
Strangers on a Beach

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The sea lapped gently at the sand, the motion and soft sound of the waves a soothing counterpoint to the thoughts that whirled through Dunia's mind. The goldrider sat on the beach with her arms hugging her knees, staring out to sea.

The shape of the Whitewing Islands was wrong. That was a good metaphor for the whole state of her life since she and Nioranth mis-jumped and she awoke here, some four hundred and twenty eight Turns in the past – everything was the wrong shape.

Dunia's head was awl with names and faces, all tangling together. She had been introduced to more and more people and was desperately trying to keep them all sorted out in her mind. Genna was Weyrwoman and K'med was Weyrleader. The junior weyrwomen were Teshea, Kadana and Vivia – the latter being the girl with the veritable fair of firelizards. Kadana was THE Kadana – the first Weyrwoman of Kadanzer Weyr, heroine of song and story. Dunia observed that the plump woman had a self confidence that bordered on arrogance, which she supposed was fitting for a future legend. Teshea, on the other hand, seemed fairly level headed and capable, but Vivia was as flighty as her firelizards. Conversations with her tended to be punctuated with girlish giggling or heartfelt romantic sighs as she talked dreamily about bronzeriders in general or one poor soul – Y'kinal – in particular. Vivia seemed to have set her sights on weyrmating the man after his bronze had caught her gold. Nioranth said little about Vivia's Zyath beyond: **She will lay her eggs soon.** Dunia was sure that that silence was not a good sign.

By now she had also met Weyrhealer Reilen and all his staff, Headwoman Ima and her headseconds, Dragonhealer Renthic and his journeymen, Weyrsinger Enril – who bore a striking resemblance to Weyrleader K'med – and a whole skinful of wingleaders and wingseconds whose names and dragons she was still trying to get to grips with. Dunia still hadn't figured out who amongst these riders were the Flightleaders, and hoped she wouldn't inadvertently offend anyone, although she was beginning to suspect that Southern Weyr didn't actually *have* Flights as such.

The stress was getting to her. Oh, everyone here was courteous and well-meaning enough, even bossy Kadana and bubble-headed Vivia, which only made it worse in a way – if they had all been the cold and distant figures that

the record hides spoke of, then Dunia could perhaps have distanced herself in turn. But everyone here was a vibrant, living human being, and the lying was starting to get to her.

Because that was what she was doing of, course – lying to them. When she said, 'I come from Southern Weyr', it was a lie. A bald, no nonsense lie. However, it was just as much a lie when she held her tongue on the topic of the tsunami... or the dragon plague... or the fate of the first site of Kadanzer Weyr – a site not yet even chosen or planned for in this time. "You will die," she wanted to tell them. "There will be a tsunami and settlements from Southern Hold to the Thornblaze peninsula will be wiped out. Southern Weyr and Southern Hold bear the full brunt of that disaster – you will all die. I don't want it to happen, but you will all die."

When it all got too much for her, she sought refuge with Nioranth and the dragonhealers who were carefully tending to her queen's shattered and much abused wing, or – as today – came to the beach to sit and stare.

And so she stared out at the Whitewing Islands -- or the Wherry Arches, as they were known in this time -- seeing familiarity and strangeness all mingled together. One of the nearer cliffs looked top-heavy, its profile marked by an overhang that no longer existed in Dunia's time. And just offshore from that overhang was an interloping sea stack that must have at some time been joined to the overhang by a rock arch. Beyond the sea stack was an actual arch, meeting the cliff in a shallow curve. Overhang, arch and stack... all were long gone by the time Kadanzer Weyr graced this site. All that remained was a jumble of sea worn boulders, only exposed to human view at the very lowest of spring tides.

Dunia turned her gaze away from the disquieting shapes beyond the shore, scooping up a handful of sand and letting it trickle slowly from her palm as she reflected on the people she had got to know well over the past few days. The dragonhealers -- Craftmaster Renthic, Journeyman Corsan, and a crew of apprentices of varying age -- had become her constant companions in the days since Healer Reilen had let her up and about. Nioranth was not the ideal patient, wanting her own way far too much, but if Dunia was there to argue or cajole her into cooperation, the gold would adopt an air of affronted dignity and sit still while the dragonhealers plied their craft. Southern was the recuperation Weyr, she had learned, and had a whole Wing or more of injured dragons from the various Northern Weyr come to rest in the tropical sunshine and be tended to by Southern's dragonhealers. Long term therapies designed to get riders and dragons fighting fit again were as much a part of Southern's expertise as was triage and surgery after Threadfall -- the nature of Nioranth's injury was serious but not outside of their experience. The reassurances and calm professionalism of Renthic's team did much to relieve the young goldrider's anxieties -- Nioranth's bones would heal and the mainsail should regenerate without a problem despite the appalling burns that now scarred the tattered membrane. She would be unable to fly for a few months

yet, and would need careful exercise to bring her muscles up to strength before she did fly again, but the dragonhealers' words were all of slow and steady progress, not warnings of doom and gloom.

The goldrider wondered why the Weyrs had not set up another recuperation base in the South after the tsunami. But that event would not happen for another nine Turns or so – perhaps by then, with the Ninth Pass drawing toward its close, the Weyrs might favour autonomy over cooperation.

Sighing, Dunia took another handful of warm sand. In some ways, Nioranth's burned and broken wing had proved to be a blessing in disguise, albeit a painful one. If her queen had proved to be hale and hearty, Dunia was sure that the pair of them would have been whisked on a harper's ballad of a journey, visiting all the Weyrs in turn to be trotted out in front of the Weyrleadership of each like a canine trained to do crowd-pleasing tricks on a Gather Day. There had been talk of taking Dunia alone, but the goldrider had been adamant that her queen needed her by her side and Master Renthic had concurred that that would indeed be better for Nioranth's mental, if not physical, health. Gold dragons were not so common that anyone was willing to take risks with one's well being, even if the gold in question was an interloper from another time. So instead, a series of Weyrwomen and Weyrleaders had come to Southern Weyr, and the young goldrider recited her carefully edited version of the future again and again: *"I am from Southern Weyr in the Tenth Pass. Thread returned after a Long Interval, but the Weyrs rose to meet it and Pern is safe."*

They were intimidating, some of those meetings – being in a room with people who were names from history; who were characters from ballads replete with heroism and glory. At times she felt like a trundlebug encountering a gold dragon and became acutely conscious of her own youth and inexperience in the face of such accumulated gravitas and history. It was Nioranth's stubborn superiority that boosted her confidence when such doubts arose. Her dragon would harrumph to herself and acidly remark that of course Dunia was their equal – did she think that *she*, gold Nioranth, would have chosen someone who was not a strong, courageous weyrwoman at heart? What did Nioranth care if some person or dragon had been sung about in a ballad?

What her gold *did* care about, however, were bronzes. Nioranth was very smug about all the Weyrleaders' bronzes who came to Southern to see *her*. Even with a splinted and numbed wing, Dunia's gold managed to preen and flirt outrageously, and Dunia found herself blushing at the enthusiasm with which Nioranth admired some of the large bronzes of the Benden bloodline.

Those huge Bendens had been rather a shock for Dunia herself. The first time she had laid eyes on Kadana's full-Benden queen, Irineth, Dunia had thought she was hallucinating. Irineth was enormous and made Nioranth -- one of the larger queens in Kadanzer's time -- look like a bronze or brown beside her. Kadana regally informed her that Irineth and she had been sent from Fort to Southern to 'improve the bloodline' of the Weyr. The dragonhealers

were, in turn, very interested in Nioranth's overall form and size, and as to why she was not as huge as the Benden or half-Benden queens that graced several Weyrs in the Ninth Pass. Dunia had bitten her lip and mumbled something about the bloodlines mixing so much over the Long Interval and Renthic and Corsan had leapt to their own conclusions and speculated endlessly about the genetics of prolonged mixing of the Oldtimer bloodlines with the Benden line. Dunia smiled and feigned ignorance on the matter and oh-so-carefully did not mention the dragon plague a decade into the Interval to which the purebred Bendens had proved to be so fatally susceptible.

The young goldrider glanced up as a dragon blinked into view over the islands and began a graceful glide towards the Weyr. Even from this distance, Dunia could tell that it was one of those massive full-blood Bendens, a blue the size of a Kadanzer brown. She tilted her head back as the blue sailed by overhead. 'You will die too,' she thought as the dragon banked towards the landing field. 'Even if you escape the wave that crushes the Weyr, even if you survive the Pass, the plague will get you. Maybe you will even be one of the ones who carries it from Weyr to Weyr, making the dragons sick and killing all those that carry more than half Benden heritage in their bloodline...'

She wanted to tell them everything – the good news, the bad news, the tragedies and the triumphs that would occur from now until Turn 2859. Not to boast or show off. Not even just to warn them, although that was a goodly part of it. No, it was a simple need to have a past, and to be able to talk freely of it, without constantly having to think of consequences and to watch her tongue in case she slipped up and revealed some snippet that she should not. She wanted....

She wanted a friend to talk to.

She missed Z'haq, who had been sharing her bed for the past few months, missed the casual affection of sitting on the beach -- this beach -- with his arm around her waist, and his cheerful enthusiasm for life that he would doubtless have used to buoy up her mood, were he here. She missed Petair, R'san and Tildy and the gossip they exchanged. She missed being able to confide in Luka, Valenne and Lybelle and the other goldriders and talk her problems through. She missed chatting to her mother about cooking and recipes. She missed Balt, her blue firelizard – pesky, food-stealing little pest that he was at times. She even missed Z'blon, the bluerider perpetually assigned to the Queen's Wing for being a born troublemaker. At least he was *her* troublemaker, instead of part of this Weyr full of strangers.

Dunia sighed. Well, at least it was not forever – Nioranth's wing *would* heal, so she was not trapped in the past, merely temporarily delayed. She took another handful of sand and watched the waves that lapped at the beach with deceptive gentleness, suddenly unable to bring herself to look towards the jarring shapes of the Whitewing Islands.

One day soon her life would be the right shape again.

So intent was she on watching the water, lost in thoughts of her familiar future, that Dunia didn't realise that

she was not alone until a voice said, "So, does our beach here improve with age or is this as good as it's ever going to get?"

The goldrider started and turned to see Journeyman Corsan peering down at her with a smile on his square, pleasant features. "Oh. I'm sorry, I didn't hear --"

"Next time I'll make sure to bring a drum to bang," the dragonhealer assured her cheerfully. "Nice big one. With bells on. Mind if I...?" He waved vaguely at the sand beside her.

Dunia smiled a little despite herself and nodded. Corsan had become one of the more familiar faces at Southern, a near-constant presence in Nioranth's wallow as he tended to her ravaged wing. Dunia had grown used to hearing him chattering away to Nioranth in the background, the calm professionalism that he displayed around his fellows giving way to a cheery stream of consciousness that the goldrider suspected he was barely aware of. Her dragon seemed somewhat bemused by his frequently random ramblings but was willing to tolerate him so long as he kept her wing from hurting. Looking at him as he dropped down beside her, Dunia asked, "How is Nioranth?"

"Oh, she's asleep," Corsan told her. "She was getting a little cranky earlier -- tried to swat poor Ukalen with her tail -- but she's all numbed up and out like a stale glow now. The membrane's starting to regenerate, as Renthic said -- she'll fly again, but she's going to be complaining about the itching something fierce while it all grows back together. Whoever clawed her up did a thorough job."

The goldrider nodded sadly. The details of the accident were still hazy in her mind, a dreamlike jumble of pain and fear and flame, of Triameth's flailing bronze limbs and yellow-white eyes, of jarring agony as Nioranth's wing shattered and the world dissolved into phosphine brightness and then utter blackness. "That they did," she said quietly

Corsan watched her for a few moments. "How are you?" he asked.

"Recovering." Dunia offered him a weak smile. "The Weyrhealer says that going *between* times places a severe strain on the system -- it will take a while to build my strength up but nothing is broken and my jacket and helmet kept me from being burnt. Poor Nioranth took the worst of it."

"No, no," the dragonhealer said, shaking his head. "How are *you*?" When she just stared at him, he elaborated. "You're a long way from home, Goldrider... or entirely too close, depending on how you look at it. And much as *I* think that our Southern is a fabulous place, it must be very strange for you. So, how are you?"

Dunia blinked and looked at him a little warily. Corsan was some five or more Turns her senior, she thought, although his large blue-grey eyes and open, honest face gave him the look of someone younger. His short, sunbleached hair was a light reddish-brown and looked to be naturally unruly, adding to the amiable, almost bumbling air the man seemed to carry with him. The goldrider *knew* that there was more to him than that -- she had seen him working on

her queen, had heard him speaking to the other dragonhealers -- but somehow it made her want to trust him and that was a luxury that she dare not allow herself.

He had asked her a question, however, and it would be rude of her not to answer him.

"I'm... coping," she said.

"Coping?" Corsan cocked his head at her. "That doesn't sound terribly encouraging."

Dunia hesitated, thinking of all the things she couldn't say, could never say. But she *so* wanted to talk to someone, to *anyone* who might see her as more than just a novelty from another time.... "I don't know anybody here," she told him. "It's... hard."

The dragonhealer nodded. "Must be like gatecrashing a gather and finding yourself the Lord's bride. Everybody staring and nowhere to run."

"Something like that," she admitted. "I keep meeting all these people whose names I know from the teaching ballads and harper songs, but now they're real, they're *alive*, and it's like living in a dream some days. All these legends of the past and they want to talk to *me* as if I'm someone special."

"Well, four hundred Turns in one jump isn't exactly an everyday occurrence," Corsan pointed out, then gleefully added, "I hear the Benden Weyrwoman is more than a little peeved at you for stealing her thunder on that one and you didn't even have some dusty old tapestry to go on!"

Dunia groaned and rested her forehead against her knees. No, she'd not had a tapestry to follow -- her guide, she now realised, had been a comet. In panic and pain, she'd visualised the Wher's Tooth hanging beneath the full moons over the glowlit expanse the Weyr, a clear and beautiful image that had stuck in her mind as they left to fly 'Fall that night, but one that had been several hours out of date when she'd thrust it at the agonised Nioranth along with an instinctive wish to be *before*.... "The Benden Weyrwoman and her reputation have nothing to fear from me. She's a heroine, a legend -- I'm just a girl who made a stupid mistake and ended up where she doesn't belong."

Corsan frowned as the queenrider's voice hitched, and cautiously reached out to lay a comforting hand on her shoulder. Dunia almost started at the touch, but then turned and pressed herself against him before he could withdraw, suddenly desperate for the friendly human contact. "Just a stupid, *stupid* girl...."

"Hey, hey!" The dragonhealer didn't quite seem to know what to do with his hands for a few moments, but then gently closed his arms around her. "You're not so stupid if you brought your Nioranth here. Best dragonhealers on the planet, don't you know? Those twits at Fort or Ista wouldn't know what to do with an injury like that... well, they would, they'd try to send them here. But I guess you already know all that, being from Southern yourself, right? *Say*... I don't suppose you know of any fantastic future developments in the craft, do you? I could promise not to tell anyone you told me and just take all the credit for inventing it. That way I'd *definitely* get my Master's knots before Tolomas!"

Dunia actually giggled a little as he rambled on. "You know I can't tell you anything. As far as history is concerned, I'm not even here." It had been agreed early on that her existence in this time would be kept out of the ballads, that any clutches that Nioranth might lay before her departure would be attributed to another queen. "Benden's glories are safe from me."

"Shame, they could do with knocking down a peg or two," Corsan told her with a grin and Dunia once again thought of the plague that lay in wait some thirty Turns into the future. She said nothing, however, and they sat in an awkward yet oddly companionable silence until the dragonhealer suddenly asked, "Who did you leave behind? If you don't mind me asking? Weyrmate? Children?"

The queenrider sighed and leaned in against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "No children. No weyrmate, although...."

"There's an 'although'?" Corsan put on a horrified expression. "An 'although' is as good as married!"

Dunia smiled sadly. "Z'haq is a sweet man," she said quietly, flinching a little as she realised she'd said a name. "His bronze caught Nioranth in her last flight and things developed from there... but I don't know if he was, is the one for me. In time, perhaps, but you know me and time." She laughed, a touch hysterically, and shook her head. "I miss him. I miss all of them."

"Hopefully we can convince you to miss *us* when you go," Corsan said gently. "You're going to be here for some months yet while Nioranth recovers."

"I know." And therein lay another dilemma -- as much as she needed to hold herself apart, Dunia *wanted* to know these people, wanted to be accepted by them, wanted to be something other than the time-lost stranger washed up on Southern's shores. She was a part of their world now, even if only temporarily... and yet how could she ever see them as anything other than the walking dead, unknowing victims awaiting the fate that would roar in from the sea on a spring night nine Turns hence?

Not so very long ago she had told Luka that finding yourself in a new place with new people might just be the greatest thing in the world. She could barely believe how wrong she had been....

The need for human contact, for an honest, uncomplicated *friend* in this sea of strangers was suddenly overwhelming. Dunia felt herself tremble as she looked up and saw the mocking shapes of the islets just off the coast, the distant calls of the whitewings sounding almost like laughter. She *needed* --

"Goldrider?"

"Dunia. Please, call me Dunia." She looked up into Corsan's face and saw genuine concern there, concern for another human being, not just for some high-ranking temporal stray. She could like this man, she decided suddenly, even if she could never trust him with her secrets. She could like him and *shells*, but she needed someone she could be close to, someone who might at least *try* to understand....

Sitting up, she placed a hand on his cheek and caught his lips with her own, the sudden audacity of her move startling her almost as much as it seemed to surprise him. He gasped and pulled back, eyes wide. "Gol -- Dunia?"

She could pretend it hadn't happened, could call it a mistake... but she wanted this, she realised, wanted him for his honest interest and his solid presence in the here and now. He could make her laugh, and for now, that was enough. Leaning in once more, she kissed him again and this time Dunia was the one to pull back. "If you don't want to --"

"Oh, no, I want to!" Corsan's smile was suddenly brilliant and as he closed the gap between them, Dunia finally felt some connection to the world she now found herself in.



Kadanzer Weyr

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