Who will triumph in the fight for the right to breathe?

REEK

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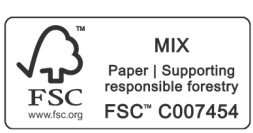
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For Pip and Richard, the smartest grown-ups I know

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The Reek

When the Reek came, it came *fast*.

That's what surprised everyone. I mean, we'd all heard the warnings about polluting the ground, the seas, the air. We knew we were heading for disaster – we had to fix things *now*, before it was too late! And all the politicians said, "Yeah, yeah we'll do it tomorrow." Acting like a kid with their homework, you know? Saying, "Tomorrow. We'll fix things tomorrow."

And then something happened.

It was just a smudge at first – a little yellow-brown cloud somewhere over the Pacific. The cloud drifted over the sea. It drifted

over a tiny island. No humans there – just thousands of birds.

When the cloud moved away, every bird on the island was dead. And the cloud was bigger.

When the first researchers reached the cloud, it was the size of a town. By the time they escaped, it was as big as a city – a horrible yellow-brown smoke that killed every breathing creature. When it passed over land, everything died. When birds flew through it, they died. The oceans below the cloud couldn't absorb oxygen, and half the fish died. In the first week, the cloud doubled in size. Then again. Then *again*.

How did it happen? Everyone wanted to know. There were theories. Perhaps the cloud was a poison attack, released by some hostile country. Or it was a freak gas eruption from the sea and would disperse – nothing to worry about. It was locusts. It was aliens! (Someone always says aliens.)

We're pretty sure now that it was an experiment gone wrong – someone's cunning plan to "fix the planet quick". But whatever it was, the Earth was the perfect environment for it – poisoned, polluted, too warm. The scientists called the cloud a "highly self-replicating airborne algal bloom". I don't know what that means.

Everyone else called it the Reek.

It drifted on, as big as a country, then bigger. And finally, *finally* we realised. This was it. This was the disaster we'd all known was coming. It was happening right now.

We were all going to die.

Well … we didn't. But it was close. An internet billionaire, Axel Brodie, saved us. I mean, he didn't cure the Reek, because no one can. But he worked out how to take the Reeky air, clean it in huge purifier factories and sell it back to us.

It was a terrible idea. For this to work, we'd be wearing masks and oxygen tanks all the time, *for ever*. We'd have to live in bubbles, like we were on the moon or something! It sounded horrific.

But we had no choice.

Zephyr Industries, Brodie's company, saved *billions* of people. We all got used to the masks, and the tanks, and the "Zephyr Air". It was just one more thing we all had to pay for – heating, lighting, food, and now the air we breathe …

So, we survived the Reek. And that's what we're doing now. Surviving.

Every day.

Just surviving.

1

Sparrow

Ping-ping goes the alarm.

Urgh.

Ping-ping.

Ten minutes more – that's all I need. Ten minutes and everything will be fine.

Ping-ping-ping-ping—

I groan, stick out a hand and hit snooze. Then, my eyes still closed, I grope around for my earpiece and put it in my ear.

"Good morning, Sparrow," says Sam's artificial voice.

Sam is my smart pad. Phone, personal computer, digital assistant. I'd be lost without him. Literally lost – he's my map too. And my alarm clock …

But today he's *far* too early. I rub my face. "What's up, Sam?" I mutter.

"New job available," says Sam. "Signed single parcel, pick-up from Duke Street, deliver to Tollcross. Pick-up within thirty minutes. Accept yes/no?"

I heave myself up into a sitting position and cough as quietly as I can. Our flat's supposed to be airtight – our own personal oxygen bubble. But the seals are a bit worn. Some of the Reek manages to seep in overnight, and by morning my lungs always hurt. I reach for my mask and breathe in deeply until the pain eases.

Signed deliveries pay more, so I sigh and say, "Yes. Accept. On my way."

I creep out of bed and get dressed, trying not to wake my little sister, Nina. Grandpa's already up, pottering in the kitchen. He sleeps on the sofa but always tidies it away before we get up. He's making a cup of tea and pours one for me.

"Morning, Surep," he says. "Or are you *Budgie* now?"

I roll my eyes. "*Sparrow*, Grandpa. I'm *Sparrow*."

He grins. I still feel a bit sick from the coughing, but the tea helps.

"What are you doing up so early?" Grandpa asks.

I peer outside, where it's still almost dark. It's only six in the morning, urgh.

"Job," I say.

Grandpa sighs. "You were late back last night. You need your sleep, girl."

We're low on credit, and it's only the middle of the month. But I don't say anything, cos it makes Grandpa feel bad. I shrug.

"Nina's teacher read her story to the class," Grandpa says. "She says Nina's got a real talent." He sounds proud.

We're both proud of Nina. I was never good at the book stuff, but my little sister's got a chance to get to secondary school – maybe even an office job one day. Imagine! In a big place, with a suit and a computer and all the air you can breathe … She'd be *rich*.

"You make sure she keeps doing her homework," I say.

Grandpa smiles. "She will, love. But what about you?"

"I'm OK," I reply. "This is a signed parcel – that's good money."

I look around. Our place is tiny. One room for me and Nina, Grandpa in the living room,



a kitchen space with one ring and a kettle, and it's freezing even in summer. *And* we need to fix the seals to stop the Reek getting in. It's not good waking up coughing every day.

Ping-ping, whispers Sam in my ear.

"Gotta go," I say.

"You back for dinner?" asks Grandpa. "We've got some real veg – *cauliflower*. I'm making a curry."

Real food! "Yum! Don't eat it all without me!" I hug him, and he hugs me back tight. Grandpa's getting a bit thin, but his arms are still strong and I breathe in his familiar smell as he wraps them around me.

"Right," I say. "Come on, Sam, let's go."

I collect my skates and helmet. Then I strap Sam onto my shoulder, and my helmet display flickers on. My flight suit's a bit baggy. I got it second-hand, or third-hand, or, I dunno,

tenth-hand. I'm pretty small compared to the other couriers – that's why everyone calls me Sparrow. The sleeves wrinkle around my arms, and I fold them up a few times.

I hook up my oxygen tank, fasten my face mask and give Grandpa a thumbs-up. Then I squeeze into the airlock at our front door. The airlock whines as it sucks the good air back into the flat, making my ears pop. Then there's a *whoosh* as the outside air comes in, and I step out into the city.

The Reek is thick this morning, and the world is a murky yellow-brown colour, like sulphur. Our flat is high up in a really old, curved tower block, and from our concrete balcony I can see west across Edinburgh. There's the castle, sitting on top of the huge rock in the centre. Across from it is another mountain of rock called Arthur's Seat.

Behind the castle, more than twice as tall, is Zephyr Tower, the company headquarters.

It looms over everything, owning the city. Lights at the top blink green and red to warn aircraft of its presence. The tower is already half lit up from office workers starting their day. It stands like it's the most important thing in the world.

Well, I mean, it's Zephyr – so, yeah, I guess it is.

I wonder if Axel Brodie is awake at the top of his tower. He has loads of houses of course, but they say he likes to sleep there so he can keep busy. He never stops.

I strap on my skates. They're a bit rubbish, and they cost a fortune. I had to borrow money to pay for them, and the next payment's due in a week. The courier company I work for, Zephyr Deliveries, arranged the loan. The loan company is Zephyr Finance, and *they* link directly to my Zephyr Bank account. Sometimes it feels like all the Zephyr

companies are just moving money between each other for fun, and I never see any of it.

I tap my skates together. They activate and gently lift me up until I'm hovering just above the concrete.

"Duke Street?" I ask Sam.

"Correct," says Sam. "You have twelve minutes."

I'd better get going. I unloop my tether, hook it around a nearby pillar … and leap off the building.