

Mom always says the ocean took everything.

But she's wrong.

It left us something.

It left us Low Tide, a floating city made of what the sea didn't swallow. Old ferry parts, driftwood, metal, glass panels, and the people who refused to sink.

Our parents built it thinking we'd only need it for a few years.

But the ocean never went back. So, neither did we.

From above, Low Tide looks like a junkyard barely holding together. But from here, on our old ferryboat, *The Spine*, it's actually kind of beautiful. The turbines hum, the water flashes like mirrors, and sometimes the sky feels close enough to touch. This is the only part of the city I like, except, of course, the renewable energy. But that's different than the old world. Cleaner, quieter. Less guilt in the air. Sometimes I wonder if we really deserve it, this second chance. But I write anyway.

The Spine is where I write. Nobody asked me to, but someone should remember what it's like to live after the end of everything, just in case we ever get to be on dry land again.

Johnny's already awake when I find him under a half-built turbine. His sleeves are rolled up, arms covered in grease. The sun's barely up, but he's been at it for hours.

"Missed breakfast," he says without looking up.

"Not hungry."

He snorts. "You're a terrible liar."

I shrug, fiddling with the strap on my notebook, wishing I were better at hiding things.

Mina climbs up from below deck, hair tied back with a wire, tablet under her arm, muttering numbers to herself. Mina always bites her thumbnail when she's thinking, even though she says it's a bad habit. Lance follows, carrying seaweed and algae from the morning harvest.

The four of us, Johnny, Mina, Lance, and me, call ourselves Rust Tide. Because everything rusts out here eventually. Except us.

We're all from different places around the dry world. Mina's mom was an engineer from Mumbai. Lance's family came from the Caribbean islands that vanished under hurricanes.

Johnny's great-grandfather was from Newfoundland, back when it was still land.

And me? I was born in Canada. My world was beautiful until I realized most adults didn't care about global warming. They weren't using renewable energy, and because of that, our cities drowned. I still remember my mom rinsing sea salt out of my hair with the last clean water

we had. Her hands shaking, the sting in my eyes. That was the moment I started hating the ocean, and everything that came after.

I hate our city, other than *The Spine*. The constant smell of salt and iron is what I hate most. The way we work all day is just to keep from sinking. It's Survival, not life.

But sometimes, when the turbines go quiet and the air feels soft again, I almost love it too, and I hate that I love it.

At night, we sit by the dim lanterns and listen to the waves hitting the metal edges. Johnny always taps the railing three times before he speaks, a habit he says is "for luck." He swears it's silly but never forgets. He does this because when he was escaping to the metal, he knocked on it three times, he survived holding this scrap of metal.

"One day," he said once, staring into the dark, "we'll find something that doesn't fade." I didn't believe him then. I wasn't sure I believed *anything*.

After breakfast one morning, Mina called us to the café built out of an old fishing boat. The walls still smelled faintly of salt and engine oil. She had a hologram spinning above her tablet, glowing blue and gold.

"It's called a *Lumen Cell*," she said. "Pre-flood technology. It uses bioluminescent coral and saltwater conductors to create clean, renewable power. No pollution, no burning." Johnny leaned back, squinting. "So, it's like... a sun in a jar." "Sort of," Mina said. "It doesn't consume; it shares. It's photosynthetic. It lives off the light it stores."

Lance frowned. "If people had this before, why did the world still flood?"

Mina sighed, rubbing her forehead. "They didn't listen. Back in 2025, carbon emissions were over 37 billion tons a year. They talked about change but never made it happen. The air thickened, the ice melted, and they kept saying someone else would fix it."

I looked at the hologram again, its center glowing like a heartbeat. "And now we have to fix it."

Johnny smiled. "Then let's start."

That's how it began finding the Lumen Cell.

The ruins of an old coastal city waited for us, towers half-swallowed by the sea. We built the *Rust Runner* out of turbine scraps and glass panels.

"Remind me why I'm doing this again?" Lance asked, loading gear.

"Because you like history," Johnny said.

“I like not drowning.”

Mina didn't look up. “If this works, none of us will drown again.”

The ship creaked as the waves nudged it. The air smelled like rust and old storms.

“You think it's really down there?” I asked.

Mina nodded toward the scanner. “Coordinates near old subway tunnels. Coral likes metal.”

Johnny grinned. “Lucky for us, I'm part fish.”

“More like barnacle,” Lance muttered.

Johnny tossed him a greasy rag. “At least barnacles hold things together.”

Mina rolled her eyes but smiled. “You two are impossible.”

“You'd miss us if we weren't,” Johnny shot back.

“Debatable.” But she said it softly.

I looked out the window, the water endless and pale. “It's strange,” I murmured. “All this used to be land. We would've built houses here. Drove cars. Now we're floating above memories.”

Johnny's voice turned gentler. “Maybe we're their lesson.”

Lance raised an eyebrow. “That's deep.”

Johnny shrugged. “Accidentally, probably.”

When Johnny dove, the sea swallowed him whole. His light flickered on the monitor like a heartbeat in the dark.

Then Officer Judith climbed aboard, shouting about rules and safety. “Kids don't belong down there! There are dangerous creatures you could get hurt.”

Mina tried to reason with her, but her voice shook. “If we stop now, the city keeps dying.”

Judith's eyes softened just a little. “Then get him back safe. He will not die on my account.”

We listened in silence as static crackled through the speakers.

Johnny's voice came faintly: “It's beautiful down here. Coral over the train tunnels. Nature's building again.”

“What do you see?” I asked.

He hesitated. “Something glowing inside an old train car. Writing on the walls... sunlight carved into glass.”

Then nothing.

“Johnny?”

No answer.

My stomach twisted. I hated how easily the ocean could take someone and pretend it didn't notice.

Finally, his voice again: “It's real.”

And then, light.

Gold burst from the depths, flooding the water. When he surfaced, gasping, he was holding a glowing cylinder in both hands.

“The Lumen Cell,” Mina whispered.

Johnny laughed, breathless. “Told you the ocean didn't take everything.”

That night, we connected the Cell to the city. Light ran through the battery of sunlight.

One by one, Low Tide came alive. Children shouted. The turbines sang instead of coughed. For the first time, hope didn't feel imaginary.

We had a celebration. Music. Food from every corner of what used to be Earth. Lance danced terribly; Mina almost smiled. Johnny kept pretending not to, but he did too.

Weeks passed. The air grew cleaner. Coral bloomed again. The Cell didn't just help us. It helped wildlife and plants.

Lance turned scraps into sculptures. Mina rebuilt broken circuits. Johnny taught people to fix turbines properly.

And I wrote. Not about what we lost, but what we were finally becoming.

Still, I didn't realize how much I loved this world until Johnny showed me.

One evening, he was on the north dock adjusting solar sails. The light from the Cell shimmered across the waves.

“Still think it's too bright?” he teased.

I laughed. “I used to hate it. Felt fake. Like pretending the world was okay again.”

“And now?”

I looked out at the floating farms, the glowing reefs. “Now I think it's the most human thing we've ever made.”

Johnny leaned on the railing. “It's what we should've done all along. The people back in 2025 could've had this, living power, clean air, but they kept digging holes instead of planting anything.”

I nodded. “We’re their second chance.”

He shook his head. “No. We’re our own.”

We watched the turbines hum with the tide. The ocean didn’t look angry anymore.

“Hey,” Johnny said softly, “remember what I told you before?”

“That the ocean didn’t take everything?”

He smiled. “Yeah. It left us the light.”

Mina and Lance joined us, spreading a recycled plastic blanket on the dock. We sat together, watching stars we could finally see again.

Now, when I stand on *The Spine* and look at Low Tide glowing across the sea, I understand what he meant. The ocean didn’t just forgive us. It taught us how to begin again, cleaner, humbler, kinder.

Maybe the point wasn’t to rebuild the old world.

Maybe it was to finally deserve a new one.

So, I open my notebook and start to write:

They say the ocean took everything,

but it left us the light.