

Michael

Restricted duties.

Damn right they're restricted. I've barely received enough food to feed the rat that shares my quarters. I have to hand it to the fella: this place is meant to be impenetrable – an iron fortress – yet he's managed to find his way up nine hundred storeys and sought out one of the few humans in the Tower that wouldn't kill him instantly.

I assume it's a *him*. Or could this be the Eve of the rat population, kept locked away up here for her own 'protection'?

I throw him a scrap of bread, although I'm surprised they even call it bread, the artificial crap they created when all the wheat died out. He sniffs the crumbs but turns away without eating it.

'I don't blame you,' I scoff, chucking what's left into

my mouth. I wash it down with a swig of water and it still sticks in my throat.

After what I've done I'm lucky to be alive, let alone allowed to stay in this building *and* keep my job. We are the Final Guards, the highest level of security. We have one objective: protect Eve. Not only did I fail at it, but I put her in direct danger by taking her into that lift.

If the situation was different, if Ketch and half the team hadn't been caught in that blast at the sanctuary, I'd have been . . . Well, Ratty here wouldn't have a friend no more.

The fact is, though, the Extinction Prevention Organization need me right now. Security is thin and times are tenser than ever. Not that the EPO would ever admit that. It's not in line with the façade they present to Central, the barely beating heart of what's left of this world. Sometimes I think this place is all just one big show, an illusion. And I guess I've seen too much of the truth for them to let me go now.

The lab.

The blood.

The experiments.

Eve.

I clench both fists and dig my nails into my palms until all my knuckles click. Her face flashes in my mind again. It was the first time we'd properly met – I'd seen her countless times, of course, as one of her Final Guards, but we'd never made eye contact before. That was drilled into us all from our first day on the job.

She was terrified, I see that now. Trapped with me in the lift, like a metal prison.

Trapped with a *man*.

What the hell was I thinking?

What are you going to do to me?

I shake my head violently, trying to rattle away the thoughts. The thing that scares me most is that I don't know what I was going to do. There was no plan. I just knew I had to pull her from that room, from that maniac Potential. He'd already murdered Mother Nina, believing her to be Eve. I had to get her to safety.

Before I knew it, we were alone and . . .

The lights in my quarters burst into a blinding cold white, snapping me from my memory. Emergency sirens scream through the concrete corridors and punch my eardrums until I'm on my feet.

Ratty scampers away and my door swishes open.

'Turner!' booms Guard Ryan from the doorway, with a look of urgency. 'Final Guards, we're needed immediately.'

'But I'm Restricted!' I shout over the deafening sirens.

'Not any more.' He gestures at my bare torso and I follow his gaze down to my tag – the small circular implant sitting under the skin on the left side of my chest. The subtle red glow that I've seen for the last few days is now replaced with a refreshing blue. I'm back on full active duty with no explanation.

Something's happened.

I grab a vest and slip it over my head as I follow Guard Ryan out into the corridor, where the rest of my fellow Final Guards are gathering. They shoot me curious looks and I shrug. I'm as surprised as they are that I'm here, but I'm glad to be reunited with them.

The metal sphere opens. We climb inside and look to Ryan, our temporary commander.

'This is a real-world scenario. We have reason to believe the Tower has been breached,' Guard Ryan says, placing a matt black helmet on his shaved head. Eve's golden emblem catches in the light as the chin-strap self-fastens and automatically tightens. 'I know it's not ideal that I'm here instead of Ketch, but we've gotta work together now.'

The sphere closes and begins to glide.

'Wait, we're going up?' I blurt out. 'We're on the nine-hundredth floor. Where the hell's the breach?'

YOU HAVE ARRIVED AT THE DOME, the automated voice of the lift announces within a few seconds.

We all glance at each other.

The Dome?

A breach in the Dome?

That's impossible.

Ryan raises one eyebrow in confirmation as he backs out and heads to the Gate – the invisible barrier that separates the Tower and the Dome. I follow and instantly feel the tag in my chest vibrate as I pass through the transparent beam of energy, which scans

for any unauthorized personnel and would induce instant paralysis. Temporary, of course, but I still wouldn't want to go anywhere near the Gate if my tag was still glowing red. Even my rat companion wouldn't get this far.

My heart skips at being back in action. Guard Ryan passes his hand over a plate on the wall and a hidden hatch slides open with a hiss. These hidden armouries are plotted all around the Tower. Only the commanding guard knows their location and can access them. For obvious reasons they can't have weapons fall into the wrong hands in here.

We suit up and arm ourselves in a matter of seconds. We've drilled these scenarios hundreds of times.

'Guards,' Guard Ryan barks.

'Ready, sir,' we chant in reply and fall in line.

I take second position behind Guard Ryan. Of course, I would be first if it weren't for the lift incident, but there's no time to dwell on that now.

Red strips of light suddenly illuminate along the metallic corridor, guiding us to the emergency.

'They must have located the intruder,' I say, and we all pick up the pace.

EMERGENCY. ASSISTANCE REQUIRED IMMEDIATELY IN THE DOME, a voice announces, making us all explode into a sprint, following the red hallways as all others have been blacked out.

'This can't be right,' Guard Ryan's voice mutters, through the earpiece inside our helmets.

We all know what he's talking about. The lighting is guiding us towards the garden zone.

The harshness of the concrete and steel softens as the doors unlock and slide open, allowing us into Eve's world.

Our weapons click gently as they automatically adjust to non-lethal mode.

Eve must be close.

We steal looks at each other. I know their hearts will be thudding, just not as hard as mine. They don't know Eve like I do. What she looks like up-close. What she feels like. What she . . .

'The Drop. Now,' commands a sharp voice we don't hear very often: Miss Vivian Silva's. I spot her ahead of us, radiating impatience.

'Yes, Miss Silva,' Guard Ryan replies instantly, and signals with his hands for us to follow at pace. Her sharp gaze studies us as we pass and I sense an undertow of anxiety that she can't hide behind her angular features.

Her eyes meet mine and the moment seems to linger.

I read the look.

This is my chance to redeem myself.

'Holy shit,' Guard Ryan's voice hisses in my ear. 'We have a situation.'

I sprint through the trees without a care for the endangered plant life that perishes under my boots.

The guards have gathered at the entrance to the Drop – Eve's favourite location in the Dome. The place

she can look out at the world and philosophize, blissfully unaware that the entire thing is a sham. The most elaborate and expensive prison walls in history and she doesn't even know that's what they are.

RealTV screens project an alternative view twenty-four-seven, controlled by the EPO or, more specifically, Miss Silva. Eve sees the world Miss Silva wants her to see – lingering sunsets that kiss the clouds for what feels like hours, eventually giving way to starlight bright enough to cast your shadow on the concrete. The perfect illusion for the illusion of perfection. And all this just to give Eve hope. To make her think the world's worth saving. No one else can do it, after all.

'What the hell is she doing?' Guard Ryan mutters.

'I can't see. Move.' I shove my way through the six guards huddled at the doorway as they fail to override the hacked system that's keeping them shut. My face is practically up against the glass doors by the time I see them.

Eve and Holly, the holographic projection she calls a friend.

'What are they doing?' I ask.

'I don't know, but she's got something in her hands,' Guard Ryan notices. 'I thought objects were banned on the Drop.'

'They are,' Miss Silva interrupts from behind. 'Now, stop gawping and get those doors open.'

'Yes, ma'am. Guard Turner, Guard Finn.' Guard Ryan steps aside and we set to work instantly. I pull the small plasma blade from my belt and begin slicing

away at the seal between the doors but it's so secure I think it'll take hours to cut through.

'Why are these doors locked?' Guard Ryan calls, as Finn follows my lead and begins cutting too.

'The whole system has been compromised,' Miss Silva says, from her spot a few yards back from us.

'Compromised? How?' Guard Ryan asks. 'I thought this whole place was impenetrable from the outside, physically and digitally.'

'It is. This was done from inside,' Miss Silva says coolly, not taking her eyes from Eve.

'Sir . . .' Guard Finn says. He's stopped cutting at the sealed doors to point at the Drop.

We all look. We all see.

'No . . .' Miss Silva whispers.

Eve pulls back her arm and I catch a glimpse of a small multicoloured cube in her fist before she launches it into the air, over the Drop.

There is silence. Total stillness as we watch the cube rotate and glide gently through the air before disappearing from our line of sight. We all know what Eve would have seen next, though. That little cube will appear to be floating on a patch of sky as though some invisible force is holding it up.

She turns and yells at her projected companion with the widened eyes of someone woken abruptly from a dream. Or a nightmare.

The game is up.

Eve knows.

‘Break the glass!’ Miss Silva demands and we all jump into action. I remove my useless knife from the rubbery seal, pull back my gun and slam the butt against the thick glass doors.

Eve glances in our direction and my heart stops. I feel my face flush with embarrassment at the thought of her seeing me among this pack of wolves that are hunting her down.

‘Turner!’ Guard Ryan shouts, and I’m aware that I’m staring uselessly through the glass. ‘Get back!’

I hear the high-pitched charge of a detonation device and my eyes instinctively find the source – two explosives stuck to the doors.

I leap for cover and feel the force of the blast knock the wind out of me as it blows the doors to pieces. Glass falls like rain from the artificial sky, and through the downpour I see Eve leap.

Chaos instantly follows.

Boots crunch on the broken glass as the Final Guard charge along the Drop, weapons drawn. I arrive at the edge first to find Holly’s projection flickering as she grapples with an invisible foe. Whoever is piloting her has been found.

I climb over the circular railing and stare at the clouds below. Guard Ryan arrives at my side and we take a breath before jumping. My stomach lurches as we drop. The view looks so real, even though I know it’s all a façade.

We crash on to the screens masquerading as the sky,

and they freeze and flicker. They were not designed to be walked on, let alone trampled by several adrenalin-fuelled guards. Guard Ryan is on his feet first and bolts after Eve as Guard Franklin crashes down next to me.

‘I need backup.’ Guard Ryan’s voice crackles in my earpiece. I scan the horizon and find her – Eve, closely followed by . . . Eve?

There are two of her. The men chasing split up to follow them.

‘They’re both projections!’ Miss Silva screams from the Drop above.

I scramble to my feet.

I have to do something.

I have to prove myself.

I raise my gun. It emits a soft green hue from the barrel. Eve, the real Eve, is still close – too close for me to be able to use my weapon.

‘I’ve got her! I’ve done it!’ Guard Ryan’s voice rattles around my helmet.

I quickly flick the visor down.

‘Locate Guard Ryan,’ I command, and the display instantly highlights his body. He’s a hundred feet or so away now, with Eve’s foot in his grip but she crunches her heel into his face and he releases her.

Idiot. That’s why he’s not meant to be in command.

Now’s my chance, though. The others are following the false Eves but I have the real one directly ahead of me.

She climbs. I sprint.

I sense Miss Silva's eyes on my back as I cross the sky. I steal a look but she's not on the Drop any longer. By the time I whip my head back Eve has vanished.

'Up there!' Miss Silva screeches. She's on the sky with us now. Man, she can move fast!

She points to a black hole where a panel of sky has been pushed in.

I'm the first guard to arrive at it and Miss Silva steps aside to let me through. It's dark and there's a ladder. I hear Eve's footsteps echo on the metal rungs above.

I begin to climb when BOOM!

The pressure in my head causes me to lose my grip and I fall, landing on Guard Matthews below.

Cool air rushes from behind me as it tries to escape the Dome with Eve. She's found the hatch.

I yawn, equalizing the pressure in my head. My eardrums pound, but there's no time for that now. I launch myself up the ladder but when I reach the top she's gone.

My helmet senses the change in oxygen levels as I step outside the Dome and into the chill of reality. I'm surrounded by clouds that loom with a threatening stillness, looking down on us as though awaiting a bloody battle. A narrow metal walkway wraps around the perimeter. My visor extends automatically and seals itself to the chinstrap. The pressure inside settles and fresh oxygen begins circulating.

BREATHE NORMALLY, the automated voice instructs.

‘Locate Eve,’ I command and translucent arrows direct which way I should turn my head.

There she is, further along the walkway, and she’s not alone.

My heart stops.

It’s *him*.

Dr Wells’s son. The pilot she had a connection with. Bram.

But how could he be back? He’d already achieved the impossible once by escaping this place. Getting back inside? That’s another story.

I run after them, feet clanging on the walkway. The fall below is impossible even to comprehend so it doesn’t concern me.

‘Target Bram Wells.’ My visor highlights him.

I raise my gun, its primary function still locked as I’m so close to Eve. I aim at the glowing silhouette of Bram in my display and pull the trigger.

A non-lethal ball of energy pulses in his direction but misses.

‘Drones deployed,’ Guard Ryan’s voice announces inside my ear, and I spot him coming from the opposite side of the walkway, cutting off Eve and Bram. ‘They have nowhere to go now.’

He’s interrupted by the voice of Miss Silva. It booms mightily through the air, causing everyone to stop.

My heart is pounding and my breathing is so heavy I can barely hear the words, but I catch the end.

‘This is your home, Eve. Your world. It’s yours and only yours. Perfection.’

Eve looks in my direction. My gun is raised at them.

‘Weapons down!’ Miss Silva orders, and the entire Final Guard drop their aim.

Suddenly I know what is about to happen. It flashes in front of me as a premonition.

I’m snapped back to the moment and see it unravel for real.

Bram pulls a Gauntlet from a yellow box, which is ready and waiting for him. He straps the harness around Eve and they climb over the safety rail together, all while Vivian Silva’s voice blasts at them, followed by that of Dr Wells.

‘What do we do, Turner?’ Guard Ryan whispers into my earpiece, realizing he’s no good in command, but it’s too late.

We’ve already lost her.

‘Just watch,’ I reply.

They kiss.

They smile.

They jump.

They fall towards the broken clouds below, leaving an eerie silence in their wake, as though the whole world just gasped in unison.

The moment replays over and over in my mind, like a recording stuck on a loop.

Her lips pressed on his.

Her lips pressed on his.

Her lips pressed on . . .

I shake my head to clear the thought. I just saw the most important human in history leap from the tallest building in the world and all I can think about is that kiss.

I look at my fellow Final Guards. Their eyes finally rest on me, and I feel the weight of responsibility that comes with this uniform crash down on me, as though it wants me to follow them over the edge and through the clouds.

I know what I must do, what I'm trained to do . . . what I want to do.

I'm going to get Eve back.