

Vena forced herself not to look at anyone in particular as she waited for the elevator doors to close, hoping no one would get on with her. Even when they did close, she couldn't allow herself to let out the sigh of relief she had been waiting to release. She knew that there was probably someone watching her on a monitor somewhere. She couldn't afford to look anything but calm, confident, and most of all, like she belonged there. Rousing even the slightest suspicion could lead to her death. If she was lucky, it would be a quick death and they wouldn't try to torture information about Theta out of her first.

It took a moment for Vena to identify the emotion she was feeling but finally she pegged it: fear. This was the first time she had ever felt frightened during a mission. Of course she had felt apprehension and nervousness before. That was only natural. There was always a chance that a choice she had made had been wrong, or that something unpredictable would happen, and that she would end up dead because of it. But this was different. For the first time, she was alone.

She had done plenty of missions by herself. Most of her missions she'd done by herself, in fact. But there was a big difference between doing a mission solo and being alone. There was no method nearby that could provide backup, there was no one to call if she found herself in a corner, no one even knew where she was. If she didn't survive this mission, there would be no one to come save her. And even if Theta did somehow figure out where she was, they wouldn't send anyone to save her anyway.

She had gone rogue. In an Agency hub. To save a method that was considered a double agent that had gone back to the Agency. If Theta sent someone to get her, it would be to kill her for defecting and turning traitor. It would be assumed that she had been corrupted by Rander and joined the ranks of the Agency.

Also, for the first time, if she failed the mission, she was dead. If she didn't acquire the target, there would be no coming out of this. If she couldn't manage to get Rander out alive, she wouldn't make it out alive. Besides the fact that it was unlikely she'd make it out of the building without Rander, if she did make it back out without Rander, again, she would be assumed a traitor and killed by her own people. She had to succeed at this mission or prepare to die.

And, if she was honest, she was scared for another reason: she was scared for Rander. She was scared that she would be too late and that there was no one left to save. She wasn't sure what would be worse, finding out that he was an Agency double agent, or that he was dead. She didn't think she would be able to handle either scenario. She told herself that he was alive and not a traitor. It was the only possibility that would leave her alive and sane.

The bell on the elevator finally rang to announce she'd arrived at her floor. The unfamiliar fear made her hesitate for just a moment. She hoped that hesitation wouldn't end up being lethal. She had to get her fear in check, and fast. She would probably run into Agents in the hallway, and if they got the slightest impression of fear from her, she was dead. Fear to Agents was like blood to sharks; a swarm of them would descend on her in a frenzy if she didn't keep herself under control.

Lucky for Vena, she had practiced getting her emotions under control within moments her entire life. By the time she was three steps out of the elevator, she had stowed her fear safely away in a deep dark corner where it wouldn't surface until well after the mission, if it surfaced at all.

She was almost there. The hallways were eerily empty. She could hear nothing but the muted thud of her footsteps, which she forced into being slow and steady. She would only have a precious few minutes once she opened the door. And in fact, the countdown until she was discovered as a spy had been running from the moment she had swiped her ID card at the front turnstile. The building's system would be matching her identification with all the other data in the system. It would take a few minutes, but eventually it would figure out that the ID of an incapacitated Agent had made an impossible 3 hour jump from Australia to here. At which point she had better be on her way out.

The fact that the Agency was willing to put aside pretenses and put up the out of place turnstiles in the lobby was not a reassuring sign, either. It meant they weren't expecting an attack and on the odd chance that there was one, they were sure that they would be able to squash it with no trouble. Vena had been to several Theta headquarters, and none of them were that confident. It was completely rational that she had found herself afraid, albeit unsettlingly unfamiliar and inconvenient.

She prayed that she hadn't been mistaken when she had chosen her ID and that it wouldn't raise an alarm as she swiped it in the doorway. Rander was a high profile prisoner. He had been in the higher ranks when he'd deserted the Agency, and he had turned traitor and risen quite a few ranks after doing so. From the Agency's perspective, he was a trove of enemy secrets and a huge liability. Unless Rander had been a double agent, they undoubtedly planned to kill him as soon as they got information.

The click of the bolt in the door sliding open was the only thing that happened after she swiped the ID card. She forced herself to casually open the door and step in instead of rushing in the way she was compelled to do.

As soon as she heard the door click shut behind her she dropped all pretenses and rushed forward.

It took her a moment of Agents not attacking her, alarms not going off, and torture devices not being employed before she realized she was in what looked like a rather spacious hotel room, with a man sitting in a chair and admiring the view displayed through the large, curtainless windows.

Her heart sank immediately. All had been for naught. She had made a mistake and come into the wrong room. Soon the system would discover the discrepancies with her ID and she would be killed, never knowing whether she had even been close to saving Rander or if he was already dead.

She was about to sink to her knees and fall in despair, waiting for her inevitable capture and death when she noticed the man's reflection in the window.

It was Rander.

She rushed to him, immediately taking his vitals and trying to figure out how badly he was injured. He didn't even look at her. He must have been drugged.

"Rander," she said in a hushed tones, although, realistically at this point it didn't matter. "Rander, can you hear me? I'm gonna get you out of here. I'm gonna give you some adrenaline to counteract whatever they've given you, then we're gonna get out of here."

As soon as she took the syringe out of her pocket he grabbed it from her hands and threw it across the room.

"What are you doing?" she asked, horrified, studying his face. "Rander we have to go, we only have a few minutes, seconds maybe before alarms start going off."

He continued to stare out the window, his eyes focused on a spot somewhere out in the distance. He didn't seem to be injured, but he wasn't moving. He was so still she had to glance at the syringe he had thrown to reassure herself that the movement hadn't been a figment of her imagination.

She knelt in front of his chair and took hold of his face, forcing his distant eyes to look into hers. He finally focused on her; the lively eyes that sparkled at the chance of danger were now dull.

"Go ahead," he said, "leave me here. Hurry." His voice had been drained of its vivacity and mischief as well.

She gazed steadily into his eyes as she said, "I'm not leaving without you, Rander."

And it wasn't just a sentimental statement either, although it certainly was that. If he didn't go with her, she wouldn't make it out. Escape was a two-man job.

"You don't know what I've done. You wouldn't be here if you did," he looked down and away from her, tears started streaming down his face. "You still have time to make it out."

"Just move Rander, come on," she said, tugging futilely at his shoulders. "We have to go. Please."

"This is what I deserve," he said. "This is my penance. Go, before it's too late."

She felt the tears welling up in her eyes, but for once she didn't hold them back.

"I won't make it out of here if you don't come with me," she whispered. "I need you."

He looked at her again, tears still falling down his cheeks. Tears falling down both of their cheeks now.

"Whatever it is, it doesn't matter..." she trailed off for a moment, thinking the worst. She let out a sob and said, "You didn't. You didn't give away Theta."

"No," he said. "That's not it."

His face was so full of sadness, it made her heart ache as she looked at him.

"Then it doesn't matter, but you have to come now. We're out of time," she could feel the tears still falling down her cheeks.

And then he started studying her face, and she felt completely bare and raw and exposed. For him to see her, open like this, scared her. She felt herself breathing hard and she had to force herself to not to flinch back and hide herself away.

"I can get out, but you have to leave ahead of me," he said.

"I'm not leaving this building without you," she said. "I'm staying until you walk out the door beside me."

He stood up and checked his guns, and a hunting knife, which had been laid out on the bed. She would question him about this later, but now she stood up, wiping the tears from her eyes and composing herself.

"Ok," she said, "You find your way back down, and I'll keep the area clear."

"Count 15 seconds once you get down to the lobby and I'll be down there," he said, holstering his guns.

She slipped out of the room and walked straight to the elevator, her hands rested on her guns, ready to draw. The hallways remained empty, which she didn't take as a reassurance. She stayed wary for signs of an ambush.

As she stepped off the elevator into the lobby she did draw her guns.

"Everybody down!" she shouted. All but a few Agents immediately lay on the ground when they saw her drawn guns. One of the Agents reached for his gun and she shot him in the chest. She and the two crouching Agents froze until they saw that he didn't move again. Then the other two Agents laid on the floor along with everyone else.

"Nobody move and everything will be fine," Vena said, moving carefully to the center of the room where she could get a better view.

"When you find your way back down in one piece, then I'll just be waiting here. Right here," she whispered, keeping her back pressed against the concierge desk and constantly sweeping her eyes over the Agents and civilians laying on the ground at her command.

Five more seconds and she would have to start moving forward, trusting that Rander was there behind her.

At the end of the count she began moving forward toward the glass doors. She spun once, making sure everyone was staying down and no Rander. She kept moving forward and spun again to see Rander appear from the stairwell, walking with a wide, deliberate pace, and flinging a blade, slicing open the throat of someone reaching for a panic button on the concierge desk.

Gone was the broken man she had left in the hotel room. He was again as she had always seen him; sure stride, fluid motion, and well dressed. She moved faster, putting her back to the doors once she had cleared the people in front of her. As soon as she turned she shot an Agent getting up with her right hand, and an Agent on the floor reaching for his gun with her left.

Rander reached the doors and she turned and they ran. Rander fell back just a pace behind her, not knowing which car to run to and following her lead.

She ran to the passenger side of the the blue convertible, while Rander jumped into the passenger seat.

"Inconspicuous," he said.

"Fast," she said, as she sped away from the curb.