
Sea Creatures

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The day Nerissa's calf came there was a considerable swell and an onshore wind, making the sea dance and batter itself at the Weyr's shoreline. Pod leader Nerissa was braving the swell to talk to her human partner, Miralynn, about the fliptail swarm that the pod had sighted. Talking with Man Speech was difficult when the sea and air were noisy above the waterline as well as below. Shouting in air was not a dolphin talent – communication underwater with clicks and whistles was far more suited to carrying over the hiss and crash of the waves. However, men – even the special men who forged a partnership with the dolphins – could not hear all of the sounds of proper underwater speech, and sometimes failed to understand the subtleties of those they could hear. Nerissa was very proud of her partner, but she sometimes wished that men had less of the land and more of the sea in their heritage.

“North, north, above broken reef. Big swarm. Plenty feeding.” Nerissa was riding the swell, deftly avoiding its attempts to slam her into the wooden dock where Miralynn squatted as they talked. It was too rough for her partner to join her in the water. Lyn, Keet, Rin and Maile of the pod were also there, adding comments of their own to the report. Fliptails were small and crunchy, but men liked to eat them, and this was a big swarm. If the men were quick with their boats they could catch them before the fliptails were eaten by a bigmouth or a school of grabbers. Nerissa judged that it was not too rough for men to go fishing – this blow was wearing itself out, not building to a storm.

“Men be quick. Bigmouths come soon. Bigmou—squeee!” Nerissa's next snippet of information was lost in the sudden sensation from within. Contraction! “Calf coming! Calf coming!” she sang out, alternating between Man Speech and dolphin-speech. Miralynn showed her teeth in the Man expression of delight.

“We go now! We go now!” The females with her chorused.

Nerissa clicked agreement. She could not give birth here – the waves were too strong. A newborn with no experience in controlling its breathing could inhale at the wrong moment in these chaotic waves. Or be dashed into the dock or beached on the sand.

She knew her partner would be disappointed – Miralynn had hoped to be an aunt at the birth – but the needs of the

calf came first. Nerissa needed to head for open water, where the swell would be less and the waves were broad curves, not tall and white-capped and dragging on the seabed. “I go now!” Nerissa trilled, and twisted away from the dock to knife through the water and out to sea, the other female dolphins keeping pace with her.

“I stay!” churred Maile behind her – the male dolphin partnered to Journeyman Killian. “I lead boats to fliptails!”



Nerissa timed the flexing of her tail with the rhythm of the contractions and swam in a wide circle, Lyn, Keet and Rin keeping pace with her. The calf was coming, the calf was coming... the calf was here! Nerissa gave a welcoming whistle and turned in the water to nudge the little one up to the surface for its first breath. The aunts hovered nearby, ready to assist if needed.

It was a male. Nerissa repeated her whistling, adding tones of encouragement and pride as the calf opened his blowhole to take that vital first breath which would expand his lungs. The sad songs told of calves born too early, who could not make their tiny lungs open enough to inhale properly. But her calf was full term and sucked in air greedily, clicking in surprise at the sensation. The females whistled in delight, Keet performing an ecstatic tail walk.

“I Nerissa. I your mother,” Nerissa informed her offspring, repeating the announcement in Man Speech. It was never too early to start teaching calves the Words.

“I, I...” said the calf, emitting its first babyish attempt at a call sign in dolphin speech. “Who I?”

Nerissa and the aunts repeated back the sequence of clicks and whistles to it. “You! You!” Over the next few days the calf would strengthen and refine this sequence – his call sign in dolphin speech – and it would be his name for life. The pod would also discuss what name to give him in Man Speech. He might be given one of the twenty-five names that had been handed down over the generations in the Name Song – the names of the first dolphins to swim in these seas. Or perhaps he'd be given one of the newer names, taken from dolphin songs and histories. Or be granted one that was in memory of a dolphineer or healer whom dolphinkind had come to revere.

But now, there were other things to worry about. Nerissa flexed and shuddered with a final contraction, expelling the afterbirth into the water. The scent of that, plus the blood and other fluids shed during the birth, would soon attract seawhens and other dangers. The calf should suckle briefly, and then they must move!



Today the waters round the Weyr docks were calm enough for a calf to safely play in. Nerissa guided her offspring shorewards, proud that he had only taken two days to learn to swim as swiftly as an adult. He tired faster, of course, but he was a fine, strong male and would father many fine strong calves in his turn.

The aunts accompanied them as they approached the Dolphin Bell at the end of the dock. "See that? That bell," Nerissa explained. "We ring, man comes. Man rings, we come. Report." She powered with her tail flukes to lift herself the short distance out of the water and grab the rope that dangled from the bell. She waggled her head to ring out the sequence of chimes that signalled 'Report'.

Her calf squeed with excitement at the sound and the new opportunity for a game that the bell presented. "Beh, beh!" He butted at his mother, trying to grab the rope from her mouth.

"Bell," corrected Nerissa, and was echoed by a chorus from the aunts. She dropped the rope and let the calf try to grab it – rather more of a stretch for a youngster than an adult.

He finally succeeded and jerked the rope to and fro at random, creating a cacophony of pealing. Dolphin merriment clicked and whistled through the water at his attempt.

The thud of footsteps along the dock announced the imminent arrival of several dolphineers. The calf did not notice their approach until Miralynn and Trileigh loomed over it on the dock above. He gave a startled squeee and darted away to hide behind his mother. "What those?"

"Those men," replied Nerissa.

"Woman men," added Lyn. "Female."

"G'day, Mrlynn. G'day, 'Rilee," Nerissa greeted her partner and that of Lyn.

Miralynn scooted down the dock to kneel on the pontoon that floated by it, so she was closer to dolphin level. Trileigh was calling something back along the dock – presumably to more men? That was good. Nerissa wanted as many men as possible to see her fine, new calf.

"Good day to you, Nerissa. Good day, Lyn, Rin – and is that Keet?" Miralynn glanced Keet's way, but couldn't hide her interest in the calf that was lurking behind the adults.

Nerissa squeed and splashed her partner with water. "Keet here. Calf here too." She twisted in the water and nudged her reluctant offspring forward. "Male. Strong. *Brave*," she added, more for the calf's benefit than Miralynn's.

"Hello," said her partner to the calf. "I'm Miralynn, your mother's partner."

"Mrrr..."

"Miralynn. What's your name?"

The calf rattled off his dolphin call sign. Nerissa splashed her partner again. "Not got Name yet. Soon. You swim with us?"

Miralynn grinned with delight and slipped into the water to join them. The calf swam round her, marvelling at this strange new creature. Above them on the dock the other dolphineers had gathered to welcome the new arrival. Nerissa gave a happy leap. This was going to be fun!

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The pod settled on the name of Max for the calf – one of the old names. Keet, Rin and Lyn looked after him while Nerissa was away feeding, but otherwise he was by her side, watching and learning all there was to know about the sea.

Today Max would stay with her as she fed, for today was when Thread fell from the skies and the whole pod would gather to feast. Important things had to be conveyed to young Max about Thread, and Nerissa and the aunts stood especially alert as the tangled clumps descended towards the sea surface.

"No, no, no jumping!" Nerissa repeated the most important instruction, and her call was echoed across the pod by young and old alike. "Thread is air creature. Bites like bloodfish in air. Rips like rock in air. Attacks like seawher in air." Sometimes the very young forgot, swept up in the thrill of dolphins and fish gathered in huge numbers to gorge on the drowned strands. Sometimes they forgot and leaped up, up, up into the air, as Thread came down, down, down. Once in water the strands would die, but not before the brief seconds in air had allowed them to sear and score through dolphin hide. Those wounds could not be stitched by healer-of-dolphins. Those wounds sometimes killed.

"Thread air creature," Max repeated. "Dolphins sea creatures. Stay underwater lots, lots, lots."

Nerissa clicked approval. The pod speeded forward to where Thread splashed down into the waves. They were not the first there – schools of fingerlings and yellowfin were already swarming round the drowning strands, darting in and out to snatch mouthfuls. Normally yellowfin ate fingerlings – and dolphins ate yellowfin – but when Thread fell the bounty was great enough for all to gorge without turning on each other. Unless, of course, there was a game to be had by scattering the shoals of feeding fish!

The pod darted hither and thither, grabbing chunks of sinking Thread. There was so much that bellies were soon full to bursting, and feeding was abandoned in favour of play. Big strands were fun to seize and tow around until another pod member caught the end and it was pulled apart in a tug of war. Nerissa and the aunts joined in the fun, but were careful to keep an eye on Max, and ensure that he did not rise to take a breath in a descending clump or forget himself and leap or tail walk into danger.

"Dragons come! Dragons come!" Maile whistled out the sighting, and Nerissa tilted her head up to see the ordered ranks of dragons in the sky to the west. As the Thread moved from open sea to the shallows the dragons would kill it, so it did not attack the homes of men.

"Dragons air creatures?" asked Max.

"Dragons are air creatures," Nerissa agreed.



Max's education included learning about men, as well as about the oceans. Nerissa went back frequently to see her partner and to assist in the tasks that the men might have for the pod. Miralynn was a healer-of-dolphins, and often had to



stitch up males that had been fighting, or foolish youngsters who forgot that as they grew they could no longer squeeze through the gaps in the reef off the Whitewing Isles.

Lyn's partner, Trileigh, was a healer-of-men, and Lyn regularly assisted with this. Nerissa had to explain to her calf that men did not see the way dolphins saw, and sometimes did not know what was inside their own bodies.

"Why not?" Max asked.

"They land creatures. We sea creatures. We got sonar. They got colour."

"Cullur?" Max tried out the new word. "What cullur?"

Nerissa wasn't quite sure herself, but it was something that men referred to a lot. "Colour is way men see things. Important to them. *Very* important to dragons! Come, I show you." She whistled an instruction to the nearby aunts, and the lot of them headed off to find some dragons. Dragons were good to play games with!

As she had hoped, there was a group of young dragons in the water at the weyrling bathing beach. Max leaped and cavorted excitedly. He had earlier been introduced to Perinath, dragon-partner of T'rynne. T'rynne was mate to Miralynn, so he and Perinath were often to be found with the dolphins.

T'rynne was one of the men who taught young dragons, but it was not him on the beach with his charges. The man with the adult dragon was named E'zok, and his dragon-partner was Struth. Struth enjoyed games with dolphins, especially if there was much splashing. Nerissa did not know the names of all E'zok and Struth's weyrings, but she would be sure to ask! Dragons had a lot of calves all at once, so it was good that men helped to raise them. The pod had been spotted by the young dragons, and heads turned in their direction. Nerissa and the other dolphins leaped towards the young dragons with happy squees.

The dragons' enthusiasm for their arrival was just as loud. Bathing was forgotten as young dragons, young humans and dolphins splashed and bounded in the water together. Struth joined in, flicking his tail this way and that through the surf for the dolphins to chase and leap over. A firelizard zipped in the air above all the chaos, chittering energetically. Max splashed water at the firelizard. It vanished *between* with an indignant shriek.

After a happy ten minutes or so the young dragons, almost as one, stopped their cavorting. E'zok was limping into the water, and the nearest weyrings parted to let him approach the dolphins. "Greetings to you, dolphins," he said politely.

"G'day, Eezok," said Nerissa, saddened that the game had ended. However, now she could teach Max about colour. "This Max. My calf. You show him colour?"

"Colour?"

"Yes. Dolphins see sonar. Men and dragons see colour. Dragons be colour. You show him colour?"

"Ah, I see." E'zok glanced about for a moment. "You lot," he shouted at the Weyrlings, "line yourself up in the shallows." There was a flurry of movement from weyrings and dragonets. Max made to join in, but Nerissa called him back.

E'zok's dragon padded forward to stand in front of Max. ***I am Struth. I am a brown. My hide is brown.*** Dragon Speech was strange. You could hear it, but not speak it – at least not if you were a dolphin.

Max whistled at this off method of communication, then paused to think about the information it conveyed. "Brrwn. Brrwn is cullur?"

"Brown is one colour," explained E'zok. "There are lots. Go along the line – the other riders will tell you their dragons' colours."

Max happily skimmed up and down the line of weyrings, asking about their colour and receiving replies: This is Reshath – she's green. This is Tsunoth, he's brown. Xylinamoth is green. Kepiruth is a blue. This is Kharuth – he's a bronze. My Annolth is a green... Nerissa tried to explain why the mysterious colour was important to men and dragons.

Max paused and whistled at Nerissa. "Some light, some dark. Colour is light and dark?"

"Some colours light and dark. Some colours different. Men and dragons see deeper. Like dolphins use eyes and sonar – see more than eyes alone."

Her calf went up and down the line again, repeating his questions about dragon colour. He raced back to his mother. "Females all grreen. Grreen is female?"

"Green and gold female," his mother corrected.

"Gold? Which gold?" Max asked, spy-hopping out of the water to see if there was a dragon that he had missed.

There are no golds here, Struth answered. ***Golds are very few. Golds are very important. Kadanzer Weyr has six golds.*** Pride tinged his tone at this last statement.

Nerissa could explain what golds were. "Gold is pod leader!"

Max clicked his understanding of this statement. "Gold dom-i-nant. Grreen female. Other cullurs is male. Dragons need cullur to know who to mate with?"

Nerissa praised her calf's cleverness for working this out. E'zok gave a gruff laugh. "That's a fair assessment, young Max."

Excited by his success, her calf raced up and down the line again, calling out the colours he'd been told. He paused at the far end. "What cullur I?" he asked the boy there.

The youngster grinned. "You're grey. All dolphins are grey. Some darker than others."

Her calf tail-walked in triumph at this revelation. "Max grey! Max grey! Max got cullur!" Nerissa chattered agreement as he swam back to where she, Struth and E'zok waited. She thought that it was probably best that all dolphins were the same colour. It would not do for dragons to mistake a gold dolphin for pod leader when she, grey-coloured Nerissa, held that responsibility.

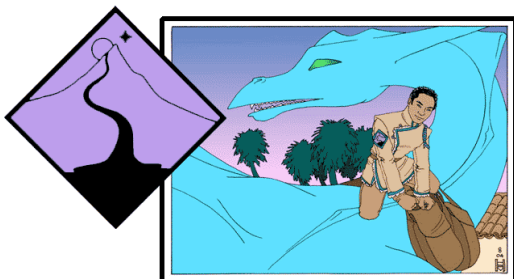
"What cullur you?" Max asked a girl.

"Um..." The girl looked at her bare arms as if she'd never noticed them before. "Pink?"

"No, she's not," piped up a boy, who'd earlier introduced himself as D'goz. "Sun's got to her, just like it got to me. She's *red*." He pointed at others. "Tiombe's brown. Reyda's tan. M'dor's *pink*!"

“Am not! I’m as tanned as anyone!” The dispute quickly degenerated into a good-natured water fight, which the dolphins gleefully joined in.

“I like men and dragons!” squeed Max. “Cullur is confusing, but I like men and dragons!”



Kadanzer Weyr

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