

The Gold Shell
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Isobel waited alone in a sea of humanity. Lively chatter breezed by. Footsteps thudded in the sand. Money clinked as bets were made and lost as the sun inched toward the watery horizon. Isobel gave only slight attention to all of this. Her fingers fumbled in her pocket, and her gaze was fixed upon three women at the end of the pier, the only people as still as she. Isobel suspected that the waiting crowd knew each figure, each name and birthday, maybe even each favorite color. She had, once, when she'd been Izzy.

She used to chirp and parrot with the other mindless birds, chewing every shred of gossip until the famous family could not sneeze without her knowing. The older girls were her age. The boys were too young, but just right for her sister Ellie, so she had an excuse to hang their pictures across the shared bedroom. Trenton, always Trent to the girls, was their favorite. Every flaw was an endearing quirk in their eyes—the nose too wide for his lithe face, the tight curls that became tacky long strands in the surf.

There had been no crowd on the dock when Isobel returned last night. Ellie waited alone, and her eyes were anxious, not like the exuberant crowd today. The Nerieds had never lost a ship, but you never knew what could happen at sea. A storm could come up, rocks could lurk below the surface, pirates could attack... the surf was full of possibilities. But no one waiting on the beach tonight doubted that the Nerieds would appear before sundown. At Isobel's side, Ellie was jabbering about all the gossip about baby Maretta's first voyage. The mother and older girls had remained at home, but Trent had promised to bring them golden shells, so rare that no other sailors seemed able to find them.

Izzy had been the envy of her friends when Maretta was born on her thirteenth birthday. A coincidence, to be sure, but a coincidence shared only by two adults with too much life to fawn over someone else's. They were even more envious three years later when Izzy received an invitation to the personal family brunch for the girl's third birthday. It was a dream come true for a silly teenager, and her hopes soared like the spray ricocheting off the rocky cliffs. She could hardly sleep as she decided what she would say that would make them demand that she join their family. She could be great like they were.

Ellie's excited bouncing pulled Isobel back to the present. She pointed at the horizon. Isobel didn't bother to look, and a few moments later the crowd sighed. The offshore smudge had become some sea creature, an exciting sight any other day. Isobel put an arm around her crestfallen sister, which seemed to comfort her. The girl talked too much, but her information could be useful.

When they'd heard of the party, Izzy's friends had warned her that the Nerieds would never be impressed by her homespun dress, even if it was the color of Trenton's eyes. Their warnings were unfounded. The boys were polite, if a little stiff, and the girls so warm and friendly that she had no concern when the adults left them alone. The oldest girl had asked, "Do you see the ocean's deepest blue?" It was a special greeting, and Ellie's intelligence had supplied her with the correct answer—"I see the inner current." The older girls beamed, and the little one clapped her frosting-smearred hands. Clumsy with pleasure, Izzy's elbow found and shattered her water glass.

Up on the pier, the mother placed an arm around each daughter. It was the only motion they had made in the past hour, the only sign of concern leaking from their stoic vigil. Neither Isobel nor her sister had ever heard of a Neried alone, without others of its family nearby. Maybe

that was why Izzy had longed so badly to be one of them. Her parents didn't even know she'd returned from her voyage last night. She wasn't sure they knew she had left. They'd been much too busy to wait at the beach today. They might have expected there was no reason to worry, yet murmurs of anxiety were beginning to creep through the crowd.

Izzy's anxiety had grown too, as the water flowed across the table. It gathered upon Trent's outstretched hand, a giant inverse bubble. Before Izzy could process that something was wrong, he tipped the ball into her open palm. The bubble burst. Water leaked through her open fingers, and the warmth on their faces leaked with it. She looked from face to face as the jovial smiles became guarded. The older ones tried to repair the damage, but it was too late. She knew. They were wrong. They were somehow, unexplainably wrong, and they had accepted her only because they believed that she was also wrong. The admiration of the townsfolk was stolen, not earned, stolen by some strange trick she could never learn. Izzy would never be like them.

Isobel watched the astonishment rise in the faces around her as the last rays of the sun sank beneath the sea. She saw the horror in the faces of the three women, the terror in her sister's. In the morning the beach would be a hum of activity as every vessel set out to search for the lost ship. The remaining Nerieds might use their wrongness to help them search. It didn't matter. Isobel knew they would not find what they were looking for.

After the party, Izzy had stared into the Nerieds' faces across the bedroom walls. They were so beautiful, so well-mannered, so popular, and it was all a lie. Ellie's intelligence was false information they'd used to cover their real identities. The thought that there was no such thing as a perfect family stabbed her heart, and she knew she had to stop it. She had to protect the little people who were being deluded into believing in that soft, safe life that was all illusion. So she had.

The onlookers drifted away from the beach, their voices a whisper overshadowed by rumbling waves. Ellie disappeared unnoticed into the crowd. Isobel stood still as at last the three women retreated. Only then did she remove the object she had been holding in her pocket.

Glimmering in her hand was a golden shell.