

## XLII. The Price of Freedom

Sam, Maria, Auralie, and Steve all crept into Shield Headquarters early that afternoon, a bit before the scheduled launch of the helicarriers. Together they made their way to the announcements center where Shield gave important orders over the speakers for all of its people to see. Nick would join them a little later, and Natasha had gone undercover at the meeting Pierce was holding with the World Security Council.

The operator turned to look at them, surprised.

Auralie sighed, "let me make this easy on you. Let us use this place, and get out of here, and everything will go a whole lot smoother for all of us."

The agent nodded and left the room. Sam and Maria guarded the door together, and Steve and Auralie went over to the PA system. Steve turned it on and said into the microphone, "this is Captain Steve Rogers and Agent Auralie Shadow."

Auralie gulped, calming her nerves and said, "hi."

"I know you've heard a lot about us these past few days," Steve continued, "some of you might have even been tasked to hunt us down. But now I'm going to tell you the truth. Shield isn't what we thought it was. It was taken over by Hydra. Secretary Pierce is their leader. The Strike and Insight Team is Hydra as well. I don't know how many more. They could be sitting right next to you. They almost have what they want. Total control. If you launch those helicarriers now, you'll be putting the win right into their hands."

Steve's words weren't very fancy, but they were the truth, and they resonated with the part of Auralie that always wanted to do good. Steve spoke like a leader, with the strength to issue orders and the compassion to make everyone feel like he was talking directly to them. The mood it created was the kind of special that didn't come around all that often.

Auralie added, "maybe some of you think that launching those carriers is right. Maybe you think it will make the world a better place. But we can't kill millions, and we cannot, under any circumstances, sacrifice free will for safety. It's not who we are, or who we want to be."

"I know this seems like a lot to take in," Steve finished up, "the price of freedom is high, it always has been, but it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not."

He turned on the PA system and Auralie whispered, so only her friends could hear, "you aren't."

That was when they heard the sound. The helicarriers were taking off. They looked to the security cameras and saw a fight had broken out. Rumlow had launched the carriers and was now in a brawl with Sharon Carter and several of the technicians. Auralie wasn't sure if anyone was hurt. If Rumlow was, that was fine, but she didn't want anyone on their side to have to pay the price for standing up to Hydra.

Steve shot her a look and she nodded to him. He turned to Sam and Maria and began distributing his orders, "Sam and I will exchange the chips. Maria, stay here and keep at least part of the place under our control, monitor the situation. Ali, go where you're needed, help the team, use your powers and make sure they don't gain the advantage. Help our people, then go help Nat."

"Sure thing, Captain," Auralie nodded, "I'll come with you and Sam and clear the takeoff point."

"Thanks," Steve smiled briefly at her, before running for the takeoff strip. Sam and Auralie followed.

"Hey, Cap," Sam yelled, "how do we tell the good guys from the bad guys?"

Auralie, who was using her light powers to distract and knock people unconscious, thought that was a very good question.

"If they're shooting at you, they're bad," Steve yelled.

"Great," Sam muttered, clearly annoyed by Steve's plan, or lack of one, to be exact. Auralie didn't blame him. Steve was a great man, but sometimes he could rush into fights without considering some important details. Like the fact that the enemies looked the same as the good guys.

Sam's wings extended, and he flew into the air. Steve ran after him and jumped on the landing platform. Sam caught the supersoldier and yelled, "you know, you're a lot heavier than you look."

Steve whispered, a bit embarrassed, "I had a big breakfast."

Auralie made sure they were safe in the air, before abandoning the landing pad and rushing to help Maria. She found her sister in a shootout with several Hydra agents, which Maria was handling with grace, poise, and badassness. How Maria never got swept up in the chaos of battle and always kept her cool, Auralie would never know. It was just who Maria Hill was.

Auralie joined her sister, creating orbs of light, almost like grenades, which she sent flying at the enemy agents. The light grenades then exploded in their faces, temporarily blinding them and sending them flying back into the wall, where they collapsed, unconscious.

Maria smiled, "thanks sis, but I had it all under control."

"I know," Auralie replied, "but having help is nice sometimes."

"True," Maria acknowledged.

Auralie asked, "do you need me around here?"

"I've got it," Maria answered, "I suggest you listen to the Captain and go help Natasha."

Auralie laughed, "I doubt she needs it, but alright."

She dashed to her sister and gave her a brief hug. Maria smiled fondly and said, "see you after the battle."

"See you then," Auralie called, running out of the office and into the halls.

Every room and corridor was chaos, Shield and Hydra battling each other. She spotted Sharon Carter running around, shooting at the enemies, but decided not to stop and help. Maria was right, Steve had given her a job and she had to accomplish it.

She didn't waste time, turning invisible and creeping around. Then she came upon the council chamber, where Pierce was making a speech. She slipped in, invisible, and waited. She couldn't defeat him now, or else the council would be killed. But Auralie would ensure that justice was delivered. He wasn't going to get away with it.

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