

Mad world

I left my place at 505 Westminster Street at 8 o'clock in the morning. The endless descent into the elevator gave me much more time than necessary to admire the great and luxurious palace of Baron Vendal. The three-floored structure and the pure waters that flowed in the multiples fountains of its garden were staring at the people passing by with a distinctive look of contempt. I couldn't help but ask myself: how can such excesses be tolerated when the world is collapsing?" Yet, I turned my back to this offensive house and headed to the Southern Exit. I could have seen it from here if my vision wasn't obstructed by an army of holographic ads. It was a real mess: here, a lion standing on a building was roaring at a model, there, a football player was smiling and winking at the crowd. I think I even saw an Easter Bunny hiding an egg on the window frame of a candy store and then disappearing immediately in a cloud of colourful smoke that read "Happy Easter!", leaving me frozen in my track, speechless. But I remembered I had more important things to do and so I kept going.

Finally, I arrived at my destination. Despite being one of the only four Exits of the "Null Zone", it wasn't very impressive. The boring grey metallic gate was simply incrustated into the Shield. But the Shield however, wasn't boring at all: you could sense as you approached it, a growing resistance that made you understand that touching that electric-blue screen would be the last thing you'd ever do. And how could it hold the pure artificial air into the Zone? This was still a mystery to me. As I stepped closer, a guard stopped me:

"-May I check your Eye-dentity please mister?"

- Come on Peter, you know it's me!

- Of course I know it's you, you stupid idiot", he whispered through his teeth.

And louder: "Please step in front of the scanner mister".

And as my right eye was scanned, I caught a brief glimpse of a surveillance drone's reflection in the scanner's lens. A robotic voice announced: "Toman Brown, you have the authorisation to pass, have a good day." The gate opened and as I stepped in, I couldn't resist to throw: "It was nice to see you, Pete." But I couldn't see his reaction; the gate had already closed. I was now in a dimly lit corridor with another heavy door at the end. I had always found this cold metallic smell disturbing. Yet, I made my way through the never-ending sequence of creaky, creepy doors and decontamination chambers. Finally, I pushed the last door, sweating a little bit, and entered the Hell.

Immediately, I was struck by a wall of hot, heavy and suffocating air. A multitude of acrid and toxic smells attacked my throat and I could already see red marks appearing under the combined effects of the burning sun and the acid air. Before me, tons and tons of stacking wastes were piled up as far as the eye could see, under the glowing sky. The contrast with the freshness, the pleasant delicateness from Baron Vendal's palace could not have been more obvious. But strangely enough, I felt safe here...

And so I walked in this apocalyptic landscape. It wasn't crowded and joyful like in the Zone. Here, people crouched in small compartments set up in the trash mountains to find shelter. Some tried to find useful objects in the trash, others waited in front of the Bar, the only place of activity here because it was a food bank founded by a tiny association from the Zone. This time however, a detail caught my attention. It was a tiny green poster stapled to the counter. Then, looking around, I

noticed that others of these green posters had been put everywhere. Curious, I approached one of them which had been glued to a huge clock that was distorted as if it had fallen from a giant tower. The message on the paper was simple:

“FOR THOSE WHO DON’T WANT TO DIE IN THIS HELL, JOIN THE
REBELLION, JOIN THE BROTHERHOOD!”

“-Mad guys hey!”

I was taken aback by this sudden voice.

“- M- Maybe, I answered, still in shock

- Maybe? Interesting... And what is a Zoner doing around here?”

Now that I had come back to my sense, I could see the middle aged man standing in front of me. He didn’t wear the same rags as the people around and far from being scrawny and stunted, he even seemed robust in a way. I found all this very strange.

“- Oh, I just came to visit my sister Rya, she hasn’t been allowed in the Zone so she must feel lonely.

- You’re allowed and your sister isn’t?

- Yeah, I know, it’s because when our parents died a few months ago, our father left me his business- he was an optician – and so I was able to enter the Zone, but they didn’t accept my sister.”

And suddenly, for no apparent reason, my anger took over:

“A burden they said! When half of the area is taken by his Highness Baron Vendal’s fountains! I assure you it would be a piece of cake to fit all the people dying here in a one-mile radius in his garden!”

The man was now staring at me as if he could read all the secrets of my heart... Finally, when it started to feel really awkward, he said with a friendly voice.

“I’m John, nice to meet you...

-Hum, my name’s Toman, but I prefer Tom, nice to meet you too, I guess?

-Well goodbye then Tom, I hope you’ll find a way for your sister.”

And just like that, he disappeared in the wastes, leaving me startled once more. Rya’s place wasn’t too far now. I hastened. When we were young, the ancients used to tell us with nostalgic sighs that this had been the greatest city of Great Britain with buildings that touched the sky and around, miles and miles of fields filled with greenery could be seen in any direction. But it didn’t matter now, it was over, the old ones had already succumbed to the toxic air and the rest of the population would soon follow them. The situation was critical and that is why I had to take action, I had to save my sister at the very least. And as I was going through all these emotions, the warm and comforting sensation of the pendant on my neck became fiercer. I opened it. Inside, my parents and my sister were smiling at me, encouraging me, pushing me forward.

“Dad, mom, I promise you I’ll save her. I won’t let her join you so soon.”

“Tom? It’s you? Are you alright?”

-Oh, Rya it's you. Yeah I'm alright. I didn't see you coming, I answered hastily while quickly hiding the pendant.

-Tom, each time I see you, you're a bit more lost in your thoughts. You should stop dreaming like that!

-Ok whatever. Have you put on the lens I gave you ?

-Of course! In the right eye as you said, look"

It was very disturbing: now, her right eye was green because of the lens while her left eye had kept its original blue shade, the same as my own eyes'.

"It's strange, you look like a cat" was all I could say.

-Amazing, are we going then?

-If you're ready."

She stared at me with her disturbing eyes:

"I'm ready, I don't wanna die in this hell."

Strangely enough, it reminded me of the green poster from earlier. I smiled.

"Fine, let's go then."

Our plan was simple: with the green lens I had stolen at my job, Rya would be able to pass the Eye-identity test. Moreover, I had made sure that the guard in charge of the scanner would be Peter because he was a friend of mine and I knew he would let us pass.

So now, the only remaining problem was the Ecstasy... It was a state of intense euphoria that could be experienced by people who breathed the pure artificial air of the Zone after spending a long time outside of it. But Rya had spent her whole life in the outside world and she wouldn't be able to adapt gradually like I had done a few months ago. I looked at her and she must have sensed my worried eyes because she reassured me:

"Don't worry brother, we'll be fine.

-I hope so."

In front of us was a grey metallic door. The handle was locked and on the left was the Eye-identity scan.

"I'll go first, I said, watch me"

And as I put my right eye in front of the scanner, a robotic voice immediately welcomed me.

"Your turn now Rya"

Just like me, she stood on the left of the door and put her right eye in front of the scanner ... and nothing happened. One second, two, three, four, five... My breath became heavier, my throat was blocked and irritated, I could feel the power of the Shield before me pushing me back in this Hell where I belonged and then, suddenly, the robotic voice announced:

"Welcome Emma MAKAROVA, you may enter the Null Zone"

Still stunned by this overwhelming storm of emotions, I didn't feel Rya push me inside, nor did I take a moment to look one last time at my former home when she finally closed the metallic door. It had happened. We didn't fail!

"Brother, look at me... brother... you're not the one who should be in Ecstasy right now! Pull yourself together.

-Oh sorry, I answered still dumbstruck, and you, are you feeling alright?

-Yes I do, let's go now shall we?"

She was right of course but nonetheless, I found the decontamination corridor brighter than before. And when we finally exited it, I was glad to see Peter's eyes stare at me, and then at my sister in amazement.

"Hi Pete! I shouted with enthusiasm

-Tom, are you mad? She's gonna get herself killed!

-Me? Killed? Do you know who you're talkin' to Pete? I'm Rya and I survived the Hell for 16 years boy. So don't talk to me like that will you!

-Shh! Quiet! You're Ecstatic too. Tom, look at me. You must go back or you're gonna be killed, he whispered hastily.

-Oh don't worry Pete, we got a plan, now let us go please.

-Tom, look at me for real!"

And finally, I looked into his eyes, and what I saw cleared my mind immediately. These eyes were not amazed or jealous, they were bulging and shaking with fear. But I knew I couldn't come back, not now.

"Listen Peter I'm calm now, I can't let my sister die in there so I'll just get her to my place for a while and then she's gonna live a normal life, just like you and me."

Now I could see him hesitate but then, a drone appeared buzzing behind us and he finally let us pass, I took Rya by the elbow and left as fast as I could while still pretending to be calm. Thankfully, after a few minutes-walk, I was able to calm down. But Rya however was still Ecstatic and while it had seemed to make her reckless with Peter for some reason, she was now happy and joyful like a child: she seemed to like particularly the different animals that could be seen in the different parts of the street and so, when she caught sight of a group of dolphins performing acrobatics over the road, she couldn't help but scream joyfully at them, catching at the same time the attention of a group of young people sitting at a bar and a well-dressed woman who was watching the news about a new disease that had been released from the melting ice caps. When the teenagers started laughing, I forced our pace to prevent her from going into her reckless state again.

Finally, after what seemed like years to me, we arrived at Westminster Street and we were able to climb to my apartment with the elevator. But Rya was now complaining more and more because of the holograms:

"Tom, I want an Easter Egg? I saw some in the last street, can we go back please?"

-Don't worry, I'll buy one once you're at home."

And here it was, the door to 505 Westminster Street. There was no mistake this time, we had succeeded. Rya's Ecstasy would soon wear off now but I decided to go buy some Easter Eggs to calm her down while waiting. It would only take about 10 minutes. So, after locking her in, I took the elevator and for once, Baron Vandal's palace didn't affect me at all. It was also a pleasure to admire the flourishing holographic ads and smell the sweetness of chocolate coming from the shops. The nice and warm touch of my pendant was comforting, as if my parents were glad I had kept my promise. The elevator took me up gently. I walked. 501...502...503...504...but suddenly, my heart skipped a beat. The door of 505 Westminster Street was open and the lock was at my feet. I rushed inside as fast as I could, but it was too late. On the cold floor lay a body, a body red with blood, a body so twisted and battered that I would not have recognized it without the eyes. One was green, and the other was blue... Who had done this? It didn't matter. Nothing mattered now. Rich, poor, Null Zone, Hell, tears... Who cared? Rya was dead, and now, I was starting to hear footsteps approaching. Maybe they were coming for me too. That was a relief because I didn't want to live anymore. The sound grew louder. I could hear voices now. I turned my back to the door, I was ready.

"Tom are you alright? Oh shit! It's too late."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Pete? What are you doing here? And who are those guys?"

Behind my friend, a man and a woman were staring at the scene in horror. But for some reason, they seemed familiar to me. The man finally decided to talk.

"I'm John, we met a few hours ago if you can remember, and this is Aisha, she saw you in the street with your... your... she saw you two a few minutes ago. The woman at the bar.

-But what are you guys doing here? I said with a hoarse voice

-We watched you Tom, answered Peter who was surprisingly calm, as soon as I let you pass the South Gate, I tried to warn the Brotherhood, but when we arrived..."

I didn't understand. I was completely lost. Peter was a member of that Brotherhood organisation? And these guys too? But then who cared? Rya was dead and I would never see her again. That was the only important matter.

"Tom, listen to me now, the milice is gonna come back. They left because they didn't find you here, but they will come back. You have to come with us now. We will hide you in the Brotherhood headquarters. You'll be safe, don't worry.

-Don't worry? But I'm not worried Peter. I don't want to be safe."

The touch of the pendant on my neck intensified. It was cold, I opened it and Rya smiled back at me. But it was over, I would never see this smile again because of them, because of persons like Baron Vandal. My head was burning, my fists clenched, but when I talked again, my voice was cold like the grey metallic door of the South Gate:

"Peter, I swear to you that I will never rest until this Null Zone has become worse than Hell."

Prize for the "best constructed dystopian world" awarded by Emma MAKAROVA

LUCAS Vincent