



xxxvii. Zola

"Where did Captain America learn how to steal a car," Natasha asked as they entered New Jersey, the Garden State.

"Yeah, I was kind of wondering that too," Auralie chimed in.

Steve snorted, "Nazi Germany. And we're borrowing, get your feet off the dash."

That last bit was directed at Natasha, who removed her feet with a smirk. Auralie rolled her eyes at her insanely dramatic friends. It was really a wonder that they had both survived this long, but Auralie was glad they had. She was lucky to have people as crazy as her in this life.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Natasha inquired.

Steve, ever the open and caring person, replied, "sure."

Natasha chuckled, "was that your first kiss since 1945?"

"What, why?" Steve seemed confused.

Natasha tried to explain, "I was just wondering how much practice you had. I mean, everyone needs practice."

Steve sighed, "that was not my first kiss since 1945."

Auralie laughed, "and not everyone needs practice. I've kissed what, one person, and that was a while ago, and the relationship literally lasted a month before I broke up with her. I don't have much practice and I'm doing fine."

"Alright, fair enough," Natasha smiled a bit, looking down.

"Can I ask you a question?" Steve asked this time.

Natasha nodded and the super soldier continued, "who are you? All of this, what you do, is any of it the truth?"

"That was two questions," Natasha smiled sadly, "but, the truth is a matter of circumstance. It isn't just one thing to one person, and neither am I." Auralie winced. She didn't know how much Steve had heard about Natasha's past, but she knew, and she knew just how hard it had been on the woman. Natasha was one of the strongest people Auralie knew, but she had to break and break again and again to get there. Auralie could never have been that strong.

"Sounds like a lonely way to live," Steve pointed out.

Natasha shrugged, then said, "who do you want me to be?"

Auralie's head snapped up, she wanted to hear this answer too. It took a lot for Natasha to trust people, and Steve's answer could determine if the assassin ever trusted him. Trust was essential to them being able to work as a team and to friendship.

"How 'bout a friend," Steve suggested.

Natasha laughed, "well there's a chance you might be in the wrong business for that, Rogers."

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The three arrived at the destination. It was dark by then, and they snuck in, looking around at the old Army Training Center, back from WWII.

"There's no heat signatures, nothing," Natasha said, "I don't know how they could have sent the signal from here. Whoever sent it must have used a router to throw people o ."

Steve, who had been looking wistfully across the yard with an expression that made Auralie wonder what might have been. If he hadn't gone under would she have been growing up hearing about 90-year-old Steve Rogers coming out to celebrate Veterans Day? Would he have wanted that?

But Natasha's words shook him out of his fantasies as he noticed something, "this building is in the wrong place. Army regulations state that munitions have to be stored at least 100 yards away from the barracks."

They made their way to the building and found themselves inside a secret office. Rows and rows of old computers lined the desks, and there was a fading banner with the Shield symbol on it.

"This is Shield," Natasha said in awe, "I think it might be where it started." Auralie looked around too. This was all very cool for her. She could almost imagine early Shield agents filling this place with the bustling around and the no-nonsense attitudes that she had come to associate with the organization.

There were pictures on the wall. Steve's gaze lingered on a man who looked sort of like Tony and said, "Howard Stark, Tony's father." Auralie nodded. She had assumed as much.

Steve's gaze then fell on a picture of a woman. Natasha asked, "who's the girl?"

Auralie frowned. Natasha knew that was Peggy Carter, a true hero of Shield. She just wanted to gouge Steve's reaction. But she shouldn't have to ask, the sad look on the super soldier's face should have been enough to tell her everything.

Steve snapped out of his daze, and he looked around. Noticing something, he went and pulled a panel on the wall open. He said, "if you're already working in a secret office, why hide the elevator?"

The three descended into the other lab, which was filled with ancient technology. Natasha seemed confused, "this technology is ancient, they couldn't have sent the data from here."

Auralie then noticed a small data port, the only modern thing in the room and pointed it out. They went over and Natasha inserted the flash drive. Something came up on the screen. Natasha grinned, "y-e-s spells yes. Shall we play a game?"

"It's from a movie," she explained, remembering her company.

"I know, I saw it," Steve smiled.

Auralie nodded, "yeah, Clint made him watch it."

That was when the face showed up. Auralie jumped back as an accented voice said, "Steven Grant Rogers, born July 4, 1918. Natalia Alainova Romanova born 1984. Auralie Luna Shadow, born 1996."

"Who are you," Steve asked.

"More like who were you," Auralie muttered.

"Now, I may not be the same man I was when the Captain took me prisoner, but....." the voice trailed o .

Steve came to a realization, "Zola."

"Who?" Natasha asked.

Steve sighed, "Arnim Zola was a German scientist working with the Red Skull. He's been dead for years."

"First correction, I am Swiss," Zola said, "second correction..... look around. I have never been more alive. When I came down with a terminal illness, science could not save my body. But my mind, that was worth saving. Now, surrounded by all these data tapes, you are standing in my brain."

"When Shield recruited me, they thought Hydra had been defeated. But a new Hydra grew, a beautiful parasite inside Shield," Zola said with glee.

Steve looked desperately at Natasha who shrugged and said, "a er the war, Shield recruited a scientist with strategic value. That's all I know."

"The war taught us a valuable lesson," Zola admitted, "if we tried to take humanity's freedom, they would retaliate. We had to create a world in which humanity was ready to surrender it's freedom willingly. For 70 years, Hydra has been feeding chaos from inside Shield. We made history, and when history didn't cooperate, history was changed."

Accompanying the words was a series of images. Auralie saw Fury and Howard Stark among them. Zola finished his speech, "you didn't kill Hydra, Captain. I devised an algorithm that will lead Hydra to victory. And because a new Hydra rose, your death amounts to the same as your life. Nothing."

Steve lost it at that moment. He punched the screen. But Zola only appeared on another screen, exasperated, "as I was saying....."

Natasha interrupted him, "what's the algorithm?"

"The answer is both fascinating and a testament to my genius," Zola said, "but I am afraid that you will never know. You see, I am afraid I have been stalling Captain. We are both of us..... out of time."

Then he was gone. Natasha cried, "we have a low range ballistic missile coming in."

"Who at Shield can launch one of those?" Steve yelled.

"Pierce," Auralie realized.

They all looked at each other. That was when the bomb hit. Steve grabbed Natasha and pulled her close to him, protecting them both with the shield. Auralie created a shield of light around herself to disintegrate the rubble and protect her. It took a lot of energy and effort to hold it up, but she managed, her will and her mental strength were the only things keeping her physical form from collapsing.

Before it had been a Shield conspiracy and a very bad situation. Now the fate of the world was on the line. Auralie wondered, like she had many times before, how the hell she had gotten into this mess.

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