

Fantasea



John L. Marris

FantaSea

by
John L. Marris



Strategic Book Group

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CHAPTER I

Dolphin and the Mermaid

Cumulonimbus clouds moved ominously through the sky as the super cell of thunderstorms gained momentum. The rays of the sun retreated in fear at the mighty storm's approach as they were swallowed up and died within the dense mass of darkness. The temperature chilled rapidly and the brazen, gusty wind not only urged the storm forward, but also led as its vanguard to clear any resistance in its path.

The ocean waves, in response, leaped and rolled in a hopeless effort to outrun the powerful force of nature. The nearer the storm, the more agitated the waves became, crashing and frothing in their attempt to escape.

As the storm marched and trampled over the hapless waves, it billowed and roared in victory. Bolts of lightning pierced the darkness and excited the atmosphere with anticipation. Finally, torrents of rain beat and pelted the roiling water as it poured down in sheets like a raging waterfall. It was a terrifying display of power.

Far below in the ocean's depths, in the shadow of an underwater mountain, a pod of dolphins played merrily, unaffected and unconcerned with the weather topside. Like children not allowed to play outside during a thunderstorm, the dolphins frolicked freely in their watery realm and played games more suited to their current surroundings.

Unable to perform highflying aerobatics through the air, they chose games requiring speed and agility. The most fun was with the obstacle courses. They chased the leader over, under, around, and through any natural or artificial structure they could find. Tag was another favorite. This game not only required speed, but also the ability to anticipate and change directions quickly.

Delphyne was one of the younger dolphins, but she was a very powerful swimmer. Others her age were hard-pressed to keep up with her, but although she loved the games and her many friends, she had wanderlust for the open sea. She wanted to go where her elders had forbidden, not because she was rebellious, but because she was curious. Often during one of their games, her mind would wander as she raced and found herself alone. The others, mindful of the lessons they were taught, refused to follow when she swam into taboo territory. She would realize her error when one of the older dolphins would ram into her side, painfully getting her attention, then leading her back under guard to the safety of the pod.

Her parents fretted constantly, worrying about Delphyne's lack of concentration. They knew it was just a matter of time before she found trouble. And one of these times they would not be around to come to her aid.

Another worrier was Darryl. He was only a year her senior, but he had developed strong emotions toward her from an early age. He admired her slender, streamlined form and how her powerful strokes easily eluded even most of the adult dolphins. But it was her independent attitude and lust for adventure that interested him, the way she blatantly ignored long-standing rules based on generations of experience, not out of disrespect, but because she needed to know for herself. She was a constant challenge and constantly challenging. And she avoided his advances.

It wasn't that she disliked Darryl. She just had no interest in mating or sexual playfulness, which was inherent in all dolphins and a major part of their existence. What Darryl found frustrating was that he had no interest in any of the other females. He only wanted her, but she treated him more as a big brother than a potential mate. Try as he might, she was oblivious to his feelings. However, he wouldn't, no, couldn't, give up.

Eventually, the pod sensed changes in their environment and knew the storm had passed. The games had changed and

now it was time to breach the surface and see who could jump the highest or be airborne the longest. Who could walk on their tails the furthest? Who could perform the most twists in midair? Who was the best dancer? The games were endless and their outcome always in question.

Delphyne was one of the first to breach the surface. The ocean erupted all around her as her body soared freely through the air. Darryl was right on her tail and they reentered the water with a loud smack of their flukes at the same moment and sped to prepare for another glorious leap. Realizing Darryl was nearly at her side, she reached down deep and found an extra burst of power to dash away from her playmate.

When she next breached the surface with another magnificent maneuver of grace and strength, she was satisfied to hear him hit the waves much further behind. She couldn't believe how good it felt to fly free, dive deep, and do it again, all the while leading the pack and setting the pace for any bold enough to meet her challenge. The water streaming down her sleek sides was exhilarating as she picked up speed. She alternated her aerobatic jumps, sometimes coming up from the depths in a spectacular attempt to reach the clouds, sometimes performing titillating twists and turns where she was airborne long enough to dry her silky smooth skin. She was ecstatically delighted to show off her physical prowess and assumed the rest of the dolphins had the same appreciation.

Zigging and zagging, under and up, she frolicked gaily in a world of her own. Finally her stamina waned and it was time to rejoin the others. Hopefully the rest of her pod was as hungry as she was. She had just expended a terrific amount of energy showing off for her friends.

One last burst of speed and then she came to a stop almost in place. The little maneuver brought a glistening smile to her eyes. Becoming more serious, she turned to rejoin the others. None were in sight, which gave her a sense of pride and accomplishment, so she vocalized a series of clicks and whistles to locate them through echolocation. No vibrations

returned, however, and she felt a sudden pang of apprehension. She thought she knew their general direction, but with all the zigs and zags, and concentrating more on performing rather than where she was going, Delphyne realized she was most likely lost.

She continued to swim multi-directionally, trying desperately to locate her pod, but she detected nothing of their presence. She was not only lost and alone, but was famished. Hunger was never an issue before because she always hunted as a pack. She never had to fend for herself and was unsure of her untested natural instincts.

Delphyne prided herself on her vocabulary. She was quite intelligent, even for a dolphin. But the word “Timex” was foreign to her, and thus she had no way of knowing how long she’d been searching for her friends. It seemed like forever until she finally received a sound not produced by an inanimate object. She couldn’t make out its meaning, although she heard it perfectly clear. It was a song, plaintive and mournful, yet at the same time desperate and forlorn. Delphyne was certain the sound wasn’t coming from another dolphin, but she knew she had never heard anything like it before in her short life. So with curiosity and determination, she forgot about her immediate peril, and went in search for the origin of this strange and alluring song.

As she neared, she suddenly became quite concerned. Her clicks returned the message that she was heading into danger. The song she was following wasn’t coming from beneath the water, but her echolocation signals alerted her to the presence of several large creatures circling around what she deduced to be a small rock formation. It was hard to determine the number of creatures because they kept appearing and disappearing while they encircled the structure. Although the creatures resembled dolphins, she quickly realized she was swimming into a gathering of . . . sharks!

Something was in trouble and the sharks were waiting to feed. There was blood in the water! She didn’t know who or what that something was, but she did know sharks, and they

were her enemies, which made that something her friend. Without regard for her personal safety, she chose a target and charged. She aimed for the gills and rammed it full force. Delphyne didn't know if the blow was fatal, but the shark was disabled as it drifted slowly on the current and sunk to the ocean floor.

The other predators were now alerted to her presence and the next target wouldn't be as easy. The sharks were big and powerful, but they couldn't compete with her speed and agility. Their only advantage was in their numbers and she hoped to quickly reduce that edge. From the crustaceans and the tiny fish hiding in the tall sea grass below, the scene must have looked like a dance of the Titans. Feints, charges, dodges, all part of the choreography in this dance to the death.

Suddenly she saw an opening and burst like a streaking arrow into the side of the shark. Gill shot! She didn't have as much momentum as she did on the first shark because of the closer proximity, but she still was powerful enough to ram with deadly force. Unfortunately, the collision stopped her momentarily and she felt sharp teeth rake her side as she literally escaped the jaws of death with a powerful tail kick.

Ignoring the pain, Delphyne rejoined the dance with a vengeance. She followed the shark that got its teeth into her and was tenacious in her pursuit. This was the largest of the predators, also the strongest and swiftest. Years of playing tag with her friends, however, prepared her for just this type of attack. She followed the shark's every move until she was able to predict where it would go next. A quick feint, a powerful lunge, and she felt contact with soft flesh. She missed the gills, however, and the large predator turned on her, jaws wide, and attacked. Fortunately, she'd hurt it enough to slow it down, which was the only reason she wasn't dinner. As its jaws closed, she was able to swim free with only inches to spare. Her turn was much crisper and faster and her powerful stroke brought her slamming into his side. This time the damage was much worse. It didn't float away, but swam at

an oblique angle away from her, no longer able to continue to do battle.

Without wasting time to gloat, she turned on the next victim. This one was smaller, sleeker, and more agile. It was a much tougher opponent for her to gain an edge. Also, there was still one more that pursued her as she tangled with the other. While she was on the offense, she had to remain defensive, hunter and hunted simultaneously.

The one she was chasing made a sharp move to the right while the one pursuing countered in anticipation of her following. Instead, she turned left and caught the pursuer by surprise and it was quickly dispatched. That left only one, the most difficult one! One moment she was in pursuit, the next she was fleeing for her life. Positions changed and attacks were met with counterattacks. The shark managed to take some of Delphyne's flesh, but it came at a price. Broken cartilage and damaged muscle slowed its reactions enough where she was able to make each contact take a toll. Valiant as it fought, it couldn't contend with the constant pounding its body was taking from the countless rammings from the dolphin. Eventually it joined its brethren at the bottom of the sea.

Delphyne was exhausted. She swam the area until she was sure all the predators were dispatched. Then she came to the surface to see whom she had just rescued.

There was a body lying on the rocks. The mouth was opening and closing like a fish out of water, but no sound came out, no song. Its tail had a large gash that was still oozing blood, but its torso and head were human. The long, rainbow-colored hair reflected the sunlight in iridescent pastels of golds, greens, and violets. By the breasts she knew it was a mermaid.

She had never encountered one before, but often heard stories about the merpeople. This one was suffocating and needed the healing powers of the sea in order to survive. Delphyne lunged forward until her front half was beached on the rocks, her mouth near the mermaid's hair. She clamped down

securely, and with continued, powerful strokes, she managed to drag the mermaid into the water. At first she started to sink and Delphyne thought she was too late. She nudged the mermaid with her nose and tried to move her so the water would pulse through her gills. Eventually enough passed through to bring her back into consciousness.

It took several long moments for the mermaid to comprehend where she was and why she was swimming with a dolphin rather than the sharks. Then she noticed the scrapes and missing areas of flesh and realized what this dolphin must have gone through in order to save her life.

“My name is Muriel,” the mermaid sang. “I am the daughter of the king. I don’t think we’re safe here. Please accompany me home where we both can recover in safety. And thank you for my life”

“Delphyne.” The king’s daughter? I bet the king puts on a fabulous feast! “I’ll be glad to see you safely home. Lead the way! And if you don’t mind, I’d love to hear the story of how you happened to be in this precarious situation.”

“Then I’ll gladly sing you my story as we go.”

“Being a Princess has a lot of responsibilities, you know. It’s not just parties and parades!” Her tiny nose slightly scrunched when she sang and her aquamarine eyes sparkled with life.

Delphyne nodded in agreement, looking very serious, and not having any idea what a princess actually does.

“I have to make sure everyone in my father’s kingdom is happy and safe. One of my special projects is working for the homeless. Bad things can happen when you don’t have a home. For one thing, it’s not safe. It’s always the homeless that disappear first. And if all of the creatures in my father’s kingdom got eaten, who would he rule?”

Delphyne continued nodding her head, still serious, and still wondering what Muriel was talking about. Her logic

seemed impeccable, but she never heard of working for the homeless.

“So I was out exploring the seabed for unoccupied housing, which is a very hard job, you know.” She looked at her new friend, who was nodding and obviously knew how hard she had to work to help her father. “Well, there are so many homeless and so few homes that it’s a constant struggle to fill their needs. I’ve already scoured the area close to home and each time I go searching I have to go farther and farther away. Today I was having a terrible time finding shells and things that weren’t already occupied. I kept swimming and searching, searching and swimming, until I lost track of where I was. Then I found this island and it was filled with empty shells that washed up on the beach. I was so busy gathering shells that I didn’t notice the storm until it struck. By then it was too late. I tried to escape to the depths but got caught in a bad current and was dragged to the rocks. I wasn’t strong enough to swim free and the giant rollers grabbed me and threw me up against the rocks where you found me. Unfortunately, I hit with such force that I was knocked unconscious, injured and bleeding. It was my blood that attracted the sharks. Merpeople are their favorite food; of course, you already know that.”

Delphyne nodded in agreement, although she never heard of any tales regarding sharks eating mermaids.

“When I regained consciousness, I noticed all the fins and began singing for help. Then you came to my rescue!”

Delphyne didn’t know what to make of the princess. Gathering seashells as a job? She never heard of anything like it before. No dolphin in its right mind would waste time collecting shells, but it seemed important to Muriel. Regardless, all she wanted right now was to get Muriel home safely and hopefully be rewarded by a fine meal. She was hungry before tangling with the sharks. Now all she could think of was food!

“Before we journey to my home, let me just grab some shells. I would hate to have come all this way and return

empty-handed. I just hope the storm hasn't destroyed everything."

"I understand completely," clicked Delphyne politely. *Then we can eat?*

The next several hours Delphyne swam up-and-down the shoreline, waiting for Muriel to fill her net sack with shells. Of course, first Muriel had to gather the material to make the netting and then make it. Why did she have to make it so big? It was taking forever to be filled.

Finally Muriel signaled she was ready to go. She dragged her bundle . . . bundles? Two nets? No wonder it took so long! With one in each hand she kicked over to Delphyne.

"Would you mind carrying this for me?" she asked pleasantly and held one out for Delphyne to take. The dolphin took it in her mouth without clicking a word and motioned with her head for the mermaid to lead on.

Muriel took a few moments to get her bearings, then swam away gaily, singing a lilting song despite her injuries.

It was the longest journey of Delphyne's life. Although it only took a few hours, her hunger was ravenous and all-consuming. Finally she was able to see a giant reef in the distance. Her heart leapt with joy knowing they neared their destination; it was almost dinnertime! Her senses became aware of small fish and other sea creatures in large abundance moving throughout the reef. Almost there!

When they reached the outer edge of the reef, they were greeted by a menagerie of sea creatures that were excited to see the return of their princess, and a princess bearing gifts, no less! But when they saw the dolphin, they sped away in terror.

"Come back! Come back! This is my friend Delphyne! She saved my life, she won't hurt you. I promise!"

Delphyne couldn't believe what she just heard. Muriel was telling her dinner she wouldn't hurt them! Now what was she supposed to do? She didn't want to make a liar out of her new friend, and it would be rude to eat some of the princess' friends, even if it's only a few small ones, just to take

the edge off her hunger. Maybe if she did it quickly when no one was looking!

Slowly, tiny pairs of eyes came out of hiding to get a better look at the “friendly” dolphin. Most were apprehensive and not entirely willing to believe what they were told, but curiosity ruled their instincts and Delphyne couldn’t believe the size of the feast that came out to meet them! This was a true test of her resolve!

“See? She’s not trying to hurt anyone. In fact, she helped me carry these,” she said, indicating the nets full of shells. Fish and crustacean alike were amazed that their princess had the power to solicit the aid of one of their most feared predators. Then Muriel swam along the reef while emptying the contents of her bundle. Homeless creatures scurried to be the first to pick out their new home. When she was finished, she took the net from Delphyne and began to distribute that also. It was a great day in the underwater realm of the Mer-kingdom.

When the princess was finished, she led her new friend to the palace to meet her father. Along the way Delphyne was amazed at how many mermaids and mermen there were. There must be hundreds of them! And all were as beautiful or handsome as their princess.

The palace was a huge structure built from materials scavenged off the ocean floor. Evidence of sunken ships, mostly warships, were the foundation. They were renovated, rebuilt in different forms, and covered with broken shells, which gave it its palatial look. Then the entire area was covered by a clear dome from a material with which Delphyne was unfamiliar. The dome was filled with water except for the area above the palace, which was oxygenated by underwater pumps. She could see merpeople on the top-level engaged in conversation or just relaxing. Obviously, the merpeople needed fresh air from time to time just like dolphins.

At the entrance to the dome was a merman with a crown on his head and a trident in his hand. He was much larger than the other mermen, having a barrel chest, massive muscular arms and shoulders, and a tail portion built for speed and

power. A long, black beard flowed from his face, the same color as the hair that curled on his chest. He was flanked by other mermen and mermaids who watched in anticipation as they approached.

“Daddy!” Muriel sang excitedly as she dashed off to embrace her father, the king. He hugged her back but warily watched the dolphin. Merpeople were traditionally friends of the dolphins, but he easily recognized the look of hunger in the predator and feared for those under his charge.

“We were worried about you, Muriel. And rightfully so!” He stared down at the long gash along the side of her tail.

She explained how she got caught in the storm and how she was rescued because of the bravery and valor of her new friend.

“Delphyne. Daddy, you should have seen her fight! There were so many sharks I couldn’t even count them all! And she defeated all of them, all by herself!”

The king knew his daughter’s tendency to embellish, but also noticed all the fresh injuries spread over the dolphin’s body. He eyed Delphyne with new respect. Whether his daughter was saved from one shark or a hundred, he owed their new friend a great debt of gratitude.

“I thank you for what you’ve done and for bringing my daughter safely home.”

Delphyne looked away, feeling embarrassed by the attention, and her stomach flushed pink. She liked showing off and being the center of attention, but this was different. She felt comfortable around her friends, but there were too many eyes staring at her, sizing her up or looking with awe and wonder.

“There was a Great White that swam near here. Injured, nearly dead. Was that your work?”

“It sure was, Daddy,” Muriel said before Delphyne could reply. “He was really big and mean! You should have seen her battle! Awesome, Daddy!”

“You look hungry,” the king remarked as he looked Delphyne straight in the eye.

Busted! This king is no fool! She reddened even brighter.

The King, however, was even more impressed by her restraint. It must be really difficult to control such a powerful urge of a natural instinct.

“Then the feast will be in your honor,” he said to Delphyne, “and that behemoth of an opponent you defeated will be the main entrée.” He chuckled after their surprised expressions. “You don’t think I’d allow him to amble aimlessly around our reef, do you?”

Delphyne realized not only was he *not* a fool, but he was a formidable, and deadly, opponent himself! Her esteem for him grew as well.

While the *shark sushi* and *kelp à la everything else* was being prepared, Delphyne had a chance to get acquainted with the king and all of Muriel’s family and friends. She found them fascinating and got so involved in their stories that she momentarily forgot her hunger.

She had never eaten shark before. Whoever prepared the shark cut her portions to the exact size for easy eating. She commented to Muriel on how impressed she was and how knowledgeable the chef must be to know her dietary requirements. Muriel responded gleefully and with pride as she revealed the chef was her brother, Maurice. Delphyne opted not to say what she felt about eating kelp!

Suddenly there was a commotion as a young mermaid and several mermen excitedly entered the room. She whispered into the king’s ear, animatedly moving her arms and hands to punctuate her message, and the king’s brow furrowed with concern. He abruptly stood, apologized for the interruption, and swam swiftly away with the messengers.

“If Daddy looks like that, it usually means trouble!” She looked at Delphyne and wondered if they should follow. As if suddenly making a regal decision, with her best authoritative, grown-up expression, she declared, “Let’s go!”

They quickly left the dining room and followed in the king’s wake. They swam past room after room; some occupied, some not. Up one corridor and down another, around a corner and up to the next level. They were moving fast and

with purpose. Whatever the message contained, it called for urgency! Then they saw the king and his entourage enter a room and Muriel halted with a gasp. Delphyne looked at her questioningly.

“The War Room!”

They listened outside, remaining inconspicuous, and heard why the king was so upset. King Bartholomew, the barracuda king, was preparing to attack the reef. He always considered it prime real estate and it galled him that it was occupied by bunch of namby-pamby, do-gooding merpeople. He hated King Merrick with a passion. Merrick was all that stood between him and his lifelong desire to reign from the palace overlooking the plush and plentiful reef. It had been his ambition ever since he was a fingerling.

Princess Muriel was aware of small skirmishes between the Mers and the ‘Cudas, but all-out war between them would be devastating for both sides. There had to be a way for her to stop the madness. After all, she was royalty and it was her responsibility for the safety of the reef.

Just then King Merrick exited the room. He was not happy to see his daughter and the dolphin eavesdropping. That never boded well! He locked eyes with Muriel and sensed she was up to no good. Then his glare softened when he saw the fresh injuries on the girls.

“You and Delphyne go to the infirmary. Have the Mer-doc apply some healing poultices and give you something for the pain. I’m sure you’re both too proud to admit it hurts.” Then he swam off to ready the defenses for attack. He was a genius tactician, but it would take every trick to ensure the safety of the reef from the viciousness of the barracuda army. King Bartholomew was not known as a mermanitarian.

Delphyne watched warily as the mermaid nurse applied kelpie, goopy stuff on Muriel’s injury. The princess didn’t seem to mind, but it looked and smelled horrible! When the gash was completely covered, the nurse applied a gauzy, bandage-looking material to keep the stuff intact. She looked terrible! It just wasn’t natural! Then she was made to put

this rancid-smelling potion in her mouth and swallow. Yuck! To Delphyne's horror, the nurse leered at her with an evil, anticipatory grin.

The mermaid's tail flipped slowly and suddenly they were face to face. Delphyne didn't know if she should flee or stay. If she fled, she didn't know if she would be able to find her pod, but if she stayed, it might mean a fight with the merpeople.

The nurse continued to stare. She must be undecided as to which would cause the most pain, the poultice or the potion. Muriel was still fine, so it must be slow acting. Then the nurse made her move! Delphyne's eyes were wide as saucers with fear, and she was paralyzed, too scared to move. She looked to the princess for help, but Muriel was smiling and Delphyne realized it must be a trap. She was going to end up as sushi just like the Great White. What had the nurse done to make her muscles unresponsive? Maybe it was something in the sushi. Could they have had this planned from the start?

The nurse chose the deepest wound to slap on the goop. It tingled, then burned, and finally went numb. It was some kind of trick! Then the nurse went to the second-worst wound and filled the gouge with the pestiferous poultice. With horror, Delphyne knew it was too late to swim for freedom. It was already in her system and she had no way of ridding herself of the poison. The mermaid continued plastering her and she was unable to break free of the bonds of terror that held her. She had never thought it possible to be frozen in fear like she was. Finally the nurse was finished. Like Muriel, she was unnaturally trussed. And then to make matters worse, the potion! She was made to ingest it and was powerless to refuse. The acrid taste made her gag, but it wouldn't come back out. It burned all the way down to her last stomach. Then it was pumped to her brain and she felt lightheaded. Extremely lightheaded! Suddenly she realized she didn't care if she died. She felt great! Now she understood why Muriel was smiling. The princess put a hand gently on her back and led her to the terrace and fresh air. What a way to go! She didn't

feel this good when she perfectly performed a difficult maneuver and all the other dolphins were awestruck!

The euphoria lasted for several hours and Delphyne felt depressed when it wore off. When the nurse eventually came to check on their condition, it was with concern and compassion. Delphyne felt foolish for her reactions earlier and realized the nurse was not really evil. It's amazing how fear can rule your emotions! The bandages were removed slowly and carefully, and she was shocked at how well the wounds had healed. There would most certainly be scarring, considered a badge of a warrior by dolphins, but she was almost completely healed and free of pain.

"Thank you," Delphyne said sincerely and the nurse responded with a smile. Feeling better, the dolphin and the mermaid swam out of the palace and exited the dome.

"Let me take you on a tour of the reef. It'll give you some idea of why we're so willing to fight to keep it under our control."

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