Snowed Under

by mrwonderwoman (saete)

Summary

Snowed under;
To be very busy or overwhelmed with something. This phrase evokes the image of being
buried under an avalanche.

With a mystery manufacturer illegally selling modified Hammer and Stark tech, Clint and
Phil are assigned to go undercover as a couple to investigate the ski resort where the sales are
taking place. And Clint fully intends to enjoy every stolen second of partnered bliss.

Notes

For jmathieson, who asked for some of my favorite tropes including a fake relationship, first
time, and being snowed in.
You can probably tell by the wordcount that I was really feelin' the Christmas spirit with this
one. Fake Dating AUs are in my top 10 favorite plot devices but I never actually expected I'd
write one myself, and I'm really glad I ended up getting the inspiration and opportunity to do
so.
Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoy!!
There's something comforting about checking into a hotel. Maybe it's the anticipation of getting to stay in a plush room that you won't have to clean, or having the luxury of nearby amenities that aren't available to you at home. Part of it, too, is probably just appreciating a change in scenery.

The bellhop makes pleasant conversation on the elevator ride up to the suite. What's more, his smile seems genuine. Clint mentally tallies how much change he's got on him and just how much he should tip, based on the caliber of this resort. It's a really nice resort. God, he needs this vacation.

They both do.

It's been three months since they've seen each other and Clint is very much looking forward to the two of them getting to spend the next few weeks together. He shivers - because he can get away with it, and because he's excited, and because he hasn't quite shaken the chill that had followed him in from outside. The fresh, wet smell of snow is still clinging to his coat. It's one of the few things he loves about winter, and he's gotta say - right now it's really adding to the ambiance and expectancy.

He fiddles with the room key in his pocket as the carriage slows. The elevator doors open and Clint's pushing through them as soon as he can fit. Eagerness has him ready to burst. He hefts the duffel bag easily onto his shoulder as he starts towards his room. Their room.

The stretch of hallway between the elevator and the suite seems interminable. He counts down the room numbers as he walks past - 503, 505, 507 ...

His pace is eager and brisk and he really should slow down to be polite to the bellhop, but he's so close and then - he's right in front of the door. Distantly, he watches himself unlock and push it open. He steps forward with confidence, one hand holding the door wide, the other reaching up to remove his hat and bringing it down in front of him.
"Paul?" he calls out. He takes two more steps into the room before a familiar and sorely missed figure comes out from behind a corner.
"Clark," he says warmly and sweeps forward, across the room. Clint tosses the hat away from his chest and drops his duffel, eager as he moves to meet him halfway. Phil's arms stretch out to wrap around him and Clint reaches up to cup Phil's face - they reel each other in until their mouths connect and they're caught in a full, impassioned embrace.

As far as first kisses go, it's pretty stellar.

It lingers more than Clint might've expected, but he's not complaining by any means. When it finally breaks, Phil steps back to hold him at arms' length and look him over.
"I promise I've hardly changed at all," Clint says like it's a hardship to stand there under his handler’s reassuring gaze. They may be making a show (they have an audience in the bellhop, and possibly whoever is monitoring the feed if their room is under surveillance) but Clint's hardly had to do any acting so far.

"Maybe I'm just enjoying the view," Phil says, taking a half step back towards him and letting his hands slip down to grip at the thick, wool lapels of Clint's coat.
"You call this a view? I haven't even taken my scarf off. What's there to see?"

Phil does his version of rolling his eyes which is barely more than a glance at the ceiling and a sort of long blink, "My mistake."

Clint reaches up to lace his fingers with Phil's and tugs at them gently, "Now hands off; I've gotta take care of my luggage."

Phil's grip slides down the length of the lapels with Clint still keeping a hold of him, like neither of them really want to separate. Clint reaches into his inner jacket pocket for his wallet and pulls out a crisp bill for the bellhop who smiles brightly as soon as Clint starts to turn around.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, sirs?"

"No, but thank you for the conversation and the suggestions," Clint says with a smile as he casually passes over the bill.

"You're more than welcome. Don't hesitate to contact the front desk or the concierge if you need anything."

"Will do," Clint says with a wink, walking him to the door. He spins and leans back against heavy wood until it shuts and he hears the lock engage. "Alone at last?" he asks.

Phil nods and Clint walks back across the room to him.

"No cameras or bugs detected and the sensor didn't go off while the bellboy was here. But we'll have to keep an eye on that - some of the staff is definitely in on this."

"That's what I'm here for," Clint says shuffling closer and resisting both the compulsion to shove his hands in his pockets and the competing urge to reach out for Phil again.

But Phil's expression melts into a soft smile and then he's opening his arms and stepping forward to wrap them around Clint's shoulders. Clint moves into him and fits his grip around Phil's waist. Three months is hardly the longest period they've been separated for, but it's certainly the longest in a while, and they haven't had very many opportunities to exchange messages with the format and timeframes of their recent missions.

"It's good to see you," Phil tells him, close to his ear with how near they're pressed together. Clint only lets himself exhale a fraction of the deep, contented sigh that's caught inside him. "You too," he says. They break away and Clint starts to take off his scarf - the chill has been sapped right out of him.

Phil steps over to the couch and picks up his wool fedora from where it had landed perfectly on the top edge.

"I like the hat," Phil tells him as he crosses the room and hangs it up on the honest-to-god coat tree beside the front door.

"Thanks, Costuming went ham on my wardrobe when they heard I was playing a real gentleman instead of security or a boy toy." He's played other roles, but those are the ones he gets most frequently called for on under cover ops. "Elizabetta complained non-stop about my arms and shoulders."

"With a smile on her face the whole time?" Phil asks confidently.
"She always says that having me in for a fitting is a nightmare, but she's real obvious about how much she loves to see me filling out her handiwork."

"To be fair, you fill it out well."

Clint leers at him as he shucks his coat, "You know, this stuff almost has me seeing the point of bespoke ... everything."

Phil takes the coat and scarf from him and hangs them up as well. "I'm making you an appointment with my tailor as soon as we get on the transport back to headquarters," he says in total seriousness. The exasperated 'finally' goes unspoken.

Clint doesn't argue that he'd probably ruin it all in a week, because momentarily, he's willing to entertain the idea. "You don't think Elizabetta will mind me cheating on her?"

"I think she'll send me a gift basket. It's like she dies a little inside every time she catches sight of you wearing the clothes you own that aren't uniforms or tac suits. And really we could do to have our top agents make a better impression on our patrons at company functions."

"You'd think SHIELD wouldn't have any problems giving orders about dresscode."

"With this specificity? No, that's a sexual harassment suit waiting to happen."

"Can't be caught ordering assets to show off their assets?"

"Something like that."

"Well, it's not my fault slouchy clothing is comfortable," he says, picking up two of his bags. Coulson picks up the third one and leads the way down the hall.

"Don't make it sound like you dress poorly all the time. You have plenty of close-fitting clothes that make you look good," Coulson concedes, pushing open the door of what looks to be the master bedroom. "But this is a different kind of nice, and it's working very well for you."

"Ahh, so you really were enjoying the view earlier," Clint teases.

Phil drops the suitcase at the foot of the bed, "I was appreciating the outfit. I always admire Elizabetta's handiwork."

"Sure, sure," Clint drawls. He sets the other case on the floor and lets the duffel slide off of his shoulder. "We sharing?" he asks. Unnecessarily of course, because obviously Coulson's stuff is already taking up exactly half of the space in the room. "Staff involvement, right?"

Phil nods, "Yep, and there's no telling who, yet." Being discovered because they were careless enough to use separate beds would be downright embarrassing. It won't be the first time they've shared a bed though, and it likely won't be the last. Phil starts moving back towards the door, "You'll want to go ahead and unpack and shower. Take a nap if you need; we've got a reservation in four and a half hours in the resort's dining room and I expect to get every bit of gossip out of you before we need to start setting things in motion."

Clint grins at him as he shuts the door, then looks down at his bags and sighs. He hefts one hard case up onto the mattress and unlatches it, revealing the fine fabrics of the clothing he fully intends to permanently borrow after the mission.

Absently he reaches one hand out to touch the neat lines of folded cloth, and up with the other to
trace his fingers over his lips. There are still a few errant butterflies in his stomach leftover from
getting to kiss Coulson. They pick up steam when he thinks about this mission meaning he's got carte
blanche to make another one happen the next time anyone else is around.

Maybe fixating on it is kind of silly, but this is one fantasy Clint never expected to become a reality.
He's literally being paid to pretend that the man he's in love with loves him back. Christ, he can't
even bring himself to feel guilty about it (although that's bound to change at a moment's notice). He
hasn't ever expected anything to come of his affection for Phil. Not that this mission will change that,
but it's certainly a reversal on his normal M.O. of tamping down his feelings and living with the full
force of his handler's attractive nature on a regular and platonically intimate basis.

*I kissed Phil,* he thinks to himself one more time. And maybe his smile is a little giddy but there's no
one except his luggage to see it.

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Clint hadn't realized how tired he was until he flopped down on the end of the bed mid-way through
unpacking and promptly fell asleep with his arms and torso spread amongst the rest of his belongings
and his legs dangling over the side. He'd woken up with just over thirty minutes to shower and dress
and he was proud to say that he was waiting at the door five minutes early.

Dinner is lovely. And that's basically the only word to describe it.
The dining room doesn't pretend to be anything other than a ski lodge's restaurant, but it does so
elegantly. Not to mention, romantically. It's all cozy, candle-lit atmosphere, and small tables covered
in nice white cloths, under which knees and feet can bump should the diners allow.

Clint is delighted when he's the one presented with the wine-list. As soon as the waiter walks away,
he unleashes the full strength of his self-satisfied smile.

"God, it's good to be a real adult," he says as he looks it over. "My twinky days are numbered and I
could not be happier about it."

"You're not the waifish nineteen year old you once were," Phil tells him, selecting his words
carefully in the public space, "and we can toast that when the wine of your choosing is brought to us,
but don't get too excited just yet. You've still got some mileage left in you on that front."

"Tell that to my crows feet," Clint brings the booklet up to his nose like he's ignoring Phil. But when
he catches sight of the waiter heading towards them, he brings it back down to the tabletop and
points to his choice, "Good with you?"

Phil inclines his head and renews the pleased smile he'd had when they first sat down. Clint doesn't
know a lot about fine food or dining, but he's got enough training to feel confident in his choice and
a little smug at Phil's approval.
When Clint tells the waiter their selection and says they need another moment with their menus, the waiter suggests an appetizer to pair with their drink and they agree to it like they've got money to burn and have never been hungry a day in their lives. Phil laps his napkin as the waiter departs, and Clint follows suit.

"What did they have you doing when you first got to ...?" he gestures between the two of them and, as expected, Phil glances up and is able to fill in the blank with 'do under cover work'.

"I had a nice variety. My acting skills were pretty good," he says, looking back down at the menu, "except for the part where I couldn't control my temper."

"Excuse me?" Clint says, letting his menu fall to the table.

Phil looks up at him. "Clint," he says like their line of conversation is common knowledge, "You know I was sent to military school for my issues with authority."

Clint has been aware of this for a while, and ever since he found out, it's been easier to see that rebellious shit streak in Phil in real time. But now and then, little things will still manage to surprise him.

"Yeah, but I thought that just meant you smoked, and jacked cars, and played hooky, and fought with your step-dad."

"Well, part of those issues included a lot of anger that I made him the focus of." He picks up his glass of water, "By the time Junior year hit, I'd run out of bullies to corral. Everyone was minding their own business and he was the only real target I had left. But you aren't wrong about my rap sheet."

A small part of Clint wants to make a joke about what Captain America would think of him turning to a life of crime, after his whole childhood had been about identifying with a young Steve Rogers - the scrappy, fatherless, little guy, with morals through the roof and the unabating drive to stand up for everyone. Except the larger part of him that happens to be Phil's friend knows exactly how much that assessment is not a joke, but actual, too-close-to-home analysis, so he lets it lie.

"Did you just play a brooding badboy all the time, then?" Clint tries to imagine an op where that would be necessary and can only come up with a few scenarios that would warrant SHIELD's caliber.

"I mean I was respectful when I was on duty, but if I got into the character I was playing it sort of ... seeped in. I'd let go and get carried away to the point where some of my more prominent personality traits surfaced. And when I didn't get to let go or let into some enemy agents," he lowers his voice at that, "I'd burn it off at the gym until I was too sore to keep going."

"Jeez, and Psych didn't have you marked up for that?"

"Well, they were a bit more lax around the time I was new. And Nick was a pretty important handler - he'd decided he needed me, so the little red notes all over my file got swept aside."

_That doesn't sound familiar at all, _Clint thinks to himself. He'd known their SHIELD careers bore some similarities, but he wasn't aware of how parallel they were, even if the details of their issues differed. He wonders if this means Phil's motives for keeping him were the same as Fury's were with keeping Phil.

"At least," Phil continues, "until Nick actually went on one with me. He chuffs a laugh, "As soon as we landed back at HQ, I stormed off to find a sparring partner or a punching bag before debrief. Nick followed me - I guess to try and talk to me about how I'd acted before we had to explain..."
ourselves to any superiors - but I didn't know that." Phil shakes his head, amused, "He walked in on me pummeling some unsuspecting Level 4 who hadn't heard about the new Level 2 that went around genuinely asking for fights."

"...And?"

"And that afternoon, I got a notification that private tutoring with an acting coach and twice weekly psych sessions had been added to my training schedule."

Clint grins at him.

"In my defense, it only took ten weeks for it to be cut back down to the regular monthly and post-mission appointments."

"...And?" he asks again.

"And I'm told my anger management training set a record - by my then acting coach of course," Phil adds at Clint's look. "Psych may have been lax but they weren't unprofessional."

“Office gossip still the same, though?”

“Exactly.”

The waiter comes back into view, bearing their wine, and with a server trailing behind him carrying their appetizers. As they're served, Clint considers the man across from him.

Given the chance, he'd probably change his past in a handful of ways. But he can't totally begrudge his decision to become a mercenary, because it crossed his path with the best man he knows, and getting to spend the better part of the past decade falling in love with him has been pretty damn wonderful.

And in terms of being kept; Fury and Phil had a past - a military past - when he'd brought Phil into SHIELD. Clint thinks that might make enough of a difference in the reasoning behind Fury's investment in Phil, and whatever it was that Phil had seen in Clint. It's a reassuring thought, and it makes him smile and lift his glass, as the waiter steps away.

"To the people we once were," Clint toasts.

"And to growing out of them," Phil replies.

The soft, round ping of their delicate cups colliding sends a warm vibration through his fingers and up Clint's spine. The wine does the same to his stomach.

"Now," Phil starts, setting down his glass, "What is this I hear about our colleague Ms. Hand having interrupted an illicit shopping spree?"

Clint keeps his smile as close to demure as he can get, but he listed to Victoria tell this story three times and the look on her face never changed. He clears his throat and leads into the censored, public-space-friendly version of how three of Agent Hand's junior operatives had decided to take the opportunity, mid-mission, to get some shopping done because they happened to be in Milan.

He wraps up the details of their punishment - suspended, knocked down a level, and forced to recertify in all mission safety and conduct courses - just as their waiter returns to take the orders for their main course.
The rest of the meal is spent catch up on international gossip. Clint has some tidbits from HQ and the op he just got back from. But Phil got to play with a few people they actually like from another alphabet agency, and he passes on their hellos as well as some good stories they told him.

It's nice. Clint's missed this.

Even as he and Phil both keep an eye on the room and soak in the behavior of the other diners, he manages to enjoy himself. They linger until they can't justify it. But nobody stands out and soon, they're fairly caught up on the important things that have been going on for both of them.

They'd charged the meal to their room when they'd been seated, so wrapping up is just a matter of placing their napkins to the left of their plates and making it subtly look like they might be going back to their rooms for dessert.

They sit in the little living area to discuss the case details.

Clint unbuttons and throws his dinner jacket over the back of the couch. He already knows the basics of the mission, but this is their opportunity to strategize. Phil disappears for a moment then comes out of the back with files in hand. He tosses one of them onto the coffee table. Clint rolls up his sleeves and leans forward to look it over.

The first page reiterates what he was briefed on - someone is selling illegally modified Hammer and Stark tech out of their metaphorical garage. SHIELD found out about this after several unexplained explosions injured and in two cases killed civilians. After looking into the incidents as potential acts of terrorism, they've figured out it's because of this mystery tech, but until recently, they hadn't known where it was coming from. Last Clint heard, there weren't any leads on whoever is dealing and/or creating it, except that all of the people who'd acquired the tech have paid a visit to couples resorts in the past eight months and in the past three months all the visits seem to be centralized around one particular ski lodge. Which is why Clint and Phil are currently sitting in the lap of winter luxury.

If he had to, Coulson could probably handle this op on his own with remote assistance from HQ. But a single, 30-something man by himself at a primarily couples' resort wasn't gonna fly. So Fury had let Phil have his pick of agents and he'd chosen Clint.

"You're here because I need your eyes and your people skills, and you've got survival training for this terrain if an emergency happens, because, let's face it - this is a dangerous environment no matter how prepared we think we are."

"And because I'm your favorite," Clint interjects with faux-seriousness. Phil looks like he wants to whack Clint on the head with the folder he's holding.

But then he says, "Having a close relationship with you is going to not only make this easier to sell, but make it easier to deal with."

"Yeah, that's what I said."
A smile flickers at the corners of Phil's mouth. "We don't have any suspects yet-
"*Still?*

Phil disregards his outburst, "There haven't been any recurring names in the systems, so either they're being kept off the books, or they're using a different name every time."

"Or they're working and living at the hotel under the table, which also implies staff involvement."

"Exactly." He flips through the few pages and pulls out a map of what looks like the resort. "And that's not the only thing they need the staff's help with." He spreads it out on the table. "Storage of merchandise when it's bigger than luggage, use of the grounds for the exchange to take place - whether that's meeting rooms or an underground portion of the facility," his fingers splay in the middle of the outline, an empty gesture at the unmapped, possibly non-existent chamber, "It's likely that if they're already getting staff help, that they were initially using the hotel's guest list as a means of targeting potential clients."

"It's like Mystery Dinner Theater."

"I would pay good money to have you describe this frustrating, serious situation that way to Hill, if I didn’t think it'd give her an aneurism."

"If I haven’t given her one already I don’t know what will," Clint says with a shrug. "How much backup do we have?"

"Five agents on standby, twenty minutes away. That’s if the weather stays good and they don’t have to move farther out." He flips to the next page in his folder. "Have you looked over the cover story?"

Clint doesn’t say anything smartalecky because Coulson's not making a commentary about his lack of attention during redundant briefings; obviously Clint's initial entrance means that he's at least skimmed it. What he's doing is giving Clint the opportunity to voice his thoughts on the matter. Because yeah, Clint's read the character descriptions - he knows the file. And Clint would also like to know who exactly came up with this backstory, because seriously, they could have a very promising future as a romance novelist.

He and Phil are meant to be old lovers meeting for a rendezvous to rekindle their flame after reconnecting through business. Phil is playing Paul Colbert, a producer for both film and stage, and Clint is Clark Benton, a lawyer turned talent agent. They met in law school and in the coincidence of the decade, after being separated by divergent opportunity, the army, and miles of American wilderness, managed to both end up in showbusiness, on the same coast, and the same project.

The details, if a bit much, are alarmingly well-plotted.

"Yeah," he scoffs, "Only I'm a little worried someone's gonna ask about when we went from being Hallmark movie characters to real people."

"I'm sure we can think of something," Phil says, dry as a desert.

"Imagine," Clint posits, "a power-couple like us, brought mutually to our knees by kismet," he shakes his head in teasing disbelief, "Slaves to our emotions."

"Sometimes there's just no helping these things," Phil says, magicking up a pen and marking a note in the margin of his file.

Despite the potential flash of their status, it's going to be important to keep a semi-low profile; blend in with the other nouveau riche.
Their cover is well constructed enough that there's even the hope that they'll be approached as potential buyers. Their intel indicates that the people who get directly sold the tech are the middlemen. From what they've been able to gather, they're individuals with low profiles but just enough wealth, status, and connections to purchase the goods, take them out of the country, resell them to second- and third-hand contacts, and the means to get themselves out of trouble if it comes to that. But if Clint and Phil aren't approached, they'll stick to the initial plan:

"The first priority is reconnaissance; we don't have nearly enough evidence."

"I'll say," Clint wiggles the embarrassingly thin folder in front of himself. "So we keep our eyes and ears open, maintain our cover, and do the resort's activity circuit."

"That's about it," Phil nods and closes his file, taking off his glasses.

*Easy,* Clint thinks but doesn't say - because if years in the circus hadn't taught him about the superstitions of inviting trouble, being stuck on extra long missions with agents who didn't have those qualms certainly would have.

"Small steps," Phil adds aloud, to fill the space and because he almost certainly knows what Clint's thinking.

Clint gives him a closed-mouth smile and hands over the papers.

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Clint wakes and stares across the plane of the pillows at his partner's face. He and Phil wake up the way they always do when they have to share sleeping space on missions - bodies curled and facing each other, like two closed parentheses. Sleeping tactically doesn't matter so much when you wake at the drop of a pin, and the room is a nest of weapons with more alarms and safeguards than an airport.

Yawning, he sits up and stretches. Being careful and quiet is more likely to wake up his bedmate than anything, so he doesn't try to muffle himself as he leans over and gets his hearing aids out of their case in the bedside drawer. He stares at the pattern of the sunlight on the far wall as he sits on the edge of the bed to put the aids in and tests them. Satisfied, he spares Phil's sleeping form a look, then heads to the kitchen to start a very nice pot of hotel-provided coffee.

He rolls his shoulders and shifts his shirt a little, unused to the matching flannel pajamas. They're a comfy but they make him feel overdressed, and they definitely seem like a costume.

He stares blindly at the carafe as it brews him just enough to wake himself up, and once he's downed every last scalding drop, he starts another batch.

While he waits for it to finish, he goes to check the surveillance systems, waving at one of their room's hidden cameras that he passes on the way. They've got alert systems and all sorts of minorly-invasive monitoring devices throughout the suite. That and the transient nature of the hotel room as a resting place make him feel even a little safer than he does in his own apartment.

After hours, last night, when the main part of the hotel was empty and everyone else was tucked
safely into bed, he and Phil had gone around playing shadow to the security guards, planting similar monitoring devices and getting a three-dimensional view of the hotel's layout. Clint pulls out the impressively disguised, ultra-heavy-duty suitcase on steroids that hides the surveillance and on-site tech-hub computer. Hey yawns as he undoes the rigorous system of locks but when it's up and running, the recordings from last night show no behavior outside of the guards' circuiting the building. There aren't any messages waiting from the offsite backup, either, but he still shoots off a message to check in with them and they tell him that all is well. He locks it back up, tucking it under the bed in this spare room before he heads back into the kitchen.

When he gets there, he finds Phil with his hip hitched up against the counter sipping from a sleek black mug.

"Any word?" he asks.

Clint shakes his head and goes for the full and obviously waiting mug sitting just beside Phil.

"Alright," Phil says, turning to set his empty cup in the sink, "Then I suppose we should get dressed and head down to breakfast."

They clear out their weapons from the most obvious places, and lock everything else up. They post the door sign declining turndown service but leave things positioned incriminatingly because anyone with the right access cards and nefarious purposes can sneak in under false pretenses. Then they proceed to the dining room, Clint daring to put a hand to the small of Phil's back once they hit the lobby.

The point of having every meal in the restaurant is primarily people watching. The fact that the next closest eatery is a half hour's drive away in the nearest town and isn't anywhere near the quality of the resort means that their fellow guests will be inclined to dine in and provide them with people to watch.

As Clint eats his gourmet waffles, he looks around the brightly lit dining area and considers how everyone in this place is unrecognizable; it's like a sea of movie-extras where everyone has mildly pleasant faces and modest but designer winter clothing.

The low profiles are part of the issue in this case. Their seller's activities haven't been making enough of a stir for anyone to notice them or be able to point any fingers. Except...

"Oh my god," Clint deadpans in quiet but total disbelief. Phil barely raises his eyebrow at him.

"You're gonna be so mad at whoever thought this warranted the attention of two agents above Level 4."

The break in character can almost be excused, because at the moment Clint is totally doubting that anyone involved in these nefarious dealings might have any competence to speak of. Phil fakes a quiet cough in order to get his own look.

Sometimes the bad guys aren't very outwardly different from the civilians. And sometimes, they'll hold court in the hotel lounge like they think they're the Godfather or some shit.

Through the open double doors across from Clint, about fifteen feet behind Phil, he can see the end of a couch and a woman sitting on it, directing a casual sort of business meeting. On the table in front of her and in her lap are some papers and a few closed files.

Meeting in the open space, with no chance for anyone to hover nearby and possibly overhear their
conversation, she probably thinks she's being very clever. But Clint can plainly see the diagrams she's holding out to the man - men? - sitting across from her.

"There's a Stark logo on the top blueprint and Hammer's on the other two pages."

Phil's expression pulls into the subdued version of his "are you fucking kidding me?" face but Clint doesn't really have a response in this situation so he shrugs and takes another bite of food. In his lap he pulls out his secure phone and without looking down, texts their backup team to call the hotel. After a moment, a waiter approaches their table.

"Mr. Colbert? Telephone for you, sir."

Phil wipes his mouth and stands with a murmured, "Excuse me." The waiter leads him up towards the front desk and Clint goes back to keeping a discrete eye on their sudden suspect. Phil loves when they get to pull this trick, and honestly, Clint doesn't blame him. It makes it feel like they're in an old fashioned movie.

From what he remembers, there's a set of glass doors in the lobby that have a good view into the lounge and, as expected, Phil comes back with intel.

"Five in the group, three sitting across from her, a woman and two men - probably potential buyers, and a man beside her on the sofa. Seems intimate, possibly husband. She's definitely in charge of the situation."

"How long did this take us? Sixteen hours?"

Clint can tell Phil is about to protest so he holds up a conceding hand. In addition to finding the tech itself, they still have to collect evidence against the buyers and sellers and investigate just how many other people are involved, and he's aware of that, but half of their initial workload has just been finished for them. Clint doesn't bother taking any pictures with his cellphone camera - the group of suspects have set themselves up perfectly to be caught on the cameras they were able to place last night.

The both of them finish their meals without looking like they're in a rush, but when they're done, the business meeting is still in progress.

"Shall we adjourn to the lounge?" Phil asks, ever in character, but still somehow as if he's delivering a joke.

"Let me grab my book from upstairs and I'll meet you in there," Clint says as they stand. He leans in to plant a kiss on Phil's cheek then heads on up to their room. Any opportunity for casual affection.

He runs the perimeter check then pulls out their surveillance tech. He smiles when he sees Phil on the feed, settled into the corner of an elegant loveseat with a newspaper stretched out in front of him. He sends the video clip of the business meeting with some closeup stills of what the camera can see of their faces, and a brief message with Phil's analysis to the backup team, requesting information on the group members. He's quick to lock everything back up and scoop his book off of the nightstand then head back down to Phil.

Phil is still slowly making his way through the paper, but even from across the room, Clint can tell that the tension has spiked among the group of business people. He brushes away the latent urge to jump the back of the furniture, and rounds the end of the sofa. Phil acknowledges his presence by demurely smiling up at Clint and shifting to make an obvious spot on the cushion beside him. Clint
takes it upon himself to support their cover and snuggle up under Phil's arm as he blindly cracks open his book.

God, this is cozy. A moment like this isn't something he's ever really thought he could experience for himself firsthand- easy, warm domesticity. And if they weren't pretending, he'd add "genuine" to that list. Being with Phil is so fucking natural that it's almost disconcerting. He thinks he can blame his own craving for bridging the gap. Clint glances up at the not-quite-roaring fireplace on the wall across from him, keeping an ear out for the people behind them in the otherwise empty lounge. One luckily overheard conversation can make all the difference in the world.

Unfortunately, the group clears out just about a half-hour later, without having projected any further suspicious airs or actions. There's no discrete way for either he or Phil to follow them but the beautiful, ornately framed mirror above the fireplace allows him to catch sight of the elevators through the doors that lead to the lobby. Well what do you know - it seems the sellers also happen to be on the fifth floor. This really is starting to seem too convenient.

The would-be buyers head out towards the sunny patio, though God knows why. It's about twenty degrees too cold for comfort right now.

He and Phil wait a good fifteen minutes before heading up to their room. Right away they check in with their backup team, who have come through for them with the intel.

"Jaina and Michael Escobar," Phil reads off of the digital info packet, "Married five years, both independently wealthy, and it seems safe to go ahead and assume that they're the couple using her mother's maiden name on the hotel registration records - apparently the two of them are intending to stay through New Year's."

Clint remains slouched but stretches his arm out for a high-five. Phil acquiesces blindly as he continues reading.

"And it looks like I just found our in; they've signed themselves up for organized activities almost every day."

"Jackpot." Clint loves when the bad guys try to mix business and pleasure.

"My thoughts exactly. So while I go and sign us up for some of the same ones, you're going to go explore the grounds again."

"Roger that."

As Clint expected, exploring does nothing more than give him an idea of what the layout looks like during the daytime.

"Man," he says as the door to the room falls shut behind him, "I'm grateful for the nonexistent security measures here, but it sure does suck all the sport out of spying." The evening guards had been kind of fun to tail that first night but they weren't really a threat, and Clint doesn't even want to think about the really obvious hotel detective who hangs out behind the front desk and in the back of
"The good news," he starts, and Phil looks up at him as he takes his coat off, "is that on my way in, I passed the dining room and caught sight of our friends being seated." He starts to unwrap his scarf, "If we dress and head down now, I can do a little lip reading and hopefully get some deets about the buyers."

Of the two of them, Clint's better at it, given his eyesight and the partial necessity of it that sometimes comes with being deaf.

Phil shuts his laptop and stands, stretching, "What are we waiting for?"

When they get down to the restaurant, it's easy enough for Clint to casually charm the hostess into seating them where the targets are in their line of sight - "Something towards the middle and side, if you don't mind, Miss."

A little thrill goes through Clint when Phil pulls out his chair for him. He smiles across the table like the flirt he is as Phil sits down. Just over Phil's shoulder, he has the perfect view of both suspects. Reading lips from the side is way harder than from the front, but he manages. Unfortunately, they don't discuss anything important.

Clint tries to tell himself that they've learned some talking points should they have to get close to them, but the evening still feels wholly unrewarding. He'd forgotten about the slow going of interpersonal undercover work. God, why are people such suspicious creatures?

"Don't ask questions like that - it threatens job security for us," Phil tells him as they get ready for bed.

"Yeah, yeah," Clint mumbles as he finishes setting up the alert system on their security feeds.

He lies awake, unsettled, for a while before he's able to fall asleep. Focusing on the pace of Phil's breathing beside him is what finally relaxes him.

"Company, six o'clock," Clint mutters.

They've spent another morning in the lounge, the two of them snuggled up together in front of the fireplace. Clint feels like they've been in close proximity since the moment they woke up. It wasn't much different from yesterday, but it's been ages since he's woken feeling this relaxed and secure (much less two mornings in a row). He had almost forgotten what it felt like. They'd stayed in each others orbits as they'd gotten ready and fed themselves.

And now, here they are - Phil with his legs splayed and his arm across the back of a sofa in a show of relaxation; Clint curled up with his feet tucked under him and himself tucked under Phil's arm.

A half hour ago, they'd watched the three potential buyers come down to the front desk, each of them with a suitcase in hand. Obviously they'd decided that whatever deal the Escobars had proposed wasn't worth their while. Phil's magazine is open and he's been paging through it at a reasonable pace, but Clint is sure that this whole time he's just been stewing about what sort of game
changer this will become and how they can turn it to their advantage.

At the moment though, Mr. and Mrs. Escobar have just exited the elevator in full winter wear and are headed for the front doors. Clint watches Phil trace their path in the mirror and start to reach for his bookmark. After a handful of minutes, Phil pretends to check his watch, and with a few words they stand, donning their outerwear and trailing after the Escobars.

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They end up at a craft market of all places. According to the pamphlet they distribute at the front entrance, the resort arranges for local artisans to set up booths seasonally in a field that's only a ten minute, incredibly scenic walk from the hotel. There are loudspeakers playing Christmas music, and though a lot of the snow has melted or been swept away, the air still smells cold and fresh.

About five minutes into their walk, Phil had wrapped his arm around Clint's waist and brought their bodies flush together. Clint's maybe still struggling not to die inside.

Ahead of them in the aisle between the stalls, the Escobars are also doing their part of playing the enamoured couple, though with them it probably isn't an act. When they stop to speak with a craftsman, he and Phil veer off to the right to look at some jars of applebutter, and Phil's arm drops away.

The Escobars are really into whatever it is the craftsman is telling them about, though Michael seems to be doing most of the talking. Clint and Phil have to move to different booths twice to not seem creepy or rude. They're at a distance where they run a risk of being noticed when the Escobars finally move along. Clint starts off after them anyways, but is caught by a hand at his elbow. He looks back and allows himself to be led when Phil nods towards an open-air table with three large, silver vessels standing on it. He says something to the lady behind the table and reaches for his wallet but Clint's not really paying attention because he's trying to watch their targets without being conspicuous. Needless to say, he's a little surprised when Phil takes one of his hands and puts a large styrofoam cup in it. He thanks the lady at the booth then sets off down the path again, wrapping his arm back around Clint's side and scooting him along so that he starts walking too.

Clint leans into the gesture as he takes the lid off the cup and smells its contents. A puff of steam hits his face at the same time as the smell of rich, dark, pepperminty chocolate. Clint hums, then takes a long, piping-hot sip before putting the lid back on to retain the warmth.

"Good?" Phil asks him.

Clint nods, "Very. Thank you." He takes another drink.

"You're welcome."

Clint snuggles into his side then holds the cup up for him, offering a taste but Phil shakes his head.

"If I want a taste, I'll just kiss you," he says with a teasing smile.

Clint's stomach swoops and he really hopes that his cheeks are already too red for him to visibly blush.
Clint goes right for the computer when they get back to the room. Absolutely nothing happened at the fair but they've got to let SHIELD know about the buyers leaving. Using the photos from yesterday, they'll be put on a watch list but since they didn't go through with the sale, they aren't really much of a concern. He types up the brief and hits send. A yellow triangle pops up in the corner of the screen.

"Uh-oh," he says as he fiddles with the settings and clicks on the notification. Phil comes and looks over his shoulder. The alert on the screen says that there's no connection and that his message couldn't be delivered. "Think they're onto us?"

"It could be a signal jammer," he says in a way that Clint knows means he doesn't think that's what it is. "But more likely, the mountains and their inherent storm systems are naturally interfering with the satellites we're using. It was always a possibility."

"So what do we do?"

"Keep collecting evidence. Tail the suspects. All the equipment still works. Our suite was the only live feed and even without it, the motion sensors will still notify us about anyone coming in or out." He puts down the mug of coffee he'd brought over. "Within a few days, SHIELD will try to send someone in to make sure we aren't dead or kidnapped, but hopefully the signal will clear up before then." He taps a corner of the laptop keyboard, "Go ahead and upload your messages, though. That way they'll get delivered as soon as the signal is back."

Clint nods but reaches out to cup a very insistent hand around the side of Phil's mug. Phil sighs and hands it over, standing and heading back into the kitchen. Clint types one handed as he drinks, until Phil comes back with a second mug that he swaps for his original. He hums when he sips from this new one - he and Phil both take theirs as dark as sin, but cold weather always puts him in the mood for drinks with a little too much sugar.

Once he's done uploading the unsent messages, he hands the computer over for Phil to have a go at the security feeds. A few minutes into the review, Phil scoffs and turns the screen for Clint to see. It shows their suspects getting handsy in the hallway outside their door. Once they're in, Phil fast forwards through the tape to the current time, without their being a sign of anyone coming or going from the room. Ah, to be young and rich and on vacation and in love with someone who loves you back. Clint is very devoutly ignoring the part of his brain trying to fantasize about mirroring them in this aspect of their day, given that he and Phil have done so for almost every other part of it.

Phil sets the laptop aside but leaves it open with the live feed running, and the two of them settle in for a long afternoon of waiting.
"I've been thinking," Clint says as he sets a fresh mug of coffee down in front of Phil and takes a seat beside him on the sofa. "We should try and make contact with the sellers. The field's wide open with the original buyers gone and we aren't gonna get them on the weapons smuggling charge if we have no evidence of sale."

Phil's brow creases as he listens to Clint. He takes a thoughtful moment to sip his coffee, then nods, "You're right." He shuts off his tablet and checks his watch. Clint's stomach growls on cue.

"I'll take that as a vote for ordering room service," Phil says with the hint of a smile, "Now where'd that menu go..."

They order wine to keep up appearances, but they only have half a glass each. It's very good wine but it's nowhere near enough to touch their tolerance levels. The circumstances still manage to have Clint dreamily reminiscing about the way Phil looks when he's really tipsy. How his ears and the high points of his cheeks flush; the way his mouth looks when it's stained from a cheap red.

He thinks about a lot of other things when Phil deigns to lick chocolate cake crumbs and frosting off of his fingertips after he serves them both dessert.

In a genuinely amusing turn of events, the Escobars can't ski. Well, Michael seems like he can kind of ski, but Jaina wobbles with every shuffling step and neither of them can seem to get on the lift.

Clint and Phil had waited a good ten minutes to follow them out to the slopes, but upon arriving at the lift station, found the both of them still playing a losing game of chicken with the chairs.

They'd stood off to the side so that it wouldn't seem like they were trying to pressure them, but ten more minutes have gone by since he and Phil got out here and it's starting to get a little sad.

As Jaina falls on her ass for the third time, Clint looks at Phil, "Opportunity knocks?"

"I guess we'd better answer the door," he says, unsticking his ski poles from the ground and pushing off towards where Michael is struggling to help his wife up. Clint follows suit.

"Hi," he says once he and Phil are near enough to have a conversation, "You two look like you could use some help."

"Uh, no, that's okay," Michael says in a nervous sort of way. "We can figure it out. You can go on ahead of us if you'd like."

"You sure?" Clint asks, concerned and charming, "We don't mind. Paul and I are old pros, and everyone needs a hand the first few times."

"I'm not quite sure how you'd be able to help us do something as simple as get on a ski lift," Jaina pipes up. She's clinging for dear life to Michael's arm and looks even more uncertain than before.

"Easy," Clint tells them with his patented brand of confidence, "It might be a little strange, but trying
to jump on a moving chair kind of already puts you in that category."

As expected, they warm right up to Clint and his faked charm. Enough so that within the next few minutes, the two of them are sandwiched between him and Phil and following their cue as they all hold hands and lean back into the seat of the chair. Jaina yelps a little as the ground pulls away from them but she doesn't rock the seat and neither of them seem like they're going to fall off so Clint doesn't comment.

"By the way, I'm Clark," he says. "And this is my partner Paul."

"Hi," Phil says, with a dorky little wave.

"I'm Jaina and this is my husband Michael," Jaina replies, slowly becoming the composed woman they'd seen conducting business in the lounge two days ago, if a little friendlier.

"You here on your honeymoon?" Phil asks.

Her laugh isn't even unpleasant, "No, we've been married going on five years now."

"Just on vacation for the holiday," Michael adds with a smile.

Ah, damn. Clint hates it when the bad guys are nice.

They make idle chit chat as they taxi up the mountainside. Clint takes the time to scope the terrain below them; the proximity of buildings, an emergency shed - you never know when that kind of thing might come in handy.

As they approach the drop off, Clint prepares them a little and they manage to get off - once again, holding hands - without any real hassle. Jaina almost trips over her skis when she tries to take a step, but, not wanting to push their luck, Clint and Phil leave them alone. The initial contact has been established and that's all they were looking to do this morning. He and Phil wave goodbye then pull their goggles down and race off to the bottom of the hill.

Something not a lot of people know about Clint is that he's good at skiing. He'd picked it up one mission early on and proven to be a quick learner. He's even better at snowboarding but he doesn't get the opportunity to do either as often as he'd like, these days. He and Phil keep pace for a ways but the snow is so inviting. Clint tucks himself into a crouch and speeds off into zig zags for as long as the slope will carry him. He waits with a bright smile for Phil to catch up and then they shuffle back over to the lift.

As luck would have it, not only are Jaina and Michael still at the top when Clint and Phil get back up to it, they initiate a second encounter.

"So, I realize you only offered to help us with getting up here, but, uh, do you think you guys could maybe get us started too?" Michael asks.

Jaina smiles entreatingly, "We've had some lessons, but the muscle memory isn't coming back very readily.

"I think we can make some time," Clint says with a wink, then shoots Phil a quick look. These guys might just be the most regular villains they've ever met.
The muscle memory doesn't quite come back at all. Jaina at least has stopped falling down by the time they're finished though. He wonders if they don't mean a different word, or if they ever had the muscle memory in the first place. Because he's seen Phil go two years without visiting the beach, but then take a break from meetings out at one of the west coast bases to go hit the waves and he can still surf like he was born to do it. But that's Phil, for you. Clint should really try to stop holding anyone else to the Coulson standard.

At the end of the morning, Coulson offers to treat them to cocoa since their experience proved to be mostly an effort in struggle rather than a leisure activity.

"Are the two of you staying through Christmas?" Michael asks as the four of them stand in front of the little cocoa stand that's attached to the ski lift.

"We are," Phil answers, "and if we can sit still long enough, we'll be here through the New Year."

"Phil and I travel a lot. Whenever we can, actually. But we're hoping to be a little bit settled just for the holidays. Try and minimize the stress and distractions."

"I don't think we can manage any longer than that. We're both too much workaholics."

Michael smiles and nudges his wife, "This one's the same way."

Jaina sighs goodnaturedly as though this is something she's frequently accused of, "Not to derail the conversation but could we take this inside? Into the dining room maybe?"

"I second that," Clint adds. "Skiing always works up an appetite."

They discard their cups and start the brief hike back to the lodge.

"So what is it that you do?" Jaina asks.

They give their cover story and slowly progress into shop talk. It only lasts so long, what with Phil and Clint not wanting to embellish too much detail and the Escobars talking in roundabout ways in regards to what they do. But there's hardly a moment of silence throughout the meal. This part being easy isn't surprising. He and Phil are good at what they do and like Phil said, Clint's here for his people skills. There's an art to seizing opportunity.

Clint appreciates the thought and obvious effort that's been put into the decorations at this place. He wonders if they have a specially designated team, and what they do during the summer without letting the place become tacky.

At the moment, he's loitering in the lobby, admiring one of the lovely, enormous Christmas trees that are in every communal room. It's got silver and red and woody ornaments tastefully strewn across
the boughs and Clint likes them because despite the polished look about it, he doesn't think that it's meant to inspire nostalgia in anyone.

He's waiting for Phil to arrive so they can go into the restaurant and eat. The signal had come back an hour ago, and Phil has been capitalizing on the time by providing case details and talking with backup. Clint had come on down to grab them a table since it was very likely going to be crowded this time of night.

Jaina and Michael are both already seated inside. The afternoon had been passed separately to avoid suspicion, and they'd waited to come down late to dinner for the same reason. There is such a thing as too much convenient timing, and besides, both couples could use a break in company.

In the interim, Phil had watched the tapes while the Escobars napped or fucked or something in their room for a few hours, and Clint scoured the lodge for a third time. Which would have been just a bit frustrating, if Clint didn't think that he'd finally found the place they're stashing the devices. He'd been interrupted before he could try and break in, but now that they're in a position to insert themselves into the Escobars' business, he might not need to.

Phil proves, as usual, to have perfect timing. He exits the elevator looking dapper as hell just as, from the corner of his eye, Clint sees the Escobars get up to leave their table. Clint smiles across the room at Phil shooting his cuffs. There is absolutely no effort put into feigning a besotted expression, because with the free reins of the circumstances, one paints itself on Clint's face naturally. He's hard pressed to stay at his vantage point and not rush to meet Phil halfway, but he waits, and is rewarded with Phil reaching out to pull him close - one hand on his elbow and the other on his waist. Clint reaches up to finger gently at Phil's lapels and press palms to his chest, leaning in for a kiss.

"They're leaving the restaurant now," he mumbles just before their lips meet. And Christ, what a meeting it is. Phil is a fantastic kisser. Clint makes a mental note to start taking better advantage of that while he has the opportunity to. When they break, gentle smiles across their mouths, Clint catches sight of Jaina over Phil's shoulder. He gives the slightest nod of his head and Phil turns, reaching blindly down to take Clint's hand.

"Hello," he calls out.

"Well hello," she responds. Michael comes up behind her, smiling.

"Enjoy your dinner?" Clint asks.

Jaina nods, "The filet mignon is to die for."

"I hope you haven't filled up too much to join us at the bonfire later," Phil says. "Snacks and h'ors d'oeurves have been guaranteed."

"Oh," Jaina says speculatively, "We hadn't planned on going, but that does sound like fun."

"I'm also told that there will also be music, cider, and a stargazing excursion where a guide leads us out to a field and we all sit on blankets and pretend that we're able to find the Big Dipper."

Michael chuckles a little at that and Clint thinks it's hilarious that Michael's actual personality is as genuinely new-money dorky as Paul Colbert is pretending to be.

"It's at ten in the rear courtyard," Clint contributes.

"Sounds great," Michael says, putting an arm around Jaina's waist. "We'll see you then."
"Goodbye," Jaina says, and they walk off towards the elevator.

When they're gone, Phil gestures to the Maître D's podium, "Shall we?" His hand settles against Clint's lower back and renders him essentially helpless to do anything but follow Phil's lead.

Three hours later, shivering and sitting in a dark field, Clint wonders if the majority of his sense was sapped out of him in that moment. 'It's a bonfire,' he'd thought to himself when they'd gone back up to get their outerwear, 'how cold can I get in front of an enormous stack of flames?' He hadn't been taking into account the stargazing portion of the evening. So here he sits, teeth chattering and wondering why Phil left and when the fuck he's going to get back and share his body heat.

He stares out at the sea of other people in the cleared, grassy field where the craft market had been held. The figures of the guides who escorted (Clint thinks it felt more like herding) them out here dip and weave, walking among all the other people who've been seated, the glowstick batons illuminating them and bobbing prettily as they move. There's someone approaching from behind him, but he's almost startled when it turns out to be Phil, if only because instead of giving any kind of greeting, he just drapes a blanket over Clint's shoulders.

"For you," he says, and plants a kiss on top of Clint's head.

Clint tilts his head back and smiles up at him, "Thank you." And Jesus, he could not sound more saccharine or infatuated. Jaina and Michael are seated a few feet away on their own blanket, and Clint is excited to have an audience to perform for. Phil crouches and takes a seat, and Clint adjusts himself to snuggle up next to him. He holds out one end of the blessed extra blanket and Phil tucks it around himself until they're tangled in a cozy swathe.

Suddenly, Clint doesn't feel removed from the activity. He's warming up, and he's part of a couple just like everyone else out here, and he's got a stomach full of mini sausages, toasted marshmallows, and apple cider. He looks up at the expanse of clear sky above them. Off in the distance there's a visible line of clouds but the rest of the sky is clear and bright and just about as empty of light pollution as it can get. He takes a deep breath - the cold air fills up his lungs and he loves the way it tastes.

When he tears his eyes away to look back down at the people around him, he realizes that except for an older couple and two people who look really sleepy, everyone around them is locked at the lips. He's pretty sure Phil can't see more than their silhouettes but he's also certain that Phil can tell what's going on anyways.

Clint swallows. Can he justify this? Is he crossing a line into douchebag territory? Phil will stop him if he wants to, right?

He swallows again and looks over. Phil turns to meet his gaze - their noses almost brush. Clint loses the will to verbalize a preface, and just leans in, closing his eyes at the last possible second to watch for signs of resistance or discomfort. Instead, he's met with the sight of Phil's eyes falling shut and then the touch of warm, parted lips against his own. The start is slow and sensuous and Clint feels the weight of how intimately they know one another; the affection of years in the touch of their bodies. They gain momentum with a graceful sort of passion and Clint reaches out to shore his hand
against Phil's far side. Phil's warm palm comes up to cradle the base of Clint's head and his thumb strokes just across the bolt of Clint's jaw. Phil still tastes like marshmallow sugar and Clint absently wishes he'd tried something like this back in front of the roaring fire. Phil's thumb sweeps back and forth just a little and he tilts his head in what Clint thinks is an effort to get a more satisfying angle, but his mouth breaks away from Clint's and moves down to the gap of skin peeking out between his chin and his scarf. Clint gasps softly and clutches at the fabric of the sweater Phil's wearing under his coat, but he only has a handful of kisses and an endless moment to appreciate the sensation before Phil is drawing away and directing his efforts back to Clint's mouth. Clint crowds into him a little more, narrows the curve of his shoulders to get as much of himself as close to Phil's warmth as possible. Clint has never been happier to have nothing else to do.

He has only the vaguest idea of how long they go on for, but it's been somewhere close to a half hour when Phil pulls away with a tiny smack that punctuates the end of their kiss. Clint wonders why until he registers the sound of shuffling off to the side. He glances over his shoulder, which puts a little distance between him and Phil but the moment had already been cut short anyways.

Michael is helping Jaina to her feet, and the two of them look incredibly unmeshed. When Jaina catches Clint's eye she smiles politely and takes a step closer, "We're turning in for the night but we wanted to say goodbye to you before we left."

"And to thank you for inviting us. It was all charming," Michael adds.

"Very enjoyable," Jaina agrees.

Clint smiles up at them. The blanket slips from his shoulder a little more and the cold starts to seep in, as if to punctuate the moment.

"We should probably be heading in, too," Phil says. "Do you mind if we walk back with you?"

Another means of monitoring them and making sure that they really are turning in and not running off to do other things outside of the monitoring radius.

The trip is quiet, and the walk seems long with the light of the hotel so distant and Phil's arm around his waist keeping him close and a little warmer than he'd be on his own.

As the group exits the elevator together on their floor, Jaina asks, "Are you all doing anything tomorrow morning?"

"As a matter of fact we're going to be down at the stables."

Jaina's smile widens, "Well then, rather than inviting you to join us, I'll just say that we'll see you bright and early."

Michael opens the door to their suite, "Goodnight," he says as Jaina waves.

The feeds are still up when they get back to their room. Phil checks in with the backup team, but no new intel has surfaced while they were out, which was to be expected. There isn't a lot they don't know or can find out without directly asking Jaina or Michael.
"Do you think this would be more or less harder if they weren't so likable?" Clint asks as he pulls on a white t-shirt. While the pants are still fine, the novelty of the flannel top has worn off, proving too uncomfortable for him to keep sleeping in.

"Hmm," Phil fluffs his pillow. "More professionally difficult, less emotionally taxing." He tosses back the covers and sits on the edge of the bed, looking over his shoulder at Clint, "It's not as though we're consigning them to death row. They'll get a trial, hopefully see the error of their ways, and then move on with their lives. What's seven years and a few thousand dollars in fines to people with their means?"

Clint nods, putting his aids in their case before lurching towards the bed and flopping down on top of the covers. He yelps when Phil pinches his side, but obligingly squirms around until he manages to get himself under them so that Phil isn't pinned anymore.

He stretches and yawns, "G'night, Phil," he says as he tucks himself under the blanket.

"Goodnight," Phil's lips read, just visible but slurred like he's already half asleep. Clint smiles.

The first thing Clint registers when he wakes up is that his nose and ears are cold. He takes a deep breath and jeeze, even the air is freezing. He shivers and curls forward, into the line of warmth in front of him. The line of warmth moves towards him too. It stiffens as Clint opens his eyes, but relaxes again even quicker. His hand lifts with the surface it's resting again, and Clint blinks at the blue colored gentle curve under his fingers. Oh, and a small vee of skin.

He leans away from where his cheek had been nudged up against Phil's shoulder and looks up in time to catch Phil at the tail end of a yawn. His hand falls as Phil exhales.

Phil swipes a palm over his face and mumbles something. Profanity, if Clint had to guess. Clint takes a deep breath to stave off his own yawn and sits up to stretch. He rolls to get to the bedside table and retrieve his aids.

"Jesus," he mutters as he fits them in, "Did we leave a window open?"

Phil yawns again as he sits up, "Are either of us masochistic enough to have done that yesterday? It was below freezing." He walks around the end of the bed to the window and pushes aside the curtain. "Oh."

Clint gets up and goes to stand beside him, "Oh," he parrots.

There's a lovely layer of snow over everything. It doesn't look like there was a whole lot, but it's fresh and exquisite and everything is covered evenly.

"I guess we should have checked the forecast last night," Phil says absently, still staring out at the landscape. It's enough to make Clint aware of how close they're standing, and how much he wants to step in closer, to touch Phil casually, intimately while they stand here and admire something so beautiful.
He takes a step back.

"Do you remember seeing a thermostat anywhere in here?"

"I don't think so," Phil says without turning away. "There are ceiling fans and fireplaces in every room so they probably just expect us to use those."

"Fuck," Clint heads for the one opposite their bed and looking for the means to get a fire started. "There's no fireplace in the bathroom," he grumbles, "What do they expect us to do if we've gotta take a leak in the middle of the night?"

"Be quick about it, I suppose," Phil says from somewhere behind him. "I'll go make some coffee."

After Clint's had his first mug, and has gotten two fires going he starts to warm up.

"Have you checked in with HQ yet?" he asks as he goes for his second.

Phil shakes his head, "No, but I'm not hopeful. That cloud cover looks thick."

Clint finishes taking a long sip before pushing off the counter with a satisfied sound. He goes to pull out the laptop and yep, no signal and no new messages from their backup. He runs through the feeds from last night quickly as he finishes his coffee, but seeing as the alarms didn't so much as peep last night, it makes sense that there's nothing to see. He tells Phil.

"Well," he responds, "Then I suppose it's time to treat ourselves to some room-service."

It's almost colder outside than it was last night but Clint can't be bothered because there's so much goddam snow. Snow is a luxury he's had few occasions to enjoy rather than worry over, in his life. But now, bouncing up and down on his toes as they wait outside the stables, definitely falls into the 'enjoy' category. Jaina and Michael have already been sent off, but Phil is still holding his hand and despite the double layer of warm gloves, it's adding to Clint's giddiness.

Phil squeezes his hand at the sound of jingle-bells coming into range. Clint squeezes back and it's all he can do not to dash forward to greet the horses as they round the corner, pulling a sleigh. They do approach once the driver comes to a stop and waves them over.

"Can we pet the horses first?" Clint asks before the driver even signals them to get into the carriage. The driver nods and Clint, beaming and aware of it, drags Phil forward. He holds out a gently curled fist and nudges Phil's side so that he does too. The horses snuffle at their fingers earnestly. Clint doesn't know if they want attention or are looking for treats but he lets go of Phil's hand to reach up and start petting the one in front of him.

"What breed are they?" Phil asks, probably of the driver.

"Friesian," Clint breathes in answer anyways. They were the show horses the bareback riders had used. He cups one hand under the horse's chin and strokes the other down the length of her nose.
"Hi, girl," he murmurs, sweeping one hand out to stroke her neck between the bell-covered straps of her harness.

It's been ages since he got to be this close to any kind of big animal. Almost as long ago as the circus, except for one mission in the southwest where they'd had to ride mules through a desert canyon pass. He can tell Phil's watching him but he doesn't know why, and when he tilts his head to get a better look, Phil's already focused on making friends with his horse.

Eventually, they pull themselves away and load into the backseat of the sled. Phil asks the driver if he can try to catch up to their friends a little, since that's why they're doing this in the first place. And then they're racing off, the wind chapping their faces even as they snuggle under the faux-fur blankets they've been provided with.

They arrive at lunch with bright smiles and weather-reddened faces. Jaina and Michael had gone on ahead to get them a table and Clint wanted to take a minute to say goodbye to the horses. The meal is delicious, as usual, but they only manage to broach shoptalk when their plates are almost cleared.

"Well," Phil says, standing up from his chair, "Does anyone care to go on a walk with me? It feels like I've been sitting down all day."

"Thank you," Jaina replies, "But I think I'm going to go enjoy the spa this afternoon. Maybe see if they've got a sauna to warm me up."

"I don't think I'm up for it either," Clint adds, because someone has to stay here to watch her. "I'm going to grab a quick nap."

"I'll join you," Michael tells him, though. And hey, one out of two ain't bad, so they roll with it.

Jaina really does spend the afternoon at the spa. Phil comes back to the room after an hour, which to Clint seems like way too much time spent outdoors in this weather unless they were doing something more active than walking that would actually keep them warm.

"Hi honey, bring anything interesting home from the store?" Clint asks, turning the page in his book.

"It was less like taking candy from a baby and more like a dog voluntarily bringing me their favorite chew toy to show off," Phil says as he takes his coat off. "All I had to do was say that we travel frequently and that I'm always looking for new investment opportunities, and he jumped right on it. Told me that Jaina was an inventor, that I should ask her about some business ventures she had in the works because she's so creative and clever."

"Sounds cute," Clint says and then pouts, "Why don't you ever brag about me like that?"

"I do," Phil says as he rummages around the top pocket of the laptop suitcase. He comes up with a USB cable. "Why else would everybody at headquarters think you're my favorite?"

That makes Clint blush, because he's taken it out of the context of their cover, and Phil openly saying
that he likes Clint will always make him feel fuzzy. Sometimes Phil says shit like this to get a
reaction out of him. He drops his book on his face to hide the blush and hopes that Phil assumes
Clint's doing it because he thinks Phil's being ridiculous or something.

"And then," Phil says in a tone that means he actually did get something interesting, "He gave me a
caveat that I shouldn't be expecting anything to happen anytime soon, because the two of them had
come here for business. And he went on to reveal some very incriminating details about free meeting
and storage spaces because of someone they know-"

"How vulgar," Clint says affectedly into the crease of his book's spine.

"-and initial investors backing out and details about a very important investor who'd approached
recently including why she was important."

Clint peeps out over the top of his book, "And?"

"And I recorded it all," he says waggling his phone as he connects it to the laptop to upload the
soundbite.

Clint sits up and lets the book fall to his lap, "Are all of our missions this easy when there's nothing
to blow up? It's been so long since there's been one, I almost can't remember."

"It probably helps that they're amateurs and it's just the two of them." He looks away from the screen
and at Clint, "But I do feel a bit like I should be insulted by how open he was."

Clint stands and stretches, "Did he say when the new buyer was showing up?"

"Possibly tonight or tomorrow morning. Then he invited us to breakfast and I accepted. I was fairly
certain that you'd be alright with that-"

"Naturally," Clint says in the same affected voice as before.

"- but I'm not sure how Jaina will feel about it if the buyer does show up early tomorrow and the
meal is meant to be a business affair."

"I guess we'll just have to go and see for ourselves."

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Clint's pretty sure he knows what's going on this time. It seems familiar, but he can't quite put it into
words. Instead of being on his side, facing a source of warmth, the source of warmth is half slumped
on top of him. Clint shifts and realizes his legs are a little tangled together with ... with Phil's and with
the sheets. Phil takes a deep breath as he starts to wake up and Clint blinks, looking down at the line
of Phil's shoulder where it covers half of his chest and stretches into an arm laid across his waist. He
strokes his hand down Phil's back, further under the covers and away from the cold air that their
movements are letting in. Phil's shoulders compress then expand before he rolls off of Clint with a
yawn.

Obviously, Clint wishes neither of them had to get up and that Phil would stay right there on top of
him for a good long while. But he is very glad when Phil goes to start a fire.
Breakfast is exactly as politely awkward as they might've expected. The buyer shows up halfway through the meal - which had been going pretty nicely - and looks affronted at Phil and Clint's presence. She's introduced to them as Elina Kapoor. Phil and Clint make eye contact across the table as she seats herself on the end between Jaina and Michael. Clint takes it to mean that Phil also thinks he's seen her somewhere before.

When they go up to their room to change before the day's scheduled activity, the secure signal is still down. But as Phil's changing and Clint is uploading the footage of the new buyer, he realizes where he recognizes her from.

"The bulletin!" he exclaims.

Phil pokes his head through the top of his turtleneck and Christ, he should wear one of those all the time. The way it frames him makes Clint want to swallow his tongue. Phil reaches up to adjust his collar, "The bulletin?" he prompts.

"The- the bulletin," Clint waves his hand a little, "That stupid thing they send out every time it updates. The list of- The SHIELD's most wanted list! She was on it!"

"Well if it helps us apprehend a criminal then I don't think it can be all that stupid."

Clint waves his hand dismissively, "Yeah but it wastes so much paper. Why can't they just email it?"

"Do you remember what it said?"

"Yeah, yeah! She's uh, she's an international terrorist. Originally from India which is where everyone thinks she keeps going back to hide out. She's wanted by at least a few world governments and her last activity was ... two months ago? I think? No, three. How are we gonna bring her in?"

Phil is already checking his phone, "There's supposed to be a break in the bad weather this afternoon. Go ahead and upload a message to base team. Tell them to text or call you when the signal's up again and we can arrange for them to come bring her in."

Taking the extra time to do that means they have to hurry a little down to meet the Escobars. Clint is happy to rush though, because today's activity is ice skating on the pond behind the resort. He and Natasha go every year when they've got the free time, but they usually wait until January when it's colder and the crowds are smaller. But being on a natural pond instead of a man-made rink is a new experience. They follow the path in the snow out to the rental station and Clint admires the bright scenery. It's probably beautiful in the summer, too, Clint thinks and he imagines the few nearby trees full of summer-green leaves and the ever-imposing view of the mountains behind them.

"You've been before, right?" Clint asks as he and Phil sit, putting on their skates.

"I have, but it's been a while."

Clint stands up and helps Phil to his feet. They stagger over to the ice together and take a moment to
gather their bearings. Clint takes a few hesitant steps then glides forward. Satisfied, he turns to Phil, "Ready?"

But Phil is only there long enough to make eye contact between one blink and the next. Before Clint fully realizes what's happening, he's watching Phil jet off around the edge of the lake. He has to weave around a handful of people but for the most part it's just him and the wind as he races around the perimeter. His takes a turn at breakneck speed and Clint thinks for sure that he's going to fall on his side with how he has his hands tucked behind his back instead of out to his sides for balance. But he stands upright again and glides for a few feet through a clump of people, with an effortlessness that Clint would describe as a sort of laziness if it were anybody else. When he's in free space again he speeds back up.

Clint has turned around and is drifting slowly backwards as he watches. He makes sure that his mouth has closed by the time Phil approaches.

"You sly bastard," he says with a laugh as Phil comes to a smart hockey stop in front of him. He knew Phil could've meant anywhere from a couple of months to a decade but he didn't expect him to be that good. "Why didn't I know you could do that?! Where did you learn?"

"Pee-wee hockey," he says with a wink. "And then I may have played until I got sent off to military school."

Clint laughs, "Of course you did."

"I try to keep up with it and go when a rink opens up nearby. Nothing formal, just getting out on the ice."

"What?! Why haven't you ever come with me and Tasha before?!"

Phil shrugs and reaches out to hold his hand. They push off and he says, "It's your thing - just the two of you. The three of us spend a lot of time together as it is."

"There's a reason for that," Clint tells him, squeezing his grip for a moment. "You should come next time. Nat would love showing off for you."

"Don't act like you wouldn't either."

"Sure, but you'd also get to show of for her. And besides, I'm about to have my turn right now," he says with a grin and lets go of Phil's hand. He's not particularly fast and he can't do the incredible jumps and moves that Natasha can like it's second nature, but he does a mean backspin and he's got a killer full backflip, which is something Nat says she doesn't like to do because she isn't looking to get her skull split open. He thinks pulling one of those might be too much for this setting anyways, and so he moves to the middle of the pond where there's only two other people at the moment. Clint smiles at them. He skates in a circle, working up some momentum before he tries anything. He twirls, then does some backspins and cuts a few beautiful figure-eights that are fast enough to get his heart really going.

By the time he gets back to Phil, Jaina and Michael have met up with him. They all clap patronizingly and he takes a little half bow as he stops beside their group.

"Where's your friend?" Clint asks. He takes the opportunity to place his hand against Phil's lower back as if he's balancing himself.

"Sitting over there on one of the benches," Jaina point loosely towards the rental and snack kiosks.
"I suggested we grab some cocoa and join her in a bit," Phil says.

"Sounds perfect," Clint says. "But for now, there's plenty of open ice to enjoy."

They skate for a good long while - Clint makes sure he can catch sight of Ms. Kapoor every time they round the side of the pond he can see the picnic tables from. She never wanders off and Clint wonders why that is.

Michael says that since he and Phil treated them after skiing, he'll take a turn getting hot cocoas for them all, and Jaina, Phil, and Clint all go to sit with Ms. Kapoor.

"Enjoying the weather, Ms. Kapoor?" Clint asks in an attempt at friendliness.

"I would likely enjoy it more if I could be doing work," she says. Jaina takes it as a joke and laughs, but Clint interprets it as a jab towards the Escobars' relaxed attitudes and the fact that they're out here rather than conducting whatever business they have to conduct. He makes brief eye contact with Phil and the two of them laugh anyways.

"Paul and I are the same way," Clint says, resurfacing rehashed conversation topics to stay in character as the unassuming, self-absorbed WASPs they're pretending to be.

Jaina doesn't seem to mind; "I'll confess that I am too, most of the time."

Ms. Kapoor's face pinches like she's dissatisfied or doesn't believe that answer. And Clint might feel the same, if he were on a tight schedule and in her shoes. But then again, maybe she just actively hates small talk.

"Darling, you're outnumbered," Jaina says when Michael appears with a full drink carrier. "Workaholics, each and every one of us."

"Are any of you even trying to enjoy yourselves?" he asks as the cups are passed out. Ms. Kapoor sips from whatever is in her thermos as the rest of them laugh obligingly. Despite Clint and Phil's subtle efforts to engage her, she remains quiet as the rest of them chat and finish their drinks.

"Are you sure you won't join us?" Phil asks before they head back to the ice.

"Thank you, no," she says, words all the crisper in her accent, "I prefer to watch."

"As long as you're enjoying yourself," Clint says, and they shuffle away. "Bit of a spoilsport," he adds under his breath to Phil. But Jaina and Michael seem to be having a good time either despite her presence or because of her absence. It's reassuring to Clint - he takes it as a sign that they aren't friends with their less-than-savory clients.

During lunch Jaina and Michael mention that since the resort's Christmas Ball is tomorrow and there aren't any organized activities during the day, they'll be going skiing in the morning if Clint and Phil would like to join them.

"I can't think of a better way to spend Christmas Eve," Clint says, "Except maybe building snowmen
and baking cookies. But I don't think there's quiet enough snow and I'm a disaster in the kitchen." Clint thinks to himself with a bit of surprise that that might be the biggest lie he's had to tell so far on this incredibly tame op.

"That's a yes," Phil translates, and the group laughs, because mildly rich people find everything funny.

They part ways, and when dinnertime rolls around, Phil and Clint wait to make sure the Escobars are already seated by the time they get down to the restaurant. But when they get into the dining room, it's obvious that a meeting is in progress which they won't be asked to join. Nonetheless, the two of them stop by to say hi and place an audio bug before heading over to their own table.

When they get back to their room and listen to the recording the bug had transmitted to the laptop, it's the same sort of thing that Phil's conversation with Michael produced; only usable and incriminating if they get other hard evidence to back it up. Maybe the Escobars are better than they thought - or maybe they're too polite for their own good.

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With the new player on the premises, Clint and Phil take turns on watch that night. The hotel is as quiet as usual, until around three in the morning, the secure signal comes back up for an hour. And since Clint's on watch, he makes the call as soon as those little green bars appear in the corner of the screen. Phil wakes up a few hours later while Clint's making his second pot of coffee.

"Goodmorning," Clint says, generously holding out the mug he'd started to fix for himself. What can he say? He's in a great mood and Phil looks like he could use it. "Merry Christmas Eve."

Phil grunts in response, reaching for the cup and taking a big gulp as soon as it's in his hands. He leans against Clint a little as they stand at the counter together.

"The signal came up last night, and so did some good news," he says to get Phil's attention. "HQ wants us to get Ms. Kapoor out of the party tonight and around to the side of the building at 22:00 hours, ideally. They'll be on-site by the time things get kickin' at nine, though."

Phil yawns again, but sets down his cup and straightens up, fully awake, "Sounds good to me."

There's a knock at the door just then, and Clint is proud to note that when Phil goes to answer it and finds a waiter bearing a huge breakfast, a small smile appears on his face and remains there all the way through their meal.

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By the time they make it out to the slopes, Jaina and Michael are already out on the bunny trail again; bright eyed, bushy-tailed, and apparently eager to master the sport. Ms. Kapoor is nowhere in sight.
He and Phil exchange meaningful looks, and after only a few runs, Clint feigns a headache and blames the bright snow for aggravating it.

He plans on going back to the room to change out of his ski-clothes and check the footage, but as he's at the rear entrance to the hotel, instinct and opportunity dictate that he go down and investigate the storage room where he'd seen the devices before.

This time, with everyone busy upstairs preparing for the Christmas Ball tonight, there isn't anybody to block his way or interrupt him. He sneaks back down the unlocked hallway and, crouching beneath the small rectangular window he holds up his phone camera and takes a picture to get a look inside the room without being seen. As he'd hoped, Ms. Kapoor is in the room by herself.

He manages to snap a few shots and even a video of her pacing and talking on the phone, but she's inaudible, and is facing away from the door too much for Clint to read her lips and be able to get an idea of what she's saying. Though he can certainly tell that she's angry.

Clint decides that the stack of boxes across the width of the hall would provide a good vantage point and hiding spot, so he shuffles some and then tucks himself behind a little wall of them. As he watches her, he can't help but wonder why the sellers have left her alone, with access to the devices. *Amateurs.*

She's on her call for quite a while, and when she hangs up, she holds her phone like she wants to throw it at the wall, and stares at the machinery for a few minutes. Finally, she leaves just as two hotel employees enter the hallway. Clint stays crouched in his little makeshift fort, but apparently his luck has run out for the day, because the staff are here for the boxes he was using. They start to disassemble the piles, only to freeze mid-motion when they catch sight of him.

He looks up, "Damn," he says, putting on a disappointed face, "Now I've gotta find a new hiding spot. He's gonna win this round for sure." He stands up and jogs down the hallway, managing to make it out the exit without further incident as he heads up to his room. So maybe he's still got some luck left.

Phil comes back to the room about an hour later.

"They're still out there, but I begged off. Said I wanted to come check on you. They think I'm quite the doting partner."

"Awww," Clint coos, not looking up from the message he's typing on the laptop.

"So what've you got?" he asks as he strips off some of his outerwear.

"Not much, other than that Ms. Kapoor is probably working with an off-site partner. She was in the storage room talking on her phone when I got down there and she seemed pissed the whole time. I couldn't get any of the dialogue though." Phil comes and sits beside him on the sofa. "I got some pictures and video and I've uploaded those. She's in her room now, according to the feed." He unplugs his phone and pulls up said feed. "Also if any of the staff give me funny looks tonight, it's because I got cornered when I was trying to leave and for cover, I heavily implied that I was playing
hide and seek."

"As one does," Phil says, which is less of a reaction than Clint was shooting for but Phil's already reaching for the landline on the end table. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving. And in my opinion, it's worth the gamble to risk funny looks in order to get some good food."

Getting ready for formal events has never been a favorite of Clint's, especially not when it's for a mission. But he's feeling antsy and he's honestly ready to be doing anything other than watching video feeds and trying to keep himself entertained.

The occasion doesn't call for a tux, but he's wearing a beautiful suit that he just wants to continuously run his hands over. He's ready to go except for his tie, which he's hoping to get Phil to do for him, because that's something that makes the butterflies in his tummy flip their shit. It's always nice to have Phil close to him.

Phil is finishing putting his cufflinks in as he emerges from the bathroom. Clint turns and holds out his tie plaintively. Phil sighs, soft and a little exasperated, but steps forward and takes the strip of fabric from him.

"Make it fancy?" he requests.

A tiny smile touches the corner of Phil's mouth and he loops the silk around Clint's neck. Clint reaches up to flip his collar and their wrists brush gently together in a way both familiar and delightful. Phil balances the ends carefully and there's a moment of stillness before he's deftly tugging and twisting the fabric into a simple work of art. He fits the knot to the base of Clint's throat and their eyes meet for more than a moment. Clint suppresses a hard swallow, and tips his chin down to get a look at it, just to admire the way it sits and the sight of Phil's hands falling away from it down the length of the fabric. He looks up again as Phil steps back.

"Thanks," Clint says as he turns away to reach for his jacket. "See you in a few," he adds, heading for the door, thinking about Phil's strong hands on vulnerable parts of his body.

Now that backup is within range, Phil has a comm unit in and they've been instructed to get Ms. Kapoor out as soon as it can be managed. Clint heads down to meet Jaina and Michael while Phil waits upstairs until he can follow Ms. Kapoor down and hopefully catch her before she even makes an appearance.

The ballroom looks like something out of a movie. He'd seen it empty and undecorated in the dark that first night, but it feels totally transformed. Soft yellow lighting illuminates glittering decorations on the walls, the tables, and the enormous Christmas tree at one end of the room. There's a live band to one side of it, and some tables with refreshments on the other. Dining tables with red and green centerpieces ring the wide dancefloor where the movie-extra beautiful resort-goers are waltzing easily. He spots the Escobars quickly, of course, and makes his way towards them across the room.

"Where's your better half?" Jaina asks when he arrives at their table.

"I was too excited, and I got ready first. He told me to come on down." He goes for a charming grin,
"I love holiday parties."

"You're in good company," Michael assures him. They chat until Ms. Kapoor arrives, but she's only at the table long enough to set down her purse and wrap before she's headed to the portable cash bar. It takes a full minute after that for Phil to show up.

Clint catches sight of him from the corner of his eye, but pretends not to notice until he's tapped on the shoulder.

"May I have this dance?" Phil asks, holding his hand out.

Clint grins as he takes it, then turns to the Escobars, "Excuse us."

"I think my favorite part," Phil says once they're out of earshot, "about missions like this, is that you actually have manners and you use them."

"Boo, pick a better favorite," Clint chides.

Phil squeezes his hand, "Mind if I lead?"

"Not if you promise to sweep me off my feet," Clint flirts.

"It's a Coulson guarantee," Phil says, and the crinkles around his eyes might as well be a wink. They take a position among the other gliding figures on the floor and his hand settles on Clint's back, "My comm mic is on mute, so we can speak freely."

"Thank Christ," Clint says, "I might've died if I'd had ta' spend two hours making small talk on top of having done nothing all day."

"And yet, you're one of the stealthiest, most patient people in your line of work," Phil says, a smile in his tone, "The duality of man."

"What happened with our friends’ friend?" Clint asks.

"She gave me the slip when some other guests got on the elevator with her and filled up the carriage. I had to wait and take the next one."

"I don't think we need to worry about not having another opportunity," Clint tells him. "She's been checking her phone since she got here. I think she must be waiting on another call, and she'll probably step outside to take it."

"I don't think we need to worry about not having another opportunity," Clint tells him. "She's been checking her phone since she got here. I think she must be waiting on another call, and she'll probably step outside to take it."

They rotate between the dancefloor, the refreshment buffet, and taking breaks with the Escobars at their table. It's an easy rhythm and Clint thinks that if more formal events were like this, he maybe wouldn't mind them so much. The company, though, is potentially what makes all the difference.

Ms. Kapoor is approached several times during the evening, but makes only the slightest effort at politeness as she declines all of them.

Slowly, she starts paying less and less attention to her phone, seemingly content with people-watching and elegantly downing glass after glass of champagne. Phil and Clint are still alert but are no longer as worried about her darting away at any moment. Even if she's got a strong tolerance, she's inebriated enough that she won't easily get away from a pair of the finest spies.
It sets a mood - the two of them start to come off of high alert and relax into one another. The bright Christmas tunes have become warm slow dances. Phil's tried a few daring dips and twirls and Clint hasn't done anything stupid to spoil their rhythm. He feels capable and safe and it's so nice to be here, wrapped up in Phil's arms and feeling like he belongs.

Phil hums softly along with *The Christmas Song* as he pulls Clint closer, until their chests and cheeks are pressed together, only enough room between them for their feet to shuffle along. The air smells like Christmas and Phil when he takes a deep breath. Clint wants to let his eyes fall closed. It's almost like a dream.

"My alarm's going to go off any minute, isn't it?" Clint mumbles absently, because it's funny in the moment that he thinks it.

Phil shifts and pulls away, even as they keep moving. He doesn't go far, with Clint's arm held across the span of his shoulders and neck, but it's enough to put space between their noses so they can see each other's faces. Clint doesn't really think about what he's just said, though he's sure it has something to do with Phil moving away. He's more focused on whatever Phil's about to say. But Phil isn't trying to start a sentence.

"What?" Clint asks, soft and a little expectant.

Phil's eyes drop to Clint's mouth. It takes a confused moment for him to realizes this, but Phil's still looking once he does. And then Phil's expression goes distant - his eyes flick to the right of Clint's head.

"She's leaving," he says. His hands become firm against Clint, like maybe he's grounding himself.

Clint doesn't look around but they step off the dancefloor, having stayed near the edge for just this reason. Their bodies pull away but Clint leans back in to press a kiss on Phil's cheek, "Good luck," he whispers, then turns to head back to the Escobars' table. They fail to notice him returning and he watches them get up to dance again now that their friend is gone. If they come back and ask after Phil, he'll tell them he's gone to the restroom.

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Phil doesn't show back up that evening but Clint gets the "we're good" text from him about a half hour after he leaves, which only means that she's in custody. The Escobars don't notice his absence until about fifteen minutes beyond that and since the bathroom excuse is kind of a stretch at this point, he goes with, "Paul wasn't feeling well earlier, that's part of why he was late. He probably started to feel bad again, I'd better go check on him soon."

It's a relief when Clint asks them if they're worried about where Ms. Kapoor went and Jaina brushes it off by saying, "Not at all; we were actually surprised that she stayed as long as she did."

It means that they won't go looking for her anytime soon. He gives it ten minutes then calls it a night, wishing them a Merry Christmas and excusing himself to go check on his partner.

Phil isn't in the room when Clint gets up there. He didn't expect him to be but the thought is a conscious one with how empty the apartment feels. He turns on a couple of lights and dresses for
bed. For the first time, he thinks how weird it is to him that he can't feel or hear the bed creak - too new and well made for such touches of reality. He gets under the covers and tries to keep awake with reading so he can talk to Phil when he gets in. He wants to debrief about what happened with Ms. Kapoor, but also he wants to see if he can get Phil to say whatever it was he hadn't at the end of their dance.

Clint doesn't know what passed between them on the dancefloor, but it had and does make him feel warm. Not strange, but new. Pleasant. Maybe he can try to say something if Phil doesn't. The words on his page blur as he thinks about it.

The click of a light switch is what wakes him. He doesn't give himself away by tensing up until he's already sitting upright and reaching for the knife he's got tucked under the mattress. He realizes in the same moment that it's only Phil and that he's accidentally fallen asleep with his aids in. He hisses and reaches up to adjust how they sit in his ear.

"I'm sorry," Phil says from a far corner of the darkness. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, no," Clint says, his voice tired as he waves his hand dismissively, "It's good that you did." He reaches down to tuck the knife back under the mattress. "How'd it go?" he asks as he stands.

"Ominously well, if that makes any sense."

"So good it seems bad?" He looks over his shoulder as he walks towards his hardshell suitcase.

Phil nods, "She didn't struggle much. Waived the rights we tried to offer her, and confessed to just about everything."

"S H I E L D teams are intimidating," Clint says as he digs around his belongings. Maybe he should turn on a light.

"And you were right; she did have a partner. But he's not nearby or planning to show up. From what I gather, a team is being organized to go after him now."

"Are they bringing in the Escobars tonight?"

"No, they want us to stay and try to get them to sell the devices to us. Apparently hard evidence is worth more than the word of a wanted criminal."

"Is it shitty of me to be glad?" Clint asks, "I'm too tired for extraction and formal debrief tonight. And I kind of just want to sleep in that bed one more time." He finds what he's been looking for and stands up. Eyes adjusted, he gets a good look at Phil - tie in one hand, first couple of buttons undone, slouching a little with the hand in his pocket. He looks tired and beautiful in the light from the window and Clint steps forward.

"Oh, that reminds me, it started to snow again about an hour ago and it doesn't look like it's letting up anytime soon, so we should make sure to put on a fire before- ... What's this?" he asks as Clint hands him a package. He sets his tie down and takes it with both hands.
"It's your present. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas?"

Clint dips his head to the side and shrugs, "It's after midnight and I don't know when we'll have free time tomorrow. So, yeah; merry Christmas."

Phil clutches the package for a brief moment then turns around and goes for his bag. Much more quickly than Clint had, he comes up with a shiny purple box.

"Merry Christmas," he says, voice hushed as he hands it to Clint.

Clint takes the gift from him, maybe a little more carefully than it warrants, but the moment feels breakable; just the two of them in the delicate moonlight and whatever Christmas magic is hovering around them.

"You first," Clint tells him.

Phil shakes his head, "Together."

The crackling of paper fills the room as they both undo the wrapping. But when Clint is down to a slim, cherrywood case, he pauses to watch Phil, which is maybe cheating but Clint's honestly dying to catch his reaction.

Phil already has a couple of really nice watches, but this one had spoken to Clint. Kind of. The way he thinks people mean when they say that phrase. As much as an inanimate object can ask for attention, anyways. When he'd gotten to the checkout, he'd been asked if he wanted to engrave the beautiful wooden box that it came in. And into his head popped a quote from *The Man in the High Castle*. It's one of Phil's favorite books, and the line had stuck out to Clint when he'd borrowed it from him on a mission. He'd thought better of it as soon as he'd placed the order; Phil likes vintage things, but he's not a sentimental kind of guy. Except Clint couldn't bring himself to go back in and change or remove it.

"We do not have the ideal world," Phil reads aloud, "such as we would like, where morality is easy because cognition is easy. Where one can do right with no effort because he can detect the obvious."

It's not a typically inspirational or optimistic quote - the kind people usually want to commemorate, but it had seemed like a very Phil sort of philosophy when he'd read it.

"There's a whole case of powdered doughnut packages waiting in your office, too," Clint excuses, "but that didn't fit in my luggage." He'd bought it as backup because a small part of him had wanted to make sure Phil would get a present that he for sure would actually like.

"Clint, I love it," he says, close to breathless. The sincerity in his voice is a punch to Clint's gut. Phil takes it out of the case and swipes his thumb down the sleek band. He looks up and Clint lets a featherlight smile drape across his face. Phil's eyes drop down to the closed box in Clint's hands.

"You haven't opened yours."

Clint shrugs and his smile falls lopsided, "I wanted to see your reaction."

Phil rubs his thumb over the width of the timepiece again, and nods toward's Clint's gift, "Go ahead."

Clint looks down as he flips the tiny latch and lifts the dark lid to reveal two beautiful sterling cufflinks in the shape of arrow fletching - chevrons with the tips ticked the slightest bit inwards.
"Phil ..." Clint wishes for something eloquent to say but the ability to express his feelings escapes him. And so perhaps it's unfair, but he looks up at Phil, putting the moment on tenterhooks.

For the second time that night, Phil is quiet when Clint expects him to say something. *Wants* him to say something. Because there's obviously words behind his lips; in his throat. But instead, he moves forward, until their chests press firmly together and his arm wraps around Clint's back. Clint leans into the gesture and brings both arms up to hold him close, the box still in his hand.

And for now, this is a fine substitution for words. It's so good to be here like this. He watches the shadows on the far wall and lets their hug go on for an eternity in a moment of appreciation - for health, and wealth, and each other. Clint can feel their hearts beating out of time but so close even through fabric and bone. He shuts his eyes just for a moment, and then they let the embrace bring itself to an end.

"Merry Christmas," Clint says again, soft smile appearing with the words.

Phil mirrors him, "Merry Christmas."

Clint looks at the box as he turns away to tuck it into his bag, only shutting it at the last moment so he can keep admiring the gleaming silver. He listens to Phil rummaging around in his own bag as he takes his ears out. He climbs back into bed and settles into the warm spot he'd left earlier, curling up on his side to face the window. The last thing he notes before he nods off is the dip of the mattress as Phil crawls in beside him.

Clint comes to awareness slowly and immediately starts to shiver. He keeps his eyes shut and snuggles deeper into the covers to try and get the cold off of his head and shoulders. Christ, what will they have to set the thermostat on to keep from freezing their balls off?

Though, actually, Clint's balls are pretty toasty at the moment. As a matter of fact, so is his dick. He humps slowly and gently into the warm, solid form that he's pressed so tightly up against. Distantly, he recognizes that he's on a mission, and so his bed partner is not supposed to be a sexual one. But then he takes a deep inhale and his brain registers Phil and his hips cant forward again, more pointedly this time.

"Barton," Phil says, prompting, and sleepy, and dry. He's no more awake than Clint is.

"Mmm?" Clint asks wordlessly as he rolls his hips a third time.

"Don't start anything you don't intend to finish," Phil tells him, even as he tightens the circle of his arms around Clint, and it sounds so nice in his sleep rough voice.

"Mmm," Clint hums in acknowledgement, then says as a statement more than a question; "What makes you think I wouldn't finish." He rubs himself bodily against his bedmate, "I always finish. Everyone always finishes-" he yawns, "- with me."

Phil snorts, "Glad to hear it." Then he sighs softly.

"We forgot to make a fire," Clint mumbles, and tucks his face further into the crook of Phil's neck.
There's no response from Phil, and they seem to both drift off for a while. He doesn't know how long they stay like that, but soon enough - or rather, all too soon - their 8am alarm is going off. Clint, aware that he's pinning Phil down with his body, has the grace to sit up and stretch so that Phil can also get up. Only, his partner just lies there looking cozy in the rumpled bedsheets and comforter.

"Guess I've got first dibs on the bathroom," Clint says, but all Phil does is grunt in response.

He's aroused when he steps into the stall, but patiently ignores himself until it goes away. He thinks of ski slopes, and snowmen, and the fresh white blanket that probably built up overnight; cold thoughts even if he can't bring himself to use cold water.

When he comes out of the bathroom, tugging on a soft grey sweater, he finds Phil still in bed, but with the covers pulled up around him and their computer on his lap.

"Oh so you could go all the way to the guest room, but you couldn't take two seconds to build a fire."

"You're better at it than I am," Phil says in what Clint assumes is a dry tone, as he peers down at the screen through his glasses. Clint snorts and goes to the nightstand to put in his aids before moving towards the fireplace.

"The Escobars haven't left their room," Phil says as Clint stacks logs and kindling. "Though that may have something to do with the late hour they got back to their room and the quite literally falling-down-drunk state they were in."

"Them?" Clint asks over his shoulder a little incredulously.

"The footage is somewhat damning," Phil says in a tone that means Clint should know he only uses the word "literally" when he means literally.

"Well shit; good for them," Clint stokes the struggling flames until they catch.

"Good for us, too," Phil sets aside the laptop and crawls out from under the covers. Clint makes sure the logs are actually lit but then follows Phil out to the kitchen.

"As long as they're not up, we don't have to do anything," Phil says as he goes about making coffee. "Which means that I'm going to leave the feeds running but get back into bed and try finding a channel playing Christmas movies on that lovely big television we've got in there."

"Really?" Clint asks, delighted at the picture that's just been painted for him.

"There's not much else we can do until they're out of their suite. Though we should probably check on the tech every now and then and then to make sure it doesn't go anywhere."

"I'll go do it now," Clint says, failing to keep his excitement at bay.

"Hurry back," Phil says as Clint puts his coat on over his pajamas, "I don't know how well I can keep both sides of the bed warm by myself."

Clint smiles all the way down the hall. The elevator ride has him imagining Phil sprawled under the covers, and wondering about the merits and validity of any argument Clint might make for snuggling on account of his side being too cold. Suddenly, the picture becomes Clint's bed in his apartment at home, Phil alone keeping one side warm and Lucky stretched out on Clint's half. But of course, Clint wouldn't have the heart to move him when he got back, and that would definitely put them in cuddle territory - all three of them, he thinks with a smile.
The ding of the elevator when it reaches the first floor shakes him out of his daydream, and he doesn't dawdle. There's a lot of motivation to get back upstairs as soon as possible.

On check number three, Clint wishes he'd stopped to get at least a roll of slice-and-bake cookies when he'd passed through town before the start of the op. He'd really love to bake something right now. But maybe, he considers, he could at least stop and pinch the makings of hot chocolate while he's down here.

The tech is still safely in its place, of course, but Clint does his due diligence before turning back around and making his way to the kitchen.

Apparently the holiday means there's a limited number of staff on-duty, which is nice of the hotel, but the few that are here seem harried and several minutes of waiting to catch someone's attention has him feeling like a nuisance, and he'd rather not bother anyone if he doesn't have to. So when everyone's back is turned and he doesn't think anyone will get yelled at for letting him be where he isn't supposed to, he sneaks into the pantry and grabs what he needs.

He gets to work as soon as he's back in the suite. Just a little bit of condensed milk, cocoa, sugar, vanilla, and peppermint extract are going to be what makes this holiday as perfect as it can be. He only realizes that Phil might be getting worried when it's finished cooking and he's serving it up. He sets the pot back on the stove to keep warm and hopes that the end product will make up for any upset its making has caused.

But when he gets to the bedroom, it's empty. Clint frowns.

"Phil?" he calls out, but the apartment is silent. "Phil?"

He goes for his cellphone to see if he's missed a message, which, shit, he probably has since he didn't bother taking it with him when he went to go check on the devices. Fuck, this kind of carelessness is what totally screws up ops. He goes to the side of the bed and, yep, he's got one text waiting from twenty minutes ago. Fuck.

**From: Phil 2:56pm**

blk SUVs heading out to ski slopes. looks like AIM. going to check. meet me at lift. bring heat.

And sure enough, when he checks the laptop, one of the live feeds is up, showing deep tire tracks running along the outside of the building towards the slopes, and between them a set of men's footprints. "Fuck."
By the time Clint gets out to the lift with a few choice weapons, Phil is nowhere to be seen, and it's started snowing again. But it isn't enough to block the flurry of activity taking place on one of the distant hilltops. From what Clint remembers, it might be an emergency station. He wonders how the hotel staff haven't noticed their new visitors then remembers the potential for an inside man having some involvement.

He follows Phil's tracks through the snow towards the edge of the forest. Just past the treeline, there's a trail of them leading up the hill towards the shelter where the activity is happening. Clint is glad for the slight protection from the weather that means the trail will stay visible for longer.

He breaks into a jog after ten minutes of tracking but the footprints just keeps going. After at least twenty more minutes, Clint looks up to get an idea about the direction of the path, when a few yards ahead of him he sees clumps of missing snow instead of a single set of footprints. The indication of multiple people? His heartbeat picks up a little but he doesn't see anyone farther down the hill or closer to him than the building at the top. He jogs up to them and quickly realizes that there are tracks past the forest's edge; a set of ridged continuous lines - a machine? a snowmobile, maybe?

There's only one place they could've gone, so he stays inside the treeline for cover and breaks into a run until he's made it all the way up the hill, parallel to the emergency station. All the lights are still on and visible from the outside, but the activity around the exterior has died down.

The AC ducts are definitely going to be too small for him in a building this size, but it looks like there's a crawlspace he can get to if he climbs the drainpipe. It's a simple goal, and the ventilation cover he'd been aiming for is easy enough to pry out of the wall and pull back in behind him. The crawlspace is just what it had looked like from the outside; too small to be a real attic but perfect for him to hide in. It also looked like it spanned across the entire length of the long building. Clint props himself up against a support beam and pulls up a ceiling tile to make the tiniest crack for him to see through. No one in the room below. He crawls forward and can hear voices in the next room over, but none of them are Phil's.

"...-zzard rolling in," one of them says.

"So we wait it out and once the snow stops, we storm the castle and grab the tech."

"And the guests?" a third asks.

"What did I say before? We're here to get what we came to get by any means necessary. That's what the guns are for, cadet."

"Hey, fine by me."

"No arguments here, sir."

_Bingo_, Clint thinks. Threat to civilians by potentially terroristic AIM agents - that's his kill-shot green light right there. He makes an executive decision. The building’s not that large. If he's careful, and sweeps it like the pro he is, he can find Phil and together they can take these suckers out in no time. Clint at least, has the element of surprise on his side. He reaches over his back and pulls out his compound bow and three stun arrows. He nudges aside the ceiling tile just enough to get a gauge on who is where in the room. What do you know, they've all got little AIM logos on their uniforms. Good, he doesn't have to feel guilty about this later.

It only takes a moment to nock and aim, and then he's shoving the ceiling tile all the way aside and making clean holes in three foreheads. There's a fourth guy in the room who'd been standing in the
corner but he's too startled to do anything with the gun in his hand. Clint leans down and beans him over the temple with his bow, knocking him out.

No noises from the hallway means it's unlikely anyone's aware of what just happened. He drops down into the room to retrieve his arrows, then pulls himself back up into the crawlspace and goes about searching for his partner. He zig-zags across the space peeking down into rooms, finding two guys in the bathroom next door and one in a cot across the hall. He's running out of distance here, though, and the closer he gets to the far end of the crawlspace, the more he just wants to drop the stealth and storm the building, bashing heads in until he finds Phil.

He's pulling up the slat above what seems to be a medbay, when yelling comes from further down towards the far end of the building. The two guys taking inventory look out towards the hallway and follow the sounds as the noise continues. Clint hooks his bow back on its harness and draws a gun. He lifts the ceiling tile and silently hops down to the floor. The hall is empty when he peers out but he can see movement taking place in the garage through a door on the far end. There's gunfire and a sudden silence follows it. He makes his way towards the sound, keeping an eye out for people coming out of the few doors he passes, but everyone seems to be in the garage. More gunfire as he reaches the doorway, and a bunch of guys in black, longsleeve tac suits like the one's he's already taken out, are spread across the garage behind different barriers they seem to be using for cover. A few of them are standing at the open garage car door, and all of them have weapons drawn. A motor revs out in the snow beyond Clint's view and there's more gunfire. Clint easily sneaks up on the guy closest to him who's standing behind tall stacks of emergency supplies. He goes down quick, and under the sound of more gunfire, Clint's able to take the next closest guy out with a knife when he blocks Clint's punches.

He would be more worried about Phil right now, if he didn't have a strong feeling that Phil has managed to escape and is probably the person all of these guys are shooting at. Clint just wishes that Phil would wait a second for him to catch up so the two of them could ride down the hill together. It was a longass walk up here.

He draws his bow again and takes out three more agents without the others noticing, then bolts for the side door just as the motor revs wildly again. The sound is distant but even through the snow, Clint can still see a good amount of detail on the figure astride what is definitely a snowmobile and he's certain that's Phil's shirt. Shit, where's his coat at?

There hadn't been another snowmobile in the garage, and anyways, Clint isn't sure he'd be able to steal one without running headlong into a barrage of bullets. He starts chasing after Phil, ready to yell despite the dangerous attention it would call to him, when more gunfire rings out. Clint ducks but as soon as the sound stops, he looks up, only to see the snowmobile speed up and start wavering in its path. A third and fourth shot ring out and it veers to the right. In seconds, Clint's up and running harder, panic rising in him as he realizes it's going out of control. He watches, helpless and breathless for more than one reason, as the machine careens towards the forest edge.

"No, no, nononono-" he half prays but the snowmobile keeps its course and crashes head first into a tree, spinning midair for a moment and tossing its rider. "Fuck, oh God, fuck, fuck, fuck."

Clint tries to pick up the pace but the snow is already up to his ankles every time his foot lands, and it's only falling heavier by the minute. He watches the mutilated snowmobile slide and roll slowly down the hill, and any hope of using it to drive to safety evaporates.

Another round of gunfire spears the air and something bites the side of his neck. His gloved hand flies up and the pain worsens at the contact - a bullet graze. His heartrate rabbits. Goddamn, why hadn't he worn a scarf?
He hangs a right and darts towards the treeline, hoping to use the forest as cover as he searches for Phil.
It takes him twenty minutes with the help of gravity to get down the hill through steadily increasing wind. The darkening sky doesn't do him much good either. He stays just under a sprint as he makes his way through the foliage to the point where he'd seen Phil disappear. It's ten more minutes of frantic searching in the area near the crash site before he finds Phil's slumped form lying curled on the ground.

"Phil!"

Phil shifts enough to be noticeable, but when he tries to get an elbow under himself he collapses.

"Phil!" He falls to his knees in front of his partner.

"Clint..."

"Hey, hey - you with me?"

He groans, "Yeah..."

"What day is it?" Clint asks, crouching forward and tilting Phil's head just enough to get a good look at his face. Clint's stomach bottoms out at the sight of an ugly gash across the top of his forehead.

"Christmas - December 25th. Thursday."

Clint swallows around the lump in his throat, "Where are we?"

"Clint-"

"C'mon, Phil; concussion test."

"I'm not concussed."

The mild slurring and dazed expression do not support that assessment.

"Prove it."

"We're on a mission," he answers, exasperated, "At a ski resort. Under cover as a couple."

"Tell me what happened."

"I got shot." He shifts and hisses but Clint can't see any blood. "It knocked me off th' snowmobile, but my head didn't bang against the ground. I don't hav' a concussion."

"Then what's with the glazed eyes and lead tongue?"

"They gave me fucking benadryl."

"Benadryl?"
While normally this might make someone a little drowsy, Phil reacts to half an adult dose like a baby to warm milk. And it's probably just started kicking in for him. He's going to feel like falling asleep any minute and that's no good when the weather's this cold and nasty. Much less when there's a head injury involved.

Phil nods, "W'nted to shut me up. Keep me from 'scaping. Tried three times b'fore I managed. They had a lot 'f people there."
"How much? How long ago?"

"Three pills. Just b'fore I escaped."

Over a half hour lying wounded and drugged in the snow, severely under-dressed for the weather. *Shit.*

"What about that nice little papercut on your head there?"

"Turned a gunfight int'a hand-to-hand. He hit me there with th' butt of his pistol." Phil shifts again and Clint catches sight of dark shininess on his sleeve - blood, he's sure. But from where?

"Uh-huh, 'no concussion'. Sure." He mostly believes Phil, but he's not *not* going to give him a hard time. "Any other injuries?"

Phil shakes his head. The blood around the wound glints in the dim light.

"Good." He puts a hand to the back of Phil's neck. It's freezing cold and Clint adds hypothermia to his list of concerns. "Where the hell's your coat?" he asks as he helps Phil sit up.

"They took it. Didn't have time to grab it before I left."

"Jesus," Clint grumbles, starting to take his own off, "You couldn't have even worn a damn hat? I've got like three in my suitcase you could've borrowed." He wrangles it onto Phil.

"They would've taken that too," Phil mumbles and Clint can't decide if either of them were going for levity or not but he lets it slide. He gets one arm under Phil's shoulder and around his back and their combined efforts get them both standing.

"I've got some bad news, sir," Clint says. If he can keep Phil in mission mode, maybe that'll stave off the impending drowsiness. "You went the exact wrong direction when you took your detour."

"I'm sorry I let my being drugged and shot have a negative affect on my sense of direction while driving through a snow storm."

"Yeah, me too, smartypants. My point was that we've gotta head out across the open slope because if we keep following the forest, we're gonna hit a huge dip and fall right down into a little valley and that'll make getting to the hotel even harder." He starts walking, because the longer they're out here the worse it's going to be. From a pocket, he pulls out his compass and shoves it into Phil's hand. "I need you to hold this for me, and you've gotta keep it level." He doesn't ask if Phil can manage that because there isn't really an option - both of his arms are busy supporting Phil and keeping their combined balance.

As soon as they're beyond the treeline, the windchill picks up. Clint has to raise his voice a little, "I'm gonna guide us, but your job is to keep alert. You're still in charge of this op, you hear me?"

When they start walking, Clint can see the shadow of the distant, opposite treeline. Within fifteen minutes, it's disappeared, though the compass says they're still walking in the same direction. Reduced visibility is one of the few things he doesn't enjoy about snow. He'd guess that he can see about ten feet in front of himself, max.

The going really starts to get rough around the half hour mark. Clint's legs have started to shake and cramp - from the cold, from awkwardly supporting the weight of another person, from trudging through piled snow. He's got his gloves still but he really is fucking freezing without his outer jacket and he's starting to doubt his ability to make it the rest of the way back to the hotel. He squints at the horizon and tries to guestimate how far they still have left to go. And something in the mission-
sensitive, life-preserving part of his brain flips a switch, recalling the layout of the slopes from that first ski lift ride. Shelter lies a handful of yards and a mere twenty degrees to their right. An electrical shed, he thinks. He finds the remains of his third wind and changes course, pushing himself until the dim shape of a structure appears a few feet in front of his face.

Clint breaks the door open and they stumble in. The space has some mounted boxes and insulated cables that probably power the emergency shed and ski lift. The only light comes from the dimmest little meter display in the corner and there's barely enough room for them to turn around, but the busted door stays shut when Clint steps away after closing it. He drops to his knees, Phil reclining in his arms, blinking lazily.

Clint’s eyes fall to Phil’s shoulder where he expects the bullet wound to be, but even with his vision he can barely make anything out in the dark. There’s no way here to treat it even if he could assess it. He still moves his hand and tries to feel around on Phil's side - they need to get pressure on it to stop the bleeding. His fingers brush against the hardened blood on Phil's sleeve. Clint glances up at his face for signs of pain, but his eyes are closed and his expression is slackening.

"Hey, Phil?"

Phil opens his eyes and what little light there is reflects in them. Clint reaches up to wipe at the blood dripping down to his eyebrow. It hadn't seemed this bad out in the woods.

"You gotta stay awake for me, because I'm really worried. The last time you had a head injury like this, medical was only thirty minutes out."

“And they didn’t ev’n hav’ to get me a transfus’n. Was fine.”

Clint realizes he's found a way he can keep Phil talking and in mission mode. "You remember when we got snowed out together in Montreal? Tell me what happened, Phil." Clint flexes his fingers and toes, trying to get the blood flowing and make the cramps and muscle spasms subside.

"We ... we had t’ pull over," he says and Clint is so thankful for his clear, if hesitant tone. "It got too snowy ... couldn't see more th’n three feet ahead 'f the car."

“So what’d we do?”

Phil tells him about how they’d crawled into the back seat and huddled together until somebody driving a snow plow home for the day had pulled over and given them a lift.

Clint’s limbs are still trembling as he listens but his cramps are fading and his vision doesn’t feel blurry any more. He tries to enjoy the moment of rest. They won't get another one until they reach the hotel.

Clint asks every question he can think of and Phil adds the details about drinking the last of the coffee in their thermos and how many jackets they had and that the driver was wearing a stocking cap. But but his speech and faculties start to deteriorate anyways. He’s fading fast and Clint can’t tell if it’s from blood loss or hypothermia or if it’s just the drugs, but he’s not going to risk it.

“You’re doing a great job, Phil-“ (he’s not) “-come on, tell me another story. Tell me about ... about, a hockey story! Tell me about playing hockey when you were a kid.” He reaches down to rub some warmth into Phil’s legs. He flinches when Clint gets to his ankle, and that can't mean anything good.

“Fuck, ‘m so tired...” Phil blinks like he’s trying to clear his eyes and wake himself up, but they stay closed.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Clint pats his face until he blinks awake. “Can’t fall asleep, sir. Not with the
injuries you've got. Plus, I'm worried you might be hypothermic. I can't have you passing out on me when we've still got a long walk through the cold."

Phil nods like he understands but his eyes are still half closed.

"Look at me," Clint pats his face again.

"Neither of us make very good damsels," Phil says without prompting.

"Speak for yourself - I look great in heels and a skirt. And as a matter of fact, I know that you do, too."

"'M ref'rring to th' ... the distressed part."

"Bullshit, it would've been a great rescue if you'd just stayed put." He reaches down to touch the wet gash on Phil's head. Is there more blood coming out than before?

"Didn't know 'f you'd get there in time."

"Hey, screw you. You left me a message, there were tracks to follow - don't pretend this is about me when you're just too fucking impatient for your own good." He checks Phil's pulse before he wipes at the blood running and smeared down the side of his face. "It's okay to not be in control when you've got backup. You don't gotta just rely on yourself." There's latent anger in the quiet after his words. It starts to melt as he wipes again at the side of Phil's face, "I'm always gonna come after you, you know. It goes both ways." It did the moment Phil promised he'd never abandon Clint on an op, mostly because Clint thought that to earn loyalty you had to prove it. Phil got the chance to follow through first, though, and him making good on it was what had won Clint over. It was the foundation of Phil learning to speak Clint's language.

"s beyond that now," Phil manages to sound openly chivalrous, which is probably an accident on his part. "There's more to it b'tween us."

"Yeah?" Clint asks softly, meeting his eyes.

Phil reaches up, gesture loose as his hand falls to lay atop Clint's where it rests on Phil's stomach. He blinks long and slow a couple of times as he nods. Clint smiles down at him.

"Okay, we're gonna have a conversation, now. No more story telling. I talk then you talk, yeah?"

Phil nods, "'Re the AIM ag'nts f'llowing us?"

"No," Clint assures him. "You were about thirty seconds ahead of me before you got on the snowmobile. You literally could have waited a minute and I would have been there to help with the escape." Phil is obviously, stubbornly unmoved by Clint's argument for patience. Clint shakes his head, brushing aside the thought, "I took most of them down on my way through the building. And I seriously doubt the rest of them are gonna risk leaving their safe little shelter at the moment."

The wind picks up outside and the door rattles suddenly.

"You can't go back out there," Phil says, the closest he's been to fully intelligible since they got in here. But it seems to take a lot out of him. His eyes flutter and his chest shakes on an exhale.

"There we go - that's a starting point." Clint silently starts looking for that bullet wound again. Where's all the blood? "Let's have a little debate. Tell me why I can't."
Phil shakes his head.

“C’mon. Tell me.”

“'S too d’nger’us.”

“Now what makes you say that?”

The door shudders again, violently, and some part of the structure around them creaks.

“I can’t take your advice into serious consideration unless you’ve got some evidence to back it up, sir.”

“Clint ...”

“Got any other arguments? Because if it were anyone else I might just think they were being lazy and didn’t want to walk through a few measly feet of snow.”

Phil mumbles something but it’s completely unintelligible.

“Gotta speak up if you want my aids to catch what you’re saying,” Clint tells him. But Phil’s eyes close and don’t blink back open.

“Hey, sir, wake up.”

Clint touches the head wound again, Phil barely flinches.

"Phil? Phil."

It takes Clint slapping him three times before he comes to again.

His eyes flutter and struggle to focus on Clint. "You gotta talk to me, man. Don’t leave me here like this." The wind howls outside and more blood pools under Clint’s fingertips, and his heart jumps into his throat. Panic and age-old defenses beat in his brain - a war over the sarcastic humor he can feel ready to spill out. "We've still got a lot to catch up on. I mean," he swallows and stares at the beautiful blue eyes beginning to glaze over, "You didn't tell me how Fury liked his birthday present. And- and- I forgot to make a joke about this week ending with us shacking up," he gestures to the shed around them.

He gives a short, dead sound of amusement. "For fucks sake," he says through a tight smile and a tighter throat, "I haven't even gotten a chance to tell you I love you."

Phil's eyes widen and Clint manages a watery laugh, "Yeah, I know. But I only just worked up the courage to do it - I was waiting for the perfect moment and everything." He scoffs, "Like this is the time, right?" He shakes his head, then makes eye-contact again, getting back on track, "You can yell at me all you want tomorrow about how deathbed confessions are the coward's way out. But it got your attention." He takes a fortifying breath, then finds some determination to put into his voice, "And this isn't your deathbed. So get it together and put some effort into staying awake, would ya?"

Phil's eyebrows twitch and he looks like he's trying to say something, but only a weak cough makes it out. His eyes flutter shut and Clint has to pat his face once more. "Hey, stay with me. Stay with me." He waits until Phil’s eyes come close to focusing on him, “You've really gotta keep at it this time. 'Cause I'm about to do something kind of dangerous and I can't do that and try keeping you awake, too."
The wind doesn't sound like it's dying down anytime soon, but he's had a decent breather and Phil is fading fast. He's pretty sure he can support them both the rest of the way, now. While Phil could still mostly walk, there wasn't as much fear of hypothermia. But Clint thinks that's no longer the case, and even if he isn't hypothermic there's little hope of him stumbling more than a few feet through the snow, even with support. He'll have to be carried.

"Clint..."

"Yeah, come on. I know this isn't such a good idea but I'm doing it anyways." He heaves Phil up, bridal style - the risk of hypothermia means that fireman's carry is out of the question. "Go ahead an lay into me though, it'll honestly make me feel better."

"Jus' stay puh..."

"Just stay where, sir?" he grunts as he shoves the door open. He gets about two steps away before the wind slams it shut behind him. "Can't follow orders if you aren't givin' 'em."

The howling storm eats whatever Phil's response is. Clint peers down at the compass held awkwardly in the hand he's got under Phil's legs. He adjusts his direction and then he sets off through the white wasteland. Clint squints at the vague distance trying to keep the weather out of his eyes. Everything feels so close with the icy flakes whipping around him. He takes a moment to be grateful that they aren't walking directly into the wind. The snow clings and clogs around his legs. It'll be above his knees soon. He imagines how lonely and small they must really be out here on the canvas of the hillside, but it certainly doesn't seem that way.

The rise and fall of Phil's chest keeps time for him, three steps per breath. All too quickly his calves start burning, but there's nothing to do except keep walking. His eyes cycle in three points - the compass, the distance, Phil; the compass, the distance, Phil ... When his arms start to ache, he worries that they've been walking for too long. Every difficult step makes him more paranoid that they've somehow missed their only hope of shelter. Clint has probably dragged them to their death from the relative safety of the little shed.

And then, from the grey void ahead appears a darker shape. All Clint's hopes coalesce into another final burst of energy.

He doesn't realize just how long he's been running on empty and adrenaline until he careens bodily into the back door of the resort. There isn't anyone in the service entrance foyer, so Clint takes the easy way out and heaves himself over to the freight elevator. He angles himself to lean back against the grating and still keep Phil balanced against his chest.

"Phil," he says.

Phil's half-closed eyes open - they're glassy, but they open and Clint blinks long and swallows hard. The sound of machinery is the only noise as their adrenaline falls and they watch each other.

The door from the elevator bay creaks loudly as it opens into the hallway on their floor, but all room doors are closed and the corridor is empty. Clint shouldn't be surprised - a snowy night at a couples' resort means everyone's probably tucked in bed or in front of the fireplace, and Clint couldn't be more grateful. Attention and suspicion is the last thing they need right now.

He props Phil against the doorjamb just enough to wiggle the key out of his pocket and then he lurches towards the bedroom where he regains his grace long enough to carefully set Phil down on
Immediately he starts peeling Phil out of his wet clothes. He doesn't seem hypothermic but Clint isn't taking any chances. Especially since the general reaction to the cold plus the benadryl could be masking the symptoms.

*Be gentle, keep them horizontal, move them out of the cold,* he ticks off the boxes on his mental checklist.

He finds a gun tucked into the back of his pants - Phil must have swiped it in the midst of his escape. But even once there's only skin to look at, Clint can't find a bullet wound on him. He traces over the handful of mottled bruises and scratches taking up a fair amount of space on his arms and torso, but discolored skin is all there is to be found.

He wrangles Phil's tremoring figure under the covers as carefully as he can and figures the warm, down comforter on top of the other blankets and sheets should be enough. So instead of using the spare towels from the bathroom for layering, he starts patting Phil down to dry him off really well and get some of the chill off his skin. If the shivering hasn't let up in an hour, he'll see if the resort has a doctor. When Phil's snow-soaked hair is only a little damp, Clint goes for the first aid kit and starts to clean up the ugly gash. It's slow, quiet work, but Clint's only a little scared. The room feels darker when he's focused on their unmatched breaths and the careful movements of his fingers against the white of the gauze. When everything's covered up and it doesn't look like Phil's bleeding through, Clint goes for the one knit cap he's got in his bag to keep Phil's head covered and warm. And then he makes himself step away.

It's hard to tell, given that Clint still feels chilled to the bone, but he imagines that their suite isn't very warm at the moment so he goes about setting a fire. After that, he searches the cabinets in the kitchenette for a hot water bottle, but they're all empty. Clint decides he doesn't feel guilty about getting the materials for the hot chocolate now, because Phil needs something sweet, nonalcoholic, and noncaffeinated to drink. He ditches the now-cold batch he'd left on the stove earlier and starts a fresh one, figuring he can leave Phil alone for ten minutes to do something that will actually help, rather than just standing around, staring at him.

He reassures himself with the thought that the symptoms didn't begin gradually. Phil's pulse hasn't been weak, his breathing hasn't been shallow, he hasn't lost consciousness beyond repeatedly trying to fall asleep, and despite the head injury, he didn't have any confusion or memory loss.

Clint tries to not be a dick and worry about having told Phil he's in love with him. But there's not a lot else to think about. It's stupid - there are more important things on the table right now, and he's brought any resulting consequences on himself. There's no real going back either way. Or rather, whatever Phil's reaction ends up being. He stirs the floating cocoa powder and adds more cinnamon.

Phil shifts a little when Clint sits down beside him on the mattress. He sets the mug on the nightstand and leans over.

"Phil? Can you sit up for me?"

Phil's face twitches.

"Phil?" Clint touches the tips of his fingers to his cheek and Phil's eyes blink open at the contact. "Hey, there. Think you can sit up for me?"
Phil doesn't nod or say anything, just starts to lean and tense up like he's trying to move. Clint reaches across and helps him get a little upright and notes that his shivers have died down to intermittent bursts.

"Cocoa - drink," he says, holding the mug up to Phil's lips. Phil sips dutifully and Clint makes sure the blankets are still tight around him.

"How'ya feelin'?" Clint asks.

"Drowsy," Phil says - the word comes out slow and slurred. "B't that's pr'bably jus' th' benadryl."

The assessment further reassures Clint that he isn't experiencing confusion, memory loss, or lack of self-awareness - which indicates he's not suffering a concussion or hypothermia. They huddle quietly until the cup is empty. Clint eases him back down to the mattress.

"I think you're safe to sleep," Clint tells him quietly. He brushes a thumb across the taut line of Phil's brows, being careful of the medical tape. "Get some rest. Let the drugs flush outta your system."

"M'kay," Phil mumbles as his eyes fall shut.

Clint leans back and tries not to jostle the bed as he stands up. Phil's out like a light in the time it takes Clint to pick up the first aid kit and sit in the chair under the window. It's already posed facing the bed, so he settles in to start treating himself and monitor Phil's breathing.

Clint reaches up to touch the bloody spot on his neck. Light gunshot wounds always seem more startling than the gaping holes that occasionally are made in his body. It's like a physical place where the fear of threat meets the miracle of escape; something like fate. He takes an antiseptic wipe and cleans it up before he slaps on a Bandaid.

Clint notes the time as soon as Phil's shivering stops completely, and then again a half hour later to know that he's remained stabilized. There's no room for a sigh in his chest but he sinks down in the chair and tries to think what he needs to do next.

Despite his assurances to Phil, Clint still feels nervous about leaving the AIM goons to themselves. He won't leave Phil or try going out into the storm after them, but he can go ahead and secure the tech in case any of the remaining agents are dumb enough to try making a grab.

It only takes Clint two trips and ten minutes to get all of the devices back in their guest room, but it feels like too long to be away from Phil. He sits monitoring Phil's heart rate and breathing for a good fifteen minutes after he gets back.

By now the last of the adrenaline is rapidly draining from his system and all he can bring himself to feel is wiped out. But he can't sleep yet. So gets up to go makes himself some coffee that's more sludge than liquid. As the carafe fills, Clint looks around the small mess of the kitchen and realizes he's left the AIM gun he took off of Phil on the counter. He picks it up and empties the chamber. Rubber bullets? He flips it around in his fingers a little. There's a tiny set of holes at the tip and the weight feels odd for just a tiny piece of solid rubber. Maybe they're special weapons that were supposed to do or release something on impact? Clint wishes they had a containment case on site but the most they can do is keep them out of the gun, in the least used part of the apartment. He's hopeful that since they haven't gone off yet, they won't anytime soon.

When the machine hasn't dripped in two solid minutes, Clint concedes, but takes the time to pour himself a mug before he goes back to the bedroom and waits for the benadryl to fade from Phil's
The rug in front of the fireplace in the main room is maybe the softest thing Clint has ever sat on. Top ten at least. He's been sitting here for almost three hours and his ass still isn't sore. Granted, he keeps getting up every twenty minutes to go check on Phil and the non-functioning secure signal, but you'd think he'd have made a dent in the fibers by now.

An hour ago, Phil had woken up, had a glass of water, gone to the bathroom, and let Clint tuck him back in - going to sleep easily and breathing normally. It was enough for Clint to be assured that he'd be fine if Clint left him alone for a while. And maybe it was the coffee, but Clint was feeling kind of stir crazy and really wanted a change of scenery. Besides, being in the other room and needing to go back to check on Phil has been giving him a reason to move and something to do. He can't manage to shake the persistent, antsy feeling that's been nagging him since he put Phil to bed.

He'd been hungry a while ago and the kitchen was still open so he'd ordered food, but couldn't manage to stomach any of it when it had arrived. So he'd taken a shower, force-fed himself a few bites, refrigerated the rest, and re-lit both cooling hearths.

He's sitting here in the otherwise dark front room in his pajamas, lost in the orange flickers when he hears Phil come out of the bedroom. He looks up over his shoulder to find Phil standing a few feet away, wearing one of the hotel bathrobes and his glasses. Except for the way he's holding his arm tenderly at his side, he looks so nice and normal that Clint just sighs, contented and relieved, because he's able to let go of some of his anxiety for the first time in days. The mission is mostly over. They're safe.

Clint rests his head against his arms where they're braced across the gap of his upright knees. Phil crosses the room and before Clint can think to stop him, he's falling purposefully into a seated position beside Clint, wincing at the strain it puts on his aches and wounds.

"Stop doing things like that," Clint says without bite, from behind his bicep.

Phil holds out the gauze and tape he's got in his hand and Clint nods, reaching for it. He leans forward onto his knees and carefully goes about replacing the bandage on his forehead.

Phil's voice is soft when he speaks; "Things could have gotten very dangerous, very quickly if you hadn't been thinking on your feet and acted so bravely." Phil winces as the medical tape is peeled back. "I know I was saying not to ... but I'm very grateful for what you did."

Clint doesn't react to the awkward compliment. This sounds like the lead-up to what's going to be both the gentlest and most painful letdown of Clint's life.

Phil gives a pause, maybe waiting for a sign from Clint. When it doesn't come he says pointedly; "But my gratitude has no new bearing on my feelings for you."

For some reason it sounds colder than Clint was expecting him to be. He can't turn away from Phil until he finishes fixing the fresh bandage but he won't hurry and risk doing a shitty job. Phil looks like he's starting to say more but then changes his mind. Clint bites at the inside of his cheek and
focuses on making his expression unreadable instead of on the infinite dive his stomach is taking. He won't cause Phil any intentional guilt over this.

"You beat me to the punch, you know."

Clint does look down to make eye contact at that.

"I was lying in bed going to sleep the other night," Phil starts, staring like he can see straight into Clint, "thinking about how happy I was existing with you like this. Thinking it was the closest I'd get to making my dreams a reality, when it hit me that ... there are worse things in life than rejection."

Clint's brain is close to shorting out, because this ... sounds like the opposite of what he was expecting.

"You know who I really am and you've seen me at my most helpless. What harm could telling you do?"

He says it like nobody's ever hurt him, but there's belief behind the words.

"The scales were unbalanced - the potential outweighed the cost of the risk."

Is Phil rambling on purpose to give Clint time to catch up? He realizes his face is still making a dead expression, so he lets the mask fall. When he does, the corners of Phil's mouth turn up.

"Part of me was worried, before, about whether or not me telling you would damage your trust in me, or make you feel pressured, or something," his eyes dart away and he waves his hand, "along those obnoxiously noble lines." His eyes come back to meet Clint's, "But you know me. And God knows you can say 'no' to me." His smile widens but remains impossibly soft, "Our friendship's made of sterner stuff than that. There's blood between us, and that's something I can put faith in. And ... and if there was any possibility that you'd let me have something like this with you outside of a mission - in our actual lives, then I had to take it. Because as much as I hate being on uncertain footing - being vulnerable - ... you're worth the chance I'd take putting myself there."

The way he says it - with such faith, with all the confidence in the world - throws Clint for a loop. Phil's watching him, probably waiting for a response, but Clint doesn't know what to say or do in this wholly unexpected moment. His heart is beating double-time.

"I'm surprised you haven't jumped in yet," Phil tells him, a strange, small smile touching the corner of his mouth.

"I-" Clint flounders for words - for logic, "Are you saying- You want to try this out with me?"

A gentle, amused expression takes over Phil's face, "I'm saying I'm in love with you, too."

Clint lifts a slow, careful hand up to Phil's cheek, "In love with me?" The sincerity in his tone bodes no argument but Clint has to make sure. This is too unreal, too important to misunderstand.

Phil nods - turns into the touch and reaches up to wrap his fingers around Clint's wrist to keep his hand in place as he tilts his head to kiss Clint's palm and fingers. Clint starts to lean in but halts himself.

"Can I kiss you?" he whispers.

Phil's face lights up and he moves to meet Clint halfway. Their lips meet just as Phil's hand come up to cup the base of Clint's skull, and he doesn't know which direction or touch to melt into. As the
past few days have proven, kissing Phil is really, really nice, but there's an additional, warm satisfaction inside Clint now that he knows they're both doing it for the same reason.

He tilts his head forward and to the side and gets a wince of pain for his efforts. Clint leans back but Phil doesn't let him get far.

"I'm fine," he mumbles trying to move back in.

"No you're not," Clint says, reaching up to take Phil's hand off of his neck and hold it. "But what do you say we move this somewhere more comfortable?" he presses a kiss to Phil's knuckles, already beginning to stand.

"I'm in favor of it," Phil tells him, quick to follow suit.

But Clint catches him halfway through the motion and without warning, scoops him up in his arms. Phil reacts with a "Jesus Christ" and dilated pupils as Clint hitches his legs over his hips and holds him midair. It's an exciting and startling response to elicit, and Clint decides to cross the room and push him up against the wall just to see what sort of reaction that gets. Phil tightens his arms and legs around Clint in the handful of steps it takes to cross to the hallway and seems pleasantly surprised to be pressed against the cream-colored wallpaper rather than carried the rest of the way to their room.

His hands slip down to wrap as tight and as far as they can around Clint's biceps. Clint goes for a searing kiss and revels in the reality of being felt up by the object of his longtime affection.

Phil breaks away panting, "Christ, I don't think my back can handle it today but sometime soon you're gonna fuck me against a wall."

Clint plants a kiss on the corner of his mouth and noses at his cheek, "How about after dinner at my apartment once your bruises heal?"

"It's a date," Phil says with a wide smile that dissolves to make way for more kisses. Clint's heart flutters - Phil wants this with him; there's a future here. He gives himself over to the passionate contact, pressing closer, until some unwanted, rational cylinders start firing in his brain.

He cuts off the making out, "Wait, wait a minute-"

Phil pulls back looking concerned.

"Are you gonna be mad at yourself later? About having sex in the middle of a mission?"

Phil makes the most confused, distasteful sort of expression, "What?"

"I feel like there are rules about that."

The expression becomes affronted - annoyed, almost, "We're supposed to be a very deeply in love couple on a romantic retreat. I'd argue that having sex only backs that up. Like method acting."

"Oh my god, Phil, that's the best you can come up with? I don't know how you do it, but having sex is at least a little incapacitating for me."

"So I'll take first watch," he huffs, leaning in to have a go at Clint's neck.

"Who's supposed to be on watch right now," Clint laughs. Then he bites his lip to cut off a noise because Phil's found a particularly sensitive spot.
Phil groans and drops his head to Clint's shoulder, "I thought you'd noticed, but I'm going to point out that there's a blizzard going on outside. Which means even if Jaina and Michael have finally realized that something's up, they certainly aren't going anywhere. And that goes double for the team of AIM agents you decimated." He turns his head, already trying to get the proceedings back on track.

"Wait, wait - Are you trying to use Baby It's Cold Outside logic on me?" He wants to laugh.

"'Tis the season," Phil purrs into the side of Clint's neck. Clint gasps and reaches a hand up to the base of Phil's skull - an argument for him to never stop what he's doing right now, holy shit.

"This is too fucking surreal. I'm going to wake up any second."

"Is that what you meant the other night when you said your alarm was going to go off?" Phil mumbles.

"I plead the fifth," Clint says - it sounds breathy, almost whiny. He whimpers softly and tightens his grip on Phil's thighs when he bites gently on one side of Clint's throat and brings one hand up to rub teasingly at the other.

"Agent Barton," Clint can hear the smile in his words, "is your neck an erogenous zone?" Phil's breath puffs against his skin and he tries to hold back a shiver. "Is that why you reacted the way you did when we were stargazing?"

Clint's about to tell him his estimate of exactly how much sky watching actually happened out there but Phil's tongue and teeth mark a hot line along a tendon, cutting him off.

"I was sure I'd crossed a line when I'd done that. I spent the rest of the night waiting for you to say something to me about it."

"Didn't cross a line," Clint assures him. "Just got me super turned on. You stopped before I had a real chance to embarrass myself."

"Good to know," Phil says, and starts marking his way across Clint's jawline. Clint's happy to let him have at it, but then Phil shoves his hand up under Clint's t-shirt. His fingertips are like livewires across Clint's bare skin.

"Shit, I need this off," he huffs, and presses Phil further into the wall as he takes one hand away to start struggling out of his top. Phil helps - just as eager for the end goal, and the two of them manage to work it off without too much hassle, or Phil having to touch the floor. Clint rubs their bare chests together where the panels of terrycloth have separated over Phil's, as soon as he's free. Phil's hands squeeze between them to get palmfuls of Clint's meager but definite cleavage.

"I'm gonna get carried away if we don't move," he says into the crook of Phil's neck.

"I think we're past carried away," Phil pants, "and fuck, I don't care anymore," he reaches down to untie his robe one-handed. Clint's eyes fall first to the Rangers tattoo on his chest, and then to the exposed erection between their stomachs.

"Yes," Clint sighs and reaches under where Phil is wrapped around his waist to undo the tie of his pajama bottoms. He kicks them out of the way - Phil's robe falling with them - and shifts until he can get their cocks side-by-side. Phil's hand darts down to encircle them and Clint humps forward into the sudden warmth, pushing Phil up the wall a little.

"Christ," Phil whispers, tightening his grip, "Do it again."
Clint lets Phil hold their dicks together as he puts his effort into creating friction for them and pushing Phil into the wall again and again. Phil's legs bump against his hips and his ass with every shove. Clint thinks about the red marks his fingers are making in the meat of Phil's thighs; the small, claiming bruises they might turn into. He squeezes the muscle just because he can, "Fuck."

"Faster," Phil pants, and a full body shiver rocks through Clint because shit, if he hasn't been dying to hear Phil say that for years. The reality is fantasy fuel for the next decade at least - his flushed face and bright eyes completing the picture. He gladly gives into the demand and Phil's grip tightens around their lengths as the pace picks up. Clint fits their mouths together, hungrier for intimate contact than he is for air. He wants Phil's arms around his neck but both are occupied with holding their dicks together. It's okay - the want will keep 'till next time. And hot damn, there's gonna be a next time. Clint wonders how long that's going to keep feeling strangely intangible.

Phil twists his hands in counter directions and Clint gasps. For a moment all he can think is that it's the pleasurable exact opposite of an Indian burn, and then Phil does it again and his mind empties of everything but the gush of endorphins.

Clint feels himself getting close to the edge but he doesn't want this to end yet, and that somehow feels more selfish than chasing his orgasm. He draws back from their kiss, planting a few closed-mouth ones to the corner of Phil's mouth.

"Hang with me for a sec," he instructs.

He supports Phil's weight with two hands under his ass as he drops to kneel on the floor while keeping Phil elevated at the same height. Phil's muscles clench with the action, but to his credit he doesn't make a sound. His hands fall away from his crotch and brace against the wall. Clint nudges his shoulders under Phil's knees so his weight isn't all in Clint's hands, leaving him essentially sitting on Clint's upper body and propped against the wall.

"Comfy?" Clint asks, looking up at him between the vee of his legs.

Phil swallows visibly and Clint wonders what he must look like from down here. "Not exactly, but I'd like to see where this is going."

Clint lets his tongue loll out and leans in to curl it around the width of Phil's cock and give it a long, obscene lick. Phil's mouth falls open in shock, or a silent gasp before he closes it and swallows again, "That's a good direction."

He lets Phil drop along the wall until he can get his mouth over the head of Phil's dick and Phil gulps two breaths - gasps in layered surround sound.

"Clint," he breathes.

Clint looks up at him for a long moment, then lets his eyelids fall shut as he gives himself over to the task at hand. Focuses on the hot weight pressing against his palate and tongue. It's so good to be here - on his knees for the guy of his dreams with one goal at hand and a mutually beneficial result in the cards. His dick fills up Clint's mouth so nicely. There's nothing like giving a blowjob and the surprise nature of this one makes it all the more exciting.

He thinks he's pretty well making up for the fact that he can't use his hands; pulling out all the stops as he works him over. Clint's own cock lies dripping and hot against his thigh - he's felt the wet spot building as he's knelt here, but it can wait. Chasing the rush of Phil's attention seems more important.

Phil's soft noises are interrupted by a sound like it's pulled from deep inside him. Clint has to look up
- he wants to see the expression on Phil's face right now. It's well worth it - attentive and warm, it fills Clint right to the brim.

"God, you're so beautiful," Phil says. Clint only leaves his eyes open long enough for Phil to know he heard him, then Clint lets them fall shut again. Looking at Phil is instantly too much - a strange, rarely experienced feeling for Clint, but one that's gripped him nonetheless.

The way his muscles are moving feels more noticeable under the weight of Phil's legs. He rolls his shoulders and leans to the side to get a better angle - works his tongue up and down the sides of Phil's shaft. Phil reaches down and makes up the difference of what Clint doesn't have in his mouth. His dick feels huge and Clint is struck by a multitude of fantasies: Phil fucking him doggy style, Phil jerking himself off while Clint watches, Phil going to town on a fleshlight. Fuck.

Clint leans back without pulling off any then ducks in further, fitting more of Phil in his mouth. His lips meet the ring of Phil's fist around himself only for a moment before it releases its grip. His dick slips further down Clint's throat without the barrier of the hand. Clint lets his focus carry him away. The continuous up-down head movements and twisting of his tongue - Phil's warmth against him, his soft breaths and grunts - are what his world narrows down to.

And then Clint feels gentle fingers cautiously touch his scalp, resting for a moment before slowly starting to tangle in his hair. Clint wonders what reaction Phil's afraid of getting - what line he's afraid of crossing with this contact. Maybe he's just trying to be polite. Clint looks up at him through his lashes, trying to look pleased and alluring since he doesn't think he can manage reassuring with a mouthful of cock.

He gives a hard suck and Phil's back arches off the wall. It leaves Clint's nose digging into the soft skin low on Phil's stomach and he sucks again to keep Phil pulled taut and retain the moment of strange closeness. He backs off to get some air and Phil settles again against the wall, one of his hands falling away from Clint's head and back to the patterned wallpaper beside his hip. Clint misses it - greedy for as much of Phil as he can get - and leans into the weight of the remaining one.

He wants to reciprocate the touch and get his hands all over Phil, but settles for squeezing the meat of his ass again.

His arms are protesting at the prolonged effort of supporting a grown man's body-weight. But that just eggs him on - makes him want to get Phil to come faster. Clint tilts him forward a couple of times until he gets the idea and starts gently fucking his face - rocking forward just a little in time with Clint's motions. The extra sensation must be just enough to carry Phil towards the end; he starts making soft, huffing noises and tensing his muscles. Clint backs off until he's just got the head in his mouth, but he sucks long and hard and looks up at Phil once more with big eyes. Phil takes a deep breath as his head falls back and then he's coming down Clint's throat.

Clint sucks him through the aftershocks until Phil shivers and tries to arch away. Clint pulls off and can only be assed to let one of Phil's legs to come down and get him standing before reaching down to grab his own dick. He surprises himself with the wounded noise that comes out of him at the contact. He leans forward to rest his head against Phil's hip and softly whines when both of Phil's hands rub over his scalp. He'd love to have them on his dick but he can't be bothered to put the time or effort into knocking Phil's leg off his shoulder, much less into standing up.

He bites his lip and watches the frantic gestures of his fist over himself. He knows he's close; he just wants to finish and get back to kissing Phil. This all still feels a little surreal. He wants more contact, more proof of reality. Part of him wonders if his orgasm will help ground him or make this all disappear.
The hands on his head shift and change pressure. Phil pushes gently until Clint's face is tilted upward.

"Christ," he says when Clint's looking up at him.

Clint's lip slips from the grip of his upper teeth. Phil's thumb stretches out and rubs across it.

"Next time I want to come all over your face," he says.

Clint makes a choking noise and feels his orgasm well up inside him.

"Phil," he says, voice strained as he pumps his fist and comes all over the beautiful floors and baseboard.

He keeps his grip tight as the high fades and lets go only when it's too much. He sits back on his heels and looks up again. Phil's leg slips off his shoulder with the movement. They stare at one another for a long moment. Then Phil leans down with an outstretched hand and helps Clint up off the floor. The kiss he gets once he's standing should maybe be less of a surprise, but it's all the more enjoyable for it. Clint goes to wrap his arms around Phil's waist and shoulders but Phil leans away.

"C'mon," he prompts, taking a hold of Clint's cleaner hand and leading him down the hall to the bathroom. He takes initiative and goes about wiping the both of them down. Clint lets him go about his work and sneaks kisses where he can, which Phil seems to appreciate. As they walk back into the bedroom Clint realizes they're both still naked, and jogs back out to the front room to grab his pajama pants and Phil's robe because there’s no way he's sleeping naked in this weather.

Phil already putting his own PJ pants on when Clint comes back, but he pauses to take the robe from Clint and go hang it up in the bathroom - something he'd never bother doing if he were at home. Clint smiles to himself about it as he pulls on his pants, but then winces as he goes to pull on his shirt. Phil re-enters the room in time to catch it.

"I should have been more careful of you," he says as he crosses the room, "You've done more than your fair share of lifting today. I'm sure your muscles are screaming, by now. Will you let me give you a massage?"

"No," Clint pouts like Phil is denying him something, "I just want to go to bed and kiss you."

But even as Clint leans in for said kisses, Phil's already reaching out to take and start massaging one of his hands.

"We can do both," he says, meeting Clint's lips and surreptitiously moving him in the direction of the bed. Phil keeps massaging Clint's hands as he gets him to lay down in the right position, and then he goes for his shoulders. He starts pressing kisses to the back of Clint's neck before he even has a chance to complain. His fingers dig into Clint's sore back and Clint groans.

"Don’t think this counts as you fucking me against a wall," Phil tells him low and pointed as kneads at him, "I still plan to cash in on that once my bruises are gone." He presses another kiss just behind Clint's ear.

Clint shivers and sighs.

"No worries, sir. That offer doesn't have an expiration. Besides, I've already started planning a menu for the tie-in date. I can't go back on that kind of commitment."

"Mmm, what were you thinking of?"
"Either roasted chicken and vegetables, or chicken curry. I want to keep it light for our after-dinner activities."

Phil kisses a path up his spine, "Sounds perfect," he says, low and warm at the base of Clint's neck, and then he leans back. "Why don't you give me your ears?"

Clint wiggles to get his arms up beside his head but doesn't so much as grumble about the interruption as he pulls them out and hands them over. Phil's presence above him disappears for a moment as he leans to tuck them into the nightstand. When his hands land, steadying, on Clint's scapula's Clint melts into the mattress.

Phil goes over every inch of his torso and upper body with the sort of thoroughness and dedication he always puts into things he cares about. Just when Clint's sure his shoulders and arms are going to turn to jelly, Phil drags his warm palms down his back one final time and climbs off of him.

Clint opens his eyes to watch Phil pull the covers back and carefully slip into bed beside him. He doesn't crowd Clint but he scoots closer than either of them have dared to start their nights together here.

Phil catches him watching and smiles.

"Merry Christmas, Clint," his lips read. Clint smiles back.

"Merry Christmas, Phil."

End Notes

Happy Holidays, everyone!

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