The Ways of the Universe

by CyberQueens

Summary

No two epic love stories are the same. For Oliver and Felicity, it's quite the long road. What with all the crime-fighting, and super-secret identities, and emotionally-stunted men, and old flames, and meddlesome friends and family. Some goats, too. Picks up right after the end of 'City of Heroes' (2x01). Any similarities with the rest of S2 are, for the most part, coincidental.
The Ancient Art of Herding

Chapter Notes

So, first foray into the goodness of Olicity. Let me just preface this by saying that I have never fallen for a ship this hard, this fast - and I have been a fangirl for long years. That said, this is my first story with the these two, and I'm still getting a hang of the characters, so please do tell if I do something wildly OOC and nonsensical. Also, I have no beta, so all potential atrocities of the grammatical and/or spelling variety are of my own doing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Green Arrow.

Felicity quite liked that one. It was very…literal. Fitting, too. Plus, there many variations she could, very privately, implement on the mantle.


Or, as the case was now, Frowny-Face Arrow.

It was just the two of them left in their now upgraded to super-status lair, after Digg had left for the night, and Felicity had spent the better part of the last half-hour watching Oliver nurse a frown of varying intensity and depth, all the while alternating between twirling an arrow in his hands and glaring at it like it had Malcolm Merlyn’s face plastered to it.

After some grueling internal debate, she sighed and rose to her feet. “So, I gotta ask,” she began as she approached him, where he was half-propped against one of the tables, “why the sour face? I mean, we just whipped you up with an awesome super-secret codename, Team Arrow is officially back in business, and our new Code of Honor is all sorts of epic. So…what’s got your leathers in a bunch?”

She didn’t miss the small quirk of his lips as she planted herself in front of him, though he did wipe it away by the time his eyes rose to meet hers. “My what?”

“ – but you have so much of it, it couldn’t possibly hurt to take just a teeny, tiny bit off the top. I guarantee it won’t even leave a dent.”

He didn’t seem to quite grasp the definition of ‘manpain’ in its entirety, if the now confused frown he sported was any indication, but he did appear to have understood what she was asking. With a deep sigh, he set the arrow aside and crossed his arms over his chest. “I went to visit Tommy’s grave earlier,” he told her. “Laurel was there.”
Felicity cringed on his behalf. “Not the most pleasant experience, I take it.”

“No, it – it was, actually.” He paused there, and it was Felicity’s turn to grow confused as a small – and damn near lovesick, if you asked her – smile played on his lips. A moment later, he sobered. “We…we both made mistakes, and she doesn’t hold mine over my head. But, umm…” He licked his lips. “We can’t be together again, ever, and she made that very clear. Not that I…don’t think the same. Also, uh…”

He didn’t say anything further as he rubbed the back of his neck, but he didn’t really need to; Felicity had a pretty good idea of what was going through his mind. “Also, she hates the vigilante,” she voiced the thought for him, and knew she’d hit the bullseye when his shoulders visibly slumped.

It wasn’t a surprise; Laurel Lance had made no secret of what her main objective was since she’d begun working for the District Attorney.

“Yeah,” Oliver mumbled quietly, his eyes going over Felicity’s shoulder and growing unfocused.

She bit her lip; questioning Oliver on his feelings was pretty much a guaranteed way to get yourself turned into a pincushion, and Felicity was about to poke the proverbial mother of all bears with her next inquiry. Never let it be said the IT girl had no balls. “So, are you brooding because Laurel – the Laurel – hates what is arguably the greater part of what makes you, you” – she fidgeted for a moment, lowering her voice – “or because you don’t really think you can’t be together again?”

He stilled. Completely. From head to toe. A lesser being would have cowered, Felicity thought. Still, she held her ground, waiting for her answer.

Eventually, Oliver deflated, and sighed. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

A wise woman would have left it at that; Felicity decided to tempt fate just a while longer. “If I tell you what I think, do I still get to walk out of here with all my limbs intact?”

He raised an unimpressed eyebrow, which Felicity interpreted as permission to barrel on, whether he had intended it as such or not. “I think that, somewhere deep down, you still believe – or hope – you and Laurel will somehow, someway, end up behind a white picket fence and drive around in a tacky minivan.” When he began to glower, she rushed to add, “Not consciously, obviously, you would never do that, because of Tommy –”

Oh God, she was just making it worse.

“ – not that Tommy – you know what, let’s not go there, what I mean is, you and Laurel have too much history for it all to just go away, even after…well, happenings, and it’s all very complicated – honestly, I don’t think complicated even begins to cover it –”

This was it. The end of the road. She was going to get impaled in the next ten seconds.

“ – so I think, what you really need to do is make it less complicated – you know, figure out exactly what Laurel is to you, and go from there.”

The murderous glint in his eye lingered for a moment, as she struggled to steady her breathing after her longwinded speech, but was soon replaced by plain confusion.

“What do you mean?” he asked, and she was so immensely happy that he didn’t seem like he was planning her imminent demise.

She took a deep breath. “What is she to you?” she asked simply. That only seemed to confuse him
Sighing, she figured she’d present with options to sample from. “Okay, she’s Laurel, right? Laurel, Laurel, Laurel – and wow, saying it three times fast is –”

He cleared his throat.

“Right,” she veered back onto the right course. “But is she…Tommy’s girl? Your ex-girlfriend? Your ex-girlfriend-turned-BFF? The one to rule them all? Your heart’s one desire? Your goat herder?”

Oliver blinked. “My goa –yes, definitely my goat herder,” he declared flatly.

“Okay, then you –”

“Felicity,” he interrupted, a breath of laughter coating his words, “I don’t know what a goat herder is – I mean, I do know, but I don’t think we’re going by the same definition here.”

She threw her hands up. “You know, your goat herder. Your unicorn. Your coconut. Because your love is just so epic and all-encompassing that the English language can’t even begin to grasp it, and the universe has to attribute you a random word since none in existence can live up to the power of your love.”

He was just staring at her blankly now. Well, almost blankly; there was a shadow of something else in his eyes but he was far too difficult to read for her to recognize it. “So?” she prompted. “Is she your goat herder?”

Oliver gave her no answer.

It was some time later that Oliver was left alone, Felicity having gone home herself.

He spent quite the amount of time going over their earlier conversation. Felicity’s, however silly, question had gone unanswered, as Oliver had decided it was territory he didn’t want to wander in and promptly changed the subject; to her credit, Felicity only huffed under her breath.

Now alone in the relative darkness, Oliver let himself think on it. Who was Laurel to him? As Felicity had so deftly put it, she was Laurel – the Laurel. She was everything…except when she wasn’t.

There were times when he was at peace without her. And then there were times when it almost physically hurt to be without her. It was – again, as Felicity had put it – complicated. Diggle had once told him that it was always going to be Laurel, and everyone else be damned; as loath as Oliver was to admit it, it was probably the truth. But then, his traitorous mind would conjure up scenarios where he would have to choose again, between Laurel and everyone else who mattered to him, and his thoughts would come to a screeching halt; he couldn’t choose. Would he sacrifice Digg for Laurel? Or his family? Felicity? He got slightly sick just thinking about having to make any of those
choices.

But Laurel was Laurel. She was his goat herder. She had to be. Really, if anyone herded all of his goats, it had to be Laurel.

And now he was thinking in weird Felicity metaphors.

Maybe he was losing it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I know there's a lot of goat-talk here - and please, rest assured that all and any goats are used in the most innocent of ways. Not that there will actually BE goats walking around. As to why there's so many goats...well, you try spending some quality time in a godforsaken French village and walking away mentally unscathed. I'm a city girl. Chickens and goats give me nightmares.

That nonsense aside, I hope you liked this prologue.
For the purposes of this story, I am (I think) tweaking canon a bit, so in this particular puppy, Laurel has been working as ADA for some time before Oliver returns to SC - as in, it's not exactly the newest of jobs for her.
With that out of the way, please carry on.

Isabel Rochev was a meanie. An honest-to-God, nightmare-inducing meanie.

With the hostile takeover averted, Queen Consolidated still remained a family business. Unfortunately, there was a price to it, and Isabel Rochev was here to stay.

At least she had stopped making blatant jabs at Oliver's lack of corporate prowess. Well, that could also be a downside. Felicity caught the other woman's calculated, shrew looks when she sat by Oliver's side at this or that meeting; his mindless-playboy mask was debunked and now, Miss Rochev was beginning to see beneath the surface. It could become a problem.

Which Felicity suggested could be at least somewhat resolved by increasing the frequency with which Digg put on the green hood when Oliver was very publicly somewhere else; both her partners in crime-fighting had agreed, though with some grumbles on Diggle's part.

And then there was another problem; Isabel Rochev was on the list.

Oliver would not touch that list with a ten-foot pole now, but the fact remained that he, as well as the two other members of the – as Felicity liked to call them – Golden Trio, knew that damned list by heart. And Isabel Rochev was on it.

So, yes, Felicity concluded. Isabel Rochev was a meanie.

And so was Oliver, after hours in the board room. Felicity estimated that four hours was his limit; after that, Grumpy Arrow came out to play and it was every poor, unfortunate soul for themselves.

Of course, two very unfortunate souls didn’t have the luxury of ducking for cover. So, she and Diggle were in Oliver’s office, as the latter had decided this was a good time to further discuss their nighttime activities. While being grumpy.

Felicity had tried to lift his mood. She brought him bagels. She even brought him a smoothie that looked like a rainbow. He didn’t seem particularly enthused with either.

“If we’re doing this,” Oliver proceeded with what was a rather long speech about the newly-reformed Team Arrow, “we have to be meticulous about it. More careful. Before, we mostly just stumbled our way through the dark and learned by going; we have to be better than that.” He made a pause there. “We need ground rules.”

From his spot by the door, Diggle simply deadpanned, “Don’t piss me off, those are my ground rules.”

Felicity stifled a smile, while Oliver’s hand flailed around in irritation. “This is serious, John.”
“I was being serious.”

Felicity bit her lip. “And I demand better coffee,” she informed, effectively making Oliver turn his frustration on her. “Felicity…” He huffed in annoyance. “Will either of you please take this seriously? It’s important.”

Felicity chanced a side-glance at Diggle. When they had dragged Oliver back home, he was as uncooperative as could be when it came to the hero business; he had gone through the acceptance phase, which was great, but now, he seemed more into it than either of them.

Now, it could be because the thought of making Tommy proud, of being better in his memory, was something that motivated Oliver on a very deep level. Somehow, though, Felicity wasn’t sure that was all there was to it. Somehow, and in light of their recent late-night conversation, she thought that maybe it had to do with Laurel, too. And, by the look on his face, Diggle seemed like he was thinking along the same lines.

After a moment of tense silence, during which Oliver took turns in glaring at both of them separately, Felicity cleared her throat. “Okay,” she said. “We’ll bite.”

Oliver released a deep breath then settled back in his chair and spread his arms out, as if to tell them to hit him with their best suggestions.

Felicity frowned. “Wait, you want us to come up with something right now?”

“No time like the present,” he declared, and Felicity thought this was about as close to Chirpy Arrow as he was ever going to get.

Diggle sighed. “How about we make it homework?” he suggested. “Otherwise, I will make it a rule for you to wear a pink tutu over your get-up every time you go out, Oliver, I swear to God.”

After some lip-curling, Oliver relented in the face of that threat. “Fine,” he agreed. “Just…give it some thought, okay? This matters.”

Both Diggle and Felicity nodded dutifully.

With that promise made, Diggle excused himself to hit the men’s room. “Try not to attract any masked gunmen while I’m away,” were his parting words, to which Oliver glared.

Now alone with him, Felicity took a moment to watch him. He was looking out the window, a certain contemplative look in his eyes.

“I have a ground rule,” she broke the silence, taking him by surprise. When his eyes connected with hers, she went on softly, “We’re doing this for the city. And its people – all of them. Those who need help, and those the city has already failed. This isn’t about making ourselves feel better, or proving anything to anyone. It’s about our city.”

He frowned for a moment, as if he couldn’t understand why she was bringing it up, or phrasing it the way she was. Then, his features cleared in understanding before they settled into a stony mask, and she knew she’d been right earlier; this was about Laurel, too. It was like watching a terrible shipwreck unfold; part of him was getting invested because he thought, consciously or not, that it would make Laurel see his alter-ego in a different light. Felicity didn’t want him to hope against hope; she didn’t want to get into this for the wrong reasons, either.

“Those are the only reasons I’m doing this for, Felicity,” he said flatly.
She pursed her lips. “And that brings me to ground rule number two” – she gave him a pointed look – “which is honesty.”

He looked like he was chewing on his own tongue now.

“No lies,” she proceeded. “You can, you know, keep a dirty secret or two if you want, but no lies to your fellow conspirators.”

After a moment, he nodded. “No lies,” he agreed.

She raised an eyebrow, indicating she expected him to own up to his earlier lie. He didn’t cooperate.

They decided to take it easy for their first mission back on the job – well, easy was relative in their line of work.

On their first night back, they were taking down a drug ring leader – one of many to have risen to power after the earthquake – who was only known in the streets under a pseudonym; apparently, after the Hood and the Count, baddies everywhere had taken to hiding behind witty titles. This particular member of the criminal scene went by, as ridiculous as it was, Scarface. Whether he took inspiration from the character or literally had a face full of scars, no one really knew.

What was known however, to Felicity at least, were his whereabouts. The man was a ghost, with no record or picture in any public database, but all it took for a computer genius was some time – or rather, some weeks – spent on trailing the sellers, through both traffic cameras and trackers Diggle had slipped on some of them, and waiting to see where they all converged. All minions had to report to the master eventually.

So, Felicity had a location: the barely-standing ruins of the old CNRI offices.

When she related that piece of information to Oliver, it alone sufficed to get him riled up. He did make a point to praise her for her great work, though. And then did the same for Diggle when the latter grumbled indignantly.

It wasn’t a mission that they would classify as needing all hands on the proverbial deck, and besides, they needed a bit of practice to find their rhythm again.

So, Oliver went out alone, while Diggle and Felicity kept a comm link on, nursed tall cups of coffee, and waited.

As they did, Felicity slipped a few articles into the internet ether, all referencing the man in the hood as Green Arrow, rather than just ‘the Hood’; hopefully, with a couple of initial steps taken, the name would take off on its own.

“Smart,” Diggle commented as he watched her put the finishing touches on the articles. “Does he know you’re doing it?”

“I just thought of it,” she said. “But hey, if it works, maybe he’ll pat me on the head and call me a
good girl.”

She paused, narrowed her eyes, then turned to Diggle. “Did that sound dirty?”

He choked on a snort. “Only to your dirty mind, Felicity.”

“My mind’s not dirty,” she defended. “It’s just…wired wrong.”

Diggle only shook his head.

Having finished her task, she drummed her fingers against the keyboard as they waited for Oliver to reach the target. It was a relatively short wait.

Their comms crackled to life, making them both on alert; there were sounds of a crash, as Oliver either broke down a makeshift door or ran through a brick wall, and the telltale hiss of an arrow being nocked back.

“Put your hands on your head and get down on your knees.”

Felicity started at the sound of Oliver’s distorted voice. “Wait, where’s the catchphrase?” she blurted out, and the low grumble in her ear told her Oliver didn’t seem to appreciate that particular part of her running commentary.

There was some rusting to be heard before another voice broke through, presumably that of the notorious Scarface. “Hey, Hood guy!”

Well, for a hardened criminal with an arrow pointed at his face, he sounded awfully…chipper.

“I prefer Green Arrow these days,” came Oliver’s reply, and Scarface’s subsequent snort.

“That one’s even worse! Seriously, where do you come up with this stuff?”

Felicity turned to Digg, who looked as bewildered as she felt. “Is that guy high or something?”

“Well,” Diggle hedged, “he is a drug cartel leader, so…could be.”

“Yeah, but even if he were wasted, he wouldn’t be antagonizing – oh!” Her fingers began moving as soon as it clicked, and she switched the satellite feed transmitting to her monitors to a thermodynamic filter. Sure enough, Oliver and Scarface were in the middle of the crumbled building, while Felicity counted five heat signatures moving just outside Oliver’s field of vision, and closing in. If he hadn’t noticed them before, they had to have been in hiding – and being damn good at it, too. Too good, in fact, for Felicity not to suspect that they had been expecting him.

But to focus on immediate problems…

“He’s distracting you, Oliver,” she said quickly. “His trigger-happy buddies are closing in on you.”

“I gathered as much,” was his dry reply, just as Diggle started describing the men’s positions with precision and a lot of military words Felicity didn’t really understand.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Well, you’ve got your sidekicks,” Oliver told the man at his feet, “and I’ve got mine.”

The hiss of a flying arrow filled her ears next, then another, then four more; all in quick succession, and none wasted. Felicity watched the colorful blurbs move over her screen, the one representing
Oliver having barely moved, yet all his targets were down. She could just picture him, nocking one arrow after the other, using his instincts to back up Diggle’s words and hit every last man; probably without breaking a sweat.

Her traitorous tongue was about to get the better of her brain when something else caught her attention; the SCPD’s scanner she had running on a side monitor was going haywire. Frowning, she turned the volume up.

“All units to the East Glades, old CNRI headquarters, the vigilante is on site, all units to –”

She turned her frantic eyes to Diggle as the crackle of the police dispatcher’s voice hummed around them. “It’s a set up,” she let out before raising her voice. “Oliver, get out of there, get out of there right now!”

She held her breath as she listened to his labored pants while he made a quick escape, balling her hands into fists when she could hear sirens echo in the background. There was some shouting, and even what sounded like gunfire to her, but more importantly, the roar of a revving engine. Soon, it was the only sound to be heard, apart from Oliver’s breathing. “I’m in the clear,” he informed gruffly. “Taking the long route back to the club.”

And with that, he was offline. Felicity heaved a sigh of relief as she discarded her comm, but said relief was only temporary; they had been set up. The vigilante had been set up. There was no other explanation for it; both the lurking men and the inordinately quick police response. All knew exactly where Oliver was going to be.

She had a feeling now, as to how it all connected, and she really, really hoped her gut was wrong.

Her hands were at the keyboard once more, running specific algorithms in search of patterns on both SCPD files and all and documentation the District Attorney’s office had to offer to the cyber-world, cross-referencing with a compiled list of different channels she knew were used by law enforcement and informants to communicate under the radar.

By the time Oliver strode through the door, she knew exactly how they had been played, and promptly turned to Diggle. “You tell him,” she muttered.

Diggle sighed and rose to his feet, coming face to face with a very put-off Oliver. “What happened?” he demanded immediately. “You said it was a set-up. By whom?”

Felicity felt the sudden urge to cry. “I’m sorry, Oliver,” she began, her voice quiet and thick, “I should have known – I mean, we should have known – and I should have checked before sending you there, it was stupid, I mean – no, really, what self-respecting crook calls himself Scarface? – and I should have figured it out, I’m a genius – well, I’m supposed to be, but I’m obviously not, and – ”

“Felicity!” he interrupted her somewhat tearful babble, now looking angry, confused and worried all at the same time. “Just…explain it to me, please.”

She didn’t have the heart for it. She really didn’t.

So, Diggle took over. “After we realized it was a trap, Felicity did some digging – ”

“Which I should have already done beforehand,” she mumbled under her breath.

“– and it turns out, this was a pretty big deal,” Diggle went on as if she hadn’t spoken. His voice grew more stilted, more cautious, as he proceeded, and Felicity could see it confused Oliver. “For the Police Department,” Diggle said, “and…the District Attorney’s office.”
Oliver shifted, his features going slack; yeah, he was starting to get it now.

“Joint task force,” Diggle informed, “to catch the vigilante. All under the radar, all on a need-to-know basis. The reason Scarface was a ghost is because he really didn’t exist until they made him up...they gave him credit for drug buys that didn’t happen, and in the spike of drug traffic since the earthquake, it was easy to plant the false info.”

Felicity picked at her nails as Diggle explained it all methodically; she really wouldn’t have been able to do that.

“They made sure to put him on their ‘most wanted’ list, made it seem like they had trouble catching him – like he was doing a hell of a lot of damage, because –”

“– because that’s exactly the kind of target I would go after,” Oliver finished for Diggle, his voice hollow.

“Yeah,” the other man confirmed. “After you took down the Count, I think they figured you didn’t particularly tolerate drug lords. They knew we were tracking them. Felicity and I have been doing it while you were away, so they thought you were still around Starling City. They knew you – well, they thought it was you – would trace them back to base eventually. And –” He paused there, obviously not really wanting to continue; still, it needed to be said, even though Felicity was pretty sure Oliver had already figured it out.

“And, they chose CNRI because…” Diggle resumed, taking a deep breath. “Because it was...poetic justice, I suppose. Laurel, she, uh...she was pretty high up in the chain of command. CNRI was...it was her pitch.”

Felicity blinked back her tears as she watched Oliver; for a brief second, he looked more lost than she had ever seen him.

“Tommy died there,” he said quietly, barely above a whisper.

“Like I said,” Diggle reiterated flatly, “poetic justice.”

Oliver was very quiet, and very still, for a long time.

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing I’m trying another way, then,” he eventually spoke. “Otherwise, I would have killed six cops.”

He turned on his heel with those words, disappearing towards the lair’s back, where most of his training equipment was now.

Felicity knew there were tears brimming in her eyes. She felt so defeated. This was supposed to be their big comeback and it had failed gloriously. Not to mention that it had hit Oliver right in his Laurel issues.

“Ground rule number fifty-six,” she muttered, “check all intel twenty times. Then check again.”

“It’s not your fault, Felicity,” Diggle comforted kindly. “Everything seemed legit.”

She let out a mirthless chuckle. “They played us real good, didn’t they?”

He only backed her sentiment up with a nod.

They seemed to have come to a silent agreement to not leave Oliver alone; both lingered behind in
silence, to the sounds of him beating up inanimate objects.

After a particularly inhuman roar, Felicity decided that it may be wise to check up on him; just to be sure he wasn’t two seconds away from demolishing the place. Diggle gave her a nod of approval as she hesitantly inched her way closer to where Oliver was, her heels clicking against the ground, so he knew when she stepped behind him.

“I’m fine, Felicity,” he grumbled before she had even spoken.

“I’m starting to think you’re really just using that word ironically,” she couldn’t help but observe, much to his apparent irritation. His already tense shoulders went downright rigid, before they slumped. He turned to her, and Felicity thought he looked a lot like a kicked puppy.

“I’ll be fine,” he amended his previous statement and she appreciated the effort.

Biting her lip and wringing her hands, she said, “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I led you right into a trap and –”

“That wasn’t your fault,” he interjected, sounding almost confused that she would place the blame on herself.

She cracked a small smile. “I appreciate the sentiment, but it kind of was, I mean –” Letting out a loud breath, she tried to get her bearings. “The thing, the three of us, we’re – where the law is concerned, we’re criminals, right? So, when it comes down to it, all we have is each other for protection and – well, that kind of stuff. And I’m our first line of defense, I – I’m the one who digs for intel and all the cyber-stuff you and Digg don’t understand, and…and I messed up.”

She blinked and he was two steps closer to her. “Digg didn’t see it either,” he offered, his voice softer now. “I didn’t see it.”

“Yeah, but –” She was fighting tears again. “I gave all the info to Digg, and he didn’t see it because he trusts me, and you didn’t see it because you trust us.” Her eyes went to the ground as she mumbled, “So, really, I almost got you caught, or worse, on your first night back.”

Another blink and he was right in her personal space. She slowly brought her eyes to his. “Not your fault,” he repeated firmly, sporting a very no-nonsense look. “If we’re pointing fingers, then we all messed up. But, I got out before they could catch me, so let’s just…take this as a precautionary tale.”

She nodded, then offered him a wan smile. “Guess we’re still not totally past the learn-by-going phase.”

He returned her smile as he agreed, “Yeah.”

Don’t talk about Laurel, she chanted to herself as the silence stretched. Don’t even think about Laurel. No Laurel. Felicity Smoak, do not –

“I’m sorry about Laurel.”

Well, so much for that.

“I mean, I’m sorry she was involved in this,” she just rambled on when Oliver’s features went from comforting to absolutely stony, “and that, you know, she chose CNRI. Not that she would ever do that if she knew you were – well, you, and it’s all just this really cruel turn of fate, but it still sucks so…yeah, I’m sorry about…all of…that.”
He didn’t even bat an eyelid.

She gulped. “Right. Well, I’m just gonna go now, and leave you to…uh, your stuff. Yeah.”

Spinning on her heel awkwardly, she began trekking back to the safety of her monitors; Oliver called to her just before she went out of immediate earshot.

“Felicity.” he said softly, prompting her to cast a wary glance over her shoulder; she was surprised to see his uncharacteristically vulnerable expression. “Thank you,” he simply said.

She only smiled and nodded.
I am the actual worst when it comes to updating. Apologies for that. And that said, thank you so much for all the feedback, and kudos, and comments. You make me the happiest of newbie Olicity writers.

It was all over the news the next day.

Whichever channel Felicity turned on was reporting the same story; the great, super-secret task force formed to catch the vigilante had failed. She supposed it did cause too much noise for the people not to notice. And Laurel was making statement after statement, saying that this one failure did not mean they would desist from their goals; the vigilante would be caught.

It was putting Oliver in a mood. He wasn’t grumpy, she could deal with that; he just looked…sad.

By the time lunch break rolled around, Diggle was in her office, telling her they were heading out to Big Belly Burger. Oliver brooded for the entire length of the ride.

Once they were seated, he did crack a small smile at Carly’s greeting and her bringing them their usual orders without needing to be asked.

“So,” Felicity began as she slurped on her milkshake, “I hate to talk business, but are we doing damage control?”

Both men frowned.

“What I mean is, Laurel is obviously dead-set on catching the vigilante,” she explained, careful to keep her voice low. “She helped set-up a major operation; she’s not going to give up anytime soon. Any potential…uh…feelings aside, it could make our crime-fighting lives very difficult, very quickly.”

Diggle clucked his tongue then turned to Oliver, as did Felicity; he glanced from one to the other, and sighed. “If we can show her that I’m not the criminal she thinks I am,” he said quietly, not looking at either of his companions, “maybe she’ll change her mind.”

Painful shipwreck, Felicity thought. “So, we do our thing, she does hers, and we hope that while doing her thing, she doesn’t catch us doing ours?” she reiterated, though it did sound much less convoluted in her head.

Surprisingly or not, Oliver’s mouth quirked into a fleeting smile. “Yeah,” he confirmed.

She pursed her lips then nodded. “Okay. We can be super-secretive.” She took another swig of her milkshake. “Speaking of being super-secretive,” she said, “do we have a new, you know…mission?”

Oliver and Diggle exchanged glances. “I don’t know,” Oliver eventually admitted. “I mean, it’s not like I have a list to go through now…I don’t really know where to start.”

The mention of the list brought back thoughts of Isabel Rochev; Felicity had been doing some
digging in her minimal spare time, hoping to find something on the other woman. She just couldn’t be good news. All her searches had been rather fruitless, though.

Snapping out of that line of thinking, she said, “Well, since you were always good at finding trouble —”

Oliver gave an indignant twitch while Diggle laughed under his breath.

“– maybe you could apply your talents here. You know, go through the streets, find the trouble, eliminate the trouble…the city’s overrun with small-time criminals, and dealing with them is part of fixing things too, right?”

Slowly, Oliver nodded.

“So,” she proceeded, “fry the small fish, and if you happen to run into big fish in the process, we can take them on, too – of course, we’ll be looking for the big fish all the time, in the background, but… oh, you know what I mean.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Diggle agreed. “And hey, if we give her more crooks to prosecute, maybe Laurel will take it easy with the whole vigilante thing.”

Somehow, Felicity doubted Laurel Lance could be so easily distracted.

In the spirit of not wasting any time, Oliver wanted to try their new regimen that same night.

The plan was for him to cover a ten-block radius of the East Glades on that first night, with the possibility to expand the zone if the need should arise, or the designated area happened to be uneventful – not that there were any real chances of that happening.

Diggle and Felicity would man the comms in turn, keeping the SCPD scanner on idle in the background, with Felicity taking the first shift.

As she waited for Oliver to suit up, she brought up her research on Ms. Rochev and went through it one more time. She nearly squeaked when Oliver’s voice sounded from right next to her.

“What’s this?”

She brought a hand to her poor, startled heart, taking a deep breath before responding. “It’s my side-project,” she explained. “Learn all there is to know about Isabel Rochev.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Why are you looking into her?”

She gave him a look before returning her eyes to the monitor. “You know why.”

With a sigh, he said, “She was on the list.”

“Exactly. Which means she’s up to no good, and I want to know just what kind of no-good we’re
talking about here, and why she was so adamant on acquiring QC, and why she’s still sticking around with no apparent intention to leave anytime soon.”

Another deep breath.

“She’s not our priority.”

She nodded dutifully. “I know that. Like I said, just a side-project.”

“Just don’t get too caught up in your side-project tonight,” he said. “I need you to be my eyes and ears on the streets.”

“Don’t worry,” she reassured. “I’m your trusty little sidekick.”

There was a beat before he responded and she let her eyes leave the screen and rise to his; he looked like he was debating with himself before his mouth pulled into an uncharacteristically wide smile. “Well, definitely little,” he eventually said, and for a moment, she was too surprised to be affronted.

Was he actually…teasing her? As in, voluntarily engaging in a social activity normal, friendly people were known to dabble into?

His smile slipped as she only stared at him. Then, she realized he was trying; to engage, to be friendlier. It made her fight a smile of her own.

“When one is surrounded by giants…” she teased back, restoring his smile almost instantly. He gave her a small nod, squeezed her shoulder lightly, then went on his way.

She kept her smile up, even when she could only see him through the traffic cameras she’d hacked.

As suspected, the East Glades were not lacking for criminal activity.

By the time Diggle was walking down the stairs, two hours into Oliver’s very first patrol of the city, there had been three muggings, one car theft – which Oliver had let slide – five drug sells and one attempted rape.

Maybe patrols were a little more complicated than they had thought.

She sighed in genuine bliss when Diggle materialized by her side. “Oh, thank God, Digg, you’re here,” she breathed.

“This was your idea, Felicity,” came Oliver’s somewhat annoyed reply, and she glared at the faint outline of him she could see on her screen, perched on his motorcycle at a street corner.

“Yeah, well, the road to hell and all that,” she grumbled and closed her eyes; it was not a moment later that Diggle gave her a light tap on the shoulder.

“You should go home,” he told her but she stubbornly refused to as much as lift an eyelid.
“I can sleep here,” she mumbled. “The chair’s comfy.”

“I’ll need the chair.”

“We have other chairs. Just wheel me away into some corner…”

He pinched her.

“Ow!”

“Go home, Felicity,” he ordered, very unapologetic. “Aren’t you always the one who goes on and on about beauty sleep?”

Grumbling, she rubbed her eyes and pushed herself to her feet, only then remembering her comm link was still open. “Oliver?”

“Yes, Felicity?”

“I’d say this was a pleasure, though it really wasn’t, but hey, one can’t be a fearsome crime-fighter without suffering, right? Goodnight, Oliver, and I hope you fry many a fish.” With those parting words, she unceremoniously pulled out her earpiece and dropped it into a smiling Diggle’s awaiting hand.

He took over then, while Felicity gathered her things. She hesitated before stepping out; she’d had an idea and thought to see it through herself, though keeping it from Digg and Oliver would be a direct infringement of her own ‘no lies’ policy.

Still, best to run it only by Diggle first.

“Digg,” she called out quietly, lightly tapping on her ear when he swiveled in the chair to face her. Though he frowned, he understood her meaning and muted his end of the comm link.

“So, I have an idea,” she said carefully, “but I don’t think Oliver is going to like it.”

“He rarely does,” Diggle deadpanned. “What do you have in mind?”

Resisting the urge to wring her hands, she went on, “So, you know how Detective Lance – well, Officer Lance now – and I have this mutual understanding that may or may not border on a loose definition of friendship?”

Diggle nodded slowly.

“And you know how he doesn’t exactly hate the vigilante anymore – kinda likes him, actually…”

“Are you lobbying in favor of recruiting Lance to the cause?” Diggle let out incredulously. “’Cause yeah, Oliver will definitely not like that one.”

“Not recruiting, per se,” she assured. “Just…Laurel’s out to get the vigilante, right? She’s also Lance’s daughter, and he’s kinda-sorta on our side, so…I was thinking, if I ask nicely, maybe he’d be willing to give us a heads-up every now and then, if he knows about what she’s planning.”

She waited as Diggle thought it over; he seemed torn. “You really think Lance is going to agree to that?” he eventually challenged. “To spy on his daughter?”

“I think there’s a chance,” she said. “With the right approach. I mean, yeah okay, he’ll probably say no, but it’s worth a shot, right?”
She received a nod of agreement. “But you’re worried about Oliver?”

“Yeah.” She sighed. “You know how he is about Laurel. If I suggest we spy on her, he might get” – she struggled for the most fitting description – “hissy.”

Diggle snorted this time. “I think he’d get more worked up over you calling him hissy than what you’re suggesting,” he said. “But I’m with you on this one,” he added, sobering. “It could be useful to have Lance on our side. I’ll back you up when we tell Oliver.”

“Thanks, Digg.” She smiled. “Well, I’ll leave you to your sidekick duties now. ‘Night.”

“Goodnight,” he said to her retreating back, shaking his head at the little wave she threw over her shoulder. Turning his comm off mute, he spoke to Oliver, “All right, Mr. Green Arrow, we – ”

One of the screens flashed with an alert from the police scanner; there was a robbery in progress at a 24-hour fast food joint. Diggle sighed; it was going to be a long night.

The key to dealing with everything in life was a delicate approach.

The key to dealing with Oliver Queen was not so much a delicate approach as it was standing next to many solid surfaces you could duck under.

Predictably, he wasn’t all that thrilled with the idea of enlisting Laurel’s own father to spy on her.

After yet another QC meeting, Felicity and Diggle had trotted behind Oliver and into his shiny new office, where they had presented him with the plan. He’d scowled at them.

“You have to admit, man,” Diggle said when Oliver offered disgruntlement and little else, “if Laurel ever plans another set-up, and Lance leans about it and tells us, it could save us a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“We already have a plan to get Laurel to ease up on me,” Oliver countered, and bless his heart, he actually sounded like he believed that would put an end to the discussion.

_Tough love it is_, Felicity thought. “No offense,” she began, “but that plan relies on wishful thinking. _This_ plan relies on common sense and actual laws of probability – not that you’d really know what those are.” She took care to soften her tone as she stepped closer to his desk. “I’m not saying your plan will fail, but you yourself said we need to be more meticulous and careful this time around; so, we get a back-up plan – and possibly a back-up plan for our back-up plan, too, I think that’d be good.”

He was quiet for a long time. Eventually, he released a deep breath and simply said, “Fine.”

It was so quick and seamless that Felicity almost thought she’d imagined it. “Wait, did you just agree?” she let out when it didn’t seem like her mind was playing tricks on her. She turned to
Diggle; he’d heard him too, right?

“Yes,” Oliver said shortly. Then promptly changed the subject. “We need to discuss something else. Like how we’re going to explain our constant proximity.”

It took a moment for Felicity to register he was only addressing her. Which, for a genius, was rather slow; it wasn’t like he needed an excuse for Diggle.

“You…have extremely poor eye-hand coordination and spill a lot of lattes on a lot of computers?” she valiantly offered.

From the corner of her eye, she watched Diggle’s eyebrow rise ever-higher at both her words and Oliver’s sudden smile. After a moment, she returned it; great memories and all that.

When Oliver spoke again, his tone had lost its sharpness and his posture its tension. “I’m afraid that only worked once,” he said.

“Didn’t really work that one time either,” she countered, her nose scrunching. “That was like, one of worst lies I’ve ever heard, and I’ve heard some pretty bad lies – mostly from you. Seriously, how much time did you spend on that one? Or any of the ones that followed? ‘Cause they only got worse. I mean, did you even try?”

The slight quirk of his lips grew more secretive; there was some story there, but he just wasn’t telling. It only made her curious. Her eyes narrowed, as she tried to figure it out; Oliver still said nothing.

Eventually, Diggle cleared his throat. “So,” he prompted, “explanation for Felicity’s constant presence?”

She jerked slightly at her name being called; Oliver merely let his eyes slip from hers to Diggle’s. “Well, I am CEO now and that means it’s my job to get the company back on its feet,” he said. “One of the ways to do that is to get ahead of our competitors, and invest in new, lucrative ventures first –”

“Or so ‘Business Plans for Dummies’ says,” Felicity supplied, much to Diggle’s amusement; Oliver started.

She shrugged. “Amazon wish list.”

Oliver blinked, stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. “Anyway, we need new ventures,” he reiterated, “and one possibility is to invest in new computer technologies…”

He let his voice trail off and Felicity knew she was starting to grin.

“Hardware, software, all of that,” he went on. “I’m thinking it’s really where all the money is these days. In fact, I’m determined to make it one of my top priority projects for QC, to not only acquire these technologies but develop them as well. I’m creating an entire department dedicated to it.”

He looked back at her – warmly, she noted. “And I can think of no one better-suited than my trusted friend to put in charge of it.”

Her jaw dropped. “You’re giving me an entire department to run?” she let out. “As in, I will be sailing that ship?” Her eyes widened. “I’m going to have minions?”

She didn’t even notice the wary look Diggle was giving her. “I think you just gave power to the wrong person there, Oliver,” he commented. Oliver merely smiled again; he was being exceptionally
smiley, Felicity idly observed.

“Since this is a project I’m personally putting forward and overseeing,” Oliver spoke again, “it will make sense for us to see each other often without it being suspicious. And your new office is just two floors down.”

Felicity was still in somewhat of a daze. “I’m going to have a new office,” she whispered, the realization of it all finally sinking in; she promptly panicked. “Oh my God, what if I screw up? What if I bankrupt the company? What if I succeed where Isabel Rochev failed? Oh God…”

“Felicity,” Oliver interrupted her babble before it could go any further. “You’re going to be fine,” he reassured. “You…” He faltered, obviously reaching for something that would demonstrate her capability, but coming up empty. Finally, he said, “You…sit down for a couple of hours on a slow night and write a program that can crack FBI firewalls; you can handle a department.”

Well, that was sweet. Surprisingly forthcoming, too. She realized he was still trying; that, more than anything, made her breathing return to an acceptable rate, and her lips quirk into a smile. “Thanks,” she said earnestly. “You really put a lot of thought into this, didn’t you?”

He shrugged, as if it were no big deal. But it was.

As she half-stumbled, half-skipped on her way to assess her new office and meet the first of her ‘minions’, she overhead Diggle speak, just as she went out of earshot. “So, she gets an entire department,” he said, “but I’m still just your black driver?”

Felicity took a deep breath; she could do this. She was the freshly appointed Head of the New Developmental Technologies Department of Queen Consolidated. She had minions. She was in charge. She was the very image of girl power. She was awesome.

And yet, the idea of walking up to the mustard-smeared face of Detective Lance – correction, Officer Lance – while he munched on his hot dog, propped on the hood of his patrol car, and suggesting what she was thinking of suggesting terrified her.

Come on, Felicity, she told herself as she walked up to him, a little too slowly for it to be a confident stride. He won’t shoot you. Probably.

“All right. Strong and confident. “Well, I…uh…I…” Yeah, Felicity, that’s the way to do it. “Okay, so
you asked me about our…mutual friend the other day,” she tried again, clearing her throat. Lance waited a beat, then nodded for her to proceed.

“Well, I did hear from him,” she went on, “as did you, actually. I mean, he served those copycat Hoods to you on a platter, so you obviously saw him – and heard from him, I mean, I can’t imagine he didn’t at least grumble at you, but – anyway, I…” She paused, taking a deep breath. “Besides that, I’m sure you also heard about the…set-up your daughter helped put in place.”

Lance’s look darkened before he released a sigh. “So I did,” he said. “It’s funny, a year ago, I was the one chasing the Hood and she was defending him; how the times have changed, huh?”

Felicity offered him a little smile of sympathy.

“Yeah, I heard about the set-up,” he continued. “Everyone did. And I also heard our green little friend gave us a helping hand last night,” he added. “Going after the scum in the streets, leaving them for us to pick up…” He sighed. “No one else is going to say this, but…it did help. He helped.”

Her smile grew. “He’s trying another way.”

“So he said.”

She cocked her head to the side. “He did?”

“Well, while he…grumbled at me the other night, that’s what he said.”

Reining in on the grin the words brought forth, she proceeded. “So, am I right to assume you’re…on his side now, Detective?”

He looked like he was about to correct her on his title again but then dropped it; his brow furrowed the next moment. “Is there any particular reason you’re asking?”

“As a matter of fact…yes,” she confirmed – very courageously, if she said so herself. “Like I said, your daughter set him up – or she helped set him up – and…and it was a close call. Too close. So…he – well, we…it would be good if we knew the next time she has something like that in mind.”

She let that sink in. Three, two, one…

“You want me to spy on my daughter?”

Yep. There was the outraged tone she’d expected. “Well, yes…and no,” she said. “I’m not asking you to go through her stuff, or listen in on her conversations, or anything like that, just…if she slips in front of you, or shares something with you, I’d appreciate it if you let me know. We’d appreciate it.”

Slowly, the anger on his face ebbed away; he released a deep breath. “I can…do that,” he caved. “If I hear something that might help, I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you,” Felicity told him sincerely, hoping he understood she was truly grateful; he grumbled a little.

“Well, don’t thank me yet. She doesn’t tell me about her job – she rarely did before, much less now.”

His eyes grew unfocused, staring at a spot over Felicity’s shoulder. “It’s just like when we lost Sara,” he added on a whisper, more to himself than to her, Felicity supposed.

She understood why he was making the comparison, of course; still, best not to engage in any way.
No good ever came out of plunging into the middle of this kind of family business.

After some more chit-chat, she was on her way. It was timely, too, as her lunch break was nearly over.

Oddly or not, it brought a smile to her face to ride the elevator just short of the executive’s floor, and step into her – rather spacey, she had to say – new office. She had the desk, and the fancy chair, and the shelves, and the sofa in the corner, and the best OS available – which she fully intended to further tweak, of course.

She was also a mess of nerves, because really, who thought it was a good idea to put a socially awkward MIT graduate in charge of an entire department, upon which the entire stability of the company may come to rest?

Apparently, Oliver.

And *that* was why she was smiling.

Of course, over the next few days, she learned that his first idea wasn’t so much making her the new big kahuna as it was making her his *secretary*; she smiled considerably less after that.
Chapter Notes

I'm amping up the manpain here. Let's be honest, you can't have a story involving Oliver without it. He's like the poster-boy for manpain.

Also, this chapter may have gotten away from me...like, the characters took the wheel, and I am not responsible for what came out of it.

P.S. I am no expert in economics (or tech) and I like to think that applying logic to it is the way to go, though I have been told before that logic is not exactly how it works. Still rolling with it, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This is bad, Felicity thought wildly. This is so bad. Abandon ship, abort mission! Mayday!

It would help if Ms. Rochev weren’t staring at her. Why was she staring at her again? Oh right, they were waiting for her to speak. An entire freaking boardroom. She *did not* deal well with the spotlight blaring at her face; she was perfectly fine with it blaring at whoever stood next to her, just as long as it wasn’t *at* her, dammit! They were actually expecting her to speak!

This was so bad.

Well, she had lasted a week. A week full of long hours and promising drafts, and here she was now, expected to present it to the board, and her tongue was as tied as that absurdly complicated knot she’d seen Digg make once. And that, she reminded herself, was why making the socially awkward MIT graduate a big kahuna was a bad idea.

There were already rumors circulating, of course, as to why the under-qualified computer nerd would be appointed as Head of Department – and that, by the most under-qualified CEO there ever was. Weren’t they the pair?

And this meeting was meant to squash those rumors, because Felicity was supposed to dazzle them all with her prowess, and wittiness, and competence. Needless to say, it wasn’t exactly going according to plan.

She chanced a look at Oliver, who, much like everyone else present, was silent as he waited for her to speak. He had an appropriately bland smile plastered on his face. Oh, this was so beyond bad.

“Well, while we wait for Ms. Smoak to find her voice,” Ms. Rochev spoke up, turning her cold eyes from Felicity to Oliver, “maybe *you* can explain to me what kind of fool’s business this is. She has no qualifications for her position.”

Felicity bit her lip; she knew she was disappointing him, and doing it oh-so-gloriously, and she knew he was as tense as one of his bowstrings beneath the cool façade. Still, his tone was pleasant as he replied. “I’ve seen Ms. Smoak’s work firsthand; she is more than qualified to provide us with the best computer technology out there.”

Ms. Rochev didn’t seem particularly impressed. Felicity knew she didn’t see Oliver as nothing but
mindless anymore, but that didn’t mean she had let go of the notion he was a child splashing his way through the adults’ sandbox. “A computer geek,” she deadpanned. “Who has no experience, or degree, in business whatsoever.” Kind of like you, was mercifully left unsaid.

As it happened, that jab made Felicity speak up – or squeak was more like it, actually. “I have –” Don’t say ‘minions’, Felicity, do not say ‘minions’ – “consultants.” And she did. A whole lot of them. And some of them were financial consultants, and others were her tech-savvy kindred spirits, and they were all really great. Not that Ms. Rochev would care much for that.

All eyes turned to her again; she gulped.

“She does,” Oliver confirmed for her, diverting the attention and mercifully buying her some more time. “This is my personal project, and it is very important both to me” – he pointedly turned his eyes back to Isabel – “and this company. So, I’ve entrusted it to a friend.”

Ms. Rochev looked like she was about to smirk in derision. “One doesn’t have friends in corporate business, Mr. Queen.”

Oliver shrugged casually. “Well, you don’t.”

From her spot to his left, Felicity stared at him. And here she thought Diggle was the resident shade-thrower extraordinaire. “Burn,” she mouthed silently as she ducked her head.

“Ms. Smoak,” he addressed her next and all her mirth was gone in two seconds flat, “maybe you’d like to start now?”

Oh...God.

He was giving her a look that wouldn’t be out of place on his bow-totting alter-ego. A moment later, he gave an exasperated sigh. “I’ll do it myself if you want,” he said, already reaching for the papers she held in her – somewhat sweaty and shaking – hands. She let out a small eep and promptly hugged the folders against her chest.

“You won’t be able to read my notes,” she muttered. He gave her a bewildered look.

“I write in code, okay?” she hissed under her breath, making his mouth twitch in a way that was just a little bit terrifying.

She took a deep, steeling breath, gulped some more, then lowered the notes back atop the table, smoothing them over for good measure. All right, Smoak, she told herself, it’s now or never.

“As it –” Deep breath. “As it stands now,” she tried again, hoping against hope that the heat rushing to her cheeks would just blend in with the blush she’d applied over her foundation, “Queen Consolidated –” She cleared her throat; God, this was worse than that fifth-grade spelling bee where she’d stuttered her way through the entire thing. “Queen Consolidated owns a few subsidiaries that…that deal with computer technology.” She was so out of her comfort zone here, it wasn’t even funny anymore. If she could just fast-forward this shindig to the part concerning actual tech, it would be marvelous; that was her field, what she was good at. “It’s mostly computer parts,” she went on, “and it gets the company a buck or two, but it’s not something to really invest effort into – not yet anyway. Besides, the company needs funds to invest, and we need to get those first. And Ol – I mean, Mr. Queen, is right to take an interest in computer technology; there’s a lot of money that can be made here – on software first. If you know how to do it, and do it well, it takes little funding – mostly because I’ll be doing ninety percent of it myself – and gets a lot of revenue. And I know how to do it – extremely well, I might add.”
Taking a momentary pause to catch her breath, she noticed the look Oliver was giving her now; it held something suspiciously akin to a mixture of amusement and pride. She realized her hands had stopped shaking.

“What kind of software?” Ms. Rochev prompted, obviously not yet impressed.

*Oh, lady, I will so blow you away.* “Do you know what an operating system is?” Felicity countered with a question of her own, a little surprised by the condescending undercurrent of her voice. By his spot by the boardroom’s glass doors, Diggle looked like he was having some trouble with maintaining his poker face.

Isabel Rochev, for her part, didn’t seem either offended or startled; there was a slight shift, though. Now, she looked like Felicity had finally gotten her attention. “Sure,” she said. “Windows, Mac, that sort of thing?”

“Well, Mac isn’t actually the OS for – never mind, uh…yes,” Felicity managed to confirm. “Your average user’s OS of choice. Now, those who know better will use Linux or write their own source code, but the majority of the tech-impaired – I mean, the general populace, will use Windows or…Mac. Except…those are *riddled* with bugs. And when I say riddled, I *mean* riddled; you get just a little bit enthusiastic, and those things crash and burn, and go up in flames, and you’re just left there crying over the ashes.”

Everyone was giving her odd looks now; oh well, they got her point.

“So, what I suggest,” she concluded, “is to offer those – poor, unfortunate, tortured souls – disgruntled users a quick fix-it for all their troubles. One program installed and *voilà*; no more bugs.”

A blink, and Ms. Rochev’s face went from intrigued back to unimpressed. “Are you not familiar with basic protection laws, Ms. Smoak? Putting out a fix-it program like that would be a direct infringement of copyright laws.”

Now, it was Felicity’s turn to look unimpressed; she really didn’t like being treated like an idiot. “Not if we market it as a completely separate program,” she countered. “A fix-it for *all* operating systems, not just one specifically. That’s one loophole taken advantage of right there. Then, we just have to be careful with the phrasing when patenting the product; dance around the subject, that sort of thing… I’m sure the company’s legal experts are really good at that.”

“We can play with the language all we want, we’re still talking about a product that can cost the systems’ owners a lot of money – the one they earn from client support in case of…bugs; they won’t just let us place this program of yours on the market without a fight. And we can’t afford that sort of legal fees.”

“Except, they won’t be able to stop it,” Felicity said with confidence. “Legal-speak aside, the program will not contain a single line of code from the OS’ it debugs; there will be no copyright infringement. And it will work on every OS. We market it as an independent upgrade, but everyone will know what it’s really for.”

Isabel tilted her head a fraction. “How?”

Felicity shrugged. “All it takes a few anonymous leeks online. It’ll spread like wildfire, if you plant it in the right places.”

“And…it will really be completely removed from the original code, and still work on every system?”
Isabel questioned again, growing curious at Felicity’s affirmative nod. “You can do that?”

“Can I do that?” Felicity scoffed. “Does the vigilante wear green tights?”

There was a muffled sound from the doorway, and all eyes turned to Diggle, where he was half-bent over, attempting to feign a cough. He raised a hand in apology, still half-facing away and pressing a fist to his mouth to hide his smile.

Felicity kept her eyes pointedly fixed on Isabel Rochev. So okay, that comparison may have been a result of her being too at ease – oh, the turn of fate – but she was going to roll with it. And nope, she was not going to look at Oliver.

Mercifully, Ms. Rochev was talking again. “And if this is as simple as you make it out to be, how hasn’t it been done before?”

“It’s not simple,” Felicity said. “I’m just very good at what I do. And others who are as good don’t come and work for corporations…or they just take money to keep their ideas under wraps. They value anonymity more than a patent.”

“So, if this takes off,” Isabel summarized, “that’s a lot of money easily earned. Which can then be used to fund other, more ambitious projects.”

Felicity nodded emphatically.

Isabel studied her for a moment longer, then nodded herself. “It’s…not bad,” she allowed. “For someone who really has no idea what they’re doing.” Felicity could be mistaken, but that did sound like some sort of praise. Ms. Rochev turned to Oliver. “You’re smarter than you look, Mr. Queen,” she said. “You do know how to delegate work to more capable hands.”

And with that, she rose to her feet; the rest of the attendees followed. “I’m not fond of your…eccentricities,” she said, extending her hand to Oliver, “but you do have my approval on this. Keep me updated.”

Oliver shook her hand politely and nodded in form of goodbye.

“Ms. Smoak,” Isabel said on her way out, and Felicity nodded jerkily in response.

The room soon cleared out, save for Felicity, Oliver and Diggle.

She finally chanced a look at the fearsome vigilante. He said only one word. “Tights?”

Felicity sighed. He could never just be happy, could he?

“Still upset over the whole tights thing?” Diggle teased as he cleared out the wrappers from their takeout.

From where he was sharpening his arrows in the basement’s corner, Oliver stated, “Not tights.”
“Oh, I don’t know, man,” Diggle said. “I had to wear those…they’re pretty tight.”

“They…can’t be too loose, otherwise they hinder my movements,” Oliver grumbled under his breath. “Doesn’t make them tights.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, Arrow.”

Eyes still focused on the arrowhead he was handling, Oliver heard the echo of Felicity’s soft laughter. She was by her computers, working on this or that; Oliver supposed it was probably the program she wanted to design for QC. They’d given themselves the night off, to celebrate success, and it had been his treat. Burgers and shakes in the…lair. Felicity called it the lair. It kind of got stuck in his head.

Momentarily pausing in his task, he cast a sideways glance at his companions. Felicity pointed to something on the screen with enthusiasm, then clapped to herself. Diggle chuckled and offered some words of congratulations, and Felicity raised her loosely curled fist up over her shoulder, so John could bump it in passing as he made a beeline for the trashcan.

And God help him, that seamless little gesture filled Oliver with such longing.

He wanted to have it, too, that easygoing camaraderie Digg and Felicity shared. And he was trying; he was being friendlier, and he took interest, and he did his best to make them feel valued. He knew they saw right through him, though; his attempts were painfully obvious, and maybe a little stilted, and sometimes just plain over the top. They knew what he was doing. And they didn’t call him on it; they just let him, and he appreciated that.

But he wanted for it to come naturally, like it did for them. He wanted to be able to fist-bump Felicity without her, probably, blinking up at him in shock and looking around for the hidden camera. He wanted to deliver friendly punches to Diggle’s shoulder without the other man, on a good day, taking his temperature and asking what drugs he’d taken. The simple truth was, it didn’t come naturally to him; not anymore. Somewhere along the way, and on the island, he’d lost the ability to connect with people through easy gestures, to be warm without reminding himself that he had to be so – that had gone out the window with a good chunk of his humanity, he supposed.

He just didn’t fit.

And he didn’t know how to make himself fit again.

He couldn’t play it up here; not with them. Out of those he cared for that surrounded him, they were his most recent acquaintances, and yet, they somehow knew him better than anyone. And they saw right through him.

The greater part of him knew he shouldn’t want it; the closeness. The attachment. He’d been warned against that, and he had learned his lesson. He’d had a team of sorts like this once before and sometimes, he wondered if maybe he wasn’t subconsciously drawn to recreate it here, in Starling City; if maybe, in Diggle and Felicity, he was looking for a new Slade, and a new Shado.

It could be so. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn’t. But the lesson always remained; he had lost his old team, and he could lose this one, too. He could lose them so easily.

So, he shouldn’t want the attachment. But he did.

He wanted it so badly.
Felicity let out a contended sigh; she was actually ahead of schedule with her program. Still, moving a bit further along while she was in the proverbial zone wouldn’t be a bad idea; with her very busy crime-fighting schedule, there were no guarantees she would get a chance to work uninterrupted again on any given day. But more work also required more coffee.

She grabbed her cup, spun her chair around on a twirl, rose to her feet, and frowned.

Oliver was staring at her – or through her, would probably be more fitting. She tipped her head to the side, changing course, and going to him instead of upstairs for a refill.

He actually started at her sudden proximity and it only served to worry her further. “Oliver,” she prompted softly, “you okay?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it. No lies.

Still, he didn’t seem to have any truths to spill either and just gave her a little shrug, before returning his attention to the arrow in his hands. Her frown deepened. She ran a mental recap of the evening, trying to pinpoint the moment when he’d gone from almost cheery to this particular brand of brooding; nothing really stuck out.

Then, she considered all the usual suspects. Laurel? Nah, probably not today. Family drama? Nothing in particular there; Moira was still awaiting trial, and Thea was doing great. Doubting everything from their pursuit of heroics to the meaning of life? Yeah, probably that one.

With a sigh, she asked, “Are you having misgivings about the cause again?”

He didn’t respond immediately, and maybe it was the wrong conclusion, but she jumped to it anyway. “Hey,” she said, a little sharply, making his eyes snap up to hers, “what we’re doing here…it’s great stuff, okay?”

“No, look,” she interrupted, “I know we’re still stumbling through the dark a little, but…” She sighed. “We’ll make it all work. We’ll clean up the streets, and we’ll restore Queen Consolidated to its former glory, and we’ll…change this city for the better. And then – ” she spread her arms out, forgetting she still held her, thankfully empty, cup – “we’ll help your family, and your mom. And after that, we’ll go after Lawton, and we’ll take him down, so Digg doesn’t have to remember his brother’s killer every time he looks at Carly, and then – ” She allowed her brain cells a moment to regroup. “And then, if we can catch a moment to breathe, maybe we’ll make Laurel see you for who you really are.” She gave him a smile and a little shrug. “A hero.”
Hero.

His every muscle tensed at the word. It came as a reflex, and all he wanted was to deflect. Just deflect. Change the subject. Anything not to hear any more of it.

Instead, he found himself muttering, “I’m not a hero, Felicity.”

And because she was Felicity, she rolled her eyes. “Well, of course you can’t say you are,” she said. “I mean, if you go around calling yourself a hero, you’ll just…sound like a pompous ass.”

He felt the involuntary smile touch his lips and immediately reined in on it; there was nothing to smile about.

She was talking again. “It only counts when others say it, and since I’m saying it, then –”

He didn’t even know where the anger came from. But to hear her call him that, actually believe it, just made him…angry.

“Well, you’re wrong,” he cut her off, a little too loudly, making her stop short and blink up at him. “I’m not a hero, and…” He let his eyes linger on the ground before meeting hers again. “And this is not about turning me into one, or whatever it is that you’re thinking.”

“I’m –” She shook her head. “Okay, I know it’s hard for you to see, but from where I’m standing, you’re doing what heroes do. I mean, hey, I can pull up Webster’s definition of the word, and run a point-by-point comparison if you want, but –”

Stop talking, he thought. Just stop talking.

“You know, Felicity, I’m starting to think you’re the one who doesn’t actually see me for who I really am.”

The words were biting and sharp, and they made her quiet instantly. She stared at him, like she couldn’t believe what she’d just heard him say; to be honest, he couldn’t quite believe it either.

He let out a deep breath. “I – I didn’t mean it…like that, Felicity,” he tried to backtrack, but no backpedaling was getting him out of this one.

He was aware of Diggle’s quiet footfalls, too, as the man emerged from the training area; brought out by his raised voice, no doubt. Felicity was still just staring at him.

Finally, she huffed and raised her hands, as if surrendering. “You know what, I’m too tired to deal with this,” she snapped. “And you know why I’m tired? Because all day, I either try to find a way to save your company and rack my brain for ways to make this insanely complicated program that will help you, or spend hours hacking into every federal agency out there for you, or hey, try to find way to buy all of this” – she gestured to their surroundings – “and get you that custom-made bow without having the FBI flag me down and show up on my door, because hey, why would a simple IT expert be buying all of that – and why exactly is it all going to Oliver Queen’s basement? – but I’m not even an IT expert anymore, am I? No, I’m heading a department now, which I have no idea how to do, and guess why is that? Well, because and for you, of course, so I can be here and help you with this little quest for justice we have going on!” She was right in his face now, raising her voice with each word. “But yeah, I’m the one who doesn’t know, or doesn’t ‘see’, you!”

She poked him in the chest. “You know, Oliver, all those little things you’ve been doing? Like,
buying us burgers, and being all friendly and whatever – it’s great, it’s awesome, but it’d be better if you actually meant any of it.”

He opened his mouth to protest to that – because he did mean it – but she was already stomping back to her desk, and gathering her things with angry movements; the loud clang of her coffee mug hitting the desk echoed throughout the space, making him flinch.

“And one of these days,” she spoke again, shutting off her system with more force than necessary, “maybe you’ll actually get over yourself. But then again, you probably won’t.”

And with that, she was out the door, the click of her heels somehow sounding like yet another manifestation of her anger, and he didn’t get a single word in; not that he knew what to say, really.

Diggle was still standing behind him. “Got anything to add?” Oliver asked quietly, decidedly looking anywhere but at his partner.

The other man was silent for a moment, then clucked his tongue. “No, I think she covered everything,” he said flatly and simply retired back to the training area.

Now left to his own devices, Oliver bowed his head; he shouldn’t want attachments.

He almost sighed in relief when he found her in her office the next morning; though, rationally, he knew she wouldn’t just pack her bags and quit, he still carried the tension in his shoulders from the moment he woke up right up to the one when he found her sitting at her desk.

He’d left her alone the previous night, knowing he was never good at controlling his temper after a fresh fight; better to sleep on it first.

Well, that was more of a figure of speech than anything else. In truth, he hadn’t actually slept much – not that he averaged the recommended eight hours anyway. Instead, he’d – and he would never admit to it – gone to see Laurel.

It was just…a gut reaction. Despite it being their night off, he’d donned the hood, grabbed his bow, and hightailed it to the DA’s office; he knew Laurel would be there, working late. He didn’t know what he was expecting, or how going there was a sensible thing to do; just that he wanted to make her see him differently – and he wanted it now, long-term plans be damned.

At first, he didn’t understand his own thought process. Felicity called him a hero. Felicity then yelled at him. And that, of course, made him go to Laurel to…try and make her see him as some sort of hero, which he wasn’t, and had previously snapped for being thought of as such. Didn’t make much sense.

It was after, when he tossed and turned in his bed at the mansion, that it became clearer.

Stupidly, a part of him had believed Felicity. Maybe it wasn’t just distorted vision through rose-colored glasses, and maybe her faith wasn’t just an innocent’s last-ditch attempt to escape the
dissonance, between being pure and helping someone like him. And for a stupid, fleeting moment, he’d believed it. But it didn’t count until Laurel confirmed it, right?

Except she didn’t.

She didn’t, and he’d been right. He was no hero.

To Laurel he was a killer, and a criminal, and she would hunt him down. Because, the bottom line was, he hadn’t saved Tommy. He hadn’t saved five hundred and two more. He hadn’t saved anyone.

Heroes were saviors, and he was no hero.

So, he couldn’t have Felicity thinking he was one. There was no point in wishful thinking, and embellishments such as this one could only lead to disaster in the long run.

He also wanted her to…well, not be angry with him. Not that that was the priority here.

Mindful to get on her good side again, he did the polite thing and knocked lightly on the half-open door.

Her head snapped up and a mild frown settled on her features the moment her eyes landed on him.

“Hey,” she said, a little uncertainly. “Come on in.”

He did as he was bid, closing the door fully as he settled into one of the visitors’ chairs. “Hey,” he echoed as he sat down, striving to give her some sort of smile; he was sure it ended up looking more like a grimace. Well, to her anyway; he’d come to learn that she sorted his attempts at smiling in two distinct categories: genuine and robotic.

“So,” she began, “are you going to try and buy me with a new piece of equipment, or are you going to genuinely apologize? ‘Cause if it’s the latter, let me just get my voice recorder so I can prove it actually happened.”

Even she would have to sort his ensuing smile into the ‘genuine’ category, he thought. “I was hoping to do it off the record, but okay,” he said. She blinked before settling back against her chair and crossing her arms over her chest as she prompted, “I’m waiting.”

And now for the hard part.

He cleared his throat before proceeding. “What I said last night…it was uncalled for,” he began tentatively, “and I’m sorry. But…” How was he supposed to explain this? Why hadn’t he written a speech? Right, because she’d see through it in a heartbeat, he answered his own sullen question.

He tried a different approach. “It’s not that I don’t appreciate everything you do for me, Felicity, because I do.” He chuckled faintly. “Actually, you…probably do a great deal more than I deserve. But, uh…” He brought his eyes to hers, hoping she would understand this. “I…I can’t have you seeing me as more than I am, Felicity,” he said, not sure if she was grasping what he was trying to convey. “It’s…dangerous. If…if you expect more from me than what I’m capable of, then it’s going to lead to…uh…”

“A massive implosion that’s going to tear a hole in the space-time continuum and destroy humanity as we know it?” she supplied.

He frowned. “Something like that.”
“Hm.”

That was all she said. Just…hm.

And then she was quiet, for a long time. In fact, in the entire time he’d known her, he’d never seen her this quiet. It was…unsettling.

Eventually, she sighed. “Okay,” she said, “I promise never to mention the h-word again. In fact, I won’t even think of the h-word again, ever. Happy?”

Happy wasn’t exactly how he’d describe himself but he nodded nevertheless.

“Oh, and that thing you said, about not expecting more from you than what you’re capable of?” she added. “Remember that next time you ask me to juggle hunting down bad guys, saving your company, hacking from sunrise ’til sundown and, oh, you know…breathing.”

He did his best to stifle his smile. “Point taken,” he acknowledged dutifully.

She looked appeased for a moment before heaving another sigh. “Look, Oliver, I get where you’re coming from, but – ”

He tensed.

“ – but you didn’t exactly expect you’d be capable of doing the whole vigilantism thing another way, right?” she challenged. “And you didn’t expect you’d be capable of running your company. So, all I’m saying is, you don’t really know all the things you’re capable of either.”

He could so easily turn those words on her. She was the one who didn’t know all the things he was capable of; she didn’t know about a lot of things he’d done, and he wagered she didn’t think he was capable of any of them. The truth was, he was capable of anything, be it good or bad. She thought he was capable of being a hero; he was just as capable of being a monster.

So yes, he could turn those words on her. But he didn’t. He rather liked being on her good side.

“And that’s the last you’ll hear from me on the matter,” she promised. “From now on, my lips are sealed.”

“I’m holding you to that,” he said. “And, uh…why don’t you take the day off?” he suggested. “Get a few hours to…breathe.”

“Tempting, but I can’t,” she declined – with great suffering, it seemed. “The code for this is so tedious to work out” – she gestured to her screen – “and I can’t really ask my minions – and don’t ever let it spread that I call them that – to help, unless it’s with the small stuff. So, no day off for me.”

“How about the night off, then?” he offered an alternative.

Her eyes widened. “Two in a row?”

He shrugged. “Well, you didn’t get much rest last night,” he pointed out. “So, take tonight off. I’m sure Digg and I will manage.”

She seemed so impossibly torn. “Okay,” she accepted, sounding like she’d just agreed to jumping off a cliff and hoping for the best rather than taking one night off. “But if anything super-important comes up, you’ll call me, right?”

“Promise.”
With one final smile, he rose to his feet. “I better get going,” he said. “I have to…talk to Isabel. About approving the funding for your project, and…I think I’m seeing someone from the legal department, too…”

She raised an amused brow as he trekked his way to the door, dragging his feet all the while.

“You’d so much rather be climbing trees and picking coconuts, wouldn’t you?” she called out as he pulled at the doorknob.

“I never did that,” he tossed over his shoulder indignantly, as he made his way down the hallway. He was sure he’d left her cackling in his wake.

Chapter End Notes

I keep dropping Chlollie references all over the place. And I'm...really not as sorry as I should be.

...don't look at me.
Felicity had to admit, it was…weird.

After all those months of considering downtime to be some mystical concept found only in fairytale land, having a night off all to herself was…weird.

She was picking up enough burgers and fries for a family of six and more soda any human should ever ingest, and once the order was up, she would go up to her apartment, have two-hours-long phone calls with her friends – and aunt Mel, mustn't forget aunt Mel – do some programming that would relax her brain for once, all the while munching on her delicious takeout. It was exactly the sort of thing she was known to do before she had hopped onto Oliver's crusade-train.

It was weird.

She took hold of her bags, her stomach grumbling in anticipation of all those Big Belly Burger's delicacies in her hands, merrily spun on her heel, and nearly lost her balance as she froze in the spot.

Coming face to face with Thea Queen, who stood hand-in-hand with one Felicity could only assume to be the infamous criminally-sophisticated boyfriend, was a variable she hadn't considered in the evening's equation.

"Hey," Thea greeted once she recognized her. During Oliver's absence, the two of them had come to be on a first-name basis; sort of. Felicity spent too much time around Verdant and its basement, so running into Thea had been inevitable; a crisis was averted when Felicity offered to restore the 'internet' and all other tech for the club to its former glory, pro bono.

"Thea, hi," Felicity found her voice, growing a little self-conscious when both Thea and her boy-toy raised their eyebrows in unison at the ridiculous amount of food she held.

"Having friends over tonight?" Thea queried casually. Naturally, it made Felicity trip over her own tongue.

"Oh, no, this is just for me, no friends – I mean, no friends tonight, I'm – I'm not a loner or anything, I have friends – lots of friends – just…not…tonight."

Yes, that went well.

Having already been privy to a babble or two, Thea only chuckled; Roy looked bewildered.

"Well, I know you at least have one friend," Thea said lightly. "Speaking of, could you like, not tell my brother you saw us" – she gestured between herself and Roy – "tonight? I don't need another interrogation."

Felicity nodded dutifully. "Sure."

"And on that note," Thea went on, "let me make the official introductions. Felicity, this is Roy – and I'm sure you know all about him from Ollie's disapproving rants. Roy, this is Felicity. She's, probably against her better judgment, my brother's friend – and employee, too."
Felicity gave a little awkward wave. Roy took a moment to observe her, his eyes narrowed a fraction; he looked like he was assessing her, then shook his head the next moment, as if discarding whatever idea he'd had from his mind.

_Weird_, Felicity thought.

"Nice to meet you," Roy eventually said.

"Likewise." And that was her cue, Felicity supposed. "Well, I'm off. You two have fun. Or don't. Whichever. I don't need to know." Deep breath. "Yeah. Bye."

"Bye, Felicity." Thea offered her own – much less awkward – farewell, while Roy presented her with a small wave, and with that, Felicity was on her way.

One relaxing, crime-free coming right up.

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Well, she had gotten the crime-free part right, at least.

Not that having five lengthy phone conversations in a row wasn't relaxing. It was totally relaxing. Especially all the lying, and omission of truth, and excuses for not calling more often; so relaxing.

At least she had gotten a chance to chat with her close ones, she supposed. Two childhood friends, and two college buddies, and one very special aunt Mel. Out of everyone she sort of neglected due to her side-life, aunt Mel was the one that weighed the heaviest on her conscience. Mel – short for Melinda, but never call her that to her face, or you will be sorry – was not just family, she was the only family. If not for her, Felicity would have ended up in a foster home, after her father had passed away when she was fifteen.

Sometimes, her life's story sounded kind of terrible, when you put it out there without context. Mother deceased after a struggle with cancer when she was ten. Father dead from a heart attack five years later. And only her mother's sister left to take care of her.

Yeah, it sounded pretty terrible.

And it had been, at the time – both times, actually. Mel had done her best to get Felicity through it, and she had done a really good job, too, if the present was any indication – which her niece made sure to tell her as often as she could.

Which, as it were, was not very often at all.

Felicity grabbed another mouthful of fries.

Guilt-tripping was the worst way to relax ever.

_Enough_, she told herself. _You are going to catch up on a show, then be a good Samaritan and crack the latest version of 'Call of Duty' for kids in need, and then you're going to eat all these burgers and pass out until Oliver calls you in a panicked frenzy because you've overslept._
Yes, that sounded like a plan.

She made herself comfortable, booted up the DVR, and lost herself in the flickering images across her screen for a solid couple of hours.

And then, a ping.

She groaned in misery, her head lolling against the back of the couch. A ping could only mean one thing; one of the five independent searches and programs she had running at all times had a hit.

Not so crime-free after all.

Her eyes turned to the ceiling. "This is my night off, universe," she lamented. "Did you not get the memo?"

Resolving herself to a life of misery and cursing what had to be her bad karma – though why she had suck bad karma escaped her – Felicity made her way to her laptop, bringing it back with her and setting it snuggly in her lap.

"All right," she said, "let's see what you've got."

She pulled up the alert, skimmed over the info, and blinked.

Well, that was new.

"I bring news!" she declared bright and early the next morning, bursting into Oliver's office before he had even had the chance to do much other than hang his coat. Both he and Diggle gave her curious looks.

"Good morning, sunshine," Diggle greeted, raising an eyebrow at the flurry of movement she made for.

Oliver, on the other hand, seemed to be in more of a monosyllabic mood. "News?" he merely echoed.

She nodded emphatically, opening her tablet and waiting for the men to gather over her shoulder. She began pulling up the pictures. "So, one of my searches came up with something last night – and before you say anything, it was an automated search so I technically didn't break the rules of a night off – and I think you guys should see this."

A few more clicks and some blurry pictures came up. "What am I looking at?" Oliver queried, and she could just tell he was doing that frowning thing he liked to do.

"Well," she began to explain, "since I have free access to the city's surveillance cameras, I set up a search – well, an algorithm, but never mind – to pick up appearances of people in masks. After the copycat Hoods and everything, I thought I'd be good to keep an eye out for other possible shady folks with the same idea – you know, in case you'd started a movement."
Oliver’s indignant grumble was met with Diggle's chuckle and approval of Felicity's methods.

She proceeded. "So, the search is designed to pick up any instances of someone with their face partially or entirely obscured, and look for patterns, but I did set the alert to go off after four sightings, to minimize the margin for error – you know, 'cause sometimes there's Halloween, and then sometimes someone's just trying to rob a liquor store with stockings on their head…"

"Still doesn't explain what I'm looking at," Oliver pointed out, and Felicity was momentarily distracted by the puff of air that blew just by her ear; why was he leaning in so close anyway?

Probably trying to focus his ninja-sight in order to get a better look, she thought. It was still distracting.

"Right," she cut to the chase. "Well, my search picked up something – someone, actually." She zoomed in on the picture, applied the corrections, and though it was still grainy, the shape was clearly discernible. "A woman," she said. "Dressed in black from head to toe and wielding some kind of metal staff-thing, has been hitting the Glades, and this is where it gets interesting; she's only targeted and taken down low-lives who've been creeping on other women."

Diggle hummed. "That's new."

"My thoughts exactly, Digg," Felicity agreed. "From the looks of it, she's on a one-woman mission to nip misogyny in the butt. It's kind of awesome."

"Trained?" was Oliver's next question and Felicity rolled her eyes; he couldn't just share her enthusiasm here, could he? Also, who in their right mind would be asking her this question?

She spun on her heel, stumbling backward a step when her field of vision was suddenly filled with nothing other than his chest and the stubble on his chin; he'd really been leaning in too close.

Righting herself, she raised her eyebrows at him. "Oliver, how am I supposed to know that?" she demanded. "I have no way of telling who's trained and who's not. Which is why" – she gave him a pointed look when he looked like was about to speak – "you are going to go over the footage, and use your ninja-radar to see if this lady is in fact a fellow ninja."

"I'm not actually a – never mind." He sighed. "You said she went after men who target women?" At Felicity's affirmative nod, he seemed to turn pensive. "Another vigilante?"

"Could be," Diggle allowed. "Whether you like it or not, man, you did set up a precedent. You know, getting justice yourself when the system won't…this woman could have the same idea." His voice turned harder as added, "Violence against women is one of the most rampant crimes, and it's also one law enforcement is doing the least about."

Felicity gave a bitter nod.

"If that's her purpose," Oliver spoke again, "it might still be good to learn more about her."

"To see if she has your sense of boundaries and restraint?" Diggle guessed, to which Oliver nodded. "And if she doesn't?"

Oliver cast a sidelong glance at Felicity before simply shrugging. "Them we help her get it, if she wants," he said simply.

Felicity blinked at him before breaking out into a grin.
Diggle chuckled. "Well, it looks like she already has a fan."

Felicity felt she was completely justified in sticking her tongue out at him. As she reverted back to seriousness, she caught Oliver's look, and it gave her pause; it was fleeting, as everything Oliver did was, but the little glimpse she got seemed filled with...longing. Which was just...silly.

She shook her head. "Okay, so I'll see what more I can dig up," she concluded. "In the meantime, I think we might have a likely source close to home, actually." She turned her attention back to the tablet, pulling up the footage that had caught her eye the previous night. "Exhibit B," she presented the screen to her comrades. "Now, I know it's dark and blurry, but recognize that red hoodie?"

Oliver's expression was, by her estimate, priceless. "That's Roy," he mumbled.

"Mm-hmm," Felicity confirmed as Diggle leaned in with curiosity. "I thought it looked familiar when I first watched the surveillance from the traffic cam, and then I remembered I'd seen it earlier last night – I mean, month...year...just, you know, around – I mean, he wears that thing everywhere, and yeah, he's at the club a lot, and I was at the club a lot, and – anyway, I remembered it. So, that's Roy."

She promptly ignored the looks both men were giving her. "It looks like he was coming to the rescue of a woman who was being harassed by some creeps," she went on, "but the lady with the staff beat him to the punch. And well, since he's your number one fan" – she turned her eyes to Oliver – "maybe, if your alter-ego asked nicely, he'd be willing to share or, you know...snoop around for us."

Oliver seemed the furthest thing from happy with the idea.

"She has a point, Oliver," Diggle encouraged. "The kid could help."

"I don't like the idea of him involved," Oliver complained. "He's...untrained, too much of a hothead..."

"Don't forget star-struck," Felicity supplied with a grin; Oliver didn't seem to find it all that amusing.

"Well, if you give him a purpose and proper guidance..." Diggle spoke up, his tone just a little too mocking.

Oliver didn't deign to respond.

Felicity rolled her eyes; he was going to cave eventually and they all knew it.

"While you ponder on that," she said, "I have some more news. And not the cheery kind this time."

"On Isabel Rochev." That perked both men's interest. "I gave my side-project some attention last night – don't give me that look, I couldn't get back into night-off mode after that ping – and I got...well, either creative or desperate, depends on how you look at it." She turned her eyes solely on Oliver. "I went through her internet history, going back two years. Nothing really pops up, except...except from around the time you returned from the island." She frowned; how sad was it that that sentence needed an addendum? "The first time," she clarified, and with that, Oliver went stock-still.

"She researched everything about your return," Felicity informed. "She looked at every news report, every snippet of you caught on camera – every snippet of anyone who was in contact with you. Then, she looked up your history – you know, pre-island stuff. She was looking into you."

This was turning into a very uncomfortable conversation, very quickly. Still, it needed to be said.

"And then she just stopped," she went on. "She dug up everything she could, and then nothing. No searches after that."
Oliver was silent, his eyes going to the room's far end; both Felicity and Diggle waited him out.

"Do you know why she was looking into me?" he eventually queried, his voice quiet.

Regretfully, Felicity had to shake her head. "No," she admitted. "There's nothing else there that I could connect it to. Then again, the only IP addresses I could tie to her were those of her office computer at Stellmoore International and of the one associated with her home address…right now, I couldn't tell you if she used any other engines, and for what."

"It could be nothing," Diggle hedged. "Just curiosity about the prodigal son's return."

Felicity gave him a look. "Do you really believe that?" she challenged. "You don't dig that deep put of curiosity – and I would know. Besides, Isabel Rochev looks like the last person who would be interested in that kind of thing. You heard the way she talked to Oliver when they first met…she thought he was the lowest of the low – no offense, Oliver."

He made a slight gesture, as if to say that none was taken.

"And if she looked into him," Diggle followed Felicity's line of thought, "then that's probably where she got the idea."

Felicity agreed with a nod, then turned to Oliver, who was yet to speak. After a moment, he took a deep breath and straightened. "This is no longer just a side-project," he declared. "Like you said, Felicity, she was on the list, and that means nothing she does can be taken lightly."

"I'll get on it," she promised.

He was halfway through a nod before he paused. He pursed his lips, then stepped closer to her. Next thing Felicity knew, his hand was on her shoulder. She peered up at him, frowning. He seemed to be looking for the words he wanted to say for a moment, and then presented her with a slight tilt of his head. "It's a lot of work," he said, "between the program you're designing, and all these searches…so, Digg and I will take on the woman in black, and I will talk to" – his expression soured and Felicity had to smile – "Roy." He shook the thought of his little sister's boyfriend off and proceeded with, "We'll take care of all that."

She had to admit, his unprompted thoughtfulness warmed her heart just a little too much. Kind of like his lingering hand did her skin.

"Thanks," she said, though the delivery was just a touch breathier than she had intended.

He gave her one last smile before letting go.

"And on that note," he said, "I need to go through the legal department's first draft for your patent…and I need to find someone to get it for me."

Diggle shook his head. "What you need is a PA, Oliver," he deadpanned.

"I don't like the idea of…an outsider being so close to me at all times," Oliver countered. "It's exactly why I wanted to make Felicity my PA" – she bestowed him with her best stink-eye and he raised his hands in surrender – "but I didn't. For now, the lack of a secretary or a PA can just be attributed to Oliver Queen's eccentricities, and I plan to take advantage of that for as long as I can."

Diggle made a face, forcing Felicity to stifle a smile; his aversion to Oliver's referral to himself in third person was one she often shared. It was kind of freaky.
"Well," she spoke up, "I'm sure one of my lovely minions won't mind getting it for you. You'll have it in a few minutes. My minions are very efficient."

He shook his head at her term of choice for her assistants.

"Are you nice to them?" Diggle inquired, striving for stern.

"Very nice," she confirmed. "I love my minions. And I think they like me, too...they said that I'm the nicest boss they've ever had...though that's probably because I don't really know how to be a boss..."

"Well, you'll learn, I suppose."

She shuddered. "I hope not."

That earned her a nod of approval and with that, she was on her way. She already had the draft waiting on her desk when she arrived, and she put Cheryl, her legal consultant, in charge of procuring a copy for Oliver as well. After a snarky, "Are you sure he'll know how to read it?" and a promise from Felicity not to repeat the comment to another living soul, Cheryl completed the task in record time.

Of course, then Cheryl had to sit down and explain some of the more convoluted terms to her boss, and Felicity had to admit; law was complicated stuff.}

Oliver's eyes were crossing. He prided himself on his endurance, and patience, and focus, but reading legal documents was more of an exercise in maintaining his sanity than anything else. Maybe he shouldn't have been so eager to drop out of every Ivy League college.

Some five hours in, a knock brought him out of the painstaking attempt to read through the entire draft and actually judge its merit with any sort of accuracy.

His eyes met Diggle's as they rose from the paperwork.

"Laurel is here to see you," he informed.

Oliver blinked; well, that was...unexpected. He nodded slowly. "Send her in, please."

"Of course," Diggle acquiesced, though with a lot of sarcasm. "And just for the record," he added as he made to exit, "I'm not your secretary either."

Before Oliver could reply, Diggle was leaving and Laurel was stepping inside. Her eyebrow quirked in amusement. "Do you not have a PA or did they already quit?"

"I'm...trying a different approach to this CEO thing," he said, offering her a smile as he gestured towards the visitor's chair. "Have a seat."

He took a moment to observe her as she settled in, and she looked...tired. Worn out. He didn't like
seeing her this way. "So, what brings you by, Laurel?"

She looked like she was about to speak but closed her mouth shut before any words left it, and her brow furrowed; he followed her line of sight to the slightly mangled pile of papers on his desk. "What's that?" she traded his question for one of her own.

He resisted the urge to groan. "My friend is designing a software for QC – Felicity Smoak, I'm not sure if you remember her."

Laurel took a moment to sift through her memories, but her features soon cleared in recollection. "I saw at Verdant, right? She was setting up your internet or something."

He nodded. "Yeah. She was an IT expert here, and I recently promoted her…she's heading up a department now, and she's designing this new program, which is basically the thing that's going to save the company. It's a new patent, so lots of…paperwork, and I'm" – he heaved a long-suffering sigh – "going through it all."

She gave him a knowing look. "And how much of it did you actually understand?"

"The…small words," he grumbled.

Laurel's lips pressed together to contain her laughter; shaking her head, she extended her hand. "Gimme."

At his resulting frown, she rolled her eyes. "I'll take a look, see if there's something you should have amended. Corporate law is not my area, but I did go to law school, so…you know, I think I'll understand the 'big words', too."

He tried not to look too hasty in gathering all the sheets and handing them to her.

She took hold of them, settled back and began reading, grabbing one of his pens to have in hand should she need to add some remarks. She nodded and hummed here and there, and for a while, he just watched her work in silence.

She was the one to break it. "Felicity is releasing it under an assumed name?" she asked – or rather, stated.

He nodded. "She's doing it as a favor to me…her only condition was that she gets to preserve her anonymity."

"It's a big favor," Laurel commented.

"It is," he agreed. "I'm…trying to make it worth her while."

"It's a good thing," Laurel said softly, raising her eyes from the paperwork, "that you're surrounding yourself with friends here." She paused, looking uncertain for a moment, then sighed. "Speaking of friends…I, uh…well, I didn't actually come here to help you understand legal documents."

That sounded very…ominous. He gestured for her to continue.

"I'm...I'm here to tell you something, and I want you to hear it from me first," she said. "As ADA, I will…be joining the prosecution in your mother's trial."

His blood ran cold. "You…you're going to prosecute my mother?"

"Help prosecute, and – well, yes and no." She sighed again, her fingers curling around the pen she
"My boss is very serious about this, Ollie...he wants to prosecute her to the full extent of the law, and he wants to make an example..." She bit her lip. "He's going to ask for the death penalty, Oliver."

The wave of shock made his every muscle lock into place, and he sat entirely still. "You're going to help the DA hang my mom?" he asked quietly, the words feeling like acid on his tongue.

Laurel blinked. And then, she looked nothing but affronted. "Of course not!" she denied, her voice rising a decibel or two. "Do you really think I would want to see Moira dead, no matter the circumstances?"

He threw his hands up. "Well, then I don't understand, Laurel! What are you saying here?"

She took deep breaths, her eyes falling to her hands. "Tommy, he..."Another deep breath. "Tommy always said his dad was a monster, that he was cold, that he didn't have a heart," she spoke quietly, and though her eyes were averted, Oliver knew they were likely to be filling with tears. "And we...you and I, we always told him that Malcolm was still his dad, and that he couldn't be that bad..." She took one last, deep and steeling breath before meeting his eye again. "But Tommy was right," she said. "Malcolm Merlyn was a monster. And we didn't listen. He was a monster, and he forced Moira into helping him, I do believe that. And I do want justice for everyone who died or suffered when the Glades fell, including Tommy, but I don't want anyone else to lose their life over it...and I certainly don't want it for your mom."

She squared her shoulders. "So, I may be joining the prosecution, but that means I can...I can tell you what arguments we're putting forward, so you can plan your defense accordingly, and if it turns out that the jury isn't buying it, I can help get your mom a deal...I have to be on the prosecutor's bench for that, I can't do anything from the sidelines."

Oliver looked down in shame. "You're trying to help," he realized.

"It's the only way I know how."

He brought his eyes back to her. She was unsettled and fidgeting, and the hand she rubbed over her forehead was a thing of the weary; she was drowning.

"Thank you," he said earnestly. He gave her a moment to herself, then asked, "Laurel, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

She wasn't. He'd tried to feed that same lie to Felicity and Diggle enough times to spot it.

Before he could prod further, she spoke up. "Of course, this means we can't be seen together – at least not too often," she said. "I've already had some trouble arguing that there's no conflict of interest for me here, so it's best not to poke that bear any more than necessary. If I know something, I'll let you know, but since all electronic or phone conversations are susceptible to be monitored, we'll have to forgo those. If we ever do talk or text, it won't be about Moira's trial."

"Felicity could encrypt our conversations."

She raised an eyebrow. "Or we could just use burner phones."

He pursed his lips. "Right."

"And we can't be seen alone too often until it's over. But...if we do this right, maybe we'll manage to
avoid another tragedy."

Before Oliver could blink, she was on her feet. "The documentation looks like a promising start," she said. "I hope this does turn out to be the golden goose you're hoping for. I'll just...leave you to your business now."

She was at the door in a blur. "Laurel," he called out, stopping her in her tracks. She stilled, balled her hands into fists then unclenched them, before she finally turned back around. "I really do appreciate this," he told her. "Thank you. I know..." He sighed. "I know you're already...busy and swamped with work, and...I know this can only make things harder for you, so...thank you."

She shrugged. "I'm fine, Ollie."

Slowly, he shook his head. "No, you're not," he said bluntly. "You look tired, Laurel. You look...like you haven't had a good night's sleep in five months."

"That's because I haven't," she retorted flatly. "Have a nice day, Ollie."

He sighed as he watched her go, running a hand over his face; sometimes, Lian Yu felt like more of a safe haven than home ever did.

Chapter End Notes

This is the kind of mess that happens when I start setting up storylines. I should be kept away from long!fic.
Chapter Notes

I am (and will probably always be) terrible at updating. Yet another reason why I should be kept away from long!fic. My apologies for the belated update.

Felicity pulled out her earpiece just as her partners' voices began echoing in sync with the comm link. She whirled her chair around to face them. "So," she prompted, "all good?"

"The kid's all too happy to join the cause," Diggle said, backing up the bits of conversation Felicity had heard over the comms. "At one point, I thought he was going to pass out from excitement."

Diggle had been watching the interaction from a distance, as it was a little stop at the end of that night's justice-seeking trip; the rest of it had been filled with a lot of bad guys who liked their illegal guns just a little too much.

Felicity grinned as she turned her eyes to Oliver. "You very first fanboy," she congratulated. He looked extremely put off as he laid his bow on the table and unstrapped his quiver. "Please don't call him that," he grumbled. "Let's just hope he's not more trouble than he's worth."

"Give him some credit," Diggle countered. "He knows the streets, he knows the people…firsthand intel is never without value."

"I know," Oliver said. "It's just that…"

"It's just that he's dating your baby sister," Diggle supplied as he made his way over to Felicity's station; Oliver had no comebacks to argue with that assessment.

"How long d'you think it'll take him to find the kickass lady with the staff?" Felicity directed her, somewhat overly enthusiastic, question at Diggle as soon as he was by her side. He chuckled at her.

"If he's a fanboy, then you're a fangirl, Felicity," he commented.

She shrugged. "I wear my colors with pride," she said simply. "So, ETA on the woman in black?"

"Shouldn't take him more than a few days to dig something up," Oliver chimed in. "He's" – his lip curled for a moment – "well-connected. And I thought we agreed you wouldn't add this to your list of things to keep you busy," he added, giving her a pointed look.

She huffed. "Well, sorry for being curious."

"Don't worry," Diggle said, "there's three of us on the job. I'm sure it can't take us that long to track her down. And I promise, the moment we find her, I'll get you an autograph."

"I want it on my special mug," she declared in all seriousness. "And I want there to be a dedication." John nodded dutifully. "You'll have it."
She resisted the urge to clap, containing herself to a grin. It slipped when her eyes left Diggle and slid back to Oliver; he stood a few steps away, his posture somewhat awkward. She cocked her head to the side and, noticing her movements, Diggle followed her line of sight. "Anything you want to share with the rest of the class there, Oliver?" he prompted.

Oliver's eyes went from one to the other, then to the ground. "There's something I haven't told you yet, and I think you should...probably be kept up to speed with it."

They waited.

"Laurel, when she came by the office yesterday," Oliver proceeded, "she told me that...she was joining the prosecution on my mother's trial." Before either Felicity or Diggle could properly wrap their minds around that, he added, "It's her way of...helping. She's going to feed my family and me information about the DA's strategy, and...and if things go south with the jury, she'll do what she can to get my mom a deal." He paused there, swallowing hard. "Because the DA is going to ask for the death penalty."

His words were met with silence. Felicity blinked, and opened and closed her mouth, but she had no idea how to respond to this. Luckily, Diggle was better equipped for dealing with these situations. "So, at least in this case, Laurel's on your side," he reiterated.

Oliver gave a small nod of confirmation but his tension didn't quite ease.

"Okay," Felicity spoke up, "then where do we stand on that? Are we happy? Are we sad? Are we worried?"

After a moment of consideration, Oliver let out the deepest sigh Felicity had ever heard anyone give. "Happy and worried, I suppose," he said.

"Well, does this mean she'll be putting the witch-hunt for the vigilante on the backburner?" she prodded further.

"I don't think so."

And there it was again, she thought. That sad look in his eyes.

"Everything she does now, even helping my mom," he went on, "it...it's still about Tommy. She blames me - well, the vigilante-me - for...a lot of what happened to Tommy, just as much as she blames Merlyn." He took a deep breath. "I don't think she's giving up anytime soon," he admitted, his words laced with defeat.

Felicity watched as Diggle pushed himself off the desk and walked over to Oliver, putting a hand on his shoulder. "One battle at a time, Oliver," he advised. "One battle at a time."

Oliver inclined his head ever-so-slightly, as if to acknowledge the merit of the advice. Diggle delivered one strong pat to his shoulder before letting go. "Go change," he told Oliver, "and we'll all go home for the night."

The comment snapped Felicity back to full attention. "You guys go," she said. "I'm pulling an all-nighter here."

"You need to sleep, Felicity," Diggle chided, to which she waved a dismissive hand through the air. "I had a nap earlier," she informed. "In the office. And I had too much coffee - way too much coffee." She bit her lip. "My minions keep bringing me coffee to show how much they like me and
how much they want to keep me, and they all know I love my caffeine fix, and they all bring me cup after cup, and I don't know how to say no…"

Oliver's mouth pulled at the corners; well, at least her coffee woes had cheered him up. Diggle only rolled his eyes, then prompted, "Oliver?"

To Felicity's surprise, Oliver shook his head. "Don't feel like sleeping either," he said, then frowned; his perpetual insomnia was something both Diggle and Felicity knew about but never brought up. He probably hadn't meant to make a reference to it. "I have some papers to go over," he added. "Lots of papers."

"Suit yourselves." Diggle swapped his leather jacket for the coat he'd previously worn, heading for the exit. "But I better not see either of you grumble about sleep deprivation in the morning – yes, Felicity, I'm looking at you."

She rolled her eyes. "Sleep tight, Digg," was her farewell as she turned back to the computers. She heard the sound of the men's goodbyes, the door shutting close, and the rustling of Oliver's movements as he bustled about. Then there was the screeching of the exercise equipment and the clang of the salmon ladder, and the man of the hour's mandatory grunts of exertion; she tuned it all out after a while.

Which was why she nearly fell out of her chair when he materialized at her side. He even had a shirt on and everything. And when exactly had he showered? Just how long had she been engrossed in her work for?

"You've been going at that for three hours," he answered her unspoken question. "What is it?"

She sighed. "Well, this here is the source code for the software" – she pointed to one screen before moving her finger in another direction – "and this one here is the code for a new upgrade in the FBI firewalls that I have every intention of cracking, and that one there" – she motioned to the final screen – "is all about the Isabel Rochev business."

Oliver's eyes flickered from one monitor to the other, then back to her. "That's…good," he eventually declared.

Oh, Oliver, she thought cheekily, you smooth-talker, you.

"Thanks," she accepted the praise nevertheless, halfway back to focusing on her work again when something struck her; she spun her chair sideways once more. "I thought you said you had paperwork to go over?" She cast a look around, just in case he'd done that too while she wasn't looking. Nope, she assessed, not one measly paper, not anywhere.

Oliver blinked, looked everywhere for a possible escape route, then finally cast his eyes to the ground. "I…lied," he admitted.

She gasped dramatically. "We said 'no lies', mister," she chastised, using her sternest voice. He peeked up at her, fighting a smile; he nodded in acknowledgement.

"Why, though?" she asked. "I mean, you don't exactly need an excuse to be here…"

He seemed to debate his answer for a moment, before shrugging a little uncomfortably. "It just sort of…came out."

She bit her lip as it clicked. Basic defense mechanism against perceived vulnerability, right? Something like that. But it was so unnecessary…at least in front of her and Diggle. She supposed it
had become a gut reaction by now; his issues probably deserved an entire section of a library somewhere.

But now the question was… to talk to Oliver about his feelings or not to talk to Oliver about his feelings? Both had equal potential for disaster.

*Oh, well,* she thought. *Here goes nothing.*

"So, uh, remember how, once upon a time, you told me I could tell you about my day if I needed to?" she asked, making him frown for a second.

"That offer still stands," he assured.

"And that's always nice to hear," she said, "but it also goes both ways. I mean, okay, I already know how most of your day goes, and the 'day' is more of a metaphor than anything else, but…" She let her voice trail off on a shrug; he got her point.

He shuffled his feet. "Felicity…"

Well, she hadn't expected anything other than having her offer turned down, she supposed. Which would be fine, if she didn't think it was because he thought she couldn't handle his damaged and broken self. She knew he talked to Digg about this stuff—well, not all that much, but *definitely* more than with her. She knew Digg knew more than she did, maybe more than she ever would. And that was cool, too, and she didn't let it get to her; it still annoyed her.

"Hey, it's your call," she simply said, finally putting her focus back into the monitors in front of her.

It came as a surprise when the desk rattled slightly, and Oliver leaned against it; looking up at him, she noticed his somewhat uncertain expression.

She waited. And waited. And then waited some more.

Finally, she sighed. "Still not a mind-reader, Oliver," she commented. That didn't earn her any discernible response either. So, she carried on with the conversation, as it often happened, by herself. "Okay, I know you don't talk about… you know, *stuff* with me, and you mostly just bond with Digg but…" She huffed out an exasperated breath. "See, I'm pretty sure that if it were *him* sitting here instead of me, you wouldn't be taking this sudden vow of silence—granted, you probably wouldn't say much, but you'd say *something.*"

"Felicity…"

Oh, honestly, was this his idea of a conversation? Just repeating her name?

She did kind of like how he said her name…

And that was so not the point.

The point was… "I'm *really* doing my best not to go down the 'you trying to protect my delicate sensibilities' road here, because that would be an insult to everything we've been through so far, but you're not exactly making it easy for me."

At least he had the decency to look contrite. "It's just that—" He took a deep breath. "There are some things that might make you think less of me," he said quietly, "and I'd really hate for that to happen."

*Yay, progress,* she thought. She also thought he was being entirely too dramatic. "Yeah, at this point,
there really isn't much that would make me run away screaming, Oliver." She rolled her eyes. "I mean, hey, you're an all-American Russian mobster and I'm still he –"

She stopped short, biting her lip. He probably wasn't supposed to know she knew that.

The look on his face confirmed that hypothesis. "I never told you that," he said.

"Obviously," she deadpanned, and he had the common courtesy of looking away in shame.

"Did Diggle tell you?"

Well, he was just intent on getting a rise out of her, wasn't he? "Okay, first of all, never question John's honor in front of me again," she warned, "and second, I thought we were past the phase where you got your kicks out of trying to insult my intelligence." She gave him a pointed look. "Oliver, I've seen your tattoos," she reminded him, "and I also spend a lot of time monitoring the crime in this city. Now, the Bratva – like the name, by the way, very 'family values' – they really like to participate in that. I've seen that little crest of theirs around, Oliver, particularly on…well, you."

He stared at her, unblinking, for quite some time. He turned on his heel then, and for a moment, she thought he was just going to leave her there without a word; instead, he grabbed a spare chair, brought it over, and placed it to face hers before taking a seat. It was her turn to go quiet – out of surprise, mostly.

He took a second to gather himself, then said, "I'm sorry."

She sighed. "I wasn't fishing for an apology, Oliver."

"I know," he told her softly, "but I think one's still in order." He licked his lips before proceeding. "You're right, I am a member of the Bratva – a Captain, actually, it's…a high rank. And Digg knew about that. We needed my Bratva contacts on a few occasions, and sometimes Digg went with me to talk to them, and sometimes he talked to them directly. And…I'm sorry neither of us thought to tell you that."

His delivery was cautious and guarded, and Felicity realized he was waiting to see if she would prod further, ask him to explain how exactly a shipwrecked party-boy had come to be a high-ranking officer of the Russian mob; she didn't.

"Apology accepted," she said instead and swore she could see his shoulders relax in relief. "You know, what I said, about you being allowed to keep a dirty secret or two?" she went on. "That still stands. Your dirty little secrets are your business until you decide to make it our business, and that's fine. Just…just keep in mind that Digg's not the only sounding board you've got, okay? And that you may want to make more frequent use of said sounding board…and this metaphor is getting a bit weird, so I'm just gonna stop now."

He gave her a little nod. He looked like was about to speak, too, so she waited him out – while trying her best not to get fixated on how close he was. He was leaning in, elbows resting on his knees, and was very much within touching distance; it was all strangely…intimate.

"I don't…I don't really know why I said that thing about having paperwork," he spoke again, his voice quieter, and Felicity felt a familiar sense of sadness worm its way to her heart. This was Oliver Queen giving voice to the damaged parts of himself, those he kept under heavy lock-and-key, and it wasn't because it served a goal, or some scheme, or kept his family and friends from asking more questions; his unplanned displays of emotion always made her the saddest.

"You're right," he said, "I don't need excuses for you and Digg, and I don't need to justify my
presence here but…” He ran a hand over his head. "I let it slip that I didn't want to sleep, and I just…"

The end of that sentence was on the tip of her tongue but she swallowed the words back; she'd read somewhere that it was always best to let people voice their feelings themselves. Or something.

Oliver cast a look around the basement. "All of this, it's…it's only one part of everything I have to keep hidden from my family, and my friends…they've always had all these questions, but I know they don't actually want the answers – it would hurt them to know the answers. So I just…lie and make excuses, so they wouldn't see what I'm really hiding. And there are things…” He looked down at his hands, as if there were a thousand ghosts ready to spring out of his fingertips; Felicity had no idea what it was that he saw. "There are things I never want them to know," he went on quietly. "Things I don't want anyone to know…things I wish I didn't know."

She gulped. "Why not?"

His chuckle was so bitter that it made her hold back tears. "Let's just say it's the sort of thing that, if you're lucky, earns you a padded cell in a psych ward somewhere – things besides green leather and vigilantism," he specified, as if he had read her mind; she couldn't help but to crack a small, watery smile.

"Well," she said, "the first rule of psychology is that there's a continuum between what is considered sane and what is pathological, so…basically, we're all a little insane."

She nearly cringed as soon as the words left her mouth; he didn't seem to mind, though.

He glanced up at her and it wasn't long before his mouth pulled into a smile, and he was shaking his head; the last time she had seen him do that, he'd called her remarkable.

No such compliment left his mouth this time, though. He lifted his hand and it lingered in the air for a moment, before he slowly, carefully, let it covered hers.

His friendly hand, she reminded herself. His big, warm, friendly hand.

He could not have surprised her more if he'd tried. 'Touchy-feely' was not how she would describe him on any given day, and though there were instances where he would initiate basic human contact or break that unwritten rule of strictly defined personal space, this felt different; probably because it was just the two of them, at nearly the crack of dawn, sitting in a basement with only the hum of computers and their own breathing to keep them company. Also, he'd just shared a deep and dark part of his – again, deep and dark – soul with her.

This felt nothing like the occasional hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you," he whispered.

His eyes really were very blue, she decided, from where she was looking into them, at what was decidedly not a safe distance away; she could actually feel his breath on her cheek.

"For calling you insane?" she whispered back.

"For not saying it like it's a bad thing," he clarified, giving her hand a light squeeze; the next moment, he was back on his feet and stepping away.

*Holy whiplash.*
"You should head home," he said. "Shower and change before work."

She blinked a few times, centering herself again, then glanced at the clock on one of the monitors; it was nearly seven in the morning. She really should get going.

"See you later, I guess," she told him as she gathered her things and set her computers on idle; they both had a busy day ahead.

Apparently, it was the day for surprises – and not necessarily the pleasant kind.

Just before lunch break, a knock on Felicity's office door brought with it the very unexpected presence of Isabel Rochev; the mere sight soured Felicity's mood.

"Ms. Smoak," Isabel greeted. "Do you have a minute?"

"Sure," Felicity said with faked courtesy – which she was sure didn't go unnoticed by Ms. Rochev. "Have a seat."

Isabel nodded and settled into one of the visitors' chairs, crossing her legs delicately. "I'm here for an update on your progress," she said. "Is everything going according to plan?"

Felicity raised an eyebrow. "It is," she confirmed. "I'm on schedule with the program – ahead of schedule, actually."

"So, everything will be set in time for the release date?"

"I might even have more time than I thought to test it before the release." With a frown, Felicity added, "Don't take this the wrong way, but isn't Oli – Mr. Queen keeping you updated on this?"

Ms. Rochev's mouth twitched into a fleeting smirk. "Things tend to get lost in translation," she said. "I always prefer to go to the source."

Okay, that made sense. "Well, I guess you have everything you need, then," Felicity observed, a little surprised by the dismissiveness of her own tone. "Unless there was something else you wanted?"

The animosity wasn't lost on Isabel, and Felicity was certain of that; it didn't seem to put the other woman off, though. "I've been asking around, about you," Ms. Rochev said, "and everyone says the same thing; that you really are very good at what you do – especially your colleagues from the IT Department, some of whom have followed you here."

This was going somewhere, and Felicity would bet it was nowhere nice.

"You may be good, Ms. Smoak, perhaps even the best there is, but you're still not here" – Isabel nodded in Felicity's direction, where she was sitting in her big, shiny chair – "because of your talents; you're here because you are Mr. Queen's…friend."
Felicity tensed; she knew that tone. "Yes," she stated coldly, "I am his friend."

Isabel waved a casual hand through the air. "I don't care what you and Mr. Queen call each other, Ms. Smoak," she said. "As long as it doesn't affect this company's image, it's your business. It's unprofessional of him, but I understand why Mr. Queen would want to fill the high ranks with his own people – it's not a stupid move. And you are an asset."

Pursing her lips, Felicity asked, "So, what's your point, then?"

"My point is," Isabel began, leaning forward, "that it's obvious you benefit from some privileges here; you have some degree of power over the CEO and therefore this company – power that comes from personal and not professional reasons. And that makes you dangerous, Ms. Smoak." She cocked an eyebrow. "And it's part of my job to assess risks."

Of all the things to accuse her of... "I'm here to help my friend," she protested indignantly. "I don't have some agenda, or whatever it is that you're implying."

Isabel studied her from head to toe, then said, "Queen Consolidated isn't a middle school playground, Ms. Smoak. There are high stakes here, and that's a hell of a favor – no matter the friend. So, I'm sure you understand why I can't take your 'help' at face value."

"Yeah, okay, just because you may not have morals or scruples doesn't mean that everything everyone else does is a scheme and – "

She stopped short, biting her lip; she hadn't actually meant to insult her so forwardly. It was supposed to be more of a rant she would have within the safety of her own brain...

Another surprise of the day came in the form of Isabel's chuckle. "I don't know what to make of you," she admitted. "You look like this innocent girl who's been dropped in a sea full of sharks, and she doesn't even know it." She shook her head. "Maybe you really are just doing this out of the goodness of your heart, and if you are, then that's...well, let's call it admirable." She leveled her with a look then, and if its intensity made Felicity want to hide under her desk, no one could blame her. "You don't like me, I get that, but no matter what you think of me, I am always in it to win."

Isabel rose to her feet. "Which means that, if you really are as...noble as you seem, we are on the same side," she concluded. "As long as we both work to restore Queen Consolidated, we are on the same side. Have a nice day, Ms. Smoak."

And with that, she was out the door, leaving a rather speechless Felicity in her wake. Well, that had been a strange conversation.

"You okay there, Felicity?" Diggle asked, watching as she sat down at her computers and just stared at the screens with a strangely blank look.

He got no response.
"Felicity?" he prompted again, leaning against the desk. It was a new night to fight crime, and they were just waiting for Oliver to make an appearance; he'd called to say he was visiting his mother and that he got held up, though he had told John to leave for the club and that he would manage on his own.

Felicity started, blinking up at him. He only gave her a look.

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I just…Isabel came by my office today. It was…weird."

Given everything they were trying to find on Isabel Rochev but couldn't, the information immediately put Diggle on alert. "What did she have to say?"

Felicity made a face. "Well…apparently, I'm dangerous, and she also thinks I might be this opportunist who's using QC as a springboard for bigger, greater and shadier things – and I'm pretty sure she accused me of sleeping with Oliver at one point, too…though not in so many words."

Diggle sighed. "You're out of place in her world, Felicity," he said. "She's trying to figure you out."

"That seems to be her thing," Felicity agreed darkly. "Although, nothing suggests she gave little ol' me the same treatment as Oliver…"

"Any progress on that front?"

Felicity's shoulders slumped. "Nothing," she admitted in defeat. "I have no idea why she was looking into him. It's just like…this random blip on the radar, and I have nothing to connect it with."

By now, John knew her well enough to detect not only worry for Oliver and wariness towards Isabel in her words, but also annoyance at herself for coming up short and being unable to crack a mystery. "Maybe you just need a fresh pair of eyes," he suggested. "We'll go over it together one of these days. It could help."

She gave him a smile and patted his arm. "Thanks, Digg."

Oliver chose that moment to come clattering down the stairs; Diggle turned his eyes to him. "How did it go with your mother?"

Next to him, Felicity spun her chair around; Oliver looked like he'd returned from the deepest circle of hell.

"In hindsight," he said, "maybe I should have just kept Laurel's intentions to myself."

"I don't think that would have worked in the long haul, Oliver."

The other man pointed a weary finger in his direction. "Please remind me of that every chance you get."

"What did they say?" Felicity asked with sympathy, to which Oliver heaved a deep sigh.

"Well, Jean seems to think Laurel is not playing her boss but me, and that there's every chance she'll be feeding us false information, or on the flipside, use me to get information on our defense tactics, and that my personal involvement here is clouding my judgment." He sighed again. "So, now I'm…I don't even what to think."

John straightened. "Would Laurel do that?"

Oliver shrugged. "I don't – I don't know, Digg. I don't think so. She wouldn't…she wouldn't want to
see my mom die, she's not…that's not the kind of justice she wants."

"But?"

After another deep breath, Oliver looked away. "But I didn't think that stringing up the vigilante was the kind of justice she wanted, either."

"Yeah, but," Felicity interjected, "that's different. I mean, okay, I don't actually know her, but…this is your mom we're talking about, and you – the Oliver-you. She wouldn't do that to either of you… right?"

Diggle was inclined to agree, but he'd learned the hard way that allegiances could shift; Oliver had, too.

"You're right," Oliver said quietly. "I just – I need to clear my head."

"I'm sure the city's scumbags will be more than happy to volunteer as your punching bags," Felicity supplied, and it brought a smile to both men's faces.

Oliver went to change after that, and John watched him go with a slight frown; he really hoped they wouldn't have a second Laurel Lance problem on their hands. He liked to believe so, but experience had shown that Oliver had trouble remaining objective when it came to the people he cared about – especially Laurel. He supposed only time would tell, come Moira's trial.
This one isn't very long, but the next chapter is coming along nicely so there shouldn't a too-long gap between updates this time, and hopefully, that will compensate for the shortness of this thing (and yes, I know I totally jinxed it now).

There were three of them on the job, they said. It couldn't take them *that* long to track her down, they claimed.

And yet.

The woman in black remained as elusive as she had been two weeks ago, when Roy was brought in to help. He'd done a decent job, too, repeating the word on the street right into Oliver's ear; the problem was, whenever the Arrow came looking into this or that possible hideout, the woman was already gone – assuming she had been there in the first place, of course.

Felicity didn't know whether to laugh or shake her head at how annoyed both Oliver and Diggle seemed with this development.

"She's very careful," Oliver commented one night. "Never stays in one place for more than a couple of days. By the time the information reaches Roy, she's already gone."

"So, basically," Felicity concluded, "you guys have nothing."

Diggle grumbled.

"I *could* help…"

"No," Oliver said firmly. "This one's on us. You have other things to do."

She sighed. "Have it your way, then." Halfway back to turning to her computers again, she paused; Diggle was quiet and frowny, and he had been so for the past few days. She'd thought it was maybe just her imagination or that it was something personal he didn't want brought up, but it still nagged her.

"Am I missing something here?"

Oliver's voice snapped her out of her staring at Diggle, who in turn was staring at no particular spot of the floor; Oliver was looking between the both of them, having now joined the frowning party.

"I don't know," Felicity said. "Is he, Digg?"

Diggle spared them both a glance, then sighed. "Well, there is something," he admitted, "but it's…we have enough on our plate as it is, and it's more of a personal thing."

That earned him looks from both his companions. With a resigned nod, he caved. "Lyla called the other day."
"Lyla…your friend from A.R.G.U.S.?

When Diggle nodded at Oliver's inquiry, Felicity waggled her eyebrows. "Friend, huh?" she teased. "Does that mean we can start calling you Johnny, too?"

Diggle groaned. "Felicity…"

She took no shame in her ensuing giggle. Oliver was looking between them again, obviously clueless as to what the punch line was; he didn't look unlike a wet puppy, and Felicity took pity on him. "Digg and I were looking for a…well, let's call it a contractor, a few months back – for, you know, renovations," she explained. "Digg met with Lyla to see if she could recommend someone who wouldn't ask a lot of questions – since she's kind of a super-spy, and super-spies know these things – and I was on the other side of that conversation." She grinned. "She calls him Johnny."

While Oliver did crack a smile, it looked half-hearted at best. In hindsight, Felicity thought, it was probably too much to expect that he'd already be over the guilt for abandoning them for five months.

Diggle picked up on it, too, and resumed the conversation as if it hadn't happened. "So, Lyla called," he reiterated, giving Felicity a pointed look. "I've…I've asked her to tell me if she hears anything new about Deadshot."

That revelation erased any lingering desire for teasing Felicity had left. Next to Diggle, Oliver straightened, too.

"He killed someone else, three weeks ago," Diggle informed. "A doctor – researcher, I think. Lyla wouldn't tell me anything else."

Felicity watched as Oliver hung his head. "Why didn't you say anything, Digg?" he asked. "We could have looked into it."

Diggle shrugged. "Like I said, we already have enough on our plate," he maintained. "Your mother's trial, Isabel, the mysterious woman in black, trying to save the city while staying off Laurel's radar… that's enough without dragging Deadshot into it, too."

Though it made sense, Felicity knew any mention of Deadshot put a strain on John; it put a strain on his relationship with Carly. He could be as self-sacrificing as he liked, she decided, but she was still going to look into it.

Hours later, that was exactly what she did. She and Diggle had taken turns in helping Oliver maneuver the streets, before she had handed the reins to him completely and focused on research. He thought it was about Isabel; he was only partially right.

She was still going at it when Oliver returned. She sensed him come up to her and glanced over her shoulder; Diggle was not in sight, though she had heard him mumble something about bathroom breaks.

"Hey," Oliver said softly as he perched himself on her desk, casting a cursory glance at the stairs to ensure John wasn't coming down. "So, Digg said not to look into Deadshot's latest hit but – "

"Already on it," she informed brightly, pointing to the monitor. Oliver only looked surprised for a moment before he smiled.

"Anything so far?"

"Well, I can tell you that Dr. Elijah Haze isn't the kind of person you'd think would have a price on
their head," she said. "Neurobiologist, had all these amazing breakthroughs under his belt before Deadshot took his head off – metaphorically speaking, of course. Tracing the payment will be pretty much impossible, as you well know, but I'm looking into Haze's personal stuff to see if I can dig up dirt…he looks squeaky-clean but something got him killed."

Oliver was nodding along, brow furrowed in thought. "Keep looking," he instructed. "And…if you find something –"

" – talk it over with you first before I bring it to Digg, so we can decide if it's worth the speech he'll give us for not listening to him," she supplied dutifully, rolling her eyes. "I know, Oliver."

He gave her an appraising look, then shook his head. Next thing she knew, his hand was on her shoulder and his mouth close to her ear. "Don't work yourself too hard over it, either," he said. "Just because you don't have to listen to Digg doesn't mean he's not partially right; we do have a lot going on."

Doing her best to reign in on her heartbeat – because, really, did he have to use his husky voice to make that statement? – she gave a little nod. "I'm great at multitasking," she assured. "Just watch me."

With a small smile, he gave her shoulder a squeeze and pushed himself off the desk, just as Diggle was coming into view again. By the look he gave them, Felicity was pretty sure he knew something was up; he didn't comment on it, though. Instead, he said, "We should call it a night. Your mother's trial starts tomorrow, Oliver…I think we need the sleep."

And so it had begun.

The trial of the century, as the news outlets liked to call it. Felicity thought it was terribly cliché.

Cliché or not, it was happening. After just over five months in federal detention, Moira Queen was facing trial, on no less than five hundred and three homicide charges – okay, so maybe 'trial of the century' wasn't too far from the truth.

Felicity hadn't gone to court, obviously, but the news channel was on her office computer screen, and so what if she gave it more attention than the actual work she was meant to be focusing on? Her friend's mother was facing the death penalty; no one could blame her for being unable to dive headfirst into writing code.

Thankfully, Diggle was supplying her with the information the newscaster couldn't, via texts, from where he was sitting behind Oliver and Thea – and Roy, Felicity had been informed – in the courtroom; even he couldn't grumble about his bodyguard front in this situation, seeing as it was perfect to not only calm Felicity's nerves but also offer Oliver moral support – not that either of the men would admit to the latter.

Her phone vibrated, signaling a new text.
The DA just told the court the prosecution will seeking the death penalty, it read. Bastard actually looked happy doing it.

Felicity bit her lip. They knew it was coming, of course, but it still had to be tough on Oliver and Thea – and Mrs. Queen, too – to hear it spoken out loud.

How's our boy holding up? She texted back, using the term of endearment she and Diggle only uttered when Oliver was at least ten miles out of earshot. Diggle had started it, though.

I'd say about as good as he can, came the reply.

Then another text. But I have a bad feeling about this.

"You and me both, Johnny-boy", she muttered to herself. Still, she asked, Why?

This trial will be merciless, he replied. Mrs. Queen looks like she can take it but I'm not so sure about her children.

Felicity had to agree. Who knew what sort of terrible things would be said and uncovered? And then there was the dreaded question of the witness stand; there was no question about Moira's involvement in the Undertaking, so all there was left for the defense to do was to play the mother card to the fullest…and that meant her children would come into play. Felicity didn't like the idea of that DA Donner-person anywhere near either of the Queen siblings, but she knew it was coming.

Just say the word and I'll make the DA's life miserable, she texted and sat back, waiting for the updates.

There was a recess and then they came back, and it went on and on. The news didn't offer much additional information and so Felicity waited, only pretending to actually work when Cheryl came by with some paperwork.

Three hours went by without a single ping, and then came a singular message from Diggle. It's done for the day. We'll meet tonight in the lair.

She could only muster the meakest of fist-pumps at the knowledge that the 'lair' label had stuck.

"Jean, you can't be serious," Moira protested, eyeing her lawyer and longtime friend with warning. The first day of her trial had been grueling, and it was bound to only get worse from there; she would still be damned if she put her children through any more heartache than they had already endured.

"Moira," the other woman matched her tone, "you knew this was the card we were going to play. It has to happen."

Moira kept silent for a moment. DA Donner, after eloquently painting her as cold-blooded, selfish and heartless, had used her children's past to further drive his point home, and more than that, engage in a preemptive strike for their – as Thea called it – "mother of the year" strategy; if he could invalidate her mothering skills, it would weaken their defense before they had even presented it.
He had spoken about Thea's involvement with drugs, Oliver's partying ways, both their troubles with the law and, in what Moira personally considered to be a particularly low blow, her daughter's relationship with a known petty criminal.

It had been disheartening.

These words had to be countered and negated, and in order to do that, her children had to take the stand; Thea's testimony had been part of the plan from the start, but Oliver…

"I agreed to Thea taking the stand," Moira said firmly. "Not Oliver."

"I'm sure he'd be willing to – "

"I'm sure he would," Moira agreed sternly. "But he has gone through five years of solitude on a godforsaken island – he watched his own father die – because of Malcolm Merlyn, and because I couldn't keep him safe…I will not let him relive any of that for the world to see, and for a mere possibility that his testimony will make the jury more sympathetic."

Jean looked suitably contrite but would still not relent. "Those five years don't have to be touched upon…he only has to confirm what everyone already knows; that Malcolm Merlyn sabotaged the Queen's Gambit. Oliver will remind the jury of Merlyn's cruelty, and it will go a long way to make it clear that he was a danger to your family – your children."

"No."

Her friend gave an exasperated sigh. "It will come up anyway, Moira," she said. "I have to bring it up."

"Be that as it may," Moira maintained, "I will not have him put on the spot and cross-examined like – "

"Don't I get a say in it?"

Her son's soft voice made her whip her head around, to find him standing at the entrance to the Iron Heights visiting room; she sighed. "Oliver, I thought you'd left an hour ago."

"Laurel had some information for me," he said quietly. "I circled back."

She didn't have to look to know that Jean had tensed at the mention of Laurel Lance's name; while Moira didn't exactly share the distrust, she wasn't as trusting as her son, either.

"Sweetheart…" she began but he cut her off, coming to the table and taking a seat next to her.

"I know you don't trust her," he said, "and you don't have to take any of it seriously, but she did risk a lot by coming to me."

"Unless it's all part of the strategy," Jean supplied.

"What did she have to say?" Moira inquired before Jean could embark on another lecture.

Oliver sighed. "They know you will be calling Thea to the stand – it's the obvious thing to do. The DA plans to undermine her testimony by pointing out that she took five months to visit you after the quake…and there's going to be a long speech about what a dysfunctional family we are in general, too."

Moira cast a glance at Jean; they had both been expecting that.
"But," Oliver went on, "they're not counting on me to testify, so –"

"No," she cut him off, taking firm hold of his hand to get him to look at her; his eyes had been flittering from the table to the ceiling to the floor, and if the mere idea of doing this was putting him in such a state… "Thea will testify, and we'll take from her testimony what we can. That's it."

"It's not going to be enough, Mom," he whispered, and God help her, it broke her heart to hear him say it.

She looked away, taking a deep breath; she could have been at peace with this trial marking the end of the road for her, but the thought of her children being left motherless on top of everything else…

"I can do it," Oliver spoke again. "And whatever the prosecution throws at me, I can take it."

Could he, really? Moira wasn't sure, and she wasn't inclined to test the theory. She knew, of course, that her son had grown stronger on that island – more serious, too, no matter his indiscretions and distasteful displays since his return. But he had also become darker, despite how hard he tried to seed light into his words and behavior, and she wouldn't bear to have that darkness pull him under further because of her sins.

He turned to Jean before she could protest. "I'll do it," he said with conviction. "Put me on the stand."

While Jean looked pleased with the outcome, Moira's reservations persisted; any further attempts to dissuade him would be futile – her son was stubborn, if nothing else – so she hoped to God it would be worth it.

Felicity powered down her office computer, sighing at the late hour. After having spent the good part of the morning and afternoon doing pretty much nothing, she'd had to stay longer than anticipated at QC, just to catch up with the workload. She was pretty sure the only ones in the building with her were the night security guards and Isabel Rochev; she swore the woman never left.

She called Diggle on her way down to the garage. "Got held up here, so I'll be a little late to the fort," she informed when he picked up. "So, you know, don't panic – at least not for the next thirty minutes."

"Got it."

He sounded not a little grumpy, prompting her to ask, "Is everything okay?"

There was silence for a moment, and she simply knew he was moving out of Oliver's earshot so as not to be overheard; she frowned.

"Remember that bad feeling I was talking about?" he spoke again. "Well, get this. Oliver will be taking the stand in the trial…character witness for his mother and living proof of Merlyn's monstrosity, all in one."
"Oh…" she let out; what were the chances of that ending well?

"He volunteered, so there's that," Diggle went on with a sigh. "Not sure if he's up for it but... he seems pretty determined."

Felicity sighed. "The press will latch onto it like vultures," she said despondently. "Everything they didn't get from him when he first came back will be up for grabs once they make him say it in court..."

"That's only part of what worries me. But at least we can somewhat control that, right?"

She gave a determined nod. "When it comes out, I'll erase as much of it as I can... crash a few servers with nasty viruses if I need to."

Diggle was probably mirroring her nod right about now.

"So, how's he taking it?"

He took a beat to respond. "Well, I think we need to find him a drug cartel to bust tonight. Preferably a big one."

That brought forth a small smile to her lips. "You guys get on that and I'll be there as soon as I can," she instructed. "See you in a bit."

"See ya."

Returning the phone to the depths of her purse and snatching her car keys, Felicity made to unlock her Mini. She didn't even get the chance to press the button before she was hitting the ground and losing consciousness.
Bird Song

Chapter Notes

I have exactly zero idea how trials actually happen, so here, have a (probably highly inaccurate) representation inspired by an unhealthy amount of American TV. Carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was cold.

Cold, and dark, and she felt groggy.

At least she was lying on something marginally soft.

Not yet opening her eyes, Felicity brought a hand to her forehead and moaned in misery; she felt like she had taken the nap of the millennium, and her mind was full of cobwebs and an anvil was weighing her head down. It didn't hurt, though. Nothing hurt.

With both great effort and great reluctance, she blinked her eyes open. The little light there was around her still seemed like a blaring spotlight, and she squinted against it, taking in her surroundings; small square room, bland walls, no furnishings, a slight breeze and a glass clock face.

This isn't where I parked my car, she thought idly before tensing from head to toe. Oh my God, this isn't where I parked my car!

Before her throat could close up in panic, the shadows moved and a shape materialized in front of her; dressed in black, complementary black mask, unreal blonde hair – along with the glint of a long metal staff, too.

Oh, wow. "I didn't even bring my mug," she let out, forsaking panic for shock; she was staring right at the woman in black they'd worked so hard to find. Well, she'd found them, Felicity supposed. Or just her, really.

If the woman found her comment odd, she didn't dwell on it. "You've been tracking me," she said instead.

Felicity felt like giving a dramatic gasp of indignation; she was literally the only one on the team who hadn't been tracking her. She'd been benched on that one.

The world was so full of injustice.

With a slight groan, she managed to partially right herself, half-sitting, half-lying on what she now realized was a mattress; well, at least the accommodations weren't too shabby.

"I really haven't," she replied honestly, torn between being excited by the other woman's presence and being terrified of it.

The woman crouched slowly, using her staff as support. Felicity kept quiet as her face came closer, noting the dimpled chin, freckled skin and blue eyes behind the mask.
"Well, not you," the woman agreed. "Your boys."

"They're not my – okay, yeah, they are," Felicity babbled. Would this be a terrible time to ask for an autograph? Or engage in conversation about the woman's mission, and women's rights in general? Probably.

"Wait," she backtracked, "how do you – I mean, I'm not – there's no…uh…"

The woman looked like she was about to smile. "Felicity Smoak," she said. "IT expert, now heading a department at Queen Consolidated – that is, when you're not moonlighting as the Arrow's right hand." Her head tipped to the side. "Or is it his left hand? There's three of you – well, four if you count that kid you've sent around to ask questions."

Felicity gulped. "How do you know that?"

There was a smile on the woman's lips now. "First rule of the jungle," she said. "It's only a matter of time before the hunter becomes the hunted."

Oh, cryptic statements-slash-catchphrases, Felicity thought. Now, where had she seen that before?

"So…"

"So," the woman reiterated, "I know more about you than you do about me. But I don't appreciate this cat-and-mouse routine we have; so that ends tonight."

Felicity shuffled back instinctively. "W-what does that mean?"

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you," the woman assured, and Felicity did believe it; no one who dedicated themselves to protecting women would harm one.

"You're more of a…calling card," she proceeded. "The Arrow and I need to have a chat."

On the other hand, she may be more inclined to harm a man.

"Is… 'chat' code for something really violent and bloody, or…?"

The woman smiled again. "If there is blood, then I won't be the one to draw it."

Felicity felt like shaking her head. Those vigilantes…they couldn't just talk like regular people, could they?

"Right," she said slowly, "so…when you say 'calling card'…uh…see, I'm not sure how long I've been here, but there's a tracker on my phone, and I don't know how much time you thought you'd have alone with me – and if that sounded dirty, I'm sorry – but this party is bound to be crashed pretty soon…"

The staff screeched against the ground as the woman rose to her feet. "I'm counting on it," she informed.

The breaking glass came raining down next, and Felicity brought her arms up to cover her head, squeaking in the process; there was a thud and then the telltale sound of a bowstring being pulled taut. The Arrow had answered the call.

Peeking up, she saw him standing opposite the woman, who now had her back to Felicity, arrow ready for use.
"Let her go," he commanded, his voice deep and distorted.

She made to interject and point out there was no need for growling and animosity, but the woman's sharp twirl of her staff distracted her.

The woman's feet began to draw a circle and Oliver followed, and soon, their positions were nearly reversed. It was only then that the woman spoke. "I knew you'd come running," she said, and though the words held a hint of familiarity that surprised Felicity, what shocked her more was Oliver's reaction.

He tensed in a way that had nothing to do with his shooting stance, and while she could only see his profile, she watched as his jaw went slack. What shocked her the most, though, was seeing his hand shake ever-so-slightly; his hands didn't shake.

"I didn't hurt her," the woman went on. "I just needed to get you here. I knew you'd come for your partner." She gave him an appraising look. "When did you learn what it means to be loyal, Ollie?"

The cold seemed icy now.

Oliver's hold on his bow faltered, and Felicity swore she could hear a ragged breath leave his lips; she turned wild eyes from him to the woman.

She knew him. And she knew him well.

Felicity's mouth hung open; how could she know him?

"I'm getting tired of being chased," the woman went on, and Felicity could swear her voice had grown thicker, as if she too were affected by the meeting. "So I guess it's time for me to stop running." She straightened. "This is a lot to take in, so I'll give you some time to wrap your head around it." The broken glass crunched under her feet as she moved to stand right before the gaping hole in the clock face. "I'll give you a couple of days to let it sink in. Then I'll come to you."

Her foot hit the ledge then and with a backflip, she was out the window; Felicity heard the hissing sound of a wire unfurling fill the night. It was quiet after that.

She didn't speak, and neither did Oliver. He just stood there, numbly clinging to his bow and not making a sound.

The silence wasn't broken by either of them; heavy footsteps shook the small metal staircase in the corner, making it creak and rattle. Diggle barged in, winded and with a gun at the ready. He took in his surrounding and froze, having obviously not expected to find…well, this.

"What happened?" he asked. Felicity could see his earpiece, so had obviously been privy to the conversation that had taken place; many explanations were still needed, though. "Oliver, who is she?" Diggle demanded, tucking aside his sidearm; he got no answer.

He moved then, crouching down at Felicity's side, looking her over for injuries. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

That query seemed to snap Oliver out of his stupor, and as Felicity shook her head to convey that she wasn't injured, she watched Oliver's turn to the side a fraction, taking her in from the corner of his eye.

It lasted a second before he was moving, shooting a zip-line into the night and disappearing out of sight a moment later.
There was a beat before Diggle commented, "Well, I guess we found our mystery woman, then."

Felicity could only nod numbly, letting Diggle assist her into getting to her feet. He gave her a second onceover, remarking on the puncture mark at the base of her neck and noting it was likely from a tranquilizer dart, given its shape and size. Felicity accepted the theory without question, trotting down the stairs at John's heels as he led them to the car he had hidden in a back alley, her mind still reeling; who the hell was that woman?

The answer to the question, however, threw her in for a loop; she had considered many possibilities, each more ridiculous than the other, but never this one.

She and Diggle had found Oliver in their cherished basement, sitting in the dark and with his back propped against the wall, staring into nothing. They'd given him a moment of peace before Diggle had asked again. Who is she, Oliver?

And the answer had frozen them both on the spot.

*Sara. Sara Lance.*

So, yes, of all the ridiculous possibilities, this was the one Felicity had not considered. "But...but she's dead," she stuttered quietly, feeling Diggle tense by her side.

"So was I," came Oliver's reply, quiet and rough.

"You're sure it's her?" Diggle questioned, ever one to stay on top of a difficult situation; Felicity, for her part, couldn't even begin to try and think rationally at the moment.

Oliver's head bobbed up and down slowly. "I'm sure," he said. "It's – " He drew a deep, unsteady breath. "It's her. It's Sara."

Diggle pursed his lips, seemingly struggling with the best way to phrase what he meant to say. Eventually, he just threw his arms up and let out, "How?"

Oliver was suddenly on his feet, walking away from them. Diggle's sharp, "Oliver!" made him stop in his tracks and whirl around.

"I don't know!" he yelled, and Felicity flinched at the loudness. "I – I saw her drown, I – " He was sucking air in through his teeth, and though the lighting to his face was dim, it still reflected unshed tears. "The Gambit went down, and Sara – Sara was pulled under, and…" His voice lowered, and every word he spoke sounded like it was being torn out of him. "My father pulled me into the lifeboat and I – I was yelling her name but she wasn't – there was no one there, she wasn't – " He gulped. "She wasn't there. I was...I was sure she drowned," he finished miserably, leaning against a table for support and running a hand over his face.

Felicity felt tears of her own prickle at her eyes; she looked up at Diggle, who in turn had his features set in stone.
"I just left her there," Oliver spoke again – or rather, whispered – more to himself than either of his companions.

It was filled with so much self-loathing – something he had only just begun to work past – and it finally prompted Felicity to find her voice. "You did the best you could, Oliver," she said. "It wasn't your fault."

But he shook his head. "It was. I took her on the Gambit with me. It was my fault."

She would let him have a lot of things, but indulgence in self-pity and recrimination was not one of them. "Right, because you dragged her there kicking and screaming, and then sabotaged the yacht yourself," she retorted, realizing her tone may have been a bit too harsh when he visibly cringed. She took care to moderate it as she went on. "It was her choice, too, wasn't it? To get on that boat with you. And Merlyn was the one who sabotaged it…so, if you wanna feel guilty about something, and I can't believe I'm bringing this up now, then feel guilty about cheating on your girlfriend with her sister." He cringed again. "That's on you," Felicity concluded. "Nothing else."

There, she'd given him her speech; he could take from it what he liked, if anything at all.

He didn't speak for a long time, and when he did, it wasn't about Sara or her miraculous rise from the dead. "Go home, Felicity," he instructed before he turned his eyes to Diggle. "Take her home."

"Oliver – "

"I'll be fine," he cut off her protests. "Like S – " He took a deep breath. "Like Sara said," he tried again, "I need to wrap my head around this."

It was a loaded statement. The knowledge that Sara Lance lived was only part of it; now that he knew – that they knew – she was alive, what would they do? Would they tell anyone – the Lances, the Queens, anyone? Would Sara even want them to? And if she didn't, would Oliver be able to carry the weight of yet another secret, especially one this big?

Yeah, wrapping their heads around this was high on the priorities list.

Still, Felicity didn't like the idea of leaving Oliver alone with his thoughts. "Oliver, you don't need to – "

"Just go, Felicity," he interjected again, sounding weary beyond measure.

"But – "

"I said, go!" he raised his voice this time, making her flinch again. He looked ashamed the moment the words left his mouth. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he said, "Just…just go, get some sleep. I'll be okay." When she raised a doubtful eyebrow, he added, "Promise."

Felicity let Diggle walk her out, an unspoken retort about empty promises on the tip of her tongue.
Get some sleep.

Ha! As if.

He couldn't possibly expect her to sleep under these circumstances – she was pretty damn sure he wouldn't be sleeping. And neither would John.

Felicity sat on her living room couch, cross-legged and in her sleepwear, staring at her TV without actually taking any of the images in.

Sara Lance was alive.

And no one knew how, and no one knew why she had returned, and no one even really knew what she was up to; somehow, Felicity doubted an anti-misogyny crusade was the only reason for her reappearance in Starling City.

It felt surreal to have actually seen her – spoken to her, without knowing who it really was beneath the black mask.

Sara Lance was the woman in black.

And she was alive.

Had she mentioned that?

Sara Lance was freaking alive!

Felicity let her head hit the back of the couch with a soft thud; Oliver had to be in such an undesirable state of mind of right now. She should have insisted on not leaving him alone.

At least Sara had said she would come to him, in a few days; that could be...good. Or something.

Three days later, she decided that it was definitely something.

Before that, though, Oliver had been called to the witness stand at his mother's trial.

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On the third day of Moira Queen's trial, Felicity stood in Oliver's office at QC and gnawed at her thumbnail as she watched him adjust his tie.

There had been an early board meeting – a direct result of rescheduling due to Oliver's required presence at court – and it was now time to get to the trial; Diggle stood at the door, too, waiting for Oliver.

Oliver.

Oliver was, in Felicity's personal opinion, a mess. Not that one could tell, necessarily. Or what they did see, they could attribute to the dreaded anticipation of the witness stand. Felicity and Diggle,
though, knew that was only the tip of the iceberg.

Oliver was…withdrawn. Quiet. Grave. Morose.

Even more than usual, that was.

So, Felicity gnawed at her nails.

"Do you want us to come with?" she blurted out, breaking the staring contest he'd been having with his tie. "I mean, me," she added, shaking her head. "Cause Digg's gonna be there anyway, so…do you want me to come with? You'd have an extra cheerleader."

She knew the situation was dire when his lips didn't as much as twitch.

"That's not necessary, Felicity," he said, in his flat, monotone voice; he'd been using that one a lot the last couple of days.

"Yeah, I know it's not necessary," she retorted. "I'm asking if you want another friend in the audience today."

That seemed to melt his mask of composure, and he looked away. "I'll be fine," he muttered.

Yeah, right.

After a moment of consideration, she stepped closer to him. "Okay," she conceded, "but I'd like to know if you don't want me there because you really will be fine, because you think I will cramp on your style, or because this is another Bratva situation."

She could practically hear Diggle's head whip in her direction. Oliver's did, too. He raised his eyes from the ground to look at her, and she knew it was mostly the third option. He'd rather she not hear what he might say on that stand.

Which was not a little nonsensical, seeing as camera crews had been camping outside that courtroom since before the trial had even started, and they would get his every word on tape; a tape she would have to dig up in order to either erase or corrupt so as to make it unusable. She would get to hear it anyway.

The world would, really, because no matter how much she scrubbed, it would still get out. He knew that.

She watched his Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallowed thickly, and after a moment, his hand found its way to her shoulder. "I could use another friend," he admitted softly, his thumb rubbing circles against her collarbone.

"If you're sure," she said. "I don't want to, you know…impose or anything."

And thus, a miracle came to pass; he cracked a smile.

"It'll be nice to have you there," he assured fondly before giving Diggle a quick nod over her shoulder; that particular nod, Felicity knew, was code for 'get the car'. Was it sad or impressive that she could actually differentiate between the various kinds of nods they gave to each other?

As Diggle stepped out, Oliver spoke again. And his hand still rested on her shoulder. "Thank you," he said quietly, to which she shrugged.

"Sometimes, you only need to be reminded that it's not just you against the world anymore," she told
him, bringing her own hand to cover his, giving it a light squeeze.

As they drove to the courthouse, he did seem to be in a slightly better mood.

Which effectively crumbled to dust as soon as he was put on the stand.

Felicity sat next to Diggle behind Thea and Roy, who in turn were seated just behind Mrs. Queen and her lawyer. Thea had smiled upon seeing Felicity, giving her a small nod of gratitude. Her mother had noticed the gesture, eyeing Felicity with curiosity, as if trying to place her; when Thea specified who she was, Mrs. Queen gave her a silent nod of gratitude as well. There'd been a lot of nodding going around that day overall.

And then Oliver was escorted through a side door and onto the stand, and the room fell quiet.

Oliver knew the prosecution had been surprised by his appearance on the witness stand; they hadn't had much time to prepare their questions as a result, but he also knew the questions they needed weren't hard to come up with.

He sat in the small hardwood cubicle, putting his focus into presenting the appropriate facial expression; open but not nonchalant, shoulders squared but not stiff, stance serious but not threatening. Jean had drilled it into him. Not that he didn't know how to 'act human for the masses', as Felicity sometimes called it.

His eyes went to the right side of the courtroom; behind his mother and Jean, and Thea and Roy, Felicity sat next to Diggle and looked...well, just terribly out of place. Amidst all the charcoal grey suits, beige blazers, black ties and muted colors, she wore a vibrant blue-and-green dress, had nails painted in different colors and bright red lipstick. She was just so...incongruous. Everything about her was incongruous. On the rare occasions when he allowed himself to feel it, he found that it soothed him.

When she saw him looking her way, she gave him the thumbs up.

The quirk of his lips came, as if often was the case, involuntarily, and he glanced away to school his features. Only Felicity, he thought.

Some words were spoken by the judge before Jean approached the stand, as the first to examine him.

"Mr. Queen," she began, "about six years ago, you boarded the Queen's Gambit with your father and seven other passengers. Just off the coast of China, your boat went down, killing everyone but you, having been sabotaged by Malcolm Merlyn. Is that correct?"

Keep it concise. Keep it clean. "Yes," he said, curling his hand into a fist against his knee.

He had to shut it down. Everything he may be feeling, anything that didn't pertain to his objective of helping his mother; he had to shut it down. He was good at that.

He had to shut it down.
"And you have, since your return, learned of the reasons behind the sabotage?" Jean proceeded.

He grabbed a fistful of his pant leg. "Malcolm Merlyn wanted to kill my father," he replied dutifully. "He sabotaged the Gambit to ensure it."

"And his reasons for wanting your father dead?"

"My…my father meant to pull out of the Undertaking." He cleared his throat; he couldn't allow himself to falter on his responses. "Malcolm used him as an example, a threat. To my mother, to… anyone who might have wanted to start working against him and his plans for the Glades."

Jean was nodding along. "So, in your own words, how would you characterize Mr. Merlyn?"

Oliver found his eyes shifting from Jean to Laurel, where she sat next to the DA.

A monster. Tommy had been right. And they hadn't listened.

Laurel's posture was rigid and even from this distance, he could see the circles under eyes she hadn't quite managed to conceal; despite that, she gave him a barely perceptible nod of encouragement.

"A monster," he said. "He called my father his best friend but he killed him without a second thought when he became an obstacle to his plans. He was merciless. Any casualty could be justified by his endgame. He was a danger to anyone who opposed him."

"Including yourself and your sister?"

"Especially us."

"And what do you make of your mother's actions in the face of the threat Mr. Merlyn posed to the two of you?"

Oliver looked at his mother; sometimes, it really struck him just how poised she was. But there was also worry there, and sadness, and he knew she was recalling the time he had confronted her about her secrets, as himself.

"I think – " He cleared his throat again. "I think she was afraid. And I think she did what she could to protect us, the only way she knew how."

Jean nodded. "Thank you, Mr. Queen. No further questions."

As she walked back to her bench, DA Donner rose to his feet, and Oliver's fist immediately tightened. His eyes drifted to Felicity again, because he simply knew what he would find there; sure enough, she was glaring at the back of Donner's head like she was trying to telepathically fry his brain. She didn't like him, either.

He brought his attention back to the man in question.

"Mr. Queen," Donner spoke, and his tone practically dripped with moral superiority; Oliver felt like arrowing him on mere principle; somewhere non-fatal, of course. "Between your return from Lian Yu and the Undertaking, has your life been directly threatened or endangered by Malcolm Merlyn?"

Several times, but he couldn't talk about any of them. So, he was forced to say, "No."

"Your sister's life?"

Oliver forced his anger down. "No," he replied tightly.
Donner hummed. "Of course, one might argue that threats were made but never acted on, due to your mother's...compliance with Mr. Merlyn's conditions. But one might also argue that you really weren't in as much danger as you'd like this jury to think. Your stepfather, for example, was kidnapped by Malcolm Merlyn but his life was spared; now, if her second husband was given such treatment, how can any of us believe that it wouldn't be extended to Moira Queen's children?"

"Walter wasn't an immediate threat to Merlyn's plans," he ground out, and it struck him that the air in the room shifted; belatedly, he realized he'd used a tone more fitting for his alter-ego. He did his best to moderate it as he spoke again. "If Merlyn thought for a second that my stepfather could compromise his plans, or if my mother hadn't followed his orders, he would have killed him, just like he did my father."

"And you know this...how?" Donner challenged, insufferably smug. "Did he happen to tell you this? Or are you just indulging in wishful thinking, Mr. Queen?"

"No, I'm - "

"You can't claim to have spoken to Mr. Merlyn on this matter, so all you have is your mother's word." He turned to the jury as he added, "The same woman who was complicit in destroying part of this city, and helped plot that destruction for years, and who still painted herself as a philanthropist and respectable matriarch. A woman who is a liar."

Oliver's knuckles were white, his fist starting to shake against his leg. "Thea and I - "

"Tell me, Mr. Queen," Donner cut him off, "you weren't even supposed to be on that boat six years ago, were you?"

"Sara and I weren't meant to be on the Gambit," he found himself saying, "but the crew members were. Merlyn would have killed six people to teach a sick lesson...instead he ki - he killed seven." *Four.* He'd thought it was five; for six years, he thought it was five. But Sara wasn't dead. And his father had killed the captain. And then himself. "Seven people," he repeated. "And it didn't matter to him. So, for five years, my mother...my mother thought I was dead, while I was - while I
was stuck in a place literally called Purgatory."

His eyes wandered to Laurel again but her own were closed shut and her head was bowed, while her fingers were wound around her pen so tightly her hand was shaking. He shifted focus to his mother, where she held a hand to her heart and was looking away.

*Please, I don't want to hear this.*

That was what she'd said to him, when he told her about his father putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger. She didn't want to hear it, any of it; neither did Thea. Anyone who'd known him then, before he had disappeared. They didn't want to hear it. It *hurt* them to hear it.

"My mother thought she'd lost me, along with my father," he forced himself to keep going, digging his fingers into his thighs. "She believed that for years, and…my sister was the only child she had left and she…she had to protect her, because Malcolm had already taken her son away…"

It hurt him, too, to say these words; he had wrench them out, will himself to make them leave his mouth. He didn't know where to look so he wouldn't see his family or Laurel's pain, what to anchor himself to so he could tell this story without the waves pulling him under, like they had six years ago.

Everywhere around him, people were looking away in either pain, or pity, or discomfort.

The colorful green-and-blue swirl drew his eye and he let his gaze rest on Felicity; there was a little crease between her brows, but she wasn't looking away. And next to her, neither was Diggle. It didn't hurt them to hear it, not like it hurt the others. They didn't pity him. They weren't made uncomfortable by his demons.

He could tell *them.*

"And every day after I returned," he continued, his voice quiet but still carrying across the room, "I was a living, breathing reminder of what could happen if she crossed Malcolm Merlyn…Thea and I were only safe as long as she played by his rules; we were leverage." He found that he was calmer now, more in control, and though she looked like she was close to tears, Felicity gave him a little smile; John nodded. "I'm not saying my mother was justified in being complicit to Merlyn's plans," Oliver went on, "but she was justified in her fear for our lives. And…" It had to be some kind of cosmic joke, he thought, that the greatest thing he could say in his mother's favor right now was also the one thing he couldn't allow himself to speak; when she thought she would die courtesy of an arrow through her heart, she'd gone down on her knees and held up a photo of him and Thea. "And nothing matters more to my mother than her children's lives," he concluded, taking a deep breath. "Malcolm Merlyn destroyed half a city, and with that, killed five hundred and three people, and he'd hurt and killed many more before that, all because…his wife was murdered twenty years ago." The anger was coming back, seeping through. "He was *crazy.* And my mother had every reason to fear him."

There. It was done.

The courtroom was silent.

He turned his eyes back to DA Donner, who, for once, didn't look like he had much to say. "Do you have any more questions for me, Mr. Donner?" Oliver asked coldly, and with a sour look, the DA had to shake his head.

"No further questions," he said and retreated to his bench; Laurel still hadn't looked up.

It was quiet for a while longer, before the judge spoke up. "Thank you, Mr. Queen," she said. "I
think we could take a break now. The court will reconvene in an hour."

With a loud thud of her mallet, there were two officers of the court appearing at his side, ready to escort him out the same way they'd led him in. As soon as he was out, he practically ran away from the main hall, where he knew the others would go, and in search of a secluded, isolated corner he could hide in; he just wanted to run away.

Chapter End Notes

Since the big axes of this story were plotted out before S2 aired, and definitely before 2x04 aired, Sara's backstory is somewhat different, meaning that, as you've noticed, she didn't end up on Lian Yu at any point in time. Because obviously, I thought, like everyone else, that Oliver really did think she died when the Gambit went down and not a year later. So yeah, just to point that out.
Once again, my apologies for the late update. Between being too tired to focus my brain cells into making coherent sentences and the last episode's...well, let's keep it clean and call it an 'unexpected turn' that put a dent in my inspiration, this chapter took some time. So, I'd just like to thank you all for reading, following, favoriting (totally not a word), reviewing and just bearing with me :) Please carry on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Where the hell is he?" Thea let out, after her fifth call to Oliver went to voicemail. Roy was right there to put a comforting hand on her arm but she seemed too agitated to notice.

Not that anyone could blame her, Felicity supposed. Oliver's testimony had been...intense. And now he had disappeared.

"Ms. Queen," Diggle began in an attempt to reassure her, "I'm sure he just wanted some privacy."

Thea looked up, her eyes glossy with tears, and Felicity felt her own begin to prickle. She was a bit of an empathetic crier; it sucked sometimes.

"Yeah, they'll find him," Roy offered. "He's probably just...at a dive bar somewhere, numbing the pain with vodka."

More like a dark corner someplace, staring into nothing, Felicity thought.

"You're not helping," Thea snapped at her boyfriend, who seemed to be in-tune enough with her moods not to snap back. Then, Thea turned to Felicity and Diggle. "Do you know where he went?"

Felicity stuttered helplessly, her eyes flittering between all present parties, while John straightened in his spot.

"I know you're his friends," Thea went on. "Like, the only ones I know he has right now, so..."

"I – uh...he has...friends," Felicity said, casting a look at Diggle. "We're – we're not his only friends."

"Well, you're the only ones I've heard him talk about, so – " Thea sighed impatiently. "Just – just find him, okay? I...I need to get back to Mom."

Felicity agreed with a jerky nod. "Uh, yeah, sure."

Thea muttered a, "thanks" before Roy began steering her back towards the courtroom with a hand on her back, nodding to both Felicity and Diggle as he went.

As soon as the two were out of sight, Felicity practically tore her handbag in two in her haste to get to her tablet. Diggle was hovering over her shoulder in a second.
"He deactivated the tracker on his phone," she observed, then grumbled, "Of course he did."

"Right." Diggle sighed. "So…we search the dark and vacant nooks and crannies of this place, you take the right, I take the left?"

Felicity bit her lip. "Maybe we should give him some space…"

"Sure, I'll give him space," Diggle deadpanned, "as soon as I'm sure he's not halfway back to Lian Yu already."

Well, she had to concede that he had a point; she nodded. "You take the right, I take the left," she agreed to his plan of action, and with that, they split, heading in opposite directions.

Felicity was not above admitting that she got a little lost at some point, wandering through the giant maze of identical corridors; really, would it have killed them to spice things up a little around here?

On the plus side, slightly creepy and deserted hallways that bounced the clacks of her heels back at her meant she was probably going in the right direction.

*And bingo,* she thought as she rounded a corner. Oliver was leaning against a railing, hands gripping the metal bar, his eyes closed shut and his posture rigid; she knew he'd heard her coming.

"Hey," she said softly, taking a few steps closer but keeping a safe distance between them; she didn't want him to feel cornered.

She didn't receive any discernible response.

"So," she went on, wringing her hands, "the recess is almost over. Wanna head back?"

Silence.

"Right, you probably don't…uh – " She didn't know what else to say. *Give one grunt for 'no', two for 'yes'?* "Well, your sister's back inside, so you can make a quick escape if you want – not that…you'd necessarily need her to *not* be around to make a getaway, what with your ability to like, *skulk* about – which is…totally not a bad thing…um…"

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, uh…Digg and I have been looking for you, so…guess we found you. Yay us! I mean, *me* – yay me! 'Cause…I'm the one who found you, so…yeah," she finished lamely, heaving a deep sigh and closing her eyes.

She nearly squeaked when he spoke.

"I just need a minute, Felicity," he said quietly, still keeping his eyes closed and his head bowed.

"You've had nearly an hour," she pointed out, and cringed. Wrong thing to point out.

A small huff came forth, one she identified as an exasperated chuckle on his part. "I didn't mean a literal minute."

"I know," she said. "Just…" she sighed again then reached for her phone. "I'll text Digg, tell him to stop searching on his end and bring the car around. We'll just…wait for you there."

She turned around to leave as she typed, resisting the urge to flinch at the loud echo of her heels hitting the marble floors.

"Felicity…" His soft call stopped her and she turned around, to find his eyes open but staring at the
ground. "Thank you," he said quietly.

She frowned. "For what?" Being awkward and unhelpful in times of extreme emotional distress?

He gave a small shrug. "Just…being here today." He swallowed thickly. "Both you and Digg. The truth is, I…" He didn't seem to know how to go on after that, and Felicity found herself walking closer to his side; he still hadn't looked at her.

"Oliver, I'm your friend," she told him. "So is Digg. Of course we'd be here."

"You make it sound so simple," he remarked.

She shrugged. "It…really is that simple."

"Not – " He let out a deep, slow breath. "Not in my experience."

Sometimes, he said such sad things, it actually made her heart hurt.

"My, uh…my testimony," he spoke again, "was it as bad as it looked from where I was sitting?"

Oh, there was no right way to answer that question. "That depends," she said. "The jury, well…they looked sympathetic. I mean, that little old man with the funky glasses? He looked like he was about to cry. So, yeah, I think…everything you said will stick with the jury."

He nodded. "That's…good," he stated, and looked the furthest thing from satisfied as he did.

She bit her lip; he'd done this for his mother, and if Felicity knew him at all, then it didn't matter how much it hurt him, as long as it had served its purpose. Which made his testimony both a good, and a very bad, bad thing.

"What about…my mom? Thea?" He paused a beat before adding, more quietly, "Laurel?"

"Well…Thea was kind of freaking out," Felicity admitted. "Although, that was mostly because you'd run away and wouldn't answer your phone." He cringed. "Sorry." With a deep breath, she added, "Your mom…I'd say she's about as okay as she can be, considering…" Considering she had seen her son break down in a packed courtroom on her behalf. "And Laurel…uh…I don't know. She looked upset. Then again, you did bring up Sara…"

His eyes closed shut again.

"Of course, what she doesn't know is that Sara is still…alive and kicking – literally kicking." Felicity blew out a breath. "But, um…what I want to know – what all of us who are not you want to know is, how bad was it…for you?"

She watched as his grip on the railing tightened. "I can take it," he said flatly.

"Just because you can doesn't mean you have to," she whispered, and though she knew he'd heard her, she also knew he'd pretend he hadn't. So, she promptly changed the subject. "Digg will have brought the car by now," she said. "Wanna head out or do you need another minute?"

She counted three rounds of 'breathe in, breathe out' from him before he pushed himself off the railing. "I'm good," he declared. "Let's go."
Oliver had declined to return to the courtroom – not that anyone had expected him to – and after shooting Thea a quick text to assure her he was alive and well, though the latter was arguable, he’d sat back in the car and kept silent.

After fidgeting in the ensuing awkwardness for a solid five minutes, Felicity had taken out her tablet and begun working on the footage that was already being uploaded to the media outlets’ servers. She couldn't erase or corrupt all of it, lest she raise suspicion, and she also had to give the same damning treatment to other, unrelated footage, just to be on the safe side, and minimize the risks of anyone making the connection.

She must have been making an array of unsavory expressions because Oliver's breath was suddenly hitting her cheek as he asked, "What's that?"

She yelped in surprise and hugged the tablet to her chest, then let out a loud huff of a breath. "You have to work on giving me some kind of warning, Oliver," she chided. "I'm too young to have a heart attack."

"Sorry," he said, looking the furthest thing from it. Then, he asked again, "So, what is it?"

She adjusted the grip on her tablet, allowing him to take a peek. "I'm going through the footage they have of you from today," she informed. "I'm deleting some of it, making some of it unusable…of course, I'm coloring around the lines a bit, because it'd look too suspicious otherwise, so I'm afraid that story about the cat who looks like Michael Jackson won't be making it to primetime." She shrugged. "Whoops."

Waving a finger in the direction of the driver's seat, she added, "And Digg has discreetly…relieved a few reporters of their memory cards, so I'd say damage control was successful on this one."

She turned to Oliver and frowned when she realized he looked nothing but surprised by all of this.

"You guys did that?" he asked, meeting Diggle's eyes in the rear-view mirror.

"We have your back, man," Diggle stated simply, as if it should go without saying. And it should – it would, if Oliver weren't…well, Oliver.

Felicity nodded emphatically to support the statement.

Oliver looked between them, then shook his head and chuckled. "Thank you."

"Oh, this isn't what you should be thanking us for," Diggle commented. "If you want to thank us for something, thank us for putting up with you."

Felicity grinned as Oliver nodded. "Thank you for that, too," he said dutifully. Then, he asked, "So, do you guys have any plans for the rest of the day?"

It was Felicity's turn to exchange glances with Diggle through the mirror; they both shook their heads in unison.

"In that case," Oliver spoke again, "why don't we head to the…lair early, and just…have a drink?"

Felicity raised an eyebrow. "A…drink?"
He nodded. "A drink."

Well, that was…new and unexpected. After exchanging another look with Diggle, she acquiesced. "Let's have a drink."

"Where the hell have you been?"

He only had one foot through the door before his sister's voice assaulted his eardrums, from where she was bounding down the stairs. Angrily.

"And hello to you, too, Speedy," Oliver said, closing the door. It was the morning of a new day, and while he felt considerably better than the previous one, he had also elected not to call Thea; considering the last she had heard from him was a trite text during the car ride to Verdant, he had to concede that her anger was justified.

Thea stood right in front of him now, the force of her irritation filling the mansion's foyer; maybe he should have listened to Felicity and called her last night.

"Where were you?" she demanded, crossing her arms in a posture that reminded him eerily of their mother. "You do realize that it's been twenty-something hours since I last heard from you, right? I've been worried, Mom's been worried – even Roy looked a little worried after a while. So, where the hell have you been?"

Oliver tried to think on the spot and come up with something better than, 'well, Speedy, I just didn't really feel like talking to any of you'. "I slept over at Felicity's," he lied, and even Felicity herself would have to admit that, as far as his excuses went, this one was entirely within the realm of reason. Thea knew Felicity was his friend; it was entirely plausible that she had let him crash at her place.

The truth was, they had all crashed in the lair, after a few drinks and Felicity's declaration that driving was not a legal option anymore, calling cabs would be more trouble than it was worth, they had perfectly comfortable chairs and mats, and Saturday, so they could all get away with an early morning walk of shame in last night's clothes. Of course, that last one had led to a blush and a specification that it was not a walk of shame walk of shame, and not that there was anything wrong with a walk of shame, but they would not be doing a walk of shame. They would just sleep together – innocently!

It took Oliver a moment to realize that not only had his lips twitched into a fond smile at the memory, but also that Thea didn't look particularly relieved; in fact, she looked rather disappointed.

"Not to tell you how to live your life, Ollie," she said, "but Felicity is basically one of your only two friends, and if there's one thing worse than your track record with friendships, it's your track record with girlfriends."

He blinked. Then blinked again. And then it clicked. "She let me spend the night over. I crashed on her couch," he defended, a little surprised by the harshness of his tone.
Thea looked doubtful. "Really?"

"Yes," he maintained firmly. "Really."

His sister gave him a studying onceover, then sighed. "Look, I just…" She threw her hands up. "Felicity's really nice – like, she gives a literal meaning to her name – and she looks like she would always be there for you, so I'd hate to see you mess up what you have with her, like you have every other relationship in your life."

"Please, don't hold back," he deadpanned.

"I mean it, Ollie," she said, apparently in no mood for anything other than giving him a piece of her mind. "What, you don't think I saw you looking at her and Mr. Diggle yesterday?" She swallowed. "In court?"

Oliver averted his gaze; he'd run away because he didn't want to talk about any of this with his family.

"Granted, I may have…hidden my face in Roy's shoulder at one point," Thea proceeded, "but I'm not blind." She gave him a pointed look. "So, I'm gonna take a guess here and say that, if they hadn't been there, you would have stood up and bolted in the middle of your testimony."

It was a scarly accurate assessment. It worried him; Thea shouldn't be able to see so close into the other side of him, the one that relied on Felicity and Diggle. It brought her one step closer to knowing the real him. It was dangerous.

"Don't get me wrong, it's great," she went on, "especially if what you say is true, and Felicity really did let you crash on her couch because…you just didn't feel like coming home, right?" He knew the tone that was creeping into her words, and closed his eyes shut for a moment; he hated disappointing her, even when he couldn't help it, or when it was necessary. "It's good that…you have someone you can go to when you're…off your rocker," she told him. "You know, for those times when your family just isn't enough – which is most of the time, really. So, I'd really hate for you to waste that away because you're…well, you."

He let the words go through him, only feeling a numb ache as they passed; once you were shot with enough bullets, you didn't really feel the new ones at all. "I'm sorry, Thea," he said. "I just…" He sighed. "I needed some time."

"I get that." She stood rigidly for a moment, then relaxed her posture and laid a hand on his arm. "Are you okay now?" she asked.

He gave her a weak smile. "Yeah."

She nodded. "Good. You should pay Mom a visit," she advised. "She's about two seconds away from murdering Jean. And the DA. And you. Not necessarily in that order."

His smile widened, and he gave a little nod of compliance.

The intended visit turned into only a phone call, after he realized that the time spent in testimony and the subsequent hideout in the club's basement had set him back on QC work – which he was only reminded of after an irritated call from Isabel. He headed to the office on a Saturday, though he declined Isabel's offer to come along; he would rather suffer through it without her. It would go faster with her help and he could force himself to be in her presence, but as Felicity had pointed out, just because he could take it, didn't mean he had to. So, there.
Granted, it was probably not what Felicity had had in mind when she's said it, but he chose to run
with a loose interpretation of her words.

He was going over reports and pie charts and financial prognoses well into the evening, with Diggle
coming and going; when he came back the third time, Felicity was right at his heels.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he looked up from the paperwork. "It's Saturday."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Sometimes, I wonder if you even realize how ironic most of what you
say is," she quipped, coming up to his desk and settling a large bag of Chinese takeout right in his
line of sight; his stomach gave an indignant grumble and he realized he hadn't actually eaten since the
previous day.

"Someone has to feed you," Diggle informed, digging through the bag to snatch his containers, then
moving to the coffee table in the office's corner.

"And keep you from giving yourself an aneurism," Felicity added, gesturing to the offending reports
on his desk.

Oliver shook his head at them both, finding himself relaxing in their presence; he couldn't really
pinpoint when he had developed that reaction to their company, but it was rooted in him now. As
soon as he let himself feel it, he was reminded of Shado and Slade, and he promptly put an end to
that line of thinking; he couldn't keep allowing his mind to make the comparison. Though he was
loath to admit it, it frightened him to draw the parallel.

He took hold of the proffered bag, following John to the couch. Felicity disappeared then returned
with mugs and a fresh pot of coffee, setting them all on the low glass table. "We're gonna need this if
we're staying here," she said as she settled into the armchair facing the men.

"You don't have to," Oliver told them both.

"Oliver," Diggle turned to him, a very serious expression on his face, "I've watched you go through
those reports for hours and you still have a pile left. It's painful to look at, man. If we don't give you a
hand, you'll be here through the night, and I really don't wanna bear with the mood it'll put you in."

Oliver didn't deign to respond and promptly gave the takeout his full attention.

"Why isn't Isabel here?" Felicity asked as she dug into her noodles. "I thought she'd be the first here,
dragging you kicking and screaming."

"I told her I could handle it," Oliver said.

Felicity gave him a look. "See, that's just very immature, coming from a CEO," she chided. "Just
because you don't like her, doesn't mean you're not obligated to play nice for the good of the
company. She's always in it to win, you know."

He frowned. "What?"

Felicity waved her hand through the air, nearly propelling a bundle of noodles into Diggle's face.
"It's what she said to me, a few weeks back," she informed.

Oliver shook his head. "Be that as it may," he said, "she was still on the list, and she was looking
into me. Until I know her agenda, I'd rather keep my distance as much as possible."

"Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer," Felicity recited sagely, pointing her chopsticks
in his direction.

"Wise words," Diggle commended, raising his mug in a mock-salute.

Oliver lost track of time as they ate and then refilled cup after cup, too at ease to bring himself to
draw their attention back to the paperwork they had supposedly come there to help him with. It was
getting dark outside and the sounds of the city were dying down; in the back of his mind, he
registered that it was probably past midnight.

Goosebumps raised the hairs on the back of his neck and he immediately straightened in his seat,
growing still; he had long ago developed the instinct of feeling someone's presence in his vicinity,
even if he could not see them. It was in the sounds, the energy; the foreboding.

He idly noticed that the conversation had stopped and that Diggle had gone on alert as well, though
whether it was because he'd seen his reaction or because he too had felt a presence, Oliver couldn't
be sure. Felicity, by his appraisal, remained clueless, but could probably tell from their reactions that
something wasn't quite right.

The shadows moved just beyond the glass office walls. Oliver was on his feet and moving; John
followed, drawing his gun. The creek of the armchair meant Felicity had risen, too, but she was
being shielded by both men now, and Oliver didn't have eyes on her; instead, he was focused on the
entrance, where the shadows crossed the threshold and stepped under the dim lighting of his office.

He drew a sharp breath; Sara had come. Just as she'd said.

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Felicity felt her momentary fear drain away as she caught a glimpse of blonde hair.

Oliver and Diggle were both in front of her, which was either sweet or ridiculous, and she had to rise
on her tiptoes to get a peek through the space above where their massive shoulders met.

Sara walked toward them, dressed in her full garb. She had a fighter's stride, Felicity decided; she
had seen a vigilante and a soldier strut around enough to be able to tell. The staff was in her hand,
but she didn't seem to have any intention of wielding it. Felicity watched as her hand rose slowly,
pulling at her wig and taking her mask along with it; her face was uncovered the next moment, and
Felicity vaguely recognized her from the various news reports she had seen surrounding the boat
accident and, years later, Oliver's return from the dead.

Sara halted her movements, close enough but still a safe distance away. "Hello," she said.

Diggle cast a look at Oliver before holstering his gun, and that too, he did slowly and carefully.

Oliver, for his part and from what Felicity could tell from her spot behind his back, looked frozen in
time for a moment; then, his shoulders relaxed. "Sara," he let out, and there was too much in his tone
for Felicity to even begin to try and dissect it.

Maybe he was smiling, because a second later, Sara was, too.
"Not exactly the reunion I'd imagined," she said.

"I never imagined there would be a reunion," Oliver countered quietly before taking a deep breath and stepping to the side; Diggle followed his example. "These are my partners, John Diggle and – "

"Felicity Smoak," Sara supplied. "I know." When Oliver looked a little thrown, she added, "You were tracking me just as much as I was tracking you. I always knew you were the vigilante." She took a few steps closer, taking in her surroundings. "I may have been…a long way from home, but I still kept tabs." She then pinned Oliver with what Felicity considered to be a particularly unimpressed look. "Oliver Queen gets rescued from Purgatory, and a man in a green hood comes to Starling City. The Glades fall, and when Oliver Queen disappears for five months, so does the vigilante. Then, Oliver Queen returns, and the Arrow follows." She raised an eyebrow at him. "You need to be more careful."

On a scale from one to 'requiring stitches', Felicity wondered, how hilarious was it that the first thing Oliver got out of this reunion was a lesson in vigilantism?

"Most people don't make the connection," Oliver said. "They can't see Oliver Queen as the vigilante."

"Well, most people didn't hear stories about Lian Yu," Sara conceded. "If they did, you wouldn't have it so easy."

Felicity could feel the mood shift, and she caught sight of Oliver's sideways glance to her and Diggle; they hadn't heard the stories either, not really. Not all of them. Sara seemed to pick up on it, too, and she looked like she understood.

There was silence for a while, before Oliver asked, quietly, "How are you here, Sara?" He gulped. "I watched you die."

Sara took a moment to respond. "I don't know how I didn't," she said. "I went under and…I think it didn't take me too long to pass out from the cold. Then…when I came to, it was morning, and I was drifting on a piece of the wreckage…" She turned away, tossing her wig and mask onto Oliver's desk and twirling her staff absentmindedly. "There was no sign of you," she went on. "Of anyone. I drifted, I think. And then I washed ashore. On one of the islands in the chain." Craning her head to the side, she looked up at Oliver again. "Jiu En."

"Salvation," Oliver whispered, to which Sara offered a faint smile. Then, Oliver frowned. "Your mother came looking for you last year," he said. "She was sure you were alive."

Sara nodded. "That was my fault. I let myself get caught on camera." She took a deep breath, then turned back around fully. "It was too early, I wasn't ready." More quietly, she added, "I'm still not sure if I'm ready." Whatever she was feeling, she shook it off, then said, "When I got word my mother was looking into the photo, I sent one of my…associates to impersonate the woman in the picture." She shook her head. "My family couldn't know. I couldn't have them keep looking into it."

"Well, you seem to have a tendency to get caught on camera," Oliver commented. "Maybe I'm not the only one who needs to be more careful."

"Luckily for me, most people," Sara threw his words back at him, "aren't as good at playing the eye in the sky as your partner." Her eyes went to Felicity then, and it may have made the latter smooth down her dress self-consciously. Just a little. "You're good," Sara told her and Felicity could feel herself blushing.
"Thanks," she croaked. "I'm...kind of the...resident Big Sister around here."

"The one who sees all, and knows all," Sara told her with a smile.

Felicity chuckled. "Just a few divine powers of prophecy short of an Oracle," she declared, spreading her arms out wide; they remained in the air awkwardly before she slowly lowered them. Sara was still smiling, though.

It was Oliver who broke the ensuing silence. "Where have you been, Sara?" he asked quietly, breaking any light mood Felicity's words had created. Oliver gestured to Sara's overall appearance. "Where did you learn how to fight?"

Sara looked away for a moment, then said, "That's a long story."

"I've got time," Oliver maintained.

"Do you?" She raised an eyebrow in the direction of his desk, where the impressive pile of paperwork still sat.

He shrugged. "There's always Sunday."

Felicity doubted that, and exchanged a quick glance with Diggle; he nodded. If the situation called for it, they would take on the paperwork. Or create circumstances that would justify its untouched state.

Eventually, Sara nodded. Then, she reached for her mask and wig and slipped them back on. "I'll wait for you in the alley behind your club. You can give me a tour of that basement of yours." She turned her eyes to Diggle. "It was nice to meet you in person," she said, to which John replied with a warm, "You, too."

"And it was nice seeing you again," she then told Felicity. The latter offered an awkward mixture of a half-successful nod and a grin.

With a final glance at Oliver, Sara was out the same way she came in, all in the blink of an eye.

Yeah, Felicity decided, meeting with Sara was definitely something.

"So, you're not actually going to tell me where you were?" Oliver questioned.

He and Sara were in the basement, sitting side by side and with their backs propped against the wall, having a much needed conversation. Not that Sara was particularly forthcoming.

"I can tell you I was in Asia for most of it," she said.

Oliver shook his head; she was as evasive as he was. "Who taught you how to fight?"

Sara sighed deeply. "When I washed up on Jiu En, I was taken in by some people. They were...not
your average fishermen. Their care came with a price, and if I wanted a chance to live, I had to give something in return." She licked her lips. "Some American tourists passed by one day…one of them was wearing a Rockets hat – the one my mom recognized in that picture." She let out a hollow chuckle at the memory. "I…took it. But then someone snapped a picture." Running her fingers along the staff she held in her lap, she added, "I left Jiu En not long after. That's when my training really began. The people who trained me, they…are the kind of people even the bravest should fear." Her eyes grew unfocused. "I owed them a debt."

Quietly, Oliver asked, "What kind of debt?"

She turned to him then, and he recognized the look in her eyes. "The kind you pay in blood," she said simply.

If he'd thought his guilt could be eased with the knowledge that she was alive, he was wrong. Because Sara was a killer. Just like he was.

"I've killed, too," he told her. "To settle my father's debt."

Sara only nodded.

"So, is it over now?" he prodded further.

"It's never really over, not with them," she said. "But my debt's been settled, yes. I owed them a hundred deaths." She took a deep breath. "I delivered all of them."

A hundred deaths. Oliver shut his eyes against the tally, knowing from experience that every life you took chipped away at your own, until you felt dead, too. A hundred deaths were a high price to pay.

"If there comes a time when they call on me, then I have to go back," Sara went on. "But for now, I'm free…as free as I can be, anyway."

He gulped. "So, what do you want to do with that freedom?"

She averted her gaze again. "The entire time I was away, all I thought about was home," she began, sounding a million miles away, "about how, once I've paid my debt, I'd come back and…see Laurel, and Mom and Dad again." Her voice hardened as she went on, but it cracked along the edges all the same. "And every time I…slit someone's throat, or crushed their windpipe, or gutted them, I told myself I was one step closer to home…I never let myself forget it." She pursed her lips. "But now I'm here and…and I don't know how to approach them, I don't…I don't know what they'll see, or if I'll be able to keep what I am from them…I'm not the Sara they remember."

He knew exactly what that felt like. She was like him. It crippled him with guilt.

"They'd be happy," he said quietly. "To see you, to…know that you're alive." It was his turn to look away. "But it's not…easy, when there's a whole side of you they don't want to see or…can't." He shrugged. "It'd be hard for them, to look at you now and not see the person you were six years ago."

He closed his eyes and counted to ten, then whispered, "Sara, I'm sorry."

From the corner of his eye, he watched her whip her head in his direction. "For what?"

Breathe in, breathe out. "I took you on the Gambit with me," he said. "And everything that's happened to you, everything that…that it's done to your family, it's my fault." He hung his head. "I'm sorry."
His words were met with silence.

It took a while, but eventually, Sara spoke. "You really do believe that, don't you?" she let out. "That my 'death' is somehow your burden to carry?"

He shrugged helplessly. "It is."

It took him by surprise when she chuckled mirthlessly. "Maybe we remember it differently, but I seem to recall that I jumped at the opportunity to board the Gambit with you." He dared meet her eye, and she looked...very put off. "I was young and tired of living in Laurel's shadow, and I was petty, so I wanted to get something she didn't...even if it was something as stupid as your attention. Which I actually thought was love. But I chose that," she emphasized, her voice sharp. "We both carry the burden of betraying Laurel, but it was my decision to get on that boat. It was a bad decision, for so many reasons, but it was mine." She leveled him with a glare. "Don't take my choice away from me just because you need another thing to feel guilty about."

The first thing that ran through his mind was an echo of Felicity's words. *It was her choice, too.*

Ever-so-slightly, he nodded.

Sara didn't seem entirely placated, but relented nevertheless. "So," she spoke up, "you know my story. What's yours?"

"I thought you'd kept tabs? You should already know."

She gave him an appraising look then dipped her chin a fraction, as if to say she understood; if she was being evasive, then so was he.

"Well, then tell me something I don't know," she challenged, and Oliver hesitated. He could bring up a common subject; Laurel, Mr. Lance, her mother. Tell her things surveillance and travelling rumors couldn't. But it was very much a bittersweet, difficult subject.

And yet, he wanted to keep the conversation going. It was comforting, to be talking to her.

Sara was a paradox. She existed both in his past and in his present. She was familiar but changed, in all the same ways that he was. She was the one point of contact between who he used to be and who he was now. As much as it filled him with guilt, it also brought him comfort.

He wanted to relish it a while longer, without his heart growing heavy. There was only one topic that sprang to mind.

"I didn't always have partners, you know," he began. "I thought I could do it alone, when I first came back. But then I realized I couldn't subdue a fried laptop with a bow and arrow..."

Chapter End Notes

So, about Sara. As previously mentioned, I'm not running entirely on her canon backstory, so while I did go with 'League of Assassins Assassin', she wasn't on Lian Yu, and she's basically like...on an approved leave of absence from Ra's al Ghul. Also, about the island she did wash up on. In 1x18, the photo was taken in a fishing village (that I went ahead and turned into a proper island - I take liberties, okay?) called 'Salvation'. Now. I tried to get the exact name in Mandarin, but the closest thing I came
to phonetically is jǐng jiú, which not only does not really translate as 'salvation', but also doesn't seem to make any grammatical sense. I looked up the literal translation for 'salvation' in various online dictionaries, and the consensus seems to be that salvation = jiù ēn (presented without accents in the fic). So, I ran with that. If anyone who speaks Mandarin (or knows about it more than I do) can enlighten me on this matter, shoot me a PM.
Hello *awkward wave*

Do you guys even still remember this story? I hope you do. In any case, my apologies for not updating in...I don't know how long, but writing this chapter was not unlike pulling teeth - not because the babies don't give me inspiration, but because 2x09 is still fresh on my mind and leaving a bad taste in my mouth. I thought the hiatus would help me cool off, but my anger only appears to increase every time I think of it.

That aside, I hope you enjoy :)

P.S. I've no idea how on Earth it got this long.

There is more to having his back than helping him dodge literal bullets, Felicity told herself for the hundredth time. There is more to having his back than –

She realized she was just staring at the same line, and that she couldn't even remember what she'd read so far.

...helping him dodge literal bullets, she finished her inner mantra miserably.

As it turned out, she'd been right; Oliver wasn't going to take time away from Sunday to finish going over the paperwork. In fact, she was pretty sure he'd forgotten about it by now. Which meant that she and Diggle were currently cooped up in her apartment, deflating her coffee supply at alarming speed and doing the work for him, lest he incur Isabel Rochev's terrible wrath come Monday.

"There is more to having his back than helping him dodge literal bullets," she whimpered out loud, rubbing her temples.

From where he was sitting opposite her, Diggle grumbled, "Yeah, there's also getting that crash course in business I never wanted." He sighed. "Is it just me, Felicity, or are we getting nowhere with this?"

She looked up, to his poor, tortured face, and had to admit to defeat. "We're out of our depth, Digg," she said. "I have no idea what half of this even means…and Google's failed me on this one." She frowned. "That's a first." With a sigh of her own, she set the papers down and sunk deeper into the blissfully comfy cushions of her couch. "I'd ask Cheryl to come and help, but then, it's Sunday, and while I know she loves me enough to make the sacrifice, I'm not sure it's a good idea for anyone to know that Oliver gets his paperwork looked over by an under-qualified IT girl and his bodyguard…"

"Yeah," Diggle agreed grumpily, setting his own pile aside. "Well...we can always throw in the towel, interrupt his ongoing reunion and drop all of this" – he gestured to the scattered paperwork around them – "back on him."

"He'll never get it done," Felicity pointed out. "And he needs it in order for tomorrow – investors meeting at nine a.m. sharp, which he may not think is a big deal, but Isabel definitely does, and while she has that 'yip-yip hooray, partnership!' act going on, I'm sure she's also just gathering ammo to
overthrow Oliver the first chance she gets – probably once he's helped rehabilitate QC, and she gets to reap all the benefits while dancing on his grave."

Diggle raised an eyebrow, as if to convey that she was being just a smidge dramatic, but nodded nevertheless. "We don't know what her endgame is," he conceded. "Better not to take any chances."


It was a testament to how tired he was when he didn't make to protest at the nickname in any way. "Maybe we should just…take a break," he said, leaning back in the armchair and closing his eyes.

Felicity took a moment to observe him in the ensuing silence; a year ago, she could never have imagined that John Diggle, war veteran and overall badass, would become one of her closest friends – or that it would become natural for him to hang around at her place. The latter had happened during Oliver's absence, really. With him gone, and it the wake of the quake, they only really had each other, she and Johnny-boy. Well, in some ways, anyway; the Glades had fallen and Oliver was gone, so they were left with a demolished basement that needed rebuilding, and an entire city in shambles. And there were things that only the two of them knew. Felicity didn't think she would have gotten back on her feet after the Undertaking if it hadn't been for John; he was the only one left she could talk to about everything, without Oliver around to listen to how her day went.

Her eyes slipped to the side, to the painting that hung on the wall just by the entrance to her – modest, underused and badly equipped – kitchen; she smiled. About two months after the quake, she and John had been running themselves ragged, trying to juggle the renovations of the basement, Oliver's absence and partial damage control of the escalating crime in the city – well, she had been taking it the worst. Diggle had some experience with traumatic experiences, he knew how to deal, at least for the most part; she didn't, not really. Not with something like this, not when the tragedy went so far beyond the confines of her own life. So, she was running around from dusk 'til dawn, trying to fix everything, rebuild everything, help everyone…it hadn't been pretty. And one day, John just showed up at her door, a six-pack of beers under one arm and a wrapped painting under the other, and said, "We're taking the night off."

Felicity wasn't above admitting that she'd cried for a solid hour upon the unwrapping of Diggle's painting – one of his own doing, because as it turned out, he had done all the paintings she'd seen hanging in his place himself. It was a landscape of the Glades, as they used to be; both a reminder of the tragedy and a symbol of hope at the same time. And sometime during her crying, Diggle had imparted some wisdom on her. You can't help everyone. You can't fix everything, he'd said. Isn't that what you always told Oliver? You know, just because he's gone, doesn't mean someone has to replace him.

So yes, without Johnny-boy, she would probably be on her road to recovery from nervous exhaustion right about now.

"Digg?"

"Hmm?"

"How d'you think it's going?" she asked. "Oliver's…you know, bonding time with Sara?"

He opened his eyes, giving her a look. "Are you asking me if I think they're…revisiting the past?"

She scrunched her nose. "Maybe," she said, then sighed. "It's just that…well, Oliver has a tendency for it. And I don't really know Sara, so I can't tell if she has…the…same…tendency."
Diggle heaved another sigh, then said, "Well, I like to think that every once in a while, Oliver does learn from his mistakes. But then again, this is between them, so…it's not really any of our business."

"I know," she assured. "It's just…this never ends well. He tried with Laurel, and he tried with McKenna, and with Sara he has the added bonus of openly being himself, like with Helena, except that ended badly too, and – "

" – and there's more to having his back than helping him dodge literal bullets," Diggle echoed their motto, nodding in understanding.

"Yeah," she said softly.

Diggle pondered that for a while, then just shrugged. "Still none of our business."

"Right," she grumbled. Then promptly turned back to the abandoned paperwork. "I think I'll just call Cheryl," she stated. "And…subtly ask her to explain all these weird concepts to me."

There was a beat before Diggle agreed, and though she wasn't meeting his eyes, Felicity knew he was giving her a knowing look; still, he didn't prod, and she appreciated the courtesy. "Okay," he said. "Diving back in."

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Oliver grunted as he found himself flat on his back again, and Sara moved to straddle him.

The next thing he knew, the cold metal of her bo-staff had made its way under his chin.

"I expected better, Archer," she said, looking rather smug. Then again, she had beaten him six times in a row; she probably had good reasons for being smug.

He gave another grunt, making her grin and rise to her feet; she offered him a hand. He took it and rose himself, grinning back."Well, I've still got better aim."

"With arrows, maybe," she allowed. "But you can't throw a blade half as well as I can."

She could be right.

"How about we take a break?" he suggested.

Her grin grew smugger. "I was wondering when you would finally throw in the towel," she commented, trading her staff in favor of a water bottle; Oliver did the same with his practice sticks.

After some silence, she said, "I should probably head out soon. Need to find a place to sleep tonight."

She took him by surprise; he thought it would go without saying that she could stay with him. "Sara, you can come to the mansion. It's big enough so no one will see you. Besides, you're good at hiding in plain sight."
Her head tipped to the side. "And I thought the days of you sneaking me into your house were behind us."

"I'm – I wasn't – " He shook his head. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Good," she said. "Because I have no intention of revisiting that part of my past." She turned to face him more fully, and he simply knew he wasn't going to like where she would take this conversation next. "You know, Ollie," she began, "ever since I came back, all I've wanted was to leave my past behind; these six years. Find a way to let it go. And I thought, when we finally came face-to-face, that you'd have some pointers for me."

Yeah, he definitely didn't like where this was going.

"But you seem stuck in the past," she concluded.

"Where did you get that from?" he grumbled, doing his best not to snap at her; really, he hadn't brought up things from either of their pasts once since last night.

"Oh, come on." She rolled her eyes. "You spent all this time clinging to the notion that you were responsible for every bad thing that's happened to me and my family, and since last night, you've done everything in your power to keep me around." After a slight pause, she gave him a pointed look. "And of course, then there's Laurel. Always Laurel. You may have avoided to as much as mention her name, but I've been watching you – both of you. And you always find some excuse to circle back to her." She shrugged. "From where I'm standing, it looks like you're grasping to every last part of your past you can salvage."

"Does this have a point, Sara?"

She only raised an eyebrow at his tone. "You have the means to let it go, Ollie," she said. "See, you have everything to make it happen, but you're just so stubborn." She gave a hollow chuckle. "I've been here for six months, and I still haven't figured out how to step away from the shadows, but you? You've built this whole new life, and you have everything you could possibly need to move on, but the sad thing is, I don't think you even realize it."

He chewed on his tongue. "Realize what, exactly?"

She sighed. "Oliver," she began, giving him a look, "we were up all night, and you spent most of that time talking about your team – about Diggle and Felicity." She propped her hip against the table. "I've barely spoken to them, but I know Felicity graduated from MIT, I know she's Jewish, I know you fed her a bad lie about a latte and a laptop the first time you met, and that she wasn't someone you'd meant to have so close from the start, but that your team wouldn't be what it is without her now; I know she's incredibly intelligent, if not a little awkward, and that she's not a natural blonde. I even know how she takes her coffee."

Had he really said all that?

"Now, Diggle," Sara went on. "I know he is a three tours in Afghanistan veteran, I know he acts like your bodyguard and doesn't like it all that much, I know he is 'brutally honest' – your words, not mine – and I know that he wasn't really onboard with your crusade from the start, but that since, he's become one of your closest friends." Then, she smirked. "Don't know how he takes his coffee, though."

He narrowed his eyes at her last comment. "What are you trying to tell me here, Sara?"

Her smirk only grew. "Oh, I think you know."
He didn't deign to respond to that. Instead, he said, "So, you think I'm...trying to hold on to a past I've already moved on from, and I just don't know it yet?"

The glint in her eyes lingered, but he wouldn't indulge her; Felicity was his friend, and only his friend. Eventually, Sara seemed to drop it and nod in approval to the conclusions he'd drawn. "Neither of us can ever be...just a regular person," she said. "But I like to think that we can still aspire to be more than ghosts stuck in limbo."

Oliver wished to think like that, too; it wasn't easy, though. He tried, sometimes. But he lacked the hope. The faith.

And if words like 'hope' and 'faith' in conjunction to himself made him think of Felicity, then he didn't dwell on it.

Instead, he walked over to the glass case that housed his weapons and picked up a set of throwing knives. He raised them in challenge. "Wanna test that aim of yours?"

Felicity could weep from joy.

Cheryl was a godsend. A lifesaver. She loved Cheryl. She was about two seconds away from building Cheryl a shrine.

"Remind me to send Cheryl a 'thank you' note," Diggle said, as he restacked the paperwork into a neat pile. "And flowers."

Felicity only grinned back; thanks to Cheryl's expertise and willingness to be disturbed on a Sunday without asking too many questions, they had been able to elucidate most of the reports' convoluted phrasing, and therefore the reports themselves, and get them in order for Oliver's Monday morning meeting. Mission accomplished.

"Do you think Oliver's still at Verdant?" she asked. "Or do we need to drop these off at the mansion?"

Diggle shrugged.

"Right," she mumbled, reaching for her phone to give him a call. She unlocked the screen and frowned, seeing a single pending text from Mr. Lance. Call me as soon as you can, Ms. Smoak.

Frowning deeper, she dialed the number and waited, while Diggle raised an eyebrow in questioning.

"Ms. Smoak," Detective Lance picked up after the third ring. "Thank you for calling."

"Of course, Detective," she said, trying not to let her tired brain run through all sorts of apocalyptic scenarios that would require her call. "Did something happen? Or is this about...the favor we talked about?"

There was a deep sigh before he responded. "It's about a favor, but the one you asked me for. I still
don't have anything to tell you about that. This is...a favor I'd like to ask from you."

"What do you need?"

"There have been some reports lately, Ms. Smoak," he began, "about a woman in black in the Glades, beating up rapists and other creeps..."

Felicity stilled, biting her lip.

"It's nothing solid," Lance went on. "We only have eye witness reports and she's definitely not been as outspoken as our mutual friend, but..." He sighed again. "The reports are piling up, and sooner or later, it's going to draw more attention. So, I need to know, Ms. Smoak...do I bring this to my superiors or do I use the little pull I have left here to keep it quiet?"

He was asking her to tell him what to do, she realized. He trusted her to make the right choice. He trusted she knew what it would be. Felicity swallowed, feeling tears prickle at the corners of her eyes; he was asking about his daughter, too, even if he didn't know it.

She closed her eyes against Diggle's increasingly worried look, and took a deep breath. "She's one of the good guys, Detective," she said earnestly. "I can guarantee that."

There was silence on the other end for a while, before he released a quiet breath; she imagined he was nodding right about now. "How many vigilantes do you protect, Ms. Smoak?" he asked, sounding...concerned.

She smiled through her incoming tears. "Only those that deserve it."

After another pause, Lance said, "I can take your word for it. Thank you, Ms. Smoak."

"Goodbye, Detective," she bid him farewell before hanging up, only to be met with Diggle's questioning look.

She gave him a quick rundown of the parts of the conversation he hadn't heard, before blinking back the last of her tears and moving to call Oliver; the sooner they dropped the paperwork back on him, the better. Besides, she needed to get to the lair anyway; there was a system diagnostics she'd left running, and that she needed to see through.

Which could take hours.

She nearly cried again. Another sleepless night for me, she thought cheerlessly and dialed Oliver's number.

Oliver frowned as he turned to face the stairs, which were rattling under two pairs of feet; Felicity had called him about half an hour ago, and after a uncharacteristically curt 'Where are you?', told him to sit tight, wait and 'look presentable for company'. He wasn't sure why she thought he wouldn't.

Or why she sounded like she was in a bad mood.
That particular mystery was solved as soon as she appeared in sight, Diggle at her heels, with an armful of binders. He cringed; he'd forgotten about the paperwork.

He spread his arms out so she could transfer the load onto him, offering a quiet, "You didn't have to do that."

She gave him a look then, complete with circles under her eyes and a hairdo that was just a bit messier than usual. "There is more to having your back than helping you dodge literal bullets," she recited tonelessly, like it was a verse from some bad poem she'd been forced to memorize; behind her, Diggle gave a nod that anything but enthusiastic.

Even so, the sentiment behind the words held so much meaning, and with everything Sara had said earlier, it took Oliver a moment to swallow past the lump in his throat. "Thank you," he told them both, and it seemed to make them soften the tiniest bit; Felicity even gave him a tired smile.

He heard a clang and a soft thud behind him, which meant Sara had dropped from the salmon ladder she'd been testing out, and was coming to join the party. She came up next to him, glanced from the paperwork to his partners, then gave him a disapproving look.

"I'm sorry your Sunday got wasted," she apologized as she turned to Diggle and Felicity.

"That's okay," Felicity said, "as long as your bonding time went well." She paused there, looking between them, then added, "Did the bonding time go well?"

There it was again, Oliver thought, that something in her tone he couldn't place – which was odd, considering Felicity was usually an open book.

"All things considered," Sara spoke up. "His knife-throwing technique could use some improvement, though."

"Really?" Diggle piped in, sounding curious. "I once saw him throw a kitchen knife with pinpoint accuracy at a moving target. The thing wasn't even balanced properly."

He'd obviously never seen Sara hit a flying tennis ball from across the basement and pin it to the far wall, Oliver thought. "Why don't you head home and get some rest?" he suggested. "I think you need it."

To his surprise, Felicity grumbled, "Can't. I have – " She pointed over his shoulder to her computers, but couldn't seem to find the necessary words, which left her to wave her hand around, grumble some more, then sigh and sullenly stomp over to her chair.

"System diagnostics," Diggle supplied. "Which, fortunately, I have nothing to do with. I don't care if you're dying in a ditch somewhere, Oliver, don't call me." And with that, he gave them a nod of farewell and was out the door.

Letting out a sigh, Oliver realized Sara had left his side and joined Felicity – and already struck a conversation, too.

He took a moment to look Felicity over; she really did look tired. Even more telling than the dark circles under her eyes and the messy hair were the slower-than-usual hand gestures that accompanied her speech; she was only half as animated as she should have been.

Putting the binders away, he made his way to the upper level in search of coffee; he knew she'd appreciate the caffeine at a time like this.
"– and that is how I know if any particular part of the system needs upgrading or maintenance," Felicity finished her longwinded explanation of all that system diagnostics entailed and why they were so important.

Sara nodded. "It's impressive," she remarked. "Everything you can do with just a keyboard. You know, Oliver told me you once decrypted a security fob no one had managed to crack before…and that you've hacked more than one federal database. It's…really impressive."

"He told you that?"

Sara shrugged. "He talked a lot."

Felicity frowned. "Really? 'Cause it's usually an uphill battle to get more than two words out of him…" Unless it's all really a question of him just not wanting to talk to you, she thought, then internally sighed at the words that had gone through her mind; the sleep-deprivation was making her head such a negative space.

"I think it's just a matter of getting him in the right setting," Sara commented. "And on the right topic." She smiled. "He only really talked about you and Diggle."

Well, that was…nice. Unexpectedly heartwarming, too. Of course, it'd nicer if he talked to her and Diggle instead of about them, but hey, baby steps.

"So," she said, "aside from that episode of 'Starling Meets the Twilight Zone' where Oliver Silent-and-Brooding Queen turned into a chatterbox, what – "

Her question was long forgotten as soon as she caught a whiff of the most magnificent scent wafting through the lair. Coffee.

Sure enough, a moment later, a steaming cup was set down on the desk before her; Oliver's hand fell to her shoulder and squeezed lightly just as the mug hit the metal, and Felicity found him smiling down at her as she looked up. The small quirk of his head that followed, she knew, was non-verbal for 'thought you might need it'.

She grinned in thanks, practically lunging for the cup; she wrapped her fingers around its warmth, and took a long, appreciative inhale.

Coffee was made of rainbows and unicorns and fluffy kittens. It was the nectar of the Gods. The one thing that made life –

Wait, why was Sara smirking?

And why was Oliver giving her a very 'shut up!' kind of look?

Felicity narrowed her eyes; what kind of stuff had come out of Oliver the Chatterbox last night, exactly?
"What am I missing here?" she asked.

"Nothing," came Oliver's reply, a little too quickly; she was definitely missing something. It didn't look like she would be let in on the 'big secret', though.

Oliver left them after that, to indulge in an alternating mixture of prep work for the investors' meeting and rigorous workout.

In the ensuing silence, Felicity bit her lip; there was something she needed to share with the other woman. "Sara," she began, "um…I don't know if Oliver told you this, but...your father knows I work with him – well, the vigilante-him. I'm kind of...the go-between. And also the go-to girl for all things vigilante for Detective Lance. Officer Lance. Mr. Lance. Your father."

Sara straightened, her posture shifting from relaxed to stiff. "Like I said, Oliver mostly talked about you and Diggle." She looked away, then asked, "How is he?"

"He's...umm..."

After a deep sigh, Sara said, "I know he's been demoted, after the quake. I – from what I've seen, it looks like he's been taking it pretty well. But..." She licked her lips. "I've also seen him go to AA meetings, once a month or so." She looked back at Felicity. "While I was...away, he hit the bottle, didn't he? I mean, I...I'd kept tabs on my family, where I was, but...I still didn't get to hear everything, I guess."

"I honestly don't know," Felicity told her. "It's probably something you should ask Oliver. But...your dad's doing okay – now, anyway. He helped save half the Glades – which is also why he got demoted, but I think the fact that it was for a good cause softened that blow. Anyway..." She took a deep breath. "He called me earlier, asking about...well, you."

When Sara began to frown in what Felicity could only deem a scary way, she was quick to add, "Not you-you, obviously, your black-on-black alter-ego – and I didn't tell him anything, just that...you know, you're one of the good guys." She shrugged. "There've been reports about you, so he asked if he should try and keep it quiet, so...yeah, I told him you were one of the good guys."

Sara's shoulders slumped and she hung her head, taking a deep breath. "Thank you," she said as she righted her posture again. After clearing her throat, she added, "I do appreciate it, especially since...you don't really know me."

"Well, you've saved a lot of women from a lot of bad guys...even if I didn't know who you really were, I'd...still call you one of the good guys." She bit her lip for a moment. "Speaking of," she began cautiously, "can I ask...why did you come back?" Okay, that was kind of a too-personal question. Ease into it, Smoak. So, she amended her query to, "I mean, what made you want to...you know, become the woman in black? And we really need to come up with a better name than that..."

Her mind was already running with different possibilities when Sara spoke up. "Where I was," she said, "they called me Canary."

Felicity considered that, then nodded. Definitely beats 'the woman in black'.

"And as for why," Sara went on, "I...I did come back for my family. The entire time I was away, I never...let myself forget that I had to come back to them. And as soon as I was...free, I came back, but – " She let out a hollow chuckle. "I didn't really think it through. So I've spent months lurking in the shadows, watching them but never...stepping out into the light. I'm not sure I know how."
"And approaching Oliver was the first step in the learning process," Felicity concluded, to which Sara smiled faintly.

"Yeah," she confirmed, though there was a crease that formed in her brow which made Felicity think the experience wasn't as instructive as Sara had hoped. She didn't linger on it, though, and instead offered Felicity a vague yet strangely informative retelling of her nights in Starling.

Felicity barely noticed the taste of her cherished coffee as she sipped on it, listening to Sara speak about how she had come to target the rapists and aggressors in the Glades; there was an underlying anger to her words, directed at all those men, and Felicity couldn't help but nod along.

"Not every woman can fight," Sara concluded. "Not every woman wants to. It still doesn't give anyone the right to try and hurt them."

Felicity knew she was staring at the other woman, but she may have imagined having this conversation an inordinate amount of times since she had learned of the female vigilante in the Glades. So, no one could blame her.

"I should probably get going," Sara spoke after a moment of silence. "It'll be getting dark soon."

"Well, you can always stay here," Felicity offered. "We have a very comfy…mat."

Sara cracked a small smile. "I've slept on worse," she said. "And I appreciate the offer – both yours and Oliver's – but I think I have a place." She shrugged. "It has a…nice view of the city. And I think I might stick to it for a while…now that I've given up running."

Felicity had a feeling Sara wouldn't be disclosing the location, so instead of prying, she offered, "Well, you where we live – not that we live here. Actually, we might as well…sort of. We spend a lot of time here. Too much time, probably – " She sighed. "Anyway, you know where you can find us, at almost all hours of the day."

That particular babble earned her an exceptionally wide smile, before Sara nodded in acknowledgement. "Thank you," she told her, lightly grasping her forearm in silent gratitude. "I'll just say goodbye to Ollie, then. Goodnight, Felicity."

"'Night," Felicity said in turn, before her eyes dropped to the now empty mug. She pursed her lips, casting a quick glance at her desk; a perfectly nice permanent black marker was right there within her reach…

Her gaze flittered to Sara's retreating back. Oh, what the hell.

"Sara," she called out, and when the other woman circled back, already had both the mug and marker at the ready. "Sign my mug, please?"

If it took her by surprise, Sara recovered quickly and agreed to the task with a grin. She scribbled for a while before returning the mug with a wink, and silently trekking back towards Oliver.

When she looked down at the previously pristine ceramic, Felicity found a roughly drawn black canary staring back at her.
She knew she should have done diagnostics sooner. Always get ahead of the problem, don't let it make you play defense instead of offense; that was the sacred rule. Or it should have been – it would have been, if she hadn't been so damned busy these past few weeks. Months.

She sighed; well, what was done was done. Nothing left to do but start fixing the bugs she'd found in the system; they weren't anything worthy of a code red, but the longer they piled up, the more the risk of a system failure grew.

She really needed those new processors.

"It's nearly midnight."

If she had it in her, she would have screamed. As it happened, she was too burned out to do much other than let out a soft whine. "You have to stop sneaking up on people, Oliver – or just me. You can sneak up on other people if you want. Just not me."

He didn't speak again until he was by her side, angling her chair a fraction so he could meet her eye. "It's nearly midnight," he repeated. "And you look more tired than I've ever seen you. So, go home. Get some sleep." He looked past her for a moment, seemed to consider something, then added, "And take the day off tomorrow. The investors' meeting is my problem, and I think you can get away with a sick day."

That did sound very appealing. However… "Bugs."

It was probably very telling that he knew exactly what she meant by that one solitary word. "They will still be here tomorrow."

"And that – " she waved a finger at him – "is exactly the problem."

His eyes flickered from her face to her finger, and his mouth quirked in that little half-amused, half-exasperated smile she tended to bring out of him.

Not that she spent any considerable amount of time analyzing his facial expressions.

Retracting her finger, she said, "I need to finish this tonight, while I'm still…ahead of it and 'in the zone'." She sighed. "But, I think I will take a walk on the wild side and skip the office tomorrow."

"That's a walk on the wild side for you?"

"Oh, trust me, Oliver," she said, "you know nothing of my wild side."

No, wait – She closed her eyes and counted to five. He would ignore it, like he always did.

And the prediction proved true, since the next words coming out of his mouth were, "How long will it take you to…debug the…system?"

It was totally cute, the way he fumbled with technical terms. Not that he was cute.

Anyway.

"A couple of hours, I think," she said. "Maybe three."
He nodded but remained standing right where he was; she raised an eyebrow.

"I'm waiting for you to finish so I can drive you home," he informed. Before she could protest, he added, "Digg drove you here, so you don't have your car, and I know just how much you hate trying to get a cab to come pick you up here in the wee hours. So, I'll drive you home."

She didn't quite know whether she should be worried or happy that he had decided to be so considerate. At length, she agreed. Which he took as an invitation to just keep standing there. When she pointed out that hovering wasn't going to speed the process up, he proceeded to drag a chair to her side as she worked – something that instantly brought back memories of their rare heart-to-heart from a few weeks back.

"Hey, what's that?"

And he was not the quiet observer, evidently.

Pausing in her keystrokes, she turned to him, and smiled when she realized he was pointing at her new favorite mug.

"I got my autograph after all," she announced proudly.

"It's a...bird?"

"A canary," she corrected, then frowned. "She didn't tell you?"

He shook his head the faintest bit, so she said, "Well, apparently, she was called Canary wherever she was – and I don't know where that is, and I'm thinking neither do you."

"She didn't go into specifics." His shoulder rose and fell in a small shrug.

"Well, now you know how the other half lives," she said, bringing forth an annoyed little head quirk with her jab at his lack of sharing. She raised her hands in surrender. "Just saying." Then, she added, "Maybe it's a castaway thing. Or a vigilante thing – oh, speaking of vigilantes – "

She grabbed her tablet, from where it was sitting propped up against one of the screens, pulling up the notification she'd seen earlier. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to show him this. Well, she'd meant to as soon as it came up, and she'd had every intention of interrupting his workout to do so, but then she'd gotten a bit distracted by how he was going about that workout, and then there were ten pop-out windows signaling bugs on three different screens, and well –

In any case...

"I forgot to show you this," she said excitedly. "I saw it earlier, but then there was – yeah, I just... forgot. Anyway, this – she presented him with the tablet – "is going to print tomorrow, front page."

He took hold of the tablet, squinting slightly as he worked to make out the words, and then his face cleared in what Felicity thought was incredulity with a touch – a smidge, really – of the closest thing to happiness that Oliver could achieve.

"Green Arrow," he read the article's title out loud. "More than Just the Guy with a Bow."

"See," Felicity declared proudly, "they're not calling you the Hood anymore."

His resulting smile was exceptionally wide. He looked pensive for a moment, then turned his eyes to her. "Did you have something to do with this?"
"I…might have slipped in a fake article or two after you picked out your new name," she admitted. "Very low-key stuff, but I hoped that, with a little luck, it would take off and stick." She beamed. "And it did."

"You didn't have to do that," he said softly.

She rolled her eyes. "Right, like I didn't have to be in court for your testimony, but I was. Or like how Digg and I didn't have to go through mind-numbing report after mind-numbing report to give you and Sara time to catch up on things. Or how we didn't have to travel halfway across the world and jump out of a plane that violates all kinds of safety codes to – and I quote – 'haul your white ass back here'." She shifted her sitting position, so she could lean in closer to him. "But we did."

His eyes slipped back to the tablet, and she watched him swallow thickly. It was actually sad, she thought, that he still didn't really believe that they were there for him. That they were his friends.

He cleared his throat, before whispering, "There is more to having my back than helping me dodge literal bullets, right?"

"Exactly."

The look he gave her then was enough to melt her insides – metaphorically, of course, because if he were literally turning her insides into goo, then that would be bad. So, yes, he was metaphorically melting her insides with his pretty, bright blue eyes.

And then the staring got kind of long, and it was starting to make her feel self-conscious.

She nervously tucked a strand of her behind her ear. "What?"

He sighed deeply, had a false start or two, then shook his head. "You remind me of someone," he said, in a way that made her think it hadn't been the first thing to come to his mind. "Digg, too," he added.

She frowned. "Who?"

The simple query seemed to turn him wistful – sad, too. "They're gone now," he whispered, and something about it made her certain that it would be erroneous to take that statement at face value. "So I'd rather not even make the comparison to begin with."

She cocked her sleep-deprived and therefore slightly groggy head to the side. "Is that your way of saying you'd very much like to keep us around?"

"Yeah," he said warmly.

She smiled at him, thinking that this really was a déjà-vu; the two of them, sitting face-to-face next to her humming computers and having impromptu, deep and meaningful conversations. It was dangerously close to becoming a thing. Not that she necessarily minded the thing. No, she could definitely get onboard with the thing.

The warmth in his eyes soon grew dull, though, and he averted his gaze again. Even if it was done in a roundabout kind of way, Felicity still believed she had uncovered the answer to at least part of the mystery he made for; like why he kept her and Diggle as close as possible, and yet at arm's length.

"The…people Digg and I remind you of," she began quietly, "it…ended badly with them, didn't it?"

His jaw ticked, and his lips parted as he blew out a long, quiet breath. "Yeah," he confirmed,
busying himself with placing the tablet back on the desk before adding, "And a lot of it was my fault."

"Not everything is your fault."

"There are a lot of things that still are," he countered.

He went silent after that, resting his elbows on his knees and seemingly a million miles away – or however many there were from their special little basement to Lian Yu.

"Well, we're not them," she broke the silence. "Whatever…similarities you see, it's not the same. And there's a difference, between the past and the present…which I'm not sure if you can really see."

Her words made him look up for some reason, and his eyes reflected the overhead lights and the glow of her screens a little too strongly for them to be completely dry; he seemed to realize it, too, and quickly dropped his gaze again.

He shook his head, licked his lips, then let out a faint chuckle.

"What?" she asked.

"Just something Sara said."

On a different occasion, she might have let him leave it at that, but maybe she could give it a try – getting him to say what was really on his mind for once, that was. It was all about getting him in the right setting and on the right topic, wasn't it? And she liked to think of it as helping him express himself rather than prying.

Maybe the lack of sleep was affecting her rationality.

Biting her lip, she reached out and slowly, carefully, let her hand cover his. While he did start at the unexpected touch, he didn't pull away, and after a moment, grasped her hand fully.

"What did she say?" she queried.

She didn't get her answer right away, and was too busy watching his bowed head for any sort of reaction to notice he'd begun idly playing with her fingers.

"She said I'm – " He sighed. "She said I'm holding on to my past when I've already got a much better present to live in. I guess I've…got one foot on each side, so to speak."

She thought that much was obvious, but refrained from pointing it out. "Well," she spoke, "following that thought, you'd need to…put both your feet on one side, right? Preferably that of the present, obviously."

He didn't respond – didn't react, really – but she knew he was listening. Oliver was like this big human sponge, emotions-wise; a lot of things came in, but very few came out. While she tried to find the right words to speak next, and get rid of a mental image of Oliver as an alternative incarnation of Spongebob Squarepants, her eyes fell to their joined hands; he ran the pad of his thumb across her knuckles, then over each finger, from base to brightly painted nail. And it didn't seem like he really realized what he was doing.

"What you need is a leap," she found herself saying, quietly. "Just close your eyes and jump. Put both your feet on one side." She shrugged. "It's not as scary as you might think."
He pursed his lips, and even if he still didn't speak, she knew he was doubtful. She wasn't just throwing random platitudes around, though. "I took a leap once, too, you know," she said. "It may not be on the same scale, but...the principle still applies."

Her eyes fell to their hands as she remembered the time she'd made her decision; she didn't notice Oliver's own eyes rise to watch her.

"Before I signed on permanently," she went on, "I had a bit of the same conundrum as you. I mean, on the one hand, I had my boring IT girl life at QC, and everything was stable and normal -- and I wanted to keep that." The corner of her mouth pulled into a smile. "Which is why I said I would only keep you and Digg company until we found Mr. Steele. And then six months went by and...well, I got used to the 'temporary arrangements'. So, when we did find your stepdad, I had to make a choice. On one side, I had my...normalcy and stability, and on the other, I had -- " She looked up, letting her eyes wander over every corner of their base of operations, before finally settling them on his; he didn't look away this time. " -- all of this," she finished warmly, giving him a small, one-sided shrug. "So, I'm familiar with the 'one foot on each side' situation. And well, you asked, after we found Walter, if I wanted to stay, though it was mostly a formality because you knew I would" -- his mouth quirked into a fleeting smile at that -- "and I said yes, of course, but there was a lot hyperventilating behind it for me, you know." She chuckled as she recalled one particular one night in her apartment, when she was sitting in the middle of her bedroom, hair haywire and glasses askew, surrounded by piles and piles of pros-and-cons lists. "But I loved it here," she said earnestly, hoping to convey just what it meant to her to be able to contribute to saving the city; she was never a fighter, or a soldier, or a lawyer or a law enforcement officer, but here, in this basement, she could still help. "So, I took my leap. Left my only-an-IT-girl life behind for good." She shrugged. "And it was one of the best decisions I've ever made."

His stare was very intense, as most things he did were, and eventually, he asked, "Even with...everything?"

She nodded resolutely. "Even with everything."

His eyes stayed on her for a while longer, before he let out a breath and nodded; his free hand came to rest on top of both their joined ones. "Thank you," he said.

She smiled wider, moving her own hand to the growing pile. "You're welcome."

They lingered in the ensuing silence, and with no words left to fill it, Felicity became increasingly aware of their physical contact; the movement of his hand under her palm, and the swipe of his thumb against her skin. It did more to fire up her brain activity than any of her previous caffeine fixes. She'd had quite a few dreams that started out like this...

And none of them were PG-rated.

She pulled away, in what she really hoped didn't seem like an overly abrupt manner, and rolled her chair back. "So," she said, clapping her hands together in a bit of a loud clap, "you ponder on all of...that, and I'll just -- " she waved and gestured around in a way that seemed to confuse him, nodding along in sync with her out-of-control hand motions -- "I'll just do my thing, over here. Yeah, let's do that."

She promptly turned to her computers again, and pretended she hadn't just gone into weird-mode; if she ignored it, then so would he. It was another thing they did. Not that they had things. That they did.

Ignoring it.
He played along, of course, retreating to the back again in order to give her space with a soft, "Tell me when you're ready to head out."

Three long hours later, she was. She didn't even need to speak the words, though she suspected her loud sigh of relief was all the cue he needed, and Oliver was already there with his jacket on and car keys in hand.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you home."
Chapter Notes

It found plot!

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about me and a regular-updating routine. (I do have the next chapter all written, too, so just this once, the wait won't be long).

In any case, my apologies for the late update as always, and also my apologies for not having replied to reviews for the last chapter - but thank you all so so much for the amazing comments, and I can't even tell you how glad I am that you're not only enjoying the Olicity, but also Sara, Diggle the Sass Master of Our Hearts, and everything else about this story. Thank you!

P.S. There have been a couple of comments here on Ao3 asking about my intense dislike of 2x09. Rest assured it has nothing to do with Barry - he is my baby, and I love him, and I want to keep him. My dislike stems from Shado's death - everything from the circumstances under which she was killed, to the fact alone that she was killed, to the (non)"purpose" her death served. Everything about Shado's death makes me see red. Add to that Felicity's 'fantasy island' and 'beautiful island girls' lines (like, pls refrain yourselves from giving my feminist bb Felicity inherently misogynistic lines, 'kay writers?), and the establishment of Slade's Manpain of Doom arc (my dislike of that arc has only increased after it was stressed the Mirakuru is a mind-altering substance in later eps), and you've got yourself a very put off fangirl who wishes she could forget 2x09 ever happened. And those are my reasons for hating on that ep in a nutshell. (but mostly, it's about Shado)

She'd fallen asleep about halfway through the ride to her apartment.

Even as he parked the car on the sidewalk by her building and shut down the engine, Oliver didn't wake her. She was half-curled in the passenger seat, a few strands of hair plastered to her cheeks and she was, by the looks of it, drooling on the headrest.

Oliver let his own head hit the expensive leather, and sighed.

What you need is a leap.

She was right – rationally, he knew that. Living in limbo was not really living at all. He felt it every day, the push-and-pull of each side, and he knew that, someday, it would probably drive him insane. More than he arguably already was. Even Sara was trying to get out of her own limbo; she didn't know how, but she had every intention of trying. He, on the other hand, couldn't bring himself to believe the benefits would be worth the risks; what if he failed this time, too?

Because he'd tried before. He'd spent year after year dreaming of the past, nursing the delusion that, once his crusade was over, once every name on his father's list had been crossed, he would fall back into the life that was familiar, the life he'd promised himself he would cherish this time around. He'd had every intention of picking a side, and it was that of his past. Except it hadn't worked out that way.
He'd tried. When he believed his crusade would be over, that Malcolm Merlyn would be stopped, he'd decided to take what Felicity called a leap; he'd gone to Laurel, made what had turned out to be empty promises, and meant to start again. And then the Glades fell. Tommy died. His mother went to prison. And he went back to Lian Yu.

Leaps were dangerous.

If he left his past behind for good and embraced the present, it would mean truly accepting his role as good-doer for his city as more than a temporary arrangement. It would mean letting go of the near insurmountable guilt he carried around at all times, and believing he deserved another chance despite all he had done. It would mean making his lies to his family a thing of strategic routine indefinitely. It would mean letting his partners in the way he wanted to; the way he was afraid to. It would mean letting Laurel go for good.

Laurel.

Tonight wasn't the first night Felicity had given him good advice. It was months ago now, but she'd told him, on the night their team was officially put back together, that he needed to figure out what Laurel meant to him. Make their complicated situation less complicated.

Is she your goat herder?

He smiled to himself in the darkness of the car. Goat herder, honestly.

But the thing was, he still didn't know. He couldn't quite figure out how much of what he felt for Laurel was love, the kind Felicity had been talking about, and how much of it was him being stuck in the past, as Sara had said. Figuring it out could be liberating. It was also not a little frightening.

There'd been a thought, creeping at the edges of his mind for a while now, and taking the proverbial leap would mean acknowledging it. The truth was, he did have a connection with someone – the kind of connection he'd dreamed of having with Laurel, the kind that surpassed those dreams in a way he had never thought of but that he found suited him. And that someone was currently all but passed out in his car.

So, yes. Leaps were dangerous. Limbo was easier and, in its own way, safer.

And he was pretty sure that, if Felicity could hear his thoughts right now, she would call him chicken.

He also decided that he'd spent entirely too much time staring at the steady rise and fall of her chest, and moved to wake her.

His first attempt at doing so was met with a clumsy swat of her hand and a mumbled, "Sleepin', ask Digg to do it."

Waking up in the middle of the afternoon was a long-forgotten feeling for Felicity.
It was, much like a night off all to her lonesome, weird.

Still, she was in her PJs, digging her spoon into ice-cream and watching bad sitcoms. Weird was actually kinda nice.

That was, as long as she didn't think of the embarrassment of having drooled all over Oliver's car last night. By his account, it had taken five attempts and as many different strategies to get her to wake, and when she did wake, it was to the telltale sensation of a drying trail of drool running from the corner of her mouth. *Embarrassing.*

She comforted herself with the knowledge that he'd probably seen worse in his lifetime.

But of course, that wasn't all. Previous to the drool incident, they'd had a…*moment.* A heartfelt, honest, beautiful moment that had somehow become oddly sexually-charged at some point. Which wasn't actually without precedent; they'd had, during the time they'd known each other, had many a moment. The moments seemed to be gaining in frequency lately, though. She didn't quite know what to make of that.

Best not to think about it too much. They had enough to think about as it was.

Not the least of which was Deadshot's latest hit. Felicity had squeezed in some digging here and there, and somehow, her objective had shifted from Lawton to figuring out why exactly Dr. Elijah Haze had received a curare-laced bullet to the heart. She liked to think she'd sharpened her instincts since joining the vigilante business, and her instincts were telling her the real story didn't lie with Floyd Lawton, but with Elijah Haze. There was more to it than just another hit. Deadshot was an elite assassin, and if someone hired him to take out Haze, then they not only had means but also strong motivation. And one of the greatest motivations to seek out a gun for hire was to bury secrets.

As far as Felicity could tell, Haze had been a withdrawn man, both personally and professionally. No spouse, not even a partner for at least ten years, no children, no real friends. In his lab, he only had one assistant he let in close quarters, and even he didn't have the clearance to access some of the files Haze held in his computer, from what Felicity gathered when she hacked into the assistant's computer and found a list of passwords for various folders. She'd shaken her head in pity at the assistant – because, honestly, just leaving all those passwords there? – but one folder name in particular had drawn her attention. *Phobos.* And while listed on the document, there was no password to go along.

Now, if Felicity remembered her mythology correctly, Phobos was the god of fear, which really didn't inspire confidence about the folder's contents. Contents she'd tried to access but still hadn't managed to hack; Haze had no background in computers, so he had to have paid good money to get himself that kind of grade A encryption. Which only cemented Felicity's belief that secrets were being kept – bad, dangerous secrets. Because, god of fear, hello? That couldn't possibly be good.

What confused her, though, was that there was no indication that Haze had ever, in his entire life, fallen in with the proverbial wrong crowd. He had been a renowned scientist and researcher; all of his published projects had been on brain chemistry, and Felicity had to admit she'd been very impressed by his innovative approach to neurobiology and subsequent experiment protocols. She'd gotten so engrossed in one of his published works that she'd forgotten she was supposed to be researching him.

Still, she had also found regular payments to his account, very large anonymous donations that she couldn't trace back to the senders. Her best guess was that the money went into the funding of project Phobos, whatever the hell that may be. So, she supposed, Haze could have been a wolf in sheep's clothing, despite appearances. But he'd also been taken out, which meant there was an
even bigger big bad from the heap of big bads that had funded his project out there with all sorts of unholy plans, probably.

A spoonful of ice-cream hit her square in-between her breasts, and after a yelp, she realized she'd been so engrossed in her musings about Haze that she'd forgotten about the spoon she had to her mouth. She sighed. She couldn't even make her brain quit the crime-fighting business long enough to down some quality ice-cream. All work and no play....

Scrunching her nose in distaste, she hopped off the couch to get rid of the chunk of ice-cream that was currently making its way down to the waistband of her shorts.

"Still no assistant?"

Oliver looked up from the progress reports Felicity's department had sent over, to see Laurel standing in his office's doorway; he leaned back and spread his arms out. "My approach to the CEO thing is still working out," he said. "Why mess with a good thing?"

She raised an eyebrow. "That's a little ironic, coming from you."

The jab was more teasing than biting, and in hindsight, he probably should have seen it coming; he nodded. "So, what brings you by again?" he asked, gesturing for her to take a seat. "I thought you didn't want us to be seen together until my mother's trial was over?"

"I didn't want us to be seen too often," Laurel corrected as she settled in. "Besides, I think this merits a face-to-face. Closing arguments for Moira's trial are on Wednesday." She shrugged. "So, however it goes…it's coming to an end."

Oliver nodded; he hadn't been able to get that date out of his head ever since it was announced. Jean felt confident that even with a guilty verdict, the jury would not be in favor of the death penalty, but the final call would still be made by the judge, so until it was all done with, the possibility still hung over his family's heads. "Yeah," he agreed, "so I'd like to thank you again…for what you've done for us."

Laurel smiled, though something about it felt off; Oliver couldn't quite put his finger on it. "Hopefully, it'll have been for something." She licked her lips, then looked away.

Oliver frowned. "Laurel, what's going on?"

"Would you like that in alphabetical or chronological order?"

Well, she had a point there. "It's just…you still look like you haven't had a good night's sleep in months," he observed quietly.

She seemed to have focused all of her attention to a stray pencil on his desk. He was almost surprised when she spoke. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."
"Do you ever – " She sighed, then tried again. "Do you ever feel like, however hard to try, you always…fail? In everything. Every time you try, you always lose? You just…never get it right."

*Almost every day*, he thought. "I know the feeling," he admitted.

She looked up at that, eyes slightly wet, and nodded. "Well, maybe this time, with your mom," she said, "I'll actually get something right."

So, that was why she couldn't sleep. No matter what she tried, it ended in disaster and a broken heart. With Tommy, with himself, with her family, with CNRI…it always fell through, and the one common denominator was her. Always her.

"You know," he began, "a really good friend told me that not everything was my fault, no matter how much I made it out to be."

"Some things still are."

"Which is exactly what I said," he went on, "but according to her, it doesn't mean I have to keep dragging that load around."

Laurel gave him a long, studying look, before her mouth quirked into a faint smirk. "Was that friend Felicity?"

He pursed his lips. "Maybe," he allowed.

She spared him a look at the admission, one that reminded him eerily of the one Sara had given him, before nodding. "Still," she said, "I…I need to know I can get it right. I…I want to get it right, just this once." Before he could interject, she added, "But I'm not here to talk about me. I wanted go over what we'll be putting in our closing arguments, so you can see if you need to adjust yours accordingly."

It was all business from then on, though things did get very awkward when the subject of his testimony arose. Laurel tried to present how the DA would spin it without turning the matter personal, except it was personal, which in turn made them both dance around the intricacies of his testimony, which just made it plain awkward. Oliver felt his eyes wander to the door on more than one occasion, balling his hands into fists to keep himself from making a beeline for it.

By the time Laurel bid her goodbyes and wished his mother luck for Wednesday, he'd lost all and any will go keep working. But one of the benefits of being CEO was that he didn't strictly speaking have fixed work hours. Which meant he could pack up and head to the lair, and punch inanimate objects while he was at it.

He made it to the club in record time, pulling at his tie as he clambered down the stairs, only to pause in his tracks as he reached the bottom. "You're supposed to be at home."

"And you're supposed to be at QC," Felicity retorted, not even sparing him a glance. "Guess we both live to break the rules. We're rebels like that."

His mouth twitched as he approached her, feeling his urge to hit things get pushed to the backburner. "If I didn't know how you spent your nights, I'd never have pegged you for the rebellious kind," he remarked.

"Just part of my civilian disguise," she played along. "It's how I fool the other mortals into thinking I'm just an average computer geek."
"Well, you're anything but average."

"Actually, I do have average height and built – well, more average height than built, since recent polls have shown that the average American woman is a size fourteen rather than a size six as the media and society would have you believe, and – "

He cleared his throat.

"Right." She nodded. "Thanks for the compliment."

Shaking his head, he took off his suit jacket and draped it over the back of her chair without thought. "So, why aren't you at home?" he asked as rolled up his shirt sleeves.

"Turns out, I can't get my brain out of the gutter long enough to finish a bucket of ice cream." She paused, blinked, then specified, "Not that gutter."

If you asked him, her mind was in that gutter often enough, but in any case… "Anything in particular that wouldn't let you relax?"

"Oh, this and that. Our super-secret snooping mission we've been keeping on the hush-hush from Digg. My in-progress pride and joy for QC. Isabel. Disturbing new crime trends. You know, stuff."

While her delivery was lighthearted, it still made him frown. It was a lot to worry about. To think about constantly. There was a balance that existed, one that he could never reach, but that he certainly wanted for her to have. "That's a lot of worry about," he voiced his thought out loud.

She must have noticed the undercurrent in his tone, because she peeked up at him, then sighed. "I guess it's true that I get carried away sometimes," she admitted, shaking her head. "When you were away on Lian Yu," she added, lowering her voice, "I kind of got really caught up in…trying to do everything. Fix the Glades, bust the drug cartels – and that obviously didn't work out – upgrade the lair, keep an eye on your family to make sure they were okay…and then I'd get really worked up when things fell through, and…" She sighed deeply. "It took Digg to remind me that we didn't need another you around, just because you were AWOL. You're like my cautionary tale – " she cringed – "and that sounded better in my head. The point is, I'm good," she told him, confident smile in place. "I can handle multitasking. Mentally and otherwise."

He'd believe her, if that weren't what he always said.

"Well, if it ever gets too much, you can always tell me," he reminded her. She smiled and nodded to acknowledge his words, but then turned the focus right back on him with a, "Speaking of things getting too much, what drove you away from the office?"

He frowned, which in turn made her scrunch her nose. "Sore subject?" she guessed. She was right, of course.

Fortunately, he was saved from speaking by Diggle, who came in clattering down the stairs. "And I thought I'd be the early comer for once," he commented. "Did I miss a memo?"

There was a beat before Felicity turned to him. "Nah," she said. "I just can't get my brain to shut up, and Oliver got a visit from Laurel."

Oliver started. "I didn't say that," he let out, to which Felicity gave him what he could only describe as a pitying yet all-knowing look. "You have your Laurel-face on," she said.

"I don't have a…Laurel-face," he defended indignantly, which only earned him a flat, "yeah, you
do" from Diggle.

Fine, maybe he did.

"So, what did Laurel have to say?" Diggle asked next, crossing his arms.

"The trial's closing arguments are two days away," Oliver said, which was no news to either of his teammates, "so she just came by to run point on things."

"And…?"

"There's no 'and'."

"There's always an 'and'."

*Dammit.* "And it got really awkward at one point," he admitted. "What with…things, and well…she's going through some rough times, has been for a while, and…" He shrugged. "I think she needs a friend, but I'm also pretty sure I don't meet the criteria after…everything."

"It might help if Sara talked to her," Diggle suggested.

"But Sara's not ready for that," Felicity pointed out. When both men gave her looks, she shrugged. "What? We talked."

"Well, in any case," Diggle said, "Laurel's personal affairs aren't our" – he pointed to himself and Felicity – "business, so if you think she needs a friend or help, Oliver, you're gonna have to figure it out on your own. Not our place to meddle – at least not until she starts gunning for your leather ass again. Speaking of," he reverted back to business, "Carly's been telling me about this new gang of low-lives dealing from behind the diner. May want to check it out tonight."

Oliver nodded. "Sure. I'll just get a few hours of workout before heading out." He turned to Diggle. "Wanna join?"

His partner agreed, and a few hours later, Oliver was suited up and ready to take down the drug dealers stupid enough to take residence next to the Big Belly Burger. Felicity craned her head around to wish him good luck, and the last thing he saw before stepping out was her frowning and rapidly blinking at the suit jacket he'd left on the back of her chair.

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"What am I missing here, Digg?" Felicity lamented, gesturing in a wide circle to her screens.

Oliver's patrol was in full swing, and after having rid the diner of its pests, he'd taken to seeking out whichever scum he could find, which had led him to running into Sara, and they had, according to the latest reports, decided to start bringing down bad guys together. And hey, who were she and Digg to take leather-clad vigilantes' fun away? Oliver had initiated radio silence, as he had Sara to direct him to criminal hotspots she'd observed, which meant Felicity was left with enough time to finally rope Diggle into helping her take a second look at what she liked to call *The Isabel Rochev Files.*
But even with Diggle's hawk-like set of fresh eyes, they were no closer to figuring out Isabel's motivations for looking into Oliver, or her motivations for quitting on looking into Oliver.

Diggle sighed. "Okay, let's take it from the top one more time," he said. "When did the searches start?"

Felicity pulled up the logs. "October 11th, 2012," she recited. "Just after Oliver returned from Lian Yu."

"Which would mean she had an interest in him, or in what he might have to say."

"I considered she might have wanted to figure out if he was a threat to the Undertaking," Felicity said, "but then, there's nothing to suggest she was directly involved with the Undertaking, or that she'd have an interest in it, and also...how would any of these searches help answer that question?" She gestured to all the different search results she had at her disposal. "I mean, footage of reporters chasing him for questions he didn't answer, and looking up his history? Why would she look up that video of him peeing on a cop -- and, really, did she have to look up that video, because down the line, that meant I had to see it, and -- " She scrunched her nose and shook her head. "Some of it wasn't even blurred out," she whined, grieving for her long-suffering memory bank, because there was no brain bleach available that could erase that image.

Besides her, Diggle shuddered in distaste. "Damn, that boy was a nasty piece of work back then."

"It's a good thing we didn't know him before the island, I guess."

"I don't think we would have liked him," Diggle agreed. "But you're right, this isn't the kind of search you run when you're trying to get specific info, it's...I'd say you do it when you try to get a sense of what a person is like. Which would fit with our assumption that this is where she got the idea that Oliver was just an airheaded pretty boy."

"Okay," Felicity allowed, "but why look into him in the first place. There's gotta be something we're missing here."

Diggle blew out a breath. "Maybe we should see if she has history with -- wait a minute!" He straightened in his chair. "When did you say the searches started?"

"October 11th."

"Which would be a day after Oliver returned," Diggle pointed out. "The story broke on October 10th. So, if we assume she was really invested in this and your logs show unrelated computer activity for the 10th, why would she wait a whole day before she started to dig?"

"Maybe she only learned about it a day later?" Felicity suggested, but Diggle was shaking his head.

"No way," he said. "It was all over the news. Every channel, every hour -- even some of my buddies overseas heard about it in a matter of hours. I'm sure you did, too, right?" When she nodded, he added, "And Isabel strikes me as the kind of woman who follows the news closely, if only for the stock market segments. There's no way she would have missed it."

"You're right!" How had she not seen that? It's always in the little things, Smoak. She hit the keyboard with renewed enthusiasm, pulling up news footage from both days of interest. She turned on closed captioning, muted the sound, and let all the videos play side-by-side on the screens. "Okay, spot the differences," she said. "What changed between the 10th and 11th that made her go full psycho-stalker on Oliver?"
They both fell silent as they skimmed each screen. *Come on, come on,* she thought. *There has to be something.* Her eyes flickered over each line, which all looked just about the same; they were rehashing the same thing, the same story, the same tired scandal, so what was it that had drawn Isabel's attention?

And then, two innocuous little words caught her eye. She was so used to them that they had just passed her by, but they were *it;* they were the difference. "Lian Yu," she let out.

Diggle perked up. "What?"

"Lian Yu," Felicity repeated, hitting pause. She pointed to the screens, tapping her finger against the tiny little words. "They reported the name of the island on the 11th. They'd only mentioned it was in the North China Sea when the story broke out." She turned to Diggle. "That's gotta be it. Lian Yu."

Diggle frowned heavily, his expression growing dark. "She only got interested in him when she learned he'd been on Lian Yu."
A Snake in the Garden

Chapter Notes

So, this update obviously didn't happen as quickly as expected. Even though it was all written. Yeah.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*She only got interested in him when she learned he'd been on Lian Yu.*

Felicity bit her lip, watching the screens again. This meant Isabel had a particular investment in Lian Yu – in whatever might have happened there while Oliver called it home. It couldn't be good. "What do you think happened there that she was interested in?"

"I don't know, Felicity," Diggle said, both his expression and voice dark. "But you've seen Oliver; you've seen his scars. I think a lot of things happened, and none of them were good. And if Isabel was part of any of it…"

She swallowed. "Do you think Oliver will tell us?"

"Maybe, maybe not. We need more."

Felicity nodded, fingers springing into action. "I dug through her history, but I didn't know what I was looking for, so now that we have a clearer directive in mind…" She pulled up employment records, bank statements and relevant articles, putting particular focus on happenings in and around 2007. "So, this is what I've gathered," she said. "Isabel Rochev has always been the best. If you need good investments and huge profits, she's the one you call. Actually, from what I can tell, there is one smidge, and one smidge only, on an otherwise spotless record of tearing down companies and acquiring good investments for her employer." She tapped on a few keys. "Before Stellmore International, she was the VP of Acquisitions at Galaxy Communications, and it was going really well, until she made a move that was incredibly risky and, as it turned out, stupid, which – "

"Which doesn't fit with her track record," Diggle supplied when she ran out of breath. "So, what was it?"

"Well, I'd have thought nothing of it," Felicity went on, "but it involved China, and we now know she was interested in a certain someone because he was shipwrecked near the Chinese coast, and I've stopped believing in coincidences a long time ago, and – "

"Breathe, Felicity."

"Right." *Three, two, one…* "So, she acquired all these small-time tech and communication companies – some stateside, some from abroad – and the one thing they all had in common?"

"China was the reason they were only small-time companies," Diggle guessed.

"Exactly," Felicity confirmed. "China is a giant in the business world – I mean, you don't get bigger than China – and the business-savvy always put their bets on China, except Isabel didn't. She bet on the struggling, non-Chinese companies, and it cost Galaxy Communications a hell of a lot of money, so she had to have thought it would pan out big-time, right?"
"Right," Diggle echoed.

"Except it didn't," Felicity concluded. "The Chinese economy continued to thrive, the small-time businesses officially rant out of business, and Galaxy Communications lost millions, I think. She quit the company after that, and a year later, she was working for Stellmore International."

Diggle was nodding along slowly. "And you think it's connected to Lian Yu?"

"It has to be...somehow." She sighed. "I don't know how, but...I know it is, Digg."

"Well, you should always listen to your gut," he said. "But how does a risky business move connect to – "

"What are you guys up to?"

While Diggle twitched, closed his eyes and took a deep breath, Felicity jumped and shrieked. She was too young to have a heart attack, dammit!

Her indignation disappeared as soon as she twirled around and found Oliver standing there, hood down and bow discarded, with a slight smile on his face; whatever he saw on their faces, though, made it slip instantly.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, approaching them in quick strides.

Felicity gulped. "We've been looking over The Isabel Rochev Files, and we've got something – we cracked it, yay us! – and well, we need to ask you something about Lian Yu...you don't have to give us details – unless you want to, which you probably don't because you never do, and I promise that wasn't supposed to sound so judgmental, and – "

"What she means is," Diggle cut in, rising to his feet and leaning against the desk, "we figured out Isabel only started looking into you after she found the name of the island you were stranded on. Now, at the time you were marooned there, she was working for Galaxy Communications, and we think the bad business move that made her quit her job there was connected to something that happened on Lian Yu. So, can you think of anything that would fit that bill? Maybe something to do with China? And China being...one of the world's leading economies?"

Felicity had seen Oliver shocked before. She'd seen go still with shock, too. She'd seen him go so still, it looked like he'd just shut down.

But the way he stillled now actually scared her a little.

Something had happened on Lian Yu that justified Isabel Rochev's failed investments; something that made Oliver really, really angry.

The heavy silence grew long, until he rasped out a single word. "What?"

Felicity watched Diggle take a step closer. "We're right, then," he concluded. "What happened on Lian Yu, Oliver?"

He didn't get his answer. Instead, Oliver just stood there, pulling loud breaths in through his nose and ground teeth, with his fists clenching at his sides. And if the way his eyes flittered wildly in the direction of his bow were any indication, he was two seconds away from storming out and just putting an arrow in Isabel Rochev.

Felicity jumped to her own feet. Distract him from murder-y thoughts.
She walked the few steps up to him slowly, reaching out with a cautious hand; he tensed when she finally laid it on his arm, and while he wouldn't look at either her or Diggle, he didn't seem like he was about to go on a killing spree anymore, either. "What happened, Oliver?" she echoed Diggle's question.

His eyes went from her fingers, to the ground, to the basement's far corner, and for the brief second that they met hers, she caught sight of the tears there; whether they were born of anger or sorrow, she couldn't really tell.

Eventually, he quietly spat, "Edward Fyers."

Felicity's brow furrowed at the unfamiliar name, but she heard the shuffle of Diggle stepping closer. "Edward Fyers?" he echoed with interest. "I've heard of him. He was an elite mercenary. But no one's seen him in over six years."

"That's because I killed him," Oliver said, his voice so low and deadly, and Felicity had to put effort into not recoiling from him; she never liked it when he got that tone of voice. "He was the first man I killed with an arrow," he stated further, in that same dreadful tone; Felicity gulped.

"What was he doing on Lian Yu?" Diggle asked.

Oliver took deep breaths before answering. "He was hired to blow up a commercial airliner, he...he had missiles on the island, and it was to...destabilize China's economy. If - " Another deep breath. "If a plane blew up in Chinese airspace in what looked like a terrorist attack, they would have to ground their entire fleet, all outgoing travel, and that would...that would be a huge hit for China's economy. I - " He stopped short, then closed his eyes for a moment. "We," he corrected, "we never figured out who his employer was." He did look at her then, and Felicity understood the meaning behind the correction; the 'we' included his friends from the island. The people she and Diggle reminded him of.

She nodded ever-so-slightly in understanding, and a moment later, Oliver looked up at Diggle. "Guess we found the employer now," he said bitterly, and Felicity worried about his murderous urges again.

"But she didn't get what she paid for," Diggle observed. "I take it you stopped Fyers from taking down that plane?"

Oliver nodded. "Me and my...my friends." It seemed to take everything he had in him to utter that one word, and Felicity let her hand slide down his arm and to his still clenched fist; when he opened his palm and squeezed back, she brought her other hand to their already joined ones.

"Well, that would explain why she was looking into you, into the kind of person you were," Diggle said.

"She assesses risks," Felicity whispered. Looking up at Oliver, she added, "She wanted to know if you were a risk, too."

"But no pretty blonde airhead is going to mess with mercenaries," Diggle supplied. "She probably decided someone else had foiled her plans and you just...hid in a bush somewhere. Guess your bad playboy shtick paid out this once." He sighed. "So, what now? Does she get a visit from the Arrow?"

"Whoa, no," Felicity interjected before Oliver could speak – to agree, probably. "She already knows you're not an airhead, which, in light of recent discoveries, is bad enough, and if you go in there
arrows blazing and start asking questions about mercenaries and Lian Yu and missiles, she's going to start connecting dots that should never ever be connected."

"So, I just let it go?" Oliver asked. "They – they killed my friend's father, Felicity." He shook his head. "The man who saved my life. And they – " He stopped himself, and the way he pressed his lips together made it look like he was physically keeping the words from coming out of his mouth. She probably didn't want to know what else they'd done, Felicity thought.

"What I'm more worried about," Diggle spoke up, "is if Ms. Rochev has something similar planned in the present. She's always in it to win, right? And now we know she'll do whatever it takes to ensure victory. Who's to say she's not doing similar dirty work for Stellmore International, too?"

"I'll look into all the acquisitions she's made for them," Felicity assured. "See if there's something suspicious about any of them – I mean, she's mostly acquired failed companies, but maybe she aided that process." She squeezed Oliver's hand with both of hers. "But what I'm worried about," she added, "is what she might have in store for the CEO of the one company that didn't fail."

He met her eyes again then, before he let his own fall to their hands and let them stay there.

"Until we know more," Diggle said after some silence, "I think the best we can do is just keep an eye on Isabel."

"Yeah," Felicity agreed, turning to gauge Oliver's reaction to the proposed course of action; she found that he was still only staring at their hands. A moment later, he was extracting himself from her hold. "I have to go," he muttered without looking at either of them.

Felicity called after him, though he predictably ignored her. "Let him go," Diggle advised. "He needs some time alone."

She sighed, brow creased with worry, and circled back to her computers to pull up the signal from the tracker in Oliver's boot. When Diggle raised an eyebrow, she said, "Just in case he decides that paying Isabel a visit isn't actually a terrible idea."

Diggle hummed, as if to agree she had a point there. After a moment of silence, he asked, "Felicity, if there was something I should know, you'd tell me, right?"

She froze. Okay, that question could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but considering she was currently conducting a search that involved his brother's killer behind his back, she got a little tense. "What do you mean?" she traded his question for one of her own, eyes still on blinking red dot moving on her screen.

She couldn't see him, but she simply knew he was crossing his arms right about now and giving the back of her head his best 'do not BS me' look. "Putting the Isabel problem aside for a moment," he spoke, "what I mean is, when exactly did you and Oliver adopt the hand-holding routine?"

She whirled around. "W-we do not have a hand-holding routine," she spluttered, which was…a lie. And Diggle obviously knew it. So, with a deep sigh, she said, "We're friends who hold hands every now and then. It's all perfectly normal."

"Yeah, 'normal' is definitely how I'd describe it," Diggle deadpanned. With a shake of his head, he added, "Look, Felicity, I'm not going to tell you – or Oliver – how to live your lives outside of the work we do, but…" He gave her a pointed look. "I just don't ever want to see you as hurt as you were when he packed up and left for five months again."

Felicity bit her lip, looking away. She closed her eyes, counted to ten, then shook her head. "We're
just friends, Digg," she said. "And when it comes to his...people skills, I know what I can and can't expect from him." She nodded with confidence. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Too late." He sighed. "You do expect a lot from him, though." He raised an eyebrow. "You expect him to be a hero."

She waved a finger in his direction. "That's because I know he can be one," she said. "Just because he hates the h-word, that doesn't mean it doesn't apply to him."

Diggle shook his head. "Felicity Smoak," he declared, "believer in heroes."

"I should get that embroidered on a pillowcase," she mused.

Diggle rolled his eyes, then looked past her to the screen. "Looks like he's just standing on a rooftop somewhere," he observed. "But he'll be circling back here at some point, and he'll want us to be gone by then." He nodded towards the staircase. "Come on, let's go home and get some sleep."

And for the latest proof that brooding in the dark never solved anyone's problems, Felicity thought as she sat awkwardly in the boardroom, watching Oliver watching Isabel with what was a distinctly unpleasant look.

As predicted, Oliver was in arguably the worst mood she had ever seen him in. This morning's meeting had been called to run point on Felicity's department's progress on the new program, and since it was coming along to schedule, the PR department was pitching in marketing strategies. Felicity was consulted every step on the way, with Cheryl taking dutiful notes by her side, and Isabel pitched in every now and then. Of course, every time she spoke, Oliver's already dark expression darkened even further. He barely uttered a word, and when he did, it was a little too growly not to sound threatening.

And everyone was starting to notice.

While Isabel was shutting a particular marketing strategy down on the grounds of it being likely to completely pass the target demographic by, Felicity exchanged looks with Diggle, who was by his spot at the doors; his expression was suitably blank, but Felicity knew he was internally cringing just as much as she was.

She chanced another glance at Oliver. And sure enough, he still looked like he was trying to smite Isabel down with the power of his glare alone.

"What's wrong with him?" Cheryl whispered in her ear, discreetly enough so as to not be overheard.

Felicity bit her lip. "Mrs. Queen's trial," she whispered back, spinning the best excuse she could come up with. "Closing arguments are tomorrow. Makes him cranky."

Cheryl made a face, shook her head, then went back to taking notes.

Felicity started when Isabel addressed her. "Ms. Smoak," she said, "anything you'd like to add?"
Wait, what had they been talking about? She cast a quick look at Cheryl's neatly written notes, and gathered they'd been discussing financial projections for the program's revenue once it hit the market. God bless Cheryl. "Not really," she said. "I mean, with the right strategy, we can even top the expected income, but best not to aim too high, 'cause when you have high expectations, you always end up being disappointed in the end – not that this program is going to be a disappointment, it's going to be the best thing since sliced bread, but what I mean is – "

"Best to keep our goals modest, and if we surpass them, then all the better for us," Isabel cut to the chase with an odd mixture of understanding and impatience that Felicity had come to associate with their interactions over the past few weeks, and the interruption actually made Oliver growl a little. Felicity promptly kicked him in the shin – which hurt her toes more than it hurt his musclebound leg, probably. He gave her a look, which she squarely met with an even dirtier one of her own; he chewed on his tongue for a while then sighed, and seemed to put effort into keeping more amiable appearances for the rest of the meeting.

Felicity counted the seconds until it ended.

When it did, Oliver made a beeline for his office, with Felicity and Diggle at his heels. Once they were all inside, she spoke up. "At the risk of you painting these walls with my blood," she began, "I have to say, you may want to consider taking the animosity down a notch or two. People can notice, you know. And I can only spin the trial excuse for so long."

He whirled on her and looked like he was about to snap, but held himself back. Instead, he just released a sharp breath and ground his teeth.

Diggle stepped forward. "Look, I get it, man," he told him. "Every time you look at her, you remember everything the men she hired did to you and your friends. I feel the same every time I see Deadshot's face. And I just can't think straight." He sighed. "But letting your feelings on isn't going to help anyone here."

"She's never going to pay for it, Diggle," Oliver said. "No one's ever going to know what happened on the island, and I…"

And he'd made a vow not to kill anymore, Felicity thought.

As she watched him take a seat and run a hand over his face, she just hoped things would go his way tomorrow at his mother's trial; he needed some bit of good news right now.

Come Wednesday, the courthouse hall was bursting with people, as they waited for the court to convene.

Diggle stood by Oliver's side, in his bodyguard capacity, while also keeping an eye on Thea and Roy, who stood huddled together a few feet away; it looked like Roy was trying to lift her spirits before they went inside.

He wished he had a way to lift Oliver's spirits, too. But given everything that was happening, he was
just glad that his friend still seemed to be keeping it together. He also seemed to be glancing to the entrance every now and then, and while Diggle may have interpreted it as an urge to get away on another occasion, nothing else about Oliver's body language indicated his fight-or-flight response was kicking in.

The frequency of the looks increased with each passing moment, making Diggle observe his friend with a raised eyebrow. He was just about to speak when Oliver asked, "Where's Felicity?"

Diggle blinked. "At the office," he said slowly. "Where she works."

Oliver actually looked confused for a moment. And then he just looked disappointed. "Oh," was all he said.

If he had it in him, Diggle would laugh at his sorry ass. Pursing his lips, he wondered, "Any particular reason why you'd expect her to be here instead of QC?"

The other man shrugged, as if to brush it off. "I just thought – it's closing arguments, so…doesn't matter."

Diggle hummed. "You know, Oliver," he said, "if you want her to be here and hold your hand – "

As predicted, that earned him an indignant glare, and Diggle raised his hands in surrender. He didn't know what either of them thought they were doing, but it was obvious Oliver drew comfort from Felicity's support, so as long as it helped him and Felicity remained firm in her intentions not to let her feelings drag her down the rabbit hole, he wouldn't complain, or meddle – not too much, anyway.

Egging Oliver on was a little too much fun to pass up on, though. "Hey, I'm just saying," he told him. "If you'd like her to be here, you may want to tell her much."

Oliver, of course, didn't deign to respond. They were called to the courtroom soon after, so the subject was dropped.

"How'd it go?" Felicity asked before she had even fully crossed the threshold to Oliver's office. He and Diggle were back from court, so closing arguments were done with; the only thing left now was for the jury to come to a verdict. Which could take a while.

She didn't get an answer immediately – not from Oliver, anyway. He looked tired and worn out, and something else she couldn't really place. So, Diggle spoke up. "All things considered," he said, "I think it went pretty well."

"Jean did a good job," Oliver piped in quietly. "Then again, so did Donner."

"Oh, I don't know," Diggle countered. "I don't think any of the parents in the jury appreciated it when he said your mother's desire to protect her children was irrelevant."

That did bring out a small smile from Oliver.
"Well, I need some coffee," Diggle declared next. "You two want any?"

They both declined, and with that, Diggle was on his way, but not before giving Oliver a look – one which Felicity sorted in the 'tell Felicity about that thing we talked about but she doesn't know we talked about' category. She narrowed her eyes at his retreating back, then turned to Oliver. "What was that look about?" she asked.

Oliver opened his mouth then closed it, and was just left to stand there awkwardly. Which only served to confuse Felicity further. She took a step closer to him. "Did something happen?"

"No," he said quickly, then shook his head as if to emphasize just how much nothing had happened. She raised an eyebrow.

After another moment of looking like a fish out of water, he came closer to her. "Felicity," he began, in a way that made her think that whatever he was about to say next would be important. Which is why she only got confused again when he followed it with, "Jean thinks the jury could take up to a week to come to a verdict. Or it could be a day. It's not an exact science."

"Okay," she said slowly.

"So, it…well, there's only one court session left now," he went on. "When they…reach the verdict."

Was it just her, or did he sound…nervous? Why would he be nervous?

"Right," she went along with the strange conversation.

He started nodding, then stopped. Then pursed his lips. Then fixated his gaze on her shoulder rather than her face.

"So, uh," he started again, "it would – if you could…if you wouldn't mind, just to…umm…"

She blinked up at him until it finally clicked. "Are you trying to ask me to come with you to court when they read your mom's verdict?"

He did meet her eyes then. "If you want."

She smiled and let her hand rest on his arm. "Of course," she said without hesitation, which brought a smile from him, too.

He squeezed her hand where it lay on his arm. "Thank you."

Three days went by with no verdict, and no progress on the Isabel front, which only made Oliver grow crankier with the hour.

Felicity had found that three of the acquisitions Isabel had secured were only made possible after the companies' CEOs had been institutionalized for similar mental health issues, which had caused their companies' stock to plummet, but she and her partners in crime had agreed that inducing a psychotic
break was a little out of even Isabel Rochev's area of expertise.

Probably.

Still, there were no indications that she had been implicated in any of the three CEOs' decline in health, and running a business was stressful stuff. Then again, Isabel had orchestrated an intricate plan to destroy China's entire economy that Felicity admitted was actually unbelievable in its simplicity – and by that, she meant horrible and bad and terrible. The point was, there was nothing she would put past Ms. Rochev these days, but as there was nothing she could find, they were at a standstill.

Which happened to make Oliver very, very cranky.

Currently, he was taking his frustration out on Diggle while they trained, having already gone through no less than three rounds with Sara.

Felicity typed away on her keyboard, with Sara perched on the desk by her side, and cringed every time Diggle grunted, or alternatively, Oliver growled.

"Don't worry," Sara said at one point. "Diggle and I have a signal for when he can't take it anymore, and I need to take over again."

Felicity chanced a glance over her shoulder; by her assessment, Digg was in the process of impersonating a punching bag. She sighed. "At this point, I'm just holding out hope that Mrs. Queen's verdict will go over well – or as well as it can. One load off his chest won't hurt."

Sara agreed with a nod. "I hope for the same. Moira is not innocent, but I wouldn't want to see her die."

Felicity brought her eyes from Oliver to Sara, then bit her lip. "At the risk of…stepping on every last one of your toes, would you mind me asking…don't you hold what she did against her?" she asked. "Not the Glades necessarily, but…she helped the man who sabotaged the Gambit, who…well, made life very hard for you, I'd imagine. I mean, Oliver doesn't, 'cause she's his mom, but…" You may not be so inclined to forgive.

Sara seemed to take no offense in the forward query. "Moira did what she did for her family above all," she said. "And that's something I can understand. I've done terrible things for my family, too – for the chance to see them again." She looked down for a moment, then met Felicity's eyes. "And," she added, "if I can guarantee one thing, it's that Malcolm Merlyn was no man to be trifled with."

"Yeah," Felicity agreed emphatically, "he was one…crazy, dangerous psycho-guy."

"He was, but that's not what I meant."

The statement, along with the way it was delivered, made Felicity curious. She frowned. "What did you mean?"

Sara looked away again. "I was trained by the same people he was," she spoke, her voice hollow. "I was made into the same thing he was. A killer so deadly, death itself runs scared." She shrugged. "I'd never met him, but I know him all the same."

Well.

Felicity had not been expecting that. And in the light of this revelation, she realized how her earlier words may have sounded. "When I said he was a crazy, dangerous and a psycho," she backtracked
quickly, "I didn't mean that…you…were…a dangerous…crazy…psycho-person…too."

"I know," Sara assured. "I get the feeling you don't like to judge people on the actions of others," she commented next, which Felicity took as high praise, before adding, "But the fact remains that I am, in many ways, like him. It's strange, isn't it? That I was led to the same life as the man who took my old one away from me."

That was such a sad thing to say, Felicity thought. It was also not true – them being made of the same stuff, that was. "It's not the same," she argued. "I mean, I know Merlyn got his training, whomever it was by, because he wanted to – I know it was when Tommy – " Sara dropped her gaze again at the mention of the name – "was a kid, that's the only time Merlyn fell off the grid completely, so…he wanted that. He wanted that for himself, so he could have everything he could possibly need to be a monster, but – " She paused for breath. "But that's not why you got involved with those people, right? Okay, I don't actually know the details, but somehow I doubt you just saw them one day and said, 'hey, that band of merry killer ninjas looks like a fun crowd to take a road trip with' or something, and – " She gulped in air again. "I'm just making this worse, aren't I?"

Sara took a moment to respond, and when she did speak, her voice sounded a little strained. "No, actually, you're spot on," she said. "But, uh…there's a little more to them than being a – " her lips pressed together – "band of…merry…killer…ninjas." And with that, she burst into laughter. It was so unexpected and loud that Felicity jumped a little. And Sara just couldn't seem to stop, so Felicity eventually joined in with some nervous laughter of her own – and when she cast a furtive glance to the side, she noticed Oliver had apparently frozen mid-punch. Not that either of the men seemed aware of the fact.

Oliver looked shocked, Diggle looked bewildered, and she just kept chuckling along nervously.

It took quite the time for Sara to wind down. She raised her hand in apology to the men, who kept standing there for a moment, then exchanged looks before going back to what they were doing.

Sara, for her part, was wiping tears from the corners of her eyes. "Thank you for that," she told Felicity, smile still firmly in place. "I think I'd…actually forgotten what it meant to laugh like that. Thank you."

Felicity shrugged awkwardly. "That's not…really what I was going for, but you're welcome."

The other woman's smile lingered for a while longer before it dimmed. "Well, you're right," she said. "My decision to join the – " she cleared her throat – "people who trained me was born of…a lack of options, I guess. They said they saw something in me, something they could shape into what they were – still are, actually." She shrugged. "All I wanted was to see my family again…so, I agreed to their terms. But I – " she licked her lips " – but I hadn't counted on what all the training, and all the blood on my hands would turn me into…so now, I don't know how to do what I came here for."

Quietly, she added, "Be with my family again."

Her words were rather vague and ambiguous as to what it was exactly she had done, or been turned into, but Felicity had seen another castaway who believed that what they thought of as their sins surpassed who they were; what they had fought for. Their survival. And even if they thought otherwise, Felicity didn't think it made them monsters; it made them fighters.

Her eyes wandered in Oliver's direction before going back to Sara. "Well, I think," she said, "that what you've done was to survive…you went through things that would…break most people into pieces, but you're still here. You're alive. And you still have a good heart." She smiled. "The way I see it, it's not really what we do as much as it is why we do it…so, you're a survivor and a fighter;
you're strong. I think that's amazing. And I think your family will, too."

The slight tears in Sara's eyes weren't from laughter anymore, though she did smile again. Eventually, she nodded. "I hope you're right." With a deep breath, she went on, "I think I'll go see my mom. Tell her I'm alive. She's in Coast City, so I'll go there and…talk to her." She swallowed. "I think it will be easiest to break the news to her first, I think – I think she'll be the most inclined to accept everything. Or what I do decide to tell her, at least. She – she saw me, on the night I boarded the Gambit with Ollie…and she let me go, because I told her it was what I wanted…so, she never blamed him for anything. She's not – she won't start playing the blame-game, she'll just – " She blew out a breath. "She'll just think of me." Her smile grew a touch wider. "I'd always been closest to my mom."

Felicity mirrored the smile. "I was always closest to my mom, too," she said. "She…died when I was ten, and…by the time I got in a good enough headspace to stop making my dad feel guilty for not being her, he was…gone, too." Closing her eyes for a moment, she shook her bad memories away and got to the point she was trying to make. "But both your parents are still alive and kicking – your sister, too. And so are you." She grinned at Sara. "It could be great."

Maybe it wasn't entirely due to her skills as a motivational speaker, but Sara's smile did grow more confident. "I hope it is," she said, then looked to where Oliver was still sparring with Diggle. "I'll wait to see how things go with Moira before I head out to Coast City."

Felicity followed her line of sight, and sighed. She hoped the wait wouldn't be that long. If it was, it would probably do her in, too, as well as Oliver. Fingers crossed.

Chapter End Notes

So, that Isabel thing is a theory I was fond of after the like, legs we saw in 1x22 in conjunction with Summer Glau being cast as Ms. Rochev, though it has by now been made obvious that the legs do not belong to Isabel. But fanfiction is for dreams, and I like to dream.
It took the jury an additional three days to reach the verdict.

The court session had been announced, and when the time came to go in, it was through a near-impenetrable sea of reporters. The courtroom itself was packed, too.

When she was finally inside, Felicity felt like she had just gone through at least a dozen Black Friday shopping rounds. The two front rows behind the defendant's bench had been left empty – by the Queen family's request, Felicity surmised – and the second one stayed so. All five of them – Roy, Thea, Oliver, herself and Diggle – had ended up squeezing into the first row, after she and Diggle had tried to slide into the second one, as they had before, to which Oliver had made this odd little sound of disapproval, which in turn had left them all standing there a little awkwardly until Thea had huffed, then stated that what her brother wanted was for all of them shack up in the first row because he'd like to have his only two friends literally within his reach.

Oliver hadn't appreciated that.

In any case, here they all were, squashed in the front row, with Felicity seated between Oliver and Diggle.

The jury had already taken their seats when Mrs. Queen was led in. She turned to the five of them, giving Roy, Felicity and Diggle polite smiles of gratitude before focusing on her children. "However it goes today," she told them quietly, "I want the both of you to accept it."

"Mom –"

"No," Mrs. Queen interrupted the beginnings of her daughter's protests, taking her children's hands in her own. "I have to say this, and I want both of you to listen."

The deep sinking feeling in Felicity's stomach made her close her eyes then look away, focusing on a smudge on Diggle's shoe rather than the family conversation taking place right next to her. She knew what would come next. Her own mother had taken her hand and sat her down for this kind of conversation; she'd been nine, going on ten, at the time, so her mother's words were much more sugarcoated than what she assumed Mrs. Queen's would be. The basics were still the same, though. It was the worst kind of a just-in-case conversation.

"I've come to terms with the possible outcomes of my situation," Mrs. Queen went on, "and even though I'd like to hope for the best, if it doesn't go that way, I don't want for it to keep you – either of you – from moving on with your lives."

Felicity heard Thea's quiet sniffle and felt Oliver's leg tense against hers; she still didn't turn her head back around, only lifting her eyes to Diggle's profile. He was resolutely looking straight ahead. Letting her eyes move past him, Felicity focused on Laurel, where she was seated next to the DA.
She looked about as bad as Felicity felt.

"Promise me," Mrs. Queen prompted her children. "Both of you."

While she didn’t hear anything from Thea, Felicity assumed she had given her mother a nod or some other form of acquiescence. She did hear Oliver, though, and his quiet, "Promise, Mom."

Speaking from experience, Felicity could tell it was a mostly empty promise.

She caught movement from the corner of her eye, when Mrs. Queen turned back around to face forward, and with a deep breath, finally let herself look back at the siblings; Roy already had an arm around Thea's shoulders, letting her lean into his side for support. Between herself and Thea, Oliver just sat, back ramrod-straight, with his fists clenched on top of his thighs; she reached out and covered the one nearest to her with her hand. His fist didn't unclench under her touch, but she still didn't move her hand away; there was no guarantee things would work out, so any reassurances on her part would just be empty words, and they both knew it. The best she could offer was to run her thumb over his taut knuckles.

The unexpected thud of the judge's mallet made her jump a little, and after officially convening this court's session for the record, the judge turned to the twelve jurors. "Has the jury reached a verdict?" she prompted.

A woman rose from her seat, presumably the president of the jury. "We have, Your Honor," she said. "In the case of State versus Moira Dearden Queen; on five hundred and three counts of conspiracy to commit murder, we, the jury, find the defendant guilty."

Felicity's hand stilled on top of Oliver's. *No, come on, no...*

"On five hundred and three counts of first-degree murder, we find the defendant – also guilty."

The courtroom was dead-quiet after that, save for that one quiet sob Felicity was pretty sure she heard Thea let out. She felt like crying herself, as she held her breath for what came next; they still had to go through the sentencing.

Felicity felt pressure on her hand, where Oliver had grasped it fully in his.

"Does the jury agree with the prosecution's recommended sentence?" the judge asked next.

Her free hand shot out, to grasp Diggle's. He squeezed back in comfort, while Oliver held to her other hand tightly – a little too tightly for it not to hurt, but the pain of squished phalanges was the last thing on her mind right now.

Felicity shot a glance to the prosecution's bench, narrowing her eyes at Donner's self-satisfied expression. *The smug little piece of –*

"The jury does not."

*Wait, what?*

And just like that, the courtroom buzzed with a new sort of energy.

"We recommend a sentence of five years under house arrest," the president of the jury went on, "with highly restricted movement under supervision, and one thousand hours of community service. The defendant will also be made to pay damages to the families of the five hundred and three victims of the earthquake."
Okay, that was good – that was really good. Of course, the judge still had to agree. But Felicity liked this jury; instead of just making an example of Mrs. Queen, they wanted to make sure her sentence benefited the destroyed community – and Felicity liked to think they were all also smart and humane instead of vindictive and morally-rigid like Donner, who had just about the sourest possible expression on his face right now – *ha!*

But of course, the judge still had to play along. She might. And well, if she didn't, Felicity supposed they would have to work quickly – breaking Mrs. Queen out of Iron Heights would be tricky but not impossible, because Oliver could infiltrate it and she could hack their system to give him the time to do so, and of course then they would have to get her out of the country with a new identity, which Felicity could make happen – but they would have to ship or fly Mrs. Queen off somewhere without an extradition treaty with the U.S., so maybe Cuba? Cuba was nice – well, maybe not, because the sun there and Mrs. Queen's complexion were probably a match made in hell. Oh, Russia could be good! And Oliver's Bratva contacts could definitely help the whole thing along, so yes, Russia could –

"I agree with the jury's recommendation," the judge spoke up. "I hereby sentence the defendant to five years under house arrest, one thousand hours of community service, and order her to pay damages to the victims' family, the amount of which will be determined by the state of California." Another thud of her mallet. "The court is adjourned."

Felicity barely heard her – the entire courtroom barely heard her, really. Everyone was suddenly on their feet, and everyone was talking, and flashes were going off everywhere, and Felicity was hugging John.

He hugged back, patting her back as he let go. She grinned then spun around, to find Mrs. Queen hugging both her children. She could see the relief in the relaxed line of Oliver's shoulders, and Thea was smiling so widely, it would probably start to hurt soon.

Felicity couldn't be happier for all three of them; she had refrained from weighing in on Mrs. Queen's actions from the start, because she was Oliver's mother. That was enough for her to only want to see the other woman alive – which is exactly what would happen, though she would be under house arrest, which wasn't fun but hey, still better than death by lethal injection. No one was dying – and bonus, they wouldn't have to smuggle Mrs. Queen out of the country! All in all, Felicity concluded, it was a good day.

Next thing she knew, she had two armfuls of Thea Queen. She hugged her back with a laugh, then backed up so Thea could fully make her way through to the aisle, and hug Diggle. "Congratulations, Ms. Queen," Diggle said when she let go, to which the young woman grinned, then circled back to the front to hug her mother's lawyer.

"I'm happy for you, man," she heard from behind her, and turned to find Oliver had crossed the length of the row after his sister, and was now getting one of those part-hugs, part-pats-on-the-shoulder, part-handshakes from Diggle. "That's one battle won, right?"

Oliver smiled – *genuinely* smiled – and nodded. And then, he turned to her. Which for some reason, suddenly made her fumble. Should she hug him? They'd never hugged before, how would she know? Maybe high-five him – or would a fist-bump be more appropriate?

That turned into a bit of a dilemma, which left her to raise her hand for a high-five, then think the better of it and offer him her fist for a bump, but then that didn't seem quite right either, and in the end, she was just opening and closing her fist awkwardly.

He raised an eyebrow at her flailing fingers, his mouth quirking at the corner; he shook his head next,
and reached for her.

Having been bear-hugged by a well-meaning giant or two over the years, Felicity braced herself for impact. Said impact was, however, not what she had expected.

His arms came around her, sliding over her waist and up her back, and his stubble brushed her cheek and grazed her collarbone when his chin came to rest at the crook of her neck. She blinked before winding her own arms around his shoulders, and hugging back. She could feel him relax into her, and his hand trace a trail up her spine, before moving under the strands of her ponytail and coming to rest at the back of her neck. Her eyes closed for a moment.

"Just FYI," she whispered, "if things hadn't worked out, I already had half-a-plan worked out to smuggle your mom out of here and to Russia – or Cuba, whichever."

He laughed softly, and his warm breath coasted over her skin, raising the hairs on the back of her neck. The goosebumps came next, spreading along her arms right up to where her hands clenched around fistfuls of the suit jacket at his back.

"Thank you," he told her softly.

"I didn't do anything."

"Well, you came up with a back-up plan," he said. "And you were here today." He blew out another, quiet breath against her skin, making her bite down on her lip. "It means a lot."

Her mouth pulled at the corners, and she let herself drag her chin down the slope of his shoulder, to burrow her face deeper into his collar. His thumb rubbed circles against the side of her neck, and she could feel her mouth get drier with each swipe; soon, she felt short-cropped strands under her own fingertips, and realized she'd begun mimicking his movements. The arm he had around her middle tightened its hold.

Next thing she knew, a throat was being cleared in their vicinity.

She started and looked over Oliver's shoulder, to find Diggle standing there and looking like he was very much judging the both of them. Both she and Oliver backed away from each other at the same time, which made things even more awkward than her 'high-five or fist-bump?' conundrum, and in lack of an immediate escape route, she looked around a little frantically in search of one. Her eyes landed on Laurel.

Donner was still next to her, seemingly ranting, but Laurel didn't look like she was listening to a word of it; instead, her eyes were on their side of the courtroom, and she seemed – well, Felicity would say sad, but there was also a hint of a smile on her face. "You should go talk to Laurel," Felicity told Oliver, who to his credit, only looked bewildered for a split-second before he nodded.

He stayed in his spot for a moment longer, then sprung into action, going over to where Laurel was. Donner was still next to her, seemingly ranting, but Laurel didn't look like she was listening to a word of it; instead, her eyes were on their side of the courtroom, and she seemed – well, Felicity would say sad, but there was also a hint of a smile on her face. "You should go talk to Laurel," Felicity told Oliver, who to his credit, only looked bewildered for a split-second before he nodded.

He stayed in his spot for a moment longer, then sprung into action, going over to where Laurel was. Felicity decided to resolutely look in the opposite direction, which made her eyes land on the Queen women, who were still huddled together with Roy looking a little out of place next to them; Thea had something not unlike a very contemplative look on her face, then leaned in to whisper something in her mother's ear. And the question of whether they were talking about her was definitely answered when Moira Queen turned her way, with a look that was in equal parts intrigued and measuring.

That of course, made the two women another unsafe place to rest her eyes on, so she just brought them forward again; Diggle still stood there. And he still seemed a little judgmental.

But really, so what if she and Oliver hugged now? They were friends. Who held hands and hugged.
Normal people did that. Especially when in platonic crime-fighting partnerships, and normal people definitely got a little awkward after their hugs grew long and they'd previously burrowed their faces in each other's necks. Yes, normal people did – and she stood by that.

"Are we sure that ankle monitor doesn't come in a different model?" Thea asked, eying the contraption around their mother's ankle with distaste. They were, all three of them, seated at the breakfast table in the mansion, and the only thing that set it apart from all the other times they'd been like this was the reminder of his mother's sentence. Oliver thought she was taking it quite well – the house arrest, that was. Everything else her sentence entailed, too. Then again, he had yet to see a thing his mother couldn't take in stride.

They were still waiting for the final calculations of the damages to be paid to come in, and it was bound to be a very substantial sum; of course, Queen Consolidated would be where they'd get the money, which had prompted Oliver to speed up the timetable on Felicity's project. She'd said she would handle it.

But apparently, that part of the sentence wasn't what worried Thea. She had a gripe with the ugly ankle monitor. And other possible atrocities of the fashion variety their mother's impending community service could bring. In her own words, the thing they had made her wear in jail was cruel and unusual punishment enough.

"I'll just try not to look at it too much," came his mother's reply to Thea's very important question about the nonexistent variety of ankle monitors. "But maybe, it will be a good reminder," she added, lowering her fork to offer both her hands for him and Thea to take. "Of how fortunate I am that the jury saw things our way. Even if I was prepared to – "

"Mom," Thea interrupted, "we're not talking about that again. That's done – it's behind us. You're here. And even if you won't be able to actually leave here for anything other than pick up garbage by the side of a road once every two weeks, it's so much better than the alternative – which we will never speak of again."

Oliver smiled faintly at his sister's words, and so did their mother; she raised her hand to smooth it over Thea's hair, then sighed. "All right, then," she said, "let's focus on lighter subjects. Like for instance, Oliver" – she turned to him – "Thea's been telling me about Felicity."

Though he definitely considered Felicity to be a pleasant subject, Oliver still narrowed his eyes, then cast a glance at his sister. She looked particularly...gleeful. "What about Felicity?" he asked cautiously.

"Well, from what I understand, she's been developing a new – software, is it? – for the company," his mother said.

Seemed innocuous enough. "Yeah," Oliver confirmed. "Actually, we're moving up the timetable on that, since we're counting on a lot of money to come out of that project, and we'll be needing it sooner rather than later for – but we're not talking about that," he changed course at Thea's warning
look. With a nod, he went down a different road. "Felicity's an IT expert, and she's...really good at what she does." He thought back on that program she'd designed for their more nocturnal activities which allowed her to access any CCTV camera in the city, and couldn't help but smile.

"Mm-hmm," Thea chimed in. "You know, she restored the club's entire network after the quake pro bono –"

Oliver frowned; she hadn't told him that.

"– and she has a quick fix-it tip for everything tech-related that ever goes wrong –"

That was true.

"– and aside from Mr. Diggle, she's Ollie's only friend."

Wait –

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true," Moira said.

"It is," Thea affirmed. "And Ollie thinks she's the most amazing person ever. Right, bro?"

– what?

"It was very nice of her to be in court," Moira agreed, while Oliver's eyes just kept bouncing from one woman to the other.

"Yeah, she's a great hugger," Thea supplied. And with that, both pairs of eyes went to him.

He plastered a tight smile on his face. "We're friends."

His sister raised an eyebrow. "And how are the benefits?"

"Thea!" his mother scolded, though she seemed to be amused more than anything. Oliver, for his part, was not.

"A few weeks ago, you were ready to read me the riot act just for crashing at her place," he reminded.

She shrugged. "Well, maybe I saw something that changed my mind."

He wished people would stop meddling. First Sara, now Thea – even Diggle had given him and Felicity one of his trademark looks. The cherry on top had to be Laurel, though; when he'd gone to talk to her in court, she'd told him she was happy things had worked out – that she'd finally gotten something right. Then, she followed it with a remark about how no matter this one success, there was one thing she'd failed in, and there were no seconds chances left – and that watching him and Felicity had reminded her of that.

In hindsight, it probably said something that he'd immediately known she was talking about Tommy and not him. And that it didn't bother him.

However, what grated on his nerves, especially in this current setting, was that everyone presumed to tell him what he and Felicity had; or presumed to know what it was.

Well, if he were being completely honest, he didn't quite know it himself, but that was not the point.

"You're barking up the wrong tree there, Speedy," was his neutral response. It was too much to hope
that it would make her desist, though.

And he knew he’d chosen the wrong colloquialism when his sister grinned in an all-too-mischievous way; he hoped she would be distracted when her phone buzzed on the table but that, too, was hoping against hope. Even as she snatched her phone, she opened her mouth and sing-sang, "Ollie and Felicity, sitting in a tree –"

"I have seen kindergarteners exhibit more maturity than this," Oliver commented dryly.

" – K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" his sister finished triumphantly before finally putting the phone to her ear and moving away to take her call; Oliver would bet it was Roy calling.

He shook his head in her wake.

"Don't hold it against her, sweetheart," his mother spoke up in the ensuing silence. "She's happy. With Roy, and now, she's happy for us – for our family." She reached out for his hand again. "And she wants you to be happy, too."

"I am happy, Mom," he said quietly.

Months in prison had done nothing to put a damper on his mother's capability to convey so much with only a raise of her eyebrow. "Are you, really?"

He forced himself not to look away. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Honestly, Oliver, I don't know," she told him, point-blank. "If I knew what went on in your head, perhaps I could answer that question. But I don't – and neither does Thea. But," she stressed, "Thea is also under the impression that if anyone would know what your thoughts are, it would be Felicity – or Mr. Diggle. And to think you were angry with me when I appointed him as your bodyguard."

Oliver smiled faintly at that, dropping his eyes to his mother's hand, where it covered his own, before quietly saying, "They're my friends. Really good friends."

"But nothing more? With Felicity, I mean."

"She's just my friend," he repeated. "Nothing more."

"And that's all there is to it?"

"That's it," he affirmed, though the words left a bitter taste in his mouth. He wished he could brush it off, as well as the slight clog in his throat as he said it, but the truth – the truth he'd rather not acknowledge – was that his feelings for Felicity weren't as clear-cut as he made them out to be. Not anymore.

And his mother seemed to pick up on it. "I can respect that it's part of your life you don't want me involved in," she said, but sighed as she added, "However, your sister may not be so easily persuaded."

Oliver thought so, too.
Felicity wondered if this may finally be the time to consider amphetamines to sustain wakefulness and concentration. College hours hadn't beaten her, QC office hours hadn't either – even nighttime vigilantism hadn't gotten the best of her. But nighttime vigilantism combined with QC office hours combined with after-hours software development – now, that was the deadly combo.

The clause of Mrs. Queen's sentence which called for damages to the paid to the victims' families was, of course, a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things, but still a price; and Queen Consolidated still hadn't been fully rehabilitated in the financial department. Her program was what would tip the scales on that one. So, Oliver had come to her, asked her if she could speed the process along even more than she already had – and really, how could she say no to that request?

So, she was logging in in the dead of night, running scans on the already written code and keeping her minions awake along with her on Skype so they could brainstorm together in cases of hitches along the road and whatnot – also, in lack of amphetamines, their voices helped her stay awake.

With this new development, the schedule had been moved up three months, which meant the pre-release marketing moves and sales pitches would be knocking on their door in the upcoming weeks – and Felicity was expected, if not willing, to attend at least the major events. Even if no one was aware that she was the ultimate mastermind behind the project, as Head of the New Developmental Technologies Department, she had to be there for the investors and the technologically-enthused crowd. She wasn't exactly looking forward to it – but on the bright side, Cheryl had promised to be there and keep her company. And possibly save her from embarrassment when speaking to this or that stiff-suit.

All things considered, though, she would meet the new deadline – with style and without glitches.

After that, she would dedicate all of her professional time to acquiring and investing in new technologies rather than developing them at the same time. Hopefully then, she would be able to actually get some sleep.
So, uh...hello! How's life been treating you all this...past month or so?

Terrible at updating, I know. My apologies. But this chapter's done, and I'm not going to make promises about future ones, 'cause I only end up breaking said promises. But I will try.

Also, in the spirit of full disclosure - a part of this story that was supposed to be handled in this chapter got axed. I tried and tried to make it happen (which actually kinda explains the month of radio silence), but the flow was all wrong, I'm not the kind of fangirl that could make it work. I actually feel kinda terrible about it, since it touched upon Felicity's backstory and also feel terrible as a writer, since I was all about dropping hints about her family in one of the earlier chapters and that's just gonna lead nowhere now. But it was either axing it or giving up altogether, so...yeah. As a result, I rearranged some stuff, which probably sped up the timetable on events somewhat, so I hope it doesn't all feel like a massive failure. (if it does, I'm sorry)

Anyway, my apologies again. Carry on, please.

It was like a war zone. Except only one side actually knew a war was being fought – well, not much of a war, really. More of a battle of wills.

And in Oliver's case, Felicity surmised, a battle for self-control. These days, she counted any conversation that didn't end with Isabel Rochev getting arrowed as a victory.

Ms. Rochev had, obviously, not been pleased to hear that a crucial product for the company was being rushed so that Mrs. Queen could pay her dues – not the company's concern, she had said. Naturally, Oliver had responded to that by stating that it was a family concern, and that Queen Consolidated was a family business, and bottom line – he'd made the call and she would have to play along. Of course, that didn't sit well with Isabel, who had issued a rather biting reminder that she owned half of that 'family business' and that she was to be consulted – to which Oliver had said that he'd already made the decision anyway and she would just have to accept it.

And in that moment, Felicity swore she could see all the ways in which Isabel was killing him in her mind.

Also, if you asked her, pissing off the lady who was almost certainly planning your demise and had no qualms about blowing up commercial airliners full of people was not exactly the wisest road to take, but here they all were.

In the boardroom. Two weeks into the Queen vs. Rochev ice war, and she was presenting the final stages of her program to the board. Her notes were at her fingertips, though she didn't need them much, Cheryl was by her side, and most importantly, her coffee thermos was right within reach.

"The last of the coding should be done by the end of next week," she spoke. "Then comes the beta testing, which we will also put a rush on, so everything should be about ninety-nine percent done by
the time the first public presentation comes knocking." She reached for her coffee, taking a hearty swig. "The first sales pitches have already been made, and have garnered the desired hype and anticipation – congrats on that marketing, by the way – " she turned to the two representatives of the PR Department; they gave her grateful nods in return – "so we already have some big names signing on as potential buyers and investors, which I think is a really good start." She paused for a breath, then glanced down at her notes – what else had she been supposed to talk about? Oh right, a conclusion and a subtle reminder that she and her minions had been busting their asses off for this. "In any case, the program should be ready for mass ripping and downloads in roughly two months, by which time we will, hopefully, have the funds to start investing in technologies we aren't developing ourselves. And speaking of that, my department has been working overtime on this for weeks, so I'm not saying 'raise our paychecks', but a nice Christmas bonus would still be in order."

She looked pointedly at Oliver, whose lips looked like they might be in the process of twitching into a smile; he nodded. "You should expect nothing less," he agreed, then turned to Isabel with a look that simply dared her to defy him. Felicity reached for her coffee again.

"Provided we are not bled dry before we are even rehabilitated," Isabel fired back – very coldly, if Felicity said so herself, "and the funds we do earn don't get spent on outside matters, the bonuses this year should be very generous. Especially for your department, Ms. Smoak."

And so the ice war continues, Felicity thought; Oliver and Isabel were giving each other death-stares again, but hey, at least she had a promise of additional cash for her hardworking minions.

She made to take another sip of her coffee, only to find the cup empty; she grabbed the thermos for a refill, only to find that it too had been drained. She frowned; well, that was one entire thermos gone before lunchtime.

She'd worry about it, except she was too tired to do so.

And now the excess of coffee was making her stomach gurgle painfully. Not to mention pushing her for an emergency bathroom pee-break – when would they be wrapping this shindig up anyway?

As it turned out, it took another half hour.

Felicity dashed for the bathroom the first chance she got, and when she made it back to her office, she expected to find Cheryl there, ready to ask what she wanted for lunch; as she spent most, if not all, of her lunch breaks at her desk, Cheryl had taken to asking her what she wanted brought back from the place most of the employees liked to frequent. But instead of Cheryl, she found Oliver.

She froze in her tracks. "What happened?"

He actually looked confused for a moment. "Nothing," he said, which just made her confused.

"So, this is a...social call?" she let out. "Which doesn't make any sense, since you just saw me – actually, you see me all day, every day. I mean, at this point, the three of us might as well be living together – it's like this weird ménage à trois – no, wait, 'cause that would be – " She blew out a long, long breath; what was the point of trying to dig her way out of sexually-laden innuendos these days, anyway? "So, social call?" she prompted instead.

"Uh...sort of." Oliver scratched the back of his head, then took a step closer to her; she realized she was still standing in the doorway. Oh well, he was already making his way to her, why move now?

"I was thinking, maybe you'd like to have lunch," he offered, and she was just about to inform him that yes, she would like food and very much so, but that she was just waiting for Cheryl to swing by,
before realizing he probably meant lunch with him.

She frowned. "What's the occasion?"

"Why does there have to be an occasion?"

"Because this is literally the first time ever that you've asked me to lunch with you."

He opened his mouth as if to protest that, then immediately closed it; the ensuing little tilt of his head let her know that he had conceded to her point.

"I just...thought you might enjoy a change of lunch break scenery," he said, his voice dropping to the softer, more sincere note it adopted every now and then; she really did appreciate it when it happened. He stepped all the way up to her now, so that she had to look up to meet his eye. "I've been asking a lot from you," he added, "and I – " his gaze wandered over the top of her head while he searched for the words he wanted to say – "I don't want you to think I'm unaware of that."

She couldn't help her small, weary smile. So, he was trying to do something nice for her. It was sweet. "Didn't think you were," she told him, watching as the few small words made his own mouth lift into a smile – just a tiny, little one. "But I'll have to pass," she declined the offer. "There's still stuff I need to do here – and before you say, 'gee, Felicity, you can still afford to put your feet up for just an hour', I'll remind you that we have a lot planned for our nighttime job later, so I won't be able to do this stuff after-hours, which means I have to do them during office hours – sort of."

Though she made complete sense and they both knew it, he still got that face he made when he knew she was right but was still unhappy about it. "Felicity – "

"Oliver, no offense," she said, "but I really, really need to get back to work."

He seemed to understand this put an end to it. "See you later, then," he said, letting his hand brush over her shoulder on his way out. Felicity remained in her spot for a moment longer, closing her eyes to savor a deep, steadying breath, before striding to her desk with purpose.

She really did have stuff to do.

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Felicity watched Oliver and Diggle get ready for the night's mission, scraping her teeth over her lip; after some weeks of gathering intel and tracking patterns, they were finally gearing to take down the Starling branch of an international human trafficking ring. The plan, in itself, wasn't anything extraordinary – they knew where the local leaders' den was, so Oliver and Diggle would go in, subdue them, which would then leave Felicity to alert the authorities and send them to the site via anonymous tip. And they had Roy on standby, just in case. Simple enough.

Except, and according to an earlier call from Mr. Lance, Laurel was also gearing up. To take down the vigilante. Again.

So, naturally, Felicity worried about Oliver. When she'd announced this, he hadn't really said much
other than they had to get ready – so, again, she worried. Making an executive decision, she rose from her seat and marched over to where he was stashing arrows in his quiver.

"Because we're friends and partners and all that," she began, "I have to ask: are you okay?"

He looked up at her and frowned; she decided it looked more like a frown of confusion than intense emotional distress. Which was further confirmed when his features cleared in understanding a moment later.

"I'm fine, Felicity," he said.

"Are you sure?" she prodded. "I mean, this is kind of a history repeating itself, what with Laurel – "

"– gunning for your leather ass again," Diggle joined the conversation, taking a stand at Felicity's side. "Which effectively makes her our problem – again."

Never let it be said John Diggle didn't keep to his word – he had said Laurel would only be their business again when she resumed her hunt for the vigilante. And she had.

In the wake of Mrs. Queen's trial, Laurel had picked up where she'd left off – or so her father reported.

Oliver sighed. "We'll stay under the radar," seemed to be his everlasting solution, though the delivery carried much less angst than any of its predecessors, as far as Felicity could remember. "Like before."

Felicity narrowed her eyes a fraction; either he was getting really good at hiding the pain in his soul or something else was up. "And you're...not going to try and change her mind?" she asked tentatively.

He gave her a look she couldn't quite place, then moved his eyes to Diggle; eventually, he simply said, "No."

There was a mutual understanding that this was all they would get from him on the matter. Still, Felicity had hoped that, maybe, after even the press had started calling Oliver the Green Arrow and painting him as more of a good-doer, Laurel would have changed lanes, too. Evidently not. Which was why anything and everything they took on made her worry and think back on the set-up that had been waiting for Oliver on his first night back as the vigilante – it was, coincidentally, also why she had checked and took apart all the intel they had on the human trafficking ring more times than she could count.

Had she mentioned that she worried?

On this one occasion, though, it turned out that she had worried about nothing. The mission went according to plan – barring a slight hitch or two about extra muscle to take down they hadn't foreseen and some hidden barbed wire that Oliver's rear end hadn't appreciated, but still nothing they couldn't take in stride – and Felicity managed to clock out of her night job and still get home in time to get a solid four hours of sleep. Yippie.
It would help if they didn't actively try to create a tense atmosphere.

Not that she didn't understand where Oliver was coming from – or that she didn't see why Isabel would fight him every step of the way, being who she was; it was just that her head was seconds away from exploding.

Her solid four hours of sleep had turned more into two hours of shuteye, as she'd kept waking up, jolted awake every half-hour or so – sometimes from disturbing dreams, sometimes because her brain wouldn't shut up about all the things she had to do.

So yes, Oliver and Isabel's back-and-forth really didn't help her case.

Felicity was still obligated to sit through it, of course, which she did – and she took it like a trooper, if she said so herself.

That day and all those that followed; even through the sleep deprivation, and the unforeseen problem in her program's coding that she just couldn't figure out how to fix, and playing the eye in the sky for a brooding archer, and taking calls from Sara over encrypted communication lines to keep her updated while she stayed in Coast City, and not being able to figure out Isabel Rochev's masterplan, and not having time to decrypt Elijah Haze's files on Phobos, and keeping that whole mess from Diggle – and had she mentioned that she just couldn't figure out a way to fix the damned bug in the damned coding for the damned program?

She pushed her keyboard away in frustration, bringing her hands up to rub her temples; her head hurt like a mother. And her stupid brain wouldn't work! She was so close to finishing everything and being done with this whole program, and she just couldn't get past one small, stupid little glitch! And now she would miss the deadline, and Isabel would probably gloat and Oliver would brood, and then she would probably organize a coup and overthrow him and crown herself the Queen – provided that she didn't just kill him, but hey, he'd probably be dead long before that since Laurel Lance was hunting him again, but did he worry about that? – No! But she worried – she worried about him, and their heroics, and whatever lurked behind codename Phobos that she wasn't getting to, and Isabel Rochev, and the stupid glitch!

Felicity bent to open her bottom drawer, deciding an aspirin would be a good thing right about now. She pulled and the wood rattled but the drawer wouldn't budge. She pulled again and again, but it stayed jammed, only banging in tandem with her pounding head, until she felt her eyes prickle with tears and kicked the drawer with her foot.

A sob bubbled from her throat next while angry tears slipped down her cheeks; her lungs felt too tight, and her face felt like it was on fire, and her throat felt clogged with tears. She'd been down this road before, and she knew that even as she cried harder. For five months, it had been just her and Digg. And in those five months, she had cried and lost sleep over things that she couldn't fix, couldn't control, time and again – and sometimes, Digg heard her, and sometimes he didn't, and he'd given her a painting of the Glades for solace.

She tried to stop herself, shake it off, but only ended up curling into a ball in her chair, throwing off her glasses, and burying her face in her hands.

"Felicity?"

Of course he would choose this moment to barge into her office – and why didn't he ever knock?
She moved her fingers away from her eyes just enough to be able to see, hiccuping into her cupped hands, and though his shape was blurry, she knew his eyes were going over the place in threat assessment, even as he moved closer to her.

"Felicity, what's wrong? What happened?"

She shook her head, closing her eyes as she wiped her cheeks. She tried to say that it was nothing, that people just cried sometimes, and it was no big deal – it was nothing, really – but all that came out was a stuttering, "M-my drawer i-is jammed."

Oliver didn't respond to that, and she didn't look up to try and make out the features of his face, but eventually, she felt more than saw him move away – her eyes snapped up to track his progress to the door, where he quietly shut it, then made his way to back, only to bypass her desk and head for the windows, cracking one open.

He strode back to her next, and offered her his hand. "Come on," he coaxed softly.

Part of her just wanted to shoo him away. Still, she took his hand and let herself be led over to the open window; the slight breeze washed over her face and she took a deep breath to clear her lungs. The fresh air did help.

She noticed the blur that was Oliver's hand rise, thumb facing upwards, and for a moment, she thought he was actually going to brush away the tearstains on her cheeks; it fell to her shoulder instead, and his thumb rubbed circles against her collarbone. It calmed her somewhat.

Oliver didn't speak for a while, keeping quiet as she worked on her breathing, but when he did speak, it was only to ask, "Do you want me to call Digg?"

Felicity snapped her eyes from where they were focused on the knot of his tie to the features of his face she could vaguely make out, and frowned. One of his shoulders rose and fell in the barest of shrugs.

"You used to tell me a lot about what was bothering you," he said softly. "Well, it was mostly about your incompetent supervisor at IT and stuff like that, but then I left, and – " He cleared his throat. "And you don't tell me much about anything anymore – and I may not be the most perceptive guy, but I do notice some things." His eyes dropped to where he was still drawing circles against her shirt, and he blew out a quiet breath. "And I know that if there's anyone you'd tell about what's bothering you, it'd be Digg. So...do you want me to call him?"

Felicity was halfway through shaking her head before she stopped herself, because he did have a point. For five months, she'd only had Digg. And Oliver – well, she didn't deal well with people leaving. Even if they'd never actually promised to stay.

And he was right, she didn't tell him much these days – in fact, he told her more as of late, which, when she took a moment to think about it, was all sorts of weird. She hadn't been doing it on purpose – at least, she didn't think so. And it wasn't that she didn't trust him, it was just –

Well, she knew what she could and could not expect when it came to his 'people skills'.

She tried again, and managed to give him a firm shake of her head this time. "No, it's – it's fine," she said, running a hand over her eyes. "I'm fine, the – " she gestured to the window – "getting some air helped."

She promptly looked anywhere but at him after that.
"Hey..."

And just like that, there were tears in her eyes again. She didn't know when it had become a habit, or when it had garnered so much meaning, but him uttering that one little word had come to carry more weight than a thousand speeches he could give. Which was why she was crying again.

"You know how – how I said that while you were away, I – I got way too caught up in things?" she found herself talking; she hadn't been telling him much about anything, but she knew she'd told him that. "And that – " she sniffled – "that I got really worked up when it all fell through?" She watched the blur that was his head bob up and down in a careful nod, and admitted, "Well, I think it might be happening again."

Next thing she knew, his arms were winding around her like they had in the courthouse – gently but strongly, and her cheek pressed against his chest while his hand came to rest at the back of her neck. "I thought I was past all of that," she mumbled into his shirt – one she was probably leaving mascara stains on, "and I – I didn't know how to deal with any of it, and you were gone, so I – so I lost it sometimes, but it's different now, you're back and we're a team and –" *And* I shouldn't be feeling like this now.

Oliver was quiet for a while, only rubbing soothing circles against the skin below her ear; for someone with such poor people skills, he sure knew how to lull her into comfort. "Things like that never really go away," he whispered into her hair. "You think you're good, that you're over it, but then something happens that just...brings it all back."

"I take it you have a lot of experience with that."

She'd cringe at being tactless, but he was probably used to it by now. "Yeah," he said, in a way that made her think he might be smiling a little. She burrowed deeper into him.

"There's a bug in the program," she admitted. "And I don't know to fix it. And I don't – I don't remember the last time I actually slept well, and...and then there's Isabel, and who knows what she's up to – and it doesn't help that you've basically declared war on each other. But of course, then there's also Laurel, and Haze and whatever godawful things he hid behind *Phobos*, which I don't have time to decrypt, and I just –"

Oliver tightened his hold on her, and she thought it might actually be grounding her. "Why didn't you say anything?" he asked softly. "You don't have to carry everything around on your own."

"Says the pot to the kettle."

"True, but I'm your cautionary tale, remember?" he reminded.

That might have made her smile a little, too. "In my defense, I thought I was handling it," she said, pulling back just enough to look up at him. Though his face was still out-of-focus, she could tell his eyes were going over her own features, just as she felt the warmth of his hand move from her nape to her face and his fingers start to lightly comb through her hair. She let herself lean into the touch.

"You know, it never occurred to me to say this," he spoke after a moment, "but...I'm sorry, Felicity." At her frown, he added, "For leaving, after the quake – leaving you and Digg. I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "That's – it's fine, you don't have to apologize for that. I mean, it's not like we'd signed binding contracts in blood or anything."

"But you thought we had," he remarked.
"What, no – okay, maybe a little," she admitted. "I just...I guess I expected you'd stick around. I didn't...consider that you wouldn't. No big deal."

Except it kind of was – in all truth, there'd been a few weeks, in the beginning, when she had cursed his name for running away instead staying to brave through the aftermath. She'd stayed. So had John. His sister had stayed. Laurel. Just not him.

And she hadn't understood it, at the start, not the way Digg had. And yes, she might have perceived it as him breaching a nonexistent team contract, which she evidently hadn't understood wasn't even in place – again, not the way Digg had. But she was fine with all of it now.

Except she was falling into the same pattern of keeping all strings controlled like she had when he wasn't there, so one might say she was gearing up for the inevitability of him leaving again when or if everything crashed and burned.

Okay, so maybe she still had some unresolved issues.

Either she had said it all out loud or Oliver was a mind-reader, because the next words out of his mouth were, "I'm not leaving again. No matter what happens. I promise."

She thought about empty promises again, but decided that, just this once, maybe she would take his word for it. With a smile, she brought her hand up to curl her fingers around his wrist and said, "I am holding you to that."

He let out a quiet huff of a chuckle, which in turn made her grin up at him, and next thing she knew, his stubble was scratching the bridge of her nose, and his lips were brushing her forehead. Her breath hitched in surprise and he froze like a statue, with one arm around her waist, a hand in her hair and his lips warm against her skin.

They'd had awkward, not-quite-as-platonic-as-they-should-be situations before, one not a couple of weeks back in the courthouse, but this – this took the cake.

Oliver backed away from her the next second, dropping his arms to his sides, clenching his hands into fists, and standing very rigidly a foot away from her. He had a few false starts before he cleared his throat. "Right. Uh..." Another bout of throat-clearing. "Well, since we are a team, and we should...discuss...things, maybe we should talk about...everything that's been weighing on you." He looked like he wanted to reach for her again, but then thought the better of it. "So, uh...we should sit down and talk about all of that, since we're a team, and teams work together and share the load and – " The stilted, awkward edge to his tone grew softer as he added, "And the fact that we are a team means that none of us have to be alone in anything – which is something you and Digg went to great lengths to show me. And I'd hate for you to think that the same doesn't go for you."

Felicity honestly didn't know how to respond to that. So, she hoped her resulting smile said it all. "Okay, so...team lunch?" she proposed.

Oliver nodded. "I'll have Digg bring the car. And uh...you may want to...fix your make-up."

Her eyes widened. "How bad is it?" she dared ask as she brought her hands to feel around her eyes; the whole general area felt very sticky under her fingertips.

Oliver said nothing – which was all the answer she needed, really.

"Okay, give me ten minutes," she said, moving back to her desk and slipped her glasses back so she could see what she was digging for in her purse – but not before taking a moment to revel in the bliss of having the world in-focus again.
Just as Oliver was moving to the door, she remembered what had brought on this entire situation in the first place. "Wait!" she called out, and when he whirled back immediately, asked, "Could you maybe...help me with the drawer? It's jammed."

He looked like her request amused him but he complied nevertheless, grabbing a letter opener from her desk before crouching at her side. The drawer was forced open with a click bare moments later, and Felicity couldn't help but grin. "My hero," she mused.

Of course, the h-word was out of her mouth already before she thought it might not have been the wisest choice, considering his aversion to it and their conversation on the matter, but while he did still at its utterance, she also swore she saw the corner of his mouth quirk into a smile.

Oliver unceremoniously dropped into the foyer's armchair, unbuttoning his suit as he waited for his mother. Raisa had told him she was on the phone with the soup kitchen she was volunteering in as part of her community service.

There was something he wanted to discuss with her, and get an full, honest answer out of her, as it had been decided during his, Felicity and Diggle's earlier 'team lunch'. It had been a little awkward at first, as Felicity wasn't all that comfortable talking about her issues so openly – which was something he could relate to all too well – but having John there had put her ease. They'd gotten so engrossed in references to past events Oliver couldn't understand, but he wasn't so childish as to butt in and demand explanations. He was fully aware that Felicity and Diggle had spent five months with no one but each other for support, and that it had made them grow closer – and if the feeling of being left out made a somewhat bitter taste settle in his mouth, he didn't show it. Well, he was pretty sure Felicity had noticed at one point, which had made her include him back into the conversation. The fact remained that it hadn't been the first time he felt like an outsider looking in – in fact, that feeling had been there ever since he had returned from Lian Yu.

Slade's warning about staying away from attachments had rung in his ears even as he worked to strengthen those he had with his team, especially while he put together the pieces of how difficult it had been for both of them while he was away. Still, it had never been clearer to him that he wanted the attachment. He wanted his team.

And gradually, Slade's voice had faded into a buzz in the back of his mind while Felicity's had grown louder, telling him he needed to take a leap, and pick a side.

Which, he decided, was a commitment and a struggle for another day.

Though Felicity worried, there wasn't much they could do about Laurel. She was in the opposite camp, so to speak, and Oliver felt like trying and convince her otherwise was a battle he'd fought and lost already. And everyone made their own choices.

Sort of how he and Felicity had made the choice not to tell Diggle about Elijah Haze, which Felicity had remedied through a lot of babbling and hand gestures. *I thought we said 'no lies!*, had been John's solemn response, but after Felicity's apologies and a very longwinded account of everything she had dug up so far, he'd seemed placated. He'd also reminded that there was a reason why he'd
said not to look into Deadshot's hit, but faced with the new information, he agreed that it was worth looking into – and Felicity vowed to give it her all after she was done with, and he quoted, the program from Hell, and she didn't even believe in Hell, so that's how bad that thing was. And while Oliver was telling her to extend the deadline and that no money was more important than her, her wellbeing or her sanity, she'd suddenly lit up, clapped and announced she'd had a Eureka moment about the 'stupid bug'.

Oliver had, however, insisted that she take it easy with now many hours she put in – both in the office and in the lair – and after some debate, it was settled that she would take some nights off from aiding and abetting a criminal in green leather, just until her work schedule returned to normal after the release of the program. He and Diggle could handle a few nights on their own – and yes, they had both solemnly sworn that they would call her if they got in over their heads.

Which left the matter of one Isabel Rochev.

It was what he had come to speak with his mother about. She'd told him, the first time Isabel had sauntered onto the scene, not to trust her. She'd kept it vague and succinct, which, if he knew anything about his mother, meant that she wished to keep the reasons behind her distrust secret. Oliver had played along, but as both Felicity and Diggle had pointed out, maybe this was the time to get some answers.

"Oliver?" his mother's voice echoed in sync with the clacks of her heels. "You're home early," she remarked as she joined him in the foyer. "I'm usually already fast asleep by the time you're here. Raisa said you were looking for me?"

He nodded. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Well, this sounds serious," she said, taking a seat on the couch. "Is something the matter, sweetheart?"

"Not exactly." He shifted in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. "I have to ask you something. About Isabel Rochev."

He could see the warning in his mother's eyes, cautioning him to tread carefully on the matter. But he was all about throwing caution to the wind, as it happened. "When I first told you about her, you said I couldn't trust her, that she was dangerous. Why?"

His mother was quiet for a while, then looked away. "Why does it matter, Oliver?" she deflected. "You saved the company. She may be your equal in ownership, but – "

"Mom," he interrupted. "Just tell me what you know about her."

After a quiet sigh, his mother ran a hand over her hair to smooth it, then rose to her feet. She had her back turned to him when she said, "It involves your father."

Given the last time she had been this evasive and used this tone when in relation to his father, Oliver felt his stomach churning at the mere prospect of – "Please tell me they weren't..."

"No," came her mother's answer, and he breathed a sigh of relief. "At least, I don't believe so," she added. "But in a way, it was actually...worse. Your father met Isabel in Russia, actually – she was interning at the Merlyn Global subsidiary in Moscow and your father was there with Malcolm. And they sort of – connected, I suppose would be a good word for it."

Oliver frowned, watching his mother make a beeline for the liquor cabinet and pour herself a scotch. "It became more and more obvious, as time went by," she resumed. "I don't believe they
were...involved, if only for the reason that Robert never spoke of any of his mistresses with me, much less in such high regard. He certainly never introduced them to me. She had a difficult upbringing, if I remember it correctly. And Robert admired her...perseverance." She tipped back her glass, lingering for a moment before she faced him again. "And she admired him, too. Then, she got her degree and came here. She wanted a job at QC. It all seemed...harmless enough, I guess. But the more I saw of her..." She shook her head. "It was the look on her face when Robert walked her through the offices. She just looked at it like...like it was hers. And I remember one time, when we were at a benefit and Robert spoke of you – of you as the heir to his company, the look she got in her eyes." She closed her own eyes shut, looking like she might shudder at the mere memory. "It was like she hated you. Just the idea of you at the head of Queen Consolidated."

Slowly, she made her way back to the couch and lowered herself onto it, staring at the depths of her glass. "Robert didn't notice, but I did," she said. "And I told him to end it. Whatever it was he had with her. I wanted it to end. And...he listened. Isabel didn't get a place at the company, and she was out of Robert's life, as far as I knew." With a deep breath, she finally met his eyes. "I believe she wanted Queen Consolidated for herself then, and it might be the same now. I do know that, if that's the case, you are what stands in her way. And that's why you can't trust her, Oliver. That's what makes her dangerous."

Oliver sat in silence for a long time. Of all the possible things, he had not been expecting this.

But, he supposed, they had an answer to Felicity's months-old question about the reasons behind Isabel Rochev's adamantly desire to acquire QC now.
"That explains a lot."

Felicity felt herself nodding at Diggle's comment, though she was still mostly trying to play mental catch-up with this new information Oliver had just dropped on them.

They'd had most pieces for the puzzle Isabel Rochev made for, and she and Diggle had encouraged Oliver to ask his mother to provide the last one; said final piece, however, had not been what they were expecting. But Diggle was right; it did explain a lot.

"Like why she was so adamant to acquire QC," she said. "And why she's so interested in sticking around."

Oliver nodded grimly. "Also explains why she was on the list," he added. "She has ties to both my father and Merlyn."

Felicity bit her lip, exchanging a quick glance with John; if there was one thing this discovery proved, it was that in all likelihood, she had not been too paranoid for thinking that Isabel was out to get Oliver so she could snatch the company for herself.

"So, uh...are we not gonna talk about how much danger this puts you in?" Felicity asked, and when Oliver looked like he was about to try and wave her concerns off, she raised a firm hand to stop him in his tracks. "Look, I get it," she said, "you're a big bad vigilante, which she doesn't know, and you can take care of yourself, but – " she gave him a pointed look – "that doesn't mean you're untouchable either."

"She's right, Oliver," Diggle backed her up. "We're talking about a woman who was willing to kill over a hundred people and tear down an entire country just to get what she wanted – a good investment. And this is even more personal for her."

Oliver looked between the two of them, seeming to be considering their points – and they were good points, too. Eventually, he nodded. "I can be careful," he said. "And I like to think that, with a little time, I can find a way to get her out of the company." He sighed. "But obviously, that can't happen yet."

Oddly enough, Felicity felt the slightest twinge of pride; being a responsible CEO and curbing his own personal desires in favor of that responsibility was not something she would have expected him to consider as his first option as recently as a few months earlier. So, she was the tiniest bit proud of him. Because, whatever else Isabel Rochev was, she was also a savvy businesswoman, and her contributions were helping rehabilitate the company, which was not yet fully done.

"Well, in the meantime, just try and dodge any possible attempts on your life," she advised. "Like, if she offers you coffee, don't take it – 'cause, you know, could be poison."

Oliver's mouth twitched into a smile. "I don't think she would be that obvious," he said.
True, she wouldn't be. But that was actually part of the problem.

Another part of the problem was keeping up appearances, and juggling the knowledge they had with the need to play nice with the enemy in order to save the company – and keep their heads, too, probably.

Felicity knew Oliver had a really, really difficult time with that balancing act. It was personal for him on every front, and Felicity was pretty sure he simply longed to put Isabel Rochev down for good. But he was also getting better at playing nice, and separating the Isabel who advanced his business goals from the Isabel he wanted to see dead – and that, too, made Felicity just a little bit proud of him.

It was easier for her. She spoke to Isabel in meetings, without much other interaction happening outside that setting. And also, her friend's father hadn't been killed by mercenaries Isabel had hired, and Isabel hadn't had a twisted mentor-disciple relationship with her father, nor did she have designs on her company.

Yeah, that probably made it easier, too.

Except Isabel made it just a little bit harder.

Her unexpected knock on Felicity's office door came with a suitably bland half-smile and a rather flat, "Do you have a minute, Ms. Smoak?"

Last time this happened, she had been accused of using QC for her own gain, manipulating the CEO and possibly sleeping with said CEO, while also being called a naïve girl in a world she didn't belong to. Add recent discoveries to that and Felicity was naturally more than a little wary as she nodded for Isabel to come in.

She settled into the visitor's chair with ease, crossing her legs and leaning back, her arms lining up perfectly with the armrests at her sides. She looked like a queen sitting on her throne.

Maybe she was practicing.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Rochev?" Felicity asked.

"Well, the first launch party for your program is tonight," Isabel said. "I wanted to confirm you will be in attendance."

Unfortunately, she would be. No getting out of that one. "It's not like I can just take a rain-check, right?" At Isabel's unimpressed raise of an eyebrow, she added, "Yes, I will be attending the party. Is that all you wanted to speak to me about?" Somehow, she doubted that.

And she was right.

"I also wanted to congratulate you," the other woman told her, and Felicity's jaw promptly dropped.
"Don't look so surprised, Ms. Smoak," Isabel went on. "Your program has already brought in investors, and the financial prognoses for future sales are very promising. Not to mention, you've accomplished this with very limited funds." She shrugged delicately. "You're essentially this company's saving grace."

Felicity frowned. "Really?" she let out. "'Cause, last time you were in my office, you said I was a risk for this company." And a bunch of other stuff she'd rather not bring up again.

"You are," Isabel reasserted. "But in your case, the benefits outweigh the risks." She looked her up and down then, a small smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. "You've come a long way, Ms. Smoak," she said.

"I – I have?"

Isabel's smirk grew. "When I first met you," she began, "it was painfully obvious to me you had no idea what you were doing, save for your skills with computers. Do you remember the first meeting we sat on together?"

She'd really rather not.

And Isabel must have read that very thought on her face, because she said, "You stuttered your way through it. But, you see," she added, "you don't do that anymore. Maybe you haven't noticed, but during these latest meetings we've had, you've grown... confident. You're still characteristically – " She pursed her lips there, seemingly searching for just the right description. "Exuberant," she finally decided, "but you talk like a woman in your position should – and where you would turn to Mr. Queen for answers and support before, you now ask that he meet your demands." She raised an eyebrow. "So yes, Ms. Smoak, you've come a long way."

Felicity really had no idea what to say to all of that. "Um, not to sound... ungrateful or anything, but...does this have more of a... point?"

Rochev's smirk became more of a grin now, and Felicity had no idea what to make of that either. "My point is," she said, "you're good. Not just as a programmer, which you know you are, but as a woman of business. Your idea to leak information about the software in a select few spaces has created exactly the kind of buzz you said it would, and I've also seen your proposals for your department's future investments; they're excellent. You have a lot of potential, Ms. Smoak. And as such, I think you would be the first one to aspire to more than your current position." She shrugged. "Maybe owning your own business? Something along the lines of a computer software firm?" she suggested. "A few years down the road, Queen Consolidated could offer you exactly the kind of capital you'd need to start such a business – provided, of course, that you stay with the company."

What's happening? Felicity thought wildly. Was this what being lured to the dark side looked like? Because it certainly felt like it.

Felicity cleared her throat. "Well, thank you for the vote of confidence," she said. "But, uh...I haven't exactly thought that far ahead yet."

Isabel didn't speak right away, but when she did, her words were followed by a slight nod. "Well, you should start," she advised, rising to her feet. "I'll see you tonight, Ms. Smoak."

"You, too," Felicity said, staring at the door long after Isabel had closed it on her way out. Well, that had been... weird.
"Don't think system emergencies will get you out of coming to the party tonight."

Felicity started at the sound of Oliver's voice, spinning away from her computers to face him. He was casually sharpening his arrows in the corner, while Diggle was cleaning the firearms they had in the place – or something.

"What makes you think I'm looking for a way out of it?" she asked.

Oliver raised an eyebrow. "You've been staring at that screen for the past twenty minutes," he remarked. "I can practically hear you begging the system to crash just so you'd have to stay here and fix it."

She took offense in that assumption. "Since when are you the spokesperson for corporate shindig attendance?"

"Since he can't get out of it either," Diggle supplied, much to Oliver's apparent annoyance.

Felicity cracked a smile. "Don't worry, I'll be there tonight," she assured. "Just because I...casually fantasize about possible escape plans doesn't mean I'll actually bail." With a frown, she mumbled, "Besides, that's only part of it."

"What's the other part?"

Felicity looked up, to both Oliver and Diggle's awaiting faces, and sighed. "Isabel came by my office earlier."

Predictably, this piece of information was enough for the men to drop their toys of choice and focus all their attention on her.

"What did she want?" Diggle asked, and Felicity knew he was thinking back on the last time she had received a visit from Ms. Rochev.

"Well," Felicity began, "she – it was weird. She actually...congratulated me." She was met with two pairs of raised eyebrows. "I know, right?" she said. "She sort of said all this stuff about how I've come a long way from the stuttering ball of nerves I was at the start, and how I've got potential and possibly hidden business skills that I think she thinks need some grooming, and that's not even the weirdest part." With a deep breath to give her lungs the fuel they'd need, she barreled on, "I got the distinct impression she likes me – not, likes me, likes me, but you know, likes me as an investment. Or she would if...people were investments. Well, she probably thinks they are, but the point is, she made these really grand suggestions about my future career. Like, how I could continue to thrive at QC and then in a few years, I could start my own company – which is actually a pretty great idea..."

She tipped her head to the side as she considered it. "I mean, I was never going to be just an IT expert or anything, and well, I did have this idea back in college about starting my own software development company – which she actually guessed would be my dream job, how about that? – and it would be an all-women business, by the way, 'cause you guys may not know this, but the world of ones and zeroes is seriously sexist, and it's hard for women to get executive positions or even just positions where they get to do what they do best, so having a place with only girls allowed would kinda top my aspirations list – of course, starting the company would be tricky, but Isabel mentioned
capital and investments and stuff, and she was basically spot-on with – wait, why are you looking at me like that?"

Oliver ducked his head and gave a little shrug, as if to brush it off, and when he looked back up at her again, all traces of the look were gone. But she'd seen it. She couldn't quite place it, but there had definitely been a look.

Her eyes widened when it clicked. "No, wait, no!" she let out. "I'm not saying she's right or anything! Just that...well, she made a good point or two, I'm not – I would never switch allegiances."

"I wasn't thinking that," Oliver denied.

She scrunched her nose. "Really? 'Cause you kinda looked like I'd just kicked your puppy back there..."

His resulting expression was, for once, one she was familiar with; that little half-contained smile of his was common enough occurrence. Not that she was counting or paying attention or anything.

"You're seeing things," he maintained.

She raised an eyebrow.

Diggle rolled his eyes.

"I think you're on to something with the allegiance thing, though," John steered the conversation back to important matters. "Because to me, this whole thing looks like a strategy to get you on her team – I'm not saying she's not right about your talents, but she has to have a reason for bringing it up."

"Yeah," Felicity agreed. "She's a master player, so she'd want to keep all the good assets once she gets a change in regime and takes the throne for herself."

"We're not actually fighting an Arthurian war here, Felicity," Oliver deadpanned.

"Oh, this is definitely modern warfare," she said. "Corporate edition."

He only shook his head at her.

"What I'm worried about," Diggle intervened again, "is that this means she definitely has plans to kick you out of your own company."

"Not if I kick her out first," Oliver countered. "I think, when the time is right, the board would take my side on the matter. I doubt she'd be willing to get bought off, but I can remove her by force with enough votes on my side."

"I'd plan something better than that if I were you," Felicity advised. "You're up against a real heavyweight here. And she's good."

"Yeah," he said quietly. His face was doing weird things again, with a little frown creasing his brow, but before Felicity could point it out, he changed the subject. "We should start wrapping things up here," he said. "We need to get ready for the party."

Felicity groaned. "And it'll take way more time for me than it will for you boys," she commented. "I'll just set up the scan on Haze's Phobos files and we'll be good to go." Spinning back around to face her babies, she got to work. "Since I now finally have the time for this, I figured I'd get an early
start," she explained. "I have Haze's entire hard drive downloaded on our servers, but he also has some major encryption going on – which I'll have to break down manually."

"So, what's the scan for?" Diggle asked.

"That, Digg, is me trying to make this easier on myself," she informed. "The scan will look for weak spots in the encryption, so I'll know where to start dismantling first. It's a time-saver."

"Do your thing, Felicity," was Diggle's reply.

She threw him a quick grin over her shoulder before diving back in; the program that performed the scan had already been written ages ago and had since its creation been stashed in her little virtual toolbox. She only needed to start its work on Haze's files.

The finishing keystrokes were just about done when a warm hand fell on her shoulder.

"Hey."

She was smiling even before she craned her head up to look at him. Oliver leaned forward, bracing his other hand on the desk to bring his mouth all that closer to her ear. "If you ever did decide you wanted to branch out and start your own business," he said softly, "you know I'd be your first investor, right?"

The little jolt of surprise went away as quickly as it had come, because when she considered that scenario playing out, there really was no other way for her to envision it. Still, it was heartwarming to hear him say it aloud.

She lolled her head to the side, letting it rest against his forearm. "Yeah, I know," she whispered.

He smiled down at her, his eyes crinkling at the corners before his gaze dropped to where she had covered his hand with her own; his fingers flexed under her touch. She felt the hairs on his forearm under her cheek as she tipped her head back just slightly, to look up at him. From this close, she could see the light play of muscle beneath his stubble, and she wondered what it would feel like to let it scratch the pads of her fingers. And when he met her eyes, it made her think that maybe, if she did, he wouldn't mind.

Diggle cleared his throat behind them. Loudly.

Oliver backed away and straightened so quickly she was surprised he hadn't sprained his back.

"Ready to go?" Diggle inquired flatly.

An awkward moment later, Oliver was responding. "Yeah, ready," he said. "Uh, Felicity?"

She shook her head. Very emphatically. "You guys go," she insisted. "I'll just finish here. Besides, I have my car. Go."

She didn't track their departure, choosing instead to focus on her desktop.

It's all platonic, she told herself. All purely, blissfully, completely platonic.

Even as she thought it, she could feel herself rolling her eyes. It was not purely, blissfully or completely platonic.

But she could still pretend it was.
The party had been, as far as corporate shindigs went, actually very nice.

Then again, maybe it was because Verdant held so much familiarity. Though it had felt more like a brightly-lit ballroom than a nightclub for the evening.

The launch party itself had been a resounding success. The investors they already had on board had brought their friends, and the turnout when it came to what one might call the general populace made of code-aficionados was quite impressive as well; the buzz and anticipation were exactly as high as they wanted them to be, and it was precisely the kind of start they had hoped for.

Oliver went on stage at one point, to make a speech. It was all very smooth and gallant – and Felicity had to admit, he knew how to fake a convincing public persona when he wanted to – and he took care to commend her and her department on their hard work. He even raised his glass in her honor, and there was a little wink in there, too, as he took a sip of his drink, just for her.

All in all, Felicity had expected worse – of herself, that was. She was not much of a big kahuna at heart, so mingling with actual big kahunas was not something she'd been looking forward to; it had gone better than she'd expected, though, barring the few occasions where Cheryl and Oliver, and sometimes Isabel, had to rescue her. And that one time where none other than Thea Queen had to do the saving. But there was a nice drink in it for Felicity at the end, which Thea had called her token of gratitude.

Not that Felicity had expected or wanted that gratitude, but according to the youngest Queen family member, she was owed the thanks because the money she had pulled in wouldn't just save the company but also pay Mrs. Queen's debt, which was mattered to Thea the most. So, Felicity had accepted her drink.

The night was at its end, though, and she was just slipping her coat back on; Diggle was waiting to drive her home.

She spun around to pick up her bag from where she had left it on the table, only to find that Oliver was already holding it up for. Bringing a hand over her poor, startled heart, she muttered, "Stop sneaking up on me."

"It's all actually part of your training," he said, transferring the bag into her hands. "I'm teaching you to be aware of your surroundings."

She wondered when he had become this much of a smart-ass.

"Well, the only thing you're accomplishing is bringing me that much closer to heart failure," she retorted. "So, you know, you may want to revise your strategy."

"Duly noted."

He went quiet for a moment, licked his lips, and when he did speak again, he was back to being serious. "I just wanted to thank you," he said. "Before you go."
"For what? Not skipping the party?"

"That too, but..." He stepped closer to her. "It's not just that I'm grateful, I'm also..." He took a quick, quiet breath, then said, "Proud of you."

She blinked up at him, to which he added, "For the way you've handled your promotion, and everything you've managed to do with it, and...just how well you did." He cleared his throat. "And more than that," he proceeded, "how you – "

"Okay, stop," she interrupted. With a sigh, she asked, "Oliver, is this about...what Isabel said? 'Cause you've been weird ever since I brought it up."

He looked like he wanted to deny it with everything he had in him, but couldn't find a believable way to make it happen; Felicity pressed her lips together to keep herself from smiling.

"It's not actually a competition, you know," she told him. "You don't have to outdo Isabel in the compliments department or...whatever it is that you're doing."

A little duck of his head and fleeting hint of a smile later, he nodded. "I know," he said softly. "I just...I don't want you to think that Isabel is the only one who sees how brilliant you are." He took yet another step closer – so close, in fact, that she had to tip her head back to meet his eyes. "I know you don't think I take you for granted," he went on, "but when you were talking about all the things Isabel said – and she was right, on this one occasion – I realized that...that I hadn't thought to tell you any of that. And it's not because I didn't think it, it's just that...I didn't consider that maybe I should, or – I don't know."

Felicity shook her head at him even as she raised her arms, and placed her hands on his shoulders for a change. She'd have that one happen the other way around, if only just this once.

"Oliver," she said, very clearly, "you created a whole new department just so I could run it, and you placed just about all of your faith in me knowing what to do with that." She smiled up at him. "I got the message."

His immediate answer was a soft, "Oh."

"And you don't have to start doling out compliments, or trying to one-up Isabel Rochev, of all people, or anything like that," she added. "Because I do know that you are, in your own words, proud of me. And as it happens, I am proud of you, too." When he looked just a little bit more surprised than he should have been, she rolled her eyes. "College drop-put or not, you make a pretty good CEO. Even if you didn't actually want that for yourself – running your family's business, I mean. But you're doing a good job of it, and you're getting better by the day. So, I'm proud of you for that."

His mouth pulled at the corners slowly, but in the end, the smile lit up his entire face. He ducked his head again next, and Felicity was a somewhat surprised herself to find that he looked a little embarrassed.

It took a moment for him to meet her eyes again. "Thank you," he said softly, and Felicity was pretty sure she could fill a small library with all the unspoken things the two little words carried. It wasn't just about her pride in him, or her efforts with the program, or even her loyalty; it was about everything. And she understood.

She blinked and he was leaning in, to place a light kiss on her cheek. His stubble brushed her skin
when he lingered, and she felt his breath right in her ear; closing her eyes, she let the seconds tick away, her mind playing with the same thoughts it had earlier in the basement.

And when Oliver did finally pull away, she caught sight of Diggle over his shoulder.

Maybe this whole thing was getting just a little out of hand.

Felicity kicked off her heels, going straight for her couch and letting herself bounce off the cushions.

Oddly non-platonic happenings were going to be the death of her.

Which was something that seemed to worry Johnny-boy, too. He didn't say it in so many words, but Felicity was well-aware of his...reservations. And when she'd prompted him on the ride over, he had only one thing to say, which somehow served as both his thoughts on the matter and some words of wisdom.

*Beware of the rabbit hole.*

Wise man, that John Diggle.

She was fully conscious of the very clear line that existed in her relationship with Oliver, and the rabbit hole would only become a potential danger once that line was crossed, which it would not be. They were not crossing that line. They were just...stomping on it a little.

It was all good. They were friends.

When her phone rang loudly in the otherwise quiet apartment, she both cursed and thanked Sara for calling. While she wasn't sure how much more fright her heart could handle, she was also in need of a distraction from her current thoughts.

"Hey," she picked up.

"Hey."

Sara's voice was quiet and sounded thick with fresh tears. Felicity immediately straightened in her seat, already half-poised to get Oliver on the other line.

"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," Sara said. "Really, it's – it's a good thing, actually."

Felicity frowned. "Then why do you sound like you're crying?"

Sara sniffled. "They're happy tears."

It only took a second for Felicity to grin. "You told your mom," she realized.

Sara had been in Coast City for weeks now, with the intention to tell her mother she was alive. Felicity had spoken to her a lot, sometimes to update her on what was going on in Starling,
sometimes to ask her about her own progress; it had been slow and bumpy, and Sara would always, for lack of better terms, chicken out at the last moment. Not this time, though, it seemed.

"Yeah," Sara said. "I just sort of...went for it. Turned up at her door." She chuckled. "It took less time than I thought it would to convince her I wasn't a hallucination."

"So, I take it the reunion went well?"

She imagined Sara nodding. "It did. You were right...it was great."

"See?" Felicity told her. "You were worrying too much." Letting her body sink into the couch cushions, she asked, "How much does she know?"

"Not much." Sara sighed. "I told her I was saved and taken in by some people, and that I'd finally repaid them for their care. She knows I'm hiding a lot, obviously, but...I don't think she cares."

Felicity smiled. "She's just happy to have you back."

Sara sniffled again. "Yeah," she agreed. "You were right about that, too."

People really were on a roll with complimenting her today, Felicity thought.

"So, uh, Mom's waiting for me in the living room," Sara went on. "I just wanted to call and tell you."

"I'm glad you did," Felicity said. Some good news were always welcome.

"And I'm not sure how long I'll stay here for," Sara added. "I've told Mom, so that still leaves Dad and Laurel...I think we'll be telling them together, but – " she laughed softly – "I also think Mom wants to keep me just to herself for a little while longer."

Felicity echoed her laughter as she said, "I'm happy for you, Sara. I really am."

"Thanks. Not just for the sentiment, but also...all the encouragement. Both mean a great deal to me."

"Don't mention it," Felicity told her softly. "Well, I wouldn't want to keep Mrs. Lance waiting, so I'll let you get back to the reunion. Just, when you decide to come back to Starling, give me a heads up, okay?"

"Of course," Sara agreed. "See you soon, Felicity."

"See ya, Canary."

The sound of Sara's chuckle was still echoing over the line when she hung up.

In the ensuing silence, Felicity took a moment to just relish the softness of her wonderful couch. She'd get some sleep, possibly by passing out right there on the cushions, and with the weekend at her disposal without overtime QC work to fill it with, she could dedicate her time to some good old file decryption.

But first, she was getting her beauty sleep.
Fear Is the Enemy

Chapter Notes

Guess who updated?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Oliver kept his focus solely on the breakfast plate in front of him, doing his best to ignore the weight of his sister's gaze on him. But he could feel it all the same, her eyes boring into him. Eventually, and with a sigh, he prompted, "Something on your mind, Speedy?"

He knew exactly what was on her mind. Which was why he was ignoring her.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Why so moody, Ollie?"

"Because it's hard to focus on my food when you're staring," he deadpanned.

Thea narrowed her eyes a fraction, drumming her fingers against the table. "Really?" she challenged. "I think it's because you know what I wanna talk about, and you're trying to avoid it, 'cause that's what you do."

Well, there went his appetite.

He lowered his knife and fork, then leaned back as he twined his fingers together. "What do you wanna talk about?"

"Ollie, come on."

She wanted to talk about Felicity. Ever since the previous night, when she'd seen them saying goodbye after the launch party, she'd been nagging.

Blowing out a breath, he said, "Okay. Felicity and I, we're friends. And you're meddling."

"You know, you're getting weirdly defensive about this."

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, Ollie," Thea went on, her voice growing softer, "it's okay to admit you may want more than that."

Her words struck a cord with him, but he did his best to silence the echo of it. "You're making assumptions," he retorted.

"Am I?" she countered. "Because, I've seen you two around each other – like, just a couple of times or so, but even with that, it's – " She sighed. "I may be a nag, and your meddling little sister," she said softly, "but that doesn't mean I'm wrong." Her mouth quirked into a smile. "And hey, I can drop it, if it's bothering you so much, but..." She shrugged. "Just bear in mind that it's okay to admit you want something you think you shouldn't. Denial's bad for your health, bro."

And with those words of wisdom, she popped a piece of toast in her mouth and went back to her
Oliver, however, was trying to keep the part of him that wanted to agree with her at bay. She didn't know everything, she didn't know how complicated it truly was. She didn't know the true context of it all, so obviously, that meant her advice didn't apply.

Right?

Even as he thought it, it rang false. If she was wrong in trying to apply a simple mold to a complex situation, then so was he; if working with Felicity, and Diggle, had taught him anything, it was that all the rules, all the carefully-built, rigid guidelines he had learned on the island and meant to apply to his life in Starling were ill-fitted. They didn't work.

And they, he and his team – he and Felicity – had forged their own rules, their own way of doing things, and little by little, Oliver had run out of cautionary mantras to repeat.

He had already formed the attachments – to both Felicity and Diggle. And if he said that a 'relationship in the workplace' would complicate things too much, throw them off balance, then he would be rehashing a tired excuse with no care for the actual situation they were in. But it was easier; the limbo he had made for himself, with one foot on each side. It was so much easier.

It's okay to admit you may want more than that.

If he as much as thought it, there would be no way to take it back.

He still thought about Felicity. He went through the motions of making her coffee; two sugars, no cream, hot enough to warm her throat, but not so hot as to burn it. He thought about how she'd taken to painting one of her fingernails green as an inside joke – one time, it was her middle finger. She was mad at him that day. He remembered her calling him insane and saying it like it was a good thing, and he remembered her calling him her hero; he remembered wanting to wipe the tears off her cheeks when she'd cried in her office. He recalled the weight of her hands on his shoulders as she told him she was proud of him, and how soft her skin had been under his lips when he'd kissed her cheek.

And the thought just crept into his mind. I want more.

"How's the decryption going?"

Felicity sighed, then spun her chair around to face her boys. "Slower than I'd like," she admitted. "The scan's done, but turns out, the weakest spot in Haze's encryption is still as strong as a standard NSA protection. Which means it'll take a while...and that someone who's as good as me used their powers for evil." She pursed her lips. "That sucks."

"Says the cyber-terrorist," Diggle teased.

She stuck her tongue out at him.
Her eyes fell on Oliver next, where he stood somewhat awkwardly next to Diggle at the bottom of the basement's stairs; she frowned. "You okay, Oliver?" she asked.

It took a moment for him to react, and when he did, it was with a quirk of his head and tight smile. "Hmm, yeah, fine." He cleared his throat. "What's on our to-do list for tonight?"

Changing the subject it is, she thought. "Well, nothing major on your vigilante's to-do list tonight," she informed. "Usual patrol routine. And speaking of vigilantes," she added, "Sara called yesterday – well, she calls almost every day, but she had some news this time."

Oliver's smile grew more genuine. "She told Mrs. Lance?" he guessed.

Felicity nodded with enthusiasm. "And it went better than she thought it would," she said, "which is really great. Of course, the next step is telling Mr. Lance and Laurel – "

"– and that might end with you getting shot," Diggle supplied for Oliver's benefit. When Felicity gave him a look, he merely shrugged.

"He does have a point," Oliver said. "They spent a lot of time blaming me for what happened – "

"As did you," Diggle chimed in again.

"– and I've spent a lot of time telling them that I was sure Sara was dead."

"You were," Felicity stressed. "You didn't lie to them."

"Be that as it may," he said softly, "I still...left her there, and that's – I wouldn't blame them if they held that against me."

Felicity thought about protesting once more, but then again, that was precisely one of the reasons Sara had chosen to tell her mother first.

"Besides," Oliver added, "I have been lying to them, sort of. I've known Sara is alive for a while now. Even when I was...on the stand, telling everyone that Merlyn was responsible for her death."

"There's a difference between being a liar and respecting others' choices," Felicity pointed out.

He did crack a small smile at that. "Yeah," he agreed, but his heart didn't really seem to be in it.

Felicity decided to drop it for now. There'd be time later, once their job was done.

Felicity worked on her decryption while Diggle directed Oliver through the streets. And it turned out to be a pretty busy Saturday night, as far as random street-crime went – which effectively made Johnny-boy a little worried.

"Are you sure you don't want me there with you, man?" Diggle asked.

"I'm good," came Oliver's response through the comms, along with the whoosh of an arrow and the indignant cry of a disgruntled criminal. "Besides, don't you have that dinner tonight?"

"You did promise Carly," Felicity joined the conversation.

"And I remember using my family name to get you a reservation in a highly over-priced restaurant," Oliver supplied.

Diggle sighed. "I don't want to carry you getting killed because you didn't have the back-up you
need on my conscience."

"I have it under control," Oliver assured. "It's all – hold on."

Some gunfire, a few more whooshes, a couple grunts and indignant cries later, he was speaking again. "Like I said, I've got it," he maintained. "Felicity and I can manage, John. Go to your dinner."

"You know you'll never get a sitter for a Saturday night again," Felicity coaxed him further.

"And you should take some time to be with Carly," Oliver added, his voice growing softer. "We're more than just our work, right?"

Was that a hint of longing she detected in his voice? Could be. He hadn't had as much as a hint of a personal life beyond the vigilante and the CEO since – well, it had been a while. And she could, sadly, sympathize entirely.

Which was why they were both very invested in getting at least one member of their team to have a successful love life.

"Right," Diggle agreed. After a beat, he added, "I've still got twenty minutes to kill before I need to get going, so let's find you some more crime to fight, shall we?"

They managed to squeeze in one last interruption of a robbery in progress before Diggle was on his way.

"Have fun," Felicity called over her shoulder and John gave her one final grin before going out of sight.

She watched him go, then told Oliver, "I will bet you that they won't last five minutes at the restaurant."

"Why do you say that?"

She raised an eyebrow at her screens, where she was tracking his progress through the city via hacked traffic cams. "Do you really see either of them faring well at a place overrun by waiters with fake French accents?"

"You have a point," Oliver conceded, and she imagined he was doing so with a smile.

Felicity abandoned her Phobos files in favor of giving the police scanner her full attention, looking for incoming crime alerts from the dispatcher. "I'm also willing to bet they'll eventually end up in the jazz bar on Main," she added absentmindedly as she typed. "And I'm positive Carly will convince him to go up on stage, too. His band plays on Saturdays."

There was silence on Oliver's end. And then, "John's in a jazz band?"

"Well, yeah," Felicity said. "You didn't know?"

"Uh..."

"I mean, it's more of a once-in-a-blue-moon kind of gig these days, you know?" Felicity went on. "What with his schedule and everything, especially now that the team is back in business, but he gets together with the band for a song or two when he has time – he plays the saxophone, by the way. He took me to the club once to watch him play, he's really good."

Oliver was quiet again, and it was a while before he said, "That sounds like it was a lot of fun."
Felicity bit her lip. "Well, you're here to stay this time, right?" she said softly. "There's opportunities for you to see John rock the jazz club scene yet."

"Right," Oliver whispered.

Before Felicity could think of something else to say, an alert popped up on her screen. Duty calls.

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"I told you to go home."

"And I don't actually take orders from you," Felicity retorted, twirling her chair around to face him; the patrol was done, the criminals were getting booked at the precinct, and Oliver was now standing in the lair, hood down and giving her a look.

He shook his head after a moment. "Working on Haze's files?" he queried as he laid his bow on the table and unstrapped his quiver.

"Actually, yes," Felicity said. "Diggle texted, by the way," she added. "I was right."

Oliver let out a warm huff of a chuckle. "You usually are."

Maybe she had a wild and overactive imagination, but that little statement sounded heavy with implied meaning. She tipped her head to the side. "Since you can't use crime-fighting as an excuse to ignore me now," she began, "I'll ask again: are you okay?"

Oliver was still for a moment, before he drew a quick breath and his lips parted with a quiet pop.

"Yeah."

"You don't sound like it," she remarked.

"I'm – " His eyes left hers, to focus on some distant part of the basement's ceiling. "I just...realized something today, and it's – " He sighed. "It's all I can think about now."

Well, that sounded suitably vague and cryptic. "Was that something good or bad?"

"That...depends on your point of view, I guess."

Wow, she thought. He was turning evasiveness into an art form.

"Well – " she clasped her hands – "does it have anything to do with the bullet with your name on it, scheduled to be fired by a member of the Lance family?"

"Uh...yeah."

Liar. But never let it be said she didn't know how to play along. Besides, it probably was something worthy of discussion. "Okay, well...no matter how Mr. Lance or Laurel react, I think you should remember that Sara doesn't blame you for any of it."
"I blame myself," he said quietly.

Right. "I get that you're used to carrying the guilt of everything that ever went wrong around," she told him bluntly, "but at some point, you're just gonna have to accept that people make their own choices. Like Sara did. She wanted to go on the Gambit with you, and now, her telling her family she's alive needs to happen on her own terms – since it's, you know, her life. So, you feeling guilty over respecting that and not telling her family she was alive before or whatever your thought-process here is – well, it makes you sound like some sort of guilt-junkie or something."

He looked like he might smile for a moment, before he focused his attention on getting his gloves off.

"And," Felicity added, "if her dad and sister want to blame you, then sure, they can, but if you ask me, it will be as misplaced as the blame you place on yourself." She shrugged. "Not everything is your fault."

He did smile this time. "So you keep telling me," he said.

"Hey, maybe you'll actually end up listening to me." When he didn't offer a comeback, she asked, "Wanna tell me about what's really bothering you? 'Cause I'm not buying that this is all there is to it."

He spared her a sidelong glance, then braced his hands against the table, bowing his head. The seconds ticked by while he kept quiet, and Felicity had the feeling he was gathering his thoughts, organizing them and following the thread of what weighed on him right back to its roots. So, when he did speak, he had her utmost attention.

"When I came back," he began, his voice low, "I had this clear notion that...good things don't last, if they ever do happen, so I – " he licked his lips – "I resolved myself to just being a...vessel for justice, I guess. Nothing more. It didn't matter what...what I wanted, or – it didn't matter. I didn't matter. And I did my best to remember that, but sometimes...I forgot – I still forget. I forget that happiness doesn't last, and – " He shook his head. "I'm afraid," he admitted. "I'm afraid of wanting things, hoping I'll get to have them, only to...watch everything crash and burn."

Felicity had heard him say a lot of sad things since knowing him, even if he hadn't intended them as such. This, however, had to be the saddest thing she had ever heard him say.

She didn't know what it was that had sparked his fear this time around, but she supposed the reasons weren't what was really important here. "Bad things will always happen," she said. "It doesn't mean you shouldn't enjoy the good stuff while it lasts."

He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "I tried that," he muttered. "I still lost, in the end. And I'm...I'm not sure how much more losing I can handle."

For a man whose response to nearly every emotionally-crippling situation was, "I can take it", it had to be so very difficult to admit that he could not, in fact, handle pain indefinitely.

Felicity rose to her feet, slowly making her way to him. "Not everything is doomed," she told him when she was at his side. "And even if it is, you should still enjoy the good stuff while it lasts." She only hesitated a moment before laying her hand on his shoulder, and running it down the length of his leather-clad arm; his bowed head turned to the side just slightly, though he still didn't meet her eyes. "So...what is it you're scared of wanting this time?"

She watched as his brow creased slightly and his mouth opened as if he wanted to speak, but no actual answer left his throat; eventually, he shrugged helplessly. "Everything," he said. "I want everything. To be...Green Arrow, to have my family, and my team, and – " He stopped himself
short, pressing his lips together. He drew a breath, then a second one, before he repeated, "I want everything. And I'm scared to death of it."

Felicity tried to temper her smile, even as a lump clogged her throat. "Remember all that stuff I said about leaps and closing your eyes and jumping and all of that?" she whispered her question, and got her answer when his mouth quirked at the corner. "Well," she said, "I think...I think you already made your decision about that."

He did meet her eyes then, his mouth pulling into an actual smile. "Like I said," he told her warmly, "you're usually right."

Felicity grinned back; sometimes, she really was proud of him. And not just because he'd finally acknowledged that she was right ninety-nine percent of the time.

Her hand was moving before she could give her actions some actual thought; her fingers came to rest at the nape of his neck, brushing the short strands there, and her thumb swiped the side of his cheek.

She froze, as did he, and for a few awkward moments, she had no idea what to do. Should she remove her hand, mumble an apology and retreat? Pretend this was all completely normal and roll with it? Scratch him behind the ear like a puppy?

Faced with all these choices, all at once, she just left her hand there.

But then he surprised her. He leaned into her touch, closing his eyes and bobbing head up and down just enough to cause the slightest bit of friction between his skin and the pads of her fingers. She gulped.

And when he opened his eyes to look up at her, they were steady, and focused, and she thought that maybe, everything he wanted somehow included her, too.

Which was just –

She cleared her throat and backed away, letting her hand drop back to her side; Oliver's eyes tracked its descent in silence before he nodded, ever-so-slightly.

Felicity tried to think past the loud rush of blood in her ears, scrambling for a possible way out of this situation. "It's, uh – it's late," she blurted out. "We should go home – homes! We should each go to...our own home, which is not...the same home. Obviously."

She cleared her throat once more, practically lunging for her coat and purse, and diligently avoiding to make eye contact again. "I...will see you later," she muttered as she dashed past him, where he still hadn't moved as much as muscle.

She was already halfway up the stairs when she heard his soft, "Goodnight."

Pausing in her steps for a moment, she sighed. "Goodnight, Oliver," she said, letting her heels clack against the stairs the rest of the way up to the door.

She had a feeling that pretending everything between them was purely, blissfully and completely platonic was going to get just a little trickier.
Clocking in for vigilante duty on a Sunday was probably sad. Then again, she spent all her weekends down here, mostly.

Yeah, definitely sad.

Still, she had files to access, ones she had dropped the previous night, and that meant self-imposed extra hours. She hadn't made as much progress as she would have liked before, what with the encryption proving to be a challenge and her... *conversation* with Oliver, but here she was now, ready for battle.

Felicity cracked her knuckles, then worked out the kinks in her neck.

She had coffee, free time, a mind in need of distraction, a keyboard and encrypted files; it was time to do some heavy-duty code-breaking.

A few hours later, she almost wished she hadn't.

She waited, arms wound tightly around herself, for Oliver and Diggle to arrive, so she could tell them what she'd found. When the clatter of their footsteps echoed behind her about twenty minutes or so later, she sat perfectly still, her eyes simply itching to fill with tears, even as Oliver called out, "Felicity?"

He and Diggle flanked her sides, waiting for her to walk them through her findings. She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out; she closed it, took a deep breath, then tried again.

"I cracked Haze's files," she said, her voice low and scratchy; out of the corner of her eye, she saw Oliver shift closer to her. "The – *Phobos*, it's...it's actually a codename for a drug," she went on. "That's what the project was about, Haze, he – he was developing a drug, and – " She cleared her throat. "He was being funded by multiple buyers, and he made a lot of money, but I can't trace those payments, the files – the files is where he documented his research." Closing her eyes, she added, "His *experiments*."

After a beat, Oliver softly prompted, "What experiments?"

With one more deep breath, Felicity placed her hands on the keyboard and started bringing up the footage and the notes; she could practically feel the men grow still next to her.

There was silence for a while, as the images flickered by. Felicity refused to play the audio as well; she'd already heard it once.

"What the hell did he give to those people?" Diggle let out.

Felicity's eyes stayed on the screen, on a nameless man huddled in the corner and pulling at his own hair; they couldn't hear it now, but she knew that the video went hand-in-hand with an audio feed of the most blood-curling sobs. "Phobos is the god of fear – in Greek mythology anyway," she said. "So, this drug, it's...it's about making people afraid." She pulled up the files that detailed the make-up of the drug. "So afraid," she added, "that they eventually break down."

Swallowing past the lump in her throat, she forced herself to explain. "The drug, what it does is...it attacks the amygdala, which is the brain's officially unofficial fear processor, and – well, it's a little more complicated than that, but the point is, it overstimulates the area to the point that
it's...overwhelming. And – " she pointed to a few items on the list – "it's coupled with very powerful hallucinogenics, so, essentially, it..."

"Makes your worst nightmares come to life," Diggle supplied. "Literally."

Felicity managed to nod in confirmation. "And the drug's designed so that it has an inordinately long half-life," she said. "So, by the time it's broken down..."

"The damage is already done," Oliver concluded quietly.

"Yeah," Felicity agreed. "Haze noted that some of his – " she ground her teeth – "subjects developed severe anxiety disorders and PTSD. Some of them...died." She gulped. "Their hearts couldn't take the stress and the adrenaline so...they died."

"All these people, and no one found the pattern before?" Diggle asked.

Felicity shook her head. "He only took people who had no one to report them missing. Or no one who cared enough to do it. The homeless, sex workers..." Her lip curled in disgust. "He was...careful."

Tasting the bile on her tongue, she closed her eyes and pushed her chair back. "You guys...look through it if you want," she said as she rose to her feet. "I'm gonna – I just need a minute."

She felt Oliver's eyes on her with every step she took towards the more solitary corner of their lair; she stood stiffly in her spot, staring down at no particular spot of the floor. She heard the faint mumbling of hushed voices behind her, then the quiet sound of approaching footsteps.

"Hey."

She looked up to find Oliver standing in front of her. "You okay?" he asked.

"No, I am...definitely not okay," she said, shaking her head. She bit down on her lip as she quietly added, "I'm never going to get used to this stuff. You know, whatever...whatever we see while we're doing this, I'm just...never gonna get used to it."

Oliver didn't respond right away, his eyes wandering over the nooks and crannies of the place before they returned to hers. "That's a good thing," he eventually told her.

She huffed. "Really? 'Cause it doesn't feel all that good right now."

"Maybe," he allowed. "But it takes a lot to...be able to see horrible things all the time and not get used to them, become indifferent to them. You shouldn't – you shouldn't let that happen."

_You shouldn't be like me_, was what he really meant.

She did her best to offer him some semblance of a smile in response. "Yeah, I know," she whispered. She had never subscribed to the idea that strength equaled a hardened heart; she liked to keep her own heart open, and it was a part of herself she didn't want to lose. With the work they did, though, the balancing act got difficult sometimes. But she appreciated the reminder, and the encouragement.

Oliver's eyes crinkled at the corners under his own smile, though he said nothing further. And with no actual words left to break the silence, it was the unspoken that filled it. Namely, the very fresh and palpable memory of their most recent on-the-wrong-side-of-not-platonic situation.

They were usually very good at ignoring things; the occasional slips of the tongue, and the oddly
sexual undercurrents, and her sometimes obscene innuendos, they ignored it all. This latest development however, felt just a little harder to dismiss.

Felicity thought about the way he had looked at her the previous night, the way in which he was actually beginning to look at her now, and she thought about the scratch of his stubble against her fingertips. Her eyes followed the path her thumb would take, across his cheek and down the line of his jaw, then over his chin and just under the arc of his bottom lip; she thought about what it would be like if it weren't the prickle of stubble she felt under the pads of her fingers, but rather soft lips...

"The drug isn't in Haze's lab!" she let out, a little too loudly, and spun around towards John; he jumped a little at the sound of her voice. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Oliver too looked a little startled, blinking rapidly. She barreled on as if nothing had happened. "He had his own private lab, so he could hide it there without getting caught, but after he died, the local PD did an inventory of everything he had in there, and none of the compounds accounted for match the chemical makeup of Phobos."

"So, it's safe to assume that whoever ordered the kill also took Haze's supply of the drug," Diggle concluded.

Felicity nodded. "Yeah. And I mean, it makes sense – in a way. There are plenty of scientists out there who can recreate a formula if they have enough material to extract it from. And this way, our Big Bad doesn't have to rely on suppliers to get their goods."

"So, the question is," Oliver piped in, while Felicity studiously kept her back to him and her eyes on John, "what are they using it for?"

"This kind of drug can easily be weaponized," Diggle said. "If our...Big Bad wants to become a supplier himself, he can sell it to our enemies, which would...compromise all of our troops abroad. And if it's turned stateside, it can be used to cause mass hysteria or take out government figureheads, destabilize the country."

"Terrorism, then," Felicity summed it up. "That's cheery."

After a moment, Oliver spoke up again. "Is there any way we can start looking for this thing?"

Felicity took a deep breath, looking over her shoulder to face him again. "None," she admitted. "I can't trace the buyers' payments, and I can't trace the payment made to Deadshot either. I – Haze kept everything very discreet, he didn't have names in his ledgers, only numbers. And without knowing who he sold this stuff to..."

"We can't know where to start looking for it," Diggle added resignedly. "Although, it says here – " he gestured to the screens – "that he had an assistant. Think the kid may know something?"

Felicity shook her head. "Doubt it. The assistant didn't have access to the Phobos files. I don't think Haze let him anywhere near that side of the business."

"Might still be worth a shot," Oliver countered. "I should pay him a visit."

"You can't exactly afford to take a trip to Metropolis right now, Oliver," Felicity said. "Since that's where he is, and you have a busy schedule – on both fronts."

"When my schedule clears, then," he conceded.

"I still don't think he'll know anything," Felicity repeated quietly. "I think we'll actually have to wait for someone to use the drug, and hope it makes the news, which is just...depressing."
Oliver had his hand half-raised in a second, looking like he might have wanted to place it on her shoulder, but changed his mind midway. Instead, he said, "We'll get them, Felicity, one way or the other."

"Yeah," she muttered. She did believe it, but she also had a weird sort of feeling about this, like they were going about it all the wrong way, while missing something glaringly obvious.

Chapter End Notes

Do you have any idea how much I angsted over the introduction of that drug? Like, introducing what it is and what it does? I had all these pages earmarked in my psychophysiology textbooks so I could brainstorm semi-believable ways to make it happen, and then the show introduced the Mirakuru with something as basely simple as 'mystical substance + sedative = superhuman', at which point I said 'screw it' and went down the good ol' 'complete BS with a couple of smart words thrown in to make it seem clever' road. I hope I have not failed you.

Also. There was this picture circulating a while back on Tumblr that pointed out that our dear John Diggle has a saxophone in his apartment. I had henceforth accepted the headcanon that Digg plays in a jazz band.
Rabbit-Hearted

Chapter Notes

This chapter is trash, I'm sorry.

But at least I've updated...right?

I'm sorry.

It wasn't awkward.

Just a little...weird.

But not awkward at all.

"Did something happen I should know about?"

Oliver dragged his eyes away from the computers station and his thoughts away from the woman that sat there, to find Diggle standing in front of him with his hands stuffed in his slacks' pockets and a raised eyebrow.

"What do you mean?" Oliver tried to deflect, but it only served to get Diggle's second eyebrow to join the first high up on his forehead.

With a quiet sigh, he set aside the arrow he was meant to be sharpening but wasn't really paying that much attention to anyway. "Nothing happened, Diggle," he said.

"Really?" the other man challenged. "Because you and Felicity have been weird around each other for days. Now, when I asked her, she said it was nothing too, but after the third high-pitched, 'nothing happened, John, nothing!', I got the idea that she might be, you know, lying."

Okay, so maybe it was a little awkward.

More than he had expected, actually. As long as they talked about the vigilante business or the new mission on their hands or Queen Consolidated, everything was fine; the moment they ran out of words, though, he swore all that hung in the air around them was the memory of him leaning into her touch. He shouldn't have done it. He had overreached. But it was so easy, sometimes, to get wrapped up in Felicity's optimism and to think that, maybe, grasping for something better, something happier, wasn't all that foolish. But just because she believed in him, and stood by him, and liked to watch him work the salmon ladder, didn't mean she wanted the same thing he'd realized he did.

And now, he'd made it awkward between them.

But awkward or not, neither of them were actually lying; nothing had happened.

Oliver let his eyes slip over to Felicity one more time. "Nothing did happen, John," he said. "It was just – I sort of had this idea, and..." He shrugged. "For a second, I thought it could actually...happen, or – I don't know. The point is, it didn't happen, and it won't, so it might be weird for a few days, but it will soon...go back to normal."
He cleared his throat, bringing his eyes back to Diggle; he found that the latter's expression betrayed nothing, though Oliver surmised it wasn't for lack of strong opinions on the matter.

The seconds ticked by, until Diggle finally sighed and said, "Look, man, I promised myself a long time ago that I wouldn't get in the middle of whatever it is you and Felicity have going on, but you are both important to me, and the stability of this team is important to me, so I'll ask...do you want things to go back to normal?"

Oliver shook his head. "It doesn't matter, Digg."

"Doesn't it?" John countered. "You know, Oliver, the world won't end if you admit to wanting something."

After a faint chuckle, Oliver commented, "You're not the first person to tell me that."

"Well, maybe you should start listening."

"I did," Oliver said quietly, meeting Diggle's eyes. "And now, things are weird."

Diggle hummed and nodded, as if to say he had conceded to that point. After a moment, he added, "I'm not gonna stand here and pretend like I don't know exactly what we're talking about, Oliver, and I'm not gonna pretend like I don't think this is for the best either."

"But?" Oliver prompted.

"But," Diggle obliged, "I also think that maybe, things are weird because the two of you haven't actually talked about this."

"There's nothing to – "

"Heads up!"

Both men turned to Felicity, where she had spun around in her chair and was waving her phone around. "Sara and her mother are coming to Starling," she informed. "ETA is ten hours."

"Ah, well." Diggle clucked his tongue. "I think we have a bulletproof vest for you around here somewhere, Oliver."

The proverbial bullet came the next day.

It was the end of the day's board meeting, which had actually ended on a oddly chipper note, what with Isabel positively bursting with expectations for Queen Consolidated's appearance at the Starling Expo Center that weekend and the subsequent investors' party at the Queen mansion.

Oliver wanted nothing more than to be rid of that woman.

And when Laurel came bursting into his office, ignoring Diggle's instructions to slow down, Oliver
wanted nothing more than to be literally anywhere but at his desk.

"Laurel, what – "


That wasn't news, and Oliver had been told that Sara wouldn't be saying anything about him knowing that; in her family's eyes, he would be learning about this when they were. So, he had to put on a hell of an act.

"Wh – what are you talking about?" he whispered.

Laurel's features grew slack, and he realized he'd forgotten that she knew him best when he was lying.

"Did – did you know?" she demanded. "You knew, didn't you?"

"Laurel, I – " He rose to his feet, leaning in to quietly add, "I don't know what you're talking about. Sara, she's – she's dead."

Laurel gritted her teeth. "You'd think so, right, after all the times you told me you saw her drown," she hissed. "But she's not, she came back. She's here."

Oliver opened and closed his mouth, not knowing what to say, even to make his lie more believable.

"Just this once, don't lie to my face," Laurel went on, "and tell me the truth. Did you know she was alive?"

He didn't want to lie to her, not again, but he couldn't tell the truth either. And as it turned out, Laurel was very good at reading between the lines.

She huffed. "Of course you did," she said. "How long, Ollie? Last year, when you were telling me how sure you were she was dead, after my mother was so sure that she was alive, did you know then, too?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, pulling in a deep breath before looking up again. "No," he said, and for once, it really was the truth.

"Right," she muttered. "She came here with Mom, you know – actually, maybe you did know that, too." She chuckled dryly. "Like with everything when it comes to Sara, I'm always the last to know."

"Laurel – " Oliver tried to get another word in, but she was already spinning around and marching out of his office.

From his spot by the door, Diggle deadpanned, "That went well."

Oliver hung his head.
"Anybody home?"

Oliver turned to the lair's entrance in time to see Felicity already spinning around and jumping out of her chair, even before the stairs were done rattling under Sara's combat boots, to run at and throw her arms around the other woman. Sara stumbled slightly under the momentum, letting out a little sound of surprise.

"Oh, sorry." Felicity pulled back. "Is it weird that I'm hugging you?"

Sara smiled widely enough for her dimples to show. "Not at all," she assured, then leaned in for another hug. Felicity wound her arms around her tightly, squeezing back. "It's good to have you back," she said.

"I second that," Oliver joined in as he walked up to them with Diggle at his side; Felicity stepped away, and Oliver tried not to dwell on how quickly she'd done so as he gave Sara a hug of his own. It really was good to have her back.

"Welcome home again, Sara," Diggle told her warmly.

"Thanks," she said. "And uh, Ollie, I'm sorry if...Laurel gave you a hard time. I assume she went to see you after she...stormed out of Dad's apartment."

"Guess I've lied to her so many times, she's not buying it anymore," he commented.

"I'm sorry if...Laurel gave you a hard time. I assume she went to see you after she...stormed out of Dad's apartment."

"I second that," Oliver joined in as he walked up to them with Diggle at his side; Felicity stepped away, and Oliver tried not to dwell on how quickly she'd done so as he gave Sara a hug of his own. It really was good to have her back.

"Welcome home again, Sara," Diggle told her warmly.

"Thanks," she said. "And uh, Ollie, I'm sorry if...Laurel gave you a hard time. I assume she went to see you after she...stormed out of Dad's apartment."

"Guess I've lied to her so many times, she's not buying it anymore," he commented.

Sara frowned. "What do you mean?"

Oliver half-shrugged, then sighed. "She sort of...figured out I knew you were alive, you know, before now, about five seconds in."

"Oh."

"Yeah. So, uh..." He cleared his throat. "How did Mr. Lance react?"

Biting her lip, Sara said, "He's...not your biggest fan right now. But it's – he's processing. Like Laurel." More quietly, she added, "Although, Laurel isn't...my biggest fan right now either."

Felicity reached out, grasping Sara's hand in her own. "The hardest part's done," she said softly. "Your family knows you're alive. It can only get better from here."

"When I first came back, she told me she'd hoped that I would rot in hell for a lot longer than five years," Oliver supplied helpfully. "So just...give it a little time."

Sara looked in equal parts grateful and terrified, before she eventually shook her head, as if to rid herself of the sadness. "You're right," she told them, turning to Felicity and squeezing her hand as she added, "It can only get better."

Felicity beamed. "We should celebrate," she suggested. "Unless you...wanna go right back to your family?"

"I can spare a few hours," Sara said.

"Great. How do you feel about burgers, fries and giant sodas?"

Sara nodded her approval.
"Digg, to the Big Belly Burger," Felicity commanded. "We'll be right back."

Sara's brow creased in their wake, and when they went out of earshot, she asked, "Is carrying the food really a two-person job?"

It wasn't.

Things, however, were weird.

"Felicity just probably wants to handpick the best food for you," he said.

"Mm-hmm," Sara hummed, making it clear that his excuses weren't getting any better as time went by.

"So, umm...do you want me to bring down something from the bar?" he changed the subject.

Sara shook her head. "I'm good, thanks." She looked over his shoulder then, and with a grin, made her way to Felicity's computers; when he joined her, Oliver found that she was holding the 'autographed' mug and smiling at it.

"She kept it."

"Yeah," Oliver said, feeling a smile of his own breaking forth. "You know, she'd wanted you to sign her mug from the moment you rolled into town – even before we knew it was you."

Sara chuckled. "She's been so great to me," she said fondly. "While I was in Coast City, every time I started having doubts about telling Mom, she found a way to make me feel better."

"Yeah, she...has a way of making things better," Oliver whispered.

Sara paused in twirling the mug in her hands, sparing him a sidelong glance. "Still just friends?" she inquired.

It was funny, Oliver thought. The last time Sara was in town, her insinuations to the contrary were something he would dismiss as ridiculous and way off-base; this time around, though, it was dismissing the idea that felt ridiculous.

"Yes," he said, and knowing that that was the only answer he could give felt a little like a punch to the gut.

"Oliver, what's going on?"

"Nothing," came his automatic response, but much like his excuses, Sara didn't seem to be buying it; she merely raised an eyebrow at him.

With a quiet sigh, he added, "Nothing's going on, Sara, nothing happened. Really."

With a soft clang, the mug was back in its corner of the desk, and Sara was turning to face him. "Why do I get the feeling that's exactly the problem?"

Oliver looked away.

"So, things have changed while I was away," she concluded.

"No," He shook his head. "Things are – they're the same, it's just...I got – I got carried away for a moment, and..." He licked his lips. "I just thought, because – because of everything, that..." That she
might want this, too.

Shaking his head again, he said, "It doesn't matter. I...thought wrong, and...there's that." His fingers traced patterns on the desk's smooth surface, while he rigorously avoided meeting Sara's eyes; as he had discovered the last time she was here, he seemed to have a tendency to talk too much, notably about Felicity, when she was the one listening.

"Is this something she told you, or is it something you're assuming?" Sara asked.

"The message was pretty clear," he muttered.

"Right. You know, I can think of at least one relationship of yours that failed because of a lack of communication," Sara pointed out and, when Oliver spared her an unimpressed look, shrugged. "Look, one scarred castaway to another," she told him, "sometimes, taking big chances pays off. It did for me. Sure, my sister still kinda hates me, but..." She sighed. "If I deserve to be happy again, Ollie," she said, "then so do you."

Happiness didn't last, he thought. He'd learned that, time and again – and then he forgot the lesson. That had to fit the definition of insanity quite nicely. He probably really was insane, too, if only for the giddy little thought that danced around his head, telling him that Felicity literally meant happiness.

She shouldn't.

She should just leave him there by himself. He liked being alone a lot anyway.

Even as she thought it, her feet were taking her back to her desk, and the chair Oliver was seated in. It was just the two of them left now, after all the food had been cleaned out and Sara and Diggle had both gone back to their families. Their little improvised dinner had been really nice, actually, though Felicity swore the awkward tension that lingered between her and Oliver had spread and become an undercurrent for all four of them. That same awkwardness, as it happened, was why she should just leave him alone, to sit and absentmindedly twirl that pen in his hand; it also happened that it had become a habit of hers to do the exact opposite of that.

"Are you okay?" she asked quietly when she was within his earshot; the chair spun as he faced her, and Felicity saw his eyes flicker from the empty space around them, then to her, before he quickly returned his gaze back to the pen he held.

Shaking his head a little, he said, "Yeah."

Dammit, Felicity thought as she stepped closer, planting herself right in front of him. "Come on, no lies," she chided softly. There was a little twitch at the corner of his mouth but he offered nothing beyond that.

"Is it...about Laurel?" she tried, wringing her hands a little. "'Cause, what you said about...her coming to see you today, it kinda made it seem like it wasn't very fun for you, so...is it that?"
It took a moment for her to get a reaction out of him. With a deep, long sigh, leaned back in the chair; he met her eyes then, and Felicity thought that he just looked very...sad.

"No," he whispered, "it's not that, Felicity."

There was just no mistaking that tone; this was about her.

She gulped.

"Right," she muttered. "Well, I'm glad we cleared that up. I'll see you tomorrow then, bye."

Making a run for it in high heels was really not ideal, but she could make it work. And she was so close to the finish line, too, when –

"Felicity, wait."

She halted in her tracks, cursing both him and herself, before taking a deep breath and slowly turning around to see him rise to his feet and make his way to her; she clutched her bag a little tighter.

"We should talk," he said.

"Talk? Talk about what? There's nothing to talk about."

"Felicity."

She grumbled under her breath.

"Things have been...weird, these past few days," he told her. "Between us."


His lips pressed together as he raised his eyebrows, and Felicity had to admit to defeat. "Fine, it's a little weird," she allowed.

"That's my fault," Oliver said quietly, "and I'm sorry."

Her nails dug into the strap of her bag as she bit into her lip, and watched his Adam's apple bob up and down before he cleared his throat.

"I thought I'd just pretend like it didn't happen," he went on, "and that would be it, but..." His words trailed off on a sharp little breath, and for the split-second before he averted his gaze, she caught the traces of uncertainty there.

She closed her eyes for a moment, and shook her head. "Nothing happened," she said.

"It did," he whispered, so quietly she almost didn't hear him, but the words still blared in her ears as if he had shouted them.

"I got...carried away," he added, "and I – I thought that..." The tip of his tongue darted out to wet his lips, and Felicity's eyes followed its path even as her heart thumped ever-louder in her chest; part of her wanted to stop him from saying it, from putting it on the record where they couldn't pretend it wasn't real anymore, but her mouth wouldn't form the words.

So, he kept talking; after a deep breath, his eyes were back on her, going over her face before they met her own. "I thought that maybe, you'd want more than what we have now, too," he said. "And I think you understood that."
The rush of blood filled her ears as she drew a quick breath, and a strange sort of buzz crawled up her skin, sparked by the knowledge that, if she leaned in close now, he’d probably close the distance left.

And that was –

That was the way down the rabbit hole.

"But I got the message, too," Oliver went on. "I was wrong, and – and I'm sorry that made things weird between us. I get that – " He sighed. "You and me, we're friends, and we're partners, and I wouldn't – I never want to lose that." After clearing his throat, he added, "And I get that you don't want anything more than that. So...I'm sorry."

In the quiet that followed, Felicity couldn't quite tell what had her more tongue-tied; his incredible display of honesty, or the mess of thoughts tumbling through her head. Some made his words taste sweet as they echoed in her ears, others made panic simmer in her throat; and the rest just made her fingers itch to pull his head down to hers.

So in the end, all she managed to say in response was, "Oh."

"Yeah," he muttered, gaze firmly trained on some spot on the floor. Felicity let her eyes go over the stiff set of his shoulders and his bowed head, right down to his hand, where he was rubbing his thumb and forefinger together. It had to have taken him so much, she thought, to say all of this to her; to be this honest with her.

She owed him honesty in return, and the words were right at the tip of her tongue; he hadn't gotten it quite right, not really, because it wasn't that she wouldn't want more, or that she couldn't see it happen – she could see it very clearly, actually.

But then she thought it was better to just leave it like this, to not test her ability not to fall down the rabbit hole that were her feelings, and her feelings for him. He'd given her a perfect out, a perfect way to seal the lid on this.

"What we have now," she whispered, "it's good, right? Like you said, we're friends, and we're partners – and we fight crime together, I mean, how many people get to say that?"

There was a little twitch at the corner of his mouth and Felicity felt herself smiling too, even as her eyes began to water. "And nothing is ever going to change that," she promised, making him look up again and letting her meet his eyes – his pretty, sad, bright blue eyes. "But I think it'd be better if that's...all we'll ever be," she made the words roll off her tongue, even if they tasted bitter. "Friends, and partners. That's...that's what I want."

The little bob of his head came as soon as she was done talking, like her words were exactly what he had expected to hear. He looked away, licking his lips, before he gave her one clean, firm nod.

"Then that's how it's going to be," he said. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable, Felicity," he added, more quietly, "and I don't want things to be weird between us."

"Okay," she breathed out. "We'll just...hit the reset button on all of this, and...go back to normal?"

He reared back, just a tiny little step, and Felicity didn't quite know why, but she thought he might be literally trying to put distance between himself and what she had said. He still offered her a small, wan half-smile, though. "Yeah," he agreed.

"Good, okay." She nodded. "Um...see you tomorrow?"
"See you tomorrow, Felicity."

She kept her steps and breathing even the whole way to the door, then to her car. The next draw of breath into her lungs was unsteady, though, and it was just as broken as she blew it out. It was ridiculous that there were tears in her eyes right now, and that she was sniffling as she dug around for her car keys; this was what she'd wanted. Redrawing the line right where it used to be and not messing with it ever again; it was for the best.

And she really, really shouldn't be crying about it.

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His mother had always known how to throw a great party.

The investors' party at the mansion was a thing of organizational wonder; there wasn't as much as a step out of sync in the waiters' circling routine, nor was there any imperfection in the color-coordinated set-up of assorted foods and drinks. It was all, much like his mother, very elegant in nature.

She had been quite eager to take on the planning of the event, and Oliver thought that it was probably because house arrest was boring her out of her mind in-between community service hours.

He stood in the corner of the salon, champagne in hand, taking a respite from sweet-talking investors and other, as Felicity called them, big kahunas.

Felicity.

His eyes wandered over to her, where she was engaged in conversation with a representative of Wayne Enterprises. She had often spoken about her desire to sign more contracts with the company, especially for her own department, as they held some of the best patents in the tech world – which, Oliver thought, probably explained her wide smile and enthusiastic hand gestures as she spoke to the woman from Wayne Enterprises. The corner of the woman's mouth was lifted into a half-smile as she listened, and Oliver felt a smile creeping onto his own lips.

Felicity had that effect on people. She was just so...lovely.

Oliver drew a quick, sharp breath against the sudden hollow pang in his gut, and let it leave his lungs on a quiet sigh.

Things weren't weird anymore. They were as they used to be, though the first day had been a little bumpy. But they were a few days in now, and while Oliver was glad they had found their footing again, that he hadn't managed to lose her, there were still times, like right now, when the longing just cut right through him.

"You need to stop staring, man."

Oliver pursed his lips before turning to Diggle. "I'm not staring," he defended.

John leveled him with an utterly unimpressed look. "Oliver, I don't know what happened exactly,"
he said, "and things have pretty much gone back to the way they used to be – except when you keep staring at her when she's not looking."

"What do you want me to do, Digg?"

After a soft sigh, Diggle shook his head. "This isn't going to make it easier for you."

"Well, that's my problem, isn't it?" Oliver snapped. "And shouldn't you be glad about this? It's how you wanted things to go, right?"

He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth, and he hung his head. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "That was...it was petty, I'm sorry."

Diggle hummed. "Yeah," he said, "but I'm not glad to see you hurting, man."

"I'm not – "

"Oliver," Diggle interrupted, giving him a very knowing look, "I spent years wanting to be with my brother's wife. I know what it feels like."

"Things worked out for you and Carly," Oliver remarked quietly.

"They did," John agreed, then seemed to ponder something. Eventually, he said, "For the record, I'm not glad that things didn't work out – between you and Felicity. But – " he clucked his tongue – "what you are is a flight risk, Oliver, especially when it comes to the women you're involved with. So, I am glad that I don't have to worry about seeing Felicity left behind one more time."

Oliver looked away, twirling the drink in his hand. The words were heavy, and sharp, and they too cut right through him.

"I'm not leaving again, John," he whispered.

"I do believe that," Diggle told him. "But this isn't just about you being Green Arrow, Oliver, this is about being with someone who...who's never done anything halfway. And I'm not sure you're up for that."

He probably wasn't.

"It's a moot point anyway, Digg," he said. "She doesn't want anything more than what we have now."

"So, you did have a talk?"

Oliver blew out a breath. "Yeah. So, you don't have to worry."

"I always worry," Diggle grumbled, to which Oliver couldn't help but crack a smile. John gave him a friendly pat on the back next, before going back his duties as part of the event's security, and Oliver appreciated the gesture.

And then his eyes went straight back to Felicity.

Isabel was at her side now, and the sight made Oliver grit his teeth; Felicity was, for all intents and purposes, playing nice, and the only hint of her discomfort was the tense line of her shoulders. The twinge in his stomach at seeing Rochev's obvious interest in Felicity on display came unbidden, and rationally, he knew it was ridiculous; Felicity disliked the woman almost as much as he did, and if she acted suitably nice around her, it was because she believed in keeping your enemies closer. It still
left a sour taste in his mouth.

Maybe he needed another drink.

He made to flag down a passing waiter, only to freeze mid-movement; his sister was leading newly arrived guests in, one of whom happened to be Laurel.

The news of Sara's rise from the dead had gone public during the last few days since, as her whole family knew now, there was no real need to hide it anymore, but Laurel hadn't spoken to him since her visit to his office.

Now however, it seemed to be exactly what she was here for. Her eyes scanned the room until they landed on him, and he watched her take a deep breath before making her way over; he also noticed, just in the corner of his line of sight, that Felicity's eyes tracked her movements, too.

"Hey," Laurel said when she was in front of him, going for a smile; it didn't really work.

"Hey."

"Can we, uh...can we talk?" she asked.

"Sure, yeah," he agreed.

She nodded and squared her shoulders, letting out a long breath.

"I wanted to say I'm sorry," she told him, "for how I...went off on you the other day. The truth is, I – " she shrugged "– had a gut reaction to hearing you lie to me again, more than anything else."

"Laurel – "

"No, just – " She held up a hand. "Just let me finish, please?"

He nodded for her to go on.

"I think I get it," she said, "why Sara would tell you first – I mean, it makes sense, right? You were on that boat together and – " She cleared her throat. "Well, it makes sense. And I get why you didn't say anything, it's – she told me, after, that it was how she wanted it, so...I get that."

"So...how are things between the two of you?" he asked quietly, to which Laurel pursed her lips and looked away.

"The thing is, Ollie," she said, "I've forgiven you – I've had time to. But...I don't think I've really forgiven her yet."

"She loves you, Laurel," he told her. "She always has."

She chuckled under her breath, and it sounded bitter. "Well, we both know it's not really as simple as that, right?"

"Right," he echoed, looking away. And his eyes were drawn to a very particular spot in the room.

"Your love life's getting complicated again, isn't it?"

He whipped his head back towards Laurel, to find that a small, knowing smirk was twitching the corner of her mouth.
"Huh, what, no, it's – it's not like that."

Laurel raised an eyebrow, her smirk turning into more of a grin now. "You're lying again," she commented.

He ducked his head, and in the end, all he could do was give her a little nod; she really did know him best when he was lying.

"For what it's worth," she told him, "I hope it goes well, with you and Felicity."

There it was again, he thought, the hollow feeling in his gut. "That's not – it's not gonna work out like that, Laurel," he muttered.

"That's a shame," she said quietly. "I'd like for at least one of us to get a happy ending, after everything."

She was talking about Tommy again, and he meant to offer her some words of comfort, though he didn't quite know what they would be, but she was already shaking her head and backing away.

"It was good talking to you, Ollie," she said. "I'll see you around."

"You too, Laurel."

She walked away, offering him one last smile over her shoulder as she did so.

*I think that, somewhere deep down, Felicity's words from months ago ran through his mind, you still believe – or hope – you and Laurel will somehow, someway, end up behind a white picket fence and drive around in a tacky minivan.*

And as his eyes tracked her retreating back until she went out of sight, he found that it wasn't what he hoped for at all. Not anymore.


"A hell of a party, right?"

Oliver smiled at her question, just as he haphazardly tossed his suit jacket over the back of the couch. The guests were all gone, Mrs. Queen and Thea were off to bed too, Felicity believed, and John had left earlier on account of wanting to read AJ his bedtime story; so, it was just her and Oliver. And she, for one, was glad that it wasn't weird being alone with him now.

"Well, my mother is something of an artist in that area," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. "Do you need a ride home?"

"Nah," she waved his offer off. "I've got my car – and, because I am a responsible adult, I only had one drink three hours ago."

He nodded in approval.
She fidgeted for a moment; there was something she wanted to bring up, past the small-talk, even if she knew she probably shouldn't. There was really no reason to bring it up, definitely not right now. Still, she blurted out, "Uh, I saw you talking to Laurel earlier. You guys looked...friendly. So um, are you two...good now?"

A little frown creased his brow, but in the end, he nodded. "Yeah," he said softly, "we're good."

"Oh, okay." She wrung her hands. "That's – it's good, 'cause...you know, you have a lot of Laurel issues, so...one less issue is good."

"Laurel issues?" he deadpanned.

She couldn't help but roll her eyes. "Well, yeah. Speaking of your Laurel issues, what about – " She cast a quick look around, and though there was no one in sight, she decided some extra precautions might still be necessary, so she walked up closer to him and lowered her voice as she added, "What about her manhunt for your green alter-ego?"

Oliver's posture grew stiffer, though Felicity couldn't quite say if it was from the question or the fact that she was suddenly so close to him. Maybe she hadn't thought this one through. Still, he said, "It didn't exactly come up, Felicity."

"Right," she muttered. "'Cause why would it – yeah, no, that was a dumb question." She cleared her throat. "But hey, I'm...still glad you guys are...friendly, again."

He was nodding along, chewing at the corner of his lip; Felicity narrowed her eyes. "What?" she prompted.

His shoulders rose and fell in a deep sigh. "Nothing, really, it's – " He seemed to be mulling something over, his head shaking from one side to the other just slightly, before he added, "It just sort of dawned on me, tonight, that Laurel, she's...she's very important to me. But she's not – " he blew out a quiet chuckle – "she's not my goat herder."

Felicity blinked. It took a moment for it to click, but when it did, she had to bite down on her lip to keep herself from laughing. "Oh my God," she let out, "I can't believe you actually remember I said that."

He offered her a small, one-sided shrug in response. "Well, it was kinda memorable."

She snorted.

"It was good advice, though," he said next, growing a little more serious. "What you said to me, back then. There was something in there about a white picket fence and a tacky minivan, and I...I realized that I did want that, at some point."

"But not anymore?"

"No." He shook his head. "You know, I think that...for a while, I had this idea that the bow and arrow were just gonna be temporary, and that...once it was done, I'd – " he shrugged – "move on to the picket fence and the minivan. And it kinda hit me that...it's really not what I want anymore."

She smiled up at him. "You can't both be Green Arrow and lead a quiet, normal life in the suburbs, right?" she whispered.

He grinned – really grinned, all white teeth, and dimples, and pretty bright blue eyes.
Her arms were around his shoulders next, before she had realized what she was doing, and he grew still under her hug; in hindsight, she thought, this was probably not the best way not to make things weird again.

"Sorry," she muttered, pulling away. "I'm just – I'm really glad to hear you say that."

She chuckled nervously, then realized her hands were still gripping his shoulders; she smoothed them over his shirt, giving his chest a light pat, before she figured that it probably wasn't helping matters any. In the end, she resorted to just curling her hands against her chest.

His warm breath brushed her cheek and she looked up, to see him reining in on his smile; his eyes were on her mouth, though, and when he scraped his teeth over his lip, she almost forgot that this wasn't the road they were meant to go down on.

"Kinda took me off-guard, you know," she blurted out, "which is why – I mean, this is really progressive thinking, coming from you – " No, wait – "Not that you're a caveman or anything," she added quickly, "you're a very progressive, forward-thinking...man, and uh, yeah, what I mean is, I'm just really happy to see you're embracing...all of...this."

She nodded emphatically to punctuate her statement and, very unsurprisingly, found that he was smiling down at her when she finally paused for breath; it was all soft smiles, and batting his eyelashes in slow flutters, and dammit, why did he have to look at her like that?

"It took me a while," he said, "because I thought that – " he shook his head slightly – "everything I learned on Lian Yu were the only rules out there. But I realized, among...other things," he added, making her gulp, "that ever since we started out, as a team, that we've...made our own rules as we went." His eyes slipped down her face, and she subconsciously licked her lips. "It shouldn't have worked out, not like this," he added. "But it did. I had...so many rules I'd promised myself I'd never break, because there were good reasons for them, and then I broke them anyway – because of you, and Digg. And it worked out." He drew a deep breath, and she felt the coolness of it against her wet lips as he blew it out. "We can make our own way of doing things."

She swayed towards him, before catching herself and taking a deep breath; she felt like she was overheating, not just from their proximity, but from his words, and all the implications they carried – because that was a statement full of implications, if she had ever heard one.

Damn him, she thought. Damn him, and his pretty face, and his pretty lips, and his pretty words.

"When did you become such an optimist?" she wondered.

The corner of his mouth pulled into a quick smile. "I got a lot of it from you," he said.

Beware of the rabbit hole, the words flashed through her mind, but it wasn't all that easy to heed them this time around, not when all his pretty words full of promises and possibilities tugged her closer to the edge. It hadn't be a week since he had told her he wanted the same things she kept tucked in the far recesses of her heart, and she had walked away, because – there were reasons, dammit! Good reasons!

As she pulled air in through her nose, his hand came up to rest on her shoulder, and God help her, it felt burning hot against her skin.

"Felicity..."

He'd never said her name quite like that.
Not in a way that made her want to go up on her tiptoes and grab fistfuls of his shirt, lick along the inseam of his slightly parted mouth, pull his bottom lip with her teeth and bite into it, slip her tongue against his, and just –

She gripped the back of his head, pulling it down to hers.

And down the rabbit hole she went.

It took a moment for it to register through the heavy pounding in his head; the faint taste of her lipstick, the blunt scrape of her nails at the back of his neck and the warmth of her sharp breath brushing his cheek. The feeling of her mouth under his.

Her hands slipped around to his cheeks, holding his face down to hers, and he let himself fall into it. Her nails catching on his scruff, the hungry little nips at his lips and the way her tongue licked a slow line to part his mouth under hers.

He fell into it all, trailing his hand over the curve of her shoulder and up her neck, relishing the smooth skin under his fingers before burying them in her hair, and combing through the silky stands; he wrapped his free arm around her waist, holding her tightly enough to feel every point of friction between her breasts and his chest under her heaving breath, and she let out a quiet little moan, right into his mouth.

He was kissing Felicity. And it felt...weightless.

There was no big secret on the tip of his tongue that he had to smother with his mouth on hers, no great lies needing to be upheld prickling at the back of his mind, and the force with which he clung to her wasn't laced with a desperate attempt to claw his way though the dishonesty and the darkness just to pry out one grain of contentment.

He couldn't remember the last time it had felt quite like this.

He trailed his lips over her cheek and along her jaw, licking over a sweet spot or two just to get a taste of her, then tipped her head back, so he could lay wet, open-mouthed kisses down her throat; there was a little hitch in her breath, like a hiccup, and so he did it again, and again, sucking and nipping harder, until her hiccups sounded more like strained moans.

He didn't even care, he thought as she crumbled his shirt in her small fists and nudged his head with hers until she got him to meet her lips again. He didn't care that happiness didn't last, that he was letting himself be swept away by the kind of light he wasn't altogether sure was within his reach, or deserved for someone like him. He just wanted it.
The burn of his stubble against her skin was delicious, as was the strong line of his body pressed against hers, and sinking her teeth into his bottom lip had made her belly clench. She could feel the drumming of his pulse wherever she put her hands, and she was sure the beat of it matched the mad racing of her own heart; it was hard to remember why she had put the brakes on this before. But it was easy to let her muddled mind wander.

She pictured them in more secluded quarters, with considerably less clothes on.

She pictured him dipping his head lower and his stubble scratching a path down her cleavage, and between her breasts.

She pictured him leaving those same marks on the inside of her thighs instead.

She pictured him bringing her coffee, made just the way she liked it, in bed and not at her desk, and she pictured tricking him into making her coffee every day, because he had really gotten the hang of it and perfected the grains-to-sugar ratio, and so she wouldn't have to bother.

She pictured little stolen pecks on the lips in-between board meetings, kisses of good luck before they had to save the city.

And she pictured him leaving.

There were good reasons why she had put the brakes on this, and she remembered them clearly now.

She broke away from him, screwing her eyes shut as she pulled air into her lungs noisily; his hand was smoothing down her hair, cradling her cheek, and he rested his forehead against hers.

"Stupid rabbit hole," she muttered.

"What?" he panted.

Felicity tipped her head back and gathered the courage to open her eyes; there was a smile playing on his lips, with faint pink smudges around his slightly swollen mouth to remind her just how thoroughly she had kissed him, and it struck that he looked really, really...happy.

She gulped, then uncurled her fists from his shirt and flattened her palms against his chest; he stepped back as she pushed, his hands falling away from her.

When there was a safe distance between them, she blew out a quiet breath. "I shouldn't – I shouldn't have done that," she said. "I'm sorry."

He was usually quick at keeping his face from betraying what he felt, but she got to see it all play out this time; his smile slipped, replaced instead with a slight frown in his brow, before he pursed his lips and looked away.

"I'm really, really sorry," she went on. "I'm – I'm the one who got carried away here, and I'm...really sorry." She turned her eyes to the ceiling, trying to blink away the sting there. "I know this is...probably a horrible thing to say, considering how much you've worked to show us – show me, that you're sticking around this time, but – " she swallowed past the lump in her throat – "but you left. And I – I know you're not hanging up your hood again, I do believe that, I..." Blowing out a breath, she added, "I trust you'll stay, I do, but I can't – I can't help but think that, if you and I just
went for it, there's — " she shook her head — "there's no way I'm getting out of that unscathed. Because then there's — there's the actual horror movie that is your dating history, and I..." She sighed. "I know you said we can make our own way of doing things," she said quietly, "but I just...I can't — I can't risk it. You know? It's — I think it's still better if...friends and partners is all we are."

He nodded ever-so-slightly, like he had somehow expected to hear all of this, too. It took a while for him to speak, but when he did, his words were quiet and clear. "I understand."

He still wouldn't look at her, and Felicity felt her eyes fill with more tears. "Please don't hate me for this," she whispered.

She watched him close his eyes in response, shake his head like it was the most absurd thing he'd heard in his life. "Never," he said vehemently.

She sniffled.

"So — " he took a deep breath — "hit the reset button again?"

"Y-yeah, that — that sounds good," she managed.

"Okay." He nodded. After a beat, he added, "Goodnight, Felicity."

"Goodnight," she echoed in a small voice, then practically bolted for the foyer to pick up her clutch and run out of the mansion as fast as her heels-clad feet would carry her.

It was better this way, she told herself as she settled in her car and wiped at her cheeks.

And she really, really shouldn't be crying about this, either.
Ok, so you know how sometimes you build your whole way-too-long story to a certain high point, and you've sort been leading everything before that up to it, and then you actually write it out and it's really, really not as good as it was in your head? Well. Like, just an FYI, this chapter is not the crowning jewel of my fic-writing career.

Also, I am sorry that I literally only update once a month.

And I...hope you like this?

A month.

It had been a month.

And it was fine.

Everything was fine.

Just fine.

"Oliver, are you listening?"

He blinked, to find that Felicity had lifted her eyes from the folders, scattered across the boardroom's table, and was now watching him with an annoyed little crease in her brow. It was just the two of them, going over possible new deals for Felicity's department; she was very excited about all the possibilities she was putting forward, which had translated into animated hand gestures and smiles – which, in turn, had distracted him. His eyes had stopped straying to the papers she waved around and focused only on her, and even the words coming out of her mouth had stopped making sense at some point.

He still had some trouble with not staring at her.

He cleared his throat. "Hmm, yes, of course."

She narrowed her eyes, and he found himself stifling a smile.

"What was I talking about?" she prompted.

Honestly, he had no idea. Something about Wayne Enterprises, maybe? He couldn't say.

She looked like she was about to push further, probably to ask what it was that held more importance than the future of the company, and he saw the exact moment when she answered her own unspoken question, pressing her lips together. She looked away, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

Oliver closed his eyes for a moment; he got too caught up, sometimes, in his feelings for her. And she noticed. Just like how he noticed her gaze straying a little south of his eyes sometimes, for just a little too long, when they talked.
But they didn't speak of such things.

"So, we have a few offers from Wayne Enterprises," Felicity broke the silence, like nothing had happened, "and I kinda want to take them up on all said offers, but I'm thinking that might be considered as playing favorites?"

He gave himself a split-second to feel the sinking in his stomach, then promptly shut it down. "What offers did they make?" he asked.

"Well, we already have a wholesales contract for my program, as you well know, but I have five – " she slid the folders over to him – "other proposals here, one that would give them a longstanding wholesale contract for every new patent my department dishes out, one that would give us dibs on all the – very awesome, by the way – new tech they're developing, and three offers for collaborative projects – you know, we make the software for their hardware, that sort of stuff."

Oliver nodded, giving the documents a quick onceover. "And you want all five of these?"

She chewed on her lip for a moment, like she was warring with herself. "Yes?"

He couldn't help his smile this time.

"They have the best tech, okay?" she said. "And they seem really, really determined to snag everything we put on the table." She frowned, then added, "I'd say it's because you and Wayne are old boarding school buddies, but I'm not actually sure that would work in your favor here – and before you ask, I know you went to school together because I looked into him. And you."

He nodded again, having expected nothing less. "Well, there's no reason why you can't accept all of these," he said.

She positively beamed, and he had to lock his hand into a fist, to snuff out the warmth filling his chest; everything she did made his heart feel lighter. And the more he felt it, the more it began to hurt.

"So, uh, any other offers you're considering?" he asked.

Her nose scrunched a little. "There's the one from Stellmoore International that we kind of have to take, and then there's the two from LexCorp, which are pretty good, but I'd really rather not tie QC to Luthor if I can help it – "

"He's got monopoly on basically the whole of Kansas," Oliver pointed out, "and subsidiaries in places we don't. It could open up a new market for us."

Felicity pursed her lips. "He's shady."

His mouth twitched. "I'm not exactly clean as a whistle either." Frowning, he added, "Isabel definitely isn't."

"We're not getting into business with Lex Luthor," she said, like it was final; he nodded his compliance.

Seemingly satisfied with this outcome, she went on. "Galaxy Communications is definitely out, but S.T.A.R. Labs have a project involving artificial intelligence that they'd like us to hop onto, which I think we should – of course, we'll also have to coordinate with Applied Sciences on it eventually."

"Artificial intelligence?" he echoed, not a little warily.
She promptly rolled her eyes at him. "It's a far cry from robots taking over and annihilating humanity, Oliver."

"Okay."

"So?" she prompted. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "Close all the deals you think are best."

"You know, the whole point of this – " she gestured to the rest of the empty boardroom and the piles of papers – "is for you to go over these so I can get your approval on the deals you think are best."

"I trust your judgment," he said.

Her stern look slipped away, replaced instead by a small grin; she shook her head next, though she was still smiling to herself. "Fine," she told him, beginning to gather the documents as she rose to her feet. "But," she added, arms full of somewhat frumpy folders, "if I end up bankrupting the company, it's on you."

He watched her go, shaking his head at her battle with the too-many folders in her hands and her grumblings at their insubordination; he kept his smile up until she went out of sight, letting it slip when there was no more chance of her witnessing it.

It had been a month.

And everything was fine.

Felicity dragged her pen across the multicolored post-its, scribbling notes for Cheryl and sticking them to the relevant folders.

And her mind kept going back to Oliver.

Every time she managed to convince herself that things were as they used to be, she'd catch him looking at her, or on the flipside, looking away from her like it was an effort for him to drag his eyes elsewhere.

They didn't hug anymore. Or hold hands. Or really just touch each other in any way if they could avoid it.

It seemed to be an unspoken agreement they'd come to – and it should have helped their cause, too, except it had become unnatural for them to maintain strictly defined personal space. And so any time she had to remind herself not to brush her fingers against his after a patrol hadn't gone to his liking, or she didn't feel the weight of his hand on her shoulder when he stood at her side by her computers, it served as a reminder that things weren't the same; it was just a really elaborate act they put on.

On some level, Felicity acknowledged that it was probably unhealthy to be falling back on this sort of pattern.
They hadn't told anyone, either. Not John, though he'd asked if something was wrong, or Sara. And though she couldn't say with certainty, she was pretty sure Oliver hadn't mentioned it to his sister or his mother, or to anyone – no, actually, she was positive he hadn't mentioned it to anyone. It was their dirty little secret.

One they were both trying to hide and keep tucked away.

Except it got kinda difficult sometimes.

She'd watch him talk and find her eyes dropping to his mouth while her fingers drummed against her neck, remembering the marks he had left there – ones she'd had to conceal with turtlenecks and scarves afterward.

She'd track the play of his fingers while he sharpened his arrows and think back on the way they had felt in her hair and against her back, and her mind would conjure images of them trailing lower and lower, and then back up, under her skirt.

And then she'd second-guess herself, her decision to put the brakes on what they could have, before jerking herself out of that line of thinking. She'd chosen to play it safe, and that was it.

Blowing out a breath, she focused her attention back on her work.

"Dammit!"

Oliver pushed down his hood, stretching his steps as made his way to where Felicity and John were in the process of letting out annoyed sighs. "What's wrong?"

Felicity made a face, flicking her hand in the direction of her screens. "False Phobos alarm," she explained. "Thought we might finally have a ping, turns out it was just a new strain of LSD."

Next to her, Diggle echoed her annoyance in the form of a grumble, and Oliver shared the sentiment.

It had been over a month since they'd begun giving the drug their attention, knowing what it did, and they hadn't moved an inch from where they'd started at. He'd even made his short trip to Metropolis, taking advantage of an uneventful weekend, to have a little talk with Haze's assistant, and he had exactly nothing to show for it; he was also sure it had taken Felicity a lot to withhold her 'I told you so'.

"It's kinda starting to creep me out," Diggle commented. "I mean, Haze was killed about five months ago, so whoever ordered the hit has been sitting on the entire supply of the drug for a while...you'd think they would have used it for something by now."

Felicity nodded. "It sucks," she mumbled. "But to talk about happier things," she added, leaning back in her chair and tipping her head back to meet Oliver's eyes, "tell us about Roy's first night in the field."

"Sara said it was right out of Hollywood's best buddy cop movie before signing off."
And by that, she'd meant that he had spent most of it gritting his teeth at Roy's lack of discipline, his rashness and inability to follow directions, while channeling his own self-control into not banging his head against the nearest wall. Repeatedly.

Sara had tagged along, as she often did now that she was back in town, and as far as Oliver remembered, had spent most of the time discussing the apparent hilarity of the situation with his other two teammates. Not that Roy knew who they were, exactly; he knew they existed, that they were on the other end of Oliver and Sara's comms, but as he had no earpiece of his own, he'd had no direct contact or introduction. Much like how he only knew the members he did get to talk to as Green Arrow and Canary. He'd complained about that. A lot. Which had, effectively, only worsened Oliver's suffering.

So yes, Felicity knew exactly what his thoughts were. But she was looking at him upside down, the tip of her tongue trapped between her teeth and the corners of her mouth pulled into a wide grin, and he couldn't muster a single ounce of annoyance at being egged on; he just found himself smiling down at her.

"He's got a lot to learn," he eventually said – which was actually true. He hadn't meant to put Roy this close to his team yet, and he'd certainly not meant to begin his training, but he'd had to reconsider that stance, after Roy's own complaints and Mr. Lance's repeated calls, telling them to 'get the damn Harper kid under control'. Apparently, he was growing tired of Roy's somewhat sloppily executed attempts at saving people making him end up at his precinct. And, Oliver could report himself, Thea was growing tired of picking her boyfriend up from said precinct.

So, Oliver had taken the kid out in the field.

God help him.

"I'm sure you'll be a great teacher," Felicity told him, her voice growing softer. His hand was already halfway up to her shoulder before he remembered himself; he curled it into a fist instead, and let it drop back at his side.

"Yeah," he agreed, looking away; Diggle was watching the both of them, eyes flickering from one to the other. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed this sort of thing, and Oliver was sure he had his ideas as to what had brought it on; he was also sure he didn't know for certain, because he would have heard something about it by now.

Clearing his throat, he walked away from the computers, laying down his bow and unstrapping his quiver. "You guys should call it a night," he said. "Patrol's done anyway."

"You're staying?" Felicity asked.

He hummed, glancing over his shoulder as he added, "I have some paperwork to put in order."

The statement was met with a little furrow in her brow, and considering he'd been lying the last time he'd told them paperwork would be keeping him in the lair, he supposed it was justified. "Really," he assured. "I plan on convening a board meeting next week, have them vote on booting Isabel out of QC. I need to make a solid case."

Diggle nodded his approval, while Felicity asked, "You're sure the time is right?"

"We're not there yet," Oliver admitted, "but given all the deals we've been closing lately, I think they'll agree that we'll do just fine without her."

"Okay," Felicity said. "So, how long have you been working on this?"
"Few weeks."

She pursed her lips. "And why is this the first we're hearing of it?"

He rolled his lips together, noting that John too looked a little disapproving now, and settled for a small shrug. "I didn't want to bother you guys. Besides, this is on me."

"That's cute," Diggle deadpanned, while Felicity rolled her eyes in support of that sentiment.

"We'll help you out," she said, already on her feet and helping Diggle clear her desk and drag some chairs over before Oliver had even opened his mouth to wave the offer off; with a shake of his head, he decided that he probably shouldn't even bother trying. He left them to work while he changed, coming back with the load of papers he'd brought over.

Settling next to John at the desk's narrow end, he let the pile hit the metal with a clang, just as Felicity rolled her chair over to the corner. Both his partners gave the paperwork a wry look. "Hey," he reminded, "you offered."

"That we did," Diggle muttered, then cracked his knuckles.

"So, what arguments are you putting forward?" Felicity queried, dragging her tablet over.

"Well," Oliver said, "about ninety percent of it is going to be about you."

She peeked at him over the rim of her glasses, and smiled. "Never mind that neither of us knew what we were doing," she commented.

He mirrored her smile. "They don't have to know that."

"And what goes in the other ten percent?" Diggle piped in.

"She came to QC for a hostile takeover, we can't trust her, it's a family business," Oliver began ticking off the talking points. "We're not in danger of bankruptcy anymore, more investors are coming in every day – " he shrugged – "and that is thanks to the program Felicity released."

"Which was only possible because she was promoted, which was your move and not Isabel's," Diggle concluded, nodding along. "It's good."

"And props for not dragging the fact that she's a woman into this," Felicity added.

Oliver frowned. "You think I'd play that card?"

Shrugging, she said, "Most of your board is made of stuffy old men." Her nose scrunched in distaste. "They'd love it."

Diggle hummed his agreement, Oliver nodded his own, and with that, they started going over the documents point by point. Diggle pitched the idea of toning down the 'family business' argument, as the board members' priority was profit and not legacy, and only using it as a final touch-up.

"Make it the cherry on top," he said.

Felicity, for her part, was in favor of axing the linear presentation of QC's rehabilitation Oliver had put together, and opening instead with the numbers after the quake and the current ones, side-by-side.

"Shock value," she explained. "Elaborate once they've already been dazzled".
She then became engrossed in creating pie-charts and graphs, for 'visual aids', and she and Diggle started picking out the colors and the fonts and the figure placements, since John had a 'good eye for color and making things pretty', being a painter – which was something that had come as a bit of a revelation for Oliver.

He sat back when they decided that they apparently didn't need him for this, watching them huddle closer over the tablet, their shoulders bumping at the desk's corner.

And he thought about Shado and Slade.

It had been a while since he had thought about comparing them – there was a difference, between the past and the present, between his old team and his new one. *We're not them*, Felicity had told him, and he *had* accepted that, begun believing it, at some point. But they were here, helping him get rid of the woman who had brought Fyers to Lian Yu in the first place – Slade's plane being shot out of the sky, his partner getting the chance to betray him, Shado getting the change to betray him, Shado being dragged to the island, Shado watching her father die, Shado and Slade both getting stuck in Purgatory with *him*; it was all because Isabel Rochev had ordered a fake act of terrorism.

And she was never going to pay.

He could kick her out of his company, he could even find a way to destroy her, but she would never be exposed for what she was, and he couldn't make her pay in blood, either.

He couldn't think about her without thinking about Lian Yu, and with that, the ghosts of his old friends danced in front of him, circling around his new ones.

The soldier, who lived by a code of loyalty and brotherhood, and –

His eyes flickered to Felicity, then past her, to where he had laid his bow.

She had given him that bow. Just like Shado had given him his old one.

Drawing his gaze away, he let it settle on the brightly-lit glass casing, and the hood it housed. He wore it to honor Yao Fei, and to honor his daughter. Shado had tried to teach him, what it meant to be a killer and a hero, how not to lose sight of the two halves that made him – and that too, he thought, was a lesson he'd forgotten.

He was learning again, new lessons beyond the ones Shado and Slade had given him, and no one had instructed him more than the two people who sat next to him. They had made him, just as Slade and Shado had, and he could feel the fear rise in him, twisting his insides, just watching the ghosts dance around in front of him, thinking about what would happen if they spilled into the present.

If he had to watch Felicity being gunned down while trying to save him, even if he had never been worth the effort, not from someone so much better than him.

If he had to watch the hatred gather in Diggle's eyes when he betrayed him and gave his allegiance to the people who had killed her for his own survival, and in the end, pick up her bow, and nock an arrow, and drive it through his eye.

It wasn't the same, he reminded himself – *they* weren't. But he could see it so clearly; Shado perched over Felicity's shoulder, and Slade with his treasured swords, standing over Diggle, reminding him that he had lost them, in every possible way.

And it made it hard to breathe, watching Diggle and Felicity happily color-coordinate his pie-charts, and remembering that he could lose them the same way, too.
"You okay, man?"

He blinked and the ghosts were gone, replaced by his teammates' concerned faces.

"I'm fine," he said, but it sounded too strained and broken to be believable, even to his own ears.

Diggle shifted, turning to get a better look at him, while Felicity's forehead creased with worry.

Oliver tried to force another false reassurance out but it got stuck in his throat, when he realized that it would both be futile and unnecessary. He could tell them.

Part of it, anyway.

"All this stuff with Isabel, it...it reminds me of Lian Yu," he admitted quietly. "Of Fyers and his men, and – " he drew a quick breath – "my friends." He glanced over to Felicity, watching her nod in understanding. "And how much the two of you remind me of them," he added, shrugging. "It's – it's hard to think about it, considering...how it ended."

Neither Felicity nor Diggle asked anything further, seemingly satisfied with the vague references to his past he had given them. John nodded in support, while Felicity offered him a small, slightly watery smile to show her own, and he was reminded of his time on the stand at his mother's trial with sharp clarity, when they had been the only ones he could look at; he could tell them, because they didn't shy away from his horror stories, and if it had held too much meaning for him to even wrap his head around it back then, it did even more so now.

Which was why it frightened him to draw the parallel, to even think about losing them.

He had no idea what he would do, if he lost them.

Felicity tapped her pen against the desk in rhythm with her foot against the ground, stealing glances at her phone's clock every other minute.

It was finally happening.

Oliver had gathered the members of the board for an impromptu meeting, and she knew that right about now, he was halfway through elaborating on Queen Consolidated's progress since he had returned, with the help of all the pretty visual aids she and Diggle had helped him put together.

Isabel had been kept distracted with the deals Felicity was in the process of closing, timing it perfectly with an influx of reports on current sales numbers to ensure Ms. Rochev was fully occupied while the vote took place.

With a little luck, it would go in Oliver's favor.

Still, Felicity was restless as she waited on the verdict; while the anticipation certainly made her jittery, she also had the nagging feeling that this was all way too easy. Since joining her team, it had definitely not been her experience that things ever ran as smoothly as planned. And she didn't see
Isabel Rochev going down this easily.

She had voiced these concerns to Oliver, though he didn't seem to share them – well, he was concerned, of course, but felt that it was precisely the simplicity of this plan that was going to make it work. She didn't doubt it, not really; she just had a bad feeling.

The minutes ticked by, half an hour, forty minutes –

And then both her phones went off.

Her office landline was loud and shrill, the ID showing Cheryl's extension, while her cellphone screen flashed with Diggle's name. She grabbed for the latter, a knot twisting in her belly as she answered it.

"You need to get up here," Diggle's voice sounded in her ear, quick and agitated. "Now!"

Felicity pushed away from her desk, leaving her landline to blare in the empty office as she hurried down the halfway and went for the stairwell; it was just two floors anyway. Diggle didn't say, but she knew to go straight for the boardroom when she pushed the door to the executive floor open; there were people in her way, some of whom she recognized as members of the board, mumbling and gesturing, stealing glances at the glass doors. John stood there, blocking the entry and telling people to scatter; Felicity pushed through to him, blocking her momentum as she grabbed his arm.

She had a spare second to meet his eyes, and all her demands for explanations died in her throat when her gaze slipped past him and into the room. There were papers scattered everywhere, coffee cups overturned and dripping their contents onto the carpet, chairs pushed back at odd angles and some of them tipped over, and behind the long table, on the ground, was –

"He just...freaked out," Diggle told her, looking more out-of-sorts than she had ever seen him. "I don't – " He shook his head, glancing over his shoulder. "They've called an ambulance, but I think – I think it's the drug, Felicity, it's just like in those videos you showed us, I think we found Phobos."

Felicity gulped, dropping his arm as she took a slow, careful step further inside. "Oliver?" she called out.

Oliver was on his side, his back to her, and she couldn't see past his shoulders with the table blocking her view, but his hands were over his ears and the closer she got, the louder his ragged breaths became. It was just like in those videos, the ones that had given her nightmares for days, except in her nightmares, it she was she who was writhing on the floor in fear, or John, or –

"Oliver?" she tried again, her voice coming out strangled. She could feel the sting of tears at the corners of her eyes as she brought one foot in front of the other, the click-clack of her heels beating faster against the ground, until John's hand curled gently around her arm.

"Steady," he cautioned, voice only loud enough to be heard. When Felicity dragged her eyes to the side and up to him, he added, "Nearly took one of those guys' – " he gestured to the board members outside – "head off when he tried to grab him." He swallowed tightly then, eyes trained on the room's far end. "I think he thought they were attacking me."

Felicity bobbed her head up and down in a small nod, on reflex, her eyes going over her shoulder, to the people in question; she could see them, through the glass doors, huddled in groups and talking, and pointing, and whispering, and with them was –

Isabel.
She was watching, too, but there was no concern or confusion on her face. From her crossed arms right up to her raised chin, she just looked...victorious. Like a queen who had just crushed the bones of her enemies under the sharp points of her red heels.

And it all suddenly made sense.

The three CEOs who had been institutionalized, whose companies had been taken by Stellmore International as a result, the tying of loose ends when Haze got a price on his end, the complete calm before the storm with Phobos...

It was Isabel.

All of it.

In that moment, Felicity wanted nothing more than to rip her head right off her cold-blooded shoulders with her bare hands.

"Hey," she heard Diggle call to her, feeling herself getting pulled back a step.

"It was her, Digg," Felicity ground out, her tears burning hotter. "It was Isabel, it was her."

John blinked at her, then cast a quick look over his shoulder before his eyes drifted shut, and he gritted his teeth.

They should have made the connection. They should have seen it. It was so obvious, and they should have seen it, but they hadn't, and now –

She broke away from Diggle, measuring her steps as she worked to swallow down her new violent urges; she had to focus on Oliver, she could think about killing Isabel Rochev later. She had to think about Oliver.

His unsteady breathing grew louder still the closer she got, and beneath it, she could hear every little snuffle and stutter that broke its rhythm; she watched his fingers twitch against the sides of his head, his palms pressing against his ears as though that would somehow make it all stop.

Finally at the table's corner, Felicity dragged her eyes over him, where he was on his side and curled in on himself, like he was trying to be as small as possible.

She bit back her sob, digging her nails into her palms against the urge to just reach for him. "Oliver?" she tried one more time, and it seemed to get through to him this time, his voice cracked and frail when he mumbled something that faintly resembled her name.

She went to her knees slowly, scooting up behind him. "Hey," she whispered, resting a tentative hand on his shoulder, "it's just me, it's okay."

His entire body jerked in response, and she heard it again, that broken sound that was meant to be her name, except now it was cut through by a sob.

Felicity bit back another one of her own, where it was building in her throat, and gently dragged her fingers down his arm; she felt his body shaking under her touch. Her other hand went under his head, slowly, and she let it rest at the crook of her elbow as she draped her arm across his chest, pulling him against her. She could see his face now, the creases in his forehead from screwing his eyes tightly shut, the tears clinging to his lashes and the ones running down his nose, and the ones that had already dried on his cheeks. He was crying and shaking in her arms, and she had the hysterical thought that this wasn't how she'd imagined them spooning.
Dropping her forehead to his shoulder, she curled her fingers into the fabric of his jacket, feeling every tremor, twitch, and quiet, small wail of his run right through her. She knew what the drug did, that it was trapping him in all his worst nightmares, making him so scared that he was curled into a trembling ball on the floor, and she had no idea what to do to make it stop.

"It's the drug," she found herself saying, "it's Phobos, it's – it's not real, okay, whatever you're seeing, it's not real." His hands were suddenly grasping at her forearm, gripping it like it was a lifeline, and she held him tighter. "It's not real, it's gonna be okay, it's all gonna be okay," she kept going, only half-aware of what was leaving her mouth. "It's not real."

His head jerked up and down in what might have been a nod, before his eyes popped open. "Di – " he choked out, sucking in a ragged breath. "Digg, wh-where's Digg?"

"I'm right here, man," John's voice sounded from beside them, as he made his way around; he crouched down in front of Oliver, resting a hand on his arm right next to where Felicity had laid her head. "We're both right here," he said. "Your team."

"Yeah," Felicity agreed, but Oliver's eyes slammed shut again, and every line of this face was etched with pain.

"M-my team, I had – I had a team before," the words tumbled from his mouth, "Shado, and Slade, they were – they were my friends, but I...I lost them, it was my fault, and I lost them – "

Felicity lifted her head, letting her own tears fall, and looked up at John; he met her eyes for a moment, his own far from dry, before he tightened his grip on Oliver's arm, to ground him back to them.

"We're still here," Felicity said softly. "We're here with you. You haven't lost us." Leaning back in, she laid her cheek against his shoulder. "It's gonna be okay."

Ten minutes later, she had her hands braced against the table, sucking in deep breaths to get her mind to clear long enough to figure out what they had to do next. They should – they should go to the hospital, after Oliver, they should go after the ambulance, and they should call...people, yes, there were people to call, they should do that, and then they should grab chairs and desks and smash them over Isabel Rochev's head and –

She sagged against the cold table, her latest attempt at a deep breath turning into more of a rough exhale.

"I can't think," she hissed, "we need to – " She sighed.

From where he was hovering at her side, Diggle said, "We need to think about Oliver."

Oliver.

Oliver crying on the floor, Oliver trying to snap the paramedics' necks when they came for him,
yelling at them, yelling at her, things that weren't even English, things that were meant for ghosts that weren't there, Oliver having to be sedated so they could strap him to a gurney and –

She started, whipping her head towards Diggle. "We can't let them take him to the hospital," she let out.

Diggle frowned. "What?"

"We have to get the drug out of his system," she said, words coming out in a rush, "before it does more damage, that's what broke Haze's subjects, the long half-life and the time of exposure, so we have to flush it out of his system, but they're not gonna do that when they take him in, they'll send him in for a psych eval or something, and if they do run blood tests, they're not gonna find Phobos, how could they find it, they don't even know that's a thing to look for, and we can't just barge in there and tell them to trust us and stick him full of IV's so – "

"We have to take him to the foundry," Diggle concluded, nodding along and already digging for his phone.

"Call Roy and Sara," Felicity instructed, heading for the door, "I'll get Detective Lance – also, you'll need the leather."

"Because we're stealing an ambulance in broad daylight?"

She nodded. "Because we're stealing an ambulance in broad daylight."

"Where to?" Diggle yelled into his comm to be heard over the roar of his bike – Oliver's bike, technically, which he was riding in Oliver's get-up, speeding it down the street in the light of day, where everyone could see. But if Oliver was getting saved, and getting saved by Green Arrow, this was how it had to be.

"6th Street is quote-unquote 'closed for construction' so there's no traffic, and Lancelot is leading the ambulance down there so you'll be clear for the extraction," Felicity's voice sounded in his ear, and John could have laughed at the last-minute codename she had come up with for Detective Lance – a necessity, as Roy was in on the conversation.

"Lancelot?" their new pseudo-recruit echoed, from where he was tailing John and Sara in his car. "Who the hell is that?"

"Not your concern, Red," it was Sara who piped in, coming up at Diggle's side on her own bike. "Oracle," she addressed Felicity next, "what's the plan for the extraction?"

"Arrow in the front, stopping the ambulance, Canary and Red in the rear – Roy, you're getting Oliver away in your car, Canary's gonna make sure no one tries to stop you."

"How come all of you know my name," Roy complained, again, "but I don't know any of yours?"

"It's a clearance thing," Diggle told him, spurring his bike left, then right two turns down, until he
was away from the clamor of the city and going down the deserted 6th Street, racing right at Lance's patrol car – one he had 'borrowed' from the precinct's parking lot, actually, so it wouldn't be traced to him. As he sped past him, Diggle gave him a nod of gratitude, even if the man couldn't see him or didn't know who it really was thanking him, because without his willingness to lead the ambulance down a different route, under the pretense of avoiding rush hour traffic, they wouldn't be saving Oliver right now.

The patrol car kept going while Diggle skidded the bike into a screeching halt, blocking the ambulance's progress; Sara and Roy drove on, flanking its sides, until they had blocked the way in the rear.

"Hey!" one of the medics, the driver, shouted. "What the hell are you doing?"

"We're in position," he heard Sara say, for Felicity's benefit. "Going in."

"Okay," Felicity said. "Arrow, do your thing."

And by that, she meant he had to make a bit of a spectacle out of all of this, even if his audience were just a pair of confused and possibly frightened medics.

He planted his hand on the hood of the ambulance, keeping his head as bowed and his face as obscured as he could, and yelled, "Queen's been injected with a drug! It's nothing you've ever seen before and we need to help him!"

"I was on the scene, he was having an episo – " the man in the passenger's seat began yelling, too, but then there was commotion in the back and the whole ambulance shook. The driver glanced at the side-mirror, his hand already on the handle as he shouted, "What the – you can't just take him!"

"Hey!" Diggle roared, banging his hand against the metal one more time. "His episode was induced, by a drug I've been tracking for months, this isn't what you think it is!"

By the time the medic was gearing up for a response, the screech of Roy's car's tires was already filling the air, and Sara appeared from behind the vehicle, almost carefully laying down the two medics from the back she'd knocked out on the ground. She nodded at Diggle, then mounted her bike again. "Extraction successful," she said. "We're en route."

It was quiet for a beat after that, as the driver just stared at the image in the mirror with his mouth wide open and his companion looked like he wasn't quite sure if any of this had actually happened. Eventually, he simply let out, "Dude."

"The longer the drug stays in his system, the worse it is for him," Diggle spoke again, and both the other men jumped in their seats a little. "I'll give him the help he needs."

"Wait, so..." the driver chimed in. "Someone injected him with this stuff to fake psychosis symptoms?"

"Something like that," Diggle said.

Both men's expressions soured at that.

Diggle left them to mull it over for a moment, then pried his hand away from the hood. "You may want to help out your partners over there," he added before revving the engine, seeing the men scramble out of the ambulance just as he rounded a corner.

"How was that for theatrics?" he directed his question at Felicity.
"Good," she said. "Now let's hope they spread the word."

John nodded, taking the more secluded road to Verdant. Rochev had made this sort of play before—three times, in fact—and there was no mistaking her endgame: get Oliver deemed psychologically unfit to maintain his CEO position, swoop in and take the company. Any attempt at damage control, no matter how feeble, was worth a shot.

Even though both he and Felicity knew, if they were being honest, that it had almost no chance of working.

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"How's he doing?"

Felicity didn't turn her eyes to John as he came in, discarding pieces of leather as he went. Sara was adjusting the dosage on the IV, Roy was on his way to the Queen mansion to tell Mrs. Queen and Thea what was really happening, after having handed his human cargo off to Sara for carrying to the super-secret base he wasn't allowed in, and Oliver...

Oliver was laid on the metal table, still unconscious, with a needle sticking out of his arm.

"I did the math, so if I did it right, the drug should...be out of his system in a few hours," Felicity said, her words sounding oddly hollow to her own ears. From opposite her, Sara seemed to pick up on it. "Hey," she called to her softly, making her meet her eyes, "your math was good. And your plan was, too. We got him here, we're helping him, and he's gonna be okay."

Felicity pulled in an unsteady breath. "Is he?" she whispered.

Sara looked down, to Oliver, and sighed. "Yes," she eventually asserted, nodding. "We just have to wait for him to wake up."

Closing her eyes, Felicity managed to nod back, even as she tightened her hold on his hand. She was probably overcompensating, she thought, for having done her utmost to avoid touching him in a month, because she hadn't been able to let go of his hand from the moment Sara had come down carrying him over her shoulders and laid him down on the medical table.

After a moment, she felt Diggle come up beside her, having traded the too-tight green garb for sweats and a shirt. "So, do we have any ideas on how he got exposed?" he asked. "Did she put it in his coffee or something?"

Felicity thought back on how she'd joked that he shouldn't take any coffee Isabel offered him, 'cause it could be poison. He'd told her that she wouldn't be that obvious. And she hadn't been.

Gripping his hand so tight it might have actually hurt him if he were awake, Felicity said, "The drug has to be delivered into the bloodstream. It's ineffective if ingested. Unless—" She sighed, hanging her head. "Unless she found a way to make it work in the five months she's had to play with it."

"I don't think so," Sara spoke up and, when Felicity and John gave her questioning looks, proceeded
to carefully turn Oliver's head to the side, drawing back the collar of his tattered shirt and holding it up for their inspection, so they would see the slightly discolored spot in the light blue material. She then pulled on Oliver's shoulder just enough to lift it off the metal, and she pressed her gloved finger just below the matching red spot on his shoulder blade. "It's too small for a needle," she said, "so I'm thinking it was probably a pin, dipped in a highly concentrated solution of the drug." Carefully letting his shoulder drop back onto the table, she added, "There are places on the body, blind spots, where a small enough object, at the right place, wouldn't even be felt. My guess is, she pinned it to his jacket when he wasn't looking. It's how I would've done it." She shrugged. "Could have taken her less than thirty seconds, if she knew what she was doing."

"When he was preparing for the meeting," Diggle let out on a sigh. "I left him alone to go down to the conference room and make sure all the board members were there." He shook his head. "She probably waltzed right into his office and pinned that thing when he was in the bathroom or something."

"She knew," Felicity said quietly. "What he was planning. And she timed the counterstrike perfectly."

"Guess you were right, Felicity," Diggle told her. "He should have planned something better."

She closed her eyes shut, prying one of her hands away from his to press the heel of it to her forehead; she should have made him come up with something better. And she should have protected him better.

"How bad is this going to be for QC?" Sara asked, almost calm, and Felicity admired the ability to keep her head on straight, truly; in both her and John. Because she, for her part, was back to dissolving into a mess now that she wasn't too busy orchestrating a rescue mission.

"Isabel will probably be calling a meeting tomorrow," Diggle said. "To make a case for herself. Kick Oliver out, take the company from him."

There was a beat, before Sara stated, "We could kill her." That too was said so very calmly, and Felicity thought that it made the words sound angrier than if she had snarled them.

"I'm not even opposed to that," Felicity muttered.

"Neither am I, actually," Diggle said. "But we'll see what Oliver wants to do."

They all knew the answer to that, though. "He's been wanting to put an arrow in her for a while now," she whispered, "but he can't do that. 'Cause he doesn't kill anymore."

"He doesn't have to be the one doing the killing," Sara commented.

What did it say, Felicity wondered, that her first thought was to thank her for the offer? "You don't kill anymore either, Sara," she said instead, shaking her head.

"I can make exceptions."

"Let's just wait for him to wake up," Diggle put an end to that line of discussion, a little abruptly.

Sara nodded, then said, "She'll have it easy, though, convincing the board to hand over the reins to her. We can't prove she was responsible for any of this. I'm assuming she can't be tied to the drug, otherwise you would have found the connection, and we can't prove Ollie was drugged because we're getting it out of his system right now, it's been degraded already. And we can't even use the pin as evidence of anything either — "
"Because his jacket's back at QC – " right on the floor where the medics had tossed it so they could sedate him – "and probably burned to ashes and destroyed by now," Felicity finished the argument for Sara, hanging her head; Isabel's plan hadn't gone as she had envisioned it, with Oliver in the psychiatric wing of Starling General, but in the end, she'd still won. They'd helped her win.

"At least 'Green Arrow' made it clear that Oliver was drugged," Diggle pointed out. "Maybe that will work out in our favor, in the end."

They didn't have much to say after that, and eventually, Sara excused herself to go change out of her black leather and call Roy to check on the situation at the Queen family home. Diggle stepped around to fill her spot at Oliver's other side, and Felicity remained right where she was, letting her hand drop back from where it had been raking her hair and cover Oliver's again; if she let it stray from that one point of contact, she'd probably do something insane, like start tracing the lines of his face, or combing her fingers through his hair.

"Still with the hand-holding routine, huh?" Diggle remarked gently, and Felicity held back a sniffle, eyes trained to where she was sliding her fingers through Oliver's, and drawing patterns on his palm.

"Not really," she mumbled.

"Yeah, I noticed that," Diggle said pointedly. After a beat, he asked, "Wanna finally tell me what's been going on with you two this past month?"

Felicity chewed on her lip, one corner then the other, before blowing out a deep, quiet breath. "I did a bad thing, John," she whispered.

"What was it?"

"I can't – " She sighed. "Can we not talk about it right now?"

"Okay," he agreed, and Felicity gave him a small smile of gratitude, the best she could muster, before dropping her gaze back to her and Oliver's hands; a moment later, John added his own to the pile. He didn't say anything, didn't ask anything further either; he just let his hand cover both of hers. And trapped between them, Oliver's.

Felicity closed her eyes, dropping her head forward and letting her forehead rest against Diggle's arm, where it was stretched over their unconscious partner.

"Roy has an update," Sara's voice reached her ears after a while; Felicity thought she had probably stood aside even when she was done with her call, to give them a moment. As she took her spot next to Felicity, she informed, "Moira and Thea had already been called by the PD when he got there. They were freaking out, still are, but he told them the vigilante's taking care of Oliver – not that that made them freak out less. I said we'd get Ollie back home as soon as he's in the clear."

Felicity rubbed her forehead up and down John's arm, in what she hoped would translate as a nod of acknowledgment.

There wasn't much left to do after that, except wait.
"There is still no word on the whereabouts of billionaire and CEO Oliver Queen, going into hour three since his apparent breakdown at Queen Consolidated headquarters and subsequent kidnapping by Green Arrow – "

Felicity gnawed at her nails, splitting her attention between the monitors, where Diggle had brought up the news reports, and the still-unconscious Oliver; it had been a little over two hours since they had brought him in, and the news had already blown up on every channel. The speculation was rampant, with everyone questioning if his episode at QC was a result of PTSD or psychosis – and they seemed confused as to the definitions of both – or if it was really some sort of conspiracy, involving a never-before-seen fantastical substance that would warrant the vigilante's attention. The ambushed paramedics, so far, did not disappoint, repeating the story of getting cut off by Green Arrow and his team into ten different sets of cameras.

The fact that this team of his was spoken of was another problem; though The Canary had been seen every now and then, her father had taken Felicity's word on her worth and kept such reports under wraps as often as he could, and people had never known about the little helper in a red hoodie. Now, however, it was becoming public knowledge.

Felicity jumped when her phone went off, buzzing on the desk where she had thrown it after Cheryl's call, updating her on things at QC; they weren't good.

She reluctantly stepped away from Oliver, almost relieved when Lance's familiar face flashed across the screen. She took a deep breath, then brought it to her ear. "Detective?"

"Ms. Smoak," he said, "I figured this was a...good time to call. Wanted to give you some time to...well, do what you had to."

"Thank you, Detective," she told him. "For everything."

"Ah well, you said you needed my help," he waved the gratitude off. "And I may not be Queen's biggest fan, but what they did to him..."

Felicity gulped, throwing a glance over her shoulder; still no change.

"How's he doing?"

"He's – " She cleared her throat. "We're still waiting for him to wake up."
"At least we got him out on time, right?"

"Yeah," she agreed. "Um, Detective? This isn't – it's not somehow going to backfire on you, is it? I know you said you'd covered your tracks but – "

"Don't worry," he cut her off gently. "Didn't take my car, didn't take my nametag – and both officers I borrowed from were at the precinct when it happened, with witnesses. It's not going to backfire on anyone here."

She nodded, scraping her teeth over her lip. "Good, that's good." With a sigh, she added, "The news reports have been saying there's a manhunt going on – for the vigilante, to find Oliver."

Lance echoed her sigh. "We had to call for that," he said. "It's a kidnapping in broad daylight, of a high-profile CEO who should've been in the hospital. No one's going to find anything but...right now, we're canvassing, and the Captain's asking the feds for more resources." More quietly, he grumbled, "Waste of time."

Felicity's mouth twitched at that. "And Laurel?" she asked. "What's her stance on this?" Laurel wasn't pushing for the vigilante's apprehension as strongly as she used to, but nothing indicated she had become a fan either.

"She's – " Lance sighed again. "She's the one who called the Captain, to push for more resources. She doesn't trust our mutual friend, Ms. Smoak. Definitely not with Queen." After a beat, he added, "Maybe after today, she'll change her mind."

*That depends on how it goes,* Felicity thought, and fought back tears again. Still, she offered a simple, "Maybe."

He hummed in agreement before going quiet, long enough for Felicity to think he was weighing his next words. "Detective?" she prompted when he didn't speak. "Was there something else?"

"Not really," he said. "But I know that it was Harper back there, with Arrow and the woman in black – and thank you, for getting him off my hands." He paused again, then added, "Guess he's another aspiring vigilante for you to protect now, huh?"

It was spoken softly and with concern, and despite everything, Felicity found herself smiling.

"I worry about you, Ms. Smoak."

"You don't have to, Detective." She sniffled. "I'm fine."

"Yeah. But it's hard, being the one taking care of people who – well, who aren't all that easy to care for, I'd imagine. Laurel, she uh, had to take care of me, for a while," he lowered his voice as he went on. "I didn't make it easy, and it was...hard for her. So, I worry about you. With all these people you're protecting."

She was going to cry again, for entirely different reasons. "Thank you, Detective," she managed to wring the words out, even if they ended up a little choked and broken around the edges.

"Ah, don't thank me. Just take care of yourself, too."

"Yeah, I'll – "

The relatively quiet lair was suddenly very, very loud, the faint voices of the newscasters in the background getting drowned out by the screeching of metal, and shouting, and sounds of scuffle.
Felicity whipped around, towards Oliver – except he wasn't lying still anymore, he was halfway off the table, with Diggle and Sara on either side of him, holding him back and yelling over each other, and him, to get him to calm down.

"I'll have to call you back, Detective," Felicity mumbled, throwing the phone away before Lance had had a chance to acknowledge her in any way; she was across the floor in a second, click-clacking in an awkward run and coming up next to Digg.

Oliver's eyes were wild and unfocused, like they had been only hours before, when he was looking at her and seeing someone else, and for a moment, she thought that it hadn't worked, that the drug was still in his system, that it had done its work anyway, that –

"Oliver!" Diggle drew his attention, voice loud and sharp. "You're safe, you're in the foundry with us. You're okay, man, it's okay."

It took a moment for Oliver to grow still, and when his eyes began flitting again – from Diggle's face, to the hand he had braced across his chest, to the one Sara had gripped his forearm with to keep him from ripping out his IV – they were more focused, looked more assessing than lost, and Felicity breathed a sigh of relief, though it came out as a strained little hiccup.

That made him look up, to her, and she already had her hands half-raised towards him before she realized she had no idea what to actually do with them; his eyes closed shut a moment later, his forehead creasing in a frown. Felicity thought he may be trying to center himself.

"We're gonna let you go now, Ollie," Sara told him, exchanging a quick look with John; with a shared nod, they both released their hold on him. He stayed right where he was, seated up on the table with one leg half off it, not moving an inch. His frown deepened though, the more the seconds ticked by, until he was clenching his jaw, too, his mouth thinning with the movement.

"Oliver." Felicity scooted closer, a hand at the ready to take hold of his, before she remembered that it might not be the wisest thing to do. So, she let it drop back at her side as she asked, "How are you feeling?"

No answer.

She tried again. "Do you, uh – do you remember what happened?"

That didn't garner much of a response either, save for the little jerk of his head that might have been a nod. "It was Phobos," she said. "You got – you got exposed to it, when – "

"I rem – " The hiss that cut through his words was quiet and rough, and he took a sharp breath before quietly saying, "I remember hearing you say that."

And it was obviously not the only thing he remembered.

She pressed her lips together, bobbing her head up and down even tough he wasn't looking at her; his eyes were open again but he didn't let them stray to any of them, focusing on the metal he was sitting on instead.

After a moment, he let out a single, terse word. "Isabel?"

"Yes," it was Sara who answered him. "Pin on the back of your jacket, to deliver the drug into your bloodstream."

He seemed capable of filling in the blanks on his own, not requiring the step-by-step guide-through
Felicity had needed to understand; he'd probably used similar methods on some people too, she thought.

He was also clenching his jaw again, in a way she knew meant he was angry – angry at himself, for letting Isabel get to him.

"You couldn't have seen this coming, Oliver," she told him.

"Really?" he ground out. "Cause I also remember you saying that this was all too easy."

"We didn't know she was the one sitting on the drug, man," Diggle said. "Too easy or not, you couldn't have seen this coming."

Oliver was shaking his head even before Diggle was done, only to freeze mid-movement. "Wait, how am I – how did you get me down here?"

"We...kidnapped you, technically," Felicity informed. "Well, Green Arrow and helpers did," she corrected, to which Diggle let out a little huff.

"Had to wear those tights again," he said.

The comment did bring a small smile to Oliver's lips, even if it looked pained.

And the next moment, he was trying to rip his IV out.

Sara promptly clamped her hand down on his to stop him. "No."

"I have to – " He let out a frustrated sigh. "I need to go back to QC, the stock is going to plummet over this, and Isabel is going to –"

"Whatever she's going to do, it won't be happening today," Felicity cut him off. "Cheryl called and – well, it's a mess, but if Isabel is calling her own meeting, that won't happen until tomorrow."

His eyes lifted to her again, though he still wouldn't really look at her – at any of them. He was speaking to her shoulder as he asked, "What are they saying, at the office?"

"It's – I mean, Digg told the EMTs who were driving you to the hospital that this was all about a drug, so the truth's being tossed around, too – minus the part where Isabel is responsible, of course – along with all the – " She bit her lip, not quite knowing how to say it.

So he said it for her. "Along with all the talk of me being completely unstable."

Something seemed to occur to him then, and his eyes flashed with fear before he lowered them again. "What do – what do my mom and Thea think?" he asked, so very quietly.

Felicity felt tears in her eyes. Again.

"They know what really happened," Diggle took over. "That you were drugged...that Isabel did it." He blew out a short breath, adding, "Roy's with them, told them 'Green Arrow' was taking care of you. He helped rescue you, by the way – and he doesn't know about you being Green Arrow, or about any of our identities, so don't worry about that."

"He's been in touch every half hour or so," Sara supplied. "Too see how you were doing. I told him we'd be bringing you there as soon as you woke up."

Oliver nodded, mumbling, "Right, okay."
"But first," Sara said, "tell me how you're really feeling." She dipped her head closer because he still wouldn't look at her, prompting, "Any lingering effects? Hallucinations? Anything?"

When he said absolutely nothing at all, Sara's eyes went up to Felicity then Diggle in an unspoken request to be given a minute alone; they both complied.

"I'll go get you another shirt," Felicity spoke up, just as Diggle said, "I'll go get the car."

Retrieving the bag of spare clothing Oliver kept around, Felicity brought it to her desk, pretending to be searching for longer than necessary while tracking Sara and Oliver's reflections in one of her monitors. Sara seemed to be the one doing all the talking, asking quiet questions, as the only discernible movements on Oliver's part were little nods, or little head-shakes. Sara looked over his vitals, held his eyes open to assess his pupillary response, then finally moved to take the needle out of his forearm. Felicity counted only one instance of Oliver speaking, too lowly for her to hear, but it seemed to be a question of his own, because it was Sara shaking her head this time, right before she walked away to throw the used medical supplies in the trash.

Felicity supposed that was her cue.

She made her way back to Oliver, where he was sitting on the edge of the table now, clutching a plain gray t-shirt in her hands.

"Here." She held it up for him to see before laying it on the table next to him – and then she just stood there, not really sure if she should keep him company or make herself scarce while he changed.

She should stay, she eventually decided. In case he keeled over or something.

He didn't seem to have a preference on the matter either way, starting on the process of unbuttoning his shirt. Felicity watched him, noting the sharp precisions of his movements; every twist of his fingers was quick and efficient as he moved from button to button, as were the swipes of his hands as he shrugged the material off his shoulders. His breaths were measured and controlled, too, to match the very carefully neutral set of his features.

He was smothering it, all these horrible things he remembered.

So he could pretend he was okay.

"Don't do that," she whispered.

His movements stilled for only a moment; the next, he was resuming his task of getting efficiently dressed. "Do what?"

"That." She gestured up-and-down his body. "Putting yourself 'in the zone', where you can pretend like you're fine."

"I am fine," he said, slipping his arms through the gray cotton.

She felt like laughing. Hysterically. "You're not fine."

"I have to be!" he snapped.

Felicity held her breath at the outburst while the one he drew came out unsteady, and he gritted his teeth, his head bowing like it was too heavy for him to keep it upright.

"For your mom and Thea, I know," she said quietly. "But they don't expect you to be."
"Felicity, can you just – " He blew out a ragged breath. "Can you just drop it, please?"

"Okay," she agreed, blinking back her tears. "If that's how you want to deal with this, okay, but just – " She took one, cautious step closer, reining back on the urge to run her fingers through his hair – again. "Just remember that you're not alone in anything," she said – and she could tell, by the way he tilted his head just slightly, that he'd recognized her words as an echo of his own, from weeks and weeks ago. "You have Digg – and Sara." She shrugged. "And me."

It took a few false starts for him to say it, but she did hear him squeeze the words out in the end, mumbled and hoarse though as they were. "Thank you."

*You don't have to keep thanking me.* But this was probably not the time to bring it up, she decided.

"Come on," she said instead. "Let's get you home."

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The ride to the Queen mansion wasn't as quiet as Felicity had expected it to be.

Oliver had questions. Short, precise questions.

What did his mother and sister know? How much had Roy told them? How much did they know about Roy's involvement with the vigilante? What exactly was out there in the public? What were the police doing? What was Laurel saying? Was there any chance of tying this to Isabel? What lie would they be spinning, to explain why he was driving up to his house with them?

And she and Diggle gave him the answers, clear-cut and to the point.

Mrs. Queen and Thea knew that he had been drugged, what the drug did, that Isabel had done it. Roy had told them that, and that Green Arrow was treating him himself, because he knew what ER doctors wouldn't believe. They knew Roy was Green Arrow's sidekick of sorts, and Thea hadn't reacted to it all that well – or so Roy reported. But she was more worried about her brother than she was angry at him.

The public had sensationalized reports from 'inside sources', and they had hearsay from two paramedics, speaking for the vigilante; they were gossiping about the people the vigilante had with him. The police were holding up a manhunt and had nothing to show for it. Laurel was angry about the latter.

There were no chances of tying any of it to Isabel. And that was their fault. Oliver's response, of course, had been that it wasn't.

As for the lie they would spin, they settled on saying Oliver had called them to come pick him up, after he had woken up and the vigilante had dropped him off somewhere in The Glades.

And they had one question for him, too. Just one.

Would Isabel Rochev get to stay alive this time?
Oliver's answer, much like they had expected, was very simple. *No more killing.*

When they finally pulled over, it was only after Oliver had already crossed the threshold with her and Diggle at his heels that she wondered if they were even supposed to come in with him. They'd sort of just assumed – well, she had, and all things pointed to John having as well. Oliver hadn't protested. Then again, they hadn't thought to ask.

She meant to do just that but she didn't get her chance, as they were already at the entrance to the salon, and the Queen women's sighs of relief trampled over her question.

Felicity noticed Roy in the corner, looking very much uncomfortable to be there, before her eyes were drawn to Thea and Mrs. Queen's tear-stained faces, as they both nearly ran to hug Oliver; Thea had her arms wrapped around his middle in a second while Mrs. Queen ran a hand over his hair, and placed a kiss on his forehead. Oliver brought his arms up, to wrap one around his mother and one around his sister, but it didn't look quite right. Felicity knew what a real, actual hug from Oliver looked like; this wasn't it.

She looked away, not wanting to intrude further on the family moment, even if it didn't stop her from hearing the mumbled questions, and Oliver's hushed reassurances that he was okay, that he was fine. *Such a bad liar.*

John met her eye, then subtly tipped his head towards the door; she nodded in return, clearing her throat. "We, uh," she spoke, and suddenly had four new pairs of eyes on her, "we should – Digg and I are gonna go, and just – " She gestured around a little awkwardly. "We'll just leave you guys to your...family time."

Oliver was looking at her, at both of them, over his shoulder, and she thought it might have been the first time he'd done so properly since waking up – and she could be wrong, but it looked like the last thing he wanted was for them to leave.

And his mother, it seemed, was better at reading her son than he gave her credit for.

It was actually a noticeable shift, when she took a step back from Oliver and straightened her back. "There's no need for you and Mr. Diggle to leave," she said. "In fact, Raisa has been in the kitchen ever since...we got the call, I think it made it easier for her to wait for news." She paused there, turning to Oliver again to quietly add, "She's been worried about you." The next moment, her attention was on Felicity and Diggle once more. "She's probably made enough food for ten by now. So, why don't you stay for – I supposed it would be a somewhat early dinner?" she proposed. "Actually – " she looked over her shoulder – "Roy, you should stay as well."

In Felicity's personal opinion, Roy looked like there was nothing in the world he wanted less, but after a quick shared glance with his girlfriend, he was nodding his agreement with as much fake enthusiasm as he could muster. He too, Felicity thought, was a bad liar. And he didn't even have to open his mouth to make it obvious.

Mrs. Queen didn't seem at all put off by it, though. "Ms. Smoak?" she prompted. "Mr. Diggle?"

"Uh..." She looked to Diggle, then Oliver; in the end, she nodded. "Sure," she agreed. "Let's...do that."
She had been in weirder settings, Felicity argued with herself as she stuffed a forkful of mashed potatoes in her mouth – not that sitting at the long Queen dining room table, along with Oliver, his family, Diggle, Roy and even Raisa, didn't register high on the weird-o-meter by any means. Still, weirder things had happened to her.

Oliver was quiet, only speaking when he absolutely had to – which, as it happened, did not include him making it known that the two seats on either side of him were reserved for her and Diggle; everyone had sort of just assumed that going in.

She did think it made him feel a little better, though; having them there with him.

As did talking to Raisa.

She had fussed over him, brought out all his favorite foods, and talked to him in a mixture of English and Russian every now and then – which, Felicity concluded, made him feel a little better, too.

Not that he actually felt good. She knew his tells, which included but were not limited to the way his thumb rubbed up the down the handle of the knife he held; rub-rub, up-and-down, non-stop.

The talking points, the few that were broached, were about as far from what had gathered them all in that room together as they could get, and once their plates were clean of food, Felicity thought it really was time for them to hightail it out of there. John made the announcement this time, to her relief, and Roy seemed all too happy to jump on that bandwagon.

They got up, bid their goodbyes, and Felicity threw in a smile in there just for Oliver; next thing she knew, he was grabbing her hand, keeping her from walking away. John stopped, too, next to her, while she trailed her eyes down to Oliver's hand, where he had laced his fingers through hers, then back up to his face.

He didn't seem like he knew what he wanted to say, or how to put it into words, so she stepped up closer, bringing her other hand to close around their already joined ones as well. "We're just a call away if you need us," she told him, low enough that only he and John heard her. "And," she added, because she had an inkling as to why he seemed so reluctant to let them wander off away from him for too long, "if you get...antsy, just remember that we are safe and sound at home – which you can actually verify with one click on your phone. Because I made that easy for you."

And if offering to stalk them via their trackers for comfort brought a tiny smile to his face, then that wasn't weird at all either.

He squeezed her hand in thanks before letting go, then got one last pat on the back from John. They were leaving after that, Roy in tow.
"Moira, I know this is difficult, but we have to take a statement –"

"And I am telling you, Quentin, that it's not happening tonight."

"Mom, it's okay," she heard her son's quiet voice behind her.

She sighed. "Sweetheart, you need to rest. They can come back tomorrow."

"I'd rather get it over with," he said, and she sighed once again, in defeat this time.

Her son turned to the men in the doorway. "Detective Hilton, Mr. Lance," he greeted, then gestured for them to come in.

They took their seats in the salon, and while Quentin took out his pad to take notes, Moira took a moment to gauge her son's reaction; much like she had expected, he showed nothing. Save for a suitably bland look on his face, one she had seen so many times since he had returned from that island. She scarcely dared think about what he hid behind it, what he must have relieved today; it hurt, to imagine her child in the kind of pain that ran so much deeper than what any flesh wound could inflict. She didn't want to think about it, to know about it. But perhaps that had been her mistake all along.

"We'll keep this short, Mr. Queen," Hilton assured, though said assurance did nothing to make Moira stop regretting the decision to inform the SCPD that her son was safe at home again.

"Right so, maybe we can do this a little backwards, to make it go quicker – we'll tell you what we know, and you just fill in the blanks for us if you can," Quentin suggested, and Moira almost thanked him for his great, sudden consideration for her son's feelings; she bit her tongue against the remark, though.

"Okay," Oliver agreed.

"You were taken out of your offices by EMTs," Quentin proceeded, "the ambulance you were in got cut off by the vigilante, and a few others, then you –"

"I don't remember any of that," Oliver cut in, and for once, Moira believed he was being truthful. She couldn't say the same of his next statement, however. "The last thing I remember before waking up is being in the middle of a meeting with the board."

Quentin didn't look like he was buying it either, but surprisingly or not, he played along. "Right. And after you woke up?"

Oliver shrugged. "Green Arrow was there," he said. "Talked me through my confusion, told me I'd been injected with something. Then he blindfolded me and led me outside, drove me around, I think, before he dropped me off. When I took off the blindfold, he was gone. I had my phone in my pocket, so I called...my friends, to come pick me up."

"We tried tracking your phone," Hilton informed. "Couldn't get a signal."

"Must have been turned off."

"Good, okay. So anything you remember about the place you woke up in?"

"Not much. It was a...warehouse or something like that. Nothing that I recognized."

"And the vigilante? Anything you can tell us about him?"
Moira pursed her lips. "Are you here to take my son's statement, Detective," she demanded, "or is this just an ill-disguised attempt to actually get somewhere in your wild goose chase for the man in the hood?"

Hilton looked a little offended while, to Moira's renewed surprise, Quentin looked like he might laugh; out of the corner of her eye, she spotted her son reining in on a small smile of his own.

"The vigilante is, in this case, your son's kidnapper," Hilton said. "It's procedure, to gather information on the kidnapper, in cases of abduction."

"The vigilante saved my son today," she countered.

"Well, he has a habit of that," Hilton muttered, before he asked, "So, you stand by what he said?" He turned to Oliver. "That you were drugged?"

"Yes," Oliver said firmly.

"No offense, Mr. Queen, but...you can't exactly prove that, can you?"

"No," Oliver shook his head. "But I know it's the truth."

Hilton opened his mouth to fire out another question, but Quentin was faster. "Any idea on who did it?"

Her son went quiet at that, as did she; of course they had an idea. They knew it for certain. But throwing the accusation out in the open was dangerous. It could taint Isabel's own image, of course; it could also backfire, and paint her son as a desperate disgraced CEO who wanted to discredit the contender for his position.

It was wiser to play it safe. "I have a few enemies," Oliver said, "being a high-profile CEO. Any number of them could have access to this kind of substance."

"And Green Arrow, he didn't tell you about any of the guys he dealt with hunting this thing?" Quentin asked again. "'Cause if we get a lead on manufacturers or suppliers, we can get them to talk, then cross-reference buyers with people who might've wanted to get to you."

Moira had to admit, this was not the treatment she had expected Quentin to give her son – especially as it had been just a little over a month since he had found out that his younger daughter was still alive, that she hadn't died as Oliver had said she did. That was a grudge she had expected him to carry forever. She had certainly not seen Quentin believing her son in the cards.

Then again, she thought, maybe it wasn't Oliver he believed. Maybe it was Green Arrow.

"I've got nothing for you on that, Detective," Oliver spoke, then frowned. After a moment, he corrected it to, "I mean, Mr. Lance."

"Okay," Quentin let out slowly, before clearing his throat. "Well, I think this is about a good a statement as we're gonna get. Also, uh...considering the circumstances under which you were being taken on that ambulance to begin with, we have to advise you to get that medical attention you were supposed to – "

"I'm not going to the hospital."

Quentin clucked his tongue. "Well, you seem lucid enough to me to make that call for yourself, so I think that settles that." He turned to his partner, who seemed a little reluctant, but still nodded.
"We got what we came for," Hilton agreed, rising to his feet; the rest of them followed suit. "Thank you for your time, Mr. Queen."

Oliver gave him a tight-lipped smile in response, and Moira gestured for the men to follow her to the door so she could escort them out; Quentin, however, seemed to have one last thing on his mind.

"My girls have been worried about you," he told Oliver. "Sara handled it pretty well, I think, but Laurel – not so much. So, just shoot her a text or something, will you?" he requested. "To tell her you're good now. 'Cause I don't think she'll take my word for it."

"I'll let her know, Mr. Lance," Oliver promised.

Moira let her eyes linger on him, even as she ushered the officers to the door. There was a time when she would have expected a much greater reaction from her son just at hearing Laurel's name – when she would have expected for Laurel to be the one he called to come pick him up, after he had been through what he had. And she would have been pleased by that, for him to still have that reaction, because she had liked, even before, who her son was around Laurel.

But he had called Mr. Diggle, and Felicity.

Despite what he had claimed to her once, Moira strongly suspected her son viewed Ms. Smoak as more than just a friend. If only because she had seen him, during the investors' party she had hosted in their home, letting his eyes stray to Felicity every chance he got – and often, with longing.

For all the thoughts her son hid from her these days, some of them were still plainly written on his face. And what she could read, was that he held a great deal of affection towards Felicity Smoak.

Once she had closed the door behind Quentin and Detective Hilton, she turned to Oliver, but before she could get any words out, he was already speaking.

"I'm gonna go to bed," he said. "Try and get some rest."

She doubted that was his real intention behind fleeing her presence. "Okay," she allowed him to have his lie for now. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

"'Night, Mom."

Sleep was out of the question.

Even if he managed to lull himself asleep with breathing techniques, giving up control over his mind to his subconscious was not an option; he knew what kind of nightmares would come if he did, and he couldn't allow himself that. So, no sleep.

Oliver was seated on the ground by his bedroom window, with his back propped against the wall; he'd left a lamp on to minimize the risk of his mind playing tricks on him in the dark, and the window open to have enough fresh air not to feel smothered.
And most importantly, he had his phone in hand, eyes trained on the two red blinking dots on his screen that told him his partners were both in their homes, keeping their phones on. They probably weren't sleeping either – no, in fact, he was sure they weren't. In case he called them. Their phones were probably kept right within reach, too – and Felicity, she had probably turned the volume on her ringtone all the way up, just so she wouldn't miss the call if it came.

He let himself think on that, picture them right now. John was probably on his couch, beer in one hand and a remote in the other, sifting through the channels – one foot propped on his coffee table, too. And Felicity was –

His mind came to a roadblock there, because he had no idea what Felicity's place actually looked like. He knew her address, even knew what her building was like – from recon and such. But he had never been inside her apartment. He imagined it had to be bright, and colorful – and full of trinkets. He couldn't imagine a living space Felicity called home without trinkets. Or pieces of tech everywhere, at random places. She'd probably pulled an old motherboard out of her oven at some point, he thought.

He busied himself with that for a while, constructing this imaginary layout of Felicity's apartment in his head. And once it was done, he thought about where she would be; after a short deliberation, he placed her in her bed, working on one tablet, monitoring something else on another, with an additional laptop on idle by her side, while stealing glances at her phone every now and then. It was comforting, thinking about Felicity.

Like it had been hearing her voice, before.

He remembered it. Her telling him that it wasn't real, that he was going to be okay. His nightmares had been dancing all around him, even when he'd closed his eyes not to see them, they were inside his head, and they'd felt real, they'd been living memories, and ghosts spilling into the present, and they scared him, they scared the life out of –

*Shut it down.*

He pulled air through his teeth, breathed it out slowly, counting his heartbeats until their rhythm evened out again.

He used to be better at this. Controlling the flow of his thoughts. Compartmentalizing.

And ever since he had woken up, he'd been using all his old tactics, everything he had learned about control over himself, but it had taken so much effort – so much more than it used to. It seemed a little foreign now, like he was rusty.

When the soft knock sounded against the bedroom door, he nearly flew to his feet, ready to fight, before his mother came into view.

"Can I come in?"

He blew out a breath, locking his phone and dropping it to the floor. "Yeah, Mom, sure."

She closed the door behind her, padding over to him in her slippers; she had changed into her pajamas, scrubbed the last of her make-up from her face, though her still-perfect hair told Oliver she hadn't even attempted to climb into bed to try and get some sleep. Much like he hadn't.

His mother lowered herself to his side, tucking her legs under her. "This is pretty much how I found you the first night you came back, too," she commented.
Except he'd nearly killed her then. And it was yet another reason why he shouldn't – couldn't sleep.

"I remember spending hours thinking about what must have happened to you, on that island, to make you react that way."

He clenched his fist. "Mom –"

"I didn't want to think about it," she went on like he hadn't spoken, though her voice was still soft, "but I suppose I always knew that...it was more than just solitude that made it hell for you there."

There was a break in her words, just for a moment, before she was speaking again. "So when I first got the call from the PD today," she told him, "before Roy came over, I...didn't find it so hard to believe that..." She took a deep breath. "That maybe, it got difficult for you to deal with it."

He stared at his knees where he had brought them up against his chest, began counting his heartbeats again; they'd started ringing in his ears.

"I don't doubt that you were drugged, that Isabel did this to you," she said, "but even if – " She sighed. "I think there is...so much that you keep to yourself – terrible things, that you had to relive today, one way or the other."

"Mom," he tried to stop her again, his voice coming out much rougher than he liked. "There's nothing – " His breathing was uneven, too out-of-control, and he tried to rein in on it, level it, before any other half-broken sounds tumbled from his mouth; it didn't really work. "It was just – it was..."

"Oliver," she was the one who interrupted this time, voice firmer though she hadn't raised it, "when you came back, your doctor told me that twenty percent of your body was covered in scar tissue – and some of your wounds couldn't have been self-inflicted, or accidental. There were people with you there," she concluded, "people who hurt you. But when you were found, you were alone. So where did they all go?"

He held himself completely still, bracing himself. His mother didn't want to hear about what had happened to him in those five years, she didn't want to hear the story of his father putting a gun to his own head, but this – this was what he didn't want to hear. To hear his mother connect the dots, to hear her say that –

"I don't care, sweetheart," she said. "I don't care if they left on their own, or if you killed them all."

His breath hitched.

"Which is...probably not something a woman convicted of mass murder should be heard to say," she added, like it was an afterthought, like she hadn't just –

There were tears burning in his eyes, clogging his throat, and he couldn't fight it. "Mom," he whispered again, though she probably couldn't even hear it, not when it was so quiet and thick.

"I think you've tried to convince me, convince everyone," she spoke again, and her voice sounded strained, too, "that you're okay, that it wasn't – that you're better off than you actually are, because you didn't want us to see...what it really did to you. And I know –" She cleared her throat. "I know I have made it difficult for you to show anything other than what you thought would make it easiest for me, I know you sometimes act like you're alright for my and others' benefit – and it was obvious to me today."

He shut his eyes and the tears ran down his cheeks. "I don't – I don't want to talk about it, Mom. Please."
"You don't have to," she told him. "I just want you to know that it doesn't matter to me. Or to your sister. Whatever it is you're trying so hard not to let us see. What matters is that you're here, that we have you back." He felt her hand running along the back of his head, smoothing down his hair, like it used to when he was little. He gathered the courage to turn his head and look at her; she gave him a watery smile. "My beautiful boy."

My beautiful boy. She always called him that – even when he had been nothing but a disgrace, even when she had to sit down with the commissioner and negotiate a price so the department wouldn't press charges against him for peeing on a cop, even when she knew he was cheating on Laurel, even when he was as far from a boy as he could get. Those were the first he remembered hearing her say after five years.

Always her beautiful boy.

"That – " He sniffled. "That was never really true."

"It is to me," she told him. "And to all those who love you."

When she wrapped her arm around him, he let himself be pulled in, resting his head on her shoulder; her other hand came up, to brush along his temple. This was something he couldn't remember; the last time he was held by his mother, crying on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he whispered.

"For what?"

"I let Isabel get the drop on me, I didn't – I underestimated her." He sighed. "And now she's going to take our company, and...that's my fault."

"No." He felt her shaking her head. "If anyone is to blame, it's me. I kept her past with your father from you, and I didn't think she could do something like this...I didn't know what she was capable of."

He did, though. For a long time. And he'd still let her win.

"We're still going to lose the company," he remarked quietly.

"There are ways to fight her."

"None that are going to work. Not before the board takes her side."

His mother said nothing in return, only continuing to run soothing fingers through his hair.

"I tried, Mom," he muttered. "To get the company back on its feet, to be a good CEO...I really tried."

"I know," she assured. "And I am so very proud of you for everything you've managed to do. Your father would be, too."

"I still failed," he said.

"You didn't fail at anything, Oliver. And as for the company...we will try, to stop her from getting what she wants. And if that doesn't work, we will fight to take it back from her." She dropped a light kiss to the crown of his head. "She's not going to win."

The best he could manage in return was, "Okay."
He imagined his mother was probably not very satisfied with that answer, but she didn't press the issue. Instead, she simply said, "You haven't lost yet, sweetheart."

Maybe, he thought. But it felt like he had.
Past Experience

Chapter Notes

Well. hello. I hope you haven't forgotten this story exists in the like, forty days since I updated last. And I hope you enjoy this new belated update, too.

Also, Felicity's place gets a bit of attention in this chapter, which makes it the perfect time to direct you guys to the absolutely amazing Pinterest boards the lovely Devaue Fawkes over on FF.net has put together.

It has everything - and I mean EVERYTHING. Gorgeous outfits for Felicity FOR EVERY CHAPTER, and not only all the furniture and decoration for her apartment, but ALSO SKETCHED FLOOR PLANS. I have no words to describe how amazing it all is, and every last bit of it is of Devaue Fawkes' creation and it is absolutely amazaballs. So do check it out.

And additionally, there is also a board for Oliver's outfits, which you should most definitely check out as well.

One foot in front of the other.

Quick. But not too fast.

They'd seen him coming by now, and their mouths had stopped moving, leaving their eyes to track his approach.

Don't falter, don't trip, he told himself as he pushed the door open. Don't stumble.

"Mr. Queen," Isabel greeted, right from opposite him – sitting in his chair, at the head of the table. "We didn't expect you to join us."

Oliver swallowed back his anger, offering a tight smile instead. "Possibly because you hadn't informed me that there would be a meeting today," he said. "I had to find out about it from one of Ms. Smoak's assistants. Which is strange, considering I am still the CEO."

Isabel's mouth ticked at the corner. "Not anymore."

He'd known as much, he supposed, though it didn't stop the dead weight from settling at the pit of his stomach. You lost, his mind saw fit to remind him. You lost again. Still, he had a performance to deliver. "Excuse me?" he played indignant.

"We've just finished voting," Mr. Reynolds, who had sat on these meetings since the days of his father, cut in before Isabel could inform him herself. "In light of yesterday's...events, we feel you are not fit to maintain your position as head of this company. We've transferred control to Ms. Rochev. You're no longer the CEO, Oliver. " After a moment, he added, "I'm sorry."

Don't falter. "I don't even get to make a case for myself before you kick me out of my own company?"
"After what happened yesterday," Isabel said, "there's not much you could say that would go in your favor."

Just as she had wanted it – well, not quite. He wasn't in the psych ward of Starling General.

"This wasn't an easy decision," she went on, and he gritted his teeth, "but it's in the best interest of the company. Like Mr. Reynolds said, you're simply not fit to maintain your position."

Oliver counted back from three. "I was drugged." Don't trip.

There was a pause, where the uncomfortable silence pressed hard against him from all sides; he didn't have to let his eyes stray to any one of them to know what kind of expressions they were trying to contain.

Except for Isabel, of course. She wasn't like them. So what she tried to hide, was her gloating.

Eventually, it was Reynolds who spoke again. "Even if we did believe that" – which they probably didn't – "and even if it's true, all you've got is the word of a vigilante to corroborate it. No culprits, no evidence, nothing. Unless you know something we don't?"

He could say what he knew – what his mother had cautioned him against saying – but it was even clearer to him now than it was before, that any accusations he made against Isabel would only serve to disgrace him. And Reynolds was right; he had no evidence. Certainly no readily available one. So, he was forced to shake his head.

"I proposed you undergo a psych evaluation, to prove your mental fitness," Isabel said, and Oliver nearly leapt over the table to strangle her right then and there; he dug his nails into the palm of his hand to push his anger down. Again. Don't stumble.

"But the board feels that, even if you were to pass it," she went on, "it would only go so far to help the rumors. The fact is, Mr. Queen, the damage's already been done. And this company can't take another public scandal – certainly not when it's barely back on its feet."

Her words, of course, were chosen perfectly. She played the members of the board, like she had played him, to make the game go in her favor.

A master player.

Felicity had told him as much.

"Oliver," Reynolds said, "I wish there was another way for us to do this, a way for you to stay. But we can't afford to push through another PR nightmare with you, like we did with Moira. The risk is just – " He sighed. "We can't afford that."

"So you're cutting me off," Oliver concluded, nodding. He knew he'd lost anyway.

"Could you give me and Ms. Rochev a moment, please?" he requested next, to which the others complied easily enough, filing out of the room one by one. Oliver's eyes only tracked one of them, Ned Foster, who also seemed the most eager to pass by him as quickly as possible; not that Oliver could blame him. He remembered, though through a slight haze, that there'd been a moment, where Ned had looked a lot less like himself and a lot more like Edward Fyers, grabbing him, keeping him away from the ones he'd thought were his mercenaries attacking Diggle; he remembered trying to put the man in a headlock.

He hadn't hurt him, though. He hadn't hurt anyone.
Sara had assured him he hadn't.

It was just him and Isabel left now, and Oliver pursed his lips, dragging his fingers against the table's glass surface. "I know it was you," he said.

When he looked over to her, he found that she wore the single most perfectly innocent expression – which, of course, was a challenge in itself; because he couldn't prove her guilt.

"It was me that – what?" she asked.

Oliver rounded the corner of the table, sliding his fingers along the glass as he stepped closer. "I can't prove it," he told her, "not anytime soon. Doesn't mean I won't try."

Her lips pressed together, in a way that made him think she was stifling a grin. "So much for our hopes that you would bow out gracefully, Mr. Queen," she said.

Oliver narrowed his eyes, planting his palms on the table. "This is my company."

"No, it is mine," she fired back, straightening in her chair. "It is mine now," she repeated. "I won."

He gritted his teeth. "By setting me up."

"You were going to kick me out. Did you really think I wouldn't know about your little plan?" She huffed. "I'm almost offended, that you thought it would work that easily."

Don't falter.

Don't trip.

Don't.

Stumble.

"Your plan didn't work as easily as you thought it would either," he forced the words out. "I doubt it included me walking away with my sanity."

"Well, that," she said, leaning up to press her elbows against the glass, "is debatable." Looking him up and down, she added, "You've lost the faith of your board. Sane or not, no CEO comes back from that. You lost this company."

He knew that. "I'll get it back," he said, and couldn't really bring himself to believe a word of it.

"You?" she laughed, like it was the most ludicrous thing she had ever heard. "You got this company handed to you. You're here because you're your father's son, because your mother told you what to do – I mean, getting Walter Steele to fund you for the last outstanding five percent of the stock so I wouldn't get it? That's all Moira. I do admit, I didn't think you'd have the guts to pull it off and stick to it," she conceded, "but let's face it, you only got this far because you have competent friends willing to do favors for you. You don't know how to fight for this company."

"And you do?" he let out. "You're sitting in that chair because you pumped me full of a drug that messed with my head!"

She was suddenly on her feet, matching his stance. "I'm sitting here because I've earned it!"

"Earned it? By – what, exactly? Taking out your competition by drugging them? Or did you think that running after my father like his little pet earned you his company?"
Clearly, she hadn't been expecting that. It bought him a moment where she lost her footing, but before he could strike at her weak spot again, she'd found solid ground. And she was furious.

"You think you know what it was like for me and Robert?" she practically spat at him. "You think whatever Moira told you comes even close to the truth? I didn't expect him to hand this company to me – I worked for it! I worked to get my degree, and I worked to get a second one here, and I worked for every acquisition I ever made, and I worked with Robert on plans for this company!" Her hand slammed against the table, rattling the glass. "I was supposed to be the heir to his company because I did earn it!"

"You honestly believed," Oliver ground out, "that my father would choose you over his own son?"

Sayings about looks that could kill ran through his mind before all of her fury was wiped from her face, one second to the next, and she was only cold again; in control.

"I believed he was smarter," she said, "than to be blinded by his love for you. You never cared." She shook her head. "Never wanted this. Never loved this company, never had any dreams for it. Robert did." She lowered herself back into the chair, leaning back into it. "And so did I," she said. "I have great, great things planned for Queen Consolidated, and now, I can make them happen. Because it's mine. As it should have been." Her hands uncurled from where they had been clenched in her lap, to calmly settle along the armrests at her sides; her smile was back in place, too. "Now get the hell out of my offices. Mr. Queen."

Among the things that Felicity considered would happen today, Moira Queen asking her to come by the mansion was not on the list.

It was, like many things that were known to happen to her these days, weird.

Especially considering she was about ninety-nine percent certain Oliver would not be there when she arrived. And that Mrs. Queen had asked her to come alone.

"Ms. Smoak," Mrs. Queen greeted her in person at the door. "Thank you for coming."

Felicity nodded, tried to go for a smile; it probably ended up not looking quite right. "Um, call me Felicity," she said.

Mrs. Queen's nod, unlike her own, was one graceful, fluid motion. "Felicity it is," she agreed, then motioned towards the living room; Felicity followed her there, noting that there was not another person in sight anywhere. Not Thea, or any of the staff. Which was probably because Mrs. Queen wanted it that way.

"So, my son is at the office right now," Mrs. Queen began, once they were seated on the couch, "and I expect he will be back soon, but in the meantime, I wanted to talk to you."

Felicity folded her hands in her lap. "Me?"
"Yes." Mrs. Queen crossed her legs, intertwining her fingers around her knee. "As I imagine you know, whatever my son may say or do today, it will only go so far with the board. Isabel Rochev is probably being made sole CEO as we speak."

Yes, she did know that.

"So, I was wondering, now that Isabel will almost certainly be taking over, what are your plans?"

She froze.

"Um, I – " She cleared her throat. "What exactly do you mean?"

Mrs. Queen raised an eyebrow, obviously not convinced she hadn't gotten her meaning. Still, she clarified, "What I mean is, do you plan on staying with the company? To work under Isabel instead of my son?"

Oh...crap.

She hadn't even really thought about it, not until four in the morning, when she was curled up in her bed, stubbornly refusing to let her eyelids drop shut in case Oliver called; he hadn't. She, however, did stay wide awake until sunrise, trying to figure out what the hell she was supposed – wanted to do.

She had a pretty snazzy career going on for her at QC right now. And she loved it. She hadn't expected to be this into a position that required so much paperwork and diplomatic skills that she didn't really posses, but as it turned out, it did sit well with her. And Isabel would probably want to keep her around.

On the other hand, she hated Isabel.

But she didn't want to give up her career.

Not that Oliver would ask her to.

Well, of course, she could kick it off somewhere else too, she wasn't incompetent – just because Oliver had pretty much handed her the position she held at QC didn't mean she couldn't get there on her own, she was a highly skilled M.I.T. graduate, thank you very much, and –

"Felicity?"

"Uh...I, uh..." What the hell what she supposed to say? To Oliver's mother?

"You don't have to try and tell me what you think I want to hear," Mrs. Queen assured, "or even what you think Oliver may want to hear. Just answer me honestly."

Okay. She could do that. "Just for the record, I hate Isabel," she said, "but I...think I want to stay. At the company." She blew out a breath. "I want to keep working there, so unless Isabel kicks me out, I'd...like to stay there."

And she really was genuinely surprised when Mrs. Queen's answer to that was, "Good."

"Good?" she parroted dumbly, which earned her a slight smile.

"Good," Mrs. Queen reiterated, "because I was going to ask you to do exactly that."

Oh.
"You want me to be your inside – well, woman, don't you?"

Mrs. Queen's smile widened a fraction, before she dipped her chin. "Oliver has a very high opinion of you," she said, "as do Walter and Thea – and obviously, Mr. Diggle as well. I am not always...convinced of my son's good judgment, but in your case, I am willing to believe that he is right to trust you."

That was probably some high form of praise, Felicity thought.

"I am taking a chance here, that you are trustworthy, and that you won't go to Isabel with what I'm asking you to do, but...if my family's company is getting taken away, I would very much prefer it if someone I can trust – someone who has my son's best interests at heart – stayed within it."

"So, do you...have some sort of plan?" Felicity asked. "To, you know, get the company back?"

Mrs. Queen pursed her lips. "Not as such. Not yet, anyway."

"Oh, okay. Well, I'm..." Felicity shrugged. "Happy to be your inside woman here."

"Thank you, Felicity."

"It's not like I wouldn't have reported everything back to Oliver anyway," she dismissed the gratitude, which somehow seemed to pique Mrs. Queen's interest, her eyes moving over Felicity in what she assumed was assessment; it made her kinda fidgety.

"Is there...something else you want to talk to me about, Mrs. Queen?"

After a short pause, Mrs. Queen shook her head. "Nothing of importance."

Which would imply that there was, in fact, something – however unimportant it was. While Felicity debated on the pros and cons of digging further, Mrs. Queen looked past her, to the entryway, and smiled; craning her head around, Felicity brought her eyes to a very tired-looking and frowning Oliver.

"Felicity?" he let out.

She gave him a small wave over her shoulder. "Hi."

His eyes went from her, to his mother, then back. "What are you – did something happen?"

"Don't worry, sweetheart, nothing's happened," Mrs. Queen said. "How did things go at the office?"

Oliver's answer came in the form of a long, drawn-out sigh and a hand running over his face. "About as bad as we expected," he muttered as he let his body drop onto the armchair facing them, shoulders slumped. "Isabel is – she got exactly what she wanted. She's CEO now."

Mrs. Queen closed her eyes for a fraction of a second, her own shoulders tensing, before she was the very image of calculated efficiency again. "Well, we were prepared for that to happen," she said. "It's actually why I asked Felicity to come." When Oliver looked very confused again, she added, "Since Isabel has control over our company now, and the board's allegiances clearly lie with her, it – "

"I'm gonna stay at QC and work for Isabel," Felicity blurted out.

Mrs. Queen fell silent, what with being rudely cut off and all that, while Oliver grew still. And
between one blink and the next, he looked like she had just ripped his heart right out of his chest. While kicking his puppy.

She knew he'd get that look.

Which was why she kept on rambling. "Like a spy thing! You know? And also because I like my job, but I'm not – I still hate her guts, I hate her guts a lot, and I am one hundred percent Team Oliver here, I'm just – "

"Felicity," he interrupted, shaking his head. "I wouldn't ask you to give up your job for me."

"Yeah, well..." She took a deep breath. "I know that. It's just that you get...weird about this stuff. Me and Isabel, I mean."

He looked away, effectively proving her point.

"Why don't I, uh, give you two some time to talk?" Mrs. Queen proposed, getting to her feet. "I have some real estate to put on the market as soon as possible anyway."

She exchanged goodbyes with Felicity before moving out of the room, her heels tapping away against the floors, during which time Oliver had discarded his jacket and began pacing a tight circle next to the armchair he'd previously occupied.

Felicity bit her lip as she stood, though she made no move to approach him just yet. "I don't know if you think I'm somehow betraying you whenever I talk to Isabel or something," she said quietly, "but – "

"No, Felicity – " He shook his head again. "That's not what I think."

"Then what was that look about?"

His eyes went up to hers before he cast them down again, this time bringing a hand to rub at the back of his neck. "I don't..." He sighed. "I guess I just don't like the idea of her being anywhere near you."

"Yeah well, I'm not a fan of it either," she said, lowering her voice as she added, "but she doesn't have any reason to hurt me."

She didn't know if he was just that disconnected from the reality that people cared for him the way he did for them, that she did, or if he just hadn't gotten around to thinking about it, but he actually looked surprised to hear the crack in her voice, and to see what she was pretty sure were a few tears creeping into her eyes.

It was too fresh in her memory for her not to tear up just thinking about it, though she'd tried, yesterday, to put her bravest face forward – because he really didn't need to be worrying about her feelings – but really, all she wanted to do was wrap him in blankets and make him hot chocolate or something.

Something to protect him.

"I'm going to make her pay for it, you know," she promised, sniffling a little as she stepped closer. "I'm not sure how exactly, but she's going to pay."

"Felicity..."

"I let her get to you, and I messed up," she said, "but she's not getting away with this, not by a long
shot, and – "

"Wait, what – Felicity, none of this is your fault."

She brought her eyes up to the ceiling, and when that did nothing to make them burn any less, dropped them to the ground. "Well, for a genius, I kind of failed to see the really obvious here," she muttered, "which just, you know, keeps happening – I mean, first I send you right into a set-up, now I had not one but three CEO's whose companies she snatched up because they had breakdowns, and hey, what could possibly be the connection between those and a drug that does the exact same thing?" She huffed. "And I knew that it would be way, way too easy to just try and talk the board into kicking her out but I still just sat back in my office and let her waltz in and do her evil thing, and then, my brilliant rescue plan actually helped her get what she wanted – like, I can think of having Digg tell a couple of paramedics the truth but not to secure any evidence? I mean, what kind of – "

"Hey." The pressure of his hand on her shoulder halted her; she drew air a little noisily, resisting the urge to do the very undignified thing and wipe her nose on her sleeve. "Hey," he repeated, softer this time, "look at me."

She only got as far as the knot of his tie.

That didn't seem to be good enough for him, and the hand he had on her shoulder moved to under her chin, tilting her head up. His fingers lingered for a little while longer, knuckles grazing her skin, before he let them fall away. "Like I told you yesterday, too," he said, "it's not your fault – or Digg's. None of this is on you."

She appreciated the sentiment, she really did, but... "What kind of partner am I," she whispered, "if I can't even protect you?"

"Protect me?"

"You're not the only one who gets to have a protective streak," she grumbled.

Apparently, he didn't have a suitable reaction to respond with at the ready, so it took a moment, but there was a little smile at the corner of his mouth in the end, that was all sorts of incredulous and maybe just a little bit delighted.

It didn't make for much of a harmonious landscape next to the circles under his eyes, heavier than what she was used to seeing, and the ashen tint of his skin, betraying the fact that he probably hadn't had a moment's sleep in over a day.

She thought about wrapping him in blankets again.

"What?" he prompted quietly.

"I kinda want to hug you," she said. "But I'm not sure if...you're in the mood to be hugged right now."

"A hug – " He blew out a short, scratchy chuckle. "A hug would be nice."

Her arms were around him the next second.

She rose and fell along with his shoulders when he breathed in deeply, his cheek brushing her temple on the exhale; it took a little further coaxing, with her fingers running along the back of his neck, but his arms wound around her waist eventually, holding tight.
After he'd closed the door behind Felicity, Oliver dropped onto the couch, letting his entire body sink into the cushions; he barely counted five breaths before Thea plopped down next to him.

"I was gonna say hi," she told him, "but you two looked like you were having a moment, so..."

He sighed, rolling his head to the side. "Speedy..."

"What? I didn't wanna interrupt." She shrugged, lowering her voice as she added, "Besides, you look like you needed that hug."

She wasn't wrong.

"And I know you're probably going to bite my head off for this," she went on, "but I really think you should reconsider that whole 'we're just friends' thing with her, especially – "

"Thea," he warned, shaking his head.

"Ollie," she matched his tone. "I know I said I'd drop it, and I did, but – " She sighed. "I can actually see the hearts in your eyes when you look at her," she said, "and – I'm just saying, things are probably going to be rough for a while, so maybe you should...have one thing going on in your life that doesn't suck. You know, something that actually makes you happy for a change."

He looked away, to the spot just off to his right, where, a month-and-something ago, Felicity had pulled him down for a kiss. He'd had it then, for those few minutes or so, something that actually made him happy. It was a perfect memory.

Up until the moment he'd lost that, too.

"I tried, Thea," he said quietly, dragging his eyes back to his sister. "I told her, that I wanted us to be more than just friends, and – " He shrugged. "It wasn't what she wanted."

"Oh," Thea let out. And then, "That sucks."

"Yeah," he agreed, smiling for his sister's benefit when she gave him a sympathetic look.

"Mom's on the phone with the realtor," she changed the subject after a moment, and he appreciated not having more salt rubbed into that wound, "so I guess, no more summers on a private beach for us. Not that we've actually gone there since...well, since you and Dad disappeared."

He frowned. "Wait, she's selling the beach house? Speedy, that's one of yours – "

"I volunteered it away," she said. "And if you start ranting about how this is all your fault, so it's all the stuff in your name that we should be selling" – she pointed a finger at him – "then I swear to God, Ollie..."

He dropped his eyes away from her. "I wasn't going to rant," he muttered.
"But?"

He sighed. "But this is my fault," he said, "and I don't you giving up the stuff Dad left you because of it."

"Did you not hear the part where I said we haven't been there in like, seven years?" she asked. "I'm fine with giving it up. I mean, hey, we're semi-destitute now, and something's gotta keep paying the bills – and the damages. So, the beach house is the first to go. And it's fine."

"Besides," she added, "the stuff that's in your name are the penthouses in Europe. Now that's a loss that would hurt me."

His smile was more genuine as he brought an arm around her to pull her into his side; she pecked his cheek before dropping her head onto his shoulder.

Sometimes, he forgot that his little sister was actually all grown up.

"Let's just be glad Dad thought to put some independent assets we can sell for cash in our names," she said. "Well, I'm pretty sure it was Mom who told him to do it, but still."

"You think?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, making sure the two of us have a source of money we could use in case QC imploded? That's more a of a Mom than a Dad thing."

"Yeah, it is," he admitted. He brushed a small kiss against the top of her head, before he said, "You know, I didn't really think to ask, but...how are you holding up? With all of this, I mean."

She craned her head back, frowning up at him. "I'm not the one who got doused with some kind of fear drug here, Ollie."

"Scared? Please, I freaked out." There was some levity to her words, easing their sting a little; not enough to stop him from feeling guilty, though. "But you know, as far as this family's misfortunes go," she went on, "I think I'm handling this one pretty well. Which is kind of hard for me to stay mad at him."

"Mad that he's working with the vigilante?" he asked, smoothing down her hair.

"Yeah," she said. "I mean, when I told him that I was done picking him up from the precinct, I thought he'd give up on the vigilantism thing, not go pro." She huffed. "But hey, on the bright side, now we can use him as a delivery boy if we ever wanna send Green Arrow a thank you gift basket for saving your ass."

"What do you put in a vigilante's gift basket?" he wondered.

"I don't know...throwing stars?"

He snorted. It wasn't what he'd choose to put in his gift basket – Sara, on the other hand, probably would choose it for hers.

"Well, there are worse guys to date out there than a kid with a hero complex," he comforted.

"Oh, so now you approve of him?"
"Maybe a little more than I used to," he allowed, only leaving a tiny bit of space between his thumb and forefinger as he brought them together. "Just a little."

She rolled her eyes at him.

"Oliver?"

He stood in her doorway – at ten at night, might she add – hands clenched at his sides, helmet under his arm, and looking a little unsure as to how he'd actually gotten there.

"Um, hi," he said.

"Hi," she echoed. "Uh, wh – what are you doing here?" Okay, that sounded a little cold. "I mean, you don't look like you're having an emergency," she was quick to add, "and I didn't get any alerts on – well, anything, so..."

"I just – " He shrugged. "I sort of ended up here."

"Oh. Okay." She gave him her best nod of understanding. "Well, come in then."

He smiled in thanks as she stepped back to let him in, then led him down the entryway and past the archway giving into her kitchen – which he took a quick peek into, if she wasn't mistaken – taking a moment to assess the current messiness levels of her place once they were in the living area; all in all, she concluded, it could have been worse. Besides, whatever ungodly scene he stumbled upon would be all on him anyway, for not calling ahead.

"You could've called, you know," she voiced the thought after a moment, only to feel bad about it when his face fell as he turned to her. "And I'm not saying that because I don't want you here or anything like that," she clarified, "but if you'd called, then I wouldn't be, you know, greeting you wearing" – she looked down at herself, her three-sizes-too-big faded t-shirt and her worn sweats with holes in some unfortunate places – "the stuff I sleep in."

"It's fine, Felicity," he assured softly.

Well in that case, if he got a flash of her bunny-printed undies through one of the unfortunate holes in her sweats, then that was all on him, too.

"Okay, then...make yourself comfy." She gestured towards the couch, which he eyed for a quick second, and seemed to find charming, too – which it was, if she said so herself; her cozy purple suede couch was very much charming – before he surveyed every corner of the place, from the staircase that led to the upper level bedroom, to the desk that made for her 'work area', and she saw the exact moment when his mind processed what hung on the brick wall behind it.

"It used to hang over there by the kitchen," she said, padding over to his side and sticking her thumb over her shoulder, "but I think it's nicer this way. Digg painted it for me." She smiled fondly. "You know, while you were...away, and I was...in the middle of the losing-my-marbles phase."
"It's just how they used to be," he commented quietly.

She hummed. "Which is kind of the point of it. You know, to remember what happened and...what we're fighting for here."

"It's beautiful."

"It is," she agreed, then cleared her throat. "So uh, can I get you anything?" she tried playing hostess. "I have water and...well, coffee."

He spent a moment longer lingering on the painting, before he turned away from it. "I wouldn't mind some coffee, actually," he said.

"Is that why you're here instead of home?" she asked. "Not the coffee specifically, I mean, but just...not having your mom and Thea see that you don't actually plan on sleeping anytime soon."

He blinked at her, then dropped his eyes down to his shoes. "I don't want them to spend another night worrying about me," he admitted.

"They do know you're not just wandering the streets or something though, right?"

"They know I'm here," he said – and looked just a little too shifty doing so.

"Oliver," she prompted, "did you tell them you were spending the night with me?"

He stilled.

She pursed her lips. "Okay, that was a bad way to phrase – no wait, actually..." She narrowed her eyes. "Your mom was giving me weird looks earlier, do they think we're – "

"No!" Then again, more calmly, "No." He sighed. "It's just that – well, I'd sort of told Thea that I was crashing here on your couch, when I didn't come home after my testimony, so that's...something they can both believe," he explained, and she had to admit that, as far as his cover stories went, this one was actually pretty good. "I'm not inviting myself to stay over or anything," he added quickly, "I'm spending the night in the foundry – and I was on my way there, but then I realized that, uh, it was gonna be empty and..." He licked his lips. "I didn't want to be alone just yet."

She couldn't think of a single thing to say to that.

It was probably one of the strangest confessions she'd ever heard him make, actually. Right next to that one time he'd told her he didn't know how much more losing he could take.

"Okay," she found her voice. "I'm...gonna go get you that coffee now."

When she returned, cup in hand, she found his helmet on the coffee table, his jacket over the back of the couch, and him standing by her fireplace, turning over the small unicorn sculpture she kept there in his hands.

"Having fun?" she inquired as she handed him his ill-advised late-night caffeine fix. He put the unicorn back in its spot to take the mug instead, smiling as he did so.

"Yeah," he said, looking the place over one more time. "Lots of trinkets."

She frowned. "And this makes you happy?"

He shrugged. "I just...thought you'd have lots of trinkets around here," he told her. "And I was
right."

She had no idea what to say to that either.

She decided to just make her way over to the couch instead of thinking on it, expecting him to follow, but when she lowered herself onto the cushions, he was still right where she'd left him. *Okay then.* "So, I was thinking," she said, "team meeting tomorrow? To figure out battle plans and whatnot? Besides, I didn't get called up to devil's office today, which I took to mean that she's too busy gloating or grooming her horns or whatever, but I'm pretty sure she'll want to sit me down for a talk sooner rather than later – so once I come out of *that* hell, maybe I'll have some more stuff for us to use in our...battle plans and whatnot."

He wasn't looking at her as he muttered, "Yeah, that sounds good."

Well, that was just...markedly unenthusiastic. "Do you...*not* want to make battle plans?"

His attempt at denying it didn't get further than an intelligible little mumble, and he was soon back to staring at the depths of his coffee. He tapped his fingers against the mug – once, twice, before he said, "Isabel told me that she'd won, that the company was hers now – and I told her that I'd get it back."

"You will," she asserted. "You'll get your company back."

When he finally mustered a comeback, it was only a quiet, "Will I?"

"Oliver." She debated with herself for a moment, then held her hand out. "Come here."

He complied quicker than she thought he would, almost eagerly, brushing their fingers together as he took a seat on the coffee table in front of her.

"She also said I don't know how to fight for the company, and...she's right." He shrugged. "Because I have no idea what to do."

Felicity sighed, prying the mug out of his hold and setting down on the table, before she ran her fingers down his palms, until she could wrap them around his own. "We'll help you figure it out."

"But that's just the thing," he said, "everyone's been helping me figure out what do to with the company, meanwhile I'm just – " He shook his head. "My mom told me to go to Walter for the money, and I did, and then I gave you a new job, which was mostly just me putting you someplace I could keep you close, and I lucked out, because you did amazing, but – " His eyes flicked up to hers, only to drop back again the next moment. "But it doesn't mean I actually know what I'm doing."

She bit back a thoughtless remark about how that had never been a secret, to either her or himself, and while she worked on not blurting out the first insensitive thing that came to her mind, he was speaking again. "Maybe I shouldn't even try to get it back," he mumbled. "It'd be one less failure."

She didn't even try and filter her response to *that*. "Whoa," she let out, "what – what the hell are you talking about?"

His hands went rigid in hers, before they slid away and he balled them into fists against his knees. "There's, uh...there's a pattern," he told her, nodding along. "With me, with...everything I do, and – " He cleared his throat. "And it's that I try, and I...fail." Licking his lips, he added, "I always lose."

She shook her head. "Oliver, that's not true – "
"Really?" he challenged. "Because I tried to get my friends off the island, and I lost them. I tried to right my father's wrongs, and the city fell because I failed. I tried to have a life with Laurel and it slipped right out of my hands, and my best friend died right in front of me. I tried to rebuild my family's company, and I've lost it, and I tried to be with –"

He didn't say it, bit his tongue against it just fast enough, but she heard it loud and clear all the same.

With her.

He'd tried to be with her.

"Maybe I've just been kidding myself, with everything," he spoke again, eyes on his knees. "Thinking that I could...be Green Arrow and –" One of his hands came up, to run down the back of his head. "Have something good, something that I can actually hold on to." He closed his eyes. "That's just wishful thinking."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

He didn't answer right away, head swaying from side to side ever-so-slightly as he took a deep breath, and then a second one; finally, he said, "I don't know."

She reached for his hand again. "You told me," she reminded, "that we can make our own way of doing things. I know you believed that."

"Yeah," he agreed quietly, "but that was before – I got reminded, yesterday, exactly why it took me so long to believe it, and now..." He hung his head. "I don't know."

"Look, I get that it's probably...really not fun to be in your head right now," she said, "and I get that losing QC is a big thing, because we didn't see Isabel coming, but...nothing else's changed." She shrugged. "You're still Green Arrow."

When he glanced up at her again, his eyes were big and blue and a little wet.

"I wouldn't be Green Arrow without you and Digg," he whispered.

Well, that was –

Oh.

"That's what this is about?" she prompted softly. "Oliver, you're not going to lose us."

He said nothing.

"I mean, okay, we're in a pretty dangerous line of business," she went on, "and I'm not sure what the life expectancy for vigilantes-by-proxy is, but it's probably not all that great, which is" – she cringed – "definitely not something I should be bringing up right now, but um, what I'm trying to say here is, we've done our best to stay alive, and so far, we have, so..."

"There's more than one way to lose someone."

Right.

Like the two people whose names she'd never heard him speak until yesterday, she imagined. Before they'd died – and she knew they were dead. They had to be. Probably tucked away in a pair of graves back on Lian Yu.
Felicity nodded, biting her lip. "Yesterday, you...uh, you mentioned your...friends, from the island," she said. "Shado and Slade."

It was heartbreaking, to watch his face crumble just at hearing the names.

The tears in his eyes were stronger now, turning them red along the edges, and she thought her own were probably starting to look about the same, too.

"I'm not gonna ask what happened with them – and hey, even if I did, I don't think I'd get an answer, which is...fine, actually." She blew out a breath. "And I know that Digg and I, that we remind you of them, but whatever it was that happened on Lian Yu, it's not gonna happen with us." He was pulling air in through his nose, louder than before, and she tightened her grip on his hand. "You're not going to lose us," she repeated. "And" – she brought her other hand up, to smooth over the creases in his forehead – "we're not giving you up either."

The next breath he drew came out chocked and he dropped his head forward, closer, until she could see the shiny little droplets clinging to his lashes; she slid her hand around, to the the back of his head, and ran her fingers through his hair.

"That's another thing that scares me," he whispered, just loud enough for her to hear. "Because Shado and Slade, they were loyal to me, too. Shado, she – she loved me, and uh, Slade, he called me his brother, but I...I betrayed them, and – " He sniffled. "They died."

We're not –

Them.

She'd voiced that thought about a dozen different times, in as many different ways, because two ghosts from purgatory? They were as far removed from her and John as could be. But hearing them being spoken of like this – it hit just a little too close to home for comfort.

Because John would never let a brother go into battle alone, and she –

Well, she –

"Felicity?"

She blinked, finding that he was studying her carefully now, and whatever it was he saw on her face seemed to be making him hold his breath.

"I guess – " She cleared her throat. "I guess I can see why you would – why we would remind you of them so much."

It was his turn to blink, and for a moment, he held himself absolutely, perfectly still, before his shoulders slumped and he gave her a small, watery smile.

"But what you, uh – what you should ask yourself is," she added, "can you think of any possible circumstances that would make you consider...betraying us? The way you did them?"

It didn't take more than a split-second for him to shake his head. "No."

"Then that's...good enough for me," she concluded.

His eyes flicked up and down her face, while his fingers came up to curl around her wrist; she let him drag her hand down, and hold it in his against his shoulder. It made her smile, too.
"And by the way," she said, "you might think all you've got is a list full losses, but you scored some wins, too. Because, Shado and Slade may not have gotten off the island, but you did – and hey, maybe you don't think that's a good thing, but it sure is to a lot of people." She shrugged. "And The Undertaking still happened – and you weren't the only one who failed to stop it, FYI – but you took out Merlyn, and you saved a bunch of people who would've died otherwise, even if...Tommy wasn't one of them" – he gripped her hand tighter – "and it didn't work out with Laurel, and that sucks, but you're still friends, right? That's good. And you know, maybe you didn't know what you were doing with the company, but neither did I – and if I quote-unquote 'did amazing', then so did you. You did rebuild the company. And sure, you lost it now, which doesn't mean you can't win it back, whatever you may think, and..."

She broke off, pulling her teeth over her lip; there was another thing to tick off here, but that would fall under speaking of unspeakable things.

"And what?" he prompted quietly.

"And..." She took a deep breath. "And you still have me," she told him. "It may not be, uh...entirely the way you, um, you want to, but – " She closed her eyes, counted to three. "I'm not going anywhere. And I'm still your partner. That's good, isn't it?"

She watched the deep rise and fall if his chest instead of looking at him, and didn't let her eyes stray up even when he kept quiet, right until the moment he whispered, "Yeah, it is."

"Thank you," he said next.

She sighed. "You don't have to thank me every time, Oliver."

That got a soft chuckle out of him. "Maybe," he allowed, "but it still feels like I should."

She let herself glance up this time. His eyes were dry now, though still slightly red, but they were focused on her in a way that was just a little overwhelming.

"Because sometimes," he went on, so very softly, "all I can see is a broken world full of broken things, and you help remind me that not all things are broken." He ran his thumb over her knuckles. "Including me."

Yeah, she thought. Definitely overwhelming.

"Well, for what it's worth," she said, "you help remind me that there's nothing you can't survive."

She smiled. "And that anyone can be a hero."

And if the way he dipped his head to the side, to press a tiny little kiss to the inside of her hand was any indication, then maybe he was warming up to the h-word after all.
Reflections

Chapter Notes

Hi! My apologies, as always, for another long wait between updates. And also my apologies that this one's kinda on the shorter side, and I did cut it off sooner than I'd originally planned, because I figured it was better not to delay this any longer, since it's already been a month and a half and I was starting to feel really bad about it.

That said, I hope you enjoy.

She liked undercover work.

Dressing up for the role, doing a little prep work, playing it out; it was fun, in a way that her partners never seemed to appreciate.

Going undercover was fun.

Up until the moment something inevitably went off-script.

"Good morning, Ms. Smoak."

She'd had it all planned out. The perfect a-little-more-on-the-sober-side outfit, great practiced lines that hit the perfect balance between a disgruntled friend of a fallen-from-grace CEO and a career-driven woman, and a variety of angles thought of and prepared for depending on where the conversation went. Everything she could possibly need for when she got summoned to Isabel's new office.

Except the devil was currently in her office.

Felicity froze at the door, and with all her preparation and contingency plans, the best she could come up with was, "Um, what are you doing here?"

Isabel raised an eyebrow. "I didn't get a chance to speak with you yesterday," she said. "About the changes in the company."

Felicity hummed dryly as she stepped up to her desk, dropping her bag with a little more force than she'd intended; playing the disgruntled friend of a fallen-from-grace CEO was definitely not going to be the hard part of this. "What I meant was, what are you doing here?" She gestured around them, lowering herself into her chair. "Don't you have an office of your own you can call me up to?"

"I'm always the one coming down here."

"But you're the CEO now."

Isabel shrugged. "Mr. Queen used to come down here all the time."

Felicity pursed her lips. "We were friends."

"Ah." Isabel nodded. "And we're not." She leaned a little forward, folding her hands in her lap.
"Your closeness with Mr. Queen is actually one of the reasons I wanted a face-to-face – which I'm sure you knew," she said. "Because you were friends, and because I imagine you still are, I have to ask if you want to keep your place here, now that he's gone, especially considering the… circumstances under which he left."

Considering the circumstances under which he left, what she wanted was to shove her letter opener right through Isabel's eye socket but hey, that wasn't an option here. "You think I'd leave my job just because I don't like my boss?" she asked. "Because, I didn't like my 'supervisor' at IT either, and I soldiered on."

"You still don't like me, that's alright," Isabel said. "But I am glad to hear that you plan to stay with the company."

Felicity shrugged. "I like my job."

"And you're good at it," Isabel added, "which is why I would like for you and me to work as closely as you and Mr. Queen did, on projects for your department. I have some great plans for this company, Ms. Smoak, and your contributions would be a big part of that."

Felicity took a deep breath, let it out slowly, then nodded. "I guess I can soldier on through that, too."

She was used to the little half-upturned tick at the corner of Isabel's mouth, like she might break out into a grin at any second, as a constant in their little chats; so, it came as something of a first when it turned down at the corners instead.

"I don't require you to like me," she said, "or to prefer my directives to Mr. Queen's, but I am very good at my job too, Ms. Smoak, and I am your boss. So, I do require that you respect me as such."

Felicity chewed on her tongue for a moment. "Got it."

"Good." Isabel nodded. "I have a lot of things to put in order today, but I have a meeting of all the departments scheduled for tomorrow. I'll leave the details with your assistant. She rose to her feet. "And I would like for you and I to have a private meeting afterwards, to discuss proposals for your department in particular."

"I already discussed those with Oliver."

"And I'd like for you to discuss them with me," Isabel insisted.

"Okay," Felicity agreed. "I'll put it all together for tomorrow."

"Thank you, Ms. Smoak."

"Did you sleep down here?"

Oliver dropped down from the salmon ladder, grabbing a towel to wipe himself down. "Well, I spent the night down here," he said, sparing the makeshift cot on the mats he'd made for himself, and
hadn't slept in, a sidelong glance. He'd tried to get some sleep, even managed to push halfway through his breathing techniques, but it had been too quiet, and too dark even with the overhead lights, and so he'd spent most of the night working out instead, to jolt himself awake whenever he felt drowsy.

Diggle gave him a hum of understanding. "So how about you come over to my place tonight, and give it another go?"

"Digg – "

"Oliver," he interrupted, "I get it. I've been there, man. After my second tour, I spent a week on maybe four hours of sleep." He shrugged. "It helped to crash at Lyla's, you know, with someone who knew what it was like, who could talk me down if I woke up screaming."

Oliver sighed. "Thanks, John."

That earned him a smile from his partner. "It's no big deal," he dismissed the gratitude, though Oliver was sure John knew exactly how much it meant to him to be given the offer. "So," he went on, making his way to computers, where Oliver had begun pulling up all of the research they had on both Isabel and Phobos, "I'm guessing this meeting you called is about taking down our dear Ms. Rochev?"

"Actually, the meeting was Felicity's idea," Oliver said, and though Diggle didn't need any additional information, he still found himself adding, "I was at her place last night."

That got Diggle's attention. He looked over his shoulder, prompting, "And?"

And he'd played a thousand movies in his head, about how he could trail his mouth along her palm, maybe run his teeth along it just so, then follow the drumming of her pulse along her wrist, and maybe he could lean in without her pulling away, because in all the movies in his head, things were just a little bit different.

But he wasn't going to say any of that. What John got to hear instead was, "She's pretty good at talking me down when I go off the deep end, too."

Diggle pursed his lips, then commented, "You still ended up here, though."

Which had been the plan. Even if Felicity had offered to let him stay the night, in the end. "When I first came back, I woke up from a nightmare, and nearly killed my own mother, Digg," he said quietly, shaking his head. "It's not a risk I'd take with Felicity."

"Yeah," Diggle agreed, giving him a onceover before he turned around and leaned against the desk. "Oliver, do you wanna talk about this?" he asked. "You and Felicity, I mean?"

"What? No…"

John didn't look like he believed him. "You know where I stand on the idea," he said, "but if you need to talk about it…"

Right.

Oliver busied himself with getting a shirt, turning his back to Diggle as he dug through the bag.

He didn't need to talk about it. Didn't particularly want to, either. But it was always there, at the back of his mind or halfway up his throat, and he probably should just get it out.
"It'd be one thing if it was just one-sided, if it was just me," he began, slipping the shirt over his head. "Maybe that would make it easier, I don't know, but it's...it's not just me, and if things were a little different, then we'd -- " He sighed. "I can't stop thinking about it," he admitted, as quietly as he could. "About her."

"So, it does hurt."

"Yeah, well...it's not the greatest feeling," he muttered.

John didn't say anything back for a moment, and though he couldn't see him, Oliver imagined he was nodding in understanding. "Yeah, I get it," he eventually voiced the sentiment. "I lived through a few years of that. And it's...probably not going to get easier."

He didn't think it would, either.

"Look, Oliver, I'd tell you to find a way to figure out how to make it work," Diggle went on, "because I do want you to be happy, but when it comes to this -- you and Felicity -- I'm always gonna side with her, with what she wants."

"I know that, John."

"Yeah," Diggle said quietly, "but I don't like seeing you hurt like this, either. You should know that, too."

Oliver couldn't help but smile at that. It was still a little foreign, sometimes, to hear people say they cared for him, about what he felt; he loved them a little more each time they did, though.

"And you know, maybe," Diggle went on, "you and Felicity should have another talk about this."

He blew out a breath, turning around. "And say what, Digg?"

"I don't know." John shrugged. "But you've been doing this thing for months now, and I'm not even sure about all that's happened here" -- he raised his eyebrows pointedly there, and Oliver looked away -- "but dangling in the in-between isn't going to be good for either of you. So, maybe you should figure out a way to let it go."

Well, that...would be difficult. "The thing is, John," he whispered, "I don't want to let it go."

Diggle said nothing at that, only bobbing his head up and down just slightly, before trailing his eyes up to the stairs; Oliver followed suit, just as the door beeped and Sara came into sight, Felicity in tow.

She paused at the bottom, giving him a smile. "Hey," she said, rubbing her lips together.

"Hey," he echoed, and maybe he'd put just a little too much feeling into it, because it sounded too low and heavy even to his own ears, and Sara was giving him a look; Felicity still smiled wider though, and he thought that he really, really didn't want to let her go.

"Well, now that we're all here," Diggle spoke up, somewhat loudly, "how about we get down to business?"

Oliver cleared his throat; Felicity jumped a little.

"Right, okay," she muttered as she dashed right for her computers, dropping her bag on the desk, only to pause with her hands in midair. "This is the part where I'd start pulling up everything we
have on the bad guys, but it's all already here."

"I did that," Oliver said, shrugging when she looked over to him. "Figured that'd make it easier."

"It does, actually." She gave him another bright smile as she settled into her chair, cracked her
knuckles, then proceeded to take it from the top, ticking off all the general information they had
about both Phobos and Isabel Rochev.

While she talked, Sara came up next to him, laying a hand on his arm. "You okay?" she asked under
her breath, quietly enough not to disrupt Felicity.

He nodded, to which she gave his arm a light squeeze. "Good," she mouthed, before turning her
attention back to their debriefing.

" – so what we basically have here is a criminal mastermind, a very dangerous drug, and no way to
connect the two."

"You said you'd try to get some intel from her today," Oliver piped in, and did his best not to think
about how much he never wanted Felicity in the same room as Isabel Rochev ever again. "How did
that go?"

She spun her chair to face him, wearing the most adorable disgruntled pout he'd ever seen on
anyone. "I am not above admitting that I may not be cut out for this spy stuff," she said, sighing. "I
mean, I don't know how to get information out of people with words, you know? I just" – she
gestured to the equipment over her shoulder – "dig up all the digital footprints of their misdeeds, I
don't…know how to talk it out of them – "

"Felicity," Oliver halted her, shaking his head. "You don't have to do it."

Her responding expression was both grateful and annoyed in equal measure. "I appreciate that," she
told him, "but I also know what you're doing." And she didn't seem to be buying the confused look
he put on either, because she added, "This is you trying to be sneaky about keeping me from ever
talking to her ever again."

She did have him there.

"Well hey, maybe he can give you some pointers on manipulating something out of her," Diggle
suggested.

Felicity scrunched her nose. "I'm not sure I want to take advice on lying from the guy who 'ran out of
sports bottles' – no offense, Oliver."

"Oh yeah," Diggle let out, then chuckled to himself, while Oliver rolled his eyes.

"I wasn't exactly at the top of my game that time," he defended.

"Were you ever?" Diggle deadpanned, just as Sara asked, "'Top of your game' being a latte that put
bullet holes in a laptop?"

Felicity blinked at that, then looked over to him, and pretty soon, she was grinning as widely as he
had ever seen her.

He grinned back. "The bullet holes happened after the latte."

"Yeah," she said warmly, voice growing softer, "his coffee shop's in a bad neighborhood."
God, he loved her.

"So, that's a no-go, then," Diggle said.

"Well, I could tell you about some of my old methods," Sara suggested, "but I wasn't exactly trained in…gentle persuasion."

Felicity laughed. "What are you talking about, kidnapping me from a parking lot to get Green Arrow to your tower was totally gentle persuasion."

"Compared to some of Green Arrow's methods, it really was," Diggle agreed.

"But hey, non-gentle gentle persuasion is a good thing in our line of business."

"It's not the way to go when it comes to your Isabel problem, though."

"Definitely not. We need…subtlety."

"Well, none of us here are exactly subtle but – hey, man, you okay?"

"Oliver?"

He started, blinking at the spot just over Felicity's shoulder he'd been staring at; when he looked around, it was to his partners contemplating him with varying degrees of concern. "Um, I – " He cleared his throat. "I got…uh, caught up in thinking about something, so um – Isabel, maybe we should leave the spying for later, and just" – he blew out a breath – "focus on the bigger picture, and…all that."

There was beat where they all just stood still, and he was pretty sure that he caught a look between Diggle and Sara, too, before Felicity broke the silence.

"Okay," she said, "let's do that. So" – she clasped her hands – "I was thinking, big-picture-wise, maybe we've been approaching this all wrong."

"How so?" Diggle asked.

"Well, we've been keeping the Phobos thing in-house, so to speak, right?" She waited for all of them to nod before proceeding. "We were handling everything ourselves, didn't let Detective Lance about it, so what if we do tell him now? Because" – she swept her hand towards the screens – "I've got chemical composition, and logs, and client ledgers here, so if the PD has this, when we get Isabel…"

"They have something substantial to connect her to," Sara said, nodding along. "And if it's out in the public," she added, "then you also get your credibility back, Ollie."

"Right," he agreed, "but this is assuming that we're going to catch Isabel with the drug." He shook his head. "That's not going to be easy."

"Obviously, because I would've found it digging through her stuff otherwise and we wouldn't be in this situation in the first place," Felicity grumbled, "but, it just means we're gonna have to dig deeper. She's keeping it somewhere. We just have to find it."

"Suppose we do," he allowed, "she could still get out on technicality. Because all this stuff, you hacked it off Haze's computer. It's not exactly admissible."

She frowned, chewed on her lip, then suddenly lit up. "It is if the PD get it themselves."
"What?"

"If we give them an anonymous tip," she said, "then they can go digging through Haze's stuff and get all this on their own, and I know they have at least one competent techie on their payroll because he tracked me – which also made me end up in Detective Lance's interrogation room, and God, that was terrifying – and hey, I can even reprogram everything for easier access, but like not too easy, and boom, admissible!"

She looked so happy with her idea, practically beaming, and he had to snap himself out of the bright-hot warmth that spread right through him; he got distracted by her so easily.

"They'd still need a warrant to go snooping," Diggle commented. "Since dead men still have rights and all that. Think we'd get one on just an anonymous tip?"

"If a respected assistant DA pulls some strings," Sara spoke up, "we just might."

"Laurel?" Oliver let out, thrown by the look of confidence on Sara's face. "You think she'll help Green Arrow?"

Sara's mouth ticked at the corner. "She called me yesterday, invited me to lunch – just like that. And, I don't know, but we talked, some of it was about you and I just…" Her smile slipped there, growing sadder. "I wasn't there, you know? For her. I wasn't there when all this bad stuff happened to her, but…it's about Tommy, right? So much of this is about Tommy, and – "

"And me not saving him," Oliver whispered.

"Right." Sara nodded. "But you did save – well, you." She shrugged. "Green Arrow saved you, and that…that means something to her. It means a lot. So I think she will help you."

"That settles it, then," Felicity concluded happily. "We'll tip off Detective Lance and he'll go to Laurel for help with the warrant."

"We still gotta connect Isabel to it," Diggle pointed out. "And when we do, it's going to be another QC CEO in another public scandal. Think the company will take that hit?"

Oliver frowned. "What are you saying, John?"

"I'm saying, we should think about how the company – your company – fits into this plan. You want it back, right? But it's not going to mean much if it also falls into complete ruin in the process."

Isabel's voice was right in his ear again, telling him he didn't know how to fight for the company.

Whether that was true or not, what he did know, was how to delegate to more capable hands.

And as it turned out, so did Felicity. "I think this is a job for your mother, actually," she said. "If anyone's going to figure out a way to keep the company afloat while its – I-don't-even-know-which-CEO is sinking, it's your mother." She narrowed her eyes there, like she was considering something else, but when she spoke nothing further, he took that to mean that was all there was to her proposal.

And he agreed with it. "That's…exactly what we should do."

"Of course," he added, "that means we'll have to let her in on the plan. Sort of."

"We do have a little helper your mother knows about," Felicity said.

"Exactly." He nodded. "Besides, we probably should tell him, too."
"Right, so we tell him, he tells your mother – or all of you Queens, that'd be the logical thing to do if you weren't also part of 'we'… you know?"

That was a good point.

"So, I'll tell him, and then he'll" – he frowned – "tell me."

Next to him, Sara snickered.

"Aha, so to sum it up," Felicity concluded, clearly biting back a smile of her own, "you'll have Roy tell you your own plan, just so your mother could hear your plan, which you need her for, but can't tell her yourself, so you'll have to sit through Roy saying it back at you." She pursed her lips. "Can I please be there when it happens?"

He shook his head, smiling all the while.

Sara needing to leave, she could believe, what with all the mentions of another lunch with her sister being tossed around; she didn't go into details, but Felicity had seen her hopeful smile and even the slight tears in her eyes, and she, for one, could not be happier that her relationship with Laurel was showing the first real sign of getting mended.

Diggle's excuse for leaving, however, was a little flimsier, because she knew for a fact that Carly was working a shift at the moment and would not be available for romantic shenanigans for at least another three hours – the pointed look he'd thrown Oliver's way over his shoulder hadn't been subtle, either.

Oliver, for his part, was just standing there, hands in pockets, and staring at glass case housing his suit.

He was going on minute twenty, by her estimate.

She put the finishing touches on the outline of the firewall she'd be substituting Haze's nearly-impenetrable one with – just doing her civic duty, making an SCPD's techie's life easier down the road – before she made her way over to Oliver.

He'd sensed her approaching, of course, though he said nothing for a while. She stepped up next to him, breathing in deeply as she let her eyes go over the suit, too. It calmed her, all the green, patched-up leather; it was safety, and adventure, and her own chance at being a hero.

"The hood was Shado's."

She snapped her eyes over to him, though his were still locked straight ahead. It was still a little disconcerting, whenever he told her things, about himself, about his past, without her asking, without the situation calling for it; just because he wanted to.

"Shado's?"
He hummed softly. "The first time I saw it, it was on her father, when he was saving my life" he said. "His name was Yao Fei."

"Your friend's father, the one Edward Fyers killed," she let out. "Was that him?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "And after he died, Shado wore the hood."

"And now you're wearing it."

"I am who I am because of her. She made me." He nearly whispered it, like it was sacred, like it would take away from the reverence if he spoke any louder. "She…put a bow in my hands and taught me how to be an archer. And when I fight, I fight the way she did. She made me who I am."

"And, uh…and Slade?" Felicity asked.

Oliver blew out a breath. "$I wouldn't be who I am without him, either. He taught me a lot, too."

"Right, but – " She swallowed. "$This hood, you wear it to honor Shado, right? And her father?"

When he nodded, she added, "$So, what about Slade?"

His eyes slipped down, then to her, and she knew she wasn't going to like what she heard next. "$Back on Lian Yu," he said, "$there's…a mask, on the beach, with an arrow through its eye."

"Yeah, I saw it," she whispered.

He looked over her face, drawing a quick, quiet breath, before his eyes fell down to somewhere around her shoulder. "$Slade was Australian Intelligence, and that mask – it was his, it was what wore on his missions, to conceal his identity. The mask was his."

"So why – why is there an arrow through its eye?"

"Because that's…how I killed him."

She didn't know when she'd brought her arms up around herself, but she could feel her fingers digging into the flesh now. "$You killed him?"

"I, uh – it was after, after Shado died, Slade came back for me, to get me away from…um, the people who had me…" His words were coming out chocked, and almost too quiet for her to hear; just a sting of fragile little sounds that were bringing tears to her eyes. "$She died trying to get me away from them, and Slade, he came back for me. He took me back to the plane, the fuselage, but then he realized I'd – " He gulped. "$That I'd already given them my allegiance, that I'd betrayed him and Shado, and – we fought, and I just…I picked up her bow, and an arrow, and I…"

"Killed him."

In all the times she'd wondered, about what it was he saw when he got lost in his ghost stories, she had never really thought of something quite like this.

She had no idea what Slade looked like, who he was beyond the man Oliver shared part of his life with, so it was Diggle's face in her head, his eye that had an arrow sticking out of it – and it was probably what Oliver saw too, every time his ghosts felt closer than they should.

He hung his head, started turning away from her.

"No, hey – " She reached for his arm, pulling him back around until he was facing her; he wouldn't look at her.
"I wasn't –" She sighed. "I just, I wasn't expecting…that."

He nodded, as if to acknowledge her, but didn't move a muscle beyond it.

"I'm sorry, I – I don't know what to say here, I mean, what do you even say in this situation?" I'm sorry you ended up killing your friend, my condolences, was probably not it.

She closed her eyes, running a hand over her face.

"You don't have to say anything," she heard him speak; when she looked up, she found that his own eyes were wet. "It's enough that you're not running away."

"I told you," she reminded, "if figuring out you were a Russian mobster didn't make me run away, then there's not much that's going to."

He pressed his lips together, shifting his eyes away from her for a moment – which, she thought, probably meant that Russian mobsters were what this was all about. They came to the island, killed his friend, and now he was one of them. But if he wasn't going to say it, then neither was she.

"This feels like it qualifies," he remarked.

"Well, it doesn't." She took a deep breath. "But it does explain a lot."

There was a beat before he smiled, wide enough to show his dimples and crinkle his eyes at the corners; it made the tears there stick to his lashes, too.

"So…Shado," Felicity steered them back to, arguably, better memories. "She sounds really kickass."

"She was." He turned back to the case, to Shado's hood, and Felicity imagined he was probably thinking back on all the kickass things she had done while he'd known her. She couldn't see herself as Shado in these stories though, not the way she could see Diggle as Slade, so it was just the vague outline of a woman in her mind, face hidden by a green hood and a bow in her hands, slicing men full of arrows.

Maybe she should look her up. Just to see the face of the woman behind the name.

"Shado, she…she knew balance," Oliver went on, nodding to himself. "She knew what the dark parts of her were, and she knew how to live with it, how not to…get lost in that side of herself. And she tried to teach me that." He broke off there, shrugging in the silence, before he added, "But I still ended up being more like Slade than her."

"And that's a bad thing?"

He sighed. "I think it might've been."

Felicity trailed her eyes back to the suit – the hood. Shado's hood. Maybe it wasn't just about honoring her, or her father. Maybe he put it on like he would another person's skin, her skin, to be more like her; to be someone better than who he was.

"You know, um," she said, "and I'm not trying to step on your toes here, but…who you are, who and what you've become? You did that. Because…you're your own person, and you make your own choices, good or bad. Everyone else, they – they influence you, sure, but you're always your own person first." She shook her head. "No one makes you something you're not, Oliver."

There was a little smile at the corner of his mouth when he turned his attention back on her. "That's
what Shado used to say, too."

"Is that why I remind you of her?" she found herself asking before she could think the better of it, then shut her eyes with a quiet sigh when he frowned. "Because, it's – I mean, it's not gonna be the ass-kicking part of it, right?"

His forehead only creased further at that, and he was blinking down at her like what she was saying didn't make all that much sense to him. Which meant she'd have to clarify. Great.

"I'm just saying, she was…this master archer slash proficient martial artist, right, and I'm – well, not. Like, really, really not. So, you know, I'm just – I can't see how that would…be the thing that made me remind you of her."

"Why do you say it like that?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"Like it's a bad thing," he said. "That you're not the kind of fighter that she was."

She closed her eyes again. "I'm not – I mean, it's not, just – " She groaned, raking her fingers through her hair. "It's just that," she tried again, keeping her eyes averted, "you're – well, you, and John's Special Forces, and Sara, she looks like she could kill a hundred men with just her pinky, and even Roy's got that street-brawler, diamond-in-the-rough thing going on, and then there's me, and I'm –" She shrugged. "I'm the one who can barely throw a punch in a team of ass-kickers, and it just – it makes a girl feel a little insecure, sometimes."

"Felicity."

He had this tone he used with her, gentle in a way that didn't make her feel fragile, and just low enough to weigh his words with meaning.

She felt the warmth of his hand against her shoulder even before his fingers splayed over her skin, and she couldn't help but fall in just a little closer, just enough to feel his breath on her face as he spoke. "None of us can do what you can," he told her. "And this team, it wouldn't be here without you." His hand slid down her arm, so he could lace his fingers with hers. "Just because you can, uh, barely throw a punch, doesn't mean you're not a fighter."

She smiled, holding back a sniffle. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Yeah," he whispered, slipping his eyes down her face, lingering, before he dropped them all the way down to their hands. She followed his line of sight, just watching his thumb rub circles on the inside of her palm for a while.

"Digg calls it our hand-holding routine." She frowned. "That's not weird, right?"

His soft laughter echoed right in her ear, and when she looked up, he was so close, their noses were almost touching. "And it's…totally not weird that I couldn't let go of your hand when you were unconscious, either." She swallowed. "Right?"

She could feel him smile. "You held my hand?"

"The whole time." It came out a little high-pitched, and a little strained, and wow, those tears had come up filling her eyes in two seconds flat.

"Hey…"
She shook her head, to shrug it off, to keep him from talking about it, but he still tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and held a hand up to her cheek, dragging his thumb across it. He was closer, too, so that it felt like he might as well have wrapped himself around her.

And she couldn't help but laugh under her breath.

"What?" he prompted.

"Nothing," she said. "It's just – we're having this really intense conversation, we're holding hands, and you're, you know, stroking my face, it's – " She laughed again.

He joined her this time, and she felt the soft rumble of his chest right against hers.

"Yeah, we should probably talk about that," he muttered.

"We probably should," she agreed, bringing her hand up to wrap it around his wrist; it was nice to feel the beating of his pulse under her fingers. And it was going kinda fast, too.

"You know, before you and Sara came down, uh, John said that you and I should…talk, that we should figure out where we stand, figure out…what we're doing here, and – " He cleared his throat. "How to let it go."

"Oliver –"

"No, just – just let me say it, please."

She nodded, letting her eyes settle on his mouth, watching as it formed the words.

"But the thing is, I don't want to," he said, licking his lips. "Because what, um, what I want, what I still want, is to be with you, because I – " He held his breath then blew it out, before he added, "Guess that's another thing that hasn't changed."

"And if you tell me," he went on, "that it's better that we stay friends and partners this time too, then I will never bring it up again, I promise. So…" He ran his knuckles down her cheek. "What do you want to do, Felicity?"

What she –

Well, what she wanted was to turn around and walk away, keep walking back until things were purely, blissfully and completely platonic again, or to stomp on them until they became so, and she wanted to kiss him again, and again, and keep kissing him right up until the moment they fell onto one of those mats behind them and then kiss him some more there, and what she wanted was to stay the course and stick to the original plan, and she wanted to let herself feel all the bright, bright colors of the rabbit hole on her way down, and what she wanted was to not have to deal with how afraid she was of people leaving, and dammit, she really wanted him to bring her coffee in bed, so really –

"I don't know."
"The couch's definitely too small for you," Diggle told him, patting the inadequate sleeping arrangements in question, "but I've got a sleeping bag somewhere that's nice and cozy."

"I'm fine with anything, Digg," Oliver said. "And thank you. Again."

"Don't mention it," Diggle dismissed the gratitude, again, before he tipped his head to the side, giving him a studying look. "You look kinda down though, man," he commented. "And not just because you haven't slept in two days."

No, it wasn't sleep-deprivation.

Though it probably was messing with his head.

Because he'd planted himself in front of his suit, and when Felicity came up next to him, he'd started telling her his stories, stories he'd told no one, stories maybe only five living men besides him knew, and the thing was, he'd confessed his sins as a test, to see if it would be the thing to make her walk away, the thing that would give him the clean break he didn't want.

But she'd pulled him back around even after hearing it, like she did every time, so what he got in the end was the outcome he'd hoped for; a few less secrets between them, and another reason for him to love her.

He loved her.

And God help him, he'd almost said it.

Almost thrown it in with the rest, almost told her he loved her in the same breath where he'd confessed to murdering his old friend, where he'd brought up things she'd tried so hard not to speak of, as if all of that hadn't be enough to hear already. But he'd stopped himself, even though his heart was going a mile a minute and his mind was getting fuzzy from having her so close, and she didn't get to hear it.

He did, though. He loved her.

He loved her, and for a moment there, she was looking at him like maybe, if he said it, she might even say it back.

It didn't quite work out like that, though.

So he took another sip of his beer, and said, "Felicity and I talked."

"And how'd that go?"

He didn't really know how to answer that.

He'd almost told her he loved her, she'd told him she didn't know where she wanted to take this thing they had between them, to maybe give her some time to figure it out, she wasn't sure, and then her sentences had gotten kind of fast, and a little babbly, and he'd just stood there and listened until she'd run out of breath, and he'd told her that it was fine, that she take all the time she wanted; it was fine.

The best approximation he could come up with for Diggle was, "We're still…firmly in the in-between."

"That sucks for you, man."

Oliver laughed, which he thought was probably Diggle's intention, but as he was winding down, he
still found himself saying, "I almost told her I loved her, John."

Diggle's smile went away instantly. "So that's where it's at."

"Yeah," Oliver whispered.

"And you really want this? Still, with everything, you want to be with her, have an actual relationship with her?"

He'd wanted it almost from the moment he was sitting at breakfast with his sister and she'd told him denial was bad for his health, so… "Yes."

Diggle went silent for a while, as Oliver picked at the label of his beer bottle, before he said, "Then I'm glad for you."

He couldn't have heard that right. "You're…glad?"

"Well, not about…everything," Diggle clarified, "but I'm glad for you, Oliver, not that you're stuck loving someone who might not want the same things you do, but that you actually want those things. Because Felicity, she's all that's good, right? All that's too good for you?"

Oliver nodded.

She was the one with the rose-colored glasses, looking at a monster and seeing a hero.

That was how he used to think about it, anyway.

"And whatever I may think about it," Diggle went on, "you're still in a good enough place, up here" – he tapped his temple – "to want to be happy. You know, you just got blindsided by this…bad thing, with Isabel and everything, and you're still in a good place. I mean, even a few months back, I'd have thought that something like this would end up with me and Felicity having to talk you out of running back to Lian Yu but…” He shrugged. "You're in a good place," he said. "And I'm so glad for you, man."

Oliver ducked his head, because there were tears stinging at the corners of his eyes. "A lot of that is thanks to you, Digg," he managed to say after a moment, nodding as he looked back up. "I wouldn't be here without you."

John smiled at that. "Then I'm glad I could help, too."
Chapter Notes

Guess who updated! (and let's not talk about the fact that it took me almost 3 months to post this. let's just not talk about that.)

P.S. In continuing to be way better at the complementary details for this story than I am, Devaue Fawkes has made a playlist for it, which you should all check out because it's amazing.

She wasn't going to laugh.

Because it wasn't funny.

It was totally not –

God, how was John keeping a straight face through this?

Hers was starting to like, cramp, from all the effort she was putting into trying so very hard not to laugh, and Oliver looked like he was silently dealing with a really bad bout of diarrhea.

But she supposed there was only one way to react to Roy throwing their own plan out in the open, where Thea and Moira could hear it, too. And Felicity swore Oliver's face twitched every time Roy deviated even slightly from the original phrasing, as it had been presented to him by Green Arrow in Verdant's back alley.

"And um, Green Arrow, he didn't see it fit to pay my family a visit in person to tell us this?" Mrs. Queen asked once Roy was done. Probably because she questioned his capabilities as a messenger, Felicity thought.

"I think he thought you'd trust it more if it came from me," Roy said, nodding for emphasis.

Yes, he had thought that. Was probably regretting it right about now, too.

"Why does he care?" Thea interjected. "About what happens to my family's company?"

Roy shrugged. "He said that if QC goes down with Isabel, then so do the thousands of its employees. Doesn't want them to be out of a job."

"How heroic of him," Mrs. Queen commented, somewhat flatly, and Felicity had to bite back another laugh at the look that crossed Oliver's face. "But," she added, "do tell him we all appreciate his…thoughtfulness. And that he should do what he must on his end. We will do the same on ours."

Roy nodded a little belatedly, but was soon giving everyone reassurance that he would pass the message along. Then there was a glance and a little head-tilt thrown Thea's way, which she seemed to understand because she was soon dragging him along and out of sight with a sigh.

Felicity could have laughed again.
There was a good half-a-minute of silence before Mrs. Queen said, "Well, that certainly wasn't what I'd expected to hear."

"I don't know," Oliver spoke up, "Green Arrow seems pretty invested in helping us."

"Yes, he does," Mrs. Queen agreed pointedly, and Felicity got to experience a split-second of pure, blinding panic, before Mrs. Queen added, "I suppose a good deal of it has to do with Roy. What with him caring about Thea, and by extension, what happens to all of us, and Green Arrow caring about the feelings of his…protégé?"

More like reluctant trainee-slash-sidekick.

"In any case," Mrs. Queen went on, "it's good that he told us. Because this way, we get to be another step in front of Isabel Rochev, and plan accordingly."

"I'm pretty sure you'll be doing the planning, Mom," Oliver told her with a small smile, which earned him a look from his mother that Felicity couldn't really place.

"I suppose I will," Mrs. Queen said. "And I'm glad" – she turned to her and Diggle – "both of you got to hear it, too. I'm sure Oliver would have told you anyway."

Oliver nodded.

"So, this saves everyone some time," Mrs. Queen concluded, smoothing down her skirt as she rose to her feet. "And you were all off to somewhere, before Roy came in?"

"Yes." Oliver jumped to his own feet. "We're dropping Felicity off back at the office, and then Digg and I are gonna go…boxing."

It was delivered as smoothly as any of his bad lies, but Felicity had to wonder if Moira had actually bought any part of it, including the explanation for their collective early-morning presence in her home – "Hi, Mom, I forgot something upstairs, gonna go and grab it – oh, and Felicity’s here with us because her car's in the shop" – especially as it was timed almost perfectly with an unannounced Roy joining the crowd.

They needed to get better at this stuff.

Still, Mrs. Queen smiled pleasantly, wishing them a good day.

Felicity cleared her throat. "Actually, um, Mrs. Queen, I was hoping I could speak to you?" she requested. "Alone."

Her immediate answer was a perfect triple score of surprised faces.

Oliver frowned next, throwing a little inquisitive look her way; she just smiled back at him.

"Of course," Mrs. Queen agreed.

"I'll be just a minute," Felicity assured John and Oliver as they walked out, even if she could say with near-complete certainty that Oliver kept staring questioningly at the back of her head right up until the moment he could no longer see her.

She waited for the click of the closing door behind them before she stepped up to Mrs. Queen.

"I was, uh, I was hoping you could give me some advice," she said. "About…Isabel."
Mrs. Queen seemed suitably intrigued, but open for conversation – which, Felicity thought, might not last long.

"See, you asked me to be your eyes and ears inside QC, and I want to do that, I am doing that, I'm just not…very good at it." She sighed. "You might've noticed that I'm not exactly a…smooth-talker?"

Mrs. Queen pressed her lips together, like she might be stifling either a smile or a choice remark, before she prompted, "What kind of advice are you asking me for, Felicity?"

The kind that involved prodding about how one would go about manipulating criminal masterminds with possible megalomaniac tendencies.

"I, um – I don't want to offend you, Mrs. Queen," she assured, "but…you spent years pretending you were on Malcom Merlyn's side and making him believe it – "

Mrs. Queen's jaw dropped a fraction, and she turned her head away, clearing her throat.

"And I – I'd like you tell me how you did it, so I can do the same to Isabel," Felicity finished her request – very bravely, in her opinion. "Unless you're about to kick me out?"

She watched as Mrs. Queen took a deep breath, shook her head, then held it back up high again.

"You want my advice on how to make Isabel believe you are on her side?"

Felicity nodded quickly.

Mrs. Queen sighed. "Everyone has a weak spot, Felicity," she said. "Something that gives you a way in. For Malcolm" – she cleared her throat again – "it was The Undertaking. His…need to destroy The Glades. He wanted validation for that, so it's exactly what I gave him." She shrugged. "I gave him my support in that one thing he wanted the most, so he trusted me as his ally. So for Isabel, you'll need something," she added, stepping closer, "that is at the very essence of who she is."

The very essence of Isabel Rochev was probably made of the fires of hell.

But other than that…

"She's a woman of business," Felicity decided. "That's what's most important to her, that she's a woman of business."

"Then that's your way in," Mrs. Queen concluded. "And you are both women of business, now." She smiled. "I'm sure you won't lack for topics of discussion."

Especially, Felicity thought, considering Isabel Rochev wanted to groom her in her image.

"But, Felicity," Mrs. Queen added, growing a little more guarded, "you should understand that this isn't a one-way street. I don't know how far you will have to take it, but you will need to make concessions."

"Concessions?" Felicity echoed.

"Yes," Mrs. Queen nodded. "To give away little pieces of yourself so that Isabel would give some of hers in return." She paused there, pursing her lips, before she added, "It won't leave you unaffected. The key is to always remember why you're doing this."

For justice.
And Oliver.

She could remember that.

She barely had one leg inside the car and the question was already out of his mouth. "What did you talk to my mother about?"

Felicity raised an eyebrow at his impatience, making a deliberate show of settling in fully before she turned to him. "Her extensive know-how when it comes to sweet-talking villains."

Oliver actually looked offended on his mother's behalf, mouth already half-open in what she assumed would have been protest, which she never got to verify because he closed it a moment later, then frowned, like he couldn't really find any sound arguments to back up said protest.

She saw Diggle smiling to himself in the rear view mirror as he started the car.

"Look, Oliver," she said, "I know she's your mother, and this is probably not something you wanna hear, but she did spend about five years manipulating Malcolm Merlyn, so if any member of the Queen family is going to have any tips for me about the Isabel thing, it's her."

"No, yeah, um…" He shook his head a little. "That makes sense."

"And it's good thinking," Diggle added. "Mrs. Queen's definitely better at the whole manipulation thing than latte boy over here."

Oliver spared him a look, but was also in the process of cracking a smile, which, Felicity thought, was probably what John was going for. "Laugh at me all you want," Oliver told him, "but without the latte and…all the other stuff, Felicity wouldn't have joined us." He looked over to her, wearing his proudest face.

She smiled at him, making sure it looked as pitying as possible. "It's funny that you think it was all the bad lies that got me to stick around."

"Actually, the lies were bad on purpose."

She laughed this time. "Right, you came up with the sports bottles thing on purpose?"

"Okay, yeah, that was – the point is," he said, "I knew the lies were bad."

*How could you not,* she thought, but he was also smirking now, in the most overt form of non-verbal goading she had ever seen.

Okay. She'd bite. "And you kept coming up with even worse one each time because?"

He grinned this time. "To see what you'd do."

*Huh? *"What I'd do?"
"I always figured I'd probably need someone with your expertise on my side." He shrugged. "So, I came to you with a bad cover story. To see if you'd still help, if you'd tell me to go away, if you'd tell anyone. And you never did, so I just...kept coming back."

"You were testing me?"

"Well, yeah. At first, I just thought I'd...have someone like you I could come to for help, you know, on the sidelines, but then I...really liked you. And I decided I was going to bring you in on the whole thing eventually. I mean, getting shot by my own mother kind of sped things up there, but..."

"So, you're saying," she reiterated, "that you were working your way to initiating me into vigilantism?"

He tipped his head to the side, timing it with a little half-shrug. "I really wanted you on my team."

Well.

He certainly knew how to make this whole 'waiting for Felicity to figure out what she wants' standstill work in his favor.

In theory.

Because now she felt kind of terrible.

"That's the story there?" she asked, making him frown, though he still kept his smile up. "I just – I remember bringing it up a while back, and you got this look on your face, so I figured, you know, there was a story in there somewhere, but I guess I never really...connected the dots. And you never told me."

The feeling of being a terrible person had to be written all over her face, because his smile had slipped, and she thought he'd probably expected this would make her feel happy and not – well, like a terrible person.

He tried to brush it off with a, "It never came up."

Yes it had. Pretty much every time she'd made fun of him and his bad lies. Which was pretty much all the time.

She should've known. Even if he really was one of the worst liars she'd ever met.

The longer she said nothing, the more he looked uncomfortable, his face twitching in what might have been a wince. And then he promptly changed the subject. "Anyway" – he cleared his throat – "it was good thinking. Going to my mom. It's...good."

Felicity glanced over to Diggle in the rear view mirror; his face was very carefully blank.

Oliver kept talking, all vigilante-business mode, about how he was going to call Detective Lance about the warrant they needed to give the SCPD access to Haze's files. Felicity studied his profile while John took over, talking timeframes and whatnot, then slid her hand over to cover his.

He looked down, smiling to himself for a moment, before meeting her eyes.

She didn't speak, so as to not interrupt Diggle – even though she was pretty sure he was just talking to fill the silence now – but she still gave Oliver's hand a soft squeeze, turning his smile into a grin.

God, he was pretty.
Her life would be so much easier if he weren't so damn pretty.

Isabel Rochev, Felicity learned, was surprisingly pleasant when she wanted to be.

Maybe she was just in a good mood.

What with having dazzled every big kahuna in the company during her great, shiny, all-encompassing meeting.

Not that Felicity, being one of said big kahunas herself, would ever admit to sharing their sentiment. But she could, on a purely objective level, recognize that their new CEO did, indeed, have great plans for the company.

Which wasn't to say that Oliver's plans hadn't been great. They were. Just a little less...dazzling.

"What about LexCorp?" Isabel asked, flipping through the pages of the files Felicity had put together for her perusal, now that they were having their mandatory, post-meeting one-on-one. "They offered a good deal."

Felicity opened her mouth, to tell her the same thing she had told Oliver, only to close it a second later; saying that she didn't want QC tied to someone as shady as Lex Luthor was probably not going to go over as well with Isabel as it had with Oliver.

And in hindsight, maybe she'd been a little too forward with that one, even if it was to Oliver. Because when she replayed it in her head, it sounded a hell of a lot like she'd been telling him what to do with his own company as if she were the boss here. Of course, he hadn't objected but –

"Ms. Smoak?"

"Right, sorry." She shook her head. "I just...didn't think the benefits outweighed the uh, risks, on that one." Might as well use phrasings Isabel was known to be fond of while she was at it.

"Risks?" Isabel echoed. "As far as I can see, this deal would be pretty risk-free for us."

"No um, not the deal itself, just – " God, this was easier with Oliver. "I just mean," she tried again, "that the fact alone of associating Queen Consolidated with LexCorp would have been...risky."

"LexCorp enjoys a better standing than we do right now," Isabel said.

"Yes, but it's run and owned by Lex Luthor," Felicity pointed out, "and he's" – shady – "not very trustworthy."

That seemed to have piqued Isabel's interest. "He's a known philanthropist and an innovative businessman."

"Well, on the surface."
Isabel smiled at that. "Ms. Smoak," she prompted, "what do you know that I don't?"

That LexCorp, if one dug deep enough, could be associated with a number of shell corporations with suspicious holdings all over the world.

"Well, nothing really…. inculminating," Felicity allowed, "but I like to, you know, do my due diligence on anyone I – we, might get into business with, and Mr. Luthor has some…possibly suspicious, um, properties that trace back to him, so if it ever turns out that it's about not-so-legal activities and LexCorp implodes or something…"

"It blows back on us, too," Isabel added, nodding. "Good thinking," she complimented next. "Smart."

More like, she'd been in the crime-fighting business for way too long not to do some mandatory background checks on people, but no need to advertise that.

"QC doesn't need bad press." She shrugged. "I was just doing my job."

Isabel nodded again, then promptly tossed the LexCorp folder on the no-go pile.

She reached for the next one, then paused when she flipped it open, pursing her lips. "Galaxy Communications," she read, clucking her tongue. "I take it you ruled them out on the same criteria?"

That, and the fact a thwarted plan to blow up a plane that still ended up in the death of her friend's friend's father and God-only-knows-what being done to the aforementioned friend was orchestrated to benefit Galaxy Communications, by the woman she was playing nice with and secretly wanted to stab in several major arteries.

But the censored version of all that was, "Yeah. And I don't think I need to elaborate, considering you – well, worked there."

"Hmm," Isabel agreed, then tossed the file aside to join the others. "And I also take it," she said, "that you looked into me the same way you did Lex Luthor?"

Crap.

Okay, she could salvage this.

"I did," she admitted. "Not that you can blame me, since you did…you know, come here for a hostile takeover." She shrugged. "Besides, all that I found was that you closed some bad deals that fell through. And then you quit."

Isabel raised her eyebrows, but nodded nevertheless. "It always looks better to say you quit than it does to say you were fired," she commented. "Even if you did make the mistake."

"Especially if you're a woman," Felicity supplied.

Isabel hummed in agreement, though it sounded bitter underneath. "I've seen men in the business get forgiven and taken in for worse deals, in far less time," she said. "But it took me a year to find work again. And some women" – she chuckled dryly – "never even get the chance."

"One oopsie, and you're marked for life," Felicity said. "Not that I'd really know from experience, because I never actually failed at my job – which, I realize, sounds kinda arrogant, but – "

"You're good at what you do," Isabel told her. "You're not arrogant for saying it."
"You know, Ms. Smoak, I misjudged you, at first," she added after a moment. "I thought you were just another girl who had slept her way to the top."

"Yes, I got that," Felicity deadpanned.

"Well, I was wrong," Isabel said. "Maybe you did get to your position because of Mr. Queen, but you do work hard. And you deserve to be where you are. Even if you took a shortcut."

Well, she would know all about *those*.

"Um…thanks?"

Isabel smiled again, wider this time, dipping her chin in a slight nod.

This was good, Felicity thought. Headway, and progress, and bonding time all going according to plan.

The devil really liked her, evidently.

"Hey."

Felicity nearly fell out of her chair, taking a handful of wires with her, and righted herself just in time to see Sara smiling as she perched herself on her desk.

"Is the whole 'sneaking up on people' thing something all vigilantes do, or do you and Oliver just like to mess with me?" Felicity asked as she checked the cables for non-existent damage, then let them dangle back to the ground. She was supposed to be doing monthly inspection of all the wiring in the lair; needless to say, it was getting nowhere.

Sara glanced over to Oliver, where he was in the middle of his daily workout routine with Digg, before she said, in all seriousness, "We like to mess with you."

Felicity leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. "Aha, well, remember that when all of your data on all of your tech suddenly gets replaced with audio tracks of screaming chipmunks."

Sara grinned this time.

"You look happy," Felicity remarked, tipping her head to the side. "Second lunch with Laurel go well?"

"It did." Her grin grew softer around the edges as she added, "It was like this…blast from the past, you know, from before? I used to get annoyed with her all the time, because I always thought she was babying me. And yesterday, she was going all big sister on me again, and I'm just…"

"Happy."
"Yeah." Sara chuckled. "Can't believe I actually missed that. And um, she wants me to move in with her."

Felicity blinked. "Really?"

Sara nodded. "I had the same reaction. But – I mean, she thinks I've got my own place in the city, she doesn't know that I'm bouncing from towers to motels and back, but she…she wants me to move in with her."

"Where she can baby you better?"

"Probably," Sara laughed. "But I think I will. I can come up with a cover story for why I'm gone most nights, and it'll be nice, to live my sister again…I think?"

Felicity smiled, reaching out a hand to cover Sara's where it was gripping the desk. "You should go for it," she said. "You and Laurel have a lot to make up for. This is a good place to start."

Sara looked down at their hands, and when she brought her eyes back up, they were a little wet. "Didn't even think I'd get this far," she whispered.

"Hey" – Felicity leaned in closer – "you survived six years of horrible things to come back to your family, to Laurel. Nothing's gonna get in the way of it anymore."

There was a little bob of Sara's head to acknowledge the words, and a little sniffle she tried to hide, before she muttered, "Yeah, I know."

Felicity frowned. "Sara?" she prompted. "Is there something else?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, I just – the closer I get to having my family back, the more I think about…" She trailed off there, like she was going down a particular memory road, and the thing was, it didn't seem like the unhappy kind.

"About what?"

"Who, actually," Sara corrected. "When I was…away, with the people who trained me, one of them – we were together. She and I were together."

Felicity smiled. "She?"

"Nyssa." It came out soft, just on the side of loving, and Sara smiled to herself before she recited, with some laughter behind the words, "Daughter of Ra's al Ghul, Heir to the Demon."

"What?"

"That's what they call her. Heir to the Demon."

"Wow. Dating someone called Heir to the Demon's gotta be really great for your street cred."

Sara laughed again, though it was a little scratchy this time. "I miss her," she admitted after a moment. "I don't regret coming back to my family, I have everything I've wanted for six years now, but sometimes I just…miss her."

Felicity gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You loved her?"

She didn't get a response right away, but eventually, Sara was speaking again, in a sort of gentle, wistful voice that Felicity didn't think she'd ever heard before. "Loved, love, I don't know. But she
was the first person I'd met whose idea of protecting me wasn't to keep me away from harm, but to teach me how to fight it," she said. "I loved her for that." She sighed. "And I just…wish she were here with me. If only so she'd…remind me that I still have a heart. A soul."

"A soul?" Felicity echoed softly. "Sara, you don't need someone to tell you that."

"I know, but – " There were more tears at the corners of Sara's eyes now, and it took a few tries before she finally said, "It was hard to remember, sometimes. And Nyssa reminded me. Because you can't…love someone, and have them love you back, if you don't have a little soul left in you." She swallowed. "It made me feel safe. She made me feel safe."

Oh.

"I'm sorry, Sara," Felicity said. "That you had to leave her."

"She let me go," Sara told her, dabbing her fingers under her eyes. "I always said that once my… debt was paid, that I would leave, and she respected that. I mean, she did try, for a while, to convince me to stay, but she loved me, so…she let me go."

Felicity glanced over to the side. "That's probably a really hard thing to do," she commented, letting her eyes linger on Oliver for a moment before she turned back around, adding, "But hey, maybe you'll see each other again."

"Yeah, I think about that a lot," Sara admitted, a sad smile quirking the corner of her mouth. "Seeing her again. And then I start making all these 'what if' scenarios in my head, you know, just – what if her oath weren't for life? What if I could tell my family about her? What if neither of us were who we are?"

"What if things were different, yeah," Felicity agreed quietly.

"Just a little different," Sara muttered, mostly to herself, then broke off on a sharp inhale. "But that's not how it is," she said, "so I should…find a way to let her go for good."

That sounded so…final. "Never say never."

"Never linger in limbo for too long, either," Sara countered.

"Right," Felicity mumbled.

Her eyes wandered to Oliver again.

"There's no reason for you to let him go, you know."

Felicity blinked. "Huh?"

Sara nodded towards the mats. "Ollie," she said. "He hasn't said anything about it for a while, not to me at least, but it's hard not to notice…this thing you two have going on."

"Wha – no, you know what, we were talking about you, and Nyssa, we should just – "

"I could use a change of topic, actually," Sara told her, trying and failing to hide another sniffle.

Felicity slumped in her chair. "It's…complicated."

"It usually is with him."
"Actually, I'm the one who's making it complicated," Felicity muttered, which earned her a curious look from Sara. "See, uh, a while back," she went on, "Oliver told me that he wanted us to be more than…friends. And partners. That he wanted us to be together. And he told me the same thing yesterday, so…he's made it all pretty easy, which is just – " Weird. "Anyway, I'm the one who – I mean, I thought it'd be best to just shove it under the rug, you know, and pretend there's nothing there, and to just not go there, but now I'm…now I don't know."

"Would it really be so bad?" Sara asked. "To give it a shot?"

It would be terrible. Catastrophic. Apocalyptic. Or the exact opposite of that, she wasn't sure. Which was exactly her problem.

"The thing is, I'm – when I think about how it'd play out, in the end, there's always just…me, alone. Again."

Sara said nothing for a while, chewing on her lip, then clucked her tongue. "Look, I don't know if this thing with you and Oliver is just…some feelings, or if you love him," she said, "but I think that, if you want to know how it actually plays out, you have to dive in. And if it ends badly, then that's what it is." She shrugged. "Besides, you're the one who told me that leaps of faith and big risks pay off."

Felicity ducked her head. "It's rude to throw someone's pep talk material back at them like that."

"I'm just saying, maybe you should take your own advice." Sara smiled for a beat, then shrugged again. "See how it goes."

"Penny for your thoughts?"

She spun her chair towards Diggle, just about ready to give him the deepest, most long-suffering sigh he had ever heard in his life when her eyes drifted to the rest of the foundry, and the complete lack of other human presence in it.

"Where'd everyone go?"

Diggle shrugged. "Well, for starters, it's way past clocking out time," he said. "And plus, you looked like you were having a moment over here, so I told them I'd see if you're okay." He made a face there, then added, "Oliver looked kinda worried about you, but maybe that's just how he looks at you these days."

She bit her lip. "Like what?"

"Like a damn puppy," Diggle deadpanned.

"Yeah well, you should see the way you look at Carly."

He raised his eyebrows.
"Not that Oliver and I are like you and Carly. Obviously."

"Right," he muttered, going out of a sight for a moment before he returned, spare chair in hand. "Well, that might be" – he dragged the chair in front of her, taking a seat – "because Carly and I are actually dating."

She blew out a breath, hanging her head. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"You know, I got to hear his side of it yesterday," Diggle said. "Actually, when it comes to all this, you and him, I got to hear his side way more than yours lately, so…wanna finally tell me where you stand on all this?"

"Cliff-notes version? I don't know what I want."

John gave her a look.

"Fine, I do," she admitted, "but it's – I'm scared of it, okay? I mean, it was never supposed to get this far, and actually, how did it even get this far? This wasn't supposed to happen, John, I don't even know how we ended up here, because he was, you know, supposed to be tragically in love with Laurel for the rest of his life or whatever – honestly, this whole thing would have been so much easier if he'd just stayed tragically in love with Laurel instead of – "

"Breathe," John instructed.

She gulped in a breath, then blew it out, just as John said, "D'you know it's actually what he told me, too?"

"He told you he'd rather have stayed in love with Laurel?" she let out.

"No," John shook his head. "What he said was, this whole thing you two have? It would have been way easier to deal with if it was just one-sided, which" – he paused only long enough to give her a pointed look – "is what I'm pretty sure you were getting at, too."

She deflated in a second. "Yeah," she agreed quietly.

"Look, Felicity" – he reached for her hand – "I know you had some feelings, even before, and then he left and…you dealt with that the best way you knew how."

"Wasn't that good of a way."

"Maybe," he conceded. "But you were hurt, so you decided those feelings were gonna snowball if you let them and drop you down a rabbit hole that was only going to hurt you more – "

"While crying into a beer."

" – and I was with you on that." He squeezed her hand. "I still am."

"I know, John," she whispered.

Because where there was her stomping on the lines she'd drawn, there was also John reminding her there was a reason she'd drawn them in the first place.

Which had all been a pointless effort, evidently.

"But," he added, "if you think differently now, if you want to be with him, then I'm with you on that, too."
She did.

She wanted him, and to be with him, because it could be really, really great. She had a very vivid imagination and an entire mental images folder of all the ways in which it could be just that; really, really great. She also had another one with all the ways in which it could be not-so-great attached to it.

Which was exactly the type of one-foot-on-each-side situation that she'd told Oliver to get over.

Not to mention that she was actively ignoring her very firm belief that one should enjoy the good things while they last; another thing she'd told Oliver to get on board with.

So, she was something of a hypocrite and terrible at taking her own advice.

"I do," she said. "Think differently, I mean. But I'm also freaking out about it."

John nodded. "Because you're scared."

"Yeah." She sighed. "And it's all just really dumb, like – we're a bunch of good-doer criminals here, and one of these days, one or all of us might die a horrible death, or get arrested and then die a horrible death in prison, and I'm fine with that, it doesn't scare me, but I'm freaking out just over the idea of getting dumped?"

Diggle stayed quiet for a while, apparently processing all of that. "You're not…dumb for being afraid of people choosing to leave you," he decided. "Because that's what it'd be, right? A choice to leave. But for the record…I don't think he would, Felicity. I don't think he'd leave you."

She frowned. "Since when?"

That got a little nod out of him, as if to say he had conceded her point. He chewed on his lip for a moment, before he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Oliver, he's…messed up," he eventually said, "and no one can blame him for that, after everything, but he hasn't got a good track record. And I kept thinking, he's gonna have a bad day sometime, and if you two are together, he's gonna run, or he's gonna push you away, and you'll end up getting hurt."

"But," he went on, "I do think he's in a good place these days. He's doing better. Especially considering what Isabel did to him. So now I'm thinking, when he does have a bad day – because he will – maybe he'll deal with it differently. And," he added, "I've also been around the two of you for a while now, and…" He shrugged. "You have your thing."

"Our thing?"

"He sees all that's great in you," John told her. "And I'm not saying you're not great, but he looks at you and he sees all the things you could be, even if you don't, even if no one else does. That stuff he said today? About really wanting you on his team? I know he meant that. He didn't see just an IT girl, he saw someone who could fight his crusade with him – with us. And then he handed you a whole new department in his company because he knew you could handle it, even if you freaked out." He smiled. "And whatever else I may think, I've always known that he sees all the best in you, Felicity. And that you do the same for him."

She opened her mouth then closed it, smiled then tamped it down, started shaking her head then stilled. "That – " She cleared her throat. "That's…wow."

"And all of it is to say," John went on, "that I don't think it's going to go away anytime soon. At least not for him."
Felicity looked down, gulping, before she nodded; she could, if nothing else, admit that it wasn't going to go away anytime soon for her either.

Might as well go for it.

She barely had a minute to settle into that thought before there was a beep at the door, followed by Oliver and a hastily delivered, "Sorry, forgot my phone."

She'd worry about possible telepathic abilities on his end, or worse, divine intervention, if it didn't feel like impeccable timing. Before she chickened out again.

She smiled when he picked up his phone from one of the shelves – though how it had gotten there, she had no idea – then dangled it in the air for a moment. He stuffed it in his pocket next, lingered in his spot for a while, then said, "I'm gonna go now."

"Oliver?" she called after him; he turned back immediately. "Stay for a minute?"

"Okay," he agreed as soon as the words were out of her mouth, and she bit back another smile.

"Well, I'm gonna go," Diggle announced, throwing a little wink her way before getting up, saying goodbye to Oliver with a clap on his back and a, "'Night, man."

Felicity used the moment Oliver spent tracking John's retreating back to take a steeling breath, and a second one for good measure, hopping to her feet just as he turned his attention back to her.

"So, since you're already here," she said, walking up to him, "it's probably as good a time as any to talk. About you and me."

"Okay," he repeated, softly this time.

His shoulders were a little stiff, and his fingers rubbed together at his side, but he was still looking down at her hopefully, like he couldn't wait to hear what she was going to say; like he'd zeroed in all of his focus into whatever she might throw his way next.

"Right, then…okay." Well, that was off to a good start. "I know I've made this kind of…difficult." She cleared her throat. "It just caught me off-guard, you know, because I mean, there was never even supposed to be a this, you and me, that was never supposed to be a thing, I didn't expect it to be a thing – and okay, yeah, I never expected to be the vigilante's tech expert either, which I understand kinda puts a flaw in my logic, because my life's basically been a rollercoaster of 'expect the unexpected' since I met you, but – anyway."

"What I'm trying to say is," she tried again, "I knew it was never going to happen, so whatever I… felt, I could put away and keep in a box in my head, so it was easier, but then it did happen, and… that wasn't all that easy to process." She sighed. "And plus, I tend to get really attached, really fast," she said, "and I also don't deal well with people leaving, which is – I mean, the two aren't unrelated."

"Felicity –"

"No, it's fine, you don't have to apologize again."

But because he was Oliver, he still said, "I'm not leaving again."

"I know." She nodded. "But it's not so much about you leaving, as it's about you leaving…me."

His forehead creased in a frown before it cleared, and his mouth dropped open a fraction.
She ducked her head. "The thing is, you can stick around and be Green Arrow 'til you're ready to hang up the hood, but that doesn't mean you'd stick around with – I mean, you wouldn't necessarily stay with – " She sighed. "See what I meant by getting really attached, really fast?"

It took a moment for him to speak again. "I wouldn't leave you, Felicity."

"You don't know that," she countered, impulsively, then groaned under her breath.

"I don't," he conceded, "but – he took a step closer – "I can't think of any reason I'd ever want to leave you. For what that's worth."

She tipped her head back to look at him. "It's worth a lot," she said, making him smile. "And uh, actually, even if it does like, go up in flames and end in tragedy or whatever, then that's fine, too. Because you should enjoy the good things while they last. However long they last. Or don't."

He nodded. Carefully.

"I'm taking my own advice. Jump, both feet in, enjoy the ride," she went on, and might have strung all of that together a little too quickly, because now he looked concerned.

"Felicity – " He shook his head a little, biting down on his lip. "You don't owe it to – no, that's not right, um…" He took a moment to go on, and when he did, it was to say, clear and steady, "What I mean is, I understand." He dipped his chin in one, quick nod. "I've always understood why – I mean, I'm not exactly a catch, and I know that, so I don't want you to…to get into something with me, unless it's what you really want."

She nodded in return, then glanced down at his hand; she pried his fingers apart with her own, lacing them together. "First of all, you're way more of a catch than you think," she told him, and he chuckled under his breath, "and second…I do want this. Really. And" – she dropped her eyes to his chest – "the thing is, I've sort of gone all this way telling myself not to get in too deep, keep it all above aboard, keep it friendly, and I'm here now and it turns out, I'm in too deep anyway. And it's…not gonna go away."

She chanced a look at him; he was smiling again, widely enough to make his dimples show, and he tugged on her hand, pulling her closer. Her nerves spiked up then crackled out, spreading warmth all through her body, right down to her toes.

Jumps and leaps were always less scary in hindsight.

"So," she said, "if you want, you get to walk out of here with a new – and really, really attached – girlfriend."

Oliver bit the inside of his cheek, though it did nothing to lessen his smile. "That sounds really good."

"Yeah," she agreed in the same breath where she kissed him, running her fingers up through his hair, and God, she'd wanted to do this again for a while now.

It was different this time, though; calmer, slower, even if she could still hear the rush of blood in her ears. And feel another smile tugging at the corners of her mouth, curving up against his, and then he was smiling too, which made the logistics of kissing a little difficult, and he broke it off with a laugh.

She felt kind of giddy, like she could start bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet any second, and maybe kind of restless too, because the adrenaline was still pumping through her body, and she couldn't decide if she wanted to get right back to kissing or stay right where she was, all warm and
cozy, with his hand trailing up her shoulder, until his fingers splayed at the back of her neck.

"I think you have it kinda backwards, though," he said after a moment, "about who's the one who got really attached here."

She tipped her head back at that, to look at him, and he held her gaze for a beat before looking away, down to where he'd begun running his thumb along her jaw. "It sort of crept up on me, too, a while back," he went on, voice dropping lower with each word. "Because I never…expected it either, you know, I…I walked into your office, and I came out of it thinking, maybe I'd keep you close by. But I didn't expect it was going to turn out like this, that I'd want to have you down here, I didn't expect you'd be so important to me, and I never expected that—"

"That what?"

He seemed a little uncertain, chewing on his lip, tensing under her hands, before he blew out a breath, and looked back up.

"That I'd love you," he said, strong and clear, and she was pretty sure she'd stopped breathing for a moment there. "Because I do," he added, nodding a little. "I love you."

She stared at him.

This whole thing had been so weird, and really, the weirdest part of it all was that she'd spent her time pumping the brakes, not calling her feelings what they were, slowing it down because hey, he wasn't ever going to catch up, and turns out, he'd just been speeding past her while she dragged her feet, waiting for her to catch up, and now—well, she had no idea what to say.

And when the silence got kind of long, he chuckled under his breath, ducking his head. "Really, really attached, right?" he muttered.

She was still short on words but she grinned at him, leaning up to plant one big, loud, wet kiss on his lips.

She definitely felt giddy now.

He was holding back a laugh when she pulled away, sliding her hands over his back—and considering their new status, she was going to get to do a lot, minus the shirt, under decidedly not platonic circumstances, which yeah, was definitely a thing to look forward to—and winding her arms around his shoulders just as he wound his around her waist, pulling her closer against him, so that she had to shift her weight to the tips of her toes.

He brushed his nose against hers, bumping her glasses up, then starting plating little feather kisses along her cheek, her temple, her jaw, behind her ear, slowly but surely turning her into jelly.

And it was all really, really great.
So...I have updated. Yes, I have. I am really, really sorry for not doing so for almost five months. But. this new update is like, literally 10k words long, so...props for that? (I'm sorry)

Also, my Nysara is showing. Like, a lot. Oops.

"I understand I'm asking you for a leap of faith, Ned, but you know I wouldn't do so if I wasn't sure."

"I know, Moira. And you know I would rather stand by Oliver, and you, than Isabel. Even with – what happened. But it might be difficult convincing the others."

Moira held back a sigh. "But you will try?"

"Of course."

"Thank you," she said. "And I don't think I need to remind you how delicate this matter is."

"I will tread carefully. And I'll be in touch."

She disconnected the call after a few more exchanged pleasantries, and made her way to the liquor cabinet for a much needed glass. Her son had shown great faith when he entrusted her with saving the company after Isabel Rochev's planned demise, and she would see it through; it just so happened that dealing with Queen Consolidated politics required something to soothe the nerves in the aftermath.

She had gotten the habit from Robert.

Another thing she shared with her late husband, was the instant brightening of her mood, no matter how sour it had been, upon seeing Thea.

"Scotch before dinner?" her daughter commented as she lowered herself on the couch next to her. "That had to be some conversation you just had with...?"

"Ned Foster," Moira said, indulging in her need for a long, drawn-out sigh this time.

"Pulling strings behind the curtain, I take it?"

"No one in the company, besides Walter, was more loyal to your father than Ned," she obliged Thea's unspoken request for details. "I am confident he has that same loyalty towards Oliver, even after – well. And if Green Arrow does expose Isabel for her crimes, things will go south very quickly for QC, which means that the board will only have so much time to save that sinking ship."

"By reinstating Ollie as CEO," Thea supplied.

Moira smiled. "Exactly. I am trusting Ned to share this with the select few who are of similar views
when it comes to the company's rightful heir, so that when the time comes, they will prepared to make the change swiftly."

Thea looked impressed. "You're really good with this backroom kind of stuff," she said. "And I mean that in a good way."

"You are the second person to tell me that sort of thing this week."

"Huh?"

"The other day, Felicity asked me to give her advice," Moira explained, "on how to manipulate Isabel. She seems to think that I am an expert on the matter."

"That is so her," Thea laughed under her breath, then seemed to consider something. "Any special plans for her in this new – let's call it a strategy?"

"She is already doing a great deal, by making nice with Isabel." Moira shrugged. "Of course, it will also mean a great deal when she throws her support back behind Oliver again, what with being a valued executive."

"She calls it being a 'big kahuna'."

"Oh, dear."

"She's really nice, though."

"She is," Moira agreed.

And she surmised no one thought so quite as much as her son.

Speaking of…

"Oliver," she let out when he appeared in the doorway, dressed to the nines in what she thought might be a brand new suit and tie.

"Well, don't you look handsome, brother," Thea commented. "What's the occasion?"

"Uh, I…have a date."

"A date?" Thea echoed like it was the single most inconceivable thing she had heard in her life.

"Yes, Speedy, a date," Oliver replied dryly.

"With whom?"

"Felicity."

Ah.

Well, that explained the sharp new suit.

"I thought Felicity didn't want to date you," Thea said.

"Well, it – " He seemed to struggle for an appropriate explanation there, and after a few false starts, simply skipped it altogether. "In any case, we're dating now, and tonight we are going on a date."

Of course, Moira thought, the woman in question being Felicity probably also explained the way he
fiddled with the hem of his sleeves, and the knot of his tie, and the way he seemed to trip over his words; she had to stifle a smile. He was nervous.

And Thea picked up on it too. "You look like you're both happy and about to have a heart attack at the same time."

He swallowed. "Is it that obvious?"

"If it helps, I'm pretty sure Felicity's all jitters right now, too," Thea comforted. "Which is weird, because you guys are already friends and spend all of your time together. I mean, this will be like, the chilliest date ever."

"Yeah, but – the thing is, we've never really done date-like things together," he said. "We've mostly just – " He sighed. "This is really important to me, and I don't want to mess it up."

With his past experiences, Moira could understand why he would have such concerns. Of course, she didn't voice the thought aloud.

"Just be yourself, Ollie," Thea advised. "She likes you that way."

"Yeah," he agreed quietly, and did so with a smile.

"Thea's right, sweetheart," Moira told him. "It'll be great."

It was terrible.

Well, maybe not terrible.

More like a moderate train wreck.

She was nervous – which was absurd, which in turn only made her even more nervous, and there was only one thing she did when she was nervous, which was talk.

A lot.

Which was why she was just now finishing a very, very, very long-winded account of that one time she had built that one mini-robot back at MIT.

To Oliver's credit, he'd seemed completely fascinated by every word coming out of her mouth.

But that was probably just because he loved her.

Oh yeah, and that was another thing.

That one time he'd made that one grand, heartfelt declaration of love.

Which had yet to be declared back.
Maybe she should just bust out with that?

No, that would be bad.

Would it?

"Are you okay?" Oliver asked. "Because you…kinda look like you might throw up."

"What? No…" She swallowed. "Okay, maybe a little."

"Yeah, me too," he muttered.

"So is this the worst date you've ever been on or what?" she laughed a little hysterically, then cringed because why did she even say that? "Not that it's the worst one I've been on – not that it is bad, it's definitely not bad, I mean, this is actually pretty good, compared to that one time I went out with this philosophy major in college and she spent the entire time telling me I shouldn't vaccinate my kids – like, I don't even have kids, why would you – "

"Felicity."

She broke off on a gulp, then grabbed for her water glass so she could proceed to gulp down every last drop of it.

When she looked up, it was to Oliver wearing the single most dismayed, kicked-puppy face she'd ever seen on him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No, it's – " He sighed. "It's just that…this is not really the way I wanted tonight to go."

Yeah, you and me both, she thought. "Well, you know, maybe we're…overthinking it? I mean, this isn't just any first date, the stakes are kinda high here, right?"

"Yeah," he agreed quietly, then reached across the table to hold her hand; at least that was familiar, and calming, in this new upside-world where she was doing the first-date thing with the man she'd once helped stop a plan to cause a man-made earthquake that would level half the city.

Well, they'd failed, but that was not the point.

"This, being with you," Oliver said after a moment, "it's…really important to me. It kind of feels like one the most important things I'll ever do, so…" He shrugged. "Tonight was supposed to go better than this."

"To be fair, I think we're probably both at fault here."

"But I'm the one with the terrible track record."

Ah yes, his terrible track record. Which she had kept somewhere in her top five list of reasons why being with him would be a bad idea.

"Don't…don't think about that so much, okay?" she said. "I mean, I don't want you like, going through the day thinking of ways to prove that you're not gonna run away from me Road Runner-style, you know?"

He raised an eyebrow at the metaphor then chewed on his lip for a moment, before he looked down to where he'd turned her hand over in his and begun tracing the lines of her palm with his thumb. "I
do know," he said quietly, "but I also know that it's not easy for you to trust that I won't run. You took a leap of faith with me. I do have to prove I'm worth that."

"Oliver – " She clasped his hand, stopping his movements; she smiled when he looked up at her. "I know you are," she told him. "That's my whole point. I knew what I was getting – who I was getting." She shrugged. "And yeah, I've got my issues, but I wouldn't be on this….terrible, terrible date with you right now if I didn't think you were worth it."

He pressed his lips together, like he might be stifling a grin, but it still broke through in the end. "Fair enough," he conceded.

"I do think about it, though," he added, more quietly. "Not that I've got things to prove, but just – who I was, who I am now, and…" He paused to look up at her, and let his eyes flicker over her face before he lowered them back to their hands. "And how much of that I can actually show you."

She frowned. "I thought we were past the part where you got all worried about offending my delicate sensibilities?"

"No, it's – " He shook his head. "It's not like that, Felicity. Okay, it kind of used to be," he admitted, "before, but that's – it's not what I meant. What I meant was – the – " He broke off on a small sigh, and she kept quiet while he seemed to be putting his thoughts in order. "The thing is, you get to see more of me than most people," he tried again, clear and steady this time. "And not all of that is pretty."

"My mom," he went on, "and Thea, and Laurel, and, uh, Tommy, before" – he cleared his throat -- "it hurt them, it still does, to know that I'm not the Oliver they knew, that I've changed. It hurts them to know, and it hurts me to let them know – they try, to accept it, but… I know it's always going to hurt them. Even if they say it won't. So I have to…choose what they get to see. But you…" He huffed a small, quiet laugh. "You're one of the exactly three people in my life that I don't have to do that with."

The other two, she knew, being Sara and Digg.

"What I told you," he said, "about Shado and Slade and…what happened with them, I'd never – I'd never told anyone else that." He shook his head. "It doesn't…hurt you, to hear all this stuff, not like it does the others, and it just – " He blew out a breath. "That means everything to me. So…I think about it a lot."

"Does that mean" – she reached over and took his hand in both of hers, holding tight – "I'll get to hear everything that happened to you on the island?"

"I'm not asking," she added quickly, "that you tell me, you don't have to. But, if you want…" She shrugged. "You can tell me everything."

Oliver rubbed his lips together, nodding ever-so-slightly, before his eyes fell to their hands again. "Do you remember," he prompted, "just after you and Digg brought me back from Lian Yu, how I, uh…got mad at you for calling me a hero?"

"Oh, yeah. I definitely remember that."

His mouth quirked at the corner. "And when I came to apologize, how I…asked you not to expect more from me than what I'm capable of?"

"I remember that, too," she said softly.
"And uh, you told me," he went on, "that I'd already found a way to do things I didn't think I could, that I'm the one who didn't know what I was capable of, and...I thought about, um, how easy it would be for me to turn that on you, to tell you that you were the one who didn't know what I was capable of. Because, you didn't know, what I'd done, who I was, you were looking at me and seeing a hero, and – " He drew a deep breath before he looked up at her. "I was...so sure," he said, his voice getting thicker, "that you didn't – that you couldn't, see me for what I really was, because then you wouldn't be able to live with helping someone like me, and uh – I thought, if you did know, if you really knew, that you would – " He broke off on a quiet gulp, closing his eyes for a moment, then simply added, "I was wrong."

She stared at him.

And she wanted to say something – anything, really – but only got as far as getting misty-eyed.

And Oliver's eyes didn't look all that dry either. "I know I can tell you about Lian Yu, Felicity." He nodded. "Because what I also know, now, is that you do see me for what I am – who I am. You see it better than most." With a shrug, he added, "And you see the best in me."

Oh...wow.

It was amazing, how he always found a way to overwhelm her.

She busied herself with tracing patterns on his skin for a while, until she got her mouth to work again. "You know, John said something."

"John?"

"Yeah. I can't believe I'm actually quoting him here" – she laughed lightly – "but he said that, you and I, that we have this thing, where we...see all that's great in each other. And he's right, I guess." She blew out a breath. "You – and again, I can't believe I'm quoting Digg here – you looked at me and you saw more than just an IT girl, and because of that, because of you, I...finally found a place where I felt like I belonged." It got kind of hard to go on after that, because there was a lump halfway up her throat, but she did her best. "So...however much it means to you that I see you the way I do, you should know that – that it means just as much to me that you see me the way you do."

Oliver smiled, lifting one of her hands to his lips to brush a small kiss against her knuckles. "It's really not hard to see what's great in you, Felicity," he said.

That was it.

She was going to cry.

Into the tablecloth.

In the middle of Table Salt.

Oliver looked like he might follow suit, too.

After a beat, he ducked his head and muttered, "This really isn't great topic for a first-date conversation, is it?"

She tried for a chuckle that came out kind of wrong, and did her best not to sniffle. Oliver breathed in, out, then met her eyes again, and she almost did bust out with that declaration of love.

It was right on the tip of her tongue, she'd already opened her mouth to get it out, when her phone
buzzed on the table – which could only mean it was an emergency, because Sara and Digg had both promised not to interrupt for anything short of a code red.

She grabbed for it, eyes skimming over the alert quickly. "Sara and Digg need back-up."

Oliver looked a little thrown, but still nodded. "Okay," he said, and with that, they were both out of their seats and up on their feet.

"I'll get our coats."

"I'll get the check."

"I'm sorry we ruined date night," Sara said, once again, sending one more apologetic smile at Oliver's hooded profile, from where she had fallen into step with him.

"No, it's fine," Felicity sounded in her ear. "When duty calls, duty calls."

"Yeah," Oliver agreed helpfully, nodding for emphasis.

"Still," Diggle chimed in, "we feel bad."

"Maybe we should have just brought Roy in…"

"He's not ready for this kind of fieldwork," Oliver promptly put an end to that line of thinking, and Sara was of a mind to agree; busting a makeshift drug lab crawling with twenty armed Triad members was a little too high-stakes for a hotheaded newbie. Diggle, on the other hand, would have been a perfect extra set of hands. Except then they'd have no one to man the comms.

"He could've handled tech support, though," Diggle voiced her thoughts. "Maybe we could speed up the timetable on letting him on the whole thing, that way, next date night – "

"Okay, no," Felicity was the one putting her foot down this time. "There is only one other person in this world I'd trust with my computers – and that's you, Digg."

"Hey," Oliver protested, even as he broke into a grin.

"Oliver," Felicity said, very seriously, "I'd trust you with my deepest, darkest secrets, and I'd trust you with my life. But I don't trust you with my gear."

"I'm not as incapable as you think," Oliver commented, still grinning. "I had a perfectly functioning set-up before you came along, you know."

"Okay, first of all, that set-up was tragic."

Sara bit back a smile.

"I'm surprised you could even fire up a google search without melting the entire mainframe, and
"second – if it was so perfect, why did I need to come down here and fix it before it could actually do anything?"

"Well…maybe it was just part of my plan. Make it seem like I was hopeless so you'd have to stay and save me."

"No, I had to stay and save you because you showed up bleeding in my car, nearly shot to death by your own mother."

Oliver's grin grew softer along the edges, and he only said, "My hero." But it really sounded more like he was calling her his beloved.

It was just like when Nyssa –

Sara shut her eyes tight.

She had to stop doing that.

Her mind couldn't wander back to Nanda Parbat, to Nyssa, at every little reminder.

And yet it did.

" – got a text from Detective Lance, the cops are just about done with reading the perps their Mirandas, so I'd say we can call it a night."

Sara shook her head to clear it – of things she shouldn't be thinking of anyway – and put her focus back on what was being said just as Oliver asked, "Any word on where is with the warrant for Haze's files?"

Oh, she could answer that. "Laurel's getting it in the morning."

"She is?"

Sara nodded. "Heard her and Dad talking about it," she said, before throwing a quick smile Oliver's way. "Told you she'd help you."

"I still can't really believe that," Diggle commented

"She's not setting him up, Digg."

"It's not what I'm thinking, Sara," Diggle assured, though she didn't doubt for a second that it had crossed his mind, "it's just –"

"She hated me," Oliver said simply. "Green Arrow. She wanted me unmasked an in prison. I mean, sure, she eased up on me after a while but this is still a one-eighty from – two weeks ago."

"Well, things changed," Sara said. "You saved you."

"I saved a lot of people before that," he pointed out. "It didn't change her mind. And Laurel, she cares about everyone, not just me, or Tommy, or –" He sighed. "I just can't help but think there's more to it than that."

Sara made to suggest there was a way to go about remedying that uncertainty, but Felicity beat her to it.

"You should go and ask her," she told him quietly. "Pretty sure there's not gonna be a swarm of
"Yeah," he muttered a little absently, his brow furrowed like he was lost in thought.

"She's still at the office," Sara supplied. "If you wanna stop by."

"Go," Felicity said, and as soon as it was out of her mouth, Sara was sure Oliver would do it.

"Okay," he agreed, just as she knew he would, before telling both John and Felicity to go home and shutting off communication; Sara did the same, and the moment they turned the corner and went down to where their bikes were stashed in a back alley, he stopped walking and spun to face her.

"You okay?" he asked.

She pulled short, blinking up at him; he shrugged.

"You kinda shut down for a moment there," he said. "So…you okay?"

He'd noticed that, then; she couldn't help but smile. "I'm fine."

He said nothing, just raised an eyebrow at her.

"You wanna do this now, Ollie? Here?"

He shrugged again, walking back until he was leaning against his bike, then crossed his arms and ankles. And just waited.

With a sigh, Sara relented.

"I am fine," she maintained, leaning against the bike next to him. "I've just been…thinking."

"About?"

She looked away. "Nyssa."

"You've mentioned her," he recalled, quietly.

"Right," she muttered.

She hadn't really meant to but Nyssa's name had slipped out, here and there, because it was easy to talk to Ollie. She'd still found that it had been easiest to tell Felicity.

"I miss her," she let Oliver hear it, too. "And I shouldn't, because I left her when I left the life I led when I was with her, but sometimes I just – " She sighed. "I tried, to tell myself that I have my family now, that I have all that I've needed for six years, but I guess I…I guess I need her, too."

She shut her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, it was to Oliver slowly nodding in understanding.

"Everything reminds me of her," she said. "She's an archer too, by the way. Guess that's my type."

Oliver laughed with her, right up until the moment she felt more like crying instead. "Whenever I hear you draw back your bow," she kept her voice low, so it wouldn't break on the words, "I'm half-expecting I'll turn around and see her instead. And the other day, Diggle mentioned he knew some Arabic, and…I almost said that I did, too." She sniffled. "That where I was, they called me Taer al-Asfer, and that it was Nyssa who taught me how to say my new name. Then Laurel, she – she made
this comment, about how I use 'big' words now, and I almost told her it was because of Nyssa, because she talks that way – "

She pulled in a deep breath when her voice did break, and hung her head.

"Hey…"

Oliver stepped in front of her, his hand falling to her arm.

"Where – where I was, what I did," she forced the words out, "it was terrible, all of it, it was – terrible. But Nyssa…Nyssa was a good thing."

Oliver nodded. "You ever wanna go back?" he asked. "To her?"

"Yes," she admitted, and it hurt so much to get that one, little word out. "They released me. I'm free, unless they need me, and I know they won't because I paid my debt, and I chose my family, and Nyssa – " She gulped. "Nyssa will respect that. And even with that, with knowing that I don't ever have to go back, on some days, I'm hoping that they will call on me…I guess it really is hard to let go."

"Maybe you don't have to," he told her. "It doesn't have to be either-or, Sara. You don't have to choose between your family and her. You can have everything."

She chuckled, short and mirthless. "No, I can't," she said. "This isn't like it was for you, Oliver. Your family, your hood, Felicity…they were all right here, the entire time. Nyssa is…half the world away, waiting for the day she gets to lead an entire league of assassins. She's never going to leave that life, and I am never going to go back to it, so…"

"You can still see her, even where she is," he said. "Or meet her halfway."

"And what? Live on stolen moments?"

He shrugged. "Maybe that's better than nothing."

"Maybe," she allowed.

"Sara, it's – look, if you love her, if you need her, then you should…try and find a way to be with her, instead of trying to make yourself forget."

She had to bite back a smile when he leaned in, like he was about to let her in on some big secret, adding, "If I deserve to be happy again, then so do you."

Oh, so, they were doing this now? Well, if they were already quoting other people – "It's rude to throw someone's pep talk material back at them like that."

She saw the exact moment he realized the words had to have been Felicity's, because now he was grinning. Again.

"You know, you and Felicity now?" she commented after a moment. "You remind me of Nyssa, too."

He tipped his head to the side, looking a little confused; Sara shook her head slightly.

"Nyssa, she – she called me her beloved," she said, swallowing. "I could hear it, in every word she said to me. And when I listen to you talk to Felicity now" – she smiled faintly – "I can hear it in your voice, too."
Oliver nodded slowly, with a small smile on his lips, and even though it was hard to really tell with the hood and the mask, she knew his eyes held sympathy – for her, because he could probably hear it in her voice now, too.

He probably could see how glassy her eyes were getting again as well, so she ducked her head, holding back a sniffle.

"You should talk to her," he advised, giving her arm a squeeze. "See her, if you can. At least then it'll be easier to figure out what you want to do."

"Yeah," she agreed quietly, then asked, staring at the tips of her boots, "Can I say something that's maybe kind of terrible?"

"Sure."

She raised her head again. "I envy you."

Even the hood and the mask couldn't hide the way his eyes widened. "What?"

"Not really, but…part of me does," she said. "You got everything you wanted, Ollie – right now, in this very moment, you have everything you want. You get to be Green Arrow, your city's embracing you, you have Moira, and Thea, and Laurel, and Digg – you have Felicity. And" – she gave him a little smile – "I like to think you're glad to have me around, too. You have everything you want and you're…happy. You got to be happy." She shrugged. "Part of me envies that."

His mouth dropped a fraction, and after she was done, he only stood there silently for a long while; apparently, he hadn't thought of this. Or maybe he just hadn't gotten around to it.

Eventually, he shook his head, as if to clear it, and said, "You will be happy, too, Sara."

Maybe. But she wasn't there yet.

"I hope so," she whispered, then took a deep breath; there was only so much of talking about this she could take, even if it was with Oliver. So, she said, "You should go. Talk to Laurel before she leaves the office."

He gave a little nod of agreement, but still took the time to ask, "Are you gonna be okay?"

She did her best to give him a smile. "Yeah."

"Okay." He gave her arm one last squeeze and leaned in to drop a small kiss to her forehead before moving to his bike, and driving it off back onto the road.

In the silence, Sara sagged against her bike, closing her eyes.

Every day, it got harder to tell herself not to miss Nyssa, not to want to hear her voice again, to see her again, and now Ollie –

He'd made it harder, too, because she'd come to Starling clinging to the shadows, hoping that he would have the answers to how to step back into the light; he hadn't. But now he did – now, he was happy, so –

Maybe he did have it all figured out. Maybe what he was telling her to do was exactly the kind of answer she needed.

So, with a deep breath, she reached into her pocket for her phone, and dialed.
"Hello, Laurel."

She seemed barely surprised by his presence in her office, at the dead of night, and merely responded with a, "Long time no see."

Oliver took a step out of the shadows, still keeping a safe distance. "Well, we didn't exactly part on the best of terms last time, so…"

Laurel nodded, ducking her head. "Right," she muttered. With a deep breath, she pushed away from her desk and stood. "You should know I won't come after you anymore," she said, like she was making an announcement. "I'm letting it go. And" – she pointed to one particular pile on her desk – "I'm going to a judge first thing in the morning, to get that warrant you asked my father for." Her mouth twitched into a quick smile. "He sort of danced around it, but I know the idea came from you. And I'm pretty sure it's why you're here now."

"I wanted to thank you," Oliver said. "For doing this. I know it's not easy for you."

"It's easier than you might think," she told him quietly, looking down for a moment.

Oliver chewed on his tongue while she kept quiet, then decided to simply ask, "Because I saved Oliver Queen?"

"That's part of it," she conceded, glancing to a picture frame at the corner of her desk before she looked up at him again. "But I've also been doing a lot of thinking, lately," she added, "and I've realized that I blamed you for a lot of things, just so I wouldn't... blame myself." She swallowed. "That wasn't fair."

Right.

People died and they left, all around her, and the only thing at the center of it was her.

Always her.

"It wasn't your fault, Laurel," he said. "That The Undertaking happened, that... Tommy Merlyn died."

"It kind of was, actually," she corrected, her eyes growing clouded with tears. "And I blamed you, because you didn't save him. I... believed in you, and you failed. You didn't save the city, you didn't save him. But the truth is... he wouldn't have needed saving at all if it weren't for me. He died because he saved me." She sighed. "That was hard to accept."

Oliver closed his eyes.

For a moment, he was back at CNRI, pushing away debris only to find blood seeping out of Tommy's chest, and realizing that it was too late; that there was nothing he could do.

"When I got there," he said, "it was too late. There was nothing I could do for him. But he was still
alive, just barely." He swallowed. "And... he asked me about you. If you were safe. He said he tried

to get you out. He didn't regret saving you. Not for a second."

Laurel smiled, just slightly, even though more tears gathered in her eyes. "Thank you for saying

that."

"It's just the truth."

"The truth, right," she mumbled. After a moment, she added, "Can I ask you something?"

He nodded.

"Why did you come to me, when you first came here?" she asked. "Why did you – I don't know,
save me every time I got in trouble, or try and prove to me you were the good guy? Just – why

me?"

That was a loaded question.

And it probably had way more to do with Tommy than it did with him.

It did have a very simple answer, though.

"Because you're good, Laurel," he said. "You fight for those who deserve it. Right and wrong is
clear to you. That didn't come easy to me. Knowing right from wrong. Being good." He shrugged. "I

guess I thought that, just by being close to you, maybe I could... be better, too."

She nodded slowly, taking that in, before she gave him a curious look. "So, who are you trying to be

better for now?"

His first thought was to say it was for his best friend.

He changed for Tommy, to be better in honor of his memory. But that was months ago. These days,

who he was, who he wanted to be; it wasn't just about other people anymore.

So, he said, "Me, actually."

Laurel nodded.

"That's good," she told him. "But you know, uh, right and wrong – it hasn't been all that clear to me
either, since the quake. But now it is." She nodded. "And if we're already telling the truth, then the

truth is, the reason I'm helping you, isn't really about Oliver, or Tommy, or the city – it's because my

sister works with you."

Oliver froze.

"Oh, come on, I know it's her." Laurel looked like she might laugh. "The woman in black? The

Canary?" She actually rolled her eyes there. "Do you know why she calls herself that?"

"Uh..."

"Our father bought her a canary, when we were kids," she went on. "A black one. It wouldn't shut

up, chirped night and day, drove us nuts. But Sara loved that bird." Her eyes were back on the

framed picture on the desk, and Oliver knew what he'd find there even before he moved just far

enough to the side to be able to see; it was Sara, on the day of her high school graduation.

"One of my informants," Laurel spoke again, "said that the word on the street was, the woman in
black called herself The Canary. The moment I heard that, everything just sort of…clicked." She
looked up at him. "Why she seems so different now, why she was so calm when Ollie got sick, why
I couldn't reach her for hours that day – it's because she was there, helping you save him."

And the moment he heard her say it, everything clicked for him, too. "You're doing this for her."

"She's my sister, and I have to protect her," Laurel said, like it was the simplest thing in the world.
"And I can't keep coming after you, or your partners, not when she's one of them, too."

"My – my partners?"

Laurel raised an eyebrow at him, then turned her voice mockingly deep as she mimicked, "You have
your sidekicks, and I have mine."

Oh, right, yes. He had said that.

"If I didn't know you had partners before, I sure did after that," Laurel went on. "And I figured I
would get you through them. That's what I focused on, actually. Finding out who they were. Never
thought it would lead me to my own sister, though." She chuckled. "But when it did, I had to…
reevaluate…a few things."

"Does she know?" Oliver asked, even if he already had the answer. "That you've figured it out?"

"No." Laurel shook her head. "She's been trying so hard to hide it. Actually, I get the feeling there
are a lot of things she's trying very hard to hide. I don't wanna…spring this on her before she's ready
to talk about it. With me, I mean. I don't want to…push her the wrong way."

His first thought was that this wasn't how Laurel did things. She didn't play it safe like this.
But it made sense, if only just this once.

She ran a hand over her face. "I don't know why I'm telling you any of this," she muttered.

He smiled the faintest bit. "You're not going to lose her."

Laurel's head whipped up to him, eyes wide, and he thought that he'd probably never seen her look
so surprised in his life.

He gave her a small shrug. "That feeling you get," he said, "that somehow, all you ever do is lose,
it's – it's an illusion. No one only ever loses." He shook his head. "But when you've already lost so
much, it…gets hard to see that."

Laurel said nothing, but he knew he'd hit home – he knew because she'd told him, that she only ever
felt like she was failing, like she could never get it right – even when she did get it right, when she
did win, it still didn't seem like enough – and he knew that feeling, he knew it so well, he could
practically see every thought running through her head right now.

But it was an illusion.

"You're not going to lose Sara," he told her again, just for good measure. "Whatever you choose to
do, she's not going anywhere."

"Um, I – " She shook her head. "Thanks for…saying that, too, I guess," she said uncertainly.

He just nodded.
"But, could you, um – not tell Sara?" she asked, faltering over the words a little. "That I know?"

He didn't want to – but he at least owed her the chance to talk to Sara on her own terms. So, he nodded again.

Laurel gave him a faint smile. "Thank you."

"You know, for all the times I've thought about jolly green men climbing through my window at the dead of night," Felicity said, "this is still really weird for me."

Oliver grinned from beneath his hood, perched on her fire escape, with a Big Belly Burger bag in each hand.

"You think about a lot of jolly green men coming in through your window?" he asked as he did just that, handing over the takeout.

"Mm, no." She went to her tiptoes to peck his cheek. "Just one."

She was pretty sure he blushed.

"So," she prompted, peeking into the bags as she walked over to the coffee table, "how come your jolly green self is in my apartment with Big Belly right now?"

She turned around after putting the bags down, to find him right in front of her.

"Well," he said, bringing an arm around her waist to pull her in closer, "our date was kind of a bust, so I...thought we could use a little do-over. Plus" – he leaned in, brushing a small kiss against her lips – "I kind of wanted to see you again before the night was over."

Her hands bunched the leather at his shoulders when he kissed her again, longer this time, and honestly, this was practically chaste compared to some of their work, even with all the tongue and teeth, and his hand coming under her shirt, glove and all, and up her bare back – yes, still, with all of that, it was practically eighth-grade hand-holding, but all she could feel under her fingers was the leather, and all she could see was the hood, and the mask – and, not to give into hormone-driven exaggeration or anything, but this was probably the hottest thing to ever happen to her.

He pulled away, just when she was about a second away from pointing him to the bedroom, and gave her a little smirk. "Food's gonna get cold," he breathed.

*Smart-ass.*

Still, she let him have his way – which, for the record, was so much less fun than hers – and followed him to the couch. She watched him sit down next to her, take off his hood, then his mask, then place the latter on the table – *her* table. It was her apartment, her couch, her table, and now he was here, with takeout and in his gear, being – well, *her* Oliver.

He noticed her staring at him. "What?"
"Nothing," she said softly. "It's just really nice having you here."

He smiled, handing her the food he'd gotten for her; her usual, of course.

"How did this work, exactly?" she asked. "Did you just walk into Big Belly and place the order in full Green Arrow gear or…?"

"Of course not," he said, like it was absurd. "I waited in the back alley for the cook to come out for a smoke and then I gave him my order."

She…really couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

No, actually, she could – this was Oliver, so of course he had done exactly that.

"You know Carly's gonna tell Digg about it, right?"

"Oh, she already did." He reached for his phone, scrolling through it before he held it up for her to see a single text from Diggle: what the hell, man?

She snorted.

"Yeah," Oliver laughed under his breath, giving the text another glance before his phone joined his mask on the table; Felicity felt a lot like hugging him.

"So, before you probably gave a poor, unsuspecting cook a heart attack," she said, biting into her burger, "how did it go with Laurel?"

His face fell a little at that. "She knows. About Sara."

Felicity nearly spat out her food. "That she's The Canary?"

"Yeah," Oliver said. "Apparently, calling herself The Canary is kind of a dead giveaway – at least for Laurel. Probably for Mr. Lance, too, as soon as someone repeats it to him."

"Sara doesn't know that she knows, does she?"

"No." He shook his head. "Which is – I mean, there's so much behind it for her, with everything that – " He sighed. "It's just hard for her, talking to Sara about it."

"So – where do we stand on this?" Felicity asked. "Are we gonna tell Sara?"

"Laurel, um…she asked me not to." He shrugged. "She'll do it, eventually, and…we should give her that time. I figure I owe her at least that."

"Right," Felicity muttered, watching as he frowned in silence, obviously somewhere off in his thoughts.

She waited him out, until he said, "Sara's the reason she won't come after me anymore."

Felicity blinked. "Oh."

"She says she has to protect her."

"Can't do that if she's hunting down the guy Sara's working with, right?" Felicity guessed.

"Right," Oliver echoed.
"Isn't this a good thing? I mean, she's dropping the manhunt, so…"

"No, it – it is," he said. "But she's…she's still going through a lot. So is Sara."

"Nyssa?"

"Yeah." Oliver nodded. "They're both still – fighting, you know, they're still not there yet, and I just – " He turned to look at her, and she was surprised to see that his eyes were getting a little glassy. "I just can't really believe," he went on, more quietly, "that – that I'm the one who has it figured out, that – that of the three of us, that I'm the one who's happy."

"Oliver…"

"I'm actually happy – me," he said, laughing under his breath, and it sounded wet and scratchy. "I'm the one who's…giving out advice, telling Sara to go talk to Nyssa, and Laurel that just because it feels like failure, doesn't mean it actually is, and I just – " He shrugged helplessly. "How am I the one who's doing that?"

"Hey – " Felicity ditched her food, scooting closer to him; she put a hand on his shoulder, and the other on the back of his head, running her fingers through his hair.

He closed his eyes for a moment, leaning into the touch. He turned his head to the side, until his forehead bumped hers. He stayed that way as he said, "I got everything I wanted. I have my family, and my hood, and Digg, and Sara, and Laurel, and – I have you." He swallowed, bobbing his head in a tiny nod. "I have you," he said it again, and when he pulled back just far enough to be able to look at her, there were tears in his eyes; she couldn't keep her own from burning. "I never thought I'd get here."

She nodded, leaning in to brush her lips against his hairline. "Expect the unexpected?" she suggested.

He smiled at that – a small, watery smile, before she felt his arm around her, pulling her closer, so that she was all but sitting in his lap; her arms went around his shoulders and his head fell to the crook of her neck, while his fingers skimmed along her ribs. She pressed another kiss to his hair.

"So far," he spoke after a while, voice quiet and rough, "this do-over date is going about as badly as the first one did."

"Nah." She sniffled. "This is great."

He chuckled against her neck, then pressed a kiss to the side of it, and she felt his chest expand under her hands, like he was breathing her in; she felt his lips move against her, too, as he whispered, "I love you, Felicity."

She felt the words against her skin just as much as she felt them inside her, and she really did believe, as he said it, that she wasn't ending up with a broken heart, that as deep as she'd fallen, he was right there with her; that he wouldn't leave.

So she put all of her heart into it, and hoped he could feel it the same way she did, as she said, "I love you, too."

A little shudder went through him, before he burrowed deeper into her, nuzzling his nose against her neck. She nudged his head back just enough to able to trail her lips to his forehead, then the bridge of his nose, then his cheek, and then his mouth; he kissed her readily, his fingers going up to her hair.
He was shifting them again, with a hand on her thigh, and she really did find herself in his lap this time, straddling him. He was still kissing her, sitting up to bring her closer, with his hands going under her shirt again, and she thought that this was great, it was perfect, because – and the thing was, she got everything she was wanted, too. She was happy, too.

She pressed in harder, hands in his hair to hold him closer, and then, because she couldn't resist, she pulled back an inch just to say, "Food's getting really cold."

Oliver smiled against her mouth, before dropping his lips to her jaw. "Maybe we should get back to the food, and not…start anything else," he muttered. "I'll – have – to leave – soon," he punctuated every word with a small kiss to her neck, like an apology.

"Or," she said, "you could stay the night."

"As much as I'd love that" – another kiss – "it'll be much harder to keep people" – the next one landed at the hollow of her throat – "from seeing me coming out of your apartment" – really, he was sending some mixed signals here for a man who was making a case for leaving, what with having started nuzzling her breasts – "in the morning."

"I have" – she held back a moan – "a change of clothes for you upstairs."

He stopped. "What?"

She sighed, a little impatiently. "I started keeping some clothes in your size – and Digg's – here, a while back. You know, in case of emergency. Like right now. So" – she gave a little shrug – "stay the night."

That was apparently all the convincing he needed – and if he wanted more explanations, he didn't ask for them – because he was back to kissing her, needier than before, one hand going down her lower back and dipping past the waistband of her sweats, and the other splayed across her ribs – also, leather gloves on bare skin? Definitely a good thing.

Then his hands were gone – and she almost protested, until she realized they were only gone because he wanted to take the gloves off. She almost protested about that, too, but what came out instead was, "You know, I always imagined you doing that with your teeth."

He paused, then made a little pointing gesture, as if to ask if she actually wanted him to take them off with his teeth.

She shook her head, smiling, then leaned in to start running her mouth along his jaw; she kind of really liked the way his stubble prickled her lips. "It's kinda nice," she said in-between kisses, "now that we're together – that I don't really have to – try and filter – all the weird sexual things – that go through my head."

He swallowed, and it seemed to catch in his throat. "Feel free."

She smiled again. "How are those gloves coming along?"

There was a faint thump behind her, like something soft landing on a pile of paper bags.

"They're off," he muttered just as his hands – gloveless, this time – carded through her hair, pulling her head up. They were on her face then, as were his eyes, going over every inch of it; he looked like he might say something but just gave a little shake of his head in the end, like he couldn't really find the words.
She dipped her head, to place a small kiss against his palm, before she reached up to take off her glasses then go for the hem of her shirt, both ending up in a bundle at the corner of her couch.

His eyes were decidedly not on her face anymore, and he pulled her closer again, pressing her chest to his, and – did she mention that leather on bare skin was like, a really, really good thing?

Not so good, though, that she didn't want him out of all that leather – well, keeping the leather would probably be all sorts of fun, too, but like, not now.

They didn't actually make it to the bedroom on the first try.

They ended up against a wall, because that scratch-and-lick thing he had going on with his stubble and his tongue was all sorts of amazing and it had her moaning and pushing as much of her skin as she could in his face, so he'd pushed her against a wall, to give himself a good long moment to really make her feel it – and then they ended up on the stairs, and she had her hands gripping the railing and about a dozen dirty cracks about archer's fingers that got stuck in her throat.

By the time they did get to the bedroom, her sweats were gone too, as was his vest, his pants were undone, and she was practically dragging him to the bed – before they somehow ended up on the floor or on the dresser – trying to pull him with her as she went.

That didn't go as smoothly – or as quickly – as she would have liked, because he had to stop and get rid of his shoes and pants; which took a while, as his archer's fingers had apparently turned more into butter fingers that tripped over the laces of his boots – and she got to hear what she was pretty was just a long string of Russian cursing as running commentary, too – so it took him over a good, full minute to actually get them off. By which time, of course, she was laughing at him.

It turned into a squeal then died in her throat when he moved, too fast for her to react, and had her on her back on the bed, hovering above her.

She wasn't much in the mood for laughing after that.

Really, all her mouth was good for from then on out was having her tongue twist and her voice break over the syllables of his name. Well – that, and an equally twisty and hiccupy and choppy stream of every dirty, and sappy, and sentimental thing that ran through her head. He hadn't seem to mind, though; in fact, he'd encouraged it. Heartily.

That was round one.

And a discovery Felicity made in the aftermath – Oliver Queen, Starling's lean mean green vigilante machine, was a cuddler. An actual, honest-to-God, will-wrap-himself-around-you-like-an-overly-affectionate-octopus kind of cuddler.

The thing was, she wasn't used to sharing her bed. So, as much as exhaustion had forced her to doze off, she still squirmed awake, because she was all sticky, and all sweaty, and had Oliver wrapped around her like she was his favorite teddy bear; one arm under her head, like a really muscly, flexing pillow – and she worried about his circulation –, the other around her middle, his chest to her back, and a leg between hers. So yeah – like an overly affectionate octopus. But at least he was her overly affectionate octopus.

She couldn't help but smile at that thought, and turned her head to brush her lips along his biceps; his hand tightened against her stomach in response.

"Trouble sleeping?" he asked, low and raspy, right next to her ear, then trailed a few quick nips along the shell of it – because that was going to help her sleep.
"Yeah," she said, kind of breathlessly. "'S your fault."

She could feel his teeth against her when he grinned, from where he'd progressed down to her neck. "Sorry."

He didn't actually sound very sorry at all.

She turned in his arms, to face him, nudging his head with hers; he immediately went in for a kiss.

"Hi," he muttered against her lips.

"Hi," she echoed, and if John could see her right now, he'd say she was grinning like a fool.

Well, actually, she should probably not be thinking about John right now. 'Cause that was kind of weird.

Not that it was hard not thinking about John, when she had a very naked Oliver in her bed, plastered to her very naked self, looking at her with those pretty bright blue eyes of his – even if the dark, she could see it, that look, like it was – sacred, maybe? Yeah, that probably came closest. Like it was sacred, being here with her – like she was.

He was playing with her hair now, fingers absently twisting the strands, while his other moved up and down her thigh. She let her own hands roam, down his arm then his back, her fingers catching on scar tissue; and she just felt compelled to say it again. "I love you."

She felt the small shudder that went through him this time, too, and everything about the way he was looking at her now made her think that what he really wanted to say in response was 'thank you'.

Instead, he just said her name, just *Felicity*, and he might as well have gift-wrapped the 'thank you' and a thousand other declarations of love in it, with a bow on top, too.

That was how they got to round two.

And then round three was probably her fault, because she'd mentioned something about wanting beard burns on her inner thighs during round two – and well, Oliver had delivered.

He'd delivered so well, in fact, that her walk down to the kitchen in the morning had really been more of an awkward, don't-let-your-thighs-rub-together kind of wobble.

In hindsight, she probably should've put some pants on too, instead of just underwear and an old MIT shirt.

Not that she minded, really. Nope, not one bit. Actually, she was grinning – *like a fool*, Digg's voice supplied in her head – as she started on the coffee.

She replayed it all in her head, round one, and two, and three – which was not an ideal line of thinking considering the whole not-letting-her-thighs-rub-together predicament, she would admit – as she waited on the coffee maker, and honestly, when he padded up behind her, hands settling lightly on her hips, she thought she could really go for round four – like, now. Right there. On the counter. She was game.

"Morning," he muttered right next to her ear; she leaned back into him.

"Morning," she sighed.

He busied himself with nipping at her earlobe for a second, then said, "I have a question."
"Hmm?"

"Why do you have a picture of me and Digg in a bunny frame in your bedroom?"

She giggled. "Because" – she spun to face him, arms winding around his shoulders – "it's cute."

And so was he. With his little bedhead and in just the change of boxers she'd left for him before coming down – and okay, he was like, really tall and built like a bear, and had a really prominent mark of affiliation to an international organized crime network right there below his clavicle, but still – cute.

He made a little face at her.

"Hey," she defended, "I love that picture. And I can't keep it down here 'cause you know, what if my aunt comes over and she's like, 'why do you have a picture of your boss and his bodyguard, Felicity'?"

"And the bunny frame?"

She grinned. "It's cute."

"So are you," he said, all low and husky, leaning in for a kiss; she promptly clamped a hand over his mouth.

Then barely held back a laugh at the way his eyes widened.

"Morning breath," she explained.

He gave her a look. "Felicity," he nudged her hand out of the way, "I – "

"Yes, yes, you survived five years without a toothbrush," she said, "and you don't care, but I – " she pointed to herself – "do."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. "Fine," he relented, and she placed a small kiss of apology to his shoulder before wiggling out of his arms and going for the – now ready – coffee.

She filled a cup for him – black, no sugar, no nothing, obviously, because he was hardcore like that.

He took it readily, though his eyes lingered on her bare legs; she was pretty sure that they'd moved up to her ass when she turned back around to work on her own cup.

"You know, after a year or so," he commented, "you won't care about the morning breath thing anymore."

"A year?" she echoed, leaning back against the counter once she'd finished adding the last of the sugar. "Already planning that far ahead?"

He tilted his head in mock-consideration. "More like five, actually," he said. "At least."

She bit her lip. "See, when you say stuff like that," she slid up to him again, "it makes really hard for me not to want to kiss you and your morning breath."

He gave her a wide, tight-lipped smile, almost like a challenge, before taking a sip of his coffee.

He really was cute. A big, cute, cuddly octopus-bear.
She should probably stop thinking of him in weird animal imagery.

"Also, you should probably drop a call or a text to your mom and Thea," she said next, tracing the lines of his chest with her free hand as she did – just because she could. It made her kind of giddy. "Since you didn't last night, and they might get worried."

He shrugged, a little smirk at the corner of his mouth. "They've probably already figured that I was spending the night with you."

And the moment that suggestive double entendre was out of his mouth, it sort of caught up with her that this was – well, not weird. Kind of weird, maybe? Because yes, she did see more of him than most people, but Oliver being flirty, and fun, and teasing – that was new. It was definitely new that it seemed to come out of him so easily – so easily, that it hadn't even struck her as weird; nothing like before, after he came back from Lian Yu, when it was so painfully obvious to all parties involved that he was forcing it, in a 'fake 'til you make it' kind of way.

So yeah, that was new.

"What's that look about?" he asked softly.

Ah, to hell with it. She was going to kiss him and his morning breath included.

She went on her tiptoes to plant one on him – and tried very hard not to breathe while she was at it.

His eyebrows were all scrunched up when she pulled away – adorably, was the word that came to mind – and he tilted his head at her.

She shrugged. "I just…really love you. Like, a lot."

He broke into a grin at hearing it. "I love you a lot, too," he said, leaning in as if for another kiss – she held her breath – but then stopped just short of target, mouth twitching, straightened back up, and winked. Winked.

She shook her head at him, then asked, "How do you feel about reheated Big Belly leftovers for breakfast?"

He gave a little shrug. "Sure," he agreed, then did that smirking thing again as he added, "Guess we really let the food get cold."

"Mmhmm," she hummed agreeably, starting to move past him as she said, "But I mean, you know, I can live with that, 'cause – and, just for the record – " She put her mouth right next to his ear to add, "it really did feel good having you inside me."

He choked on his coffee.
Chapter Notes

So...how has this past year been treating y'all?

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad.”

“No, you know what, you’re right – it was worse.”

“Felicity –”

“Worse.”

“Oh, come on,” Oliver soothed, “that sort of thing...happens. To people.”

Felicity stopped halfway down the stairs, turning to look up at him. “Who?” she said. “Who has that ever happened to?”

He pressed his lips together. “You?”

She rolled her eyes and turned away again, so he wouldn’t see her smile. “Is this your idea of being a good boyfriend?” she tossed over her shoulder as she resumed their descent. “Making fun of your girlfriend for that one time she accidentally almost propositioned her Nobel-prize-nominee M.I.T. professor? You know, I can’t believe we ran into him at the – oh my God, someone’s down here.”

Before she even had a second to process the intruder’s familiar blonde mop springing out of an ever-reddening freckled face, Oliver had already somehow maneuvered her behind him and assumed some sort of half-crouching protective stance at the bottom of the stairs.

He straightened a moment later. “Sara?”

“Don’t panic,” Sara said kind of awkwardly, tugging down at her sports bra, “it’s just me.”

“And me,” said another voice, and while Felicity looked to the ceiling, Oliver tilted his head, zeroing in on the desk; Sara closed her eyes.

Her companion rose from behind the computers, similarly semi-clothed, and Felicity’s first impression was that she was just really, really...tall.

Which was when John came clattering down behind them. “Got your text,” he was saying, “so wanna tell me what it is that came up with – ” He stopped dead. “Uh...hello.”

“Hello,” the woman said, walking up Sara’s side. “I am Nyssa, daughter of Ra’s al Ghul, Heir to the Demon.”

Wow.

“Um, Felicity Smoak,” Felicity returned the – greeting? “M.I.T. class of ’09.”

She nudged Oliver.
“Oliver Queen,” he fired out. “Uh…former CEO of Queen Consolidated.”


Nyssa nodded to all of them, like these were all perfectly normal and acceptable introductions. Sara looked like she wanted to die.

After some moments of lingering in the awkwardness, Oliver cleared his throat. “Sara, do you, uh, maybe want to…explain?”

Sara, in Felicity’s opinion, didn’t seem particularly partial to the idea, but still, she gave it a go. “I, um…I called Nyssa – ” she gave Oliver a pointed nod– “and she…came. Here. To Starling. And now she’s here. In the foundry.”

Oliver gave her a tight smile to match his little ‘mm-hmm’, crossing over to her and lowering his voice as he said, “Sara, we don’t…bring people here.”

“You did,” Diggle muttered, just as Nyssa protested, “I am not people.”

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” Sara spoke up before Oliver could react to either comment. He didn’t look impressed with that explanation either.

“Well, you – you said you were going to spend the day with Felicity,” Sara argued. “I thought you weren’t going to be here.”

“Something came up,” Oliver said dryly. “And just because we are not here, doesn’t mean that you can bring her – ” he gestured to Nyssa – “here.”

Nyssa raised her chin at that last bit, and yeah, Felicity could definitely see why they called this lady ‘Heir to the Demon’. Of course, that implied that she would someday be The Demon, which – yeah, Felicity could definitely see that, too.

“If you are worried,” Nyssa spoke, “that I will tell my father, Ra’s al Ghul, of your secrets, you needn’t be. He already knows.”

Oliver went rigid, then glared at Sara.

“You needn’t look to Taer al-Asfer as a culprit either,” Nyssa added. “All he knows, he’s learned from his warriors, and Sara…has not been one of them for a while now.”

Felicity thought she heard a little hitch in her voice there, like it caught on Sara’s name.

Oliver probably heard it, too, because he sounded like he was in a lot less of a fighting mood as he asked, “Why is your father interested in me?”

“You drew his attention,” Nyssa said. “You seemed driven by the same belief that drives him. And it’s hard not to hear of you, when your presence, methods and name are so – ” her eyes slipped to the green suit – “flamboyant.”

John stifled a snort. Felicity bit her lip.

Oliver only said, “I am nothing like your father.”

“I assure you – ” Nyssa took a step forward – “that he has no intention of recruiting, or even knowing you. Death is what you shy away from now. So, you no longer hold his interest.”
There was silence again.

Until Sara cleared her throat. “So, um…what was it that…came up?”

Before Oliver could say anything, Felicity crossed the rest of the way to the three of them. “Nothing that’s worth interrupting your reunion over,” she said brightly, then faltered a little when Nyssa’s eyes cut over to her. Because, on the one hand, she was completely terrifying – but on the other hand, she could definitely see why Sara was into her.

Still, she barreled on. “Just standard, you know, crime-fighting stuff. But we can handle it, and you two need your…together-time, so you should totally…go find some privacy. Why don’t you, um…check into a hotel or something. Five stars, room service, go nuts, have a treat.”

Sara looked to Nyssa, who said something in what Felicity assumed was Arabic; whatever it was, it put a smile on Sara’s face. After a moment, she nodded. “Okay, we’ll do that. We’ll just, uh, grab – grab the rest of our…clothes…first. Yeah.”

It was only after that awkward task was done and they were out the door that Oliver broke the silence. “I can’t believe that just happened.”

“I can’t believe,” Felicity said, moving to the computers, “that they hid under the desk when they heard us come in.” She plopped down into her chair. “I feel like a mom who just busted her teenage daughter.”

“Wait, is this how you would’ve handled walking in on your daughter?” Oliver asked with humor, coming up at her side. “Just sent her off to go do it somewhere else?”

She swiveled her chair to look up at him. “Okay, mister, how would you have done it?” she challenged. “Grabbed your daughter’s girlfriend and tossed her out the window?”

“Well, I – not out the window.”

“Oh my God,” she let out. “Oh my God, Oliver, that’s terrible! You can’t do that to a teenager.”

“No, I can’t just let her –”

“She’s going to have sex anyway,” Felicity argued. “And at least this way, she knows she has your support, so she’ll trust you and she’ll come to you if she has questions or something.”

“It’s not about support,” Oliver argued right back, “it’s that I can’t just let my daughter go off with a stranger. If you don’t know anything about the girlfriend, how can you trust her to be alone with your daughter?”

Felicity rolled her eyes. “I’m not irresponsible, Oliver,” she said. “And hello, I’m me. I would know exactly where the two of them went off to and, I would know everything there is to know about the girlfriend in like, five seconds.”

“Okay, yeah,” Oliver conceded, “but still –”

“Why,” came Diggle’s voice, “are you two talking about this?”

They both looked over to him. “What?” Felicity said, and Oliver added, “We were just talking.”

John ran a hand over his face. “Okay, well, at any rate, Sara’s not your daughter, and you don’t have any actual daughters, so –” he let a soft sigh – “how about we just talk business?”
“Okay,” Felicity said slowly, exchanging a quick look with Oliver before cracking her knuckles. “So, what came up was, Isabel sent me an e-mail this morning.”

“What about?” Diggle asked, approaching slowly, with all the caution of a man who wanted to make sure danger had passed; he braced his hands on the desk, flanking her other side.

“Well, she’s having a party,” Felicity informed. “And the only part of it that’s going to be fun for me is that I’ll get to snoop around her things. She’s throwing it at her penthouse.”

“Good.” John nodded. “Perfect opportunity for recon.”

“Exactly,” Oliver agreed. “We’re hoping we can find at least something that gives us an idea where she’s keeping her Phobos stash.”

“And I’m just really happy,” Felicity added, “that I get to be the star of this mission.”

Oliver gave her a look.

“What? I like undercover.”

“Well, it’s not going to be just you,” he told her with a little laugh. “We’ll all be there – ” his hand fell to her shoulder – “if you need us.”

She grinned up at him.

“So what’s the party for anyway?” Diggle spoke up.

Felicity blinked. “Oh, um – it’s like this whole thing, where she’s gonna gather every big kahuna in town and wow them with her corporate prowess and plans for the future,” she said. “Plans that are, I admit, pretty wow-worthy.”

Oliver laughed again. “Is this your idea of being a good girlfriend?” he teased. “Praising your boyfriend’s nemesis?”

John gave a long-suffering sigh.

“When’s the party?” he asked, ever one to keep things on track.

“In a week.”

“Plenty of time to plan, then,” he said, nodding.

“Yes,” Felicity agreed, “and also plenty of time for the SCPD to go through every byte of data on Haze’s computer, so that if – no, when I find something at that party, Laurel will have everything she needs to fry the devil and throw her in jail.”

“That’s…enthusiastic,” John said. “And uh, we’re sure Laurel’s on board with this, that she’ll take the case?”

Oliver nodded, a little stiffly. “She’s on board. Talked to her last night.”

“It was hilarious.” Felicity laughed when he looked about fifty different shades of uncomfortable, and turned to Digg. “She called him on his Arrow phone last night, while we were – ” She suddenly realized where this was going. “No, wait, you don’t want to hear about that.”

John sighed again.
“Where’s Digg?”

“Signed off for the night,” Felicity said, not turning around. “Said something about ‘the send-off was bad enough, don’t want to see the reunion’.” She pursed her lips. “I think any PDA might be too much PDA for him.”

Oliver came up behind her, spinning the chair around and planting both hands on the armrests. “Good thing he’s not here to see this, then,” he said, and leaned in for a kiss.

Felicity grinned when he pulled back.

And again when he walked away to change, and she shamelessly let her eyes go over each new inch of bared skin.

Then, he asked, untangling the leather pants from around his ankles, “Heard from Sara yet?”

She rolled her eyes. “Now I know why Thea never wanted you to know when she was with Roy,” she said. “You’re so overbearing.”

“I’m not overbearing,” he protested, grabbing for his jeans. “But it’s been hours, and she hasn’t checked in once, not even to beg out of patrol – ”

“That’s because she’s spending some quality with her elite international assassin girlfriend.”

Oliver gave her a look, just as he tugged a shirt over his head. “I am glad that she saw Nyssa again,” he allowed. “She needed that. And I wanted that for her. But…”

“But what?”

“But,” Oliver stressed, “you heard what she said about her father. He had people watching me – watching us.”

“Well, she made it sound like it was really more of a casual thing – ”

“And he was ‘interested’ in me.”

“Right. But now he’s, you know, un-interested. Because you’re not a killer anymore. I really think you should just take it as a compliment.”

He sighed.

“Come on, Sara’s fine,” Felicity said with a smile. “She’s probably just, you know…busy getting busy – ” Oliver made a face – “and besides, there are at least three covert ways in which she can send us a 911 in case of emergency, and – ” she gave him a pointed look – “you know that Sara would never put you in danger, so if she trusts Nyssa when she says her dad’s backed off and all of
that, then it’s probably because it’s the truth. So,” she concluded, “stop being such a worrywart.”

Oliver deflated. “You’re right.”

“Glad you agree.”

He smiled at that one.

She did, too, until three quick, soft chimes from the computers commanded her attention. “Oh, new activity in the Green Arrow hashtag,” she said, turning back around. “Hmm, just a few new Instagram pics…” She raised her eyebrows at the photos. “Hey, these are actually pretty good…fully body shots and everything. Usually, they’re lucky if they catch part of a foot.” She clucked her tongue. “Getting slow in your old age?”

Oliver made a noncommittal noise.

Then it struck her. “Oliver,” she prompted, spinning around slowly, “did you pose for these?”

He went completely still.

“Oh my God, you did!” She burst out laughing. “Oh. My. God.”

“Don’t – it’s –” He fumbled. “If Green Arrow feels more like an actual person than a shadow – the – more accessible – man of the people –”

She doubled over.

“Roy said – if the people of the Glades could relate to me more then – stop laughing, please.”

She quickly pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle her giggles.

He looked like a wet puppy.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just – I just didn’t think you’d…listen to Roy.”

“He’s from the Glades. He knows the people. If he says they’d trust me more if they could relate to me, then I’ll listen.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And you listened by…posing for Instapics?”

“No, I –” He let out a breath. “It’s just one thing. I – I want them to see me as more than just the guy who comes in and out in the night,” he went on, more quietly. “To see me as more than the suit and the mask. They can’t relate to me unless they can see I’m human, too.”

Felicity bit her lip; she really didn’t feel like laughing anymore. “You’re not just the guy with the bow and the arrows and the mask anymore, Oliver,” she said. “To the city, and the people…you’re a hero.”

“I know.” He nodded. “But that’s just the thing, isn’t it? If I am a hero, then I should do what heroes do.” He was stepping closer now, a kind of glint in his eyes that Felicity didn’t think she’d ever seen before. “I should – be more than just the guy who comes in and saves the day, beats up a drug lord or busts a trafficking ring, I should – be a symbol, an ideal, of hope and –” He blew out a breath. “I should be someone that people actually believe in.”

Felicity stared at him.
After a beat, he added, “And I want that. I want to be someone the people of Starling believe in.” He swallowed. “Because that’s what a hero is.”

There was a chance she might cry.

She only thought it right to inform him of the fact. “Oliver…if I start crying right now, I just want you to know that it’s not because I’m upset.”

He just stood there frowning for a moment, before his shoulders relaxed and he cracked a smile. “So you think it’s a good idea?”

She managed a nod. “I believe in you,” she said quietly, and his smile widened. “The city will, too.”

He walked all the way over now, to crouch down next to her, a hand going to her knee. “Thank you.”

“So, what’s next?” she asked, lifting a hand to trace the lines of his face; he nuzzled her palm. “Should I set you up with a Twitter account? Live-tweet all your heroic deeds?”

He actually looked to be seriously considering it for a moment. “Nah.” He eventually shook his head. “We shouldn’t push it.”

She grinned, then leaned down for a kiss. She stayed with her forehead pressed to his as she said, “I love you.”

He smiled just at hearing it, before his hand started moving up her thigh; next thing she knew, he was rising, and she was being lifted away in the process, only to find herself seated on the edge of the desk a second later.

And she was really glad Diggle wasn’t there to see that.

“Well, that was…”

From where she lay panting next to him, Felicity supplied, “Vigorous.”

“Vigorous,” Oliver agreed, then added, “I think I hurt my hip.”

Felicity laughed breathlessly. “I can just…picture the headlines,” she said. “Freak sex accident puts Green Arrow out of commission: Starling City falls to wreck and ruin.”

Oliver stretched out his arm to pull her closer. “That might not be so bad,” he said softly. “Means I get to spend more time with you like this.” But then there was an awful, wet sound when he shifted on the mats to face her, so he added, “Though maybe in a bed.”

She giggled, snuggling into him. “We could get one down here.”
“I think Digg might guess what it’s for, though.”

“Yeah,” she conceded. “Probably not a good idea to rub it in his face that we’re breaking his ‘no funny business in the lair’ rule.” She scrunched her nose; Oliver leaned in to kiss the tip of it.

“Oh well, we’re not the only ones,” she added after a moment, “so what the hell?”

It was his turn to scrunch his nose now; Felicity flicked it. Then something seemed to occur to her.

“You know, now that I think about it,” she said, “this place is a lot like a sex dungeon.”

He barked a laugh. “Felicity…”

“No, think about it.” She propped herself up on her elbow, a hand in the air. “There’s leather everywhere,” she started ticking off her arguments, “it’s cold and damp and dark –” another finger came up – “there’s drawers full of handcuffs and rope –” a third – “and plus, you know, there’s all the, like –” she gave up the counting to gesture vaguely behind her – “really phallic objects on full display.” And with that, she gave him a pointed, meaningful look and declared, “It’s a sex dungeon, Oliver.”

The worst part about it was, he couldn’t, in the moment, actually think of anything to dispute that.

“You make a good point, Ms. Smoak,” he admitted defeat instead, ducking his head to lightly flick his tongue against the hollow of her throat; she held him there when he meant to pull away, a hand in his hair, so he kept it up, kissing his way from her neck to her shoulder.

“Thank you, Mr. Queen,” she breathed when he moved lower again.

He smirked against her. “Which part for?”

“For seeing the…validity in my argument, of course.”

“Mm. Not this –” he sucked on her skin with meaning – “then?”

“Nope,” she said, though her quiet moan undermined it. “I don’t…appreciate this…one bit. It’s… completely inappropriate.” She gulped. “You treat all of your employees…this way?”

He grinned, dragging a hand up her thigh. “Just one,” he whispered. With a satisfied hum, Felicity pushed at his shoulder to get him on his back, then moved to straddle him.

She leaned in to ask, right against his lips, “How’s your hip, grandpa?”

“It’ll hold,” he assured, a hand fisting in her hair as he brought her down for a kiss.

And then her phone started ringing to the tune of *Devil’s in the Details*.

Her lips left his with a *pop*, eyes wide. “That’s Isabel.”

Oliver sighed. “Yeah, better get that.”

She was out of his arms the next moment, padding across the room; he turned his head to watch her go, and idly wondered what Isabel would think of the fact that her top executive was answering this midnight call naked from Green Arrow’s sex dungeon.

‘Yes, I’ve seen it,’ Felicity was saying, ‘I’ll take a better look now’, and ‘of course, I understand’, followed by some kind of laugh and a joke about shows and ponies. And then, finally, ‘good night, Isabel.’
Oliver quietly got to his feet after she hung up. He went for his underwear, which hung, somewhat obscenely, from the tip of one of his arrows.

His shirt, miraculously, was simply draped over the back of the chair. He handed it to Felicity. “Like you said, it’s cold down here.”

She flashed him a quick smile, letting go of the phone just long enough to drag the shirt over her head. Then it was back in her hand and she was saying, “Isabel wants me to do a presentation at the party – I’m like her show pony.”

Ah. That explained the joke.

“Which is good,” Felicity went on, “because I can sneak in something extra with the powerpoint, you know?”

“Mmhmm,” Oliver hummed agreeably, setting to untangle his jeans from the wheels of the chair.

“I could build in a worm,” Felicity was still talking, “and map her entire home system – and then, if I do that, maybe I can springboard into – I mean, she’s keeping Phobos somewhere – ”

“Right.”

“And she probably has a way to keep an eye on it, right? Like, the woman doesn’t leave anything to chance...”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah. So, obviously, even if she doesn’t have like, hours of footage of that thing just sitting on its shelf, there’s still gotta be a path from when she remotely accesses – ”

Oliver waited for the rest of it but it never came. “Felicity?”

She shook her head a little, then gave a deep, long sigh. “I’m actually just guessing here,” she spoke, a strange kind of lilt in her voice, “with how she’s going about this...and yet, I know I’m one hundred percent right.” Finally, she added, “I know exactly how she thinks now.”

Oliver frowned.

Carefully, he said, “It’s good to know how your enemy thinks. You can anticipate what they will do.”

“Yay me,” Felicity deadpanned. Then – “Can I ask you something?”

He shrugged. “Sure.”

She bit her lip as she looked over to him, then promptly turned away again. “No, forget it – ”

“Fe-li-ci-ty.” He reached for her, gently spinning her back to him. He ran his hands down her arms. “Tell me.”

She looked like she was at war with herself for the longest time, before she finally threw in the towel. “Okay,” she began, “so...I know something you don’t know I know because you never actually told me, but I do know, and I wasn’t going to bring it up but what you don’t know I know is kind of important for what I want to ask, so you should know that I know about the thing that I know – ”

He stared at her. “What?”
She closed her eyes, mouth moving in a silent, ‘three, two, one…” “It’s about the Bratva.”

“What about them?”

“I know...” She blew out a breath. “I know they were the ones who were with you on the island. That they killed Shado.”

He froze, a lump rising up his throat.

And then it just passed. “Okay,” he said simply.

Felicity only looked surprised for a moment, before pressing a light kiss to his chest.

“So what about them?”

“They were your enemies, right? They hurt you, they killed your friend, and…you had to join them to stay alive, but did you ever….”

“Did I ever…?”

For a while, Felicity stayed right where she was, head bowed, then suddenly looked up, eyes big and wide, like she was guilty of something unspeakable.

“Did you ever maybe…like one of them?”

Did he ever – oh.

His throat felt tight again. Still, he dipped his chin, and said, “Anatoli Knyazev.” He shrugged. “I still have a longstanding invitation to dinner at his house if I’m ever in Moscow.”

Felicity nodded but said nothing further.

The ugly feeling rising in his chest wasn’t unfamiliar. “I know how easy it is,” he spoke, forcibly neutral, “to – once you get in bed with the enemy, I know how easy it is to forget they were once your enemy.”

“I didn’t forget!” Felicity let out, only then seeming to realize how loud she’d been. She lowered her voice. “I still hate her, okay, I do – I’ve never hated anyone the way I do her, but…”

“But?”

Felicity fumbled, making faces and starting sentences that never formed, until it all just came out in one big, exasperated, “She’s smart!”

She heaved a breath. “You know? She’s actually really good at her job, I mean – yeah, she cuts corners and manipulates and schemes, but she’s actually good at this! And – if she weren’t evil incarnate, I would’ve –” She deflated from one moment to the next. “I would’ve really liked her.”

Well.

He knew that.

With a light squeeze to her shoulder, he said it where she could hear, too. “I know.”

She blinked. “What?”
“Well, it’s like you said…she’s smart. She’s driven, she’s talented. Sometimes, she’s the only woman in a man’s world and she’s still on top of it.” He put a finger under her chin, watching the way her mouth pinched at the corners. “Kind of like you.”

Felicity sighed softly, her breath brushing over his knuckles. “So, what you’re saying is, with a few tweaks, I could’ve been a great supervillain?”

“I would’ve been terrified of you,” he agreed.

Her little smile didn’t last more than a second. With a whine, she let her forehead drop to his chest; Oliver put his arms around her, and closed his eyes.

“You don’t have to feel bad about it,” he kept his voice low. “Just don’t cross over to the dark side, okay? Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Find another blonde to hack things for you?” she joked, mumbling.

“No one can replace you, Felicity.”

Her lips curved against his skin. “Damn straight.”

Oliver smiled, too, kissing her hair.

“Just a while longer,” he promised. “This will all be over soon.”

Sara was ignoring her.

Like that was going to deter her. She could pretend to be as deep into her typing and researching as she liked, but eventually, she was going to cave.

_In five…four…three…two…_

Sara sighed. “Yes, Felicity?”

Felicity grinned. “Nothing,” she drawled, propping her chin on her hand, “just wondering how last night was.”

All she received in response was an annoyed look.

“Come on,” she goaded. “How was it? Did you take the honeymoon suite? Spend a night of romance in luxury and opulence?” She gasped. “Did you order oysters?”

Sara pursed her lips. “We talked.”

Oh.
Not exactly the sort of juicy stuff you want to hear, but…

“You guys do have a lot to catch up on.”

“Yeah,” Sara said softly – and there it was, that little smile at the corner of her mouth. After a beat, she pushed her keyboard away; Felicity rolled her chair closer.

“It was really good to see her again.”

“Is she sticking around?” Felicity asked.

“For a while.” Sara nodded. “Can’t stay here forever, but – ” she shrugged – “we always were good at making the most out of our time together.”

Felicity raised her eyebrows. “I may be rubbing off on you,” she remarked, “cause I gotta say, that sounded kind of dirty.”

“It’s not what I meant,” Sara said. “Though it did get dirty sometimes…”

Felicity was just about to reach eternal delight, when she followed it with, “What with us being trained assassins and disposing of bodies and all.”

*What a letdown.*

“Well, only one of you is still in the business,” Felicity commented quietly.

Sara bit her lip. “Yeah.”

“How’s that gonna work out?”

“Nyssa is – ” she gave a soft sigh – “not like her father. She changed, she’s – different, now. She believes in the League but…she also understands what it means to want more than that. Even to…disagree with it.”

“Thanks to you?”

“In part, yeah…maybe.”

“Then why?”

Sara opened her mouth as if to say something, then just shook her head.

“Oh, is that like, classified?”

“It’s the League of Assassins, Felicity, not the FBI.”

“So, why can’t you tell me?”

After some consideration, Sara finally settled on, “It’s a family matter.”

“Ah.” Felicity nodded. “Private, off limits, I get it.” She cocked her head. “So…what else did you talk about?”

Sara shrugged. “*My* family, and uh…the sort of work we do here, mostly.” She pursed her lips. “I…told her about Isabel.”

Felicity stilled, eyes narrowing; there was ‘told’ – and then there was ‘*told*’. “Sara,” she asked
slowly, “did you put a hit on her?”


“We won’t!” Felicity cut in. “We’ve got a plan – it’s a good plan.”

“Even the best plans can fail,” Sara argued, meeting her eyes again. “You know that.”

Felicity straightened in her chair. “So this is your contingency one? Have your ex-girlfriend kill her?”

“Isabel is exactly the sort of person the League targets,” Sara said. “All I did was put her on their radar.”

“Meaning that she’s as good as dead.”

“Maybe,” Sara allowed.

Felicity pursed her lips. “You know Oliver doesn’t want to kill her.”

“It wouldn’t be him doing it.”

Clucking her tongue, Felicity commented, “You never really did let go of the idea to just put her down, did you?”

“Not really,” Sara admitted.

“Right,” Felicity muttered, turning back to her own screens; shucking her own research duties in favor of girlfriend talk was suddenly a lot less appealing.

“Oliver has his code now,” Sara spoke again after a while, “and it’s admirable. I’ve been trying to live by it, but…Nyssa reminded me that I don’t believe in it, not completely. Vowing not to kill anyone is noble, but sometimes, you just have to put an end to your enemies.”

Felicity turned to her again, sighing. It wasn’t how they did things down here anymore. But, if she had to pick a side on this, hypothetically – “Yeah,” she agreed. Clearing her throat, she asserted, “But the plan will work. The warrant went through, SCPD are reconstructing Haze’s files as we speak, Laurel’s ready to bring out the big guns – and, our party mission is all-hands-on-deck, so – ” she blew out a breath – “it will work.”

“I’m sure it will,” Sara said. “But, just in case something goes wrong…”

She’d jinxed it.

That was the only reasonable explanation for the three different alerts that popped up on the monitors, dinging in quick succession.

“Uh-oh…”
“What are the odds?”

For an arms dealer to finally make the trade they’d waited on for weeks on the same night as their big recon mission? “About a million to one,” Felicity said.

Diggle sighed.

Next to her, Oliver asked, “You’re sure about the date?”

“Positive,” she affirmed. “The exchange is going down the same night as Isabel’s party.”

“We’re going to have to split the team on this,” Sara voiced what all of them were thinking – and for the record, Felicity still blamed her for jinxing it.

“I don’t like the thought of us being split on either one of these,” Diggle commented. “Maybe we should pick one and shelf the other one for another day.”

“We can’t,” Felicity protested. “We’re not getting another opportunity like this with Isabel, and this arms deal isn’t just a deal, it’s a truckload of military-grade assault rifles, Digg – you better than anyone know we can’t let that kind of firepower make its way to the streets. Oliver, back me up here.”

And he did. “She’s right. Both of these are important.”

“We could let the PD handle the trade,” Sara suggested.

Felicity shook her head. “Under other circumstances, I’d agree, but the thing with these guys is, they’re really careful – hard to track, even for me.” She pursed her lips. “The only reason we even know about the trade is that it was brokered through the Bratva and Oliver used his club membership to tag the phone of an unsuspecting middle-man…”

“But,” Oliver took over, “all their communications are limited. They work out the plan in pieces then go dark – until it’s time to exchange more information. We know when it’s going down now, but we still don’t know where – ”

“Which is probably not something they’re gonna share until say, less than an hour before the exchange,” Felicity concluded. “Definitely not enough time to mobilize a SWAT team – and besides, Mr. Lance couldn’t get one going on our say-so anyway. So…this is on us.”

Diggle and Sara exchanged looks.

“So,” Digg prompted, “how is it that the two of you are so much more up to speed on this than we are?”

Felicity shrugged. “Uh…well, you know, we discuss these things. Updates and stuff, as they come along…not always when the two of you are around.”

Sara hummed. “What must your pillow talk be like?” she wondered.

Leaning around Oliver, Felicity pinned her with a look. “Do you, of all people, really want to go there?”
“Good point,” Sara conceded, biting back a smile.

“Anyway,” Oliver said, “we’ll have a small window to intercept both the message and the shipment.”

“Alright,” Diggle played along. “So, do we finally know who’s receiving the shipment?”

Felicity nodded. “We do. No name, just an alias. The Mayor.”

“Catchy.”

“Mmm. I poked around a little, and it turns out, he’s been very good at staying off the official radar, but thanks to Roy, we know that he’s what they call an up-and-coming star of the criminal underworld. No one actually knows what he looks like, but…” She slowly turned to Digg.

He sighed. “They do know he’s black.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” he said, “so I’ll go in, pose as The Mayor to make the trade.”

“Meanwhile,” Oliver didn’t miss a beat, “Sara will intercept the real Mayor on his way to the meet so you’re in the clear. Roy can be your back-up.”

Sara cocked her head. “You wanna send Roy on the more dangerous of the two?”

“On this one solitary occasion, it’s for the best,” Oliver said, and looked physically pained doing it. “We can’t sneak him into the party, and… I haven’t taught him to use the zip-line yet.”

Sara muffled a snort.

“Even with Roy, we’re undermanned for this,” Diggle commented. “A guy like The Mayor isn’t going to go anywhere without his muscle. It’s not just more men for Sara and Roy to take down, it’s also men I’d need to sell it.”

That was a very important snag they’d hit.

“I know someone who could help with that,” Sara offered the solution.

Predictably, Oliver only turned to her and said, “No.”

“Ollie – ”

“We’re not bringing Nyssa into this.”

“She has an army of men – ” Sara stepped up to him, unrelenting – “and on her orders, we can have as many as we like here for the mission. Not just for Digg, but to help me and Roy, too. And if I asked,” she added, rubbing her lips, “she’d do it for me.”

Oliver stayed quiet for a while, wheels turning in silence, before he slipped her a sideways look; ever-so-slightly, Felicity nodded.

“Okay,” he agreed, “call Nyssa. Tell her, that if she can spare a dozen men for a night… I’ll owe her one.”

Sara smiled slowly. “I’ll make it happen.”
As she moved away, phone already hand in hand to make the call, Felicity turned to Oliver. “I’m proud of you,” she told him. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

“Mm,” he said, lips pressed tightly together. “But I guess, that leaves us – ” his hand fell to her shoulder – “to take on Isabel.”

“The two of us.” She squeezed his fingers. “Just like old times.”

“She really likes shrimp cocktail, doesn’t she?”

“Nice party.”

“It’s not all – oh, shrimp cocktail!”

“Focus, please.”

“Hey, I put a lot of time and effort into this mission. This is my just reward.”

She just knew he was smiling on the other end.

“Still, keep your eyes open. It’s just the two of us here.”

Felicity held back a sigh. “It’s kind of nice though, isn’t it?” she went for bright and peppy. “You and me, undercover, saving the day…just like when you and Digg were fighting.”

“Good times.”

He could play along with the joke all he liked, she knew he still didn’t like the team splitting up any more than Digg himself did. “Look,” she said quietly, “it’s going to be okay. Digg and Sara – and Roy, and Nyssa’s little squad – are in place, and they’ve got it. And you and I – we can do this recon on our own.”

“I know,” he said, just as quietly, “but Isabel is dangerous, and I’m your only back-up. So just…be careful.”

“You know,” she said around a mouthful, “you really don’t have to worry – crap, here she comes, hold on.”

Isabel slithered up to her, her black dress dragging on the floor, and if she believed in such things, Felicity would probably call her an omen.

“Enjoying the party, Ms. Smoak?”

“Yes, definitely,” Felicity said, nodding for emphasis. “Great finger food.”

Isabel’s eyebrow went up but she said nothing. There was a little something in her eyes Felicity couldn’t quite put her finger on, but before she could worry about it, Isabel flagged a passing waiter
and a flute of champagne made its way into her hand.

Isabel raised her own. “To the future,” she said simply.

“To the future,” Felicity agreed, and waited for Isabel to sip her drink first.

Lightly licking her lips, Isabel shifted, coming to stand at her side, shoulder to shoulder; Felicity tried not to stiffen.

“I assume everything is ready on your end?”

“Yes,” Felicity confirmed. “I’ve got the presentation right here.” She drummed her fingers against her clutch.

Isabel gave a single nod. “Good.” Then – “I am counting on you, Ms. Smoak.”

“I think you can probably get away with calling me Felicity at this point.”

“Felicity it is,” Isabel agreed – and Felicity almost regretted extending the offer at hearing her name come out of the devil’s mouth. “I am counting on you, Felicity.”

“I know.” Felicity nodded. “I’ll live up to expectations, don’t worry.”

Isabel turned to glance at her, a little smile at the corner of her mouth. “I’m glad,” she said. “And what about your expectations?”

“I’m sorry – what?”

“Well, tonight is about the future.” Isabel held up her glass, gesturing to the room around them. “So I’m wondering about what expectations you have for your own future? Have you given it any more thought?”

“You mean, like…if I wanted to start my own company or something?”

“Yes.” Isabel nodded. “I’ve made you this proposal before, Felicity. When I asked you to stay at Queen Consolidated.”

“I remember.”

“So?” Isabel prompted. “Have you thought about it yet?”

“Maybe,” Felicity hedged.

“You’ve been a great asset to this company,” Isabel said, “and you’ve impressed me. Tonight proves it.”

“Thanks...”

“But it’s just the start,” she went on. “From this point on, you get to decide what your future holds. I am still willing to support you, Felicity, if you decide that what you want is to be a real woman of business. I can give you the funds you’d need for it. As a reward – ” her mouth curved at the corner – “for your loyalty.”

“That’s, um...” Felicity cleared her throat. “It’s really generous. Thank you.” When Isabel raised an expectant eyebrow, she quickly added, “And I’ll think about it.”
Isabel’s mouth pulled at the corner. “See that you do.”

The waiter came by again, and Isabel passed him her still half-full glass, picking up her dress as she began to walk away.

“Wait,” Felicity called after her. “Aren’t you staying for the presentation?”

Looking over her shoulder, Isabel said, “I have faith in you. Besides,” she added, already moving again, “there’s another matter I must attend to.”

She disappeared into the crowd, and Felicity immediately ducked behind the nearest plant, glass up to cover her mouth. “You heard all of that, right?” she asked urgently. “She’s up to something.”

“It doesn’t have to mean anything,” Oliver cautioned. “It could just be about business.”

“Yeah, the shady kind. I mean, a ‘matter she must attend to’, come on.”

He took a moment to answer. “I don’t know, Felicity…”

“Okay, are you forgetting how well I know this woman by now?” Felicity said. “This isn’t just some penthouse party about dazzling everyone in town, it’s a cover for whatever she’s planning now – and I’m here to distract everyone while she does it, so you know, props for efficiency.”

He said nothing for a while.

“I’m right about this,” Felicity insisted.

“Okay,” Oliver finally spoke. “I trust you.”

Felicity smiled into her glass. “Good, so now I have to follow her.”

“Wait, no – ”

“This is clearly time-sensitive, I can’t just wait around.”

“I’ll drop in,” Oliver said, “see what she’s up to.”

“Ol - ”

“And you’ve got your presentation.”

Felicity bit her lip, looking around – and there, in the crowd, was her everlasting salvation: Cheryl. She was already moving towards her as she said, “I’ll just pawn it off to Cheryl.”

“Felicity…”

“It’s fine, I’ll just tell her I can’t do it and she’ll have to do it for me or something – she’s worked with me on this, she knows what it’s about. Plus, my trojan will upload automatically, so…”

“Just let me handle Isabel.”

She paused in her steps. “We’re a team, right?” she asked softly. “We have to do this together.”


“South side?”
“Two minutes.”

Felicity smiled, switching the comm off with a tap of her finger. Coming in meant zip-lining which meant partial hearing loss on her end – which she had learned the hard way.

She dropped the presentation off to a bewildered Cheryl, stringing together a half-coherent excuse about how she couldn’t handle this and ‘do it for me, Cheryl, please’. She gave it thirty seconds on the clock before she took off, leaving Cheryl behind to clutch the drive in her hand.

Weaving her way through the crowd, she tried to catch a glimpse of Isabel; she was obviously long gone.

“Okay, Smoak,” she mumbled to herself, “if you were a supervillain up to no good, where would you go?”

Making a judgement call, she headed for the bedroom. People had a tendency to hide their shadiest deals in their bedrooms – and was it weird that she not only knew where Isabel Rochev’s bedroom was, but also the exact layout of it?

Out of the main salon, with the noise of the party behind her, her heels clicked loudly in the increasing silence. She bent to take them off, holding them up in one hand by the straps; behind her, Cheryl’s voice came on over the speakers. She was already too far away to discern the words.

Felicity tiptoed down the hallway, pressing back against a wall to look around the corner; the bedroom door was ajar, the faint glow of a monitor light coming from within.

_Bingo._

She raised her hand to her ear again.

And the telltale sound of a gun being cocked sounded off behind her.

“I’m sorry, Felicity,” Isabel said. “But you made the wrong decision.”

The concrete of the roof was cold, biting into her bare feet.

How many floors up was this anyway? Fifty?

Felicity walked, fingers twisting around her heels and her clutch, with the ever-present feeling of the barrel of Isabel’s gun just behind her.

“You’ve got this all wrong,” she tried lying, willing her voice not to shake. “I, um, I panicked with the presentation and –”

“Save it.”
She gulped, stopping when Isabel did at her back; they were way too close to the edge for comfort.

“So, this is how it’s going to go,” Isabel spoke; Felicity dared glance over her shoulder, and saw nothing but calculated coldness staring back at her. “In about five minutes, an SC dispatcher is going to get a 911 call that an employee of mine threw herself from the roof of my penthouse, tragically ending her own life.”

Felicity stared at her. “Are you – you’re completely insane.”

“And you, unfortunately, snapped.” Isabel smirked. “High-pressure job, too much responsibility for someone so inexperienced…people will understand.”

“How – how can you do this to people?” Felicity let out. “With Oliver, and the others before and now – how despicable do you have to be to use – ”

“I’m just playing the market,” Isabel said, like it was the simplest thing. “All I’m doing is selling what people are buying.”

“Yeah, well, they’re not going to buy this! People know me, they know I’m not – ”

Isabel cocked her head. “Didn’t you just run out of doing a high-profile presentation because you…panicked?”

Felicity stilled.

“Yeah, well – ” She swallowed, raising a hand to her head under the guise of running her shaking fingers through her hair. If she could just brush them against –

Isabel’s hand caught her wrist. “I don’t think so.”

Her fingers brushed her ear and Felicity shuddered, gulping when the comm was pulled from her.

A moment later, it was being crushed under a heel.

And the gun was pointed straight at her chest.

“You think I don’t know who you work with?” Isabel sneered, cocking her head. “Green Arrow? I’ve known since the day he saved Oliver. I’d hoped, though,” she added, a sort of wistfulness to it, “that you would do the smart thing, and choose me. You do have such potential.”

And she did have such a stone-cold gaping hole where her heart should be.

“I gave you the chance, Felicity, to reconsider, but…you’ve made your choice. Walk,” she ordered.

“No – ” Felicity shook her head – “no, I’m not going towhatever the hell it is you want me to – and you can’t shoot me, because – because then people will never buy it as a suicide, so – ”

“True,” Isabel allowed, “but I think you will jump all on your own. Because – you’re not Green Arrow’s only partner, are you? No, there’s also Queen’s bodyguard – Mr. Diggle, is it? And that woman, the one they call The Canary?”

No…

“I’m sure there’s others, too. And at least some of them are going to The Glades right now, to break up an arms exchange.”
No, no, no, no – “How do you –”

Isabel grinned. “The Mayor and I have an understanding. I put him in contact with the kind of people who can get him what he wants, build his little empire – and in return, he does what I want. Like the chance to test his new toys on the people I tell him to first.”

Check and mate.

“And I suppose,” Felicity said, even as her throat started closing up, “that if I just…jump, right now, you’ll…tell him to back off?”

The nod she received in response might as well have been the sword falling down on her neck.

The weirdest thing went through her head, that she was the Ned Stark of this scenario, playing the game of thrones and losing. You win or you die. And right now, the crown sat solidly on Isabel Rochev’s head.
I did it! It's the final chapter!
It's been like, way over 3 years, we have all lost faith along the way and I have cried
tears of blood, but it is done! I want to thank everyone who's read, left kudos and
commented on this story. It's the longest, most elaborate story that I have ever written or
will ever write, and though it hasn't been unlike pulling teeth at times, I've really enjoyed
it, and I hope you guys have, too. And I hope that you will enjoy this last chapter that
caps it all off too (and posting it now, I realize just how far removed from canon it is).

I've gotta thank Fawkes most especially throughout all this, for cheering me on,
endlessly talking to me about the story and the characters, and creating so many
wonderful things to go along with this verse. Like this amazing playlist, now fully
updated, and a whole bunch of pinterest boards to complement the characters and the
story. Sidenote: we've also got a sequel to this fic that we're working on, that focuses
mostly of Sara and Nyssa, so keep an eye out for that, too.

That all said, thank you guys again for sticking with this monster of a story, and I hope
this ending doesn't disappoint.

It's been fun, y'all.

The noise of the street below sounded muffled from this high up, almost like reaching her up from
underwater. Felicity wondered if her brain would even have the time to process the cars and the
sirens and the people getting louder as she fell.

That was a weird thing to think about.

“Okay,” she said, “okay….”

She dropped her things, hands up, and slowly moved backwards. There was the gun in front of her
and the ledge behind her – only a few steps to it, just a few before she was free-falling to her death.

And where the hell was Oliver?

Stall, stall, stall – “How do I know you’ll really let them go?”

“I’m a woman of my word,” Isabel said.

“You’re really not.”

It earned her a smirk. “You know me so well.”

“Yeah,” Felicity muttered, “thought I did.”

One step back, slow as she could, another – she could feel the wind at her back –

Isabel went with her – but she wasn’t rushing her, wasn’t telling her to get on with it, like she was
savoring the moment. Or maybe she was trying to buy time, too.

“You don’t just want me,” she realized. “You know who I’m here with, you want – ”

“Young away from her!”

_She could see him clearly over Isabel’s shoulder, bow drawn. She only caught a glimpse of the grin on Isabel’s face before she charged her, pushing her closer to the edge, holding her out over it by a fistful of her dress; the scream died in her throat._

Isabel pointed the gun at Oliver. “Try anything and I let her fall.”

Oliver didn’t move, didn’t make a sound, as Felicity clawed at Isabel’s arm. Oh God, she was going to die –

“Put down your bow,” Isabel demanded. “And take off your hood.”

As incentive, she gave Felicity a shake, dangling her like a puppet. She did scream this time, digging her toes in the concrete.

“Okay!” Oliver yelled, raising his arms in surrender. “Okay…”

He crouched slowly, laying his bow on the ground.

_No, Felicity tried to say, no, not for me._

But he rose, palms still up, one hand going to his hood.

She couldn’t let him do it. “Kill me, don’t kill me, doesn’t matter,” she yelled, too, scratching at Isabel’s skin, “you’ll never get what you want!”

The thing was, she did know her. Maybe not the tricks up her sleeve or her connections, but at the core of Isabel Rochev was one, deep-seeded, burning desire.

“Because what – what you want is recognition, isn’t it? You want to hear everyone say that you are the best! That you are the only one worthy of Robert Queen’s legacy!”

Isabel’s head whipped around, eyes blazing. If she could, she’d probably be spitting fire.

“But that’s never going to happen,” Felicity said, “because we got you. We know where you’re keeping Phobos,” she lied, “we know everything, and soon everyone else will, too! And all they’ll ever say about you – ” *come on, Oliver* – “is that you are a fraud, and a criminal!”

Another split-second, and she would’ve been thrown off that roof like a ragdoll, plans and machinations be damned.
But Oliver was there, too quick for her to process, yanking on her dress and Isabel’s arm without any sort of strategy or finesse, pulling and pushing them back. Felicity flew with the momentum, landing on the ground with a resounding thud.

At least she wasn’t dead.

She rolled over to her back with a groan. Oliver and Isabel were fighting, hand-to-hand, hitting and striking at each other, filling the night with the sounds of it – except Isabel still had her gun.

It went off, and Oliver stumbled back; Felicity screamed again.

He met her eyes, unsteady on his feet, clutching his arm. She almost sighed in relief before Isabel was there again, kicking at the back of Oliver’s knee to force him down, and pointing the gun right at his head.

Felicity didn’t even think, she just moved, scrambling to get to the bow. She picked it up, drawing back on the string just like she had seen Oliver do a thousand times, and pointed the arrow straight ahead.

“Let him go!”

The bow was too big, and her hands were shaking, and her heart was beating out of her chest – and Isabel only stared at her coldly, gun still at Oliver’s temple.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “If you had it in you to kill me, you would’ve done it a long time ago.”

Oliver grunted. Felicity wanted so badly to look to him, to have him show her what to do – but she couldn’t keep her eye off Isabel for a second.

The moment she did, they were both dead.

Felicity tightened her hold, fingers twitching around the shaft. Even if she couldn’t look at him, she could still see Oliver’s head ever-so-slightly shaking from side to side. Which was just as well, because she’d never shot an arrow in her life – and really, how was it that she was literally dating an archer and still hadn’t gotten a single lesson out of it? – and if she did try it now, she’d probably miss and get them killed anyway, so –

“Put it down, Felicity,” Isabel said.

“You first,” Felicity retorted, even as she raised the bow higher. Her hands were still shaking.

For a moment, Isabel just stared at her with those big, brown, evil eyes of hers, and Felicity knew it really was just ‘kill or be killed’ at this point. No door number two this time.

Sometimes, you just had to put an end to your enemies, right?

Isabel’s finger moved against the trigger.

Felicity stopped breathing. *Let it go,* she thought, *just do it, just let it fly* –

And just like that, an arrow was sticking out of Isabel’s chest.

Frozen, Felicity could only watch – Isabel swaying under the impact, her body going slack; the gun dropping from her fingers and her following it to ground; Oliver’s head snapping around to watch, too. Blood was flowing down her shirt, dripping from the tip of the arrow –
Wait –

Felicity looked frantically to her hands. She hadn’t moved an inch, Oliver’s arrow still nocked clumsily on the drawstring.

On the opposite rooftop, Nyssa lowered her bow.

“What the hell did you do? I thought we had a deal.”

Oliver held back a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose – then flinched when the movement pulled at his injury. Isabel hadn’t gotten a clean shot during their fight so it was merely a flesh wound, the bullet having just scraped his arm and taken a good chunk of his skin with it. He would be feeling the sting of it for days, though.

“I’m sorry, Laurel,” he said, his grip on the phone tightening. She had done so much for them – for him, even if she didn’t know it –, prepared, and forgave, and pulled strings, and instead of at least handing her the case of the century to prosecute, all he’d left her with was a dead CEO on a rooftop.

She was quiet for a moment. “What happened?”

“It’s – ” he rubbed his forehead – “complicated. We underestimated her, things…didn’t go according to plan.”

“Are you back to killing people again?”

He did sigh now. “It wasn’t me, Laurel,” he said quietly, looking over his shoulder – to where Sara was cleaning the gash on Diggle’s cheek. “And it wasn’t my call.”

Laurel fell silent again, for a long time; Oliver didn’t speak either, letting it sink in.

“Sara?”

“Yeah.”

He heard her swallow. “Okay.”

“It was a last resort. The only back-up plan we had left. It saved us all.”

He hated to say it, hated to admit that if not for Sara – for Nyssa, for the damned League of Assassins, being there to save his team from The Mayor’s ambush, to take out Isabel – they would all be dead.

Felicity would be.

His eyes immediately strayed to her, where she sat at her computers, pouring over the data coming in from the worm she had set loose on Isabel’s home network. They could still find Phobos. For what that was worth.
Laurel was talking again. “Is there any chance you’ll find where she was keeping the drug?”

“We might.”

“That’s good,” she said. “At least…at least everyone will know the truth about what happened to Oliver.”

Despite himself, Oliver smiled. “You’re a good friend, Laurel,” he told her. “And a good sister.”

“Yeah,” she agreed quietly, and he thought she might be smiling, too.

“You should talk to her,” he said. “Tell her everything. It will mean a lot to her to know how much you love her.”

“Yeah,” Laurel said again, sighing softly. “Alright, um…do whatever else you can, get some rest. I’ll talk to you soon. Goodnight, uh…Green Arrow.”

He smiled wider. “Goodnight, Laurel.”

Dropping the phone, he leaned back against the med table, shrugging out of his vest even as his eyes wandered around the room.

Diggle was pressing an ice pack to his head, talking to Nyssa. They all probably owed her more than one now.

Sara was plucking one of her sonic devices out of Roy’s hand – and what a better time than their brilliant plan going completely sideways to let him know who he was actually working with, right? All in all, Oliver thought he was handling it pretty well.

In the end, his gaze inevitably settled on Felicity again. She was watching him now, and a moment later, she was out of her chair and making her way to him.

She was tired, make-up smudged and hair sticking out from the tidy bun she’d pinned it up in, but still, she gave him a smile.

“What’d Laurel say?” she asked quietly, turning over and rearranging the med supplies he’d laid out on the table.

“She’s not exactly happy that all of this has been for nothing,” Oliver said, “but…she’s still on our side, at least.”

If he’d blinked, he would have missed her little sigh of relief.

“I gotta say, I was a little worried,” she admitted, uncapping the peroxide, “that, you know, she’d think you’d screwed her over and then it’s back to the witch hunt.”

He’d worried about it, too. But Laurel trusted him now – both sides of him.

Felicity’s fingers were hovering over his arm, just barely skimming the wound, and her forehead creased in a frown.

“Hey,” he said softly, making her look up. He shook his head. “It’s nothing.”

Her eyes softened, and he reached up to wipe away the little mascara stain on her cheek with the pad of his thumb. But he lingered, running his fingers over her face, tracing the lines of it, just to feel her under his hand. So beautiful and alive.
“Could’ve been something,” she muttered, even as she leaned into his touch.

“Doing what we do, it could always be something.” And it was hardest to accept when it came to her.

Felicity closed her eyes for a moment, nodding. Then, she pulled back with a deep breath, to start stitching him up.

“You really would’ve done it, wouldn’t you?” she asked quietly as she worked. “Revealed yourself to Isabel?”

Yes, was the simple answer. “She was going to kill you.”

“She was going to kill me anyway. The both of us, actually.”

“I had to try and buy us some time.”

It took a moment for her to speak, chewing on her lip. “I’m sorry.”

“Felicity –”

“I got cocky, you know?” she said, words coming out fast. “I was so sure I knew what she would do, and that I could get her, and…” She sighed. “It put all of us in danger, and I put you in a position where you had to make a choice between me and your secret, so…I’m sorry.”

“Felicity,” he said her name again, reaching up to still her hands with his, “if it comes down to keeping my identity a secret or keeping you safe…” He shook his head slowly. “There is no choice to make.”

It hadn’t been. It never would be. Not for his secret, his vow, his life. Not for anything.

Felicity smiled slowly, saying nothing.

He smiled, too, wrapping his fingers around hers. She wiggled them out from under his hold.

“Gonna need those,” she said, picking up the stitching again. So he just leaned in to press his lips to her forehead instead.

“I mean it, though,” he whispered that part, staying close. “Didn’t even think about it, when I saw you just…hanging there, over the edge. Scared the life out of me.”

She tipped her head up for just a moment, to kiss the corner of his mouth. “I didn’t think about it either,” she said. “When I picked up your bow. I saw her point the gun at you, and I just…went for it.”

After a beat, she added, “I think I would’ve done it. I’m pretty sure. If Nyssa hadn’t shot first, I would’ve killed her.”

Oliver closed his eyes. “I never want you have to do something like that.”

“I wouldn’t even have felt bad about it,” Felicity said. “I don’t feel bad about it now.”

He sighed, leaning away. “This wasn’t how things were supposed to go.”

“I know,” she agreed quietly. “Oliver, I know you wanted to do this another way, your way, and we couldn’t but…it doesn’t mean we failed.”
“I still can’t shake the feeling that we didn’t do it right.”

“We did the best we could,” she said. “And maybe it wasn’t perfect but honestly – ” she gave a little laugh – “it was probably never going to be perfect. This is the first time we’ve tried doing it this way, Oliver, and now that it’s all done, I…”

She shook her head. “I look back on it, and I have no idea how we ever thought we’d get it right on the first try.”

He loved her for this, for always seeing the good in things. For helping him see it.

“But we’re alive and Isabel can’t hurt anyone anymore,” she went on to say exactly what he knew she would, nodding. “That’s a win. And we’ll get it just right next time.”

He couldn’t help but smile the faintest bit. “Next time?”

She shrugged, throwing a glance over her shoulder. “This whole thing with Isabel started when we found out that Elijah Haze was killed by Deadshot.” She looked back to him. “Right or not, you got closure with the person who hurt you the most. Maybe now it’s time we help Digg get it with the person who killed his brother.”

Maybe it was.

Oliver looked over to where John was, frowning at something Roy was telling him. The particular look of contained disgust on his face probably meant that Roy was dishing out costume ideas. He had been nagging him about getting his own costume for days now.

“Yeah,” Oliver said. “That’s exactly what we should do.”

Felicity gave him a little grin. “Mhmm. And you know, I like to think,” she added, voice lighter, “that when I get a nemesis of my own, you guys will help me beat her, too.”

“Her?”

“Of course.”

Oliver leaned in to kiss her, putting his good arm around her waist.

“You’re making it really hard for me to tend to your big battle wound,” she muttered against his mouth.

He loved her for this, too, the smallest things, like a laugh and a joke.

“Felicity?”

“Hmm?”

“You herd all of my goats.”

She giggled, muffling a snort, light in her eyes when she pulled back. He saw the exact moment she caught on to what he was really saying.

“Yeah,” she nearly whispered it, “you’re kinda the love of my life, too.”

He never thought he’d have the privilege of hearing something like that. Especially not from someone like her.
So he kissed her again, long and slow.

“Guys!”

It was Sara’s voice that finally made him pull away. Felicity turned to her, too, where she was at the computers, victory in her eyes even as she cradled her injured hand to her chest.

“The worm found payments for a storage box in West Starling,” she said, “and equipment for storing bio-hazardous materials. It’s Phobos.”

“We got it?” Felicity let out.

Sara grinned. “We got it.”

It was nearly two in the morning by the time Oliver finally made it to the mansion.

His mother and sister were still awake, huddled together on the couch. The moment she saw him in the doorway, Thea jumped up, throwing away the laptop she’d been balancing on her knees.

“Ollie!” She ran to hug him, and his arms came around her automatically; he tried to hide his wince when it pulled on his stitches.

His mother wasn’t far behind, rising to her feet.

“Where were you?” Thea asked, pulling away.

*With my team,* he wanted to say, proudly, and bit his tongue against it. But it didn’t stop him from smiling. “I was with Felicity when I heard,” he said, half-a-lie and half-a-truth. *Admit what you can’t deny, deny what you can’t admit.* “Roy called to say it was all over.”

He looked past Thea to his mother; she closed her eyes, smiling to herself.

“It’s all over everything,” Thea said. “They say she was killed with an arrow, but that it wasn’t green, so it couldn’t have been…”

“Yeah.” Oliver nodded. “The way I understand it is, it wasn’t him that killed her but one of his… *associates.*” Which was probably the best way he had to put it.

They gave no comment on that, and Oliver thought they probably wouldn’t have cared if it had been Green Arrow. Especially not his mother.

“It’s truly over?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “She’s gone. And – ” he couldn’t help but smile again – “they found where she was keeping the drug. Green Arrow turned it over to the DA’s office. We can prove what she did to me.”

Thea let out a cry of victory, hugging him again.
His mother’s hand went to her heart. “Oh, sweetheart,” she said softly.

He smoothed down Thea’s hair, kissing her forehead, and went to his mother. When Sara had said they’d finally gotten it, his first thought hadn’t been of Queen Consolidated, or of everyone seeing Isabel for what she had really been like, or even of his reputation being restored; it had been of his mother, holding him after he’d been drugged, blaming herself for not protecting him.

He put his arms around her, holding tightly. “I love you, Mom,” he whispered.

“And I you,” she said, stroking his hair just like when he was a boy.

“So what happens now?” he heard Thea ask.

With one arm around his mother’s shoulders still, Oliver shrugged. “I think we wait for the phone to ring.”

He bit back a smirk when the landline blared loudly through the quiet mansion.

Ned Foster talked his ear off for twenty minutes, about emergency meetings and reinstatements and how much they would need to pour into the PR Department’s Christmas bonuses this year.

In the end, he asked, point-blank, “Did you do this?”

“Are you accusing me of murder, Ned?”

“I’m just saying.” The words were weighed carefully. “Moira seemed to know something like this was coming.”

Oliver looked over to her, back on the couch, legs tucked under her as she smiled indulgently at whatever Thea was saying, stroking her hair.

“She’s got great intuition,” he said. “Isabel Rochev was a criminal. It was always going to catch up with her, one way or the other. My mother knew that.”

There was a moment of silence before Ned chuckled. “You’re a good son, Oliver,” he said. “Worthy of Robert’s legacy.”

Oliver swallowed.

“I look forward to proving it.”

The call ended after that, with promises that Ned and the rest of the board would see him retake control in only a few hours.

He probably needed to sleep but he made his way to the couch instead, dropping on Thea’s other side. She raised her eyebrows at him.

He grinned. “You’re looking at the new CEO of Queen Consolidated.”

“Damn straight!” she declared, fist-pumping. Their mother chuckled.

Her eyes softened as they went to him. “Your father would be proud of you, Oliver.”

He shook his head. “You did this, Mom,” he said quietly. “You told them to have faith in me.”

“Felicity’s support in the wake of this,” she said, “had a great deal to do with it, too, I’m sure.”
“And one of Green Arrow’s buddies took out Isabel,” Thea mused, cocking her head at him. “What did you do again, Ollie?”

When she put it like that, he really wasn’t sure. But he shrugged and said, “A good CEO knows when to delegate to more capable hands.”

Even Isabel had granted him that, once. He thought of her again, of her face then, the coldness in her eyes; of them being alight with victory later, when she had beaten him; of them showing nothing at all when they only stared sightlessly at the stars above.

Queen Consolidated was his father’s legacy.

But so was she.

And Oliver began to wonder what his would be.

“I love you, Sara.”

“I love you, too, Laurel.”

Sara hung up, staring at the screen even after Laurel’s name had disappeared from it. She sat cross-legged on the bed, picking at the threads sticking out of the duvet. There’d been something a little off in Laurel’s voice, like she wanted to say something and stopped herself at the last moment, but it was what she did say that Sara replayed over and over in her mind.

That she knew it was The Canary who had ultimately made the call on Isabel, that Green Arrow had told her as much; that she didn’t mind. That it was okay.

*It’s okay,* Laurel had said, and some deep, dark crack in Sara’s heart mended.

“I know that look,” Nyssa’s voice reached her. “You are thinking about your family.”

A tear fell and Sara hastily wiped it away, turning to Nyssa with a small smile. They had traded in their luxury suite for one of Nyssa’s safe houses in Starling, and honestly, Sara kind of preferred it that way.

“Laurel called me,” she said, dangling the phone in her hand.

Nyssa sat beside her. “Is something the matter?”

“No,” Sara shook her head, shrugging. “That’s just it. Everything’s alright. It’s…” She laughed under her breath. “I’m not used to it.”

“Does she know who you truly are?”
“No,” Sara said, “but that’s okay. It’s better that way. But now I know, that if she did – ” she smiled – “maybe she wouldn’t mind.”

“She would not.” Nyssa smiled in kind. “I know very well the depth of a sister’s love. Yours would accept you for everything you are, too.”

Sara nodded, biting her lip. “Been to Gotham recently?”

“I have not,” Nyssa said, “but I intend to. My father won’t expect me back at Nanda Parbat for a while still. I thought I could use the time to…visit Gotham.” She smirked faintly. “See if it’s changed.”

Sara hummed, taking Nyssa’s hand in hers and squeezing gently. “Want some company?”

It earned her a pair of raised eyebrows.

“Isabel’s gone.” She shrugged. “The battle’s done. The others won’t need me around here as much for a while. Plus,” she added, using her free hand to tuck a strand of Nyssa’s hair behind her ear, “I don’t want to say goodbye to you again just yet. So, what do you say?”

Nyssa smiled again, leaning into her touch. “I will always want to have you with me, my beloved.”

“I’ve missed hearing you call me that,” Sara said, and leaned in to catch Nyssa’s lips in a deep kiss.

“Can’t sleep either?” Felicity asked when he turned up at her door - which she answered wrapped in an old checkered blanket, smiling softly.

Oliver smiled in kind. “Nope.”

She pulled him in by the lapels of his jacket, nudging the door closed with her foot, and wrapped them both in the warmth of the blanket when she put her arms around his neck.

“Got a call earlier.”

He bumped her nose with his. “Me, too.”

“Reynolds,” she was more muttering than saying, eyes closed, “actually offered me condolences for Isabel’s passing.” She snorted a little. “That was funny.”

Oliver’s mouth twitched.

“Anyway, he kept…talking…and talking…and talking…” She swayed a little with it and he swayed with her, hands on her hips, forehead pressed to hers. “And then I said – ” She perked up a little, grinning lazily up at him. “That I fully, fully …support Mr. Queen being reinstated as CEO.”

He felt a grin coming onto his own lips. “So…you were right.”
“I’m always right.”

“Yeah, but – ” He chuckled under his breath. “I mean, about the company. I did get it back.”

“Yeah, you did,” she said with a sudden spark, arms shooting up in enthusiasm and stretching the blanket behind her like a victory flag. “The kingdom is ours, baby!”

He quirked an eyebrow. And three, two, one…

“Oh my God, not ours ours! I mean yours – obviously yours!”

Oliver pressed his lips together. “Felicity…”

“I don’t think of it as mine – I mean, I do kinda, but like in a I’m-loyal-to-it way, or a it’s-my-alma-mater way, like I think of MIT, not – and I’m not saying I want it to be mine, you know, the way married couples say, ‘what’s yours is mine and mine is’ – this isn’t like a hint or anything!”

“Felicity,” he said again, lowering her arms back to her sides, “it’s fine.”

She closed her eyes with a sigh, burying her face in his shirt. He kissed the top of her head.

“I don’t mind if you think of it as yours,” he said quietly. “In any way.”

She said nothing in return, but he felt her smile against his chest. They stayed in the silence that way for a while, and Oliver thought he could spend forever just like this, until she raised her head to ask if he wanted coffee.

“Please,” he said, smiling at her retreating back and went to make himself comfortable on the couch, draping his jacket over the back of it and watching dawn break.

Felicity returned just as he was testing the range of motion on his arm and grimacing.

“It’s gonna affect your aim for a while, isn’t it?” she asked softly.

“Mm, yeah,” he said, mouthing a, ‘thank you,’ as he took the mug she was offering him. She curled her fingers around hers, tucking her feet under her as she sat.

“But I don’t need my bow to fight,” he added. “It’s okay.”

She nodded, sighing softly as she sipped on the coffee. “What did your mom and Thea say?”

“They’re happy it’s over.” He shrugged. “And they’re happy for me.”

“They’re happy it’s over.” He shrugged. “And they’re happy for me.”

“So why aren’t you with them, you know, celebrating?”

“Honestly,” he said, “I’d much rather celebrate with you.” She smiled around the rim of her mug, and Oliver sighed, letting his head loll against the back of the couch. His eyelids began to droop when Felicity started running her fingers through his hair. “And I’d rather be here than at the mansion.”

Her fingers froze for a split-second before starting up again. “Like, just for tonight, or…”

“Mm, all the time.”

“We…could arrange that.”
He slowly opened his eyes. She shrugged.

“If you want,” she said. “I’ve got a nice, big bed and everything. Plus, it would be great for hero emergencies if…you know.”

There was a sort of bubbly, near-ecstatic feeling rising in his chest. “Felicity, are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?” he echoed. Just to make sure.

“I’ve got enough space for the both of us. And I like having you here,” she added softly. “All the time. So, if you want, you can come…live here with me.” She blew out a breath. “What do you say?”

He said nothing at all, just grinned and leaned over to kiss her.

Diggle stood by the glass doors, taking his time unwrapping the bitesize chocolates he’d snagged from the receptionist’s desk, and watching Felicity buzz around the office like an exceptionally busy bee.

She arranged and rearranged the folders on the desk, moved the paperweights around to form a circle then a square, sorted the letter openers by size then by color.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” he commented, biting into his snack. “You know they’ve already reinstated him. We’re in his old office. The meeting’s just a formality.”

“Oh, I know,” she said. “It’s just that, I’m on like, my tenth espresso, so…” She shook her hands through the air, as if to demonstrate just how wired on caffeine she was. “I know we’re one hundred percent good on the QC front –” she was back to the letter openers – “so I’m not worried about that at all – if I was going to be worried about something, it’s that alert we got this morning about that one crate of Phobos that’s unaccounted for in Isabel’s stash, and which probably got stolen by the gang working the docks – or the one working CNRI – or the one working the warehouse district –”

“We’ll handle that,” Diggle said.

“I know,” she said. “Which is why I said if I was going to worry about something – which I am not.” She backed away from the letter openers, admired her handiwork for a moment, then took it all apart again. “Also, Oliver is moving in with me.”

Diggle choked on the chocolate he’d been trying to swallow.

Felicity was looking at him over her shoulder, biting her lip. “Is that okay?”
“You don’t need my permission to move in with your boyfriend, Felicity.”

“I know that.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s just that, well, you weren’t always on board with the two of us, and I know you said you changed your mind, but this is kind of a big step, you know, big flashing ‘Commitment!’ neon sign and all, so if there are any big-brother, overprotective tendencies coming up again that you’d like to talk through – ”

“I’m getting you a pound of decaf for Hanukkah,” he muttered. “Look, Felicity…” He shook his head, chuckling. “I’m happy for the two of you. And I want you to be happy, so if you guys really want to take this next step, I’ve got nothing to worry about. Besides…” He popped the last piece of chocolate into his mouth. “It’ll save me an hour on my commute.”

Felicity grinned – then wider still when her eyes slipped past him.

Oliver was standing behind the glass, just watching the two of them, with what Diggle thought might be both affection and pride.

“Mr. Queen,” he greeted grandly, wiping his hands. “How did your meeting go, sir?”

Oliver broke out into a grin, too, coming through the door and delivering a strong clap to his shoulder. “I’m CEO, Digg, can’t complain.”

“Damn right!” Felicity exclaimed, and raised her fist so Oliver could bump it in passing. He did, then followed it by pressing a firm kiss to her lips. Diggle rolled his eyes.

It was nice seeing them like this, though. Happy and together, no burdens or villains to hold them back anymore. He wished Deadshot was gone so he could finally have the same with Carly, too.

Shaking that thought away, he stepped in fully just as Oliver was off circling the desk. He dragged his fingers along the glass, almost reverently, before taking a seat in the chair – his chair. Everything was perfectly still and quiet for a moment, as he took a deep breath – then released it loudly, settling back and grinning.

Diggle was sure Felicity wanted to clap.

“Oh, before I forget,” she said, click-clacking to the bag she’d left on the sofa and returning with a book in her hands. “Just a little ‘welcome back’ present.” She offered it to Oliver. “Didn’t have time to wrap it though, sorry.”

Oliver stared at the cover for a moment, then laughed outright. “Business Plans For Dummies.”

“Nice callback,” Diggle said.

“It was finally in stock.” Felicity shrugged. “Not that you really need it anymore,” she added warmly.

“No,” Oliver agreed quietly, “I suppose not.”

They spent the next three minutes just gazing and smiling at each other. It was all very sweet.

“So, what now?” Diggle asked, looking around. “Business as usual?”

“Almost,” Oliver said, putting the book away in the top drawer. He sat up, elbows on the table. “John, you’re no longer my driver.”

Diggle raised his eyebrows. “Are you firing me?”
“I am,” Oliver said, “and I’m appointing you as QC’s new Head of Security.”

Diggle stilled. “Wait, man, are you serious?”

“Yes. See, my old Head of Security has *just* announced he’s retiring –”

“Because he woke up this morning and decided he needs to spend more time with his family?” Diggle deadpanned.

“Of course,” Oliver said, completely straight-faced, “and I want you to replace him.”

“Oliver, why are you doing this?” Diggle asked quietly.

With a soft sigh, Oliver leaned back in his chair, shrugging a little. “When you guys first brought me back from Lian Yu,” he said, “I put Felicity in charge of a new department to keep her close – *and* because I needed someone I trusted to have my back at QC. And after everything we’ve been through since, I’ve realized that it’s probably the one thing I’ve always been right about. I need you here just as much as I do Felicity, Digg.”

Damn, he was really bringing it.

“Besides,” Oliver added, rising up, “you can’t tell me you actually like driving me around.”

“I do not,” Diggle confirmed.

“Exactly,” Oliver concluded, coming to stand before him, hand outstretched. “So, I think it’s time I gave you the job you truly deserve. Don’t you?”

Diggle took his hand and shook it, chuckling. “Yeah.”

Oliver clapped him on the back, smiling – though not as much as Felicity. “Tell him the other thing, tell him the other thing,” she urged, practically beaming.

Diggle looked between them, raising an eyebrow.

“Right,” Oliver said, “so Felicity and I have been thinking…Isabel is gone, everyone I lost because of her is finally avenged. So, we think it’s time we got back to what started all of it.” He gave him a loaded look. “Deadshot.”

Diggle straightened. “You saying we’re gonna go after him?”

Oliver nodded firmly. “We’ll get him, John,” he promised. “You’ll get justice for what he did to Andy.”

Pretending he wasn’t getting misty-eyed, Diggle said, “Thank you.”

“We’re a team, Digg,” Felicity said softly. “We’ve got your back, too.”

“Yeah,” he agreed with a smile, pulling her into a hug. “Yeah, we are.”
“Now, *this* is what I call a team night.”

Tucked away in a little bar just off the side of Main street, with its rundown booths and dimmed lights, and the sounds of John Coltrane and Billie Holiday filling the air – it didn’t get better than this.

“Definitely,” Oliver agreed, pulling her closer with an arm around her shoulders, then whispered, for her ears only, “Though I’m not sure we’re all part of the *same* team here.”

“Nyssa’s an honorary member,” she muttered into his collar.

Wedged between her and Nyssa, Roy leaned in to mumble into her other ear, “I don’t think she likes me.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have compared her to Deadshot yesterday.”

“They’re both assassins!” he hissed.

She sighed. “Tact, Roy, you need to have some tact – ”

“I heard all of that,” Nyssa let it be known, never once taking her eyes off the stage. Roy gulped, and burrowed deeper into Felicity’s side.

“Don’t worry, Red.” Sara’s head popped around Nyssa’s other side. “I’ll protect you from her.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Roy muttered, and pulled his red hoodie tighter around himself. He was still getting used to all this, and Felicity could get that. But he was part of the team just as much as the rest of them, and so she had personally forced him to come out tonight. One last, great night out on the town before Sara and Nyssa hit the road to Gotham. They hadn’t said why they were going, and no one had asked them for details, either. But Felicity suspected that it had something to do with all that “family” business Sara had been hinting at.

Movement on stage caught her eye. “Guys, this is it, his bit’s coming up!”

All quibbles were forgotten when the spotlight moved to Diggle and he rose up for his sax solo. The crowd went wild for him and Felicity cheered him on the loudest; Sara and Nyssa swayed to the rhythm, eyes closed to savor it when he hit all the notes perfectly, while Roy awkwardly tapped his foot to the beat. Next to her, Oliver was grinning so widely, she thought his face might split from it.

The crowd demanded an encore and John delivered. When he bowed, his team clapped the loudest, and when he came down to their booth, beer in hand, they erupted in a new round of cheers.

“Thank you, thank you,” he didn’t even bother faking modesty as he settled into a chair. “It’s always nice to meet fans.”

Felicity kicked him a little under the table. He grinned.

“You are an excellent musician, Mr. Diggle,” Nyssa praised. Diggle’s eyebrows shot up, but he raised his beer at her in thanks anyway.

“Oh, sure, *him* she likes,” Roy grumbled to Felicity again. “He called her an assassin, too, you know.”
“Yeah, but –” She gave up. “Just be nice.”

“A toast,” Oliver proposed, with perfect timing, raising his glass. All followed his example.

“To all of us,” he said, “to this team. We’ve been through a lot, and I think we came out of it stronger because we had each other. And that’s all any of us can really ask for. Someone who makes us better, makes us stronger.” His eyes slipped from Diggle to her, then Roy, then Sara and Nyssa, exchanging looks of their own. He raised his glass higher. “To family.”

“To family,” they agreed.

“But mostly,” he added, “to John Diggle, the best sax player this city has ever seen.”

“To John!” they echoed loudly, and scared a nearby waitress into dropping her tray. Sara and Nyssa were immediately there to steady her, with a hand on each arm, while Digg apologized and Roy mopped up the mess, and in the midst of it all, Oliver turned to her, eyes twinkling.

He didn’t have to say anything for her to understand – that they were finally where they were always supposed to be. And this was perfect.

Her phone buzzed on the table and she reached for it, eyes skimming the alert. “Guys!”

She had their collective attention in two seconds flat. “We got a ping,” she said, “on Deadshot.”

A very different flurry of movement ensued – pay the check, get the coats, load the quivers – and Felicity leaned over one last time, giving Oliver a kiss to end their perfect night.

Duty called.

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