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Time of the  
Dragon

TIME OF THE DRAGON

# Time of the Dragon

By

D.L. Taylor



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## TIME OF THE DRAGON

### Chapter One

The black leathery wings of the dragon swished as they carried him through the dark clouds. His scaly long neck swung back and forth, his glowing red eyes searching the horizon for prey. His nostrils flared as his forked tongue flicked out of a triangular serpent-shaped head. Onyx skies were giving way to a pink predawn. Night was his only haven. He must finish this task before the light of day gave him away.

Lifting his snout, he drew in the cool, crisp air. Catching the scent of his prey, he jerked his head up. His body tightened, and his claws clenched in anticipation. The clouds of mist parted over a small village where morning fires set up a blaze. He swung his tail to move to the right and tilted his wings up to slow his speed. His black hourglass pupils sharpened on the activity below. He felt the beat of the maiden's heart and knew she was near.

Gliding over huts, stables, and corralled animals in silent vigilance, he soon spied the maiden he sought, carrying a basket, and climbing a nearby hill toward the forest. Bringing his head down, and flattening his wings closer to his body, he moved in swiftly and silently. The air current held him aloft. If she spotted him now, she could make it to the trees--her only safety.

Closer he flew, his large body rocking back and forth on an unseen breeze. He was forty yards from his prey when something warned her, and she glanced up. Her eyes widened with panic and stark fear froze her in place.

*All to his advantage.*

His lips curled back, over sharp incisors in a menacing grin. He would have her. Lifting his claws forward to land, he swooped lower just as she started to flee. With one flap of his great wings, he raised a blast of air that knocked the maid to the ground. She rolled over once, loosing her grasp on the basket before hitting her head, and lying motionless.

Landing effortlessly, he plodded over to her and bent down, bumping her shoulder gently with his horned nose. His nostrils flared, as he inhaled her scent. Something was different about this one. Not enough meat to be tasty but his lord would be pleased.

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He turned his head to study her features with one eye. A gentle face sat upon a fragile neck. Innocence played across her parted lips. He could sense a tender heart bloomed within her chest. Perhaps, she was the chosen, the one to break the spell.

Without waiting further, he grasped her around the waist clutched within his talons. With a powerful leap into the air, he lifted them both once more into the ever-brightening sky. He had his prey. Glancing about, he saw no one was aware of his pilfering. A disappearing maid would only add to the horror stories of wicked deeds set upon the Black Keep and the sorcerer who lived there.

His captive lay limp within his grip. Her hair tangled about his claws softly sliding across cool scales. A snarl lifted the corners of his mouth. He would soon reach the Black Keep and have his meal. He could see the dark stone towers ahead, thrusting into the sky like bony fingers clawing their way up from an unholy grave. Dried vines covered walls set on a cliff high above all human life. Here was his home, a tomb of rock, a place of safety, but a prison none-the-less. Although he knew he must always return here to survive, he dreaded his loss of freedom, his loneliness, his exile, where no other of his kind gave comfort.

He lifted over a dark tower to circle downward. With skill and ease, he landed in a deserted courtyard. He laid the maiden upon the grass then turned his angled head to view her once more. The squeal of pigs in a nearby pen perked his ears, and he lifted his head, seeking the reward from the sorcerer. Leaving the unconscious woman where she lay, he lumbered over to the animals, snatching up his feast between sharp teeth, ripping and tearing the flesh in his greed. He threw his head back, and chomped working his jaw back and forth, devouring them. With a snort, he swung his head down and around, glancing once more toward the woman. *The sorcerer would be pleased with his prize.* Giving a low-throated roar, the dragon turned, seeking a place to sleep the day away.

\* \* \*

Lilya awoke with a cold shiver and a throbbing headache. She lay still, listening and searching within herself. Dragons had tormented her sleep. The dreams had been so real. She opened her eyes, taking a quick glimpse at her surroundings. She was lying on a large four-poster bed in a shadowy, unfamiliar room. Her heartbeat rumbled loud in her ears, an unknown fear caused her to sink deeper into the mattress. *Where was she?*

The smell of age hung heavily in the air. The snap and crackle of the fire in the hearth was all that disturbed the silence of the room. She rolled to her side, pushing to a sitting position only to realize both wrists were chained to the stone wall just above the headboard.

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Panic squeezed her chest and her breath came in gasps. *What manner of fiend had her chained? Why had she been taken? What would be done to her?*

She jerked hard on the chains in a frantic need to escape and small whimpers fell from her lips, until a deep masculine voice cut through her fear, to cause her to freeze in terror.

“Stop struggling. You will only hurt yourself.”

She turned, searching the darkened corners of the room instantly aware of impending danger. From within the deepest shadows a cloaked form materialized. Nothing about his presence lessened her fears.

A pair of tightly clenched lips and square chin stood out from beneath the hood. The man was tall, about six foot eight with wide shoulders and his arms sat crossed over his chest. A disturbing power emanated from his concealed form. His stance spoke of one used to command. Lilya felt the heat of his gaze making a thorough inspection of her. A prickle of unease ran along her limbs. Could he be the one of whom the villagers spoke?

She'd heard stories all her life about the evil demon that reigned within the stone walls of the keep overlooking the village.

It was said, he hungered for the blood of innocents, stealing maids from their beds to sacrifice them, in hopes of gaining his freedom then drinking the life force from their veins. No one would go out at night for fear that the devil would free his winged servant to descend and suddenly snatch them into the air never to return.

“Let me go,” she demanded, tugging on the chains again. The cold metal bit into her wrists, but she gave no outward sign of the pain. Her need was for freedom.

He stepped closer and she instinctively retreated, pressing herself against the headboard. He made no farther advance, remaining motionless, and she wondered what game he played. Her breathing still came fast, but the panic overriding her senses eased slightly when he kept his distance. “What do you want of me? Where am I?”

“The Black Keep.”

She gasped. So, the legends were true. Every terrible word she had ever heard about this place raced through her mind. “Nae! Then the gods have abandoned me.”

The cloaked figure scoffed and turned away. His cloak swung wide as he paced to the foot of the bed, then turned to her once more.

Lilya desperately needed to see his features. Was he horned with glowing red eyes?

“Never count on the gods. They play with human lives, like the wind tosses the dry leaves. They twist them back and forth until they crumble beneath their feet.”

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The chain rattled as she turned to face him better and pull her legs up closer to her body. “You are unwise to mock the gods.”

“Oh! What good have they done for you?”

Lilya glanced away, frowning. She had always felt she was born under a dark moon. Bad luck followed her like vomit follows a purge--others had pointed that out with wicked glee. Nothing in her young life was as it should be, and she had little hope of ever having the things she desired most. And there were the attempts on her life. Had it come from the devil before her?

She ignored his question, to repeat her own. “What do you want of me?”

“All in good time.”

“Will you kill me?”

“I don’t kill women.” He sounded angry, his voice harsh, then it softened. “I wish a gift.”

She could feel his searching gaze run the length of her body then swing back to study her face. “Would you give it to me? I wonder.” Dain finished, almost to himself.

Lilya stared at him in disbelief. True, there was much in her life that needed improving, and the future was not as bright as she desired, but she would not willingly give up the few meager things she possessed like her virginity, her freedom, or her life, not for this man, or for anyone else. No one controlled her destiny. It was all she had and was hers alone.

“You will have nothing from me. I care not who you are.” The chains rattled with her conviction and the warmth of her anger chased away the last of the fear.

“We shall see.” He turned toward the door. “You must be hungry. I will see to your care.”

“Where will you go?” Plans of escape raced through her mind. If he left, she could work on these chains and seek a way out, away from the feelings he evoked.

His head turned slowly to face her. “Beware! No one has successfully escaped from the Black Keep. Try and you will come to great harm.”

Had he read her thoughts? Despite a roaring fire blazing in a large fireplace to her left, a bone-chilling cold invaded her chest.

Squirming uncomfortably, she bit her lip. How should she proceed with this cloaked man, this dark and powerful devil? If she could see his face, she might be able to read his expression and know how to respond. But chained to the bed, she could only admit defeat for the moment.

“I would be grateful for food and drink.”

“A wise choice,” he offered as he turned to leave.

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Watching him disappear through the doorway, she shivered. He'd shown no emotion in his deep voice and his somewhat aloof behavior made a snake of dread pass along her spine. Yet, he had not touched her. She was whole of body. Could it be that he might spare her?

The maids who had disappeared from the village before had never returned, so why would she hope to escape and be freed? She pressed a hand over her eyes. With life there was always, hope. She must wait for her chance to escape and take it.

The rattle of chains irritated her so she jerked on them again in spite. She had planned everything so carefully, worked so hard, came so far in her quest to be free of servitude. Now it had ended. This man was going to torture, and kill her. Her fate turned down a path clouded in shadows. She could feel it within her bones.



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## Chapter Two

This woman was more than what he expected. She had a will of fire. Even awash in almost uncontrollable fear, she had defied *him*, Dain, Lord of the Black Keep. A woman of such passion had never crossed his path before and he found the experience fascinating. The cold feeling surrounding his heart lessened with anticipation for their next encounter.

Standing in front of his bedroom door, he glanced back down the hallway. He felt the need to return to her, to experience her fire, but then shook his head. If he was to break this damnable curse that carried through every night, he must concentrate on the task he must perform or be lost for the next fifty years. His stomach lurched at the idea of what he would do to her to win his freedom.

He would watch the gentle innocence in her large eyes turn cold and dead, he soft moist lips, thin and crack, and her lonely kind heart weather to gray ashes. Had the gods not punished him long enough? Hadn't his crime been paid for? He laid his forehead against the cool wooden door. He swore after the first maiden never to grow close to anyone again. He had become a wraith, a shade, living in the shadows of his own keep when a maiden was chosen every fifty years. None other moved him.

But now... Now was not the time to become distracted by a woman even if she was the first woman to bring forth a male response in two hundred years. His body had hardened with a man's need with one glance of her laid out across the bed. Her very aura sang out her want of human touch, a calling to the loneliness in his soul. Dain shook his head and growled. He couldn't afford this line of thought. He would give her some time to calm down before visiting again and releasing her bonds only to disappear into the shadows, holding his secrets

Opening the door to his sanctuary, he walked in.

"So what's she like?"

He didn't search for the speaker. "A woman, young, a virgin," Dain stated, closing the door as he stepped inside. He pulled off his hood then untied the strings at his throat to remove the cloak and toss it on his bed.

"Is that all you're going to say?" came the high-pitched voice once more.

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Frowning, Dain glanced over to the table by the fireplace spotting the lizard who sat perched on a pillow. About the length of his forearm, its tail curled around its body, the green scaly face held an almost smug expression. It flicked out its forked tongue. "Well?"

"You are irritating." Dain slumped down in his high backed chair before the fire and gazed into the hypnotic flames. He stroked the smooth wood of the chair arms, trying to curb his heated thoughts. "I think she is very different from the women I have tried in the past. She has a fierce spirit." He did not think it wise to reveal the other ways in which she affected him. He knew from past experiences that Uland was not above using Dain's emotions and feelings against him. At times, he wondered if the lizard was really his friend or just another demon sent by the gods to torment him.

"Not good," the lizard replied.

Dain ignored his pet. Uland was always making predictions. He pressed his fists to each temple as memories of a life long past crowded his thoughts, but he forced them away, refusing to give them substance. Instead, his thoughts centered on Lilya, the curve of her ankle, the soft roundness of her breasts, the tilt of her head. He'd plucked her name from the air that whispered it in worship. He had sensed her passion, fear, anger, hope, and even curious interest. She had a zest for life, yet somehow she believed herself cursed with bad luck. But with the powers he knew she held, why would such feelings encompass her? Could it be she didn't know of these powers? She could very well be the catalyst that freed him. In that case, her worth was immeasurable.

He must find a way to loosen the powers and direct them the way they must go, to set the trap. He had suffered this damnable curse and been imprisoned for over two hundred years. The quest for freedom was becoming tiresome.

Had the gods seen fit to set him free this time? Did this maiden carry the breath of the gods?

The fire in the grate warmed the chill in his bones, or mayhap it was the remembered sparks from a pair of soft doe eyes. Her dark sable hair had hung long in a river of curls down her back. With her flushed cheeks and red moist lips, she stirred the man more than the beast. This surprised him for he had long thought his emotions encased in stone. To see her stretched out upon the bed, captive to anything he wished to do, brought heat to his loins, a response he thought long dead because of the curse.

Dain heard the clicking of small nails on his chair before he felt the weight of the lizard as it crawled up his arm to sit on his shoulder. "Why sit here brooding?" Uland asked, his tongue flicking out to tickle Dain's neck. "Use this time to woo her before the sun sets. She must be willing to give up her life or the curse will continue."

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“Off!” Dain ordered, wiping at his neck with one strong swipe, causing the reptile to leap back to his pillow before being thrown off. “I will decide how to proceed.”

Uland whipped his tail with a strong flick. “Tisk, tisk.” The lizard circled his pillow once then laid down. “Aye, and you have done so well in the past,” the animal sneered.

“Don't start or I'll make boots from your hide.” Dain pushed himself up from his chair and walked over to a pitcher on the dresser, pouring some wine into a crystal glass. Taking a swallow, he turned the chalice around in his hand. The sunlight pouring through the long floor to ceiling windows, hit the crystal and scattered sparkles of colors across the chamber.

Uland was correct. He needed to use all the time he had to build a bond, but he was unused to having company. Where would he start? He could remove the chains. Surely, she had calmed by now. Besides, where could she go? The keep had no way in or out that she could find. The only harm she could come to was getting lost among the labyrinth of passageways or stumbling into the dragon's lair beneath the castle.

He curled his lips in a sneer. No doubt, the dragon would make a good impression. She might well die of fright, then what would he do? He hated the beast and yet he was powerless against it.

Dain drained his drink and slammed the glass down with a careless thunk. Walking with determined steps to the bed, he retrieved his cloak, concealing himself once more before leaving the haven of his room. He moved silently toward Lilya's chambers. Unfamiliar eagerness crawled along his chest bone. What emotion would she share with him this time?

When he opened her door and stepped inside, the silence hit him first, then a gentle snoring. He moved closer to find her sleeping. Disappointment took the edge off his excitement, but being close to her still brought pleasure. He sat down on the bed and reached out to push back a strand of hair that had fallen over her forehead and along her cheek.

Her full lips moved slightly with his caress but she didn't awaken. Her clasped hands remained positioned under her cheek as if in prayer. She lay on her side with her knees pulled up close to her body. The creamy skin of her arms and throat that peeked out from under her gown, glowed pink, no doubt from time spent in the sun. The indent of her waist followed the gentle curve of her hips and rounded bottom. Her legs tucked up next to her belly looked long and firm. Just what was it about Lilya that moved the stone that was his heart?

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Unwilling to disturb her nap yet needing to lean close enough to unlock her chains, he reached over her head, causing his cloak sleeve to fall across her throat.

He heard her gasp and glanced down. Their gazes clashed, his face hovering above hers so close he could feel the warmth of her sweet breath along his cold jaw. Her eyes darkened, yet she made no move to pull away. Her gaze slowly slid along his jaw, down to his chin, and over his lips then back up to his eyes. Her exploring gaze brought heat to his loins. A strong need to taste her lips made him glance at these moist petals. How he would enjoy bringing cries of passion to her innocent mouth. The images of them wrapped in a lover's tryst brought a painful awareness of his goal and he mentally shook himself.

He pulled his gaze from her face to focus on the wall above her head. "I come only to release your bonds."

Lilya found it hard to breath. At first panic had welled up inside her until their gazes met. His dark eyes glowed from beneath the hood, penetrating her very soul. Her heart sped up with anticipation. Shadows concealed most of his face but what she saw was not the horrible beast she'd been led to believe by the villagers.

His jaw was square and strong, his lips were tight and curved down at the edges. In the shadows of the hood, his dark brows looked pinched over eyes that glowed. Gold flames flickered and grew behind a dark tormented gaze. A sense of the predator in him caused her heart to race, yet she was drawn to that dark part like a lamb to the wolf. A need to know more of him warred with the fear of the unknown.

"Are you master here?"

The chains fell away and he moved back, allowing her room to sit up.

"Some would say that." He took her hand, inserted an iron key into the metal cuff on her wrist, and turned it. A click rang within the steel and the cuff fell into her lap.

"By what name are you called?"

He took her other hand in his large one and unlocked the second cuff. Even though his fists were large and could bring great pain, he took care being gentle.

"I answer to Dain."

"I am, Lilya."

She rubbed at her wrists to ease the ache. "You released me. Does this mean I am free to go?"

Dain took the chains from her lap, then met her gaze. His glance came intense and direct. "The Keep has no way out or in, so you may go where you like. But mark your trail or stay close to these chambers. There have been a few who became lost, their bones were not found until years later."

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She shivered at the gruesome tale. "Will you show me where it is safe to walk?"

"If you wish." His gaze swung away. "But I have no fine graces for entertaining. I am who I am." He stood, directing with a sweep of his hand toward the door.

He was quiet, his movements smooth and unhurried and he had left her unharmed. What did she have to fear? Mayhap he was as lonely as she, and uncertain as how to proceed with a friendship.

She stood up moving past him and through the door. Knowing his gaze followed her, brought a shiver of awareness. The hallway smelled musty and spider webs crowded every corner above and below them. A thick layer of dust lay undisturbed along the floor near each wall.

She frowned, wondering why his servants had not seen to this. He led her to the top step, leading down to the main hall.

"Stay close to the wall as you descend." Why he gave those instructions became clear as she proceeded. The stone steps, well worn from use, had come loose to crash on the floor below. Were his servants so lazy that they couldn't see to his, as well as their own, health and safety?

As they reached the bottom step and turned left, she noticed how unnaturally quiet, the Keep was for the middle of the day. They had passed no one on the way to the kitchen and this room was empty of people as well. In the center of the kitchen was a rough planked table and two benches.

"Where are the others?" she asked trying to keep up with his long stride. "Do you not have servants to care for your needs?"

"I fend for myself." His voice came clipped and harsh.

"What do you eat?"

Dain stopped abruptly, causing her to almost run into him. He jerked his head around to face her, his shadowy features hard.

"The fare is not fine or elaborate, but it fills the stomach."

When she didn't comment, he moved to the iron pot hanging over a medium fire. Dain took down a bowl from the mantle and spooned a brown chunky liquid into it. As he sat the stew in front of her, and turned to fill one for himself, she wondered how long it had been in the pot.

She leaned over the bowl, sniffing the thick roasted scent of meat and found it pleasant. "It smells good." She followed him with her gaze as he sat down across from her and started eating. His hood slid back revealing dark hair over his forehead. The firelight caressed his strong features.

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Here was a man made for a woman's dreams! Dark, handsome, and lonely, he needed a woman. Her heart sped up with the realization that it was in her dreams she wanted him.

"Have there been others?" she asked.

His head came up and his intense gaze captured hers. "Others?"

She bit her lower lip. "Other women like me?"

"A few."

"What happened to them?"

A frown marred his brow. "Eat."

So, this was a touchy subject. Had he loved one of them? She was disturbed to think he might have.

"I will eat if you give me an answer."

He harrumphed, putting both elbows on the table, twirling his wooden spoon between his fingers, as he seemed to consider her request. He nodded and pointed to her bowl. "Eat. There is not much to tell. There have been three others."

He stopped speaking. His dark gaze fell to her bowl then to her once more. He raised one brow and waited.

She took hold of her spoon and brought a bite to her lips. The rich flavor chased all thoughts from her mind save the glorious taste. She was surprised that he could cook so well. Never had she tasted anything this delicious before.

Her eyes closed as she chewed. Warm buttery meat juices slipped down her throat to fill her empty stomach. "This is wonderful." Opening her eyes, her gaze fell to his warm heavy lidded ones. He had been watching her. His eyes promised something to warm her soul if she would let him. She felt again a power emanating from him, only this time she didn't fear it. Nae, this time she wanted to embrace it and fill her starving core. Had the other women accepted what he had to give?

She returned to her food, breaking the invisible bond between them. "You were telling me of the other three."

He shrugged. "They cared not to help me so I released them after a short time."

"How could you release them if the castle has no way in or out?"

He sighed and pushed his stew away. "I gave them a powder to drink which made them sleep and dream, erasing their memories of me. There is only one way in or out, but it isn't a way you would care to know of."

Mayhap he was speaking of the dragon. She wanted to ask about the beast but feared to know the truth.

"Did you ever love those women?"

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When he raised his brow, she realized what she had let slip out. Her cheeks filled with warmth, but she didn't back down from the question. Anticipation curled within her breast. She bit her lower lip, praying his answer would be nae and when it came, a burst of joy made it hard to breathe.

"Nae. If you are done, there is something else I would show you." His gaze was warm again, compelling her to follow. She smiled. "Aye, show me."

As she stood and followed him out of the kitchen then down another hall, she felt drawn to him. It was as if the gods had tied them together with golden threads that weaved their fates as one. But what part did the dragon play in this? Could it tie in with this sorcerer, or had she dreamed up the beast?

"How did I get here?"

They had ascended the spiraling steps in a tower, and he opened a door at the top of the landing. Daylight fell through the opening to brighten the stairwell and a breeze, cool and fresh, caressed the heat of her cheeks.

Dain turned toward her, his voice low as if to give comfort, yet there was a ring of sadness as well. "You know the answer, Lilya. The beast roams below the castle. But his domain only exists from sunset to sunrise. So, have no fear of him during the daylight hours. After dark you will be quite safe in your room."

He watched her face as she digested the information. Panic sliced across her gaze and her chest rose with a deeply, drawn breath. He could tell she worked to control her fear, and he felt pride in her strength of will. She was amazing. She was intelligent as well as beautiful. Her lips pushed together in a pout and his body responded. When a frown crossed her brow, he wanted to smooth it away. He was enjoying their time together. When she talked, she was so open and honest.

He found himself wanting to share in her fresh innocence. She made him feel alive and complete once more. She touched him as she talked, a pat on his shoulder or her fingers running down his arm, and a palm on his chest. He doubted she realized she did so. Every caress filled him with warmth.

He was beginning to care for her and this was wrong. She was the key to his freedom, but instead all he wanted to do was hold her close. His gaze ran over her curves-the gentle roundness of her breasts, the indent of her waist to the flair of her hips. He wanted to touch her, love her, yet he was not fit for either.

He was having second thoughts about using her, yet he knew if he let his feeling rule him, he could be doomed to live under the curse another fifty years. He could feel her growing attraction, but he, too, was swimming in a sea of powerful emotions. A

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fleeting thought crossed his mind as to just who was trapping whom in this game of love, before he shook his head and forced himself to take control of his wayward thoughts.



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## Chapter Three

Lilya watched Dain slid his gaze over her once more, he stood back allowing her to walk out onto the roof before he followed. The view was breathtaking. The castle sat on a rocky cliff above the ordinary world. Far below, village huts dotted the valley floor. The rolling hills, shone like velvet in dark and light greens. The blue river cut graceful curves along their left until it poured into the sea. Dancing clouds hung low above their heads.

Lilya sighed and took a step closer to the ledge, peering down into the courtyard. From this height, she felt like a goddess peering down from Olympus, watching life from above.

The broken crunch of masonry under foot caught her unaware. She slipped toward the edge and certain death. She tried desperately to pull back but found nothing to hold on to. The bottom fell out of her stomach when there was nothing between her and open air. The rock wall fell away with a clatter of stone and a cloud of dust.

A scream froze in her throat until strong arms pulled her back from a fatal fall.

“Have a care,” Dain warned against her ear. “You haven’t wings.” His breathing labored as hard as hers.

“Aye, I should remember that,” she said, shaking slightly as she looked again toward the ledge. A small section of the roof had given way. She buried her face against his neck. Images of her near miss crowded her thoughts. The warmth and security of his arms gave her some peace, and she found she enjoyed his touch. His frame stood solid as an anchor, and she wondered what it would be like to be sheltered by him all the rest of her days.

She frowned, confused. “You saved my life.” As she spoke, she raised her gaze to his. From the tales told of him, he should have been the one to push her, but he was not the beast others whispered about. They dare not speak aloud for fear he would hear and come to kill them while they slept. But to her, he had been nothing but kind.

Her heart melted and a tender understanding filled a hollow place inside.

“Aye. Surely, no matter how cursed this life is, 'tis better than a painful death on the rocks below.”

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She felt his hold loosen as if to pull away only to tighten around her again when a gust of wind whipped at their bodies.

His hood blew off and long black strands of his hair swung about his shoulders. She reached up and brushed a lock from his eyes. "It would seem the gods are playing with us. Well I will not allow them to push us from this place or take away the peace I find here so often. Let them find others to torment."

She could feel his gaze searching her face, and as she touched him, his hold on her tightened, pulling her closer. She gloried in the feel of him pressing along her length yet uncertainty curled within her belly. How could she be overwhelmed with a rush of desire for this man she had just met.

Lilya grew bold and ran her fingers along the shell of his ear then down his jaw to cross over his bottom lip. He took her hand in a gentle clasp, making her meet his gaze.

"A storm is brewing," he said, keeping his gaze locked with hers.

She agreed, finding the tempest raging within her breast.

"We should seek shelter," he continued, without moving away.

"Why did you bring me up here?" she asked. There was no purpose to this. It wasn't like seeing the kitchen, or the firewood shed.

"This view is the only beauty the Keep has to offer. It's for your enjoyment."

Again, she had the feeling he plucked her thoughts from her mind. But, she didn't care. The idea that he would wish to share this beauty with her brought the heat of a blush to her cheeks. "I thank you. You are very kind."

As the first sprinkle of rain splattered across her cheek, pleasure ran along her spine. He had done this for *her alone*.

His shoulders slumped with her words and he shook his head, sighing. He reached up to her cheek and wiped the moisture away with his thumb. Then his arms fell away, taking their warmth with them. "We best return inside before the heavens open."

She didn't want to leave; therefore ending this moment, but he waited holding the door open. She moved through the door first, then paused to allow him to follow. This man had touched her as none other. He had shown care for her safety and had thought of her pleasure. Great warmth slowly bloomed in her heart. She had never been treated so kindly, yet this man accused of every evil had given her a gift of great value.

A comfortable silence fell between them until they reached the bottom step and were once again in the corridor near her chambers.

"Why are you here?" she asked, slowing to turn and face him. "Are you imprisoned like I?" This question had troubled her thoughts.

He stopped short causing the robe of his cloak to billow around him.

*D.L. Taylor*

Here was his chance to win her sympathy. He could say “aye,” for in a way, he was imprisoned and had been for the last two hundred years, but he wouldn’t manipulate her.

Her own open and honest ways called to something deep within. He didn’t wish to trap her. He wanted her to love him for who he was. Then again, mayhap he was just fooling himself. It was a dangerous game. Her power of love was great and very compelling. He could fall under her magic, leaving her in control instead of him commanding it.

Glancing her way, he saw her gaze fall. With invisible waves, he reached inside her mind and found it filled with the overpowering need for acceptance, to find someone to care about her. If she only knew that, he wanted to be the one to grant that wish. He fought the urge to tell her he needed the same thing only to realize the longer he waited to reply the more doubts grew to devour her hope of companionship.

“Tis all right,” she offered. “I’m known for asking too many questions.”

He smiled. “I find no injury in your words. ‘Tis only, I have little company but my own and find not the words to say at times.”

Uncomfortable with his confession, he glanced out the window only to realize he would have more than this maiden’s tender feeling to be concerned about if he didn’t find solitude. The spring shower had passed and through the parting clouds, he spotted the sinking sun. In talking with her, he’d lost track of time. A dangerous thing for one in his position.

“It seems, I must leave you for now. Can you find your way back to your chamber?”

The abruptness of this question caught her off guard. Had she done something wrong? “Aye, it’s down this hall to the left.”

He nodded then turned to hurry off.

She watched, stunned. His cloak swung with each hurried step until he disappeared around a corner. She frowned as she walked back to her room alone. New questions clouded her thoughts, but the answers were not forthcoming tonight. She slept fitfully only to rise before dawn.

Her first thoughts were of Dain and where he might have rested last night. Opening the bedroom door, she stepped out into the cold hallway. The dust lay thick except where they had walked. As she passed several doors on her way to the kitchen, she spotted one to her right where the shuffle of feet had cleared a path.

She knocked on the hard wood surface but no answer came. Curious, she opened the door.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

Stepping inside, she found the room clean, yet sparse. A low-burning fire lit the hearth and chased the chill away. *This must be Dain's room.*

Moving to the bed, she sat down and ran her hand over the linen. The masculine scent that was all his, permeated the air around her. It didn't contain his warmth, but she could imagine him here, his dark form sprawled across the expanse of covering.

A high-backed chair and end table near the fire, beckoned to give her rest; and to her left, a cabinet with drawers, a pitcher, and glasses rested on top. She bit her lower lip, wondering what pieces of the puzzle lay within the cabinet's hold.

Surely, Dain would be gone for a while longer. Should she look? Knowing it was wrong, yet unable to resist she walked over to the drawers and quietly pulled the top one open.

Paper and ink lay neat within, as well as what looked like a journal. Her heart sped with excitement as she pulled it out.

"What do you think you're doing?"

She jumped in fright and dropped the book back into the drawer. "I-I'm sorry." She swung around to face who'd caught her, only no one was there.

Frowning, Lilya scanned the room. Was she losing her mind?

"Close that drawer and come away. You should know better."

Doing just that, she asked, "Who are you? Come out from where you're hiding." Dain had said there was no one here and no way in or out. Had he lied?

"Show yourself!"

"I am."

"I don't see you."

"Direct your gaze to the top of the bedpost."

She glanced up to see a long green lizard with its tail wrapped around the post, his square snout in the air. She was conversing with a lizard? She stood shocked.

Somehow, she must have given her thoughts away because he said, "have no fear. The shock you are feeling won't last. Now, would you be so kind as to pour some water into that bowl. It would seem Dain was preoccupied yesterday and forgot about me." One of the lizard's red eyes rolled completely around, then he flicked his tongue.

Lilya smiled. "You can blame me for that. I wanted to see this place, and he was kind enough to show it to me." She turned back to the table and poured water into a shallow dish. The clicking of claws on the stone floor gave warning he was coming.

He climbed the leg of the table then hopped up to the top and crept over to the bowl to drink. He glanced at her and tilted his head. "What, no screaming or fainting at the sight of me?"

*D.L. Taylor*

“Is that what you want?” she asked, leaning over slightly to get a better look.

“Aye. I’m a fearful beast you know.” Uland snorted, rolling his eyes.

“I can see that.” A smile tugged at the corner of her mouth.

“Dain was right about you.” He shook his body and padded over to the table’s edge, glancing at the floor, then back to her.

“How?” Had Dain been speaking of her?

He slunk closer to her, his movements slow and precise. “Why would you want to know?”

She straightened up, and frowned. Why did she care what Dain thought of her? The answer burst upon her like a fork of lightening. She cared for him. Her heart was involved.

“Quick, quick. Why must you know?”

“Because I--”

Dain's dark presence swung through the bedroom doorway cutting off her reply.

Uland whipped his tail and glared at him. “Spoiled! Spoiled! My trap is spoiled. Couldn’t you have waited two minutes?”

Dain ignored his pet, as his gaze landed on Lilya. The morning light fell over his wounded features, making her gasp. He looked terrible, as if he’d been beaten. His shoulders hung rounded with fatigue. Something dark smeared his chin and forehead. And there were dark circles under his eyes.

“My Lord, come sit down and let me tend to you.” She directed him over to the chair. Once he was seated, she went over to the drawers and opened the second and third until she found a small stack of washing cloths and poured water on one.

Moving back, she gently wiped at the black marks over his face. A strong scent of smoke coated him.

“You smell like you fell in a fire pit,” she stated, placing a cool cloth over his forehead.

Dain turned to glare over her shoulder at Uland. “Open that mouth of yours and I’ll cut off your head and make you into a leather belt.”

The lizard whipped his tail in the air, snorted, then laid down.

Satisfied Uland would hold his piece, Dain swung his gaze back to Lilya. She was a wonderful sight.

Dain watched her expression as she wiped the cool cloth across his cheek. Her movements were smooth and gentle. With one hand she lifted away his hair to wash his brow and along his neck. He felt his worries ease.

### **TIME OF THE DRAGON**

He laid his head back against the chair and his eyelids grew heavy. She smelled of heather, a flower that grew wild over green meadows. The soft blush of her cheeks drew his gaze. She bit her bottom lip as she cared for him and he found the sight endearing. The warmth of her nearness plagued his senses and stirred the man within.

Amazingly, even as tired as he was, his body responded to her. He wanted her, yet feared to make a move.

She leaned across to wash his arm and her breasts brushed against his chest, stealing his breath until she moved away slightly. The temperature in the room must have risen some thirty degrees.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

His overheated mind took a minute to realize she wasn't referring to his body's response, but to the night before.

“Nae.”

She leaned back just enough to face him. “Why not?”

*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Four

The last thing he wanted to do was relive his night with the cursed beast. The dragon had been restless last night, no doubt because he himself was disturbed. He had two days before the two hundredth anniversary of his curse. Then she would be gone from his life because he would let her go. Having made the decision this morning that he wouldn't allow her light to be snuffed out for a curse he brought upon himself. He'd come to care too much to let anything happen to her gentle spirit. The world needed the light she carried.

"Because the telling is long and I am weary." What he wanted was out of his reach. As his gaze fell to her neckline and the smooth, rounded, curves of her breasts, he swallowed.

"I have distressed you and I'm sorry," she said. Her cool fingers ran over his and he realized he'd been clutching the chair's arms.

"Tell me what is bothering you."

"By the rood, woman. Can you see? You are beautiful and nearly sitting on my lap." He helped her sit the rest of the way. "I am a man who's been alone a long time. I want you, but I dare not sample the forbidden."

Her gaze had taken on a fire and he felt his gut twist. Would she be disgusted and flee the room?

A smile curved her lips and her gaze dropped to his chest before sliding back up.

"You warm my heart, Dain. The fire in you pleases me."

Her response pushed him over the edge. He put a hand behind her neck and slowly pulled her close so his lips could meet hers. They were moist and warm, the sweetest fruit he'd ever tasted. He tenderly nuzzled her lips while his hands moved down to stroke her back. Lilya moved closer into his embrace, her hands slowly moving over his chest and up around his neck. She obviously liked it, so he claimed her mouth completely.

She fanned her fingers through his hair, sending a shudder of pleasure through him. Her tongue mated with his, timidly at first, then with growing ardor. Lilya was passionate and he found her refreshingly honest with her desire. She aroused him quickly

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

with her little moans until he found himself shaking with need. Her breath came uneven in his ears or was that his own heartbeat?

Suddenly a sarcastic voice broke through his heated thoughts. "If you take her now, you'll damn yourself."

Dain pulled his mouth away and laid his forehead against hers. "Damn you, Uland, to the hell where you were born."

"What did he mean, Dain?" Lilya asked, her chest rising and falling against his.

He lifted her off his lap to stand before him. "He put me in my place. Forgive me for my lack of manners. I would ask that you leave me for I am tired and unworthy of company." He couldn't look at her. If he did, he would be lost. She was the embodiment of all his dreams; a damned man's salvation.

Confused and hurt, Lilya stared at Dain's bent head. How could he dismiss her like that?

"I'm not some harlot that you can use and throw off at your whim," she gritted out between clenched teeth. His wide gaze swung up to meet hers, but she ignored the look of hurt in his eyes. "Have no fear. I will leave you to your rest and will bother you no longer."

"Lilya."

She turned and hurried out. As she walked down the hall and into her room, she realized how unfair she was in her anger. She had been the one to open the door for the kiss, wanting him to touch her. Her very soul stirred with their shared kiss.

With a heavy sigh, she fell upon the bed and hugged a pillow, while going over the conversation again. Uland had been hinting at something, but what.

Her eyes widened as some of the pieces fit together. Mayhap Dain was forbidden to touch her. He had said he wanted her but dare not sample. Why? And where had he been before dawn that made him fatigued and smell of smoke?

Whatever it was, he had not wanted to tell her. She scrambled from bed and went to the kitchen, hoping to find something to eat.

Again, she noticed how run-down the Keep was. How long had he lived here by himself?

Finding the kitchen clean, yet without a fire, she started looking through the shelves. Drying hunks of smoked meat hung from hooks in the ceiling rafters. Though the place was not cluttered, she found no order to the supplies. She built a fire in the cold hearth, then cut a slice of cheese and tore off a hunk of bread. She nibbled on them to satisfy her hunger as she rearranged the cooking supplies.



*D.L. Taylor*

It was late afternoon when she finished organizing and had prepared a warm supper. She had found a small vegetable and herb garden out back to aid her.

Lilya placed two meat pies and a fruit crisp made from dried fruit on a tray. She added a pitcher of wine and a glass. There had been no sign of Dain all day, so she wanted to take him supper as a peace offering. The guilt, she felt for yelling earlier hung heavily on her soul. She must make it right.

With tray in hand, she walked up the steps and over to his room. The door was still closed so she set the tray down, and knocked, but no answer came.

Glancing down at the tray of steaming food then at the door, she wondered if he would mind if she put the supper food on the table near the fire to stay warm until he was ready to eat.

She lifted the latch and opened the door just enough so she could slip through with the tray. Tattered curtains, covering the windows, darkened the room but a small fire still burned giving her the light she needed. She pushed the door closed with a foot and moved to the table by the chair.

Putting the tray down, she moved to the fireplace and knelt down. She leaned over and took two logs from the stack, carefully laying them into the fire.

The logs caught quickly, brightening the room. As she made to stand, one of the logs snapped, throwing a thumb-size burning ember. It landed in her lap. She gasped and tried to knock it back into the hearth, but her skirt caught fire.

Fear leaped up stark and vivid. Panting in terror, she hit at the flames repeatedly. Her panic turned to whimpers as the blaze grew. She felt the sharp bite of the burn on her thigh.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement, then cold water splashed over her front, taking her breath away as a chill replaced the heat.

A bare-chested Dain stooped down beside her, a frown across his brow. He was such a welcome sight she grabbed him around the neck and pulled him over. He lost his balance and fell on top of her.

Lilya cared only that he was holding her. "I thought I would die."

"It's not a way you would wish to go." His hands were all over her. "Are you hurt?"

She opened her eyes to see the sparkle of worry within the deep recesses of his gaze. She watched as slowly it changed to a passion-filled heat. At the same time, she realized how they lay.

His hair hung long beside his face to brush her neckline. She ran her fingers into his locks. It poured like silk over her palms.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

“I have missed your company this day.”

The lift of one brow was her only answer.

“I brought you food.”

“And I am hungry,” he stated, but she didn’t think he spoke of the meat pies. His words sent a shiver of pleasure through her body.

“You are cold?” he asked, rolling over and offering his hand to help her stand.

Taking it, she made to move only to cry out and sit back down.

“My leg.”

Without her permission, he pulled up her skirt, baring her legs. She took a big swallow, yet said nothing. When his large hand encountered her thigh, she jumped. With his intimate exploration, she quivered with the urgency of her own unsated needs. Blood pounded in her brain and traveled to that place between her legs, making her throb.

“You have a large burn, but I don’t think it will blister.”

Her stomach tightened as a sense of excitement began to build. A warmth tickled between her legs as she waited with anticipation for his next move.

“Do you know a lot about burns?” Her voice sounded husker than normal to her ears.

Dain glanced up from her wound to meet her gaze. He seemed to read her thoughts because his eyes darkened and he gently squeezed her leg before letting go.

“Some. I have a salve that will heal the wound overnight.”

He stood and went to the dresser’s bottom drawer to retrieve a glass jar. He came back and sat beside her on the rug.

Lilya expected him to hand her the jar, but instead, he dipped his fingers into the green salve and brought it to her thigh.

Dain’s strokes were smooth and gentle. Every time, he moved up her thigh, she wanted him to keep going, to run those fingers along the folds of her womanhood and ease the ache he was causing. But he would always stop and move away, teasing. It was a slow torture as well as pleasure.

The firelight danced over the firm muscles of his shoulders and chest. There was only a small triangle of dark hair between his breastbone, arching from one dark nipple to the other. Everywhere else was hard flesh.

She wanted to touch him, but after this morning, she feared to do so.

“I must ask you to forgive me.”

He stilled his movements. “You have done nothing that I must forgive.”

“I was angry this morning and said things that were uncalled for.”

*D.L. Taylor*

She regretted the lowering of her skirt, as she continued. "I made the offer and wanted you to kiss me, to touch me. I didn't know it would cause you trouble."

When his gaze lifted to hers, she saw so much pain she caught her breath. She raised her hand to his cheek. "Forgive me."

"You have offered me everything I wished for. I want the warmth of your body wrapped around mine, the smile of your lips to bring joy to my heart, but our time together is short. I will not take your gifts then part ways. That would be a sin I couldn't live with. Can you understand, sweet Lilya?"

"I don't understand, yet I will abide with your wishes, for I will not bring torment to your soul."

He turned away, putting the jar back. "What smells so good?"

Upon standing, she found the sting already gone from the burn. "I have made you meat pies and a fruit crisp. I hope you like them."

He walked back to the table and chair, smiling. "I love them. My mother used to make stacks of them but they never lasted long. My mouth waters for their taste."

"Sit then and enjoy."

"There are two. Would you sup with me?" Dain asked.

"I have already eaten, but I would share your company."

Because there was only one chair, Dain took a quilt from the bed and laid it before the fire, far enough away to be safe from the flames. He took the tray of food and set it between them.

She watched him take his first bite and saw a smile curve his lips.

"Tell me of your life, Lilya. Do you have family in the village?"

She glanced toward the flames. All the hardships, angry voices, and pain of rejection swam through her mind. "No one will miss me overly much. I made my living as a servant's servant." She glanced at her hands in her lap. "I have known more kindness and warmth here in your keeping than I ever have before. There is nothing of my life that is of interest. But I have a question."

Dain chuckled. "No doubt. Ask then."

"Tell me about the dragon."

He was choking!

She slapped him on the back. "Breathe, my lord."

"By the rood, woman. You have a heavy hand."

"Aye, but you're breathing again. Here drink." She handed him a glass full of wine as dark as a ruby.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

Dain lifted the glass to his lips and drained its contents. Setting the glass down, he turned toward her. "You wish to hear of the dragon?"

"If you're able to speak, I do."

He had a drop of meat juice at one corner of his lip. She reached up to wipe it off with a finger, then put it into her mouth.

Dain was mesmerized as she sucked on her finger. Her moist lips slid over the digit in a pucker. She was keeping him in a constant state of arousal that was going to kill him. He shifted his position and glanced anywhere but at her.

"What is it you would know?" he asked.

"Does he bother you?"

"Every night," he groaned. "But, you needn't fear him as long as you stay away from his lair."

"How long has he lived here?"

"I would say around two hundred years." As long as I have been here, he added silently.

"Tell me of your mother?"

The shift in topic caught him off guard. His gaze swung back to her. "My mother was a good woman." He could feel the familiar pain welling up to squeeze his heart. His family was not a subject he wished to speak of. There were too many memories, too many regrets. It was a sore wound that wouldn't heal. "She enjoyed doing things for us boys, a new coat, a sweet treat."

"You have brothers?"

"Only one." He frowned when a familiar tingling passed along his arms. He hadn't been keeping up with the time. Surely, the sun was not setting already.

Dain leaped up and strode to the window, yanking the curtains back. The last rays were turning the red sky a deep purple.

A panic took hold. He couldn't let it happen here. He grabbed up his cloak and headed for the door.

"Dain?"

"Stay here."

He swung the cloak over his shoulders as he stormed out the door.

Where was he going in such a hurry? The daring side of her nature tempted her to follow. If she was to be stuck in this castle, she wanted to know all its secrets, starting with its master. Knowing it was probably not the wisest action to take, she moved down the corridor after him.

*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Five

Lilya ran to the corner where Dain had disappeared, only to see him turn another. He was easy to follow, probably because he was in a hurry and his thoughts were no doubt on where he was going.

His path led them deep underground until carved stone became natural rock and the passage opened to a large cavern. The room was large enough to hold the entire castle. From where she stood at the entrance, the floor dropped away, falling some four stories before reappearing. Dain followed a narrow descending path along the outside wall until he reached the cavern floor.

Where was he going? She glanced around but saw no other opening. He strode over to stand at the center of a black circle on the floor. It was charred as if the design had been burned into the stone.

Her gaze widened as Dain yanked off his cloak. His wealth of shoulder-length ebony hair framed his tense face. Again, his strong, handsome features struck her, but her gaze fell to his chest.

Her breathing came quick and she wiped damp palms on her skirt. He was hard and smooth, his breastbone bulged with sinew, his arms well muscled. She knew if she was wrapped once more in his embrace, no harm would ever come to her.

Then somewhere within her heated thoughts, she wondered why he was undressing. There was no water for bathing. Did he await a secret lover?

That thought brought a stab of jealousy. She wanted to be his lover.

All thoughts fled when he reached to his waist to remove his pants. She groaned. She knew she must look away, but a hunger to see what other gifts the gods had bestowed upon him kept her eyes forward.

Once he stood naked, she drew in a breath she had unknowingly held. Her nails dug into the stone wall at her shoulder. He was wondrously made. Legs and thighs as thick and strong as oaks and a manhood anyone would covet. His hips and waist were lean and trim. Yes, here stood a man sculpted by the gods.

Suddenly, Dain's body jerked, his muscles contracted in a spasm, and a scream tore from his lips to echo along the caves stone walls.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

He wrapped his arms around his waist and fell to his knees. She moved out of hiding, responding to a need to help him. As if sensing her, he glanced up. His fiery gaze made her stumble back against the wall. Anger twisted his lips. "Nae, get out."

His gaze clouded and he jerked screaming in pain again. Fire appeared about him seeming to swallow him up, and his cry sounded long and became weaker

She took another step, wanting to reach him, her heart aching. What was happening? Was he to be lost in the fire?

The fireball consumed him, growing in size. She swore she could still see Dain twisting inside the inferno, pain ripping through him. His tortured agony became her own.

A new form began to build within the devouring flames. It was large, dark and had the head of a serpent. "The Dragon," she whispered, stepping back into the shadows of the doorway. Fear wrapped around her chest.

"Nae!" she cried, watching the man shimmer and fade while the dragon's shape became clearer, more defined. Its shiny scales glistened as it twisted and turned.

The fire vanished as quickly as it had appeared. The great beast gave a cry of such torment it seemed to tear her heart from her chest.

The dragon lowered his huge head as if weary. Small whines vibrated from his throat before he curled on the floor and laid his head on his tail. His sides heaved with each breath, a raspy sound filling the cave.

Lilya could feel his pain, yet she feared to believe her eyes. Had Dain been eaten by the dragon?

The beast lifted its head, turning its gaze to pin her where she stood. Its red eyes glowed with anger and suppressed torment.

Then, with a deep shift of awareness, she realized that Dain was the dragon. He moved to come at her with more speed than she thought possible for an animal that size.

Terror burst through her and she turned to flee; survival her one concern as his roar shook the ground and walls around her. All rational thought disappeared, replaced with a panic-stricken attempt to put distance between them. The safety of her chamber behind a bolted door was her goal.

*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Six

Lilya came to the end of the passage and had two choices, right or left. Listening, she heard nothing. Had the dragon given up pursuit? With a sigh, she turned around only to discover she knew not where to go. A pulsing tension stretched ever tighter across her chest. Unwelcome images of her bones scattered along the floor filled her head.

*Surely*, she couldn't be lost. She hadn't taken that many turns. Should she move back the way she had come? Her first turn was left, then right. *Nae*. She wasn't sure. There were too many passages. And she was alone. She could expect no help from a passing servant.

The sun had gone down, leaving dark shadows cut only with the waning light coming through arrow slits. She had to hurry. With no torchlight, the halls would soon be pitch-black and the cold would steal her breath. To be lost in a tomb of stone with a dragon on her trail would have her clawing the walls in panic.

Suddenly, a loud roar echoed down the passage from behind. Lilya's pulse beat erratically as the threatening scream grew louder. Picturing his sharp teeth and menacing gaze, she tensed, trying to control the spasms of trembling nerves.

Not caring which way was correct, she turned right. Lifting her skirts, she ran until the passage bore left and out into a torch-lit hall. There, the door to her room stood inviting.

With a thankful prayer to the gods, she stumbled into the safe haven and bolted the door. She leaned back against the heavy wood, trying to catch her breath.

Taking detail of her room, she saw the fire still glowed. Thinking again of the beast, she quickly stepped away from the door. She wanted stone walls as a barrier instead of wood.

She went to the fireplace and built a tall stack of dry logs over the fire to carry the flames to the ceiling of the large hearth.

The light and warmth from the fire helped to dispel some of her anxiety. She could only hope that he couldn't find her here!

Lilya went to the table beside the bed and poured a glass of wine before curling up in an oversized chair by the fire. Her hands were still shaking. She glanced at the door

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

then swallowed a gulp of wine, trying to make some sense of what she'd witnessed, trying to deal with its enormity.

Although she couldn't begin to imagine how Dain and the dragon could be one and the same, she knew it was true. She had seen it with her own eyes. Was it the result of some kind of curse? Recalling the agony in his gaze as the transformation overcame him, she knew it was not of his own choosing. Along with his anger, she'd seen a vulnerability that was so strong she feared it would consume her.

What had he told her? The dragon's time ran from sunset 'til sunrise. So, Dain would return to human form when the sun rose on the morrow?

She shivered again and brought the wine to her lips. Surely there was an explanation for what she had witnessed. Should she confront Dain and hope for an answer? Dark powers were at work here.

Another fearful thought crossed her mind. What if her life was in danger because of what she'd witnessed? Would he get rid of her because she now knew his secret?

Her mind told her the danger could be all too real, but her heart said otherwise. She trusted him, knew somehow deep inside that he would not harm her. It was strange, she knew, to come to care deeply for a person so fast, but it was happening. If Dain, the man, had any control over the beast, he would protect her.

A deep tiredness settled over her. The run of emotions seemed to deplete her strength. She finished her wine then replaced the glass on the table. With trembling fingers, she undressed before falling into bed. She would only sleep a little while and wake before dawn. She wanted to be ready when Dain came for her. And he would come. Of *that*, she had no doubt.

Awaking to the sound of a deep groan and a slight bite to her bare shoulder, her eyes snapped open to meet the angry gaze of Dain as he leaned over her.

"You wanted to see the beast, so here I am."

Lilya scooted backward on the bed, clutching the linens to her breasts, as if that would protect her from his anger. The ability to speak seemed to have deserted her. She ran her tongue over dry lips, trying to form the words that would cool his fury. She wanted desperately to reassure him that his secret was safe; to ask him a million questions, but her thoughts could not find their way to her mouth.

He leaned closer and she could smell his masculine scent mingled with the lingering aroma of smoke. It was thrilling, disturbing, and yet not unpleasant.

"Have you no words, woman? Yesterday you were full of questions." He leaned closer still until he was looming over her. His warm lips met hers in a kiss of anger and



*D.L. Taylor*

raw passion. He was not brutal. Even now, he took care not to hurt her. Yet there was little doubt, he was in command.

The heat from him passed through her and she felt his need merge with her own. She met every kiss with one of her own, her arms sliding around his back to hold him close. His breathing became harsh and heavy against her throat.

The warmth of his palm slid along her shoulder and down to press over her covered breast. She moaned and rose to meet his touch.

He yanked down the covers to bare her breasts and cupped one in his palm, plucking at the nipple. She sighed and placed her hand over his. To have him pressed to her, loving her as no other, had brought a sense of completeness. The beauty of his touch brought tears of wonder and immense joy to her eyes. "Love me, Dain."

He groaned loudly then rolled to the side. "As much as I wish it," he said, stroking her breast once before removing his hand, "I can not make love to you."

"Why? I wish it too." She rolled toward him.

"If you knew the kind of person I am you wouldn't seek my touch."

He moved as if he would leave, but she leaned into him and laid her head on his shoulder, her palm working over his naked chest.

"Tell me what evil magic binds you so. Share with me the secrets that torment your soul."

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close, as if the telling would frighten.

"Aye. 'Tis time you know who I am. 'Twill be two hundred years ago tonight that I was cursed. I was young and a fool. 'Twas a wonder I could carry my head on so weak a neck. I'd gone hunting with my younger brother that fateful day."

Lilya felt him take a deep breath then let it out in a sigh.

"When night fell, mother came to the hunter's cabin to bring us meat pies. We argued over the last one, but I wasn't willing to share. I grew enraged and lost my temper."

When he paused, Lilya ran her hand along his cheek, down his throat, and across his chest, waiting, encouraging with gentle strokes. So much pain.

"I grabbed the candlestick from the table and threw it at Thomas. The hot wax and flames torched his clothes. He screamed as the fire ate at his flesh. I was so stunned at what my actions had caused, I couldn't move. Our Mother begged me to help him. She took her cloak and tried to put out the flames and I watched frozen as her gown caught fire. Her screams mingled with my brothers. When I realized it was beyond hope, I turned and ran in fear, leaving them to their deaths." He pounded his fist into the bed. "A million times I have wished to go back and change the outcome."

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

“But I didn’t escape punishment. The gods cursed me for my anger and greed. I now burn every night for my sins and carry the beast within me.”

“Surely being imprisoned here *alone* is punishment enough for your crime. Why is the curse not broken?”

Dain swung his gaze back to hers. She lay waiting expectantly. He wished to tell her. A compelling force pushed the words to his throat but the stronger power of his softening heart sealed his lips. He was astonished to realize he cared for her, so much so, that he contemplated condemning himself by withholding the cure for his curse.

He raised a finger and ran it along the smooth line of her jaw. “The secret to the curse I will hold, but this morn I found something more valuable. You have showed me kindness, passion, a zest for life. I had forgotten all these.

“You have seen the beast in me yet you accept me with open arms.”

He would not ask of her what was needed to set him free. He would not take a life to save his own. Never again. The person he had been no longer lived in his body. Never again would another suffer because of his thoughtlessness or selfishness. No life would be sacrificed to save his own. Lilya stirred his heart as no other had. The best he could do was free her.

“I will see you returned to your home.”

“But I wish to stay.” Lilya press his hand against her cheek. “Please let me stay here--with you.”

She pressed her lips to his, nibbling them until he responded. It was as if a lock had been broken, freeing the water to flood the fields. She could feel the change in Dain as he accepted his need for her.

The kiss became hungry, their lips giving and finding in a play of love.

*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Seven

Dain ran his hand along the inside of her arm and down the curve side of her breast, his gaze never leaving hers. He circled her breast coming close to the hardened nipple, yet never touching it. He teased her, caressing her until she shook with shivers of pleasure.

“Touch me, Dain.”

A smile graced his lips. He enjoyed being the master of this play and by the small sounds she made, she enjoyed letting him take control. But she was not above making some of her own rules. She slid her fingers down his chest, circling his navel, then moved lower only to retreat and start again.

His smile grew wider. He leaned forward, kissing her in encouragement. His hand ran down her hip and thigh, catching her under the knee to pull her leg up onto his hip. Then his fingers worked back up her body, roaming over her bottom and along the moist heat of her womanhood, coming close to the sensitive place without touching.

When her hand moved below his navel again, he leaned over and took a nipple in his mouth. She touched his rod, causing him to moan.

Dain was substance for her soul and she feasted well. Her hands moved up to comb into his hair at his temples. Holding him close, she kissed his cheek and chin before returning to his lips.

His hand traveled down her belly and ran along her thigh then back up, finding a place no one had shared before. She groaned as he touched her there. She put her hand over his, pressing his fingers into her moist heat. She felt him watching and it heightened her need.

“Open for me, Lilya. I would behold the bud of your bloom.”

Her gaze met his and saw the fire burning in their dark depths. Slowly she let her legs fall open to his exploring fingers. He moved one along the side of her private folds, circling the sensitive bud before going down the other side. She moaned, wanting him inside her.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

“The pull of your flower’s fragrance is more alluring than any I have ever experienced. It has brought life to one who was dead. Now I want more. I wish to see the bud grow and know it was I who helped it blossom.”

He slid his finger over the throbbing heat of her desire then downward to press inside her. She gasped and raised her hips to meet his hand.

He inserted another finger, setting a rhythmic pattern of pushing in, then pulling out. She placed her hand over his, fearing he would quit the heavenly torture. The power of her need swelled until without warning it erupted in a shower of white bliss. Her cry of pleasure broke the silence around them.

She slowly opened her eyes to meet Dain’s, only to discover she wanted more of him. Reaching down, she wrapped her hand around his standing manhood. He was silk over stone. His moan of delight brought a thrill to her heart.

“If you would see me bloom fully, my love, you must use the right tool.”

“As you wish my lady.”

He moved over to lie between her legs; his lips feeding along hers. He pressed the tip of his rod into her wet heat, slowly inching in then moving out, only to slip deeper with the next gentle thrust. By slow degrees, he claimed her without pain until he filled her completely. She could feel the muscles in his back bunch with each thrust. He pushed up on his elbows, feathering his hands in her long tresses, which fanned over the pillow.

“You fill me well, my love.”

He groaned and pressed his face between her breasts as he pushed deep inside her. Pleasure built again with each thrust.

She raised her hips to meet him. He was the missing part of her soul. Suddenly, with a powerful rush that robbed her of all control, euphoria crashed upon her in a release so strong it caused her to cry out in ecstasy.

Dain grew rigid, then groaned loudly as his hot seed filled her womb. Exhausted, he rolled off and pulled her close.

He had sealed his fate with the taking of her body, but he didn't regret the love they shared. Their souls had merged packing a lifetime of loving into these few stolen hours. He would treasure their time always.

Lilya had not been aware of dozing until she felt Dain’s hand once more upon her body and smiled.

“You slept too long. I couldn’t wait to touch you again.” His deep voice and words brought pleasure to her ears.

*D.L. Taylor*

“My greatest wish is to feel your hands upon my breasts and your lips upon mine. It would be a sin to take them from me.”

Oh, my lady. Your words make my body hard and eager to love you once more.”

She giggled then moaned as his fingers moved between her legs.

“I am a hungry man.”

“Then feast upon me, my love.”

He spread her legs and pressed his face between them, nipping at the bud before pushing his tongue deep within her drinking of her honey. His fingers ran along her anus teasing her as he sucked on her bud. She came for him and he took all she gave before taking her again. They came together again in wild abandon and continued all through the afternoon.

Lilya stretched out on top of Dain, her legs tangled with his. Her forehead rested under his chin. She was content to stay there, feeling his heartbeat mix with hers and savoring the anticipation of the pleasure he could give. The hairs on his chest tickled her nipples, and his warm hand on her bottom gave a sense of rightness. Here was where she belonged.

She raised her head and kissed his chin. He turned his head to meet her gaze then smiled.

“I love you, Dain.”

His smile seemed to turn to stone.

“Does this displease you?” she asked.

“Nae.” He answered while lifting and rearranging strands of her hair. “I am honored. I have come to care for you as well, but there are some things I must tell you before I leave this night.”

Lilya moved off his chest and turned to sit on the edge of the bed. She wasn’t sure that she wanted to hear what he wanted to say.

She could feel the bed moving and heard the linen rustle before his hands came over her shoulders as he slid up behind her.

“You have to go back to the village. There is no life for you here. Cursed as I am, I can’t give you children, or wealth, or clothing, or even a Keep that isn’t falling down. I am cursed by the gods and that will not changed.”

“That doesn’t matter if you love me. Do you?”

He moved to her side and took her in his arms. With tender fingers, he brushed tendrils of hair behind her ear. “I know naught of love, but I will say this. If love means that I care for you above all else, if it means to think and do for you before seeing to my wants, then aye ‘tis love. For I feel all these things. You have my heart and soul and as

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

the years drag by, there will be no other to fill that part. As I sleep the morning through, it will be your lips and your arms I dream of. And I thank you for that gift.”

He reached for a jar on the nightstand and handed it to her. “Here, take these herbs when the sun sets. Put them in a glass of wine and drink them. They will make you sleepy, so go quickly to the courtyard and wait until sleep takes you. All will be well.”

Somehow, she sensed that he was giving her a means to return to her other life, but to do so would mean she would have to leave him. He would still be held captive within the binds of the curse. Now that she had known the strength of his love and that he would condemn himself forever to spare her, she also knew she could not leave.

“Do not condemn me to a lonely life. Tell me how I might break the curse so we can be together. I will love no other, Dain.”

He shook his head. “It may seem so now, but if you stayed you would come to hate this place and me. You would grow old, your womb shriveled, while I would stay young. Now, say you will do as I ask. Take the herbs.”

Tears clouded her vision until she blinked and they ran down her cheeks. She couldn’t speak for the hard lump in her throat. She nodded and bowed her head. Here she had found so great a love only to have it ripped away by a curse.

“I must leave you now.” His voice sounded thick with torment. “I pray that your life will be full, sweet Lilya.” He kissed her, a farewell caress filled with everything neither of them would put words to. Lilya clung to him, praying to the last moment that he would change his mind and keep her with him, but he didn’t. He rose from the bed and walked to the door where he stopped, glancing her way one last time. The agony on his face stabbed her heart. Then he was gone.

\* \* \*

She sat alone on the bed, her legs curled underneath her, watching the sun sink slowly below the horizon. She combed through her hair with her fingers, feeling a loss far deeper than anything she had experienced before. It was like a death shroud had been laid over her heart. Her luck hadn’t changed.

The sun was setting, and soon she must do as he bade. She twisted the covers in her fists. If only he would tell her how to break the curse, then they could have a future together.

Suddenly, a creature jumped onto the bed beside her. She screamed and scrambled backward until she saw it was Dain’s lizard. With her hand over her racing heart, she tried to slow her breathing.

“You gave me a fright.”

*D.L. Taylor*

The lizard tilted his head. "You humans are much too jumpy. Never are you aware of what's going on around you."

"I have other things on my mind."

"You sound like him."

"Who? Dain?"

"She has a brain." He flipped his tail and climbed up on her pillow.

"Then why can't I find a way to break the curse?"

"You didn't ask the right being."

She narrowed her gaze. Mayhap Uland held the solution. She leaned closer to the lizard. "Will you tell me how to break his curse?"

He stuck out his forked tongue then raised his nose to the ceiling. His eyes moved this way and that as if searching the room. "The fool is stubborn and has grown a heart where you are concerned. 'Tis a weakness and will seal his doom."

"Can I help him?"

Uland's intense dark gaze turned, piercing her. "If you could, would you?"

She moved her lips to reply but Uland interrupted. "Think before you speak. For what if I said you must die to free him?"

She sat back as if needing distance from him and glanced out the window. Could she take that chance? Dain had become a breathing part of her soul. But could she give her life for his? The answer was 'aye', because without Dain, she had no life, no wish to continue.

"Do you love him?"

"Aye." There was no doubt of that, and as for the other question, how could she honestly answer what she would or wouldn't do until the time faced her. "Tell me what I must do. 'Tis the reason you came to me isn't it?"

Uland moved off the pillow and onto her lap. "You are worthy." He curled up and lay down. "'Tis simple. When Dain walks among the flames with the dragon, you must step in unclothed and unadorned, pure of heart, pure of body, and pure of mind, a willing sacrifice to my lord Dain. Then will the curse be broken."

Death by fire. She shuddered at the images filling her thoughts. "Pure of body? I'm no longer a virgin. Would my sacrifice still save Dain?"

"Pure of body could mean many things. Like giving yourself only to one man in marriage, being clean, or healthy. The choice must be yours because it is your life you give."

### **TIME OF THE DRAGON**

She hesitate a moment, considering his words. Could she do it? Reaching a decision, she brushed him off her lap and leaped from the bed. Grabbing her clothing, she hurriedly pulled them on. “’Tis almost too late. The sun sets. Lead me to him.”

“Listen well, human. If you are to *survive*, your love must be your shield. If for an instant you hesitate, both of you are doomed.”

She leaned down grabbed him around the middle and ran for the door.



*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Eight

Dain felt the weight of his two-hundredth anniversary sitting heavily on his shoulders. By bedding Lilya, he had sealed his doom. Now there was no hope of breaking the curse. For eternity, he would be alone, at the mercy of the gods' whims, never to know the love or warmth of another human or taste Lilya's lips once more.

On this night, the powers of all heaven and earth would converge. To bring them to this place for a time of testing, he built a fire in all four directions just outside the inner circle where he would stand. He took a torch and lit the logs, starting at the east and moving counter clockwise.

Dain had come straight from Lilya so he stood naked and waiting, yet his thoughts weren't centered on what came next. Instead, they were filled with Lilya and the way they had made love today. The softness of her touch, the feel of her beneath him, the shy smile after their lovemaking. She had become everything to him in so short a time.

How would he ever live without her? The familiar tingling started in his chest, growing to a sharp pain, but still he held fast to her image. It was the smell of heather that teased his senses as his gut twisted.

Dain bent over, his hands on his knees as he shook his head to hang on to his humanity. He closed his eyes and groaned in pain. Then his eyes snapped open, and his tortured gaze burned into hers. Somehow, she stood before him.

"Get out, love. 'Tis not safe."

Lilya slowly shook her head and began to remove her clothing. Even now, he was trying to protect her.

"Lilya, the beast comes. I can't hold him much longer."

"I know," she whispered. From the look on his face, she knew the moment he realized what she planned to do.

"Nae!" he shouted, the word ending in a scream as fire consumed him.

The heat of the flames made her stumble back. Here was the moment of truth.

She watched him twist in agony and felt her heart torn from her breast. His pain became her own and tears welled up to pour down her cheeks. She could stop his pain.

### TIME OF THE DRAGON

How many others would watch their loved ones suffer and wish to take their place. How great a gift was this.

“May the gods who have forsaken you grant me my last request. Hear my plea and give Dain his freedom, taking me instead. I love him more than life.”

The great dragon appeared within the flames. His wings flapped and he stretched his neck to the ceiling and blew forth fire. His scream of fury and pain mingled with Dain's.

Fear snaked out, threatening to hold her immobile, but she remembered Uland's words. Love would be her shield.

She focused on Dain alone, driving the images of the beast and the fire from her head. Then with a deep breath, she opened her arms and stepped into the flames.

The intensity of the heat caused her to stagger. The smell of burnt hair assailed her senses, and she realized fire had climbed the length of her dark tresses consuming them. She waved her arms among the flames seeking the touch of her lover, but all she was aware of was the crisping of her flesh. She screamed as the darkness of death came to swallow her. A blinding flash of light took her sight, then a mighty rumble echoed around the cave walls. A blast of wind screamed about them, killing the flames and knocking her to the ground. All was silent and cold.

Through a haze of confusion, she felt something smooth and cool run along her hot cheek. “Lilya.”

She felt a weightlessness take over, as if she could float above the pain.

“Lilya! By the gods, open your eyes.” Dain's voice came thick with worry and fear. His need of her pulling at her heart. She moved to answer and found her throat dry. She swallowed then once more tested her voice. “Dain.” Taking a few shallow breaths, she tried again.

“Dain, I lost you.”

“Nae, love. You have freed me. Open your eyes. Join me in the land of the living, my love.”

She blinked a few times then raised her hand to rub her burning eyes, before opening them to see Dain's handsome face hovering over hers with a lit torch.

“You did it, Lilya. Night is upon us and I stand as a man.”

She smiled and lifted her hand to his cheek, then the life left her body once more.

*D.L. Taylor*

## Chapter Nine

The sun coming through the bedroom window awoke her. Lilya stretched, feeling a tightness across her chest, no doubt from the smoke she had inhaled. Turning, she saw Dain's dark head on the pillow beside hers. He was watching her and sat fully dressed.

"Good morning."

She smiled.

"I have something to show you, if you are well enough."

She sat up stiffly and her hair fell across her cheek. Reaching up, she found her hair had burned off to shoulder length. It had not been a horrible dream. She looked at her arms to see the skin glowed pink as if she'd been in the sun too long, but there were no visible burns. Her questing fingers touched the richness of the new gown she wore.

"Where did this come from?"

"The gods have found favor in you," Dain said, smiling.

He stood, putting his arm around her back and under her knees to pick her up. He carried her out the door. The hall looked new and clean, and when he got to the top of the stairs she saw all that had been in disrepair was now whole. The Keep glowed with renewed life. The darkness had lifted.

"How can this be?" she asked, marveling at the wonders of the room and all changes.

"Wait. There is more." He turned back down the passage leading to the tower. Climbing the stairs, he brought her to the roof.

It was as if time had erased everything to make it new once again. The Keep glowed white in the sunshine. Even stone guardian that had been missing now sat along the roof edge. Colorful flags waved from each turret.

Dain sat her on her feet. Taking her hands, he knelt before her. "You have given me life and a chance to begin again. Would you stand by my side and direct my path for as long as time will allow?"

Tears of such joy closed off her words so she just nodded.

\* \* \*

### **TIME OF THE DRAGON**

Uland sat on the shoulder of a nearby stone cherub watching them. “About time. If I had to eat dried meat scraps for another century, I would have thrown a fit. For this job, Zeus better offer me a queen’s banquet.”

The cherub’s eyes opened, then answered. “Why did you throw in the part about her having to be a virgin? I never said that.”

“Cupid darling, I am the goddess of seduction. What better way is there to bring two people together, then to throw in the forbidden?”

“Well done, Venus.”

“I know!” She whipped her tail and stood a little straighter. “Now take me home. Leather can be fun to ware but I’m in the mood for silk. Care to play?”

Cupid’s lips twisted wickedly before they both disappeared.

*D.L. Taylor*

Author Bio

**D.L. Taylor has a love for all things mysterious and magical. It is the heartbeat of all humans to wonder what lies beyond the next turn or what dwells in the darkness. She started writing stories in first grade with a friend drawing the pictures. She held on to her secret passion and has won various writing awards, one being Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award for 2003. After graduation, she met her soul mate, David, and they married in 1982.**

**Ms. Taylor studied commercial art in college, developing several commercials for channel 6 TV, as well as menus for some top restaurants in Florida, but her love of the written word held fast.**

**Along with her husband, she has two young daughters to share life with. Ms. Taylor has completed many novels and novellas with many others in the works. Her published works have appeared in health magazines, newsletters, and other short story publications. She founded Taylor's Writing Guild and Diamond Star Designs, graphic art.**

**She also works as an Editor helping other young authors attain their dreams, and a cover art designer for publishing houses.**

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