the long game

by dirtybinary

Summary

In 1945, Steve Rogers trades himself to the Red Room in exchange for the Winter Soldier. They accept his offer, but don't let Bucky go. After all, their supersoldiers come as a matched set.

(Featuring crafty Steve, pining Bucky, and a very noisy metal arm.)

Notes

I have:
(a) summarily ignored Natasha's birth year as given in MCU canon,
(b) taken some liberties with the timeline, and
(c) wholeheartedly and unironically jumped aboard the Bucky's-arm-makes-cute-noises bandwagon. How could I not?

See the end of the work for more notes

1989

“I’m bored,” the Captain announces some way into the third hour of their stakeout. “Trade you a fact
if you’ve got one.”

Killing people is ninety percent waiting. They are lounging on the roof of an abandoned warehouse, bodies cushioning each other from the jutting concrete of the wall at their backs and the uncomfortable press of concealed weaponry into the vulnerable hollows of belly and hip. The Soldier shifts to curl his cold metal arm into the warm space between them, his lips itching for a cigarette. He says, “I think I used to smoke.”

“Yeah? How’d you know?”

“Pretty sure you can’t crave something you’ve never had,” says the Soldier. He watches, content, as the Captain takes his metal wrist and rubs it with his fingers, making sure it doesn’t get so cold the servomotors stop functioning. His gears hum in a satisfied sort of way. It is a good day: the Captain remembers him this time, and even called him by name, once, far out of earshot of their handlers. “Go on. Your turn.”

The Captain says, “I think I was an artist before. You remember the map I drew for Lukin?”

“I didn’t see it.”

“No, you did, you got wiped after because you wouldn’t shut up. Dumbass. It looked nice. I bet I was an artist.”

The Soldier picks up one of the Captain’s hands and studies it. The long, capable fingers are grey with dustings of soot and bumpy with calluses; the nails, chipped and unkempt, have dirt and dried blood caught beneath the tips. If he squints he can imagine that the blood is ink, the stains charcoal; can see the hand, with its delicate bone structure, gripping a pencil instead of a pistol.

“Yeah,” he says. They have lapsed into English, as they so often do when alone together. “I think you were.”

The Captain smiles, looking pleased, his eyes lazy and half-lidded above the arrogant sprawl of his long limbs. “Your move.”

The Soldier hesitates, sifting through the jumbled pieces of his memory. The more time he spends out of cryo—and they spend a lot of time out now, because things are changing, and there is unrest everywhere, and it is easier for their handlers to move them when they’re awake—the more confusing it is to be inside his head. He finds a likely fragment, examines it, and tries, tentatively, to fit it into their jigsaw. “Natalia went over.”

“The Americans,” the Soldier confirms. “I heard them talking about it. She escaped.”

The Captain sits up straight, studying him through flinty blue eyes as if to assess the verity of this statement. The Captain likes collecting facts, picking them up from here and there and filing them away in the untidy, shoreless storehouses of his mind. The Soldier helps hold on to them when he goes to the Chair, so he can get them back afterwards. “She did it,” he says, awestruck. He never talks like this, with real emotion, where their handlers can hear. “She really did it. Did you help her?”

“No,” says the Soldier. “Did you?”

“I don’t remember.”

The Captain fiddles with the edge of his shield, painted in black and shades of grey with a red star
gleaming in the centre, twin to the one on the Soldier’s arm. He looks pensive. When he has been silent a long while, the Soldier prods him gently in the side. “It’s your turn.”

The Captain sighs, and says, “I don’t think I can come up with anything to top that.”

1990

He is in a cool, dim office, somewhere underground. A fan blows erratic currents of musty air across the room, stirring his hair against the nape of his neck. There is a laugh, coarse and monosyllabic, and a voice saying, “We can’t do that. Tell them they come as a matched set.”

The Winter Soldier oils his guns at a rickety table, waiting for his handler to hang up the phone so she can brief him on his next mission. He is good at waiting. Docility, however feigned, has its uses; nowadays no one thinks twice about discussing important things where he can hear them. His handler laughs again, and waves a ringed hand in the air. “Inadvisable, my friend. They get cranky if we separate them for too long. And when a supersoldier gets cranky it is a matter of life and death for anyone who has to work with them. Tell those misers at HYDRA they’d best dip deep in their pockets and buy them both, or not at all.”

HYDRA. It is a name that strikes something deep inside the Soldier’s being and sets it resonating at a dreadful, rumbling pitch. The cogs of his mind, obstreperous as always, begin to turn. They come as a matched set. They. The self, and another. The Captain, of course; besides him there is no other. HYDRA wants to buy them. No. No. The Captain must be told.

His arm is whirring in distress by the time his handler lets out a closing burst of profanities at the caller and hangs up. Except for the slightest grimace, she pays the noise no heed. A thick dossier materialises on the table before him, between the dismantled pieces of his favourite rifle; some diplomat or other needs killing. His handler’s lips part to favour him with a yellow-toothed smile. He does not remember her name. She does not know his.

“Well, Soldier,” she says, still smiling, “this shall be your last mission with us.”

They let him see the Captain before the mission. They have to. He has just returned from a high-profile assassination of his own, looking grim and yet, obscurely, a little pleased with himself in that ruffled golden way of his. He stands in the entrance to the laboratory, magnificent and straight-backed, waiting to be attended to. His eyes alight on nobody in particular and for a single aching moment, the Soldier cannot tell if the Captain recognises him today (one strain of thought says how could he, I haven’t seen him since he was last wiped but another one goes they cannot wipe me away). Then the jewel-bright eyes sweep back to him, and the skin around them crinkles in what is, if not quite recognition, at least a distant cousin of it. Unbidden, his own mouth curves into a semblance of a smile.

“Get on with it,” one of the doctors snaps.

The Soldier steps forward, moving slowly so as not to startle. He is tall but the Captain is taller, and
broader about the shoulders. He holds out his hands, flesh and metal, and the Captain surrenders his battered shield. The Soldier gives it over to a technician. Then he takes the Captain’s hand, and walks with him to the Chair.

(It takes him a few seconds to identify the uneasy feeling in his stomach as nausea. He tells himself, again and again, that this is the last time he will ever do this; but somehow he never quite remembers to stop.)

He is the only one allowed to do this. The last time anyone else tried, four people died and the Captain was inoperative for three years. The Soldier knows this because he kept a running count of the lonely awakenings in indecipherable chicken scratches on the inside of his cryo tank, along the barrels of his guns and on the plates of his own arm. He eases the Captain into position and the big blue eyes watch him in complacent trust as he snaps the manacles onto the powerful wrists, thick with dangerous sinew and warm, so warm, under his own fingers. Then he puts the bite guard into the Captain’s mouth and says, quietly, in English, “It’ll be over quick.”

He stays kneeling by the Chair throughout the procedure. His heart is in his throat and when the Captain screams, he feels the pain in his own head, as if they shared one body. Perhaps they do. Perhaps one of them is only a hallucination. It seems like the sort of thing that would intrigue the Captain, when they play their fact-trading game.

Afterwards he is left alone with the Captain, or as alone as they have ever been, to calm him down while the techs prepare the tank for his long sleep. The Soldier unfastens the manacles and sifts his fingers through the fine hair, stringy and limp with sweat. He leans down and presses his lips to the Captain’s forehead, and they come away salty.

Today facts are not to be bartered, but given away for free. “Your name,” he murmurs, “is Steve.”

Bright feverish eyes track across his face. He keeps his voice low and their foreheads pressed together. There are secrets they have kept for decades, telegraphs passed between them bearing information more vital than that in any classified file. After the Soldier has gone out and done his killing, he too will be wiped and it will be the Captain’s turn to hold on to these fragile matters until he comes awake again. “You said you’d known me all my life,” he goes on, voice disguised by the clatter coming from the cryo chamber. “You said one day, after we killed them all, we’d run away to a place called Brooklyn. You called me Bucky.”

Steve mouths the name against his cheek, lips moving soundlessly, hands clutching at the Soldier’s arms with bruising force. They don’t have much time together. The Soldier talks fast. “They’re planning to sell us,” he adds. He has yet to work out the significance of this, but it seems like something the Captain will want to know. “The buyer is called HYDRA. I don’t want to be sold. But if they want you, they’ll have to have me too.”

Steve’s breathing quickens. He is still in too much pain to speak. The techs are coming back in. Desperately, in the seconds before they are pulled apart, the Soldier says, “Good night, Captain.”

One of the techs laughs, and receives a metal elbow to his cheekbone for his trouble. The others take them away, the Captain to the cryo chamber, the Soldier to be prepped for his mission. A matched set. It could be years before they meet again.

The trouble is, there was only ever supposed to be one of them.
The Soldier was the first. The original. There are images in his memory that no amount of electricity can wash away. A stooped doctor with a head like a dented egg, smiling down at him. Fire and ice warring in his veins. A long fall into bitter cold, and a scream that went on and on until it ended in abrupt silence, a silence broken only by the distant rattle of a passing train. Then fear; then pain; then shimmering blades and gunfire; and then one day he woke up from cryo to find a ghost standing over him, dressed in black and grey and red with his shield on his back and a cowl over his head, and for some reason this had enraged him so much that he went on a rampage, wrecked half the facility, and had to be wrestled into the Chair by the Captain himself.

He can’t remember the rest. Perhaps his brain doesn’t want to remember. He wheedled the story out of a young trainee agent who used to make googly eyes at him whenever they passed in the hallway—or maybe the Captain did, him with his guileless cornflower gaze and crooked smile—and they tell it to each other again and again over the years, in the manner of acolytes whispering the secret invocations of a long-forbidden religion over the temple braziers by night. Steve, acting alone and against orders, had found the place the Russians were keeping the Soldier. The Russians, who called themselves the Red Room, had threatened to euthanise the Soldier before he could be rescued. Steve had struck a deal: himself for his friend. The Red Room had accepted, and then, naturally, kept them both.

(Someone, one of his handlers, told him once, “Even if we let you go, you wouldn’t have left him,” and the worst part is that it is probably true.)

It is one of the few things that can still make the Soldier angry, and of course the Captain is always stewing over one outrage or another. He can’t be sure now which of them first made the promise to rid the world of every single one of their tormentors, preferably slowly and with savour—their memories have been traded back and forth so often, like twins’ clothing, that it doesn’t seem to matter much in whose mind they first originated—but he trusts Steve, and he trusts himself, though that vow has been decades in the fulfillment. Their handlers live and die like mayflies. Already the Captain, terrible and implacable in his fury, has procured the death of the cruel, hated doctor. (He was already on his deathbed, they say, the poor, poor man; but no one ever talks about how Arnim Zola drew his last breath months before the specialists said he would, not long after one of his experiments left the Soldier screaming and convulsing in pain. The Captain might forget but he does not forgive.) They are ancient and powerful, like the titans of old, before whom even the gods trembled.

With such edifying matters on his mind, he kills his diplomat, and returns to base to be relieved of his memories.

1991

When he wakes shivering, a tall blond man helps him out of the tank, and tells him, “It’s December 1991.”

He is drowsy and peevish, but it does not occur to him to fight the strong, gentle hands. He knows that this man, whose name is on the tip of his tongue, is sweet and good and kind, and will not hurt him. It is the other one—a tech hovering nearby with his disembodied arm on a tray, waiting to attach it to him—whose presence is intolerable. The Soldier picks up implements from the med kit at her feet and hurls them at her, yelling expletives at random, until she foists the arm on the blond man
and makes herself scarce. Then they are alone together.

He waits. A half-submerged memory tells him that their hard-won privacy, however circumscribed, is somehow crucial.

The man works quickly to attach the arm, speaking in a clear, urgent undertone. “Hey, Buck,” he says. “My name is Steve.”

The Soldier recognises this as the preamble to the oldest and most important mission brief he has ever received, the one that supercedes all his programming and overrides any instruction his handlers give him. He stills, and looks up at the golden Captain, pliant and attentive. How beautiful this Steve is.

“You told me,” says the Captain, “that we’re here because they tricked us. You said we’d kill them all someday. And then—”

“Brooklyn,” the Soldier whispers, right on cue, like a magic word.

“And then Brooklyn,” the Captain agrees. His work done, his hands comb through the Soldier’s matted hair, which reaches below his shoulders today. “I should cut your hair. You were right, by the way. The sale has gone through.”

The Soldier’s eyes have been slipping shut again. His arm is whirring, but not in distress. With difficulty he moves his head out of reach to clear his thoughts, and says, “What sale?”

“HYDRA,” says the Captain, whose name is Steve. “They have acquired us.”

Nothing has changed. There are still doctors and targets and the Chair and the Tanks. The faces are different, but they were always different anyway. Their new handler is a man called Pierce. It pleases him to have the Captain sedated and stripped and the many-tentacled insignia of HYDRA branded in blinding crimson between his shoulder blades. The Soldier kicks up a fuss at that, but his arm has been disabled so that upgrades can be made and very little real damage is done. Then they are briefed and prepped, and sent out to kill some troublesome engineer.

Despite the maltreatment, the Captain seems oddly content as they set out together under cover of night to stake out their target’s route home. Joint missions are rare. The Soldier is pleased, too, though he has no idea why Pierce saw the need to rouse two supersoldiers from sleep to stage a car accident any third-rate idiot could wrangle for half the trouble. But they are working for different employers now, and he supposes HYDRA wants to take their new assets out for a test drive. “Intel says the target and his wife have a dinner appointment with someone called Carter at eight-thirty,” the Captain says. “They should be back by midnight. I’ll take out their wheels and we’ll go down to finish them off.”

They are lying on their stomachs on the gabled roof of a bungalow along a quiet stretch of road that leads to their target’s mansion. Below him, the Soldier can hear the distant homely sounds of a family settling in to supper, blissfully ignorant of the killers over their heads. He grunts his assent. The Captain is pressed against him from shoulder to knee and it is nearly impossible to think of anything else. After a long moment he asks, “What if they die on impact?”

Pierce has been oddly insistent that the target should see their faces before he dies. The Soldier misses his mask. He regards Pierce and his strange notions with suspicion, and already cannot wait to kill him. The Captain says, confident, “They won’t.”
The Soldier does not require further reassurance. His faith in his Captain is rooted so deep that no frost, as yet, has managed to blight it. Instead he reaches out to brush his fingers up the back of the Captain’s leather jacket, tracing along the ridge of his spine, stopping over the spot where he knows the stylised skull sprawls with its grasping red tentacles. “Why aren’t you angry about this?”

The Captain shrugs. “It’s just skin. Haven’t you realised? They bought us because the Red Room went out of business.”

He sounds smug. The Soldier has a dim, confused impression of their last years with the Russians, the frantic tenor of their handlers’ voices, the strange, urgent missions that sometimes left him out of cryo for weeks on end. “Was it Natalia?”

He invokes the name in a half-whisper, like an oath or a curse, the only way he has heard it spoken for years now. “Natalia,” the Captain agrees, in the same tone of voice. “She sold the Americans all their secrets. I can’t remember where I heard it from, but it’s true. So there’s one problem solved.”

He hesitates, fidgets with one of the Soldier’s knives. The swelling clouds hang low and heavy overhead, blotting out the stars. It will snow tonight. “I expect they’ll send us to kill her soon.”

“I won’t.”

A sudden grimace crosses the Captain’s face, before it is quickly arrested and his features schooled back into their façade of earnest servility. The Soldier recalls, though this is a memory of uncertain provenance, that his Steve was a showman once. He is good with these things. “You will. Just like I would. We’re playing the long game here. They can’t suspect we’re planning anything. If they find out and wipe us at the same time, it could set us back another ten years.”

He doesn’t mention the other ultimatum, that they could be separated forever, or one of them put down to save on risk and resources. Some things are beyond even the Captain’s courage. The Soldier understands anyway. Their new mission—or perhaps it is an old one—is to ruin HYDRA, just as Natalia has ruined the Red Room. His flesh hand finds the Captain’s and their fingers weave together, black leather and dark red interlaced. “All right,” he says. “I’ll do whatever they want. But only because you said so.”

The Captain bestows on him an abbreviated smile, a small quirk of one corner of his mouth, and the Soldier’s arm hums happily. “Do you know,” says Steve, shining Steve, “how close we are to home right now?”

“Closer than we’ve been in decades,” says the Soldier, and feels the red-gloved fingers squeeze his own.

The target’s sleek convertible comes roaring up the road at a quarter past eleven, going so fast he would probably have wrecked it sooner or later without any help from them. The Captain rises into a crouch and moves his arm in a long, scything sweep, a graceful blur of motion at the Soldier’s side. The shield smashes into one of the front tires. Then follows a screech of brakes, a sudden swerve, a crash that seems to resound on and on as the car goes skidding into the road divider, throwing up sparks across the asphalt. Below them, the chatter of voices stops abruptly. The shield returns to the Captain like a well-trained dog with a newspaper in its mouth, and then they drop from the roof together and stride briskly down the road to the wreckage of the car.

They are both still alive, as the Captain promised. The woman is screaming inside the car, trapped
under the crumpled door. The man, not wearing a seat belt, has been flung clear from the open top of
the convertible and lies, limbs akimbo, some distance away. He rolls over, groaning, as they come to
stand over him, and his eyes grow wide and horrified. He does not beg, like so many of their targets
do, but he does start to gibber. “Steve?” he wheezes. “Steve, what in hell’s name happened to you?”

The Soldier goes rigid. The target knows the Captain. Knew him, from that other life long ago. This
sheds a new light on Pierce’s strange instructions. That bastard.

He sees the Captain’s broad shoulders move up and then down. “Howard,” says Steve, in a very
quiet voice.

The target is grey-haired and wizened, but beneath the wrinkles there is a certain undeniability of his
bone structure. Both he and his wife must be past seventy by now. The Soldier can see the mottled
white-grey of his shinbone jutting through the tatters of skin and fabric. He must be in pain, and
already the nearby bungalow is spilling troublesome civilians onto the lawn some twenty or thirty
yards away, and still the Captain tarries as if in shock. “We tried looking for you,” says Howard
Stark, whose life is rattling in his chest like a moth trying to escape a lamp, and whom they both
knew an age ago. “We searched—we searched everywhere—Jesus Christ, is that Barnes?”

“I found him,” says Steve. He has yet to move a hair. “You should have tried harder.”

They have run out of time. The Soldier plucks the shield out of the Captain’s limp fingers and,
raising it overhand, applies the appropriate degree of force. Life will terminate without excessive
suffering and the injury will show up on an autopsy as a blunt-force trauma sustained upon ejection
from the vehicle. Startled, in a voice much louder than is advisable, Steve cries, “Bucky!”

It comes out ragged and harsh, like the sound of cloth ripping. By then the Soldier has dispatched the
wife in the same way. “Long game, Captain,” he reminds him, holding the shield out. “C’mon, we
gotta go.”

Behind the closed doors of the safehouse, the Captain shivers uncontrollably as they wait for their
handlers to pick them up. The Soldier shrugs off his jacket and puts it over his shoulders, and lets the
Captain bury his face in his neck. “I didn’t want to kill him,” says Steve. Sad, golden Steve.

“You don’t want to kill anyone.”

“I do,” says Steve, voice still muffled against the Soldier’s clavicle. “Just not the ones they tell us to.”

The Soldier slips his warm flesh hand under Steve’s myriad layers of tac gear and rubs gentle
concentric circles into his back. Poor Stevie, he thinks. His bark was always worse than his bite. The
brand between his shoulder blades has scarred over by now, and the Soldier rakes his untrimmed
nails across its circumference, wishing he could scratch it right out of the Captain’s skin. The touch
kindles an old memory he had thought lost forever, of big hands skimming over his protruding ribs,
hot breath misting in whorls in the cold air above his bare chest as a fair head kisses down his torso,
of a rickety army bunk straining beneath him as a voice tells him, quiet but almighty, Let me make it
better.

His own voice cowers in fear, but he says aloud, “Let me make it better.”

His hands find the straps and buckles of Steve’s gear and make swift work of them. Under his
ministrations Steve is placid, his muscles loose and pliable as they never are when the techs and
nurses are handling him. In the dim light his skin is luminescent with a thin sheen of perspiration. The metal arm is freezing against the Soldier’s shoulder joint, so he touches Steve one-handed, trailing light caresses across his chest, brushing his knuckles over pink nipples and watching them harden. Steve makes no sound, but the quality of his breathing shifts, and the muscles in his jaw are taut with tension. His eyes are wide in a silent, wordless plea.

The Soldier slips off the couch and onto his knees, pulls Steve’s cock out of his pants, and fits his mouth around it the way he remembers. He knows that Steve likes it when he moves his tongue in a certain way; when he uses his teeth; when he hums, low and soft, at the back of his throat. Steve used to be demanding, fisting his hands in Bucky’s short pomaded hair and pulling his head this way or that; and he talked so much, an endless stream of instructions and pleas and praise. But he is speechless now, and still, and only the hitch of his breath gives him away.

His thighs make a sudden, compulsive movement. The Soldier, long prepared, swallows every drop of the warmth in his mouth. He licks Steve clean, too, because there can be no tell-tale signs, nothing to bear witness; everything must be impeccable. He buckles Steve back into his gear and smooths down their clothes, and then he sees that Steve’s cheeks are damp, glistening with grief or joy or fear or perhaps all three.

Bucky says, “It will be all right,” and he knows it is a lie.

Somehow or other, Pierce finds out. The Soldier soon learns that Pierce finds out about everything. Perhaps there were eyes in the walls, or perhaps he stands too close to Steve, or his arm does its agitated whine a little too pointedly when their handlers try to separate them; in any case they were careless, and something gives them away.

They are not killed, as the Soldier might have hoped. Instead he is told to beat the Captain bloody, because he is the only one who can do it without getting throttled for his efforts, and because Pierce is a genius in his own twisted way and knows how to kill two birds with one stone. The Soldier experiences vivid images of circling the man’s throat with his hands and squeezing until his eyeballs pop from their sockets, but Steve is watching him with weary, rancourless eyes, all apology and absolution, and he remembers the long game. Not today. Not any day in the foreseeable future, either.

He does as he is told, his vision blurry with rage, bile bitter at the back of his throat. As at the safehouse, Steve makes no sound throughout. The vacancy of his gaze tells the Soldier that he has gone away somewhere deep inside, where the blows fall like raindrops on his back, felt but unheeded. He does not fight back. He does not make it difficult.

It is still the hardest thing the Soldier has ever done.

Afterwards they are taken away, to be wiped and frozen in separate facilities for the first time that he can remember. The Soldier goes to the Chair with his hands still red from the Captain’s blood, and it is the last night in years that he knows his name.

He passes a lonely decade or two, drifting in disgruntled isolation. There are no more joint missions.
He is allowed to accompany the Captain to the Chair, and to be comforted by him during medical procedures and difficult awakenings from cryo, but other than that they hardly see each other.

“I know you,” he tells the Captain on the rare occasions that they are alone together. Underlying this certainty is the sour thought, I don’t even know myself. “Someday we’re going to escape.” Not today. “Someone escaped, once.” I don’t remember her name. “One day we’re going to kill them all.” One day they will make us kill each other for their sport.

(“Someone told me once that it was going to be all right,” says the Captain on one occasion, after the Soldier has had all the circuits in his arm fried by a new experimental procedure and can barely move from the pain. “I think it was you. In fact, I distinctly remember it being you.” Then the STRIKE team comes in to hustle him away, and he is gone again.)

The Soldier goes to far-off places on missions. He is sent to kill a woman by the name of Margaret Carter, the one who—according to her file—crashed the Red Skull’s plane into the Arctic, parachuted to safety, and survived to make herself obnoxious to HYDRA over the years. He is told that she is now a frail, forgetful septogenarian and should pose him no difficulty. He enters her apartment through an air vent, leaves upside down via broken eighth-storey window, and requires twelve surgeries before he is operative again. He is beaten for that failure, and for some reason just beyond his reach, the Captain is angry and will not comfort him.

A long time later he is sent to intercept Natalia Romanova, which goes decidedly better. It is somehow imperative that she does not die, though he can’t remember why, and so he contrives to shoot her someplace relatively harmless while still fulfilling his instructions to the letter. He tells the Captain this, proudly, just before he is wiped. “She remembered me,” he adds. “She called me a name. I think it was James.”

The Captain frowns. “That’s not your name.” He knuckles his creased forehead, looking tousled and perplexed. “Or maybe it is. I don’t know.”

The Soldier has long ago decided that his name will be whatever the Captain chooses to call him. He says, “We’re getting close, aren’t we? But they don’t let us out together anymore. They’re afraid of us.”

The Captain smiles, then, sunny and blinding. His patience is not like the Soldier’s sniper-calm, intense and focused as a laser; his patience starts out grudging and reluctant and slowly gathers mass, until it towers high as a tidal wave, vast and unstoppable in its power. “As they should be.”

(Much later on, he hears through the grapevine that the Captain, under orders to assassinate one Fury, Nicholas J., has managed to bungle the mission so thoroughly that Pierce nearly signed off on the papers to have him put down. Closer, the Soldier thinks, we are almost there, if only to distract himself from his growing terror. He is afraid to be alone. He is old and cold and he has waited too long.)

2014

When he wakes this time, his stomach is tight and his head feels diffuse and rarefied with a sense of impending chaos. The kind blond man is leaning over him, attaching his arm to his shoulder. The
man must have been out of cryo for a week or more already; there are dull red imprints beneath his eyes and a half-healed wound along his temple where a bullet must have grazed him. Pierce and several members of the STRIKE team are ranged behind him. A big mission, then. Maybe the mission.

He sees from the Captain’s eyes that this is true. The day has come.

“I am to brief you,” says the Captain as soon as the arm is affixed. He has not been shaved in a long time, and his beard is coming in thick. He speaks in clipped, affectionless tones. When they are alone, says something at the back of the Soldier’s mind, his voice is different. “Project Insight is launching today. The one that will give us everything we have worked for. But Zola’s algorithm has been compromised. Certain elements within SHIELD are trying to stop the launch.”

He holds out his hand, and someone places a tablet in it. The Soldier leans forward obediently to look at the blurry video footage on the screen. The Captain is good. The Captain will not hurt him. They will escape together and then—

“Natalia,” he blurts out without thinking.

Their handlers stir, and exchange uneasy looks. The Captain hesitates for a fraction of a second, and then draws back his arm and strikes him: swift, open-handed blows, one to each cheek. “She doesn’t remember us.”

His chest constricted, his ears ringing, the Soldier dips his head to attend to the video again. He watches the tiny figure in the brown jacket and high heels sprint down a highway, ducking between stalled cars while a big cowled man in red and grey and black stalks along behind her. He sees the shield whirl out of nowhere to knock her down, and he cannot quite help the sound that comes out of his mouth.

The Captain gives him a severe look. “She escaped.”

Of course she did. He lets out a breath and puts his face back into an approximation of interested neutrality. As the video loops back to the beginning, he notes the error in the trajectory of the shield, how the Captain failed to compensate for her movement and so missed her head. Brave, brilliant Steve. The name comes uninvited to his mind and he shakes his head to dislodge it, so he does not misspeak again. “How did she get away?”

“Our vehicle was infiltrated,” says the Captain. With his back safely turned to Pierce and the others, his eyes take on a glitter of fierce joy. “There were many casualties.”

The Soldier collects himself, points to the graze wound on the Captain’s temple. “Did she do that?”

“Yes.”

He allows his expression to become angry. “Then she must die.”

“She will attempt to board the helicarriers and replace their targeting blades,” says the Captain. “You will prevent her at all costs. I’ll deal with the other.”

With a flick of his fingers the video changes. Now a man with wings and a jetpack circles over the highway, providing covering fire while Natalia weaves away from the Captain. “Samuel Wilson,” the Captain explains. “Ex-U.S. Air Force, pararescue. They must both be eliminated.”

So cold, so determined. Clever, crafty Steve. The Soldier says, “Understood.”
“Can we play the fact game?” the Soldier asks as they bounce and jolt to the Triskelion in the back of an armoured truck. He speaks softly, under the chatter of the STRIKE team, and puts his trust in the Captain’s enhanced hearing.

“Can’t,” says the Captain. “We’re almost there.”

“But I want to tell you something.”

The Captain glances up, intent. The Soldier looks into the expressive eyes, simultaneously the eyes of a stranger and the very pulse of his heart, and finds himself at a loss for words. It could be the last time they ever see each other. His mouth opens, and shuts again.

“It’s all right,” says the Captain. Not once has he moved his gaze away. “I know it already.”

“You know? You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” says Steve, gentle as a feather. “Always have been.”

When they get out at the Triskelion, the man called Brock Rumlow busies himself yelling orders at the STRIKE team. The Captain visibly tunes him out and turns instead to the Soldier, fussing one of the leather straps of his gear into place. “I found out your name,” he whispers. “It’s Bucky.”

“Bucky,” the Soldier echoes. It sounds right to him, slipping cleanly into its customary place in his head, from which it is so often dislodged but never quite erased.

“Natalia saw my face when I helped her escape,” says the Captain. “I think she’s figured it out. She’ll work with you. Be careful.”

“You too,” says the Soldier. He touches the wound on the Captain’s temple. “Watch out for the flying one up there. You’re getting old and slow.”

The Captain’s eyes crinkle in silent mirth. The STRIKE team forms up around them in perfect order as they march into the building, rifles loaded, helmets on. Only his and the Captain’s faces are bare, an open secret. The time for hiding is over. His heart is singing, his arm whirring its glee, the battle fever gathering like a flock of butterflies flying in synchrony in his stomach. His name is Bucky, and he has a Steve. They are invincible, a matched set, marching together to the end of the world; and all is as it should be.

Epilogue
“Trade you a fact,” says Steve, stifling a yawn. “M’bored.”

A half-finished drawing lies on the desk, the shading still uneven. Living in their government-sponsored apartment, between the frequent visits to the doctors and the psychiatrists and the therapists and the remains of SHIELD, they have more leisure time than Bucky can remember ever having in his long life. He has taken to cooking as a hobby, while Steve sits at the desk by the window and draws and draws and draws. Bucky leans over his shoulder and looks down at the colour-pencilled likeness of himself standing in a hallway, all swagger, flipping a knife while a number of dead people lie at his feet in varying poses. He says, “Natalia finds your art disturbing.”

(Natalia visits them often. Sometimes she brings her boyfriends—the flying man from the day the world ended, and another one, an archer with an enormous, exceedingly smelly dog. She refers to them as Flappy Bird and Angry Bird respectively and Bucky has, as yet, not managed to retain their real names in memory for more than a couple of hours. He is all right with this.)

Steve shrugs, adding dark blond hair, glasses, and a suit jacket to one of the corpses. “I find Natalia disturbing. It’s a mutually flattering symbiosis. Your turn.”

“That wasn’t even a proper fact, you complete asshole.”

“The economy has changed,” says Steve, still drawing. “The value of facts has depreciated. They’re a dime a dozen now. Suck it up.”

Bucky scowls at the back of his ruffled head. “I didn’t actually kill all those people you’re drawing. Natalia helped. So did the Carter woman. Not the old one, the niece.”

The entirety of the Carter household has visited them, too. There were a great deal of tears and apologies, none of which were very coherent. Peggy does not remember Steve some days (though she always remembers throwing the Winter Soldier out of her apartment window in ignominy, and frequently insists on describing the incident in vivid detail for the repeated edification of her great-grandchildren), but Steve says that’s all right; he didn’t remember her for seventy years, so that makes them square. “We’ll pretend she’s taking the picture,” says Steve. He frowns. “I’m running out of red.”

“I’ll get you more later,” says Bucky, only because Steve hates going out in public even more than he does. “The cashier at the art supply store always gives me a discount. He thinks I’m the live-in lover of a famous artist.”

“Not wrong,” says Steve.

Bucky swats at his head. “That was two facts. You owe me a really good one.”

“Okay.” Steve chews on the end of his stubby red pencil, looking thoughtful. After a moment he says, “Your arm makes a noise when you’re near me.”

“I know,” Bucky says, rolling his eyes. “I’m listening to it now, you moron. Tell me something I don’t know.”

Steve puts his pencil down and turns around. He looks younger now that he’s gotten rid of the big scruffy beard, though his eyes are still ringed with sleeplessness. So are Bucky’s. It will take time, their therapist says. Unlike their bodies, their hearts and minds don’t heal all at once. “You know everything I know,” says Steve. “We have the same brain. This game is stupid. But,” he adds, leaning up to press a kiss to the red star on Bucky’s shoulder, “if you insist, here’s a fact for you. I
like the noise. It helps me sleep.”

Bucky smiles. Healing takes patience. It's a good thing, then, that they are both very patient.

End Notes

I am always crying about Steve and Bucky on Tumblr, if you're into that kind of thing. Also maybe check out my gay arch-nemeses novel?

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] the long game by quietnight

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!