

# PART OF YOUR NIGHTMARE

**C**old water enveloped Shelly as she plunged.

She spiraled down through what appeared to be tangles of kelp. What was happening to her? Where was she going? Finally, she somersaulted to a stop in a dim underwater cavern.

She began to swim, holding her breath, not sure where she was going but knowing she needed to find an exit, to find air. But seaweed snagged at her ankles, trapping her.

“*Leave here... turn back!*” came a tiny, pained voice as clear as day, even that far underwater.

Shelly looked down and saw *faces* on the seaweed. And with her heart racing and air running out, she realized it wasn’t seaweed at all, but withered gray life-forms with sallow eyes and gaping, contorted mouths. They were nothing she had ever studied or seen in the aquarium. They couldn’t be talking to her, though. She must have imagined it.

A current gripped her and sucked her down.

She tried to swim against it, but it was too strong. Her lungs ached, fit to burst.

Suddenly, an enormous crystal ball clamped around her, and her mouth opened in a silent scream. But then the water drained from the enclosure, and she was able to breathe, though she spluttered and spat and pounded her fists on the curved crystal.

“Help! Let me out!” she yelled. Everything looked distorted through the glass. She could barely make out the underwater cavern. Glass bottles lined the rough-hewn walls, and there were glowing anemones and the eyes of those... *things*. She gasped as something huge, bulbous, and black swam past her. *What was that?*

“Lose something, dear?” The same deep, rich voice she’d heard in Dawson’s bedroom emanated from the shadowy corner of the cavern. “So coy!” A black tentacle shot out of the gloom and rapped on the glass. Shelly cowered, fear gripping her.

“Wh-what do you want?” she gasped.

Suddenly, the black tentacle reappeared, unfurling to show off an empty coffee cup.

Shelly felt her cheeks turn hot. She knew tossing that cup in the water had been a huge mistake. She knew it had been wrong. But she had done it anyway. “I’m s-sorry,” she stammered. “I-I didn’t mean to!”

“Use my ocean as your—oh, what do you landlubbers call it? Dump?”

Shelly’s heart thumped fast.

Then the voice softened. “But don’t be afraid, my child. I’m here to help poor unfortunate souls like yourself. Souls who have problems that need fixing. It’s what I

do!” The voice broke into a dark, churlish chuckle. Where was it coming from? Was there a creature with tentacles that could... talk?

“What happened to me? Where am I?” Shelly said, her voice echoing in the crystal ball. Peering down, she could faintly make out some sort of clawed, spiny pedestal that held it.

“You are a poor unfortunate soul,” the voice replied. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? My dear, you can trust Auntie Ursula.” There was another flash of something swimming through the cavern.

Shelly shied away from the glass, sitting in the ball with her arms wrapped around her knees. *Was* she a poor unfortunate soul? All the things that had gone wrong in her life lately flashed through her head. Her parents splitting. Her father moving out. Her moving with Dawson and their mother into the townhouse and changing schools. The Semester of No Friends, as she’d come to think of it—those few months at the beginning of the year. And now that she had friends—Kendall, Attina, and Alana—all she could think of was losing them. And where *was* she? Dreaming? How had she gotten there? Her memory was fuzzy, but she recalled the nautilus in the dark.

“Ursula... can you let me out of here?” asked Shelly.

“In time,” replied Ursula. “But first, what do you want even more than that?”

That caught Shelly off guard. She thought about it and said, “To be happy?”

“Is that it? Come on, now. I’m a very busy woman. Go ahead and make your wish.”

“A wish? You can grant wishes?” asked Shelly. The words felt funny leaving her mouth. How was any of this strange dream possible, if it even was a dream?

“Of course I can, silly girl,” said Ursula. “Now, what’ll it be?”

“But who...” Shelly began, feeling a stab of fear. “But *what* are you?”

“Oh, a good question, my dear. Some call me the sea witch.”

“You’re a *witch*?” Shelly asked, straining to get a glimpse of her captor in the dark. Something shifted in the shadows. She caught sight of a flash of what looked like white hair and a ripple of more black tentacles. Shelly backed against the curved glass, but then the voice probed at her again.

“Some called me the protector of Triton Bay, but not in many moons.”

“Well, are you a witch... or a protector?” asked Shelly.

“Would you believe that I’m both?” A deep chuckle—booming like thunder—emanated from the watery shadows. “Now, hurry up and make your wish. I really haven’t got all day.”

Shelly couldn’t explain it, but she felt like the voice understood her.

“One wish?” Shelly said, then bit her lip. She closed her eyes. What did she want more than anything? To patch up her family? To be popular? To get certain people to notice her?

*Nothing* was worse than having no friends. She couldn’t let that happen again.

There was one way she could be sure to get some popularity points. She needed to win her event against Judy Weisberg at the swim meet and advance to the championship meet. That way she could help her team win the trophy. That trophy mattered more than anything to Kendall, so Shelly had to do everything she could to help Kendall get her hands on it.

Shelly opened her eyes. “I want to be the fastest swimmer in Triton Bay,” she said, “so we can win the swim meet against Little River.”

“Oh, my dear, now, swimming is something I know a bit about.” The dark shape darted past the crystal ball again. Suddenly, an image projected onto the curved glass like a movie.

Shelly saw herself in the championship swim meet. She dove off the block and plunged into the pool, easily outswimming her archnemesis from the rival school and winning the freestyle race. She swam faster and faster, slapping the wall far ahead of Judy Weisberg.

The image morphed into one of her standing on the top of the podium with a gold medal draped around her neck. Kendall and her friends, still in their swimsuits, swim caps, and towels, cheered for her with their coach. She saw her proud parents and Dawson rooting in the stands.

Her mother then did something wild. She turned to Shelly’s father and hugged him. Was it possible they could get back together? Could their daughter’s winning the race make them remember how great their family was? This wish could make everything in her life better!

It was so clear, just like the crystal ball.

The vision in the crystal faded, and Shelly found herself staring at her warped reflection. “You can make all that happen?” Shelly asked. She wanted it so badly, more than she’d ever wanted anything. If she could be the fastest swimmer, then she could make her friends happy and, better yet, make her parents happy. Maybe even bring them back together again.

“Oh, my dear,” Ursula said, “all that and more.”

The vision reappeared in the glass. Shelly ran her hand over the image of her family back together. She touched her friends’ jubilant faces and the gold medal hanging around her neck. The scene began to fade away again.

“No, wait! Bring it back!” She hit the glass, trying desperately to make the beautiful scene return. But it kept dissolving, like a sandcastle washing away in water on the shore.

“Well, my dear, there’s only one way to make it work,” Ursula said as the image faded.

“I want it! Please help me!” Shelly begged.

“Don’t fret, my child,” Ursula said. “Of course I can help—provided you pay a price.”

“Please. I’ll do anything!” cried Shelly.

“Anything, you say? Well, I like the sound of that. I have something in mind.”

Suddenly, a rolled-up piece of parchment materialized before Shelly inside the crystal ball. Hovering in the air in front of her, it glowed with the same eerie golden light as the nautilus had, and as it unrolled, a fountain pen with a bony fish tail materialized. Her eyes scanned the length of parchment as she read the ornate script.

“A... contract?” Shelly asked. She reread the words scrawled on the page:

I HEREBY GRANT UNTO URSULA, THE WITCH OF  
THE SEA, ONE FAVOR TO BE NAMED AT A LATER  
DATE, IN EXCHANGE FOR BECOMING THE FASTEST  
SWIMMER, FOR ALL ETERNITY.

“Go ahead and sign,” Ursula said. “I don’t have all day, you know.”

Shelly swallowed hard and put the pen to the page, which rippled with golden light.

“Good girl!” Ursula egged her on.

Shelly hesitated, biting her lip. “What favor, exactly? What do you want from me?”

“Oh, my dearie, all will be revealed in time,” Ursula said, sounding perturbed. She swam around, shifting in the shadows like a murky cloud of billowing smoke. Her eyes glinted hungrily for a second. “Great power was stolen from me by someone close to you. I cannot be a protector of the sea without it. All I want is for it to be returned to me.... but all in good time.”

“Great power? But what is it?” asked Shelly.

“Tsk, tsk. You’re wasting our precious time!” Ursula’s black tentacle emerged from the darkness and tapped on the crystal ball, pointing at the contract. “Do you want to be the fastest swimmer, or not? Many poor unfortunate souls would kill to be in your position right now.”

Shelly studied the contract and considered her situation. Returning something that was stolen didn’t sound so bad. Stealing was wrong, of course. If anything, it would be good to right an old injustice. But still something worried Shelly. Her mother always said not to act hastily.

“Can I think about it?” she inquired.

“*Think about it?*” growled Ursula, no longer kind. “What’s there to think about, my child? Either you want your wish or I’ve got better things to do with my time and I can set you free to swim back through my cave with the hope you get out before something comes after you. It’s what a child like you deserves, for thinking it acceptable to throw your toxic trash into my domain.”

“I’m sorry. Please, I just need a day,” said Shelly, peering again at the contract. It flashed with an intense light, then vanished. Nearly complete darkness flooded back into the cavern.

“My dear, as you wish. You have twenty-four hours to return to my lair and sign the contract, or our deal shall be rendered null and void. No takebacks. No second chances.”

Six black tentacles suctioned around the glass, cracking the crystal ball.

Seawater rushed back in, silencing Shelly’s scream.