Hall to chat and laugh with colleagues over the day’s

events. If it meant I might also cross paths with Lucas Starwyck, I wouldn't mind that, either.

When Clara returned to sifting her flour, I grabbed a fresh teaspoon and tasted the porridge myself. My lips curled, and I struggled to swallow the clumpy mess. Her assessment had been too kind. The stuff was awful.

Grabbing the pot by both handles, I carried it to the buckets where we collected scraps that could be fed to the livestock. After I'd dumped it, I used a rag to wipe the splatter from my new lambskin gloves, a gift from Mrs. Crossey to replace the ones I'd damaged while helping Druansha back at Windsor. I was doing my best to keep this pair clean, though I hoped the Faytling crystal tucked snugly beneath my collar would eventually help me control my visions so I wouldn't need the gloves at all.

Until then, even casual contact with someone could send me hurtling into a vision of their past—and if I focused and if I was lucky, their present and future as well. So, the gloves remained necessary. At least no one had questioned why I never took them off, though I suspected Mrs. Crossey had something to do with that as well.

When I returned to our worktable, Clara had a visitor. A maid in a starched and ruffled pinafore stood beside her.

“Why haven't you gone?” Clara said in a hurried whisper, her shoulders rigid and tense.

“I've been busy,” the other whispered back. “But I will.”

“Soon?”

They were trying not to be overheard, so I turned my back and pretended to be engrossed in a row of hanging copper pots and pans.

The other young woman hissed, “Yes, soon. If you're so anxious, we can go tonight.”

Clara huffed. “I have plans tonight.”

“Then don’t say I didn’t offer.”

Clara made a grumbling sound in the back of her throat. “Fine, we’ll go tonight. But I need a few minutes.”

“Better hurry. I want to be back before dark.”

I turned to watch the parlor maid walk away. She stopped when she saw me.

“Hello,” I said. “I’m Jane.”

For the past week, I’d met one friendly colleague after another. Strangers turned up out of the blue to introduce themselves, and those who didn’t always brightened when I told them I was visiting from Windsor.

This young woman didn’t brighten at all. Her face flashed surprise, then her nose crinkled as she passed me without a word.

Clara caught the exchange and fidgeted like she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t. “You’re back, good. About tonight, I’m afraid something has come up.”

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