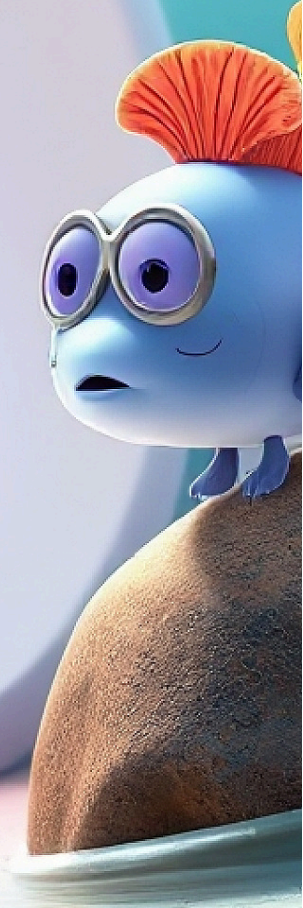


The Pearl Elevator



Yavuz DEMİRKİRAN

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Marina lived by a coral reef that sparkled like a jewelry box. Every morning she snorkeled above the sunny shallows, counting striped fish and waving at shy seahorses. One day, a giant pearl as tall as a small house rose from the reef. It glowed soft pink and white, with tiny barnacles along its base. A round doorway opened like a shell, and warm golden light spilled out.



Grandpa Coral, the reef elder, sat on a rock nearby. His bumpy coral-pink body was crowned with sea anemones, and his bubble spectacles wiggled when he talked. 'This pearl elevator carries sea creatures between ocean depths,' he explained. 'But first, you must prepare. The deep is dark and cold, and every level has its own surprises.' Marina's hazel eyes grew wide with wonder.



Marina raced home to pack her red waterproof backpack. She checked her tiny flashlight, clipped it to the strap, and added a snack and a warm cap. 'Preparation makes new places fun,' Grandpa Coral had said. She pulled on her yellow jacket and teal shorts, pushed her green snorkel mask up on her forehead, and hurried back to the reef. The pearl elevator waited patiently, its shell door open wide.



Grandpa Coral showed Marina the brass control panel with shell-shaped buttons. 'Level one is the sunny reef,' he said, pointing with his driftwood stick. 'Level two is the twilight zone, where the light grows dim. Level three is the deep, dark ocean, where strange creatures glow like lanterns.' Marina listened carefully and pressed the first button. The pearl elevator hummed softly and began to sink.



Down they went, past waving seaweed and schools of silver fish. Marina pressed her nose to the porthole and watched the colors change from turquoise to deep blue. 'The twilight zone,' she whispered. A school of hatchetfish flickered past, their bodies like shiny coins. Grandpa Coral nodded wisely. 'Every creature here has a special way to survive. Look closely, Marina, and remember.'



The pearl elevator stopped with a gentle bump, and the shell door opened. Marina stepped out into the twilight zone, where the water was cool and dim. A tiny lanternfish darted up, his silvery-blue body shimmering. A glowing orange lure dangled from his forehead, and a woven seaweed satchel hung across his side. 'Hello! I'm Finn,' he chirped. 'Welcome to my neighborhood!'



Finn swam in happy circles around Marina. 'The twilight zone is full of tricks,' he said. 'Some fish have big eyes to catch the little light. Some have whiskers to feel their way. And some, like me, make our own glow!' He wiggled his lure, and it glowed warm orange. Marina pulled out her tiny flashlight and clicked it on. 'I brought my own light too!' she said, and they both laughed.



Back in the pearl elevator, Marina pressed the button for the deep, dark ocean. Down they sank, deeper and deeper, until the water turned as black as midnight. The pearl's golden glow lit the round doorway. Strange shapes drifted past the porthole—creatures with long feelers and glowing spots. 'Are you ready?' Grandpa Coral asked. Marina nodded, her heart thumping with excitement.



The shell door opened onto the deep ocean floor, where Finn waited with a welcoming flicker of his lure. 'This way!' he said. He showed Marina a gulper eel with a mouth like a big balloon, and a vampire squid that wore its cloak inside out. Marina remembered what Grandpa Coral had taught her: every creature has a special way to live down here. She felt like a scientist on a grand adventure.



Suddenly, the pearl elevator shuddered and stopped. A low groan echoed through the water. 'Oh dear,' said the pearl elevator in a sleepy voice. 'My brass buttons are stuck. I'm afraid I can't move.' Marina tried pressing the shell-shaped buttons, but nothing happened. Finn zipped around, his lure flashing with worry. 'What do we do?' he asked. Marina took a deep breath and thought.



Marina remembered her careful preparation. She unclipped her tiny flashlight and shined it on the control panel. 'The buttons are jammed with tiny barnacles,' she said. 'We need to clean them.' Finn's eyes lit up. 'I can fetch tools!' he said, and dashed off into the dark. He returned with a soft sea sponge and a thin piece of kelp. 'Will these work?' Marina smiled. 'Perfect!'



Marina used the kelp to gently pry the barnacles loose while Finn held the flashlight steady with his little fins. 'You're doing great!' he cheered. The pearl elevator hummed. 'That tickles,' it said with a giggle. One by one, the shell buttons popped free. Marina pressed the button for the reef, and the elevator began to rise. 'Thank you, Marina!' said the pearl elevator. 'You fixed me!'



Up they floated, past the twilight zone and back to the sunny reef. Grandpa Coral waited on his rock, his anemone crown bobbing. 'You did it!' he said. 'You used your preparation and problem solving.' Marina grinned, her gap-toothed smile wide. 'And Finn helped,' she said. The pearl elevator glowed warmly, its shell door open for the next adventure. 'Come back soon,' it murmured.



Marina hugged Finn goodbye and promised to visit. She climbed out of the pearl elevator, her red backpack still snug on her shoulders. The reef sparkled in the sunlight, and she felt proud of what she had learned. 'New places are fun when you get ready first,' she told Grandpa Coral. He nodded wisely. 'And when you bring a friend along,' he added.



That evening, Marina drew a picture of the pearl elevator and all the creatures she met. She wrote down everything she had learned about the twilight zone and the deep, dark ocean. Her notebook was full of new words like 'lanternfish' and 'gulper eel.' She couldn't wait to share her adventure with her friends. The sea, she knew, was full of wonders waiting to be explored.



From that day on, Marina always packed carefully before any adventure. She kept her flashlight clipped to her backpack and her snorkel mask ready. And whenever she saw a glowing pearl in her dreams, she smiled. She knew that with a little preparation and a lot of curiosity, any new place could become a wonderful friend.