

Despite the fact that we were all ready to go, the plan was to wait for night to fall to try our luck, hoping that the darkness would give us a better chance at getting in without anyone noticing. It also meant that in a pinch we could disable the power to get complete cover inside and outside the facilities, as the darkness wouldn't mean anything with the glasses I handed out.

Since we finished around noon, that meant we would have a couple of hours to kill. Yelena immediately went outside for a smoke, while Ema, Natasha, and I kept going over the plan, idly memorizing the important bits while we waited. Eventually, Yelena returned, smelling faintly of smoke.

Eventually, after time had passed, half spent going over the plans and half spent killing time watching the Hungarian news, it was time to begin. It wasn't quite dark enough, where we currently were, or by the two prisons, but we could use the extra time scouting and observing patrols.

"You ready?" Natasha asked Yelena, who simply looked back at her, her new armor deploying around her. After a long moment, Natasha shook her head and looked at Ema and myself. "Are you two ready?"

"Yeah, I'm all set," I responded, looking over at Ema as well.

"Of course," She said with a shrug. "We have the easy target. You and Natasha are the ones going to the literal hell hole."

Apparently, the prison Melina was staying at was not maximum security, but instead a prison for much lighter sentences. Breaking her out would be relatively easy compared to our target.

"Alright. Good luck, see you back here in the morning."

Ema nodded and reached out, putting her hand on Yelena's shoulder and traveling away, leaving Natasha and me alone.

"You want wings or do you want me to carry you?" I asked, deploying my armor around myself. "And are you sure you don't want a stealth unit? It would make all of this much easier."

"Wings please," She said with a smile, though I could see it wasn't one of her real ones. "And no, Alexei won't trust it, and... I don't trust him to be able to follow me while I'm invisible."

I frowned at her fake smile, reaching out and putting my hand on her arm, my helmet fading so she could see my face.

"Hey, we are going to get him out, just focus on that for now. When he is safe you'll have plenty of time to figure out all this family stuff."

“...Spotted that, did you?” She asked, looking at me with a rueful grimace.

“Hard not to.”

“When we came back from our mission in the states, they both, Alexei and Melina, gave us up to the Red Room. Melina was injured, but Alexei helped calm us so we could be tranquilized and dragged away...” She explained, turning to look out the window at the slowly darkening city. “Melina might have helped us escape later, but it took almost eight years. When she finally did, she claimed that Alexei regretted it immensely, that when he learned what he had condemned us to, something inside him broke, so much they had to put him in prison. But...”

“He still did it.” I finished, and the red-headed super spy nodded.

“Nobody can tell you how you treat him when he is free.” I pointed out, after a long pause. “You are doing this for yourself because your heart is telling you that you need to get him out before he is executed. But after that? The world doesn't have to suddenly spin on its head.”

Natasha turned away from the window and looked back at me, head tilted slightly.

“Maybe you rescue him and decide to forgive him. Or maybe we get him to safety and you decide you can't stand the sight of him. Either way, it doesn't really matter,” I continued, reaching out and taking her hand, squeezing it gently. “You said you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if you did nothing. But no one is forcing you to hold hands around a fire and sing kumbaya with him for the rest of your life. You feel like you owe him, well saving his life is a pretty big down payment.”

After a long moment, Natasha smiled, nodding and leaning against me. We stood there for a long few minutes before she finally pulled back.

“Alright. I'm ready.” She said, her clothes shifting to some heavy winter wear. “Let's do this.”

I smile and nod, before pushing out a set of wings and helping her into them, her outfit shifting seamlessly to better suit the straps. When the conceptually enhanced strap was secure I took her hand and we traveled to one of the many landing pads I had around Russia. It was a bit disorienting, but after we had both recovered we took off, headed even further north.

We flew for thirty minutes, keeping our eyes peeled and our speed low so we attracted as little attention as possible. I was stealthed to help even more, both of us flying very low to the ground, in the dark. Eventually, we arrived at our destination, flying around to land on a rocky outcropping on the tall mountain that curved around one side of the supermax prison.

We landed and layed down on the rock, studying the surface layout of the prison far below us.

“Looks like whatever your source was, it was recent,” I said quietly, the view matching almost exactly what the images had shown.

“Only the best.”

I activated my enhanced vision, zooming in and scanning the facility. I could see several patrols, both on the ground, around the yard, and around the other building as well. I followed one of the outer patrols as they made a loop around the facility, on the interior of a tall, barbed wire-topped fence.

“How is this outfit so warm?” Natasha asked, even as she looked down off of our perch.

“It conceptually ignores outside temperature,” I explained, switching my vision to infrared. “You’d feel comfortable in a blazing inferno or dunked in deep arctic waters.”

I pulled my zoom out slowly so I could see the entire facility, watching the almost fifty soldiers and guards patrolling the surface clearly, each of them glowing with heat. Together Natasha and I put together the best possible route, shifting it over time as the guards changed. When the night really settled in, beams of bright light shot out from the guard towers, the spotlight lighting up the snowy ground.

Finally, when our clock hit midnight, the agreed-upon time for both teams, we moved. Our wings carried us down, barely avoiding the spotlights as we landed inside the outer fence, the snow silencing our landing.

Natasha didn’t even hesitate, leading the way to the closest access point, a doorway along the side of the massive exhaust tower. She stopped beside it, lights from the towers playing over the ground, shining around and along the perpendicular wall, casting a harsh, bright shadow on the snow. For a moment I was worried they had spotted something, but after a pause the light moved to a new area, scanning the distant mountain.

I waved the skeleton key, which actually looked like an oversized plastic key, over the door’s lock, which clicked open audibly. Natasha must have heard it as well, because a second later she moved, opening the door and slipping inside, with me following right after.

The interior was weathered and dirty, the walls unadorned concrete with a dark green paint, which itself was chipping and falling from the wall in some spots. I bit back a comment though, instead following Natasha, tapping her hip to confirm I was still there. She nodded, and continued down the hall, heading for our first objective, the stairs.

About ten meters away from our entrance was a security checkpoint, a concrete and steel box built into the wall, with thick polycarbonate viewing windows. It was aimed down the corridor, not at us, but we would still need to get by it to get to the stairs. Natasha slowly got closer, using the shadows cast by the old, yellowing lights that were affixed to the ceiling. Eventually, she couldn't get any closer to the checkpoint without becoming easily visible.

I tapped her shoulder twice and stepped into the light, completely invisible as I made my way to the window. There were two guards, one leaning back in his chair and napping, the other looking lazily down the hallway. A quick look around and I noticed there was a cup of coffee that was just barely hanging over the edge of the table the guard was leaning over. Silently I pulled my knife from its sheath on my belt, using it to reach inside the small paperwork gap that the polycarbonate window had. I pushed a stack of papers, nudging the cup and pushing it into the guard's lap.

He jumped up, brushing off his leg as the steaming cup spilled all over his leg. His companion woke up, startled by the cursing and movement. Understanding that this was her moment, Natasha quickly made her way across the gap, barely staying hidden against the checkpoint before making it past.

Once she was clear she stood and rushed to the stairwell doors, specifically the stairwell that the prisoners used to get up to the cold surface for yard time. It led down and connected to every cell floor, save for the last one, the solitary confinement, and special lockdown floor. It would get us close to it, though.

I waved the skeleton key by the door and it clunked unlock, the lock itself being much bigger and more secure since it had direct access to the prisoners. The door squeaked as it opened, but we both slid inside and closed it, the door relocking behind us. Once again I tapped Natasha's shoulder to let her know I was still with her.

Slowly but surely we made our way down the stairs, passing floor after floor of cells. On the fifteenth floor the stairs ended, the only way out being another set of doors like what we went through to enter the stairwell. Natasha leaned against the door, and I waved the skeleton key on the large lock. It clicked open, but I stopped, holding the handle and using my enhanced vision to check that the coast was clear. After a minute of waiting, I pulled the door open and both of us slid out of the stairwell into the lowest normal cell block.

Inside was what I imagined to be a relatively normal-looking prison interior. There were two floors of cells, with rails along the upper walkway and stairs connecting the two floors halfway to the other side.

This had been the hardest part of this break-in to figure out, though I had felt silly when I finally figured it out. There were guards patrolling, rotating between each floor as they walked on their rounds. We also had to worry about a random prisoner spotting us. There was no way

someone stuck here would ever keep quiet if they spotted Natasha. Luckily, the ceiling was relatively high for an underground structure.

Immediately after the door closed behind us I pushed out my wings, silently grabbing Natasha and swooping up to the ceiling, the relative darkness of the room covering us. We flew silently across the entire room, landing in the furthest right corner where there was a single door. I quickly unlocked it and opened it, Nat sliding inside the second it was open, with me right behind her.

We were standing in another stairwell leading down, this one smaller than the previous one since it wasn't designed for nearly as many people at once. We slowly descended the roughly lit stairs, down three flights of stairs before finally reaching the floor we were looking for. I waved the Skeleton key on the door and it clicked. Before I could open it Natasha reach out and found my arm, sliding down to my wrist.

“Stay close,” She said, the first words she had spoken since we had entered the facility.

I nodded, even if she couldn't see me, before opening the door. Natasha stepped in first, leading me in while still holding my wrist.

I was immediately struck by how different this room was from all of the other cell blocks. Instead of a normal-looking, two-floor style facility, we stepped into a large circular room, with solid steel doors all along the walls. Natasha all but dragged me in, making a beeline for the center of the room, despite the fact that the plan was to start on one end and scan each room until we found Alexei.

Before I could think about saying anything, the room was suddenly fully lit up, lights clicking on around the wall and flooding the room with harsh white light. I looked around, trying to see what had gone wrong, eyes locking on an observation room that overlooked the circular room. Standing there, wearing a smug smile, was a slightly balding man, with slicked-back grey hair, a light five o'clock shadow, and thick black-rimmed glasses. He looked like he had just stepped off the used car sales lot.

He said something and waved, thick metal doors slamming down to cover him and whoever else was inside. I didn't hear what he said, but I didn't have to wonder for long, as suddenly ten of the fifteen doors all around Natasha and I opened up. My danger sense spiked as instead of the doorways leading to cells, each door revealed a massive, high caliber minigun, of a make I didn't recognize. I turned around wildly, looking to grab Natasha and cover her with my body...

Only to see her standing in the doorway furthest from the observation room, looking back at me as the thick armored door shut in front of her, leaving me alone in the kill box.

All ten guns opened up at once, pouring bullets into the empty room. For a split second, it seemed to be random until the first bullet pinged off my leg. It sparked and ricocheted away, and suddenly it was as if they knew exactly where I was.

It felt like thousands of bullets hitting in the span of a few seconds. My magical reinforcement failed after the first two, leaving me to weather the rest of the onslaught without it. I could feel the cement cracking and chipping under me as the sound and feeling of being hit from all sides blocked everything else. I could feel every impact, but they weren't getting through. My armor was too strong.

I was, however, blinded, disoriented, and stuck, unable to focus beyond the cacophony and constant barrage. When it finally stopped the silence felt like a physical thing being pulled off of me. I whirled around, looking finally up at the observation platform. The same man as before was standing there, the armor plates pulled up, smiling down at me as he held Natasha by the neck. He spoke, and this time I could hear him.

"Before you try and do anything..." He said with a Russian accent, trailing off and squeezing Natasha's neck.

She moved, staring down at me with empty eyes, reaching up to tug on her face, pulling off her mask to reveal her normal face, as well as some sort of purple glowing construct attached to her. The bulk of it sat against her left eye, but it was strapped to her skull. Her head was shaved and I could see where it was set into her skull with surgical screws.

"This is a bomb, made from Chituri technology. I'm willing to bet your friends at Shield didn't tell you a rather large shipment of it went missing?" He said, looking happy to drop that information. "Does not matter. All that does matter is that if you do not do as I tell you, I press this button, and Agent Romanoff's entire head disintegrates into dust."

He waved around a small black device with a single red button.

"You may work miracles Carson Walsh, but could you bring her back from that? Would it even be her anymore? Now de-cloak. You may be invisible but you're still activate pressure sensors, I know you are still there."

I clenched my hands, my arms shaking as I looked up at him silently. Reluctantly, after a full fifteen seconds, I dropped my cloak.

"Ah, there you are, still silent. It's fine, I don't need your words, just your cooperation," He said. "But I can see, even without your face, that you understand. I have you Maker, in the palm of my hand."