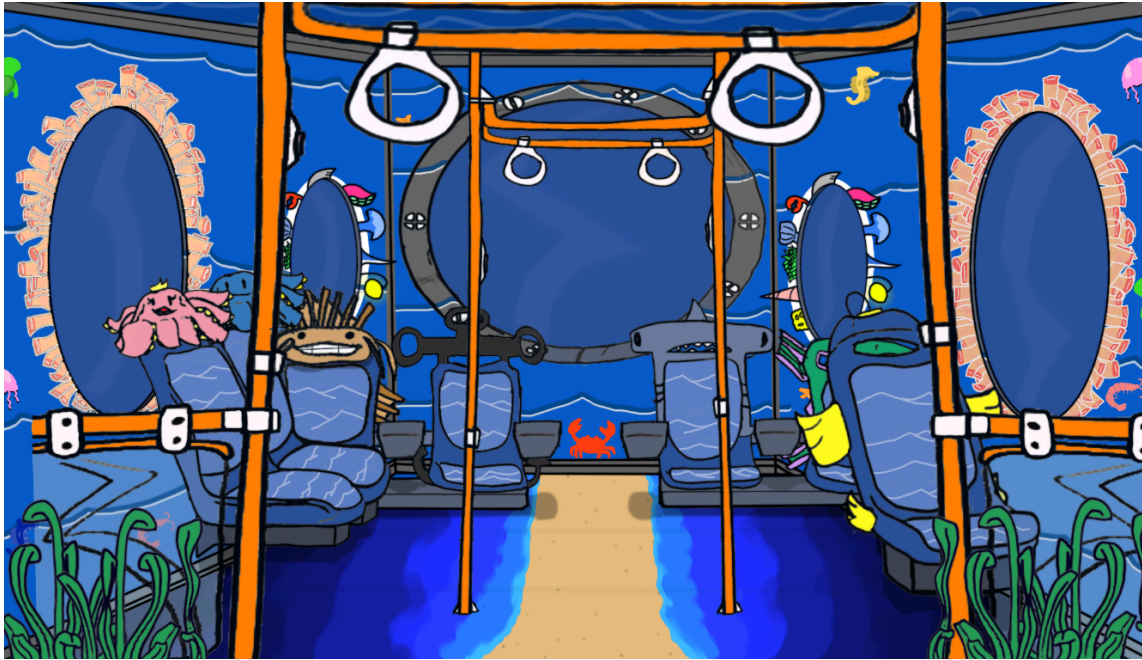


#### Chapter Four: Like Two Fish in an Anemone



The *Clown Car* was small in terms of trains, being only a single car it could carry far less than its peers. However it chalked up points in aesthetics. Paintings of waves and sea creatures wrapped the walls. Scarily realistic seaweed swayed on the floor. Each seat was adorned with a different inhabitant of the ocean. The car in its entirety smelled like the last warm sunset of a long summer.

*Maybe I should say something to her, I haven't said a word since she got on! Even something small, I've just gotta figure it out!*

Layle choked out shallow breath after shallow breath. **CHOMPI!** She bit down hard onto her hand once more.

*I CAN DO THIS!*

"What, a mosquito bit you or something?"

"AHKAH!" Layle squeaked, bouncing in the driver's seat. Layle was a bit preoccupied to notice that Lucy had gotten up.

"O-Oh! Yeah haha."

"Yeah, they're a little crazy this year." Lucy motioned to the ashes of past battles on Layle's hands. "Your blood must go crazy, you ever thought about donatin'?"

"I'm type O, I guess to the bugs you could say I'mmmmm." Layle danced in her seat. "O-Tractive hehe."

Lucy stared blankly. "Yeah I'm not gonna lie, that was not funny. But your power's pretty cool. It's so quiet and chill down here and there's so many fish I've never even seen before." Speeding by, creatures of all shapes and sizes waved at the two young ladies.

“Yeah, I think so too! I love it down here! So many beautiful creatures, all with different lifestyles and appearances but they still live in...**relative** harmony. If you count hunting and eating each other as harmony! Gehehe!”

“Heehee, ok that one was pretty good you’re at a neutral point now.”

“Aside from doing what they have to to survive, they don’t judge or bully each other. Like there’s this one ship I always stop to read in, and none of the fish bother me, it’s so peaceful!” Layle bent under the train’s control panel and dragged out a thick book. “Take a look at this picture of a Giant sea bass I got! It’s so big you will not believe it!” Lucy leaned in. “They’re close to going extinct so I was soooo lucky to get this picture. Oh! Speaking of!” Layle dove back into the compartment, coming out with a thick stack of papers and a clipboard. “Would you mind signing this petition to stop dumping in The High Place Palace? I try and clean up what I can but I’m only one gal.”

“Fuck those twats! People still dump into the ocean?” Lucy was the first person to sign.

“Yeah! You’d be surprised how often it still happens! If I could I’d like to have a word with the Goddess myself. I’ve done research online and no ones documented the dumping or even really knows about it. I think tha-Oh, oh I’m sorry. I’m sure you’re not on here to listen to me on my soapbox.”

“Nah nah keep going I like hearing you talk, this is something important to you isn’t it?”

Layle rubbed at her hands “Oh thank you, my bad I just don’t get to talk to anyone about this.”

***BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING! BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING! BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING!***

*No no no! Not right now!*

“Sounds like your phone’s ringin’ cousin.”

“Oh yeah...I’m just gonna take this real fast.”

***BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING! BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING! BUH-DA-DA-DA-DING!***

“Do what you gotta do.”

Layle walked to the end of the train car. ***GLINK!*** With a snap of her fingers, a door with a picture of a shark on a toilet reading a newspaper appeared. She shut herself inside the bathroom.

***CHOMPI!*** “H-Hello...mom?”

“**Layle!**”

“Yea-”

“**Why did you make me wait?! Are you too busy to talk to your mother!? What do you hate me or something!?**”

“N-No I ju-”

***“THEN PICK UP WHEN I CALL YOU!”***

“Y-Yes mo-”

"When are you going to quit splashing around in the water and come home? Me and your father aren't getting any younger! You act like you don't even love us! We raised you and this is what we get in return!?" Tears welled in Layle's eyes. "Your siblings work hard every day and you left us all to fend for ourselves! We helped put you through college! For what? For you to be poor at the bottom of the ocean?!"

"You didn't pay fo-"

"Are you getting smart with me, little girl!? Don't make me come down there!" Layle slowly slid to her knees. The bathroom had a clear dome, the sea's inhabitants were watching her get chewed out. "You were so quiet and lonely in school, I thought you'd be a genius or were planning something. But I was wrong! You just ran away and wasted everybody's time!"

***"I ACTUALLY HAVE A CLIENT TODAY MOM!"***

Layle shouted through tears, clawing at her chest.

***"WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU TALKING TO!"***

"What the fuck is one client gonna do for you!? Huh!? Tell me! You got a degree to get ONE client!? I can't do this! We raised you better than this I swear we did! When you wisen up and drop that shitty little business and your weird ass fascination with fish, MAYBE you can come back home!"

***BOOP! BOOP! BOOP!***

She hung up.

Lay cried

She cried

And cried

And cried

"Squeeze it."

"Hm?"

“The gap is small so I couldn’t give you a big one.” Lifting her head, Layle turned to see a small white sphere at her feet. It was mostly see-through, had uneven grooves and raises, it almost looked like an asteroid. There was almost a subtle warmth to it. “It’s a bomb.”

“A what!?” Layle hollered dropping the item.

“Wait wait wait, Ok I’m just realizing how crazy that sounds, but they don’t explode unless I want them to, and it’s just some air. It’s my ability.” Somewhat reassured, Lay slowly reached for the mine. **SQUEEZE!** Hesitantly squeezing it the solid object gave a little. With a harder squeeze, **SQUEEZE!** it gave a little more. “I don’t know what you’re going through, it’s none of my business...But if you’ll keep it, you can squeeze that mine as hard as you can and it won’t burst or nothing.” Layle found a rhythm squeezing the mine. **SQUEEZE!** “If it’ll make you feel any better **SQUEEZE!** I’ll listen to you talk however long you wanna. About like fish and stuff. **SQUEEZE!** And I’ll even keep my eyes closed so I won’t see your tears if you don’t want me to.” **SQUEEZE!**

“I’m sorry you heard that.” **SQUEEZE!**

“You don’t gotta be.”

**SQUEEZE!** “It’s just... **SQUEEZE!** I’m trying so hard to be who I want to be, **SQUEEZE!** but because I’m not what my mom wants it doesn’t matter. **SQUEEZE!** It’s fucking infuriating. I make a little head weight and she just comes along and bursts my bubble.”

“I feel you I feel you, **SQUEEZE!** it’s like if they don’t get it it’s some bullshit. **SQUEEZE!** But, who is it that you wanna be?”

“I wanna be independent, **SQUEEZE!** and, and free **SQUEEZE!**, and pretty **SQUEEZE!** and confident! **SQUEEZE!** I wanna be able to share my love of the sea with people, not just speed past it. **SQUEEZE!** I wanna do tours of sunken ships or just other cool stuff down here **SQUEEZE!** ....But I haven’t been very successful, you’re my first guest...Ever.” **SQUEEZE!**

“Ok, then lemme do it all. Can you show me that ship that you like?”

“H-Huh foreal?” **SQUEEZE!!!!!!!** Layle nervously squeezed the mine.

“Yeahhh I don’t say stuff I don’t mean, plus I have plans on taking over the whole country of Decalore so you’ll kinda be like my first too.”

**SQUEEZE!!!!!!!** Still clutching her interstellar stress ball, Layle rose to her feet. Her shaking hand stopped centimeters from the doorknob. Looking over her shoulder she saw Carl staring in at her from the outside. With as much emotion as a clownfish could realistically emit, his gaze said more than enough. **KER-CHAKI THUNK!**

Having been leaning on the door Lucy slammed her head on the bathroom floor as Layle opened it. “Oh-Oh my God Lucy are you alright!?”

Eyes closed, she said this “Hee hee hee You could’ve crossed pretty off the list a long time ago.”

***SQUEEEEEEE!***