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DELFIN SISTERS: A SCIENCE-FANTASY (FROM THE NOVELLA OCEAN ZERO)

IN VIOLATION OF THE LAWS OF PHYSICS, the planetoid Ocean One was nothing but a single drop of water orbiting the Sun. “Watery down to its very core,” Moo, the young Delfin, recited obsessively, for it provided a picture of her soul today.

The lesson on water continued: “If one is incapable of holding any shape, then one is empty.” What was wrong with this reasoning?

Moo had committed mirror assassination—the worst crime imaginable, as it left no evidence but an empty mirror. Now she too felt herself to be empty—a predictable consequence—and forever alienated from the society of Delfins swarming in their millions throughout the warrens of Asia, a spherical mountain that rolled in the depths of Ocean.

She had committed the crime without premeditation. Indeed, the crime could only have been a spontaneous act carried out in a flash of “blindsight.” In retrospect, however, she knew with certainty that she had intended to do it. How, she wondered as she swam into the ancient wreck of the spacewhale, could an act be both spontaneous and intentional?

The gigantic skeleton had become her place of refuge from the constant bloom-and-zoom of the Delfin city. She had come here often in the days leading up to the crime—to meditate, she had told herself, and to receive messages from the origin of the world. To the mild disapproval of her family, Moo had become fascinated with the ancestral trash caught up in Asia’s wake, and the greatest relic of them all was the spacewhale. What message had she received from it?

Fingers of iridescence followed Moo along the interior walls of the spacewhale, always falling short of her shadow as it crept over the technoid outcroppings. Moo was not afraid, having become accustomed to conditions inside the relic. “Who! Who!” she called softly. In the aftermath of

her crime, it comforted her to invoke the name of the first Delfin to step out of his reflection. Who, of course, could not protect her now. She would be pursued—the Symmetry Keepers would know where to find her.

Moo slipped easily through the dear old petrified bones. She imagined herself to be a spacewhale, alive and plunging through faraway red nebulae. Moo had never seen the stars—she had never swum to the Surface to breach that utterly smooth, waveless ceiling and gaze for one freezing instant at the Sun. Those who had done so—scientists and mystics for the most part—returned with their faces blackened, spiritual light spilling from their mouths.

It was not a crime to breach the Surface. To witness the wheels of heaven and confirm what was already attested in the sacred records was to uphold the shimmering O whose mirror face was o. Who said that. Only the violation of symmetry was a crime. Because of Moo's rash deed, one of heaven's wheels was now missing. Moo even felt its absence here in the beloved carcass of the spacewhale.

The Keepers would find her, take her back to Asia, and imprison her—gently, but without forgiveness—in a tesseract. Desperately, she sought some small item—some souvenir of the spacewhale—that could keep her company and succor her as she languished for a lifetime in that cell. But this mile-long tunnel contained nothing but the remnants of life machinery. There, what was that? A shiny orb lodged in a crevice. She pried it loose and found that it fit perfectly in the palm of her hand. It weighed almost nothing, but felt heavy nonetheless. It had somehow escaped petrification. She clutched the orb to her chest, as if the spacewhale had gifted it to her.

It was best to leave now and return to the city. Moo did not want the Keepers to break into the spacewhale to apprehend her. The relic's interior had become identical to Moo's own—a thought cavern where she concocted stories without characters or events. She did not wish to see this place invaded by the police.

Moo waited, as usual, for the fingers of iridescence to point toward an exit. It was never the same one, and this time they showed her a spiral-shaped sphincter near the spacewhale's head. "Thank you," she whispered, worming her way *out, out, out* into the wild wave action of Asia's detritus trail. Moo clung to the hull for a moment and savoured the water's warmth. Ocean was good to breathe after the stale effluvium trapped in the carcass' entrails.

Daylight filtered down from the Surface, dappling the hull. Miles ahead rolled the great round rock of Asia, home of Delfin humanity—a played-out utopia and a prison-house for Moo. Why not seek refuge in one of the other great rocks—America, Africa, Aust, or Arctica? They were all uninhabited now, but she would have to journey far to reach them and would probably die of starvation along the way.

Besides, the scent of her crime—like the taste of the spacewhale’s effluvium—lingered in her. She wanted to purge herself of her own poison—make an obscene bubble of it that would explode in the face of her captors. Perhaps she needed to take other actions corollary to the crime . . .

Moo pushed herself away from the spacewhale’s pitted and corroded body. She needed to dive sideways, tacking across the turbulence of the wake toward stiller water. Carrying the orb, she swam awkwardly. Its weight, or lack of weight, steered her the wrong way. In fact, it seemed to be pulling her deeper than she wanted to go. As Moo struggled with it, she realized that she had already passed beyond the wake more quickly than usual—thanks to the orb? Now, in calmer currents, the orb, as if sensing her intent, veered back toward the rolling rock of Asia.

What a strange device! It was helping her to get back to Asia in half the usual time. Yet no delight or wonder stirred in her—only a grim grey gratitude.

Once inside the city she would seek out the Keepers and surrender herself. Why not? She had cut herself off from the rest of humanity. Nothing mattered now except this new vacancy—this lack of feeling—inside her. She would sit on the floor of her cell, the orb placed before her, and think upon nothing.

Moo had lost the Precepts—the guides to good action—with which she had been born. She had always known that they were poorly formulated or even fallacious when set against the night of Time. Rather than devise better ones, she preferred to have none.

She remembered the day she’d first emerged, fully formed, along with her sisters—Loo, Soo, Foo, Roo, Boo—in the room of birth mirrors. She remembered crying with them: “Not again! Never again!” But a wavering presence within their mirrors—who? Who—showed them how to overcome this Primary Aversion. They were all reconciled to Reexistence—all except Moo.

Not long after, her sisters went who-who-who-ing through the cor-

ridors of Asia, ready to assume their positions in society. Only Moo hung back, lingering near her birth mirror. She had emerged at a different angle, as she could have been a “child”—a type of unformed human that no longer existed—who was cognizant of the history of the world and wanted to play dangerously with it. Who said “Don’t,” but she deviously reasoned that his voice must be mirror-reversed, so she heard “Do, Moo” and also “Doom.”

She was shaken from her reverie by a downward yank of the orb. She was close enough to home that she could hear the ground tone of Asia’s progress through the waters. Once more she had to battle turbulence, her sleek naked body slicing artfully through the heavy waves. It was likely that she would never again swim freely. She didn’t care. When she reached the city, she grabbed a handhold next to a public window. The window’s membrane knew her as Delfin and allowed her to slip inside.

Moo found herself trapped behind the only door in Asia. Delfins had no need for privacy unless the conduct of the dance dispersed them—occasionally, briefly—into personal alcoves where Who watched over their isolation with his mirror eye. Porosity was the main premise of Delfin ethics. Her prison thus stood as a symbol of impermeability and permanent aloneness.

“I love to hide inside paradoxes—don’t you?”

The orb that Moo had stolen from the spacewhale’s innards was speaking again, using the Delfin language of clicks and whistles—a language perfectly fitted to life underwater. How had the orb, buried for eons, acquired it? And by what means was it speaking? To all appearances, it was as smooth and featureless as the Surface and possessed no outlet for speech.

However, this was not a paradox—merely an incongruity. Moo said as much, but the orb didn’t reply. It never did. The orb had not been speaking to her, nor had it been speaking about its own ability to speak. The orb’s utterances were always out of context. It served very poorly as a conversation partner. The young Delfin flitted back and forth in annoyance, alone and unmirrored in her cell. She wished that she could silence the orb. Far from giving her solace, its presence had become part of her punishment.

She had been denied the use of mirrors, of course. No longer would she send her reflection swimming through time corridors to be welcomed into the rooms of her ancestors and descendants—who were also her exact contemporaries—to see their every gesture exfoliate symphonically, to partake of foodstuffs eternally fresh, and to trade in the treasures of the perpetual

Now. Experienced as a cascade of combinatorial patterns, those changeless changes would never be exhausted, but now she was banished from participating in them.

So what! She hated the who-who-who of those empty forms, superficially self-renewing but never new. Moo, her skin blackening with her heresy, had sought the point that did not fall on any line. Who was missing. Who alone had been as rebellious as she. Who had initiated the mirror cascade—it was forbidden to ask how or why. Who still presided over his shattered parts. She adored—careful!—*Who he was*. She couldn't cast his name into the accusative without committing further heresy. Who was not an object to be subordinated to some action. Who was the subject of every verb. Who would save her now . . .

The walls of her cell were semi-transparent, allowing her to see the shadow play of her fellow Delfins as they cycled through their ritual frolics. Who cared! Who cared very much . . .

The orb interrupted her thoughts, announcing: "Every variable is a constant in its own time."

Moo snatched it up and hurled it against the wall. "Die, you shiny turd!" she cried. "Oh, show me how to die!"

The orb executed a complicated zig-zag swerve, and Moo had to admire the way it moved so unpredictably. It was something new, after all. Could she reconcile herself to its nonsensical enunciations, since—as she now understood—they represented zig-zags in speech?

"Visitor." It was not the orb's voice but rather that of the Keeper who brought her food and gifts from her family. The gifts were sometimes little multicoloured minnows that died within days or strands of weeds that released music when stroked. Her family did not despise her for what she had done. They only sorrowed at her fate.

The door valved open, and her sister Voo came through. "One little day," the Keeper said, and the door closed with a puff. It would be a short visit.

Voo, her eyes overly large and bulging—an alluring feature among the Delfins—had emerged from the same birth mirror as Moo, but she was part of a much earlier brood. She shared many of Moo's traits, as she was skeptical and irreverent, but she was less of a loner. Voo would never have committed mirror assassination.

"Here." Voo, after looking back cautiously at the door, shoved a disk-shaped object into Moo's hand. Moo glanced down, cupping her hand to

hold it hidden, and saw a *small looking glass*. Moo whistled softly, astonished. “Voo, no—I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

“I want you to see something,” Voo said, entwining herself around Moo so that, with the mirror aglow between their clasped tendrils, they assumed Love Dance Position 33.

“What? See what?” Moo whispered, enjoying this sudden, unexpected closeness.

An image glimmered in the mirror, disappeared, and was then restored.

Moo turned her face to Voo, kissing-close. “What is this?”

“Don’t you recognize it?” Voo caressed Moo with her eyes. “It’s your spacewhale come back to life.”

Moo abruptly pushed Voo away, and the mirror went spinning. “No! It must be a trick—or a memory!”

Voo grabbed the mirror and pursued Moo around the room, pinching her playfully, if a little too hard. “Silly—it’s not a trick or a memory. Do you think this little mirror could hold a memory? It’s a real-time radar image from one of the buoys on the Surface.” Voo pressed the mirror back into Moo’s breast folds. “Keep it here, study it. Then tell me your conclusions.”

The orb piped up: “Is *mythematics* the precursor of counting?”

Voo looked over her shoulder contemptuously. “It’s not, and shut your butt.” She turned to Moo. “Want me to get rid of that thing for you?”

“You couldn’t catch it last time, and neither could the Keepers. They’re letting me keep it because they know it bothers me.” Moo paused. “But it shouldn’t bother me—it’s a piece of the spacewhale.” She glanced down at the mirror. “Voo—this is an image of a spacewhale, but it’s not the one I know, which is a dead, derelict hulk. This one, if the radar buoys are picking it up, is flying high above Ocean. It’s active—it looks alive.”

“Maybe it’s the spacewhale’s sister. I don’t know. You’re supposed to be the spacewhale expert, aren’t you?” Voo mimed mirror flatness with her hands, pretending there was an invisible barrier in front of her—a Delfin social gesture connoting incommunicability. “In fact, most of our family blames the spacewhale for your crime.”

“They shouldn’t. If anything, the time I spent meditating in the spacewhale helped me to see Who I am.” Moo smiled a sideways smile, aware that she was on the verge of blasphemy.

“It’s not just our family.” Voo edged closer to Moo and spoke in a con-

spiratorial whisper. “The Keepers also see a connection between your visits to the spacewhale, your crime, and the appearance of a new spacewhale.”

“What are they going to do? Blast it out of the sky?” Moo had watched many battle spectacles in the mirrors’ most ancient reaches. However, no object—no weapon—could be derived from those scenes. They were too far away—“older than origin,” as the saying went.

Who did not like weaponry or tools of any kind, and none were present in Asia. The radar buoys themselves had been set up by a vanished civilization of octopi in Arctica. For millennia, the self-repairing radars had detected nothing more than passing space rocks.

“The Keepers will maintain the militancy of the Now.” Voo, despite herself, hid her eyes as she said the sacred words. “If there’s any threat, everyone has been ordered to disappear into their mirrors.” She refrained from adding “everyone except *you*.”

“Whatever the new spacewhale is bringing to our world, I want it,” Moo declared. “Even if it’s death and destruction.” She made a fierce gesture. “*Especially* if it’s that.”

“Moo, dear, why do you burn?” Voo reached out to touch Moo’s lips. “Nothing burns underwater.”

Moo turned away from her sister. “I don’t need you to recite the Verities.” The orb had drifted next to Moo; it didn’t evade her as she closed her hand around it. “Maybe I did set something in motion. If so, I don’t regret it.” The orb pulsed softly in her grasp. She could heft it, hurl it if she wished—*it was a weapon*.

Voo drew back from Moo’s aggressive pose—not in fear, but in defeat. “Then I will leave you. Know that you are loved.” Voo’s face tightened with tender pity. Not waiting for the Keeper’s permission, she spun out of the room.

For the first time, the order was given to evacuate Asia in keeping with the Presentist maxim “Always for the first time.” Now everyone was gone, vanished into the Grey Mirrors until the danger was past.

To Voo, such a reaction seemed too hasty. She and Moo had always been annoyed by the reflexive behaviour of their kindred, especially at crucial moments. Who wouldn’t want to learn more about the visitor. To make that a question would be blasphemy, of course.

Having disobeyed the order, Voo, a bit crazed, ran like black ink across

the white spaces of the Delfin city. She would regain her translucency when she repented of her crime. So, never. She would join her sister Moo in exile. Perhaps they would swim to America.

With the city deserted, it was difficult for Voo to find her way. Every corridor was identical to every other. She should have anticipated this feeling of lostness, for it was the dance of Delfin society that provided purpose and direction.

Voo paused before a mirror that held a garden of phosphorescent rocks. The rocks were packed with nutrients, so she pulled out two of them, devoured one, and saved the other for Moo.

She must find her! The jail was located somewhere near the centre of Asia. Voo had been making regular visits, yet she'd relied on the wheel-and-reel of her partners in the social round to lead her where she wanted to go. Now she was simply repeating herself—here was the garden again.

As she slumped against the mirror, losing hope, a series of eddies radiated down the corridor, which was indicative of dance. Had someone else stayed behind? She offered the ritual call: "Who is there?" No one answered, and the waves withdrew as if abashed. "Wait," she cried, "I'm lost!"

Here, in the lower city, the ways were lit only by shadowlight from mirrors, so it was hard to see ahead. But Voo thought she glimpsed something at the far end of the corridor that resembled a snowflake falling out of winter's mirror, magnified . . .

She swam in pursuit of the apparition only to see it dodge around one corner and then another. It was leading her on not by dance moves but rather by throwing *spears of light*. Voo hovered, suddenly afraid. The eddies did not feel or taste right. This was no Delfin dancer. Something else—something odd—had found its way into Asia.

Voo turned tail, seeking a hiding place. Never before had she felt such fear. It was a painful form of excitement. The new sensation gripped her body, seeming to immobilize her, though she was racing as fast as she could. Away, away, down the next tunnel . . .

No, there was a shimmer in that direction too. The oddity had gotten ahead of her—unless it was a different one. She advanced, and it retreated. No, *she* was retreating, and *it* was advancing. Voo could no longer tell. As the game progressed, she became convinced that there was only one hider and one seeker.

Who, no question, had called forth the oddity. Or was the spacewhale

involved? She was discovering all the gradations between fear and uncertainty, yet this lightful thing wasn't really threatening her. In fact, there was something shy about the way it kept peeking at her.

Now it scintillated behind her. Its light spears were actually helping her to see as she groped her way into a dim tunnel of old, disused mirrors. Wrong way again. She was more lost than ever.

The opacity of these mirrors disquieted Voo even more than her new playmate. She'd heard tales of passageways lined with barren mirrors—*unable to reflect Who*—and closed off to the public. It was said that such mirrors held trapped souls. Voo thought she could hear those poor souls moaning to be released, but it was she who was moaning. "Help me, lightful thing! Get me out of this place!"

The tunnel bifurcated. Voo floated before two large mouths, both ready to swallow her. All at once her light friend shot past into the right-hand tunnel. Voo followed, at last getting a clear view of the thing as it burned and churned through the waters ahead. It appeared to be a spiky crystal—now near, now far—of indeterminate size.

Mind spore. A mythical creature come to life! Voo had read about such beings in her obsessive perusal of bibliomirrors. Spawned in the aftermath of a cosmic cataclysm, mind spores—also called "comsats" in Old Angle—were supposed to have orbited Earth long ago as messenger angels of . . . ? Voo had forgotten that part of the myth. So what! She might be witnessing the dawn of a new mythic age right here in Ocean One. This comsat must have dropped out of the sky along with the second spacewhale.

When the chase ended, Voo found the crystal waiting for her at a wide intersection, which she recognized as the gateway to City Centre. And there was the jail encased in a tesseract of monitory mirrors. Its prisoner was barely visible as a squiggle behind that lucent barrier. Voo surged forward to pound on the glass, exclaiming "Moo! I'm here! Can you hear me?"

The Keeper had abandoned his post, of course, fleeing into the Grey with everyone else. Voo clicked her teeth in anger. Lacking provisions, Moo would have died in her cell. She still might unless Voo could figure out the door mechanism.

Voo wriggled around the bulbous portal, almost dancing with its hateful weight. How had the Keeper activated it? Then she noticed that the pattern of the waters had changed. Looking over her shoulder, Voo saw the mind spore scoting up the Main Shaft toward Topside. "Come back!" she wanted

to call after it. “You were helping me!”

Moo’s voice piped at her, as if from far away. Behind the thick glass, Moo seemed to be gesturing *to your left, to your left!* And, indeed, a panel had fallen open on the left side of the door. Inside the panel, folds of muscle tightened and relaxed. All of Asia was composed of this half-alive substance known as “plast,” so Voo was familiar with its workings. Without hesitation, she massaged and manipulated the folds until the door sphinctered open and Moo spilled out.

The sisters, reunited, performed a dance of joy that broadcast sun-bright eddies across the City Centre. “Moo!” “Voo!” “Moo!” “Voo!” At last they embraced, breath bubbling after their exertion. Voo cradled Moo’s face in her hands. “We’re alone,” she told Moo. “Everyone has run away into the Grey.”

Moo’s eyes widened. “Everyone?” she asked.

Voo shuddered, nodding. For a moment they floated speechless at the dead centre of the world—the last two sparks of perception remaining in the vast empty skull of Asia.

Moo gulped, “Was it because of the spacewhale?”

Voo nodded again. “It splashed down yesterday and headed straight for Asia. That’s when we got the signal to evacuate. I hid inside a crack in plast until everyone grey-stayed. Who will tell them when to return. Here—” Voo pushed a rock into Moo’s hands. “You need to eat.”

Moo nibbled gratefully at the rock. “Sister-mine, what was that thing I saw out here with you? It looked like a pattern animal from deep Ocean, only more electrified.” As Voo hesitated, Moo continued excitedly. “And did you see what it did? It threw a splinter of light that opened the secret panel!”

“I was afraid at first, as there was no one to dance with and I lost my direction, but it helped me to find my way here. I think it was a mind spore. The old stories are coming back to life!” Voo peered over Moo’s shoulder. “And you’ve got a mythical pet of your own. Where’s that nonsense-spewing orb? Did you swallow it?”

“It died—petrified, I guess. I was wrong to pull it out of the spacewhale.” Moo dove back into the cell and brought out the ball, now smaller and pathetically pitted and dessicated. “See? It probably couldn’t survive on its own.”

“I know the feeling.” Voo took the sad object from Moo. As before, it was

hard to hold—Voo needed both hands. Weightless and heavy at the same time, it seemed to want to fall or rise in a direction that didn't exist. Though its surface looked rough, it felt smooth. Voo wondered if some invisible layer of force was preventing her from actually *touching* it.

She looked up, her eyes glowing. "It's still alive," she said quietly. "I think it has just entered a new phase."

"It's part of the spacewhale," Moo said, laying her hands over Voo's hands. "Whether it's alive or dead, I want to put it back where it belongs."

"There are two spacewhales now," Voo reminded her. "Maybe we can establish contact with the living one. Who knows," she added, using the ritual invocation, "if we find out what it wants, our people might return."

"The *people*," Moo spat contemptuously, "want only to rest at the centre of Time. Let them stay in the Grey, where nothing will bother them. What's present is the crisis point, where the past and the future collide. That's what the two spacewhales mean to me."

"Oh, Moo," Voo said tenderly, stroking her sister's face. "Where do you get these ideas? *Is* is the *was* of what will be." Voo should have known that her recitation of the liturgy would infuriate her sister. Moo muttered a curse and pulled the orb out of Voo's hands only to lose hold of it. They watched as it went spinning up the Main Shaft.

"Now look what you've done!" Moo cried unfairly. She pushed away and swam in pursuit, her legs fusing to form a fishtail.

"Moo, wait!" Voo whistled in exasperation. She had no choice but to follow Moo into the roar of that central artery, intended for transport rather than dance, where Asia's waters ran fastest. Voo had no time to think, but thought anyway, that events were becoming unmoored and unmirrored in Time. Who knew what would happen next.

In the wake of the mind spore, the orb and the two sisters spiraled up the axis of the world toward Topside.