

It took ten minutes for me to make sure I had everything I could possibly need, while also making sure that I still had at least half of the Deck empty, while still having the “essentials”. Ema was annoyed that I interrupted her painting, but quickly got over it when I explained what was going on. She quickly shifted to her usual combat look.

“Should we get some more backup?” Ema suggested as she got ready, her body and clothes shifting. “Maybe Steve and Bucky? Tony is busy but I’m sure Thor would like the chance to fight for a good cause.”

“Not until we know what is going on,” I said, chewing my lip. “I don’t want to get anyone else involved yet. If she thought the calvary would help she would have asked me to get them.”

Ema laughed, shaking her head as she checked herself in the mirror nodding and turning back to me.

“Carson we are the cavalry, the artillery, and the engineers,” She pointed out, shaking her head. “I only suggested more people because we can’t be in more than two places at once. Yet.”

We laughed, both of us quickly traveling to the outskirts of Budapest, the capital of Hungary. It was an odd place to meet, but a safe house was supposed to be somewhere you wouldn’t expect I suppose. Ema had actually been there before with Jarvis.

Both Ema and I activated our stealth field before we traveled, so we took to the air right after we arrived, following the image and coordinates that Natasha had sent. It took us a few minutes but eventually, we landed on a slightly run-down apartment building. Natasha was waiting for us on the roof, sitting on a bench, looking over the city in the opposite direction. Somehow sensing that someone had arrived, she turned to look, her finger already teasing her pistol storage ring.

“It’s just us Natasha,” I warned her, her worried expression dissolving into a smile. “Lead us to your apartment and we can de-cloak in there.”

She nodded subtly before taking a moment to stand and stretch, acting completely natural before heading back to the rooftop door. She opened it, before acting like she had thought of something, looking over her shoulder and patting her jacket. For anyone watching it would have looked like she was worried she had forgotten something, all the while leaving the door open for Ema and myself to step inside.

She led us through the apartment complex, eventually letting us into one of the many rooms. As the door shut behind her another woman stepped around the corner, her gun raised. I stepped in front of Natasha, though I was still cloaked, my eyes locked on the woman. Her hair was up in a ponytail, and while she was wearing casual clothes I could see at least one partially hidden weapon on her. She was probably around twenty years old, as far as I could tell.

“I thought you were waiting for your boyfriend?” She asked in a noticeable Russian accent, lowering her gun as she talked. “He a no show? Do we-”

“He’s here,” Natasha said, cutting the blond woman off. “Carson?”

I faded into view, deactivating my stealth field and pushing my armor away, the metal fading into dust. The woman almost raised her gun again but managed to control herself.

“Holy hell, how did... You were not joking Nat,” She said, sliding her pistol back into its holster. “Nice to meet you fancy man. And blue woman.”

I raised an eyebrow, looking at the blond woman, Natasha stepping around me and standing beside me. She gestured to the woman with a smile.

“Carson, this is Yelena. She is my sister,” She explained. “She is a bit of a twerp but-”

“Hey, who is the one who figured all this out?” Yelena asked, Natasha rolling her eyes in response. “No reason to call names.”

“Sister?” I asked, my eyes wide, looking between the two women.

I racked my brain for any female siblings from the comics, struggling to figure out what was going on. I remembered she had a brother who was dead, but I couldn’t remember a sister.

“Kind of,” Natasha explained, letting out a huff, and running her fingers through her hair. “When I was young, one of my first... missions was a long-term undercover operation in the States. Yelena and I acted as children for two agents, one of whom was infiltrating a Shield Facility.”

“How old were you?” I asked, watching her face. This was the first time she was opening up to me about what her childhood was like.

“Ten, when the mission ended,” She answered. “I spent three years undercover and... somewhere along the way, it stopped being a cover. Yelena was my sister and... the agents were my parents.”

I just shook my head. There was nothing I had ever experienced that could compare to something like that too. I stepped closer and put my hand on her arm. She looked up at me, her eyes welling as she leaned in and buried her face against me.

“I had put all of this behind me. Or at least I thought I did,” She eventually said, continuing after a long pause, her head now laying on me, leaning on me for support. “But... Yelena got in touch with me, had learned something that she wanted me to hear, and that she

needed my help. I... I couldn't say no. I might have before... before you helped me but I couldn't now."

"I understand Natasha. Let's sit down and you can tell me what's up. I promise I'll help any way I can."

She nodded against my chest, before pulling away, her hand reaching out to take mine. She led me further into the apartment, Ema following behind us. I shot her a look and gestured around the apartment and she nodded, stepping away to scan the room for anyone listening.

Natasha led me to a living room area, where there was a couch, a few chairs, and a wall covered in pinned papers, pictures, and receipts. There were even a few red lines of string connecting some of the pins together. Nat and I sat on the couch, Yelena entering a moment later, rolling her eyes at both of us.

"Yeugh, touchy-feely time then?" She asked, dropping down into one of the free chairs.

"He deserves to know what he is getting into," Natasha explained with a shrug.

"Yeah yeah, just lucky he could get here so fast, we don't have much time," Yelena said, Natash nodding in agreement.

"Yelena managed to get in contact with me-"

"Wasn't easy either!"

"She found out that... My father is scheduled to be executed," She explained, giving Yelena a look.

"He got captured?"

"No, the old man has been in prison for a long time, since our old boss threw him in for pissing him off too much," Yelena explained.

"They kept Alexei alive because he might have been useful," Natasha explained. "He was the only success from an old Soviet super soldier program. The people in charge were hoping one day they would be able to replicate and improve the process."

"How effective was it?" I asked, suddenly a lot more interested.

"Physically it was mostly on par or just shy of Erskine's formula, though they obviously couldn't directly compare them," Natasha answered, her hand still holding mine. "But there were several aspects it didn't affect, like his intelligence, most of his sense, or his reflexes."

“So why now? If he has been in prison for a while, why are they executing him now?”

“Changes in leadership,” Natasha answered with a shrug. “Someone convinced enough important people that keeping him around was a risk, not a potential future asset. Carson... he was never my real father but... He was the closest thing I can remember. I could never live with myself knowing that I did nothing to save him.”

“Alright, I’ll help you get out,” I said with a nod, smiling at her. “I’m going to need some concessions from him, that he isn’t going to run off and start some sort of new communist uprising, but I’ll help.”

Natasha slid closer and hugged me, holding me tightly.

“Thank you, Carson.” She whispered, and I rubbed her back.

“Don’t forget about what we learned this morning,” Yelena said, Natasha nodding as she pulled back.

“My mother... She went into hiding after helping... after helping Yelena and I escape the program,” Natasha explained, rubbing her head, like she was getting a headache.

For a moment I expected her to continue, but Yelena took up the slack.

“We assumed she had slipped away somewhere. While she wanted to help us... she was also very dedicated to her own goals.”

“We assumed that Alexei would know where she was,” Natasha said, having now looked back at me, seemingly recovered. “The original mission was to rescue Alexei and then leave him with Melina. She would have contacts and resources by now, she would have kept him hidden and helped him. Plus... They developed a connection during our mission together. It felt right.”

“Then we learned where she actually was,” Yelena said, standing in a huff. “The woman got herself locked up as well! Sure it’s under a different name, but of all the glupyye postupki novichka...”

Yelena started speaking Russian, shaking her head and pacing a bit before letting out a growl, and sitting back down in her chair.

“They do not know who she is in this prison, but if Alexei escapes she will be the prime suspect, her picture would be everywhere!” She continued, shaking her head like she was tired. “They would recognize her face immediately.”

“Then we need to get her out as well,” Ema said, standing in the doorway. “Can’t hurt her if she isn’t in custody.”

“What the blue woman said,” Yelena agreed, leaning back in her chair. “We would need to break them out at the same time, or close to it at least. Otherwise, there is a chance she will be discovered. Small, but still a chance.”

“Well alright, it sounds like we split into teams then,” I said, Natasha nodding next to me. “Ema and I-”

“Natasha said you both are heavy hitters. Better than Alexei is, better than Iron Man,” Yelena pointed out. “Should we not spread that out?”

“That’s... not a bad point,” I said, giving Ema a look. “It would mean both teams have a nuclear option in case it goes real bad. But I can’t pull out anything too identifiable. I mean you guys must have seen the news, I have a big responsibility now.”

“What happened?” Natasha asked, looking at me curiously. “We haven’t really been keeping up.”

“Seriously? You haven’t seen the news?” I asked, looking at them both, before shaking my head. “Doesn’t matter, it can wait until after we finish this. Just know Ema and I will have to stay cloaked for most if not all of this.”

“Acceptable, even preferable,” Yelena said with a nod. “That would make you both a nasty surprise, just in case.”

We agreed and the sisters started going over the general plan, focusing on each prison. Natasha and I would be going after her surrogate father, Alexei, who was in a prison colloquially known as the Seventh Circle Prison.

It was a huge facility, housing a large number of dangerous prisoners, the kind that Russia wanted to stay hidden from prying eyes. Most of the prison was underground, a large cylinder that was sunk deep into the frozen, mountainous land of northern Russia. The only large structures on the surface were a large surface bunker, where the warden’s office and guards lived, several guard towers, and the yard, where prisoners who behaved themselves were allowed to “stretch their legs”. There was also a duel crane system running along the surface above the prison yard, leftover from when the prison was built. Various smaller garages, silos, and radio towers dotted the snowy surface.

Yelena explained that Alexei was being kept in the lowest level of the prison, where he almost never left. Apparently, they were worried his enhanced strength would allow him to scale the fifty-foot wall of the yard. Unfortunately, that meant we would have to stealthily make our way down the entire prison before we would get to him.

I studied the floor plan for a while, before suddenly having an idea.

“You know... with all of this junk around here...” I started, pointing out an area filled with storage containers, not far from where the prison yard opening was. “We could probably hide something decently large...”

“What do you have in mind?” Natasha asked, leaning on me as we studied the same blueprint.

“I could put down an LPM and modify the structure,” I explained. “Add doors, seal guards in rooms, delete locks...”

“Delete, add, what do you mean?” Yelena asked.

“I mean literally add and delete whatever we need,” I explained. “I could make a clear path from the top of the structure, all the way down.”

“As easy as that would make our job... isn't that something they could tie back to you?” Natasha pointed out.

“I... that's a good point,” I said with a groan, before nodding my head. “Okay, looks like I need to make a good old-fashioned skeleton key. How old is the prison anyway, are we going to run into high-tech stuff or is it older security?”

“Older,” Yelena answered. “Good old-fashioned Soviet engineering. Why make something easy when you can make it difficult!”

“Alright, I'll make two Skeleton keys, one for each team,” I said, looking down at the Seventh Circle prison while Ema and Yelena studied the prison Melina was being kept in.

Together we came up with a plan, a backup plan, and a nuclear option for each team. The first plan was basically just a path through the prison that was least likely to meet any guards or staff. The backup plan was in place in case an alarm was sound, and the nuclear option was if everything went to shit.

The first two plans were pretty simple. Ema and I would stay cloaked, following behind our partners and providing support as necessary. If something went wrong we would give up on stealth and start seeking alternate routes. If everything went to shit, Ema and I would start ignoring walls and doors, cutting and smashing as necessary to get to our targets. If we managed to stay hidden the entire time we would simply travel away. If things started to get rough, however, I was worried teleporting away would point heavily to my involvement. I would do it if our lives were on the line, but beyond that, we would get them out the old-fashioned way, floor by floor.

I dropped a landing pad in the living room and traveled to the warehouse to whip up a couple of things, including rapid deploy armor for Yelena and our targets to give them some added protection, as well as minor healing rings and enhanced vision glasses. Most of the time away was split between whipping up a way to disable the gifts after a few days and the skeleton key. I might trust Natasha with my life but I had no idea who these other people were, despite the feeling that I should know Yelena from somewhere.

I ended up using some of the materials Shield was using to ensure the shield satellites would fall apart in reentry as it contained a strong planned destruction concept. That plus a few other things, including a twenty-four-hour timer, finished it off. The skeleton key was even easier, as I just clumped together a bunch of lock-picking tools, bolt cutters, and slim-jims into a whole bucket of keys and electronic keycards. I mixed in plenty of magic and some divine essence and you had the world's first and second universal lock opener. I let a UCM scan one so I would have a copy to bind to myself when I got home, before applying the timed destruction I had just finished to both of them.

I had the feeling I would be using that a lot from now on.

I returned to the Budapest apartment and handed Yelena her new temporary armor and ring, which she happily put on. She shivered after putting on her ring and smiled at me.

"Thank you, I'm sure this will be useful."

Natasha pouted when I didn't have anything for her, but I could only shrug.

"I've asked if you wanted more upgrades before, but you weren't interested in being any more enhanced than you already are."

"I know Carson, I'm only teasing," she said with a wink, and I smiled back.

"I know, but I want you to know the offer is still open."

"No, you're right," She admitted. "I'm good how I am, at least for now."

"Good. So what's next?"