

NOTHING AT ALL

by Julia Pferdehirt

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THE EASTERN KINGDOM stretched ten days' ride along the seacoast. Traders followed dusty roads from village to village, leaving kitchen knives or plow blades and taking away a winter's lacework, bags of spun wool, or great kegs of cider. The laws were few and fair, and the land was good. From harvest to harvest, all those who lived between the western mountains and the sea paid their taxes, held holiday each year on the king's name day, and generally kept the peace.

In a small village near the foothills there lived a remarkable family. The oldest child could run with such speed that people called him Seena, which means "The Antelope Runs." The second child was a story weaver who told tales of great wit and beauty. Everyone called her Ista, "The Sun Laughs."

When the third, and last, child was born, the villagers waited to see what her gift might be. Some thought she would become a great healer; others suggested a famous sculptor or a wise counselor to the king.

Years passed as this girl-child grew. She was gentle, kind, fun-loving, and clever. She made friends easily and would have been a joy to any parent's heart—except that she did nothing extraordinary. Her hands had no special skill, and her mind was no keener nor her judgment clearer than other people's. When her parents saw nothing unique in their daughter, they were shocked, and as time passed, the people in the village began calling her Ona, which means "Nothing at All."

During the autumn when Ona turned sixteen, the villagers heard rumbling in the western mountains. Sometimes the rumbling became a great roar that echoed across the valley. The oldest woman in the village said then that a dragon was on the rampage, but no one believed her, of course.

Nor did anyone believe her when the forest on the western mountains burned red for most of a week. Only when the streams from the western hills flowed with

steaming water, and the mountain villagers fled with their bundles and their fear, did the people finally believe.

The villagers asked Ona's brother, Seena, to run to the king for help. Ona's sister, Ista, composed the message, pleading for the ruler to take the villagers under his protection. Scarcely had Seena disappeared on the eastern road than the people began gathering their possessions together. The roaring in the west told them that they, too, would soon be refugees, fleeing the dragon.

As the villagers prepared to leave, Ona wandered through the streets asking the old people what they knew about dragons. They knew very little. The oldest woman told her that dragons loved few things in the world besides gold, cruelty, and riddling.

"My mother once told me that dragons are magical creatures," the old woman said, "and that they riddle because they are cruel. But if you defeat them, they must give you whatever you ask for. My mother didn't say why, and I don't even know if it's true."

A neighbor told a similar tale about a dragon that lost its magic because it could not guess a riddle. Other than that, the villagers knew nothing. They were terrified.

That night Ona cried out as dragon shapes filled her sleep. She woke shaking and rose to look out the window at the western mountains. If the dragon pursues me even in my dreams, she thought, how will running away do any good? We have children and grandparents to slow us, and nothing at all to hold the dragon back.

With those words, "nothing at all," Ona nearly stopped breathing. She gripped the edge of the window sill and stared like a sleepwalker into the darkness outside. "Hold it back," she whispered to herself. "Nothing at all to hold it back." It was almost dawn when the foolish, impossible idea came to her.

Before sunrise, the people began their sad journey to the east, their rattling carts and bleating sheep raising clouds of dust. Ona took her basket and blanket and walked west toward the meadow. In the panic, she was not missed.

Ona spread her blanket on the ground in the very center of the meadow and sat facing the mountains. Throughout the afternoon she sat, small and unmoving. Toward evening she unwrapped some of the soft round buns her mother had made for the eastern journey. Tears dropped onto the napkin as she ate.

When the sun reached the crest of the western mountains, Ona saw the dragon dark against it. She saw its great wingspan and its long, reaching neck. The beast began its flight towards the meadow, and as it approached, Ona could see its claws and the black smoke curling from its nostrils.

The dragon landed with surprising grace in front of her, but Ona did not move. When the dragon spoke, its voice was low, hoarse, and rumbling.

“You are a small one to be so foolish. Why did you not flee like the others?”

Its eyes narrowed, and cruel smoke rose slowly from its snout. Ona watched as its tail swept the ground only inches from her blanket.

“Speak!” said the dragon. “Amuse me, or I shall destroy you.”

Now Ona spoke the words she had so carefully planned. “I have heard,” she said slowly, “that you are a great riddler, and I could not imagine such a thing. I have come to see if it is true.” She forced herself to look directly into the dragon’s fierce eyes.

Perhaps the beast was amused. It stood silent for so long that Ona began to feel the coldness of the ground through the blanket. She heard the dragon’s breath, low and grating. It was a terrible sound, a sound of waiting and trapping and great claws toying with helpless prey. She held her body still by sheer force of will.

It was almost a relief when the dragon finally spoke. “You?” it roared. “You? Fool, give me one reason why I should not flame you to ashes!”

Again Ona’s dark eyes lifted to the dragon’s great burning ones and held them. She heard herself say, “Because then you will never know the riddle. And I shall never know if you can answer it.”

The dragon’s tail swept great arcs across the ground, scraping the meadow raw, clear through the dark topsoil to the rock below. The grating sound of its breathing became a rumble as dark smoke poured from its nostrils. Suddenly, terribly, the beast bellowed and leaped into the air, all wings and hot breath. Ona closed her eyes, telling herself she would only be the first to die.

“Very well!” shouted the dragon. “Tell me this riddle of yours, and we shall see. But hurry; I do not waste my time with fools.”

Now, for the first time, Ona moved. She stood up and faced the dragon. Behind the great creature, she could see smoke from mountain villages, charred to smoldering sticks by the dragon’s flame. She had no real hope that her own home and crops would

be spared, but she was determined to gain precious minutes for those who were running to safety.

“Listen carefully, dragon,” she said loudly. “I will only say the riddle once. No true riddler needs to hear it a second time.”

The dark smoke from the dragon’s nostrils gave way to flame that singed the blanket. The girl smelled burned wool, but refused to lower her eyes. I play this game for all or nothing, she thought.

Speaking in a firm voice, she said, “Here is the riddle....

*“Nothing can defeat you, yet it may,
to gain the moment, to bar the way,
in silence and stone, in dark and in day.
One clue I will give you, no more I will say;
you must seek and find nothing to win this play.”*

The girl turned her back to the beast, drew the blanket around her head and shoulders, and sat down.

For nearly an hour, the two shapes huddled in silence. Then the dragon began to mutter to itself and shuffle back and forth like a prisoner pacing a cell. Ona ate some bread and drank from a water bottle. Although she did not turn her head, she could hear the dragon’s words becoming louder and louder behind her.

“What game is this?” it rumbled. “Nothing can defeat me! Nothing! Do you hear, human?” Looking at the girl’s turned back only magnified the dragon’s growing rage. It stomped, raising billows of dust and raking its great trail over the stony ground.

Near sunset Ona could hear the dragon repeating bits of her riddle. For an hour it whispered the words “to gain the moment” over and over. She felt the creature’s hot breath on her back as the sun slipped below the mountains and the gray skies dwindled to blackness. Then she sat, wrapped in her blanket, waiting for the sunrise. She hoped to be alive to see it.

During the coldest hour of the night, a howl slapped the girl from her half-sleep. The dragon was roaring and shrieking, lashing its tail and crying out in frustration and rage. “Tell me, human,” it screamed, “how am I to seek nothing? If this is a lie, I will

show you no mercy!” This last the beast whispered with half-closed eyes, the smoke from its nostrils seeping out and sinking to the ground like a horrid creeping thing.

Ona thought she might scream from pure terror. She gripped the blanket about her with both hands and closed her eyes so she could not see the flames as the dragon flew in circles above her. Even when the heat beat against her face and the fire singed her hair, she did not move. Only as dawn approached and the dragon flew toward the shadow of the mountains did Ona open her eyes to watch its fiery trail.

The beast did not return.

Sunrise was cold. Ona huddled on the hard earth and trembled. A clinging fog crept up from the foothills, turning the valley into a bowl of rolling gray smoke. Straining her eyes, Ona searched from north to south and back again, waiting for the shadow that would mark the dragon’s return. She was terrified the beast might come without her seeing. Although she had no weapon, she did not want to be caught unawares. She pushed away the thought that she might scream and run mad with fear into the hills.

When the dragon did come, Ona was surprised by the silence of its flight. The creature circled three, then four times over the small, still figure on the ground. At last, folding its wings like great fans, the dragon settled in the open meadow in front of her.

“Human,” the beast whispered, its voice scraping in Ona’s ears like claws. Ona raised her eyes. The dragon continued to speak, low and harsh. “Did you know about the magic when you came?”

Ona was not about to give any answer that would allow the dragon to trick her, so she simply nodded.

“Then you expected to die, human,” growled the dragon. “You knew that if I answered your riddle, you would lose and I would flame you to ashes.” Tendrils of dark smoke crawled from its nostrils as the dragon began the slow pacing back and forth that Ona had seen during the night.

The dragon paced; Ona trembled. Neither of them spoke.

The silence continued. Ona had stopped wondering if she would die, when the dragon hissed, “Tell me the answer, human. Or do you have no magic to lose?”

“What do you mean?” Ona asked, her voice cracking. Her mind was working frantically to figure out what the creature was saying. Suddenly she recalled the neighbor’s tale about the dragon that lost its magic. If only she knew more!

“Do not play with me!” screamed the beast. “You spoke the riddle, and I have not answered it. Yet I do not hear you give the cry of victory and I do not hear the answer to this riddle from your own mouth. You have defeated me and yet you say nothing! What do you want?”

At that moment she knew the old people’s confused snatches of memory had been true. The dragon did not know the answer. She had riddled and won, against all hope or possibility! And now ... yes, what now? Evidently the dragon expected her to say or do something.

Ona rose, dropping the blanket behind her. When she spoke, her voice was firm. “Dragon,” she said, “I did speak the riddle to you and I have not heard your answer. I am nothing, yet I have defeated you.” Ona’s voice grew louder as she spoke:

*“Nothing can defeat you, yet it may,
to gain the moment, to bar the way,
in silence and stone, in dark and in day.
One clue I will give you, no more I will say;
you must seek and find nothing to win this play.”*

Ona waited, watching the dragon closely. In a moment its eyes flashed and its brow raised, as if in surprise.

“That is correct, dragon,” Ona said. “It is I who am Nothing, and it is I who have defeated you. I kept you here to gain time for my people as they ran from your evil greed. I barred the way in silence and stone. Consider, dragon, whether you saw me move or heard my voice in day or night. You did not!”

Now the joy of unexpected, even impossible, victory filled her. Ona cried up at the dragon, “I am Ona! Ona means Nothing at All! I am Nothing, and you did not find me!”

Now the dragon spoke so low, Ona could scarcely hear. “I see it is so. I have been defeated. What do you want? If I do not grant your wish, the magic of my flame will die.”

“Go,” commanded Ona. “Fly to the caves on the peak of the ancient mountains where no humans will ever build huts or plant gardens. If you ever return, dragon, or if one human dies under your flame, your magic will die. Go and never come back!”

The dragon raised its head and howled its fury and impotence and despair. Then the beast bowed its great, scaly head and said, “You have spoken, human. I will go. Still, your people are fools to call you Ona. Among my kind you would be called Kima, Kima Reetana.”

The dragon spread its wings and flamed out of sight over the western mountains, leaving Ona to gather her things and return to the village.

Some days later Seena returned to the village as well. When the people had not seen smoke from their burning homes, they had sent their swiftest runner to investigate. He could hardly believe what he found.

Seena raced back to his family and friends on the muddy banks of the river to the east. He ran without stopping, swift as the antelope, to bring the news. “Ona was waiting for me,” he panted. “The dragon has gone.” The word “gone” formed in each mind and was whispered, passed like a precious stone from hand to hand. “Ona riddled with the dragon and won!” Seena continued. “She made the dragon leave.”

The people collected their belongings and children and headed home. Along the road Ista the story weaver repeated the tale of Ona’s riddle and the dragon’s defeat. Each person passed the story on to the next, telling how Ona had sat in the meadow without moving or speaking to win time for the villager’s escape. The people could not walk quickly enough to satisfy their desire to see Ona, and to see the impossible miracle of their homes and crops still standing.

The celebration when the villagers returned was like the name days of ten kings! Ista was asked to tell the tale over and over, until the moon rose full and the grandmothers nodded over the sleeping children in their laps. Men and women alike held Ona’s hands in theirs and wept. They were alive, and she had done a thing beyond the most amazing story!

From that time, the village celebrated Ona's victory each year. The holiday was called Bar-reet, meaning "The Great Riddle." Each year Ista, the story weaver, told the tale of Ona and the dragon to the assembled villagers, and each year the king sent a gift in Ona's honor. And always her name was spoken with joy and respect. Only she was no longer called Ona. Now all the kingdom knew her as Kima Reetana - "Brave One, Who Riddles with Dragons."