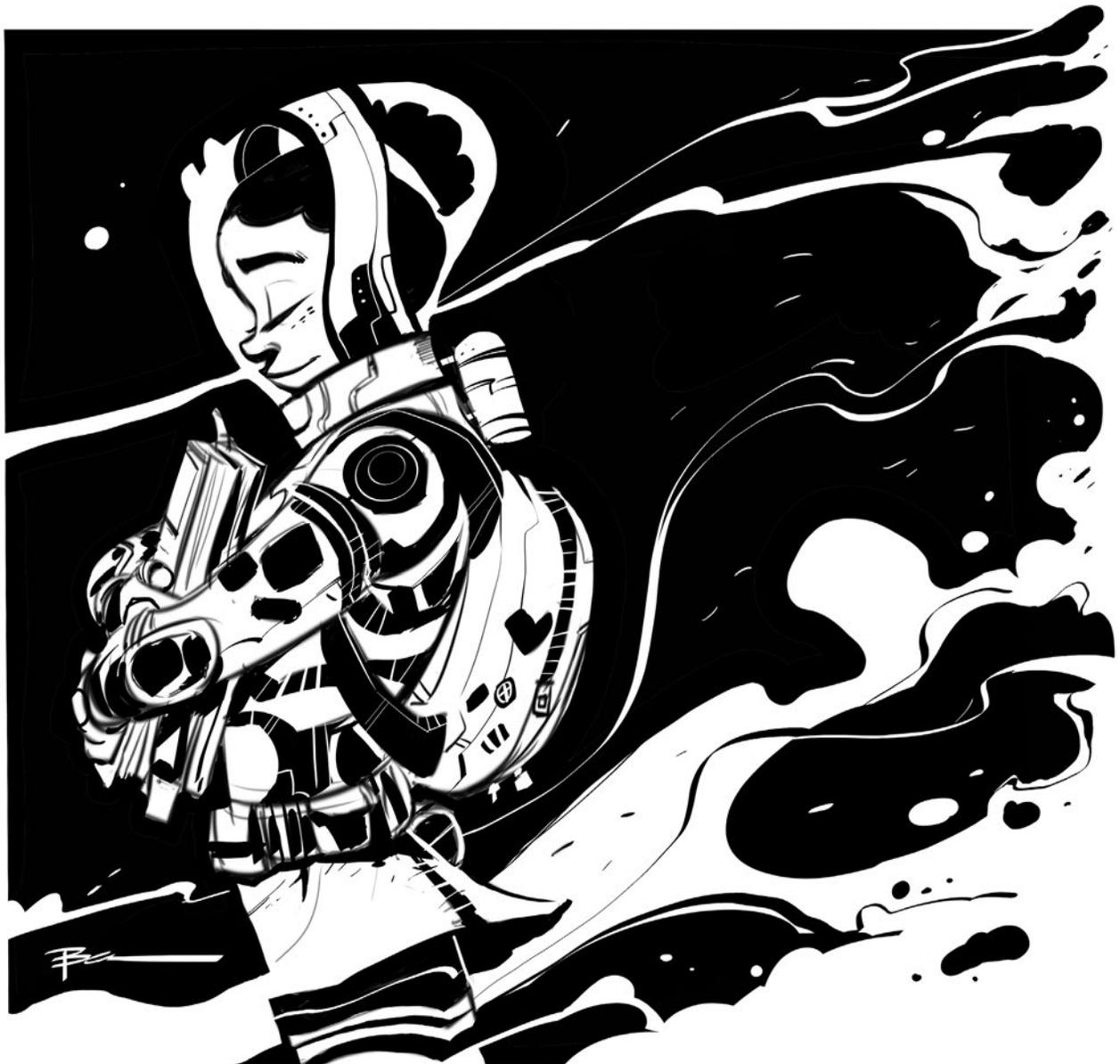


Forecast Bleak

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Walking to the school's shuttle bus hand in hand with her father was social suicide. At these times, Mia felt lucky nobody ever paid her any attention. Every day, Mia begged her father to let her take the short walk alone, and every day, he would shake his head in that serious, grim way he saved for such events. "Not a chance," he'd say as he triple-checked Mia's helmask was securely fitted. "You're not stepping outside this house without me. Ever. It's not safe."

Father and daughter begun their three-minute journey. Through her thick safety layers of clothing that insured not a patch of skin could touch the outside air, Mia grew hotter and hotter.

Her helmask entombed her entire head, and it amplified her breathing; she itched to get it off.

The familiar battle between condensation and vision commenced. Mia needed to wipe away the sweat and breath that was clouding her window to the world, but she couldn't, and the more frustrated she got, the hotter she grew.

Mia had worn a helmask for thirteen years—ever since she'd left the hospital as a newborn, but she still wasn't used to it. Whenever she wanted to go outside, the helmask went on and, every time it did, her heart beat quicker, her breath grew shallow and, ever so slightly, her fingertips trembled.

Mia quickened her pace when she saw the school's shuttle in the distance; the quicker she was on board, the sooner she'd reach the school and be able to discard her bulky accessory.

Please, God, don't let him be today's chaperone, she thought. If Mr. Finn saw Mia holding her dad's hand, he would only ever see her as a child.

Itchy strands of blonde hair stuck to Mia's face, and she thought she might risk taking her damp helmask off on the shuttle to readjust herself; her first lesson was logistics with Mr. Finn.

Her dad stopped, and Mia's arm jerked back. He was saying something she couldn't hear after forgetting to turn on her mic and speaker that morning. She shrugged her shoulders at him and pointed to her ears. He rolled his eyes and, from his suit's breast pocket, took out a piece of paper. Mia could make out her father's neat, slanted writing: *Tomorrow, I'll turn it on myself. Have a good day, darling. I love you.*

Mia's heart fluttered, and she grudgingly gave her father a hug. *He always knew.*

Before saying goodbye, as usual, her dad checked the levels of her compressed oxygen tank and made sure she was carrying her reserve. Then he checked she had her emergency air filtration breather and, finally, her whistle. Mia thought she'd rather choke to death than be found by Mr. Finn with a whistle in her mouth.

Mia hugged her father again quickly and trotted off to the shuttle.

The shuttle was cooler than outside, and Mia's fight with her own sweat ended. While her classmates chattered through the microphones in their helmask, or by instant messenger if they didn't have the upgrade, she watched the world go by through the window. It was 8:30, rush-hour time, but the streets were bare. It would be busy underground, Mia was sure of it, and she was glad the school shuttle didn't use that network; being trapped with your own breath was bad enough. Coupling it with a windowless, airless journey would be nothing short of an uninhabitable tomb.

The shuttle silently glided past fading, outdated billboards. There were three in a row advertising the same product: air.

Oxy Gold—it's a breathable treasure.

O24U—an affordable breath of fresh air!

Deluxe—because you deserve to breathe the best.

A few minutes later, the shuttle stopped to pick up more pupils. Mia spotted the park she always sought out on her route to school. Its rubber tarmac cracked years ago under the sun's constant glare and without anyone to attend to it. One of the swings lay on the floor; last week, it had creaked in the tiny breeze. The bright primary colours were faded, and Mia could make out the wrinkles in the plastic.

As the shuttle sped on, Mia looked towards the five blurry dots on the horizon, where she knew lay the graves of two swallows and three starlings.

Logistics was Mia's favourite lesson.

"Come on, stop dawdling," the teacher called through his helmet as the class ambled in. Mr. Finn—or Mr. Fit, as most of the girls secretly called him—had black eyes that glittered when he spoke; for some of the teenagers, it could prove difficult to concentrate.

As always, Mia sat at the back of the classroom, so she could spy on Mr. Fit comfortably. The solid steel door shut behind the last student, and the loud whirring commenced. After a few seconds, the bright light above the door turned from red to green, and Mr. Fit led the class in removing their helmets. Some of the girls rummaged frantically through their bags and pulled out compact mirrors. They fixed their hair using a tiny reflection. Mia flattened her own hair nervously and used the sleeves of her sweater to blot any excess moisture.

"Okay, okay," Mr. Fit shouted as the class livened up now that they were able to talk freely. "Everyone settle down while we do the register."

The class stayed still as the camera above the interactive board at the front of the room scanned them and marked them all as present.

"Does everybody have their buddy today?"

One of the boys mumbled that his was ill, and Mr. Fit updated the board. It came back with a new match.

"Okay, you'll be teaming up with Mia and Elris for the day, Cody."

The boy looked over at Mia, the corners of his mouth pulled up. As their eyes met, Cody's face turned crimson, and he looked away. Mia quietly registered the look on the boy's face; it was a replica of her expression whenever Mr. Fit looked at her.

"Right, today we're going to go through putting on a helmask by yourself..."

There was a general consensus of boredom, and Mr. Fit tried to look annoyed, but his twinkling eyes worked against him.

Mia's attention was fixated on Mr. Fit, but in her peripheral vision, she noticed Cody gather up his things and find the empty seat next to her.

"This is important," he said.

"But we already know it, sir," a boy called out.

"Then perhaps you'd like to demonstrate?" There was an awkward pause. "Right then. We'll carry on with the lesson as planned if that's okay with you, Raylan. I'm going to need a volunteer... Mia?" He smiled a smile only meant for her, she thought. "Bring up that bright helmask."

Cody's hand was so close to Mia's helmask she had to actively avoid brushing fingers. She picked it up clumsily and walked to the front of the class.

As she grew closer to Mr. Fit, Mia could feel her cheeks heating up. He chuckled as she passed her fluorescent pink helmask to him. "This is the perfect example; everyone will be able to see it! Why don't you walk us through your helmask?"

Blushing, and with several false starts and many "erms," Mia showed the class the intricacies within her helmask. She turned it around and showed how her compressed oxygen tank sat in a cut-out hollow at the base of the helmask. The class liked that. Mr. Fit gazed at his own, where his tank stuck out awkwardly at the back in a metal cage.

With the class' approval, Mia's speech became more animated. "The microphone is here—it sticks out next to your left cheek, so it's closer to your mouth—but it never gets in your way. And this part, well, it's a bit difficult to show you if you're not wearing it. But when I put it on and look up to the left, there is a tiny screen that tells you—in minutes, which is

helpful—how long your oxygen tank has left. And when you're down to your last ten, there's a horrible warning siren. Apparently, anyway. I haven't heard it—yet."

She smiled as the class laughed at her dark humour. She pointed to the bottom right side of her visor. "This is where the oxygen tank feeds in. I don't know if you can see it, but there's two plastic sheets that create a vacuum so no outside air gets in. My dad says it's a good model, and I guess it's okay, but it can be annoying. Sometimes I can't always see out of it. It's always clouded with..." Mia paused, not wanting to admit to sweating in front of Mr. Fit, "...with condensation."

"You need an upgrade!" It was her buddy Elris sneering from the back. "I mean, how long have you had it? Since primary school?"

Some of the class giggled. Mia looked at the floor as her body deflated.

"I'd be careful if I were you, Elris," Mr. Fit said knowingly. "You don't want to upset your buddy... she might not share her oxygen with you..."

The class laughed harder—Cody the loudest—and it was Elris' turn to blush.

Mia was poking at the food on her plate, replaying logistics over and over. Even her hatred for cultured meat could not dim her glow, and she absentmindedly spooned some into her mouth. Mia would probably cherish the moment forever, the horrible crimson colour Elris went when Mr. Fit put her in her place. She grinned widely until she realised how stupid she must look laughing to and by herself. She rearranged her features into something more socially acceptable and glanced out the window.

The school's playground hadn't been bulldozed yet. Perhaps they hoped one day the kids would be able to play in it again. Mia could still make out the faint outlines of a basketball court. It looked enormous, much bigger than the indoor gymnasium where the kids now went at breaktime. For a moment, Mia imagined herself playing outside like her parents used to, with no barrier between their skin and the air. Dead leaves blew by, and Mia wondered what wind felt like, how droplets of rain would taste...

She stopped herself. There was no point in imagining. She dug through her school bag and pulled out her e-reader. She used her bag to shield it from view. It was a very old one; it didn't even have the hologram feature. She opened her most recent book: *Air Pollution: Changing the Way We Breathe*. She started to read.

"H-hi, Mia."

"Cody. Everything okay?"

"Fine," he said. He reddened. "I thought you were great in logistics today. Can I sit down?"

"Actually," she said, gazing longingly at her steaming, untouched apple pie. "I was just leaving." She threw her e-reader into her bag before he could see it and stood up. "See you around," she said and walked away. She caught a glimpse of his dejected face and felt a pinch of guilt. She told herself she was doing the right thing.

Best not to get his hopes up.

She spotted Mr. Fit at the canteen door talking to another teacher. She hurried to catch up to him so she could pass by him.

Mia was halfway through her third lesson when the alarm went off.

"Not again!"

"Now, now, Jackson. You can't have that attitude," Miss Croon said, wagging her finger in an attempt to chastise the boy. "This might not be a drill—this could be the Real Thing."

None of the class were convinced. They had an air drill at least every two weeks around this time.

Miss Croon, however, acted like this was the first time such an event occurred. She bustled around the classroom and, in a shrill but authoritative voice, shouted: "Has everybody got their buddy? Good, helmets on now, please!"

Mia put hers on while most of the class was still busy gossiping. Eventually, when everyone was suited up, Miss Croon opened the door. The light above it went to a flashing red, and the class walked out single file.

Miss Croon led them down a windowless corridor. Instead of turning right towards the rest of the classrooms, she went left and into a steep decline underground.

The lights that guided the hallway were a cosy orange, a feeble attempt to calm the pupils. But Mia could only think about the tonnes and tonnes of dirt and concrete above her. Her breathing grew quicker and louder and rebounded around her helmet. She started perspiring and saw it on her visor.

The class stopped as they reached the end of the corridor and stood in front of a heavy-looking steel door. Miss Croon divided the class into three buddy pairs to enter the next room. Mia, Cody, and Elris were among the first.

Elris led the way; Mia and Cody walked in side by side, and the rest ambled in after them. As they crossed the threshold into the next room, the door behind them banged shut. Rather than reverberating around them, the slam was deadened.

It was a tiny space, and the seven pupils nudged shoulders; two helmets banged together as the owners both started at a whirring, buzzing sound. It was louder and sounded more dangerous than the one in the classroom. Lights flashed an angry red, and Mia felt the air being sucked out of the room; she felt it rustle against her clothes. More buzzing, more whirring, then...

The lights turned green, and the door leading away from their classmates unlocked. They waited while another air check took place. Then they were allowed into the school's bunker. Eventually, Mia could take off her helmet.

After being cooped up with her classmates in the bunker for two hours while the fire and air services secured the school, Mia couldn't bear the thought of the shuttle ride. When they were finally given the all clear and school finished, Mia chose to walk home.

There were two girls ahead of her, holding hands. They leaned their helmets together like a couple from another lifetime might have rested one's head on the other's shoulder.

For once, Mia's helmet was not bothering her; the sun was hiding behind a rare cloud. She was enjoying the freedom the shuttle could not offer, and she imagined removing her helmet to feel the wind on her cheeks for the first time in her life.

Mia stopped. What was she seeing? This must be her imagination because she was just thinking about it—no one would be that stupid.

But it turned out they were. The two girls who were walking in front of her had deviated off the path and sat down on the dead grass next to a dead tree. They lifted each other's helmets off.

Mia couldn't stop staring even when their lips met and they kissed so hard, so passionate, anyone would think it was their last time. Mia saw a lot of tongue and—was that slurping?

As she watched, Mia couldn't help but fantasize about her and Mr. Fit's first kiss, and she giggled—like that was going to happen.

It must have lasted a minute, perhaps two, until one of them struggled. With a noise made when a plunger unblocks a drain, the girls pulled apart. The smaller one's cheeks, which were flushed and lusty when she first sat down, were now pale, slightly green, and hollow. She looked like she was choking on food, but she wasn't eating. It was the air.

Her body fought the toxicity, and her girlfriend fumbled for the helmet, but the oxygen tanks had become dislodged from their holders, and the wires that fed into the helmets were tangled together. As she tried to extract one oxygen tank from the other, she started struggling and choking, and her cheeks went pale, and her eyes bugged wide, and her hands grew frantic as she worked the helmets.

Mia just stood there, utterly transfixed at what she was seeing.

The pictures shown to her as a small child really did accurately depict what happened when you breathed the Earth's air.

Her brain kicked in, but as she took a step forward to help, the taller girl had untangled the helmets and shoved one on her partner before putting one onto herself. They breathed

deeply, gratefully, and looked at each other. They laughed so loudly Mia could hear them through her own helmask. She watched as the girls jumped up and skipped back onto the path while holding hands.

Mia hadn't realised she was holding her own breath. Her heartbeat slowed, and she continued on her journey home.

The sun tore through the weak cloud, and as her vision clouded with condensation once more, Mia had never felt safer and more cocooned.

As she watched the girls skip home, Mia finally understood. Mr. Fit was an infatuation. Sadly, that was all. They'd never hold hands, go on a date, share a kiss...

Further up the path, Mia spotted Cody's blue- and red-striped helmask. He was alone, too. She took a deep breath and hurried to catch up to him.

