
Ties

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Farnya squealed loudly and reached for the rag doll being held just out of her reach, her cries taking on a decidedly less cheerful note as her cousin laughed and pulled the toy further away from her eager hands. Giggling, Terena edged the battered doll a little closer to the baby, then let out a wail of her own as her father plucked it from her hands and gave it to Farnya, who gurgled happily and proceeded to chew on one grubby cloth arm. "Terri, play nicely!"

Corsan laughed and shook his head as the four Turn old child scowled and stomped off to where her elder brothers were playing catch with a globefruit. R'nesan sighed and watched his daughter's retreat. "I hope she gets through this phase soon," he muttered.

"About another ten to fifteen Turns," his brother told him cheerfully. "Jecissa's into her second Turn of it now. Still have a while to go with young Farnya here, but I'm sure she'll catch up...."

"I can't wait," Dunia said dryly. "You make it sound so exciting, dear."

"The joys of parenthood are many and varied, love," Corsan told his weyrmate, lying back on the blanket to rest his head on her lap. "But they're rarely dull!"

"So I'm discovering," the goldrider said with a smile, reaching down to ruffle his hair. "Not least through having a weyrmate who seems to think he's ten Turns of age half the time!"

Corsan pouted up at her. "You didn't think that last night...."

"Behave!"

The dragonhealer beamed at her and gazed up at the patterns of sunlight that dappled the puzzleleaf canopy in a thousand shades of gold and green. It had been a while since both he and R'nesan had been able to claim a restday away from duty and today was near-perfect in Corsan's view -- bright and dry with a gentle sea breeze that kept the early-summer heat from becoming oppressive. It was a good day to be lazy with loved ones and so they had spent their time lounging near the lake with weyrmates and children and the occasional reminder that Nioranth was not so forgiving of clampering youngsters as R'nesan's brown Berumith.

"Oh, there's another one," Dunia sighed, and Corsan turned his head to see a bronze -- D'ralt's Nalth, by the look

of him -- wading into the lake and preening rather blatantly for an appreciative Nioranth. "The sooner she rises the better...."

"So long as it's not today," Corsan said, watching the gold thoughtfully. "Ceresa is meant to be along in a while, and besides, what *would* we tell the children if you suddenly started ripping all your clothes off and chasing bronzeriders around the shoreline? Would all end in tears, I tell you...."

Dunia smiled. "I think we're safe -- she's at least five days off yet."

"Ah, you say that, but you know those tricky females, just when you think you're safe, they -- *ooof!*"

Terena giggled hysterically as she bounced on her uncle's stomach. "I got you!"

"So you did, sweetie," Corsan gasped. "Looks like the big ones aren't the only ones I have to watch out for...." He pushed himself up and grabbed for the girl, tickling her until she shrieked. "Now who's got who, troublemaker? You're such a menace, I bet you're going to grow up to have a great big menace of a dragon, just like your Auntie Dunia...." He glanced towards his weyrmate with a grin and saw a shadow of sadness cross her features, quickly covered. "Do you want that?" he continued to the squirming child. "Do you want a big gold dragon *just* like Nioranth?"

"No!" Terena chirped gleefully, "Nioranth's *mean!*"

"Well, I won't argue with you there...."

Nioranth snorted irritably and turned her head to look along the shoreline. "I think your sister and her children are here, dear," Dunia said mildly, and Corsan could hear the sound of whooping, yelling youngsters coming ever closer, no doubt Ceresa and her large brood of children and fosterlings. A moment later, Cefarn and Nerrek, Corsan's eldest nephews, came running into view to pounce gleefully on R'nesan and Talya's two boys, all four rolling off laughing to wrestle in the undergrowth. As the rest of the family brood came thundering along the lakeside, Dunia sighed and lifted Farnya into her arms to keep her from being trampled. "And I thought *my* family were loud," she said good-naturedly, and then the shadow returned for a moment before being banished with a laugh as Farnya tired of the soggy rag doll and threw it into her father's lap.

Corsan lifted the drool-soaked toy by one leg and looked at it dubiously. "Why, thank you, Farnya, it's just what I've always wanted."

"It's *wet!*" Terena said, wrinkling her small nose in disgust, then darted off to dance around with her older cousins. Corsan watched her go and shook his head.

"Where do they get the energy from?" he wondered aloud, giving the doll back to his daughter as she reached for it with one chubby hand. "We still have all this to look forward to with you, don't we, sweetie, along with all the tantrums and the bed-wetting and the destructive tendencies...."

This time it was Dunia who threw the doll at him.



"At last! I was beginning to think that she would never go to sleep." Dunia dropped onto the porch seat beside her weyrmate with a sigh. "Honestly, for all the excitement her cousins provided today, she should have gone out like a turned glow!"

"Unpredictable little beasts, children," Corsan said, slipping an arm around her shoulders. "I think the dragons have the right idea. Look at Nioranth there -- she lays her clutch, pushes her impeccably behaved babies around for five sevendays, then hands them over to someone else as soon as they start to demand food. Perfect system if you ask me."

Dunia smiled. "Yes, Nioranth has *no* idea how lucky she is," she said, gazing at the golden dragon now sleeping away the deepening twilight in her wallow. "Not that it always goes right even for them. I remember poor Ev--"

She broke off abruptly and Corsan turned his head to look at her. "It's all right, love, you can tell me."

"No, I can't." The goldrider closed her eyes and sighed again. "I wish that I could but... no." She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Today was good. Thank you."

Corsan pressed a kiss against her hair. "We used to go there when we were brats, me and Ranesan and Nasec and Sanrel and Ceresa and the others, that same spot down by the lake. We could have shown Terena and the rest something about making noise!" He chuckled at the memory. "Most of the folks from the North think it must have been terrible here during the Exile, but we all thought it was *fantastic* -- all this green and the sea and the treehoppers to chase. We were too young to care about all the politics, of course...." He gave his weyrmate a squeeze. "I guess this is all just ancient history to you, of course."

"It was," Dunia admitted. "Now... now it's all a lot more real."

They sat in silence for a while before Corsan hesitantly said, "I saw the way you looked when I talked about Terena growing up earlier. You're thinking about going back, aren't you, love?"

"Yes." The goldrider's voice was very soft, as if she barely dared to admit it to herself. "Yes, Nioranth is well now, strong enough to make the trip. Her cycles, though...." Dunia paused, then went on more strongly. "Nioranth's matings are more frequent than they were and I can't risk her rising while we're halfway home. You're a dragonhealer -- would you know... some of the Oldtimer queens must have been carrying eggs when they made the trip to the Ninth Pass. Do you know if there's any danger to timing with a pregnant queen?"

It took a few moments for Corsan to find his voice. "Those queens who were too close to clutching or who had eggs on the sands stayed behind, of course," he started, reciting the history he had learned as an apprentice and ignoring the cold heaviness that seemed to be forming in his gut. "The Pass was over, the breeding cycles slowing, so there were only three such and they transferred into Benden.

Of those that left, five were with egg and two rose en route, but they flew at their own Weys and did not draw the attention of Benden -- although I'm sure that there were some pretty wild holder tales at the time." He let his gaze wander out to where Nioranth slept on, oblivious to the conversation that could decide her future. "When the Weys reached the Ninth Pass and the clutches were laid, there was some egg mortality and some sickly hatchlings, but later clutches from those queens were healthy, as were the clutches conceived on the journey." He closed his eyes for a moment, then moved so that he could see her face. "Is that the answer you needed?"

Dunia nodded, not looking at him. "Yes. Thank you."

"Right." Corsan cleared his throat. "When are you thinking of...?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Farnya... she's old enough to go *between* now and --"

"You're taking Farnya with you?"

"I can't leave her here; I *won't* leave her here," Dunia said fiercely, but then her expression softened and she met his eyes at last. "But I won't deprive her of her father, not if I don't have to. If I asked you to come with me...."

Corsan swallowed hard. He had half-expected this question, half-feared it, and now that the moment had come, he found himself uncharacteristically tongue-tied. "I... *are* you asking me?"

She nodded, biting at her lip.

"Then I think that I might say yes," he said slowly, then held up a hand to forestall anything else she might say. "I'll go with you... but not now, not yet."

"What? But why wait?"

"Why *wait*? Surely the question is 'why hurry?'" Corsan smiled at her reassuringly and took her hands in his. "Dunia, love, you know what it is to leave a world behind, to be all on your own in a sea of strangers. You landed here by accident and you've always known you'd go back, but for me -- for me this would be deliberate and it'd be a one-way trip. And I'd be leaving *everybody*, everybody but you and Farnya. I'd never see R'nesan again, or N'sec, or Ceresa or little Terena. I'd be leaving Renthic and Tolomas and Ukalen and the rest. And, well, you know that this isn't my first weyrmating and that Farnya's not my first brat." He chuckled as he thought of his other children. "I want to see Jecissa and Cejran grow up, at least a bit more. I might not get to see them Impress their gold and bronze but I'd like to see how they turn out. And I doubt Jerisa would let me take them with me."

"I --" Dunia looked down a moment, her eyes seeming to gaze through the wooden planks of the weycot's porch. "I understand," she said finally, lifting her head to meet his eyes. "As you say, there's no hurry. But understand that one day I *will* need to go."

"You and me both, love," Corsan assured her, his features suddenly breaking into a grin. "But, you know, what's a Turn or two between friends?" He dropped a kiss onto her nose, his good humour restored once more. "I'll get my head around it all soon enough and then we'll be flitting

off to your Southern and surprising everyone with your miraculous survival!"

The goldrider looked at him for a long moment, then smiled. "Thank you," she said again. Then she moved in closer and neither of them was able to say anything else for quite some time.



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