The Storm After the Calm

by Imagine036

Summary

"Every time things calm down, a huge storm finds a way to erupt around them, turning their lives to chaos. He can’t shake the feeling that something is about to go down that won’t end well for any of them."

Set two years after Felicity joins Team Arrow, canon compliant up to 2.07 (State v. Queen). After another close call, Oliver starts to realize his feelings for Felicity may be more than platonic. He struggles with what to do about it while they grow closer in the midst of their newest storm. He's learning things about Felicity he's never even thought about before, and he's also realizing that, even when they fall, they'll come out the other side stronger than before.

Notes

Disclaimer: If I owned Arrow, Laurel would have been dead as soon as they introduced Felicity. A little harsh, I know, but I wouldn’t allow for the possibility of ANY competition
for her.
A/N: OK, so I had to rewind the elevator scene in 1.22 about five times to watch it because it was SO funny, and in January I decided to take a quick dip into the waters of Arrow fanfiction because of it, which turned into a rather long swim. It took me a long time to finally decide exactly where I wanted this to go and trying to keep them all in character. It started as just a quick bit of Oliver’s internal monologue after the elevator scene but, well... Like with everything I seem to do, it took on a life of its own and it’s too late to really go too AU. So I decided ultimately to approach it as an after the fact analysis and continuation from there, but hopefully I did them justice. I spent some time figuring out an actual plot that worked after I’d finished this chapter so hopefully it’s believable.

Another little addition to my author rant: I started writing this before Felicity became his assistant, so at that point Thea didn’t know her. However, I liked the Thea parts I have written so far so I decided to just operate under the assumption that Thea has seen her a couple of times, but doesn’t actually know Felicity or her relationship to Oliver. So, now that that's done, I'll start posting! This is also over on ff.net

He didn’t know at the time why he did it, and it’s been a long time since he’s thought about it, what with the results of that particular day and the following ones. He just knew that in that instant he felt the absurd desire to reach out and hit the man.

“Where are you heading, sweetie?”

“Nineteenth floor.”

“That’s too bad. I’m going to thirteen.”

He could have reached out right then and there and killed him in an instant, or at least knocked him out, but instead he settled on knocking the guy’s papers out of his hand. He figured Felicity wouldn’t approve of ‘unnecessary violence.’

What kind of man talks to a woman like that anyways? Felicity is not a piece of meat to be ogled at by some pig. She is the kind of woman who deserves to be respected. She’s much more than just a pretty face. She’s intelligent, funny, and yes she lacks a conversational filter, but it’s a quirk that makes her more endearing. She doesn’t deserve to be treated the way he treated so many women before the island. Truth be told, his behaviour back then disgusts him now. To think he probably
would have said a (much smoother, less sleazy) variation of the same thing to her years ago makes him wince. He never fully realized just how abhorrent his behaviour toward women was until that very moment, hearing it coming from someone else.

He tries to tell himself that his reaction was a purely protective instinct. He respects Felicity and they did need the elevator to be empty. It meant nothing of significance that his stomach twisted in a knot of anger and defensiveness as he watched the guy look her head to toe and don a sleazy smile. He was only looking out for his friend. That’s what friends do, right? They have uncalled-for desires to murder anyone who disrespects their friends?

He’s been gone a long time, but he’s sure that isn’t really a thing nowadays. He does know he has a similar reaction whenever he catches guys eyeing Thea, so it could be a brotherly thing, but he’s not entirely convinced that’s it. With Thea, it’s a fiercely protective feeling, a need to ensure Roy knows not to hurt her, but in that elevator… It was like he needed to neutralize a threat, like he needed to protect his territory or something. Not that Felicity is his property by any stretch of the imagination. He just can’t stomach the thought of another man looking at her and talking to her the way that guy in the elevator did. He isn’t sure what to make of that, since he hasn’t felt that way in a very long time.

In fact, he doesn’t even feel that way about Laurel anymore. He tells himself it’s because he knows she can look after herself, whereas Felicity begged out of his attempts to give her self-defence lessons, but he knows it isn’t true. The idea of Laurel kept him alive for five years on that island, but maybe that’s all it is: an idea. The reality is that he’s a very different person now, and Laurel doesn’t know him at all. She knows the boy who got lost on an island, and the billionaire playboy who is trying to find a place in life after being stranded for five years, not the man who came back with a purpose. Even after their night together before the Undertaking, he has to admit that it isn’t the same as before, and not just because of Tommy’s death. He never planned on telling her about that part of his life, even if he had taken off the Hood for good, so he’d always be hiding some piece of himself from her. The only two people who actually know the real him are now sitting in this room with him, and neither of them are a brunette female. Or perhaps one is. He seems to recall Felicity once saying that she dyes her hair. Not that it matters. Either way, she’s not Laurel.

Looking around, he realizes there is actually only one other person in the room now. They’d come back from another successful mission a couple of hours ago which saw Felicity out in the field once more, getting caught by the man they were trying to stop, so maybe that’s what triggered this trip down memory lane. Diggle must have left while he was absorbed in his thoughts, but Felicity still sits in front of her computers, typing away as always. He’s never really noticed how absorbed she gets in her work. It reminds him a bit of the new Oliver, the one who can focus on something and let the rest of the world melt away. She’s driven; she has a purpose.

“Oliver?”
She is currently frowning at him. He hadn’t realized he was watching her so intently.

“Sorry, I-”

“Zoned out?” She supplies, grinning. “No worries, I do it all the time. I accidentally did it once at a bar at one of my friends’ bachelorette parties and unfortunately I was not staring at a straight girl… That was a bit awkward.”

His lips quirk upward in a small smile, the closest he gets to the real thing anymore aside from the fake billionaire playboy ones. “I can imagine.”

“Anyways… Now that you know that unfortunate detail of my life, I’m going to call it a night. See you tomorrow?” She asks, jumping up from her chair and grabbing her purse.

He nods. “Let me walk you out.”

He says the words before really processing them. Obviously her lack of a filter is rubbing off on him. She looks confused but nods all the same. He’s aware that this is not a normal offer on his part, but the incident in the elevator seems to be more than just a one-time thing. He can’t shake the overwhelming need to make sure she reaches her car safely, even though she probably didn’t park far. He’s always had a desire to protect her, but it’s heightened in the past few hours. Maybe it’s the reminder that danger lurks around every corner, even in places as innocent as an elevator.

“Well, goodnight,” she says, interrupting his thoughts once more. He didn’t realize they’d arrived at her car.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” He asks again.

She shrugs, “Yeah, fine. I mean, it’s not every day that you get held hostage by a psychotic drug lord, but I seem to be growing accustomed to the experience.”

His stomach clenches at her words. Not for the first time, he feels a twinge of regret at bringing her into this life. She shouldn’t be getting used to being held at gun-point. He debates saying something to that effect, but they’ve had this conversation too many times to count, and he knows how it will end.
“Text me when you get home safely,” he replies instead, backing away and figuring it might be good to get a workout in to clear his head of all this nonsense before he heads home. This is just some weird thing triggered by the fact that she went out in the field again and his own remaining adrenaline.

I’m home.

Have a good night.

Abandoning his workout, he changes back into his suit, tucks the phone in his pocket, and ascends the stairs, the slight anxiety slipping away at her assurance that she’s safely in her apartment for the night.

Everything goes more or less back to normal over the next week, with the exception of his continued escorts to her car when she leaves and his requests for her to notify him of her safe return home. They haven’t had any real missions in that time, and he’s starting to get restless. Every time things calm down, a huge storm finds a way to erupt around them, turning their lives to chaos. He blames this for his extra precautions where Felicity’s safety is concerned. He can’t shake the feeling that something is about to go down that won’t end well for any of them.

“Everything ok, Oliver?” Diggle asks as he returns from walking her out.

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“You’ve never insisted on walking Felicity to her car before, yet you’ve done it every night this week.”

He shrugs, turning his back on his friend to ensure his bow is locked away. “I just want to make sure she’s safe.”

“She parks across the street…”
“A lot can happen between here and there. Especially if someone figures out where the Ho- Arrow’s headquarters are.” He still has trouble referring to himself by the new name.

Diggle doesn’t reply, so he must have accepted the explanation. Oliver doesn’t see the other man’s skeptical look behind his back.

His run-in with her at the diner is completely unintentional. It’s become a regular place for him, and clearly it has for her as well. At first he thinks she’s alone, but then she tilts her head back in laughter and he realizes there’s someone on the other side of the table. His feet are on their way over before his brain can catch up, curious to see who she’s with. He’s never seen her outside of her office, Arrow work, and the ‘lair’ as she’s taken to calling it.

She realizes his presence before he is properly in her line of sight, tensing in surprise.

“Oliver, hi!”

He smiles his standard ‘public smile’ for his billionaire playboy ruse, taking in the sight of her companion. He looks to be a man around her age, with boyish features and the same sparkle in his eyes that so often lights up Felicity’s. He frowns momentarily, wondering when exactly he noticed a sparkle in her eyes, but then remembers the people in front of him and puts a smile back on. “Felicity. How are you?”

“Good, you?” She asks. Her face is still lit up with the remnants of laughter.

“Can’t complain. Are you going to…?” He asks, trailing off and indicating the man across from her.

“Right, sorry,” she shakes her head as though to clear it, turning to her companion, “Connor, this is my friend, and… uh… boss… Oliver Queen. Oliver, this is Connor Telman, my, uh… other… friend…?” She finishes lamely, red colouring her cheeks. His lips quirk up in another smile at her obvious discomfort, just because the way she handles herself in slightly tense situations is pretty amusing.

He turns to Connor, Oliver-the-billionaire-playboy smile in place, “Good to meet you.”
The other man returns the sentiment as they shake hands and Oliver notes his attempt to squeeze firmly. The same feeling that possessed him in the elevator takes hold once more, and his returning squeeze is enough to make Connor’s eyes widen in surprise and discomfort, earning Oliver a disapproving look from Felicity. He can’t find it within himself to even try to look abashed.

“I’m meeting my sister, so I’ll see you later?” He says, turning his attention back to her. She nods.

“Who’s that you keep sneaking glances at?” Thea asks after only fifteen minutes.

“What are you talking about?” He asks, failing to cover his surprise at being caught.

“That blonde over there with that guy. You’re not as stealthy as you think, Ollie,” she clarifies, taking a sip of her drink.

He shrugs. “She’s a friend.”

“You’re sure looking quite a lot for her being a ‘friend’.”

He shoots his sister a look. “It’s not like that. I’m just keeping an eye on her, making sure she’s ok.”

“Whatever you say,” she singsongs, grinning widely.

He sighs, knowing he won’t convince her, and glances back at Felicity again. She’s laughing away with Connor, her eyes dancing as he tells her something. The same feeling from earlier returns as he notices Connor’s eyes drinking her in, but he clamps down on it. What exactly is this feeling? Sure, he’s protective of her, but why does he feel like he wants to go over there and remove Connor from the other side of that booth? He isn’t being rude, as far as he can tell. In fact, it looks to be just the opposite. Felicity seems… happy and carefree, with her hair cascading down around her shoulders instead of confined in an elastic as usual. He finds he’s never actually seen this side of her, even before the Undertaking. Sure, she is easily the happiest and most positive of the trio, but she rarely gives herself over to such uninhibited laughter. He’s noticed she’s been leaving her hair down more frequently since his return, but smiling less, another regret on his long list. It looks good on her, happiness.
“Hi,” he says as he descends the stairs, mostly to alert her to his presence. He’s walked up behind her without a greeting before and that resulted in her on the floor and her chair across the room.

“Hey,” she mutters back, her tone distracted as usual. He’s used to her replies sounding far away when she’s looking at a computer screen.

“Digg in yet?” He asks, heading over to check on his arrow supply.

She makes a sound he assumes means ‘no’ and continues to stare at the screen, fingers moving rapidly over the keyboard.

“So… Connor seems…” The words are coming out before he can stop them or even decide what to finish the statement with. He presses his lips together tightly to avoid kicking something in his frustration with himself. He’s beginning to understand Felicity a lot better lately with his filter apparently out of commission.

The sound of her typing stops. “He’s a friend from work. Nice guy. A little shy, but sweet. No criminal record. Not that I looked specifically before becoming friends with him. I don’t usually do that, it’s just that I got the results of all of the company background checks from employee applications when I still worked in IT and I had to process them so I saw…” She stops abruptly, taking a deep breath to stall the rant before the sound of her typing resumes. “What’s this all about?”

Unable to find anything else to do to appear busy, he moves to the cabinet containing his island herbs and starts sifting through them to keep his hands occupied as his mind races for the right response. All he comes up with is a stalling, “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play coy with me. Why are you asking about Connor?” She demands, and he hears her chair swivel around to face him. He doesn’t turn to her yet, unsure of the answer to her question himself.

“I-” He falters, trying to come up with the right thing to say to diffuse the rapidly growing tension in the room. “I wasn’t asking about him. Just making a general observation.”

“That you didn’t finish,” she says pointedly. “Come on, Oliver. You think I didn’t see that stupid, macho, caveman hand-shake thing you guys were doing? You’re not as subtle as you think. And then you come in here suddenly interested in my friends and my personal life? That was the most
obvious fishing expedition I’ve seen since my dad took me ice-fishing when I was nine in a bright orange parka.”

He can’t help turning around to face her then, leaning back on the table with an amused half-grin on his face. He tries not to think of the way her use of the word ‘friend’ lightens the tension in his shoulders just a bit. “You ice-fish?”

Her cheeks turn a delicate shade of pink and her eyes seem far away at the memory she’s recalling for just a moment before they snap back to the present. “I said he took me ice-fishing, I didn’t say it stuck. He wasn’t too keen for a repeat after I fell in.”

He chuckles quietly at the image of a nine year old Felicity splashing around in freezing cold water in an orange parka, wondering when the last time anything even resembling a real laugh came out of his mouth. Laughter is a privilege he doesn’t much indulge in these days.

“Glad I could amuse you,” she snaps darkly, “But that’s not the point. You’ve never shown any interest in my personal life before. Why now?”

His mind finally lands on a semi-plausible explanation and he latches onto it eagerly, just needing a way to frame it so that she won’t get too angry. “It occurred to me after our last takedown that anyone… aware of my situation and your part in it might-”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Her eyes flash angrily as she stands, her chair rolling back to hit the desk as she does so. “I’m going to stop you right there and give you the chance to avoid saying that you think people would only be interested in using me to get to you.”

Her voice is dangerously low and his brain searches frantically for the words that will put this right. Honestly, that hadn’t been his motivation at all, but he really doesn’t have a clue what the actual reasoning is so it’s as good as any.

“I- I didn’t-” He stutters, still not finding the words. Why is it that in any other situation, with any other person, he could be covering and spewing lies by now, but in the face of the small blonde IT girl he’s speechless?

“Yes, you did. Just because you push people away doesn’t mean I will. I won’t let this secret interfere with my life any more than it has to.”
“I didn’t say you did,” he replies, hands up in a gesture of surrender. Usually she isn’t quite so quick to anger.

“You suggesting that my friends aren’t really my friends is doing exactly that,” she snaps, turning back around and pushing in her chair before starting to collect her things.

“What are you doing?” He asks, even though it’s obvious.

“I’m taking a night off. I need a break. Ever since the Glades, you’ve been three times as paranoid as you usually are, and that’s saying something,” she tells him, pulling on her sweater and grabbing her car keys. “There are alarms set on my computer if there are any reports of suspicious activity. You and Digg will be fine without me for the night. I’m going to go home, breathe, maybe take a bath, and try to forget this conversation ever happened.”

“Felicity,” he tries again, not wanting her to leave like this. Actually, he doesn’t want her to leave at all, but that thought troubles him too much and he pushes it aside. “I’m just concerned, OK? I worry about you- your safety. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself, despite what you may think,” she tells him defiantly.

“Is that why you refused self-defence training? You’re already an expert?” He challenges, feeling his temper rising. He’s trying to look out for her and she’s throwing it back in his face.

She rolls her eyes. “Not everyone is waiting to attack me, Oliver. The Count used me to get to you, yes, but that was my own fault. I shouldn’t have gone there alone and unprepared, but that was months ago and I won’t make that mistake again. And getting caught a couple of weeks ago couldn’t be helped. It happens. You may think that’s a naïve way to look at things, but some people need to look at the world and see good. Some people need to believe there are still bright spots in the dark.” She stops to take a deep breath before muttering, “Besides, I’d probably do more damage to myself than any would-be attacker.”

He clenches his jaw to prevent himself from showing any outward reaction to her words. The truth is that he admires her unfailing optimism. He wishes he could see the world the way she does, but too much has happened for that to be possible anymore.

“I’m just trying to protect you,” he says softly.
“Why now, though?” She asks, not really angry anymore. She sounds more exhausted and exasperated if he had to define it. “You’ve never cared before, yet here you are suddenly walking me to my car and making sure I get home alright and invading my personal life. If this is some big brother protector thing, save it. You brought me into this because you trusted my judgement. Trust it now.”

“This isn’t about not trusting your judgement, Felicity,” he urges, needing her to believe him. She can’t think he doesn’t trust her.

“Then what is it about?” She yells again, exasperated. She throws her hands up at her sides before throwing them back down and shaking her head.

“Protecting you.”

She scoffs loudly. He’s never seen her so angry or combative and it’s starting to worry him. The Felicity he knows wouldn’t be acting like this over something as simple as a “macho-caveman-handshake” as she’d called it. Sure, she’d make sure he knew what she thought about it, and then maybe ignore him for a bit, but by the end of the night she’d either forgive him or fake it until she had. That was how Felicity worked. Somewhere along the line this conversation took a very wrong turn and pushed some button he didn’t know she had. That has to be the explanation for why she’s looking at him like this. There’s something else going on, but he knows she won’t share it. Especially not with him, and not now.

“You sound exactly like my father. I thought I was through with all of this overprotection crap when he died but I guess not. I told you that I can take care of myself where my personal life is concerned,” she tells him firmly. He can’t think of anything to say, but she doesn’t stick around to see if he does. Instead, she turns on her heel and starts toward the stairs.

“Felicity!” He tries calling after her, finally regaining his voice. He even takes a couple of steps in her direction, but she keeps on walking.

“I need space, Oliver. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she calls back as she climbs the stairs.

Dumbfounded, he makes his way back to the table and leans against it. He hadn’t even known her father was dead.
Ghosts of Missions Past

Chapter Notes

OK, so I’m playing a bit fast and loose with the computer stuff, because I have no idea about any of that. All errors (I’m sure there are lots!) are a result of my ignorance. Also, I’m definitely continuing my roundabout way of doing things where this is concerned and introducing the beginnings of the plot in this chapter instead of the first.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Look, Mom, I’m sorry, but something’s come up,” Felicity’s voice sounds from the top of the steps the next day. He breathes a sigh of relief that she’s showed up tonight. Being a Sunday, he didn’t get to assess her mood at the office this morning. Sure, she’d still sent him the now-habitual text message assuring her safe return home last night despite her irritation, but he isn’t sure if she’s still angry with him.

“I know, I know. It’s work, OK?” She replies to whatever her mother has said on the other end of the line as she descends the stairs with the familiar click of her heels. She catches sight of him standing shirtless on the training mats and smiles tentatively. He takes it as a good sign. “Yes, my boss is a slave driver,” she continues, her eyes sparkling just a bit in amusement as his lips twitch slightly.

He watches curiously as she moves to put her bag and sweater down at the computer desk, seeming a lot more at ease than she had last night. Whatever it was must have been something he said. Maybe his sudden interest in her personal life triggered some memory of her father, or maybe she just wanted some privacy. He’s never really broached such a personal topic like that before, so perhaps it was just the tension associated with unfamiliar territory prompting that reaction. The way he’d framed it hadn’t been too helpful either.

“No, I know. How could I forget?” She says tiredly into the phone, her voice dropping a few notches. Obviously she doesn’t want him to overhear whatever turn the conversation is taking. Usually, he’d back off and give her the space she obviously wants, but he finds himself trying to catch her end of the conversation as he moves away to give her some semblance of privacy. “I’m sorry, Mom, but it’s been six years.” Her shoulders sag as she drops into her chair. He lowers himself onto the mat and concentrates on the push-ups he should be doing instead of eavesdropping like a little kid. He doesn’t make it very far. “I’m not saying that. Of course I care, but I can’t just drop everything and come back home every year. He wouldn’t want us to—”

Whatever she’s about to say is cut off as he assumes her mother starts talking again. She sighs and he stares at the mat beneath him, willing himself not to glance over at her. He chalks it up to friendly concern. Friends are allowed to be concerned for other friends if they’re acting strangely, right? He’s
sure that’s something that is allowed, unlike what he wanted to do to that guy in the elevator.

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t make it this year. I was hoping you could understand-” She pauses again, “I do care, Mom. Don’t say that I don’t. I just can’t-” Another pause, and then her voice gets tense and angry, much like last night. “Well he’s not here! Isn’t that the point of this? At some point you have to let go- No, I didn’t mean-” She sighs, and he hears the phone hit the desk, sounding suspiciously like she slammed it down. Her mother must have hung up on her.

He gives it another twenty push-ups before he gets to his feet and heads back to the edge of the mat for his water bottle. She’s sitting in her chair, head in her hands.

“Everything OK?” He asks, grabbing a towel and stepping off the mat.

She raises her head and swivels the chair to face him. “Yeah, fine. Sorry about that,” she replies, gesturing vaguely toward the phone. He doesn’t tell her that her face says it’s anything but fine.

“Do you need some time off?” He presses. “You can take a few days if-”

She shakes her head. “No. Thanks, but I’m good.”

She seems more set in her decision as she says the words, her shoulders setting and her posture straightening once more.

“I’m sorry about… yesterday, too,” she tells him after a moment of silence, “You were just trying to help, even if I don’t really understand why you feel the need to hover suddenly. This time of year just isn’t the best for me and I took it out on you and I shouldn’t have.”

He stares at her for a moment before giving her a slight smile. “It’s fine. I’m, uh, sorry if it came across like I didn’t trust you. I do. I just… I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She returns his small smile with one of her own and swivels back around to face her computers. It’s startling how quickly she seems to have compartmentalized what’s been bothering her. He’s never figured Felicity to be the compartmentalizing type, especially with her lack of a filter. It reminds him too much of himself, if he’s honest. He knows what compartmentalizing and tucking things away can do to a person, and he doesn’t want that to happen to Felicity.
“You know…” He starts, and her typing freezes, “You know that you can always talk to me about… anything… that you need to, right?”

His voice sounds tentative even to his ears, and the way her shoulders tense indicates that she very much does not want to talk about it. He’s treading on thin ice, but he can’t help himself. This newly intensified concern for her is wreaking havoc on him.

“Yes,” she replies shortly, resuming her motions. Her voice softens as she adds, “Thanks, but I’m really OK.”

“Well, if that changes…” He says, knowing she’ll understand. She nods once, but says nothing in response. He has to admit that he’s baffled by this withdrawn, tense side of Felicity. She’s always been open, honest, and quick to call him on it when he’s being exactly the opposite. It unsettles him to realize it bothers him to see her like this more than is probably appropriate. Maybe he should check with Thea and see exactly how far past “friends” he’s going here, since she seemed to think simply checking on her in the diner was over the line.

Diggle descends the stairs before he can give it much more thought, and he turns his attention over to sparring while Felicity continues to run searches on her computer. By seven o’clock, nothing of importance has turned up and he decides they may as well call it a night. They’d probably appreciate an early one every now and then considering he does work them into the ground.

“I’ve got the system set to ping my phone if it picks up any suspicious activity and if it sounds serious I’ll let you know,” Felicity tells him as she leans against the desk waiting for him to lock away his bow. “And I’m running a background search for companies going under recently. It’s minor, but I noticed a couple of smaller ones have reported their databases were corrupted and subsequently destroyed over the past few weeks, resulting in their collapse. I know it’s not normally our thing, but usually these types of attacks are just warm-ups or testers for the real deal so I figured it can’t hurt.”

He nods, not really understanding the implications of all the tech talk but figuring any clarity she might offer would be more confusing. He’s not completely inept, but she is definitely on a whole other level. She shoots him a small smile as though she knows what he’s thinking and sets off toward the stairs. He follows her out and they part ways at her car, as has become their custom. He wonders vaguely what he’ll do with the rest of his night, and resigns himself to the inevitability of paperwork.
He was kidding when he told himself he’d ask Thea, yet here he sits a full two days later, roped into a conversation he’d normally never be caught dead in. He blames Diggle for offhandedly mentioning he’d call Felicity as he left for the night. Thea was passing by at the time and couldn’t resist offering up her opinion on having his driver call his ‘girlfriend’ for him. Of course, he took the bait she so tantalizingly dangled in front of him, denying their romantic involvement. Now, he’s being pestered by her ceaseless questions, for once praying that Roy shows up and distracts the girl.

“So if you’re not together what are you?” She asks, propping her chin in her hand as she leans on the kitchen counter. He’s tried evading her by moving to different rooms but she won’t leave him alone.

He takes a deep breath. “Friends.”

She scoffs, “Please, Ollie, your only girl friends are either current or ex.”

His eyes narrow at the innocent smile on her face. “Ever think I’m trying something new?”

“Not very well,” she remarks, tilting her head to the side. “What’s she like?”

Gritting his teeth, he turns to the fridge for something to do. When did his sister’s gaze become so piercing? “Thea…”

“Oh, come on, Ollie. Give me something! Is she sweet, funny, good in bed?” She asks, waggling her eyebrows suggestively at the last part.

He turns to face her then, shutting the fridge a bit more forcefully than necessary. “She’s not like that.”

His sister’s face confirms his suspicion that his tone was a bit too harsh. “Wow, ok. You’re serious about this one.”


She holds up her hands in defence. “Ok, whatever you say. You and Mr. Diggle sure talk about her a lot for just being one of your friends, and you’ve been a lot happier since that started happening is
all. And the way you were looking at her in the restaurant…”

“What?” He asks sharply. At her failed look of confusion, he adds, “Just say it.”

Thea sighs. “It’s just… I haven’t seen you look at someone like that in a while. Even if she’s just your friend, she’s clearly important to you.”

“She is,” he finally concedes. He won’t lie about that. “Just not in the way you think.”

Before Thea can say anything, his phone rings. The caller ID reads “Diggle” so he turns and starts walking toward the entrance as he answers.

“Talked to Felicity. She said there was a hit in her system a few minutes ago. You’re going to want to see this, Oliver.”

They’re both already in the basement when he gets there. If the set of their shoulders is anything to go on, he won’t like what Felicity turned up.

“So you remember that human trafficking ring you put a stop to last year?” She asks once he’s within earshot.

He frowns but nods nonetheless. There are very few things he doesn’t remember, as much as he wishes otherwise. He’d tracked the ring back to Justin Whicker after his first return from Lian Yu, who’d only really drawn his attention at the time because his brother was on The List, and put an arrow in the man.

The look on Felicity’s face is not promising. “Looks like it’s started back up. With so many of the Glades residents still in poverty, they’re prime targets. A few women have gone missing over the past year and there’s been a slightly unusual amount of activity in the shipping yard during that time. It looks like they were smarter about it this time, though. They kept a slow pace so they wouldn’t gain too much attention.”

He remembers the words Whicker spoke before he killed him. Another will come in my place. Who
knew how long this new leader had been operating without their knowledge?

“The Undertaking was just too good an opportunity for the predators to pass up,” Digg adds, disgust layering his voice.

Oliver grits his teeth, looking off to the side to keep his cool. After all that effort, the ring sprung back up. He was a non-factor. Useless.

“Oliver!” Felicity’s voice brings him back to the present. He glances down to find her staring at him with concerned eyes, which flick down to the hand he’d placed on the back of her chair. He’s startled to find his knuckles white from the force of his grip, and it takes more effort than it should to free his hand. “Are you OK?”

He takes a second to breathe before forcing himself back to control. “Fine. Do we know who the new leader is?”

He catches her shooting a worried look at Digg before turning back toward the computers again. “Whoever it is, they’re doing a good job hiding. All security footage of the shipping yard shows several men, all different heights with a different one seemingly in charge each night. The boss probably doesn’t inspect the merchandise because he knows the danger it puts him in,” she answers, cringing as she realizes she just referred to women as ‘merchandise’. “I’ve got facial recognition software running in case any of them take off their masks, and I’m running a search on Justin Whicker to see who his most trusted associates were during his reign. It’s likely one of them took over once he… died.”

With a brief nod, he heads to the back to change. He needs to work out the frustration now filling his body. The Arrow was supposed to make a difference, and yet here was the trafficking ring, back up and running despite his best efforts to stop it.

He emerges from the back to find Digg already on the mat in his sweats. The older man catches his eye, and he knows he’s thinking the same thing. They’re similar this way, needing physical exertion to work out frustration and tension. Felicity, on the other hand, is content to let her fingers work out her- He stops his train of thought there, realizing what that sounds like. He’s really gaining an understanding of Felicity these days.

The sound of her voice permeates his concentration as he and Diggle spar, and he spares a quick glance to see her on the phone, in which time Diggle lands a rare hit. He grunts, causing Felicity to glance back at them.
“No, Mom, no one’s fighting. At least not for real,” she says into the phone. “I’m at a gym.”

He and Digg try not to grin as they hear that. Felicity at a gym conjures up a pretty amusing image.

“Yes, Mom, I joined a gym,” she replies. Clearly her mother shares their sentiment. “The city is safer than you think.” Another pause. “Yes, thanks to the vigilante. And I think he prefers the Arrow now.”

Oliver lashes out, but Digg blocks with another grunt of exertion.

“Mom, I do not need to worry,” she shoots them another glance out of the corner of her eye, “I think I’m pretty safe from the Arrow’s wrath.” A pause. “I’m sure the gym offers self-defence, why?” This time the pause takes on a horrified aura. “Mom, I do not need- Mom- Don’t you dare guilt trip me. I tried self-defence once. It took about as well as ice fishing.” She says, recalling the example from their previous conversation, and then sighs. “Fine, I’ll look into it, OK?”

He dodges another of Digg’s attacks.

“I really will, Mom. I promise.” She sounds sincere now, despite the irritation colouring her earlier tone. “No, I still can’t- I’m sorry, Mom- Yes, I know- Love you, too.”

She sighs as she hangs up, and he and Digg take a few more hits before breaking apart and going for their water bottles. He appraises her posture as he tilts his head back for a drink. She looks less tense than she did the last time her mother called, which he figures is a good thing. Whatever happened between them is obviously starting to resolve.

“Felicity, bring your workout clothes tomorrow,” he states, ensuring his tone leaves no room for argument. She swivels around to face them faster than should be possible, her eyes filled with panic.

“I thought we agreed-” She starts, looking desperately at Diggle for help. She’d had exactly one self-defence lesson from Diggle before begging out when she managed to trip herself more than she did Digg. They haven’t talked about it since, but her conversation with her mother brings it back to his attention.
“We can’t always be around to protect you,” he says, grabbing a towel.

Her eyes narrow at that. “I never said you did.”

“Then you should learn at least basic self-defence,” he points out. Glancing at Digg, he can see the other man can’t come up with a reasonable excuse to remain on Felicity’s side. Digg shoots her an apologetic look as Oliver presses on, “Besides, you did just promise your mother you’d look into it, didn’t you?”

The guilt on her face wars with her aversion to violence for a moment before her resistance collapses at the expression on his face. “Fine. I would say it’s your,” she gestures to both of them, “safety at risk, but it’s mine. Let’s just hope I don’t do too much damage to myself…”

As Oliver heads to the back room to shower and change, he hears Felicity’s defeated voice. “What was that?”

Digg’s response is accompanied by a chuckle. “I think you just joined a gym.”

“Thanks for having my back, partner,” she replies sarcastically.

She casts a longing look at her computers as she takes a hesitant step onto the training mat. Oliver tries not to laugh at the look of apprehension on her face as she approaches Diggle. He figures it’s safer to start her out slowly with Digg, as much as he wishes they had the kind of relationship that allowed him to be the one training her. However, he gets the feeling she’d be even more nervous if it were him, so he settles for watching covertly from the sidelines instead.

After the third time she manages to end up flat on her back on the mat, her computer dings and she nearly sprints to it. Diggle shakes his head in amusement as he heads over to where Oliver is now sharpening arrows.

“She’s actually picking it up pretty quickly,” he says, “It’s a confidence thing. Last time we tried this, she wasn’t as confident as she is now, but she’s still got a ways to go. She’s just overthinking it. Letting nerves get the better of her.”
“You’re going too soft on her,” he tells the other man, “Don’t give her time to overthink it.”

“I’m trying not to overwhelm her.”

“If she’s attacked, she’s going to be overwhelmed. She needs to learn to deal with emotions like that.”

“Then you train her!” Diggle snaps quietly, and Oliver lets his eyes fall to the floor in contrition. Digg is right. He has no say in how the other man approaches training Felicity.

“Hey ninjas,” she interrupts, not looking away from her computer to see Diggle’s raised eyebrow at her new name for them. She comes up with them sporadically. “I’ve got some possibilities for the new leader.”

She waits until they’re both near the computers before pulling up some photos. “So Sonny LaFontaine was Whicker’s right-hand man, judging by the information the search pulled up. He was at all the deals, even when Whicker wasn’t. He doesn’t seem like the most likely candidate, though, considering he’s already massively implicated in the whole thing. I mean, our guy is smart and LaFontaine is clearly not the sharpest arrow in the quiver.”

Oliver’s lips twitch slightly at her analogy. “Who else?”

“Well there’s his girlfriend’s brother, Uri Makarov. The guy is a little more of a background player. He met Whicker in one of his many stints in jail. You’d think after a stay in Iron Heights you wouldn’t really want a return trip but Makarov seemed to enjoy the accommodations. So did Whicker, for that matter,” she pauses, taking a deep breath to get herself back on track, “So, anyways, he’s a possibility.”

Diggle nods along with him as Felicity pulls up another picture.

“My money’s on him, though,” she points at the screen, “Brandon Whicker, aka Justin’s older brother and esteemed member of The List. He was more into the corporate side of things but that doesn’t mean he can’t dabble in human trafficking. He certainly has the brains to be behind this operation, and he has the same Russian contacts Justin did.”

“So we watch Whicker and Makarov and see who shakes something loose first. They could be in it
together,” Digg suggests, turning to look at Oliver.

Oliver considers his statement for a second, and then shakes his head, “I don’t think they’re working together, but I think one of them is definitely behind it.”

“Right, I’ll see what I can get on their addresses and daily routines and get back to you.”

He raises an eyebrow as she starts typing. “Usually you set the computer to do that automatically,” he observes.

Her fingers freeze and he can tell she’s trying to come up with a response he’ll buy. “It’ll go just as fast if I do it manually. Besides, I’ve been on my back enough for today; I’m not used to that much physical activity at one time. That came out wrong.”

Her words come out in a rush as they so often do, and he can’t help but smile at the way her brain has started catching her verbal slips more quickly. He sighs, deciding to let it slide this time. He had his limits when he first started out, too, and he doesn’t expect Felicity to get to his or Digg’s level by any means. It’s not that he doesn’t think she can, he just doesn’t see her as the kind of woman who wants to. Laurel took to combat like a fish to water, knowing far more than he did when they were teenagers, but she has the fierce edge that makes you expect it from her. Felicity is fierce, yes, but in a different way. She’s more optimistic than anyone has a right to be, and maybe that’s the difference. She sees the good in the world where he, Laurel, and Diggle see the bad, and thus has no desire to dip into her violent side.

He decides to take a trip upstairs instead of pressing the matter, since any action has to wait until Felicity has concrete information on Makarov and Whicker, and heads out to play the billionaire. After making the rounds, he decides that checking on her progress isn’t likely to get her too angry, and is just about to head back downstairs when his phone lights up with a message from the blonde in question, telling him that she’s got the information he needs. It’s time to put aside Oliver Queen and his musings for the night and don the hood.

Chapter End Notes

OK, so I figured ending it there should be good for now. As you can see, there’s actually plot happening! I will not claim it to be good plot. You’ll have to be the judge of that. I’m sure there will be kinks to work out, as I’ve never written anything like this before, but I’m trying my best to make it believable.
He stifles a yawn as he heads into the elevator in the morning. His basic recon of Makarov and Whicker’s properties turned up nothing of great value, which still frustrates him. Makarov’s permanent address is a rundown apartment that Oliver knows isn’t where he actually lives, but a decoy for those who want to track him down. Whicker, on the other hand, makes no effort to conceal his whereabouts, settling down in a well-protected compound with at least ten armed security guards patrolling the perimeter. It’s this, more than his inability to locate Makarov, which pushes him to agree with Felicity’s suspicion of Whicker. Why else would he need such a fortified house? He still plans to check out Makarov with whatever Felicity’s supplementary search can turn up, but he’ll have Digg keep an eye on Whicker tonight while he’s out.

Hoping that Felicity can at least give him good news about his day, he steps out of the elevator only to immediately wish he’d called in sick this morning. He’s tempted to step back into the elevator and escape before he’s spotted, but she sees him before he can make a quick getaway. Resigning himself to the inevitable, he heads toward the office just as Felicity points at him. Isabel Rochev turns to shoot him a cold look from where she stands in front of Felicity’s desk before facing the blonde again.

“I must say, your inability to do this job continually astounds me,” she’s saying as he gets within earshot. Seeing the look of barely controlled rage on Felicity’s face, he quickens his pace. “It’s a secretary’s job to keep track of her employer, and you seem to always fall short in keeping tabs on Mr. Queen, at least during the day.”

“Sorry I’m late, Felicity. My phone died so I couldn’t let you know,” he interrupts, hoping it buys her a break with Isabel. The other woman turns to him, raising a sculpted eyebrow. “Isabel. I wasn’t aware we had an appointment.”

“I was just explaining to Ms. Rochev that you have a very full morning and she might try to look for you toward the end of the day if she wanted a word,” Felicity explains, her voice tightly controlled as she stares at what he’s sure is a point past both of their heads. She’s had to deal with Isabel a lot more frequently as of late, and he can see it’s beginning to take its toll as her usually composed façade cracks.

He gives a tight smile, knowing there’s no way Isabel is leaving without giving him whatever lecture she’s come to deliver. “That won’t be necessary. I’m sure my 9:30 won’t mind waiting; whatever Isabel has to say is obviously important, for her to be up here delaying my appointments for the day.”

“Of course it is,” she mutters under her breath. He’s sure Isabel didn’t hear her, but he did. Trying not to frown at her, he ushers Isabel into his office, pausing to double back to Felicity’s desk.
“Everything OK?” He asks, looking down at her.

“Peachy.”

He can tell the smile she gives him is fake, and he’s sure she means for him to know it, too. He almost calls her on it, watching her warily, but decides to avoid whatever button he’s once again pushed. In fact, he’s about to walk away when she speaks again.

“It would just be nice if maybe you could try to be on time every once in a while. I mean, thanks for trying to take the blame with Isabel, but neither of us bought the story about your phone. I know you have no trouble apologizing to people for being late, but they can’t say anything to you and I’m the one who takes the flak for it,” she says, looking down at her computer as he turns back to look at her in surprise. Felicity’s never been shy about standing up to him, but this is the first time she’s directly rebuked him for his professional attitude.

Unsure of what to do, he merely blinks and says, “You’re right.”

She looks up at him, confused for a moment at his easy acceptance, before motioning to the main office. “Thank you. Now, Isabel’s waiting. Do not make her hate me any more than she already does.”

He pauses for a moment, leaning forward to place his hand briefly on her shoulder in what he hopes is comfort. “I really am sorry to make your job so difficult.”

He feels stark relief as the remnants of her frown disappear at his words. She even has a hint of a smile on her lips as she replies, “You’re lucky I like you so much or I’d have run for the hills by now,” and then her eyes widen as her words catch up with her, “I mean as in a friend, not as in like like, because that would be so inappropriate and- 3, 2, 1.”

His lips lift in a genuine half-smile at her attempt to stall her chatter. “I know what you meant. I’ll try to have Isabel out of here ASAP.”

She shoots him a grateful smile as she picks up the phone to start notifying his appointments that he’ll be running late.
Lunch doesn’t come soon enough. After Isabel’s lecture on the importance of timeliness and partnership, his morning is filled with reassurances and business pitches he confesses he didn’t fully pay attention to or care about. He’s just looking forward to a lunch in silence when Felicity knocks on his door.

“Your sister’s here,” she says, apologetically.

He gives himself a brief moment to allow his eyes to close as he breathes slowly. “Send her in.”

Thea breezes past Felicity in a whirlwind of takeout bags. At least she brought food. After the door closes, his sister turns back with a raised eyebrow to glance at the blonde. “Diner girl is also your secretary? How disappointingly predictable,” she sighs, collapsing onto his couch, “I expected more creativity from you, Ollie.”

He shoots her a warning look as he joins her, about to point out that this has hardly been the first time she’s seen Felicity and shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Before he can, though, he figures that she likely wants him to get as defensive as he feels. Instead, he opts for another tactic. “You mean like dating my mugger?”

It has the desired effect, as she glares at him momentarily after his reference to Roy. He wonders if she’d still say he has no creativity if she knew that Felicity doubled as the vigilante—Arrow’s computer expert and that was really how they’d met.

He manages to step out to grab some coffee around three, grateful that the disgruntled investor booked for an appointment cancelled altogether when Felicity called that morning, even if the blonde is less so. Hopefully coffee will soften her anger toward him. He isn’t sure what to make of her roller coaster mood swings as of late, but he knows it’s probably best to just let them run their course. She mentioned it isn’t a good time of year for her, so if he gives her some space, it should all work out. What he finds concerning, though, is that he suddenly doesn’t want to give her space. He wants to know what is bothering her so much that it turns her into someone almost unrecognizable to him at times. He can’t remember this happening last year, or the year before that, but then again he can’t really say he was paying much attention.

He’s so consumed by the puzzle that he doesn’t hear his name at first. When he finally does, he turns to see Laurel standing beside him. They haven’t seen each other in a while and, surprised, he blinks a
couple of times as he realizes she’s asked him a question. “Laurel, hi. Sorry, I was…”

“Zoned out?” She supplies, smiling slightly as she continues, not wasting any time with rambling as Felicity often does, “It’s OK. How have you been?”

He pulls out his own small smile as he responds politely, “Good, you?”

“Good,” she replies, before making a face, “Well, as good as can be expected, I suppose. I’m happy to be back to work at any rate. The facility was good for me, but it was making me a bit stir crazy, you know?”

His smile turns soft and understanding at that. She spent some time in a rehab facility a few months ago, after he and her father finally managed to convince her she needed help with her pill problem. She looks good, better than she has in months. “I’m glad.”

“I never did thank you for what you did. I may have been mad at first, but you and Dad were right; I needed help.”

“I understand.”

“Still, it wasn’t fair to you. You were just looking out for me and I lashed out,” she admits, eyes shifting away from him as she does so. She’s nervous.

He shrugs, “I would have done the same thing. It’s really OK.”

She presses her lips together as she looks up at him, regret clear in her expression. “Let me at least try to make up for it. Do you have a free hour in the next couple of weeks? We could go to lunch and pretend to be two normal people. My treat. I have something I want to talk to you about.”

He has to smile again at her offer. Laurel hasn’t initiated any form of contact since the ‘intervention’ he and her father staged, so he takes this as an encouraging sign. “That would be nice.”

She looks relieved at his acceptance, and he’s surprised that she actually thought he would refuse. “Good. I’ll call you and we can sort out the details.”
Before he can say anything, the barista calls out his name and Felicity’s from the waiting coffee cups and he turns to put them in a tray. Turning back, he sees Laurel looking at him contemplatively.

“Felicity’s my assistant,” he explains, without being prompted.

She frowns, “You get your assistant coffee? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?”

He chuckles at the memory of Felicity’s adamant refusal to do just that. “She’s not your typical assistant.”

“So it would seem,” Laurel replies, tilting her head slightly. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you laugh, Ollie. You should do it more often.”

He doesn’t reply to the statement directly, instead choosing to bid her goodbye. It would defeat the purpose of this trip if the coffee he brings Felicity is cold.

Sitting outside the secondary property for Makarov that Felicity managed to track down, Oliver feels restless. From what he’s seen so far, Makarov is more into the drugs side of things than he is human trafficking. While still abhorrent, he isn’t the man they’re looking for. Maybe once they shut down the ring (for good this time) they can revisit Makarov and his extracurricular business, but for now he’s wasting his time. Felicity found reports of a scheduled departure at the shipping yard tonight, which means one of the two should be showing some signs of their involvement. Makarov’s been in all night, not giving any hint of his being behind the ring.

“I’ll give it another half an hour but I’m not seeing anything indicative of Makarov’s involvement. Digg, what are you getting at Whicker’s?” He asks into the comm link.

Digg’s voice comes through quietly. “So far just a lot of guards. No movement inside or outside other than them. The south wall looks to be a weak spot, though, if you catch the shift change. The guards posted back there aren’t as careful as the others.”

“I’m looking at the inside with thermal,” Felicity chimes in, “I’m not seeing much else. No one inside apart from the guards, like Digg says.”
He almost curses, but holds it in. He hates the waiting that comes before the action, the calm before the storm. He’d rather be in motion than doing surveillance.

“Wait,” her voice comes into the silence again, “The street cams approaching Whicker’s residence just picked up a car coming to the property. The windows are tinted.”

Oliver watches Makarov idly while listening intently to Felicity and Diggle trading information to get an idea of what’s happening. Diggle moves around to the main entrance to attempt to get a glimpse of Whicker while Felicity tracks the car’s progress, giving him updates on how close it is. He hates being on the outside of things, not able to help if things go sideways. She announces the loss of the car from the cameras and Digg reports it entering his line of sight, too far for him to really see much. He relays the events unfolding before him, even though they aren’t much. Whicker gets out of the stopped car and turns to talk to someone still inside before leaning back in briefly.

“He’s got some kind of smudge on his cheek,” Digg says, and Oliver can almost see him frowning as he squints to get a better look.

“Lipstick?” Felicity suggests.

“That’s probably the best guess. It looks red. The car’s driving away now and Whicker’s going back inside. He’s got a spring in his step like he just got lucky, so I’m guessing you’re right on the lipstick, Felicity.”

“But does that mean he has a girlfriend, or a partner?” Oliver finally asks. Neither of them provides an answer as they realize it’s just sparked more questions.

He returns to the foundry an hour later to find Felicity and Digg already there. Felicity reported losing the car leaving Whicker’s on the cameras a couple of blocks from his house, so they can’t be sure where it went after leaving. The three of them are slightly frustrated at that, but the fact that they can now reasonably assume Whicker is responsible for the resurrection of the human trafficking ring serves to lift their spirits a bit. If Makarov were the mastermind, he would be out ensuring he had an alibi as Whicker did, not sitting at home alone waiting for customers.

“Whicker seems to have settled in for the night,” Felicity answers his unasked question as she spins her chair from side to side.
“We were just thinking we should come up with some sort of plan, since it’s a pretty sure thing Whicker’s behind this,” Diggle puts in, standing from his position leaning against her desk.

“I go in, scare Whicker into a confession, leave him for the police,” Oliver deadpans, heading over to the cabinet to tuck his bow away. He’s frustrated, and he knows they can tell.

“Just getting Whicker won’t be enough, though. There will always be people ready to take over. We need to completely shut them down. Felicity was thinking-”

“Hey!” She interrupts. “Don’t put this all on me. You thought it was a good idea, too.”

The other man sighs, “OK, fine, we were thinking we should get Lance involved, make sure he knows where the deal’s going down so he can get a team to shut the whole thing down.”

Oliver hesitates. He’s tried to minimize contact with Quentin Lance these past few months. “He might not be so willing after what we led him into last time. He lost a lot of men.”

“Leave it to me,” Felicity says firmly before grinning cheekily. “He can’t say no to this face.”

Despite himself, Oliver snorts in amusement as he takes off his mask and jacket. He finally caved to Felicity’s incessant ramblings about his lack of viable facial identity protection a couple of months back. “I guess it can’t hurt.”

They lapse into silence after his agreement, he and Diggle winding down while Felicity types furiously away at her computer as always. She always seems to be typing, though he suspects she’s purposely being a bit too enthusiastic right now so he doesn’t suggest she join them. She’s grudgingly accepted the inevitability of training with Diggle, but that doesn’t mean she’ll actively seek out the opportunity to engage in the combat. As she repeatedly says, usually accompanied by an embarrassed flush, she’s far more content to watch.

After Digg heads back to shower and change, he heads over to where she still sits. Bracing his hands on the back of her chair for balance, he asks, “Find anything?”

She jumps, her hand flying to her chest in surprise. “Holy crap, Oliver. You need a bell or
something! How long have you been standing there?”

He grins in amusement. “Only a few seconds; I wasn’t trying to be quiet. You should be more aware of your surroundings.”

“A lot of good it will do me when you’re just naturally like a cat. We had one when I was little,” she says in response, and he waits silently to see where she’s going with it, “A cat, I mean, not one of you. She was always following me around silently and popping up when I least expected her. You think I’d be used to it by now but nope. I got her a bell and I found it really helped to keep my youth. The rate we’re going I’ve already lost about ten years of my life. I’d appreciate not losing any more.”

He ducks his head to hide the twitch of his lips. “I’ll take it into consideration.”

She nods, satisfied with his response. “I haven’t pulled anything more on the actual trafficking ring, but I’ve been looking deeper into Whicker. Originally I thought he’d resurrected his brother’s work a while back but just stayed mum about it.”

“But now?” He prompts.

“Now I’m not too sure. He kept a low profile after the Undertaking, knowing he was on The List and all. He followed your lead and spent a few months out of the country,” she says, inserting just enough edge into her voice for him to know she still doesn’t approve of his actions. “When he came back he stayed on the up and up for a bit so he didn’t arouse too much suspicion before he started back in on his old habits. Again, kind of like you, but his habits are a little more nefarious than yours, though Lance might disagree with me. I’ll have to ask him.”

“Felicity.”

“Right, sorry. The pieces just don’t fit. The missing persons reports I’m finding indicate that the ring has been up and running since before the Undertaking, but Whicker’s history isn’t reflecting his prolonged involvement. I’ll have to dig deeper into the reports from before Whicker’s return and check their viability. It could be just built to make it seem like it’s been going on for longer than it really has.”

He frowns, stepping back from her chair. “Why would someone do that?”
“I’m not sure exactly. That’s what I’m hoping this search determines. If the records were faked, I can hopefully trace it back to an IP address and see who did it and then we can work on the why.”

He nods, his mind already working, trying to determine what possible motivation someone could have for faking the length of operation of a human trafficking ring. Coming up blank, he heads to the bathroom Digg has just vacated, hoping a shower clears his suddenly spinning head as she fills Diggle in on what they were talking about. As predicted, this simple takedown has become far more complicated than any of them expected.

The rest of his week is dominated by issues solely related to Queen Consolidated, much to his chagrin. While not quite as abhorrent as his playboy persona, investors have come to form a certain expectation of him as a businessman that is nearly as bad to portray. He’s tried to be a more responsible version of the expected Oliver Queen, but his attempts have been futile. Investors and department heads, not to mention Isabel, still see him as the carefree young billionaire he was before the island. He won’t be able to shake that persona, no matter what evidence of his capability he provides.

Felicity interrupts the silence in his office as she pokes her head in. “Hey, I’m headed out to meet a friend for lunch.”

“Connor again?” He asks, assuming it’s a safe assumption since she’s been out to lunch with him twice already this week.

She stiffens at his tone. “Yes, why?”

He shrugs, “Idle curiosity, I guess. You’ve been spending a lot of time with him lately.”

“I suppose I have,” she replies, and he can hear the effort she’s making to keep her tone neutral and unconcerned as she moves fully into his office. “I lost a lot of the connections and friends I had in IT when I was moved up here, so I like to put an effort into maintaining the friendships I still have.”

Again, he feels a pang of guilt at the way he’s upended her life.

“Don’t start feeling guilty or apologizing for it,” she tells him before he can do just that. “As much as I’d like to keep blaming you, it’s not entirely your fault. We needed a cover. I just wish it came with
fewer assumptions.”

“How do you mean?” He asks, genuinely confused.

The look in her eyes is more of the ‘are you kidding me’ variety than angry as she explains, “IT girl gets promoted to secretary-”

“Executive assistant,” he corrects and she rolls her eyes.

“Either way, I answer your phones and get you coffee.”

“Actually, I get you coffee.”

She crosses her arms in annoyance at his interruption and he holds his hands up in concession. “So IT girl gets promoted to be Oliver Queen’s executive assistant after said billionaire is spotted at her cubicle with increasing frequency, gaining her a pay raise which, I must point out, is completely unnecessary for the work I’m doing. I should have made more in the IT department. I was certainly a more valuable asset down there, and I actually got to use my university degree. Did I mention I wrote the code for the protections around QC’s main database? My supervisor said it was better than anything he’d seen in any other company, and how was I rewarded for that? By a promotion to secretary. But that’s beside the point,” she tells him, waving her hand in dismissal, “The point is that everyone assumes we’re sleeping together.”

He blinks. He knows Isabel assumes Felicity is trying to seduce him with her ‘short skirts’; she told him as much in Russia all that time ago. He’s tried to dispel her suspicions since then, but he’s failed spectacularly. He’d assumed that her suspicions were her own, but the fact that everyone at the company apparently thinks the feelings, or lack thereof, are mutual and consensual is new to him. “How is this the first I’m hearing of this?”

“I just assumed you’d picked up on it by now. It’s not exactly a secret in the office,” she tells him, shrugging. “But whatever. I’ve gotten used to the whispers. I even went out and amped up my wardrobe to play the part a little better. It wouldn’t do to have people wondering what other reasons you could have for ‘promoting’ me, now could it?” She asks, her lips twisting into a wry smile. He’s struck again by the sacrifices she’s made for this life he’s dragged her into. “I was a bit selfish, though. I found I wanted at least a few friends to know I wasn’t sleeping my way to the top. Connor is just one of the few who stuck by me when I told him you were just hopeless with technology and figured it was better to have your own personal IT specialist right outside your door. Though that wording doesn’t really discourage people from assuming the worst, come to think of it. Your stunt at the diner didn’t really help, either, but I think I managed to smooth that particular wrinkle.”
He can’t think of anything to say, stunned by the large amount of information she’s just dumped on him. In retrospect, he should have realized this was what people would think, but there goes that self-absorbed streak she called him on after his second return from Lian Yu.

“Anyways, I should, uh, go,” she tells him in a voice that indicates her words have caught up with her and she’s feeling the awkward tension in the room.

“Right,” he says, clearing his throat, “Wouldn’t want to keep Connor waiting.”

She opens her mouth as though she wants to say something, and then seems to think better of it and turns on her heel to leave. He’s left to sit and wonder why the idea of her going for lunch with Connor three times this week bothers him.
A Startling Reveal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sitting across from Laurel in the restaurant, he can almost pretend they’re normal, just as she’d hoped. It’s nice, being able to reconnect with her again after so long. He’s missed just being able to talk to her, even if there’s still a thin layer of tension over their conversation. He realizes as they sit here, though, that the tension he thought would slowly fade away one day is never going to, no matter how much time passes. Not only is he now a reminder of Sara and heartbreak, but also one of Tommy and rehab and too much pain for one person to possibly survive. He knows they could never rekindle old feelings, because she deserves better than what he once offered her, but a small part of him held out hope that they could forge something better than what they had before the island. Now, he knows that anything they could have in the future would be tainted by the scars of their past, no matter how hard they try to cover them up. He holds too many memories of pain for her, and she holds too many memories of who he used to be for him.

It seems she’s read his mind’s turn to more serious thoughts as she places her fork on her napkin carefully before folding her arms on the table and leaning forward just a bit to look at him. “I’m leaving Starling City.”

That surprises him, and his response is less than articulate. “What?”

“I got a job offer in Coast City a month back, and I’ve decided to take it. Starling just isn’t home anymore, you know? I used to stay for my dad, but he doesn’t need me anymore. He won’t fall apart if I go, but I know I’ll fall apart if I stay.” She pauses to look down at her plate momentarily before flicking her eyes back up at him. “I can’t be here anymore, Ollie. I can’t keep seeing reminders of what and who I’ve lost everywhere.”

“I understand,” he says, surprising both of them. “It’s the same for me.”

“How can you stand it?” She asks softly, eyes steady on his. It’s one of the things he finds most admirable about Laurel Lance; no matter the subject, she never shies away from the conversation. It’s borderline pushy, but she walks the line carefully enough that it never gets that far.

He considers her question for a bit, her gaze never straying from his face. She doesn’t assume he isn’t going to answer. Her refusal to change the topic could again be interpreted as pushy, but he finds himself thinking it’s because she knows he trusts her enough to say whatever is on his mind as soon as he finds the words.
“I guess it reminds me of why I need to be better,” he finally says.

Laurel smiles sadly, nodding. “I just need to get away from it all. Being surrounded by it isn’t good for me. It doesn’t make me better, Ollie.”

He’s not sure if that says good things about him, or bad ones.

Diggle comes in to find him alone in the foundry, sitting on the couch with an aimless expression on his face. He’s vaguely aware of the other man sitting down beside him, waiting out the silence. It’s rare that he isn’t working out or taking some other form of action, and if Diggle’s posture is anything to go by, this change has rendered him uncertain of what exactly to do.

“Laurel’s moving to Coast City,” he finally says.

Diggle huffs out a breath. “Wow. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Me neither.”

They sit in silence for a while longer, neither moving nor speaking.

“When I came back from the island, I had all of these expectations about what would happen. They varied from time to time, but they always included Laurel forgiving me. I realized today that it’s never going to happen, and not just because she’s leaving. I think I knew it already, today just…brought it to my attention. Even if she stayed, we’re two very different people, and I don’t think we could ever have gotten to a place where we could be together again. I’m just not too sure where this leaves me. The idea of Laurel kept me alive on that island, but how do you move on from an idea?”

Diggle takes a moment to digest what is probably one of the longest things Oliver has ever said to him on a personal level (and probably in general, too), before finally shrugging. “I don’t know, man. You just take it one day at a time, and eventually you’ll wake up and realize it happened without you knowing it.”
He sighs heavily, staring around the foundry in the ensuing silence. He doesn’t like not having the answers.

“Yes, Mom, love you, too,” Felicity’s voice comes from above the stairs, breaking the quiet they’ve been engulfed in for the past few minutes. “I’ll call you later, OK? I promise.” He watches as she descends the stairs, hanging up her phone as she does so. When she comes into full view and sees them sitting on the couch, she frowns in confusion. “Did you break all the training equipment in a fit of rage again?” She finally asks, tilting her head.

Surprised, he blinks at her. “No.”

Considering him for a moment longer, she narrows her eyes. “Then why are you both sitting on the couch?”

Diggle grins. “Sometimes people like to sit on couches, Felicity.”

“Yes, sometimes people do, but you guys aren’t exactly people,” she says, before her brain catches up with her words, “I mean, obviously you’re people, but you’re not normal people. I just mean that you guys don’t sit idly on a couch, you go all caveman on each other and the training equipment instead, and this really isn’t going to get any better so I’ll just stop in 3, 2, 1.”

His lips twitch slightly as she breathes steadily to calm herself before moving to her computer desk and putting her bag down. No matter what, he can always count on Felicity to cheer him up, even if she doesn’t know she’s doing it.

She clicks a few folders on her computer once she’s settled before sighing heavily. “At least the first three disappearances are not linked to the trafficking ring.”

Diggle’s brow furrows as he stands up. “How is that even possible?”

“Whoever did this was good. They took real missing persons, laid a digital trail to connect them to the trafficking ring, and covered their tracks pretty well. Most systems wouldn’t pick up the difference. Luckily for us, I don’t run most systems.”

“Can you determine who did it from the data you’ve got?” Oliver asks, moving to stand behind her chair.
“Not yet. I’ve got programs running to try to figure out where the IP address originated from, but it looks like it’s going to take a while to weed through the decoys. I might have something for you in a couple of hours.”

“Just enough time to get in a workout,” he comments.

She nods along with him before she freezes. “You meant me, didn’t you?”

“Digg’s already getting changed.”

A full day later finds them back in the foundry with exactly as much information as they’d had previously. Felicity’s search turned up three separate IP addresses for each of the reports, resulting in more frustration. Oliver’s surveillance of Whicker turned up nothing of value, but she’d left a search running to weed out any other fake reports before they’d called it a night. If her growl of frustration is anything to go by, it didn’t turn up what she’d hoped.

“What now?” He asks, dreading the answer. They really don’t need any more complications.

“The first legit disappearance linked to the Moscow human trafficking ring occurred two months ago. Two months. Someone went a year back in time to fake the trail. I’ve got a trace running on the IP addresses but I’m sure it’ll turn up several different ones, like the last search. I’m at a standstill until I can figure out how to connect them. I’m never at a standstill!”

He tries not to smile at her infuriation because, honestly, it’s pretty amusing. “You look like you want to hit something.”

“I kind of do!” She exclaims, rounding on him with a bit of a teasing glint to her eyes to soften the anger, “And I blame it on you! I did not have violent impulses until I met you.”

“Well the best way to curb violent impulses is to just let them out, I’ve found,” he responds before he can stop himself, “That, or have a drink… or four.”
She shakes her head forcefully, demeanor suddenly changed. “No.”

He meant it as a joke, mostly, but her refusal is abrupt. He frowns as her body stiffens and she turns away, taking a few deep breaths to calm herself. He always knew she was anti-violence, but he had no idea it was this deeply ingrained in her. Thinking about it, he isn’t sure that he’s ever seen Felicity hit anything in anger, or even do more than raise her voice at him. Even those most opposed to violence have a breaking point, but he’s never seen hers. He finds it admirable, but something about the way she’s just reacted makes him think it’s a bit unhealthy, too.

The sound of the door opening as Diggle arrives cuts off anything he might say, and he’s left to frown momentarily at the back of her head instead.

“Where are we at?” He asks as he hops down the last two stairs. The look they both shoot him answers his question without words.

The night wears on with little progress despite Felicity’s constant keyboard clicking and occasional frustrated growl. She steps out to take a phone call from her mother and comes back in an even worse mood, if that’s possible.

Whicker does nothing of note while Oliver is there watching, but he installs a few discreet cameras around the property that Felicity says won’t be detected so they can watch his movements when the Arrow isn’t able to do it personally. Now that they know the trafficking ring hasn’t been operating since the Arrow stopped the first Whicker, at least in any effective capacity, trying to figure out why someone would fake it is occupying all of his available mental capacity. Perhaps it’s just the elder Whicker trying to cover his tracks and provide doubt as to his involvement if he were to ever be caught. It was set up in such a way that the first missing person was reported just before the Undertaking, after which Whicker went off the map for a few months. Something like that is hardly indicative of his involvement in the whole thing, and could be used to his advantage if the cops ever figure it out. Something’s telling him that’s not completely it, though. Like everything he seems to get involved with, there’s more than meets the eye here; he just has to figure out what it is.

“Anything?” He asks as he returns to the foundry.

“No,” she sighs, her head in her hands.

“You’ve been working at it all day,” he points out, just as frustrated as she is.
“Yeah, well, we can’t all just threaten to stick an arrow in someone to get our way, now can we?”

She snaps angrily, and his head whips around to look at her in surprise.

He knows he should let it go, but she’s been like this for over a week now and it’s starting to worry him. The Felicity he knows doesn’t let anger get the best of her, and she doesn’t explode for little reason. So, instead of ignoring it like he knows he should, he puts his bow on the table a bit more loudly than necessary, causing her to look at him in surprise. Digg comes in from the back room just in time to hear him ask, “What’s going on with you?”

She feigns innocence about as well as she operates her brain-to-mouth filter. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t play coy with me,” he parrots her earlier words back to her and she bristles.

“Nothing’s going on. I’m fine.” She takes a moment’s hesitation before amending, “I’ll be fine.”

“Will you?” He challenges, though he genuinely wants to know.

“Yes,” she says angrily before sighing heavily. Taking in her facial expression, he notices the fight seems to have left her. Her shoulders sag and her eyes fill with tears before she turns away from both of them, rising and walking toward the training mat. “No. God, you’re right. You’re both right. I’m sorry,” she says as she stops by the weights and glances back at the two of them, knowing instinctively that this isn’t just coming from Oliver; Diggle is worried too. “I know I haven’t been the easiest person to deal with this past week. I just… It’s been so long and I figured I needed to just push through it. I’m OK most times, but then it just gets to be too much to deal with, you know? All the memories trying to push their way in and constantly fighting to keep them out. It gets exhausting, and then I snap, and I don’t mean to but I can’t help it because I’m already tense and whatever you said just reminds me-” she breaks off as she runs her fingers along the weights, taking a few steps away from them. He and Digg both remain still and silent, aware that this is very unlike Felicity. She’s more closed off than he’s ever seen her, with hard eyes and stiff posture, yet he gets the sense that this is the most open and honest they’ll see her, too. Whatever she’s about to say, it’s big. She turns her attention to the weights as she continues, running her fingers along the handles absently as she starts to walk again.

“You probably noticed I’ve been talking to my mother a lot more recently, with mixed results. Usually I head home around this time of year, but I figured it was time to stop. She’s not very happy with me, as you can probably tell, but it’s time to start moving on.” She’s building herself up, readying herself for the admission, and her back is still turned to them as she finally gives voice to what has been bothering her. “Six years ago today, my father threw himself in front of a Metro train
on a business trip to Shanghai.”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so a bit shorter than normal, but I really wanted to end with that.
Filling in Some of the Blanks

He can’t control his surprise, and neither can Diggle, both jerking their heads to look at the other in shock. Last week he found out her father is dead, and now she’s telling them he committed suicide? Despite the questions this raises, he knows she isn’t finished speaking, so he curbs his own instinctive reaction as she reaches the end of the weights. Instead of turning around, she stays with her back to them, and without the ability to see her face Oliver almost assumes it’s someone else speaking. Felicity is always bright and happy; this doesn’t fit with her at all. Try as he might to wrap his brain around it, he just can’t reconcile the image of her in his head and the woman currently standing in front of him. At least she’s explained why he’s never noticed her this way before. Thinking back on it, he realizes she has always gone home around this time.

“The rest of the year I’m fine. I’m just tense around this time of year to begin with, and then Mom’s mad at me for refusing to come home which only adds to the tension, and then I just start lashing out at you guys which isn’t fair at all. I don’t mean this as an excuse. Maybe just perspective as to why I have such a short fuse right now. I’m trying my best, but it just- I can’t forget.”

She brings her hand up, and he suspects she’s wiping away a stray tear, but pretends not to notice. Instead, he focuses on trying to come up with the appropriate response to this kind of confession. What are you supposed to say when a friend tells you their father committed suicide six years ago today? He wishes he was better at comforting, or even just talking in general.

Sensing his utter uselessness in the situation, Diggle slowly approaches her from behind, reaching out to place a gentle hand on her shoulder. She turns her head slightly to look up at him, and whatever silent conversation passes between them in that glance must do the trick, because she reaches up to squeeze his hand briefly before turning around, causing it to fall back to his side. Felicity looks between them, and he recognizes the smile on her face as a valiant effort to put the moment behind them.

“Anyways, I’m sorry I’ve been getting on your case lately. I’m really trying, and in another week I should be able to just shove it all back where it belongs and we can just pretend this never happened, and then next year it’ll be easier. Eventually, it’ll be like none of this happened.”

He feels something in his chest contract as he watches her determined stance warring with the eyes that desperately want to believe the words coming out of her mouth but can’t. She clearly wants to forget about her father but isn’t able to, something he understands but wishes she didn’t. He can’t forget the island, no matter how hard he tries or how deeply he shoves the neat little boxes back in his mind. He almost wants to ask how she does it the rest of the year, because he’s sure he could learn a thing or two from her. Instead, he stays silent until it’s time to head out for the night, leaning against the table as he waits for her to put the finishing touches on the searches she’ll run overnight. He never did say anything in response to her confession, and the tension in the room is a bit awkward.
“I’m sorry,” he finally says softly, unsure what else is really appropriate.

She stiffens slightly and the sound of her typing stops, knowing what he’s talking about without having to ask. “Don’t be,” she finally says, resuming her actions for a few seconds before hitting the button to turn off the screen and standing, her back still to him. “Not your fault.”

“I know. I just- I’m sorry you have to live with this. You shouldn’t have to.”

“You haven’t cornered the market on pain, you know,” she tells him, shrugging into her coat, before looking at him and biting her lip. “Sorry. My father’s selfish choice doesn’t compare. My point is that we all have something.”

He studies her for a moment and she starts toward the door in silence, not expecting a reply. He finds his voice as she reaches the bottom of the stairs. “I wish you didn’t.”

“Why not? It’s made me who I am,” she says as he finally makes his way to follow her. She shrugs as she starts up to the main level. “Sure, I grieved for a while, but one day I woke up, bought a box of blonde hair dye, and decided I could either keep letting it control my life, or I could pack it away and choose to see the good in life instead of the bad.”

“You shouldn’t compartmentalize,” he tells her quietly, “It isn’t healthy.”

She shoots him a raised eyebrow over her shoulder as if to say he’s a hypocrite, which he has to agree with.

“I know firsthand,” he adds, indirectly conceding her unspoken point. “I don’t want you to end up like me.”

“Trust me when I say there is no danger of that,” she replies, pushing the door open and turning back to look at him as she holds it. There’s amusement around the edges of her eyes, but the sadness is too overwhelming for it to take any kind of dominance. She’s trying for levity, though. “I have no desire to take up a bow and arrow and run around Starling City wearing really tight leather pants, so don’t worry.”
His lips twitch slightly despite his resolve to stay serious. She needs it, and her phrasing reminds him of just how silly it all sounds. “Good.”

When they reach her car, she turns to face him before getting in, her bottom lip between her teeth once more. Her eyes flick up to his before she speaks. “Look, I get what you’re saying. I do. This is just- It’s how I deal with it. Everyone’s got their way. Yours is to take it out as the Arrow and use it for motivation, mine is to separate myself from it completely. I give myself a couple of weeks each year to remember, and then I put it back where it belongs. I was a different person when my father was alive, and compartmentalizing everything helps me to forget her. I’m better this way.”

He can’t even pretend he understands her logic, but he trusts her. So, instead of protesting again, he simply nods, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder gently. He doesn’t allow himself to question the way his hand lingers, trailing down her arm as he lets it fall back to his side. “OK. If you ever change your mind about that, though, the offer to talk still stands.”

She gives him a half-smile in return. “It’s a two-way street, Oliver.”

He takes the bike home, as has become his habit since he started walking Felicity to her car at night. His ‘black driver’ really doesn’t need to take him everywhere, and he feels guilty making Diggle wait for both of them, especially with Lyla waiting for him at home. Their reconciliation after Russia is still going strong, despite their busy schedules. He’s made a conscious effort to ensure Digg gets more time off when she’s in town, hoping that at least one of them can hold down a relationship for more than a few months.

On his way to the Manor, he decides he doesn’t actually want to go home right yet. He’s been getting home progressively later, and it hasn’t gone unnoticed. Maybe, if he can slip in after Thea heads to bed, he can avoid the interrogation for one night. He loves his sister, he does, but her stubborn streak reminds him too much of himself. With this in mind, he turns aimlessly, surprised when he finds himself outside Laurel’s apartment building. Once upon a time, he came here every night just to watch her in her apartment, to imagine what would happen if he were inside with her, unwinding for the night. He used to wonder what it would be like if he’d said yes to her offer to move in with her all those years ago, instead of balking. Would they live together in this apartment? Would they live somewhere else? What would their nightly routine be like? Would he cook her dinner, or would they order in? Would they share a bottle of wine as she tells him about her day, or would they talk about something else entirely?

Instead of his mind following those familiar scenarios, he finds himself trying to remember the last time he came here. It was just after his return to Starling City after the Undertaking, he recalls. After their run-in at the cemetery and Tommy’s grave, when she told him they could never be together. He realizes that was when it started. It was when he began letting the idea go. He stopped wondering
what could have been, what could still be with Laurel, and focused on what the future held for himself as Oliver Queen. He stopped visiting her apartment. He stopped pretending he could have been or would ever be a part of her life. Maybe he’s closer to moving on from that idea than he realized. He’ll always love Laurel, yes, but he isn’t in love with her anymore. He no longer finds himself consumed with the desire to be a permanent fixture in her life. As he watches her pack her belongings into boxes with her father, laughing and joking, he knows that he’ll be fine without Laurel Lance, and she’ll be better off without him.

He feels more at peace with the revelation than he thought he would, and tries to reconcile his reaction with his expectation as he starts the ride home aimlessly. He always thought the day the door closed for good would send him into a downward spiral to rival all others, but he doesn’t feel that way at all. He actually feels a little relieved, to be honest. The pressure surrounding a possible reconciliation with Laurel has ruled too many of his actions since the day he returned from the island, and letting it all go is liberating in a way he doesn’t expect.

Looking up, he realizes that he’s ended up outside a different apartment in his random turns away from Laurel’s. Frowning, he looks up at the window covered by polka-dotted curtains. Usually Felicity’s window remains uncovered until she turns in for the night, a fact he’s surprised that he knows without having to think about it. Sure, he’s been checking up on her a lot more recently, but he hasn’t realized how deeply ingrained her routine is in his mind until now.

As though sensing something is off, he sees her pull the curtains aside and survey the rooftops before turning her gaze to the street below. Realization that she’s more aware of his extracurricular activities than he thought strikes him and he smiles while shaking his head in disbelief. Only Felicity would think to check rooftops first. He freezes when her eyes linger on his spot in the shadows of the alley across from her building, wondering if she knows that their gazes are locked, but dismisses the idea immediately. It’s ridiculous. He needs to get away from here and clear his head, but he can’t move until she leaves. He can’t even imagine the reaction he’ll get if she actually catches him outside her apartment. Instead, he takes in her baggy t-shirt and sweats, the glass of wine in her hand, and the phone pressed to her ear, her eyes slightly pink from what he assumes are tears until she turns away and re-covers the window. He feels something pulling at his chest at the sight she made, framed in the window. Obviously she’s more affected by memories of her father than she lets on, but he supposes that’s understandable, given that today is the anniversary.

He finally makes it home to find Thea still awake. Dropping his head down to his chest momentarily as she calls out his name, he makes the trip to the sitting room to find her on the couch, eyeing him speculatively.

“Where were you so late?” She asks, a suggestive tone colouring her voice.
He fixes her with a steady look. “The office. I needed to take care of a few things.”

“See, I know that’s not true because I dropped by earlier, and you were nowhere to be found,” she tells him, sitting up with glinting eyes, “Admit it, Ollie. You were with her, weren’t you?”

“With who?” He asks, playing dumb very badly.

His sister rolls her eyes. “You know who I’m talking about. When do I get to meet her? Officially, I mean, not as your secretary.”

“Thea…” He growls, trying very hard to hold on to his patience. His sister continues to look up at him innocently and he clenches his teeth. “I was at the office for a bit, but then Felicity needed me to sign a few things and she’d already gone home, so I met her, and then I stopped by Laurel’s. Happy?”

The brunette’s lips turn down in a frown. “Laurel? I thought you were done with that. Don’t get me wrong, she’s great, I just assumed… After Tommy and the whole rehab thing…”

“I am…” He says slowly, wondering why he’s still talking about this. He should just walk away. “She’s moving to Coast City in a couple of weeks. I stopped by to see if she needed any help packing.”

Thea blinks in surprise. “Seriously? Wow.”

“So what about you?” He asks, raising an eyebrow.

“What about me?” She returns, too innocently.

“Oh, so you can ask me for an itinerary of my day but I can’t do the same?”

“Yep,” she replies, popping the ‘p’ and grinning.

He can’t help but smile as he shakes his head in disbelief at her. He’s been smiling a lot more in
recent months, something Thea’s noticed if the way her eyes light up at it are any indication.

“I should get some sleep,” he says finally, “Goodnight, Speedy.”

“Night, Ollie,” she replies softly as he ascends the stairs.

True to her word, Felicity seems better the next day at the office. She even manages to keep her obvious anger mostly in check when Isabel comes up at lunch to demand an update on several mergers he’s handling.

“Well, at least you’re organized, at any rate,” the brunette sighs as Felicity promptly hands her the files.

“What are secretaries for, if not to maintain the organization their employers lack?” She responds, looking up at Isabel with a sickly sweet smile on her face. He ducks his head to hide his smirk as Isabel’s head tilts. He shouldn’t be so amused; it’s unprofessional.

“Not much, as far as I can see. You’ve proven utterly incompetent at most other aspects of this job.”

“That’s because I am vastly over qualified for this job,” Felicity points out, her teeth grinding together before muttering under her breath, “And yet somehow simultaneously under qualified.”

“What exactly did you do in the IT department?” Isabel asks, an over-the-top innocence to her voice. “Or is that the wrong ‘W’ question to ask?”

“Felicity was the one they directed me to when I asked for the best employee in the department,” Oliver intervenes quickly, seeing the tension start to escalate past amusing levels and into imminent-catfight territory. Normally, he would let Felicity handle things herself, but he can sense when the situation needs a mediator, especially with her mood as of late. Neither of them can afford her saying something they’ll regret. He makes sure to keep his voice firm as he alerts them to his presence. “Her supervisor told me she was the fastest-rising employee in IT, solely based on her abilities. She wrote the security codes for the company’s databases, so it’s thanks to her that our information is more secure than any other company’s.”
At this Isabel quirks an eyebrow. “Really now?” Felicity nods slightly, trying not to show embarrassment at the acknowledgement as Isabel turns her attention to Oliver. “Then why remove such a valuable asset from IT?”

“Purely selfish reasons, I’m afraid,” he answers with a sigh. He digs his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his heels in an attempt to further diffuse the tension. If he’s relaxed, maybe they’ll catch on. “We developed a friendship. Given my lack of technological skills, I thought it best to take pre-emptive measures to deal with the disruptions it would cause in my day. More important than that, though, I trust Felicity and her capabilities, and I don’t appreciate your insinuations that she’s here for any other reason. My father made the mistake of surrounding himself with people who wanted to stab him in the back. I understand that’s unavoidable in the business world, but I don’t intend to welcome people I don’t trust into my inner circle willingly.”

He can tell Isabel understands his underlying message in the way she raises her chin just a bit while fixing him with a cool look. “An admirable undertaking, if not unrealistic.”

He stiffens at the phrasing she uses before telling himself to calm down. It’s not her fault she chose the word which reminds him of his greatest failure to date. “Undoubtedly. If you’ll excuse us, Felicity and I have an appointment we need to get to.”

Isabel smirks. “Undoubtedly.”

He turns to look at Felicity after Isabel departs to find her glaring daggers after the Russian brunette.

“Sorry, you didn’t have to do that,” she finally says when she realizes he’s looking at her. “She just makes me so…” She growls in frustration instead of using words.

Chuckling under his breath, he has to agree with her. Isabel isn’t all bad, but she does have her moments.

“Um, Oliver?” She asks suddenly, her brows knitting together as she stares at her computer screen. “I’m not seeing any appointments scheduled right now. Did I…?”

“No, I decided about half an hour ago that we’re going to lunch. I didn’t bother to call and book it with you, though. I hope you don’t mind.”
She opens her mouth, and then closes it when she sees the teasing glint in his eye and fixes him with a look. “Very funny.”

“I was actually being serious about half of that though,” he tells her, grinning, “Grab your coat.”

They head with Diggle to a diner a couple of blocks away instead of Big Belly Burger, keeping some variety to their meals. Digg would never tell them outright that things with Carly are still a bit awkward, but he’s seen enough of their interactions to know the other man appreciates their widened tastes. Working the hours they usually do, they eat out a lot. About once a week, in fits of domesticity, Felicity makes a lasagne or a casserole and brings it to the foundry, insisting they eat something that won’t counteract the workouts they dedicate themselves to. Usually her cooking is pretty good, except a few of her more unfortunate experiments which failed.

On their way back up to the office, the elevator is deserted and he finally gets the chance to ask what he’s wanted to all day. “How are you doing?”

He takes in the slight tensing of her shoulders as she replies, “Fine, you?”

He stares at her with a raised eyebrow until she relents.

“Better than yesterday.”

“Good.”

They ride the rest of the way in silence and he doesn’t ask again.

He and Diggle both arrive at the foundry early that night, as though simply being there will bring the progress they want. They spend the time until Felicity arrives checking and cleaning their weapons.

“Felicity seemed good at lunch today,” Digg comments, focusing on his gun as he speaks.

“Yeah, she did,” Oliver replies, wondering where the other man is going with this.
“Did she say anything else to you about how she’s doing?” He asks, putting the gun down. “This whole fluctuating mood thing isn’t like her at all, no matter the reasons behind it.”

Oliver half shrugs. “Not really. She said she was doing better than yesterday, so I guess that’s something.”

Diggle sighs, clearly just as anxious as he is at the prospect of not being able to do anything to help. “I guess we just have to wait it out, then.”

“It’s the only thing she’ll let us do,” he concurs. Not that he’s happy about that fact.

“Hey, why the long faces?” Felicity asks when she joins them not a minute later.

“No reason,” they chorus.

Understanding dawns on her expression as she stops walking abruptly, pointing a finger at them. “You were talking about me, weren’t you?”

“And you call Oliver the self-absorbed one,” Digg snorts, attempting to lighten the mood.

Felicity’s returning smile is slightly strained. “Nah, it’s fine. I guess I can now say the one good thing my father did for me was ensure I was the topic of conversation between two ridiculously good-looking men. I can guarantee that wouldn’t happen if he were alive and well.”

Both he and Digg shoot each other questioning looks as she heads over to her computers and sits down. Her words were meant to carry the lightening mood, but the bite behind them indicates truth. Obviously Felicity and her father had their issues, but this supposition only raises more questions. Not for the first time, he’s realizing how little he really knows about Felicity Smoak. Sure, he knows little details about her life, but the big picture of her past remains more or less a mystery. Perhaps more surprising is the burning desire he feels to right this oversight of his.

Half an hour into their workout, they’re interrupted by Felicity making a triumphant noise. Halting their motions immediately, they wait for explanation.
“Oh, sorry,” she says sheepishly when she realizes they’re staring at her, “That was on an unrelated note. Remember that search I told you I was running on those companies last week?”

Oliver nods, trying not to show his impatience. He wants progress on Whicker, not this.

“Well, it turns out it’s a recurring pattern reaching pretty far back. I knew they weren’t isolated incidents. I mean, they had a different M.O. each time but that result is way too specific not to be related.”

Diggle looks thoroughly confused. “And this helps us how?”

Felicity remains silent for a moment before finally admitting, “It doesn’t, but I need something to occupy my time while the other searches are running.”

They’re just about to return to their workout when her computer dings and she calls their attention again.

“I promise this is actually related,” she says as they make their way over, water bottles in hand. “I’ve been simultaneously checking into Whicker’s lost months and checking for any similarities that can tie the faked missing persons reports back to a common origin while the backlog of surveillance footage runs through. Whicker’s financials aren’t showing payments made in the usual manner to any reputable hacker I’ve heard of, so he must have someone off the grid covering his tracks.” She pauses for a few keystrokes before resuming her explanation. “The computer finally returned something concrete. Or, well, not concrete, which is the point.”

“You lost me,” Oliver says, brows furrowing. Diggle looks just as confused.

“Well, Whicker claims he spent his months away touring Europe, much like you,” she begins, typing as she talks now, “And his credit card activity supports that on the surface, unlike yours. You could have at least put some effort into faking it a little better, by the way. I debunked that lie within seconds when I started looking. If anyone else were so inclined to look, you’d have some pretty tough questions to answer.”

“I’ll remember that in the future,” he tells her, hoping to appease her enough to get her back on track.
“No need,” she waves her hand dismissively, “I already went back and retroactively created a paper trail for you, and I, unlike whoever did it for Whicker, left no trace of it behind. You’re welcome. Odd,” she says suddenly, stopping her typing and tilting her head, “Whicker must have met whoever doctored the missing persons reports after he came back, because the financial doctoring is rather obvious, it just took me too long to think to check into it. I should have seen it sooner, but I’ve been… distracted. Anyways, the missing persons reports took some digging to uncover the fraud, indicating Whicker made an upgrade between then and now.”

“Can you use that?” Diggle asks, moving closer in interest.

Felicity snorts, “Can Oliver use a bow? Sorry, ignore me. Yes, I can use it. Right now I’m checking back into Whicker’s financials to see who was on his payroll before the Undertaking, and I’m confident I’ll find something because, well, whoever he used before frankly isn’t that good. I mean, Whicker’s smart, but he knows nothing about how to determine a hacker’s skill, or lack thereof. Not totally his fault, but I expected better.”

Oliver’s lips twitch in amusement as he watches her type at lightning speed, swiveling her head between monitors to periodically check the security footage. Realizing exactly how many tasks her brain is currently focusing on, and feeling a headache coming on just thinking about tackling all of that himself, he pulls out a chair.

She freezes. “What are you doing?”

“Watching the footage from Whicker’s while you focus on that.”

She contemplates his answer for a moment before continuing to type. “Thanks.”

“You can ask us for help, you know,” Digg tells her, seeming to realize the same thing Oliver just did. “You don’t have to burn yourself out.”

She shrugs. “This is what I do. You guys beat people, and each other, up, and I sit behind the computer and get you the information that allows you to do it. What good am I if I can’t do that?”

“You won’t be any good if you give yourself a permanent migraine.”

“I’ll remember that in the future,” she returns with a faint smile, echoing Oliver’s earlier words as she
clicks the mouse a couple of times. Her voice already sounds far away as she slips back into her
digital world. Digg moves away to shower and change before relieving Oliver to do the same. When
he returns, no progress has been made, and as much as it kills him, he sits back down and goes
through the footage with Digg. There’s no intel suggesting a shipment departing tonight, so there
isn’t even a point to checking out the shipping yard to pass the time.

After another half an hour of fast-forwarding through the camera footage, he feels himself going
cross-eyed. How does Felicity do this all day? Just when he’s about to give in and admit temporary
defeat, movement stirs his attention. He sits up quickly, hitting the play button to start the footage in
real time. Digg notices his sudden movement and touches Felicity lightly on the shoulder to bring her
out of her ‘zone’ as she calls it. She looks disoriented for a second before turning to the screen, her
knee bumping Oliver’s as she over-calculates the force required to turn the chair.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, swiveling back a bit before reaching over to grab the keyboard in front of
him. At his questioning glance, she explains, “I need to capture this so we don’t have to find it in
here every time we need to look at it.”

She types a few commands in before playing the video. They watch as a car pulls up and Whicker
emerges, talking on a cell phone. He’s followed out by another man and Felicity begins typing
furiously, freezing an image of him and transferring it to another monitor to run recognition on it
while they continue watching. Whicker hangs up the phone, then turns to the other man and says
something before they both head inside. Skipping ahead, they see the two men emerge after a couple
of hours and shake hands before the other man departs. Whicker doesn’t go back inside right away
as expected, though. He pulls out his phone once more, a more serious, calculating look on his face
as he speaks into it, staring after the car.

“Can you tell what he’s saying?” She asks. He shakes his head, as does Digg, and she zooms in.
“Better?”

He squints at the screen. “I think he’s speaking Russian.”

“That would make sense if he’s using the same contacts as his brother. They were based out of
Moscow, right?” She asks, swiveling away to the monitor she was using before. “Of course, the call
could be unrelated, but who else would he be speaking Russian to? I’ve been trying to connect Little
Whicker’s Russian contacts to Big Whicker, but no real luck so far. They were discreet, I’ll give
them that. I have managed to find a trail of payments in his financials stretching years back before the
Undertaking, and that connects to an offshore account that his first not-so-secret digital sidekick set
up very poorly, which was, wait for it…” She trails off, hitting a few buttons to bring up the records
and sitting triumphantly back in her chair. “Accessed from Russia over the months Whicker was
gone.”
“So you’re saying Whicker was for sure in Russia for those months?” Digg asks, leaning forward to study the screen.

“Yes, that is exactly what I’m saying. I’m guessing he spent that time in Russia developing relationships with his brother’s people and probably found a better hacker there, though it wouldn’t be hard. Once he figured the heat was turned down enough, he came back and used those connections, and his new friend, to restart his brother’s legacy and make it look like it had been happening since before he left.”

“Can you get any hard evidence to support that?” Oliver asks. It’s a good theory, one without many holes, but he needs concrete information to confront Whicker with if they have any hope of him confessing.

“I’m trying, but I haven’t found any recognizable patterns that I can use to eliminate the decoy IP addresses and zero in on the real one they’re hiding. I’ll keep going at it from different angles, though. Eventually something will give.”

With that, they decide to call it a night as Felicity finally shows her susceptibility to headaches, rubbing her temples as she leans her head forward and closes her eyes.

“You good?” He asks her, making sure the weapons are secured.

“I’m fine,” she replies, her voice muffled by her position.

“I just… I know it’s been a rough week. It would be understandable if you wanted to take tomorrow off.”

“I can’t do that, and not just because I know how time-sensitive this is.” She pauses, breathing deeply before raising her head. “I won’t let him dictate my life from the grave. I can’t. He’s the one who chose to take his own life. He made a selfish choice, so I’m making my own selfish choice to not let it affect me. Sitting around won’t help anyone; I’ll be far more useful here.”

“Ok,” he says simply, moving to grab her jacket for her as she stands. He knows pushing her won’t help, but he wants to make sure she knows the option to take time off is still open.

When she turns to him, she looks poised to say something, but pauses as though warring with herself
before finally giving in to the impulse. “I’m not usually… sad when it comes to him. I try to remember him before, when he would still smile at my mom and do things like take me ice fishing or take apart computers with me only to put them back together again, which was a bit more my speed than all the outdoorsy stuff. Those memories are the ones that make me sad, but I don’t think of them very often. I’m too consumed by the memory of how he was in the years before he killed himself, and it just makes me angry. I just… I love the memories of him just being my dad, but he stopped being my dad long before he died. I hate the person he was for the last years of his life, and I hate what he put my mother and I through. So no, taking time off won’t help, because I’ll just sit around angrily and then Mom will call and I’ll be mad and she won’t and it’ll just start the fight that I really hate having with her.” She stops abruptly to breathe and calm herself, clearly not meaning to say as much as she did.

Oliver nods in understanding as he tries to make sense of the faint coldness in her eyes. Thinking about it, he can only remember seeing this look when she’s referring to her father. Not for the first time, he feels the nagging curiosity about what happened between them, but shoves it back down. Before he can filter himself, though, he’s speaking.

“I feel the same way about my father.” The honesty of the statement surprises both of them, judging by the way her eyes widen. “I love the memories of him being my father, but it’s all tainted by what he did in the last years of his life, and I hate him for that.”

“It’s hard, balancing the two,” she finally says after a moment of silence.

“It is,” he agrees quietly.

As he follows her out to her car, he finds himself frowning. He doesn’t know why he felt so compelled to share his inner struggle concerning his father with her. Sure, he always feels like he can talk to Felicity, but he’s never wanted to tarnish her with his inner demons. She’s the bright spot in most of his days, and he could never forgive himself if he took that brightness away from her. Now, however, as he gives her a soft smile in place of a goodnight and runs a hand down from her shoulder, squeezing her elbow gently, he wonders if maybe he’s been kidding himself. Digg once accused him of putting Laurel on a pedestal and he considers the possibility that he’s done the same thing to Felicity. He’s made her out to be the epitome of good, the exact opposite of him, despite her protests. He’s always thought of her as the light to his dark, and treated her accordingly, but if this past week has shown him anything, it’s that no one is perfect. No one is all light all the time. As she would say, everyone has something.

A wry smile twists his lips as he gets on his bike, realizing that he can add fathers committing suicide to their list of things in common.
Enough Sitting on the Sidelines

He makes a conscious effort to get to work on time. Not that he couldn’t do so on any given day, but there are certain habits he keeps up for appearances sake, and it takes an effort to remember that Felicity’s already having a rough enough time without him complicating her day job as well as her night one. He’s been getting restless with the careless billionaire image anyways, so maybe this will finally take his reputation in the right direction. He’s tried before, but investors seem set in their impressions of him without giving him a chance, and he’s already stretched thin enough as it is without the strain of trying to become a more responsible public version of himself.

He’s rewarded for his forethought with an utterly shocked expression on Felicity’s face when she hangs up her coat and turns to see him already behind his desk, a coffee cup in the center of hers. He can’t help but grin at her surprise, one she tentatively returns before completing the walk to her desk and starting up her computer for the day. After setting a few more things up on her desk, she makes her way to his office.

“What’s this? Oliver Queen, at the office before eight AM?” She asks, raising an eyebrow as she approaches his desk.

“Hard to believe, I know,” he plays along, glad to see her happy.

“Your 9AM will be glad.”

“And what about my executive assistant?”

She fights a smile but loses as it spreads across her face. “She’s pretty glad, too,” she admits, before sobering and pointing a warning finger at him. “Though this in no way means I’m getting you coffee at any point today. I don’t believe in manipulating men into doing what I want by using rewards.”

He raises an eyebrow at her, unable to stop himself from commenting. “Good to know.”

Her face flushes as she realizes what she said. “I did not mean for that to sound dirty.”

“I know what you meant,” he reassures her, flipping open one of the folders on his desk as he does so. Taking the cue, she starts the retreat to her desk before stopping at the door and turning back to him.
“I forgot to tell you,” she starts, moving closer to his desk in order to lower her voice, “The guy didn’t come up in any criminal databases, so I checked corporate ones on a hunch when I got home last night. Turns out the guy is just the CEO of Ritter Limited, so he’s probably not connected to Whicker’s side job.”

“Ritter Limited? Why does that sound familiar?” He asks, frowning.

“It came across your desk as a possible acquisition a couple of months back, but your lesser half thought it was a bad investment. Turns out she isn’t right about everything; the company is thriving now, and in a few years it could really make a name for itself.”

As she heads back to her desk, Oliver feels a fresh wave of frustration hit him. Of course, the one lead they have as to the larger connections in the ring turns out to be unrelated. He makes a split-second decision to confront Whicker tonight, regardless of his lack of evidence. Whicker doesn’t have to know he can’t prove his involvement; all he needs to do is convince him he can so that he’ll confess. He’s had enough of sitting on the sidelines and covert surveillance. It’s time to take action.

“For the record, I still think this is a bad idea,” Felicity says over the comm.

“Noted,” he replies, perhaps a bit too sharply.

Undeterred, she continues her argument. “I mean, he’s not stupid. He’ll know you have nothing if you don’t present him with any hard proof.”

“Felicity…” He sighs, though it comes out more as a growl. She doesn’t reply, and he takes it as her way of conceding.

Getting in is easy for him. All it takes is a strategically placed ‘distraction arrow’ (as Felicity dubbed them) and the attention of the guards is diverted enough for him to slip in over the back wall Digg pointed out earlier. He finds Whicker in the sitting room, sipping scotch and smoking a cigar which he promptly drops, still burning, on the carpet when he spies the Arrow.

“W-Wh-What do you want?” Whicker stutters, the fear clear on his face.
“To talk about your side business,” Oliver replies through the voice modulator.

Whicker stumbles backward, tripping over his own feet and crashing to the ground. “I- I don- I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know you’ve picked up your brother’s human trafficking ring.”

At this Whicker starts to laugh nervously, glancing around the room in a desperate search for an escape or a weapon. “Th-That’s ridiculous.”

Oliver stays silent, staring the other man down while he waits for him to break under the pressure. They always do. Instead, Whicker seems to get bolder with every passing second.

“Prove it,” he challenges. “You can’t, can you? You don’t have any solid proof.”

He hears Felicity make some sort of ‘I told you so’ noise in his ear before he admits temporary defeat. “I will soon enough. Think about that, while it’s not too late to stop and turn yourself in.”

With that, Oliver turns on his heel and leaves the compound swiftly. It didn’t go quite as hoped, but his back-up plan was to make Whicker nervous enough he’d make a mistake, and he’d seen the sheer terror in his eyes at the Arrow’s appearance. All in due time, especially with the bug he planted while Whicker was distracted.

Returning to the foundry, he finds Felicity and Diggle on the training mat. Digg is trying to show her how to read her opponent’s body language in order to launch the best attack, but it doesn’t look like they’ve gotten far. Her back is to him and her concentration is on Digg, and before he can stop himself he approaches silently from behind. He knows Digg has seen him, but Felicity still hasn’t. Quickly, he reaches out and pulls her to him, hand over her mouth, the other around her waist in an attack hold. It’s the type of thing a street thug would do, but he wants to see her reaction time. If he had his way, this would be the only type of situation she’d ever find herself in that requires self-defence, but he’s accepted the inevitability of another situation like the one last month that started all of this.

She’s definitely surprised, but manages to dig her elbow into his side with enough force to tell him her reaction is genuine. He’s even a bit surprised to find himself giving in to her defensive jab and crumpling a bit to the side as she whirls her body around, intent on delivering what he’s sure is a
pretty hard punch before he catches her wrist. She looks like she just suffered a minor heart attack, but Digg’s right; she’s catching on quickly, if her reaction time is anything to go by.

“Good, but you should be more aware of your surroundings,” he praises with a dip of his head. He doesn’t think before he does it, and thus only realizes how close the action brings their faces after the fact. His sudden awareness of their proximity startles him, and he drops her wrist swiftly before continuing on his path to the weapons cabinet to rid himself of his bow.

“Bell, Oliver!” She manages to choke out, still clearly not recovered. Digg chuckles as she clutches at her chest, trying to regain her breath.

“That would defeat the purpose.”

She glowers at him as he heads to the back room to change his clothes. By the time he gets back, she’s in front of her computers again, typing away with her eyes narrowed. She reaches up to readjust her glasses, only to seemingly remember she put her contacts in for training with Digg and letting her hand fall back to the keyboard. He takes up her vacated spot on the mat and he and Digg spar for a bit before her voice interrupts them.

“Uh… guys? You’re going to want to hear this.”

He can feel the sense of foreboding in his gut even before he hears what the bug picked up. Bracing his hands on the back of her chair, he indicates for her to press play, almost holding his breath.

“The Arrow was just here!” Whicker’s voice comes through in a panic. “That’s all you have to say?! I was just attacked!” Oliver frowns in confusion. “I know what I signed up for when I agreed to cover for you, and it sure as hell wasn’t this! I’m on the guy’s hit list now!” Another pause. “Very funny! What the hell am I supposed to do?! I can’t just keep going ahead with this! Especially not so soon after… this!” The silence stretching on almost makes him think Whicker’s hung up, but then he speaks again. “No, he didn’t have any proof.” A pause. “He was a little busy threatening me, so I doubt he had time to plant anything.” Oliver’s stomach twists in the silence. “Fine. I’ll meet you at the usual place and have one of my guys sweep the room.” The sound of footsteps retreating indicates the end of any useful information.

“What the hell was that about?” Digg asks, breaking the silence engulfing them.

“That’s a good question,” Oliver responds, pushing himself off Felicity’s chair and heading for some
indeterminate location. He needs to move, to feel as though he’s doing something. “Will his guy pick up the bug?”

“Depends on what he’s using and how thorough he is. It’s not detectable by most devices since it’s so recently developed, by yours truly I might add, but if the guy is thorough enough it’s possible,” Felicity responds, typing once more.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking the cameras to see when Whicker left and where he went, but I’m losing him at the same place I lost that other car with the woman in it.”

“So he could be meeting this woman?” Digg asks.

The blonde shrugs. “It’s possible. I certainly wouldn’t rule it out, but he could be going any other number of places, too.”

“So, once again, in an attempt to get answers we ended up with more questions.”

“That pretty much sums it up, yeah.”

Oliver sighs in frustration at yet another obstacle they need to clear. This is starting to feel a lot more like a storm brewing than he’d care for.

Digg heads out after another hour of theorizing gets them nowhere, leaving Oliver and Felicity to consider doing the same. After securing the weapons, he turns to find her staring off into space, a troubled look on her face.

“You OK?” he asks as he approaches. “We’ll figure this out eventually.”

“Yeah,” she replies distractedly, “It’s not that. I was just… thinking.”
“About?” He prompts, leaning back against the table and crossing his arms.

She seems surprised that he asked at first, before covering it with a half-shrug as she looks at the floor. “Earlier, when you…”

She leaves the sentence hanging, but he knows what she’s referring to. He’s not sure what exactly she’s thinking about in connection to that, but he finds himself figuring it’s best to keep the conversation in more professional waters. “Your reaction time was good. I expected you to freeze up.”

She gives him a sad smile. “I did, too.”

Confused, he frowns at her. “You don’t sound happy about that.”

“No, don’t get me wrong, I’m glad I didn’t totally panic,” she corrects, waving her hands in front of her, “I just… I never wanted violence to become so instinctual to me. I’m not a violent person, Oliver. I won’t be.”

Her adamant response further confuses him, as it did the first time he noticed it. He doesn’t want to press, but he can’t deny it’s been bothering him. “It’s self-defence, Felicity.”

“I know that, but… it’s just the tip of the iceberg, isn’t it? I mean, I started self-defence, and now we’re moving on to reading body language in a fight. I just… Where’s the line supposed to be? Where does defence stop and offence begin?”

He considers that for a moment. “I’m not sure there is a line.”

“That’s exactly my problem,” she sighs, “I’ve learned the basics. Isn’t that enough? Digg and I can just keep working on those.”

He shakes his head immediately. “That may protect you from street thugs, but… I brought you into this life and I won’t let you get hurt because of it. You need to learn this stuff so you can protect yourself.”
She’s silent for a long time, twisting back and forth in her chair before standing abruptly. He watches her start to pace, confused. Felicity isn’t usually one for pacing. It takes him a minute of this before he senses the anger rolling off her in waves and his confusion deepens.

“Why the sudden concern?” She finally asks, her voice sharp. “I’ve been a part of this team for about two years, Oliver, and suddenly you jump on the self-defence bandwagon?”

He doesn’t say anything at first, trying to figure out how to explain it to her. He can’t very well attribute his concern to the suddenly acute fear that he’ll lose her; it would reveal too much. Yet he finds himself speaking before his brain can filter his reply.

“Felicity,” he says softly, reaching out to halt her motions and turning her to face him by the elbow, “I- Digg and I, we worry about you. Knowing that you know this stuff, that you can take care of yourself if it ever comes to that… it helps.” He didn’t mean to be so honest, and she obviously wasn’t expecting him to be. Their eyes lock, and he can’t stop himself from uttering one more word. “Please.”

She sighs once more, her eyes closing in defeat. He feels the warmth of the skin of her elbow beneath his hand and realizes he’s been rubbing his thumb across her arm subconsciously, but can’t seem to stop. They’re standing closer than he first intended, but he doesn’t want to move away as he takes in her closed eyes and her deep, calming breaths. She looks as though she’s struggling to hold on to her resolve but is losing the battle, the outcome clear in her eyes as she finally opens them to stare up at him.

“She wasn’t a violent person before the island,” he says before he can stop himself, and her eyes snap back to his face. For his part, he concentrates on the image of his hand on her arm, thumb still moving lightly over her skin. The movement soothes him, allowing him to feel a level of calm when referring to the island that he’s rarely felt. “I couldn’t even kill a bird for food. I learned quickly, though, that it was unavoidable. Kill or die. Later, it became kill or be killed, and that brought a whole new level of necessity to learning to fight. I’ve seen enough death in my life. I won’t let you become another casualty if I can help it, and teaching you to fight is my way of trying to do that. I tried to convince myself that I could be enough to protect you, but I need to remember that I can’t always be there.”

Her eyes, focused on his face when he was speaking moments before, slide to the right as she takes a shaky breath. He’s glad she doesn’t try to respond with empty platitudes or meaningless attempts to
pretend to understand. Instead, they stand in silence for a minute as Oliver tries to regain his grip on the present rather than slipping into the past that too often consumes him. He slides his hand down her arm without thinking about it. The connection is enough to ground him, and he wants a more firm grip on reality. When he reaches her hand, he wraps his fingers slowly around it, focusing on his actions as though they are the most fascinating thing he’s seen in a while. He wonders if he’s imagining her increasingly rapid breathing as he shoves the part of his brain telling him to let go and take a step away to the back of his mind. He knows this is a bad idea, but he can’t stop himself.

When she speaks suddenly, her voice is uneven and her eyes are still turned to the right of them. “My father used to drink,” she blurts out. Taking another shaky breath, she slips her fingers between his without seeming to realize it. “For the last five years of his life, he would go to work and make straight for the alcohol when he came home. I’m sure he wasn’t even sober when he parked the car out front half the time. One night, my mother called him out on it, but it didn’t help. After that, he’d just grab the bottle of whatever hard liquor he’d brought home and lock himself away in his home office. Mom would try to get him to come out, to stop drinking, but he never would. He’d just get angry and throw things.

“He must have realized how violent he was becoming, and maybe the one sliver of good still left in him protested it, because he went out and bought a punching bag and some other training equipment and set it up in the garage. Instead of locking himself away in his office, he started locking himself in the garage while he beat away his frustration at the life he was stuck in. My mother tried everything to get him to stop, to make him happy again, but nothing worked. She exhausted herself trying to fix whatever was broken, and I exhausted myself trying to keep her from slipping away from me, too. Eventually I stopped trying. It was easier not to care anymore, so I caved to the desire to turn it all off. I hated him for doing that to us. If we weren’t good enough, he could have left. I wish he had. Instead, I watched him self-destruct for years before he finally put us all out of our misery.”

She inhales sharply as she finishes talking, bringing her free hand up to wipe away a stray tear at the memories he’s sure are now flooding her mind. Her tone is bitter when she continues, and he has to focus on her to remind himself that this is actually Felicity talking. “And he didn’t even have the decency to do it in the same country. No, he had to complicate things so all we were left with was an empty box to bury. Not that we would have had anything to put in it if he’d jumped in front of a train in America, but… I was tempted to fill it with alcohol bottles but I don’t think my mom would have appreciated that.”

“So instead, you keep your anger bottled up inside,” he predicts, studying her face closely as she nods. Her eyes fall to the floor, lingering on their joined hands for a moment. He can tell she’s debating whether or not to pull away from what is surely inappropriate, but he squeezes her fingers lightly in reassurance. “That’s why you don’t want to give in to violent impulses. You’re afraid that once you start, you won’t be able to stop.”

She nods again, finally looking up at him. “My father wasn’t a violent person, until one day he was. I drink to prove to myself that I can do it without letting it control my life, but the last two years, the violence became just as much a part of him as the drinking did. It was like it was an instinctive
response to his unhappiness. I don’t want to become like him. I couldn’t do that to myself or to my mother, so I purposely exaggerated how bad I was at self-defence the first time, hoping you guys would just let it be.”

He blinks, unable to picture Felicity as the type of person she’s describing. “You won’t become your father.”

“How can you know that?” She whispers, her eyes reflecting just how terrified she is of the possibility.

He reaches up with his free hand to cradle her cheek, wiping away a small tear with his thumb gently. “Because I won’t let you.”

She holds his stare for a few seconds before she turns her head away and steps back, pulling her hand from his. He tries not to feel the loss of proximity, but the small nagging feeling in his stomach betrays him. He needs to focus. Whatever feelings have been stirred up recently need to be shoved back down. She seems to be trying to do the same as she swipes at her cheeks and turns to shut down the computers, giving a shaky laugh.

“Sorry, I’m being ridiculous.”

“No, you’re not.”

She doesn’t reply, only shrugs into her coat and turns to face him expectantly. Catching her meaning, he pushes off from the table and falls into step with her, his hand landing on the small of her back without meaning to. He feels her tense at first before deciding to go with it and relaxing into his touch. It allows him to feel like he’s at least being useful, as he really has no idea what to say. He’s never seen Felicity this conflicted and it kills him to have to stand idly by and watch. He finds himself wanting to take her obvious pain from her, but he knows it isn’t possible.

Instead, he does the only thing he can think of when they get to her car, and shares another small piece of himself with her in the hopes that she’ll at least know she isn’t alone. “I wanted to be like my father until we were in that life boat and he told me what he’d been a part of. He handed me The List and then shot himself in the head so I could live. I told myself I’d never do what he did, and I’d spend the rest of the life he’d given me trying to atone for his wrongs. Sometimes I wish I could go back, though, to a time when the only thing I wanted was to be like him. It was easier then. I had blinders on, thought the world was mine for the taking. Now, the very thought of someone saying that I remind them of my father is… He’s the last thing I want to be.”
He can see her face tilted up to his in his peripheral vision, but stays focused on the street around them as she speaks. “Your father was a good man at the end, Oliver. He knew what he’d done was wrong. He… he did what he had to in order to make sure you survived. Mine threw himself in front of a train because he couldn’t bear to live his life anymore. So I don’t think it would be a horrible thing if you were a little bit like your father, minus the whole conspiring to collapse the Glades and shady corporate dealings stuff.”

His lips twitch a bit as she tries to ignore the word vomit at the end, and he notices their fingers have entwined again at some point. “I’m sure there were good parts to your father, too. You said you have happy memories of him when you were a kid, and he chose a real punching bag over abuse, so there must be some redeemable qualities to the man that aren’t horrible to have.”

She shrugs. “I suppose so. I’d still rather avoid resembling any part of him if I can. I mean, it can only go so far, I guess, since I work with computers and so did he, but I see that as more of a career choice than a personality one, so I think I’m safe.”

“Me too.”

“Hey,” she says softly, reaching up to touch his cheek and bringing his eyes back to hers, “You’re a good man, Oliver Queen. Don’t doubt that.”

He smiles softly down at her, wondering how this turned in to her reassuring him, but she looks more relaxed than she did when they started this strange tennis match of sharing, so maybe it’s worked both ways. “I meant what I said,” he tells her as she pulls away to unlock her car, “I won’t let you become your father.”

“And I won’t let you become yours,” she replies, giving him a half-smile before sliding behind the wheel. “Goodnight, Oliver.”

“Goodnight.”

He makes his way back to the mansion for the night, relieved to find all occupants asleep. As he makes his way to his room, Felicity’s usual message comes through that she’s home safely and he types out a quick reply before sliding beneath the covers and giving in to a slightly more peaceful sleep than he’s had in ages, unaware of the faint smile still on his lips.
The next morning is filled with pretending the strange intimacy of the night before never happened. The unspoken mutual agreement is clear between them when she comes in to find him already there once again, offering only a small smile before she sits at her desk and takes a sip of the coffee he placed there. He watches her for a moment longer than is strictly necessary before reminding himself to focus.

By lunch, he’s going cross-eyed from staring at financial reports and prognoses, his mood only darkened by Felicity popping in to tell him she’s meeting Connor again. Digg brings in Thai takeout as she’s leaving and raises an eyebrow as she brushes past him to head to the elevator.

“She off to lunch with that Connor guy again?” He asks, setting the bag down on Oliver’s desk.

“Yeah…” He says, his voice distracted as his eyes track her path to the elevator. When Diggle’s words fully register with him, his head snaps back to focus on the older man. “She’s mentioned him to you?”

Digg shrugs, “A couple of times, sure. He’s some friend from IT. Why?”

“I just… Well, I’d never heard of the guy until a few weeks ago and now it seems like all she does is spend time with him. I’d feel better if I knew something more about him than he works in IT and doesn’t think she’s sleeping with me.”

At this Digg raises an eyebrow, fighting a smile.

“Office gossip,” Oliver dismisses the obvious question.

“It’s not just that, man. Why are you suddenly so concerned about this guy? You’ve never cared about her personal life before, which I must point out, is why you don’t know who Connor is.”

Oliver sighs, catching himself in what has become a bad habit. Trying to appear casual, he shrugs. “I realized after her admission about her father that I don’t know that much about her.”

“And you want to.”
“Isn’t that what friends are supposed to do?” He retorts, feeling a bit defensive.

“Yeah, but there’s a line between wanting to know things and prying into her personal life.”

“I know that.”

“Ok,” Digg concedes, raising his hands in his own defence as he backs away toward the door. “Just… be careful, Oliver.”

“Always am,” he replies, a lightness to his tone that the conversation doesn’t really warrant. “Don’t worry, I won’t make her angry. At least not intentionally.”

Stopping at the door, Digg fixes him with a look. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Felicity is my friend, and I’m hers. That’s as far as this goes, Digg.”

Without a word, the other man turns to leave the office, but Oliver catches the skeptical look on his face in the glass as he goes.

Felicity is all smiles when she returns from lunch, rushing into his office with Digg in tow. “So I was trying to figure out what Whicker was talking about when he said he couldn’t keep going so soon after his little visit, and I got an alert on my phone at lunch that explains it. There’s a shipment set to depart the night after tomorrow.”

“So whoever he’s apparently covering for doesn’t want to lose profit just because the Arrow’s on to him. But who is he covering for?” Oliver questions.

Digg takes a deep breath. “Here’s a crazy idea: why don’t we leave that up to the cops to figure out? It is their job. There’s too many at the shipping yard for us to take on anyways. I’m with Felicity on this. Let’s just hand it off to Lance, deliver Whicker to them, and wash our hands of it.”
“Why don’t we go over what we know about the whole thing again tonight and go from there?” he suggests. He doesn’t know why he’s so reluctant to give this one up, but he has a nagging feeling that they should hang on to it for just a bit longer.

The day crawls after that. Isabel stops by for a discussion about the company’s financial direction for the next quarter and he tries not to fidget in his impatience to leave as the meeting runs long. Seeming to sense his worsening mood, Felicity knocks after the meeting has gone forty minutes over the time they were set to leave.

“Excuse me,” she says, firmness in her tone that he hasn’t heard in a while, “Sorry for interrupting, but Mr. Queen has an important dinner engagement that he really can’t be late to.”

Isabel twists her head to look up at the blonde, a calculating look in her eyes. “I’m sure whoever it is can wait.”

At this, Felicity’s head bows for a second before she fixes Isabel with a look of over-the-top cheer contrasting the icy tinge of her eyes. “Of course, Ms. Rochev. I’ll just call Mrs. Queen right now and ensure she knows who’s keeping her son from the family dinner she’s tried to have three times this week. I’m sure your name will come as no surprise.”

He can’t see Isabel’s face, but he’s sure her eyes are narrowing as Felicity makes for her desk. Finally, she turns back to Oliver, a thoroughly fake smile pasted on her face as she rises. “I suppose we can pick this up tomorrow. Tell your mother I said hello.”

“I will,” he replies tightly, returning her fake smile with one of his own. As soon as Isabel is out of sight he breathes a sigh of relief. Making his way out of his office, he stops by Felicity’s desk. “Please tell me my mother didn’t actually schedule a family dinner tonight.”

She grins. “Nope. That’s tomorrow.”

He tries not to groan in frustration. He loves his mother, but she picks the worst times to host family dinners.

“Ok, so let’s go over what we know one more time,” Felicity sighs. They’re grouped around the table, everything they have on Whicker and the human trafficking ring laid out in front of them.
“Justin Whicker ran a human trafficking ring until the Hood stopped him. That was the end of it as far as we knew, so we went on our merry way.

“After the Undertaking, Brandon Whicker, businessman and List member extraordinaire, left Starling City and likely went to Russia for a few months. After his return, he takes up his brother’s position as the head of the human trafficking ring, but uses some hacker friend he found in Russia to make it look like the ring started back up before he left and continued during his time away,” she recites, pausing to take a breath. “You guys did some surveillance and didn’t see much at the shipping yard, but saw Whicker returning from a meeting with a woman. It’s unclear whether she’s a girlfriend or a partner. We also saw Whicker meeting with business associates at his home, too, so it could just be innocent.

“Fast-forward to planting the bug in his house. Whicker makes a call soon after and freaks out to whoever is on the other end, revealing that his position as head of the ring is really just him covering for some unknown person. So who is this person? Why choose Whicker to cover for them? How do we connect Whicker with solid proof? How do we figure out who the mystery puppeteer is?” She finishes, taking a deep breath and huffing it out.

Digg hits the desk with his fist a bit harder than is necessary. “There are more questions than answers here. We’re missing something.”

“I’ve put some feelers out in some underground communities I definitely do not frequent anymore…” She tells them, looking off to the side as she says the words. He can tell she isn’t being totally honest, but decides not to ask. “None of them have come back with anything promising as of yet, but they said they’d keep their ears and eyes open for any chatter about Russian hackers who’ve suddenly pulled a disappearing act. In the meantime, I’m running a search on Whicker and any known associates or close friends he’s got who could be tied up in this. It’s a long shot, so anything your Arrow-y sense can dig up to narrow it down would be appreciated.”

He raises an eyebrow at that. “My what?”

“You know, Spidey-sense? No? You really need to pay more attention to the world around you.”

He can only shake his head in amusement at her. “I don’t have some supernatural sense that will give us answers.”

Felicity considers his statement for a moment, her head tilted slightly to the side. “That’s more disappointing than I thought it would be.”
Digg chuckles quietly before heading over to her computers. “Need an extra set of ears to listen to the backlog of Whicker’s audio?”

“Oh, actually, I need two sets of ears,” she responds, sending Oliver a pointed look. “And eyes, if you can multitask.”

Even though Felicity set the computers to only play back clips that deviate from the baseline of audio received, much of the noise they hear amounts to faint footsteps or innocent conversations between household staff. Three hours later, when Oliver yet again suspects he’s about to go cross-eyed, movement flickers across his screen and he sits up abruptly. His sudden movement draws Digg’s attention and he pauses his screen. Felicity, on the other hand, requires a light tap to the shoulder to bring her out of whatever she’s doing; he tries not to ask anymore.

The three watch as Whicker comes to greet a man, Felicity immediately freezing an image of his face to send to another monitor for recognition, before escorting him inside. It could be luck, or a set-up, but seconds later sound registers in Oliver’s headset and he hastily unplugs it so the other two can hear.

“I came to check on your… progress,” the other man says in a thick Russian accent. This conversation sounds like it could be the break they need. If it’s real.

“Everything is proceeding according to schedule,” Whicker responds smoothly. The hint of uncertainty in his voice is nearly undetectable.

Unfortunately for him, the Russian picks up on it. “Except your leettle visit, right? Dit you think she wouldn’t tell me?”

“We knew that was a possibility. It’s being handled.”

“You drew attention to yourself too qvickly. You vere supposet to stay heedin longer.”

“It couldn’t be helped. His computer tech is better than we thought.”

At this, Felicity fights a smile before shaking her head a bit and schooling her expression into cool
indifference once again. Oliver can almost hear the internal debate she’s likely having about accepting praise from a criminal.

“Vell maybe you shoult have done your research better.”

“I did everything I could! I had your friend create the digital trail. You told me he was the best.”

“He ees.”

“Well, apparently the Arrow’s got someone better. It doesn’t matter, though. It’s all fine to go ahead as scheduled. They suspect my involvement but they can’t prove anything. We won’t have to worry about it for a while.”

“Let us ‘ope zat you are right. For your own goot as much as ours.”

After a few minutes of silence, the Russian man bids Whicker goodbye and the sound of footsteps retreating signals the end of the conversation. True to what they hear, Whicker and the man appear on Oliver’s screen within seconds. The two shake hands before the Russian gets in the car and drives off. Once again, Felicity loses the car on the traffic cameras fairly quickly.

“So was that real, or did they find the bug and stage that for our benefit?” Digg asks, the first to voice the question they’re all thinking.

“That’s a good question,” Oliver replies, standing and moving away from the computers. He runs a hand through the little hair he has, trying not to lash out and kick something in his frustration.

“I have an ID on the Russian,” Felicity calls out into the ensuing silence. It’s taken the recognition software all of ten minutes to come up with a match. “Meet Aleksandr Konn, Russian mobster extraordinaire. He’s been upper-level for at least six years, as far as I can tell. A little sloppy to be visiting Whicker so openly if you ask me, so it could definitely be a set-up, but I’d still say Konn’s the one pulling the strings on the Russian end. He also confirmed that the computer expert Whicker picked up came from Russia, meaning he spent his time away in Russia for sure. It also narrows down the possible list of hackers, which makes me think they didn’t pick up the bug.”

“That’s true,” Oliver admits, halting in his restless pacing to lean against the table. “If it was a set-up they wouldn’t have given away any information about the anonymous computer tech.”
“So we’re operating under the assumption that Whicker is covering for the Russians then? What about the woman Konn referenced?” Digg chimes in.

At this, Oliver passes a hand over his face, mentally exhausted trying to puzzle it all out. “I’m not sure where she fits. She could be the brains of the operation, or just the go-between.”

“We could let Lance figure that out,” Digg hints.

Oliver sighs. “Let’s just let him know about the shipping yard and see if he’s willing to bring in a team to bust the underlings. Maybe one of them will talk and it will solve the problem.”

That, at least, they can agree on. With the decision made, Felicity puts in a call to Lance while he and Digg start going over maps of the shipping yard and Whicker’s compound. By the time she hangs up the phone with a reluctant agreement from Lance (after she threatened to come see him in person), they’ve decided to steer clear of the shipping yard altogether while the police are there. Instead, Oliver will go to Whicker’s shortly after the ring is busted, once word will have spread to Whicker so he’ll be in full panic mode.

“Am I the only one who has a bad feeling about this?” Felicity’s voice startles him into awareness. Looking around, he realizes Digg’s gone.

Mutely, he shakes his head in response.

She breathes a sigh of relief. “Good to know I’m not the only one. It just feels like we’re missing something and I hate that feeling!”

“Me too,” he replies, sighing heavily. “You should get home. Get some rest.”

“Ready when you are,” she responds pointedly.

His lips twitch at the not-so-subtle hint that he also needs sleep, and he concedes the point. His hand falls to the small of her back automatically as he walks with her to the stairs, the only lingering reminder of the previous intimacy they’ve been able to mostly ignore. He watches as she drives off ahead of him, feeling the same strange knot of anxiety that is his constant companion whenever she’s
out of his sight these days.

Fifteen minutes later, as he’s climbing the stairs to his bedroom, his phone vibrates. The knot is already loosening at her assurance of safety when the phone vibrates again, meaning someone is calling him, not texting as Felicity usually does. Frowning, he spies Felicity’s name on the caller ID and immediately halts his progress up the stairs. She never calls him unless it’s important. His stomach drops as he presses the button to answer. She only calls if something is wrong.
A Threat and a Surprise

“Felicity. Is everything OK?” He asks, sure that his emotions are coming through too clearly in his words.

“Uh, I’m not sure,” she responds, her voice shaky. “Oliver, someone left a note on my door.”

“And?” He prompts a bit too sharply. He can’t bring himself to feel bad about it right now though, not with the way she sounds. He’s already heading back down the stairs.

“It, uh, it says I need to stop working for you. You know, the other you.”

He pretends it’s this (not the suddenly overwhelming desire to see her with his own eyes) that cements his decision. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Oh, no, you don’t have to- I checked and there’s no one-” She stutters quickly.

He tries to contain his growl of frustration that she decided to actually go check her apartment out herself before calling. It won’t do anyone any good if he starts in on the lecture he’s already preparing. Not now, at least. Instead, he schools his voice into his best impression of careful indifference. “Felicity, I’m already out the door. Just- lock yourself inside and don’t open the door for anyone else. And call Digg.” His commands are short and he hangs up before she can respond.

The ride to her apartment takes far too long, even as he doubles the speed limit. As it is, he barely waits for the bike to stop before he’s halfway across the street and entering her building, taking the stairs three at a time. When he finally knocks on her door, it seems to take forever for her to open it. He lets out a breath he wasn’t aware of holding as he takes in the sight of her, perfectly safe, but he needs to get rid of the remaining adrenaline and insists on checking her apartment himself. He can tell she’s irritated, but she indulges him nonetheless, stepping aside to let him in. He pacifies his sudden desire to touch her with a gentle hand on her shoulder as he passes by, allowing it to linger a bit longer than is strictly necessary. She’s safe. She’s standing right in front of him.

He completes the sweep of her apartment sooner than he wants to, the buzz of adrenaline now just a fine hum. At a loss for what to do next, he stops in the main room of her apartment and looks around. He’s thoroughly unsurprised by the array of colours, from red couches to orange rugs, all complementing and balancing each other. It’s very Felicity. Well, the Felicity she lets them see, not this strange, darker side of her that she’s suddenly revealing. Engrossed as he is in studying his
surroundings, it takes him a moment to realize she’s standing in front of him, paper in hand. Wordlessly, she holds it out to him. The note is encased in an envelope with her name typed on the front, leaving no room to say it’s a mistake. The actual note is also typed, with no indications of who sent it.

**You need to stop working for the Arrow. It’s not safe.**

“I think this had to come from someone in Whicker’s… employ. Whoever left it was able to either have someone mess with the security footage of my building, or do it themselves,” she tells him, moving to sit on the couch.

“It could be unrelated,” he suggests, knowing it’s improbable even as he says the words. She shoots him a look that confirms it as he tilts his head, catching the implications of what she just said. “How do you know what the security footage picked up already?”

At this, she blushes lightly, looking off to the window to avoid his gaze. “I may have set up my own not-totally-legal access to the feed when I moved in.”

He nods, biting the inside of his cheek to keep himself from grinning. The situation does not permit humour.

“Whoever hijacked the system did it well. That’s what makes me think it’s related to Whicker. It’s on the same level as his Russian computer friend. He also left me a hint,” she explains, pulling her laptop toward her and typing a few commands to pull up the video. Digg chooses this moment to arrive, thankfully, so there’s no need to wait. It takes a few seconds and the passing on of the note to catch the other man up before she plays the footage. “Ok, so he’s got it playing on a basic loop, but the what isn’t important. It’s the when.”

“February 13\(^{th}\), 2013?” Digg reads, brow scrunched. “I don’t get it. What’s important about February 13\(^{th}\)?”

“It’s the date Felicity joined the team,” Oliver answers automatically.

Felicity’s head whips around to look at him in surprise. “You remember that?”
He shrugs. “I remember a lot of things.”

She studies him for another minute before mimicking his shrug. “I guess getting shot by your own mother is a pretty memorable event.”

“So he’s covering his tracks with footage from the day Oliver showed up bleeding in the back of your car. Why?” Digg frowns, trying to puzzle it all out.

“So that I know he’s been watching me. He knows exactly when I started working for the Arrow, a phrase that, I must point out, I object to on principle. I’d like to think I’m more than just your employee,” she says before blushing, “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant like more along the line of partner than… oh God this is not getting any better.”

Digg tries not to grin as he ducks his head briefly.

“Anyways. He knows when I joined the team, so either he’s been watching me for that long, which is super creepy, or he’s just that good. I mean, we’re careful…ish.” She stops, tilting her head while considering her words. “You know, we’re not really that careful. But there’s no way he could track it to that specific of a date without having been keeping tabs on me, which, I will say again, is super creepy.”

Oliver’s jaw tightens as he moves stiffly to the window and looks out at the city. The idea of someone watching Felicity like she’s suggesting makes him far more anxious than he wants, but what she’s saying makes sense.

“Why would he tip his hand like that though?” Digg is asking, sitting beside her on the couch to get a better look at the footage. “Contacting you alone is a huge risk to take, not to mention revealing that he knows such details about your life. Unless he thought you wouldn’t pick up on it? His own little private joke?”

Oliver can sense her shaking her head in his peripheral vision as she answers. “No, he knew I’d make the connection. He wanted me to.”

“Why?”

She sighs heavily, slouching back against the couch. “I wish I knew.”
“Oliver?” Digg calls. He turns his head away from the window. “You’ve been quiet. Any ideas?”

“No,” he admits, turning the rest of his body from the window as well. “We won’t figure anything out tonight. Why don’t you just head home?”

Digg nods, understanding the unspoken words but mostly containing the slightly disapproving expression on his face.

“Yeah we all need sleep,” Felicity says before catching the specificity of his words and snapping her head to look at him. “Wait, you told Digg to go home.”

“Yes.”

“Where exactly are you going?” She asks with narrowed eyes.

“Nowhere,” he answers simply, “I’m sleeping on your couch tonight.”

“I- I’m sorry, what?” She splutters, eyes wide.

“I’ll just let you two… sort this out,” Diggle says, slipping quickly from the room with a parting, “Call me if anything else turns up.”

“No,” she snaps once Digg leaves. “Just no, Oliver. I don’t need a babysitter. Go home so you don’t feed your sister’s delusions that you’re sleeping with your secretary.”

“I’m not here to babysit you; I’m here to protect you. Some guy broke into your building and left a note on your door. He knows you work with the Arrow.”

“And Oliver Queen suddenly sleeping on my couch isn’t a dead giveaway of your connection to the whole thing at all,” she retorts sarcastically.
“It’s a risk I’m willing to take to make sure you’re safe.”

She fixes him with a look. “The note was on the outside of my door, Oliver. There’s no indication he could even get in. Besides, if he wanted to hurt me, don’t you think he would have by now? Instead he just left me some stupid, overbearing command like I’d actually listen to some weirdo I don’t know.”

“Or he could be playing with you,” he points out, “You said it yourself. He left that footage on there for a reason. This is some kind of game for him. For all we know this threat could just be the start of it all.”

“Threat?” She snorts. “I wouldn’t really call this a threat. It was more of a hypocritical piece of advice.”

“You often get advice taped to your door in strange, unmarked envelopes?” He snaps back, unable to control himself.

At his words, her shoulders slump forward and she drops her head into her hands. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just on emotional overdrive. I realize there’s a reason I take a couple of weeks to go home now. I didn’t realize how draining it would be, trying to deal with all the stupid stuff forcing its way to the surface and simultaneously trying to figure out Mystery #154. Then there’s the she-devil.”

He chuckles despite his anger. “You’ve been keeping track?”

“No…” She replies, her lips remaining puckered around the ‘o’ as she turns her head away in embarrassment, giving the word away for a lie. He continues to stare at her, one eyebrow raised, as she studiously avoids looking back at him. Finally, she caves. “Ok, it’s not like I keep it all written down in a diary or journal or anything… I just remember the number. I remember a lot of things.”

He shakes his head in disbelief, grinning as he stuffs his hands in his pockets and makes his way over to the bookshelf beside her television, stopping to study the volumes organized in neat, alphabetical rows. She seems to have a bit of everything, with a bit more selection of fiction than any other category.

“I used to read nothing but fiction books when I was younger,” she says, and he turns to find her watching him. “But then I grew up and realized there was an entire world out there, waiting for me to use it as the backdrop for my own story. I wasn’t doing myself or anyone else any good staying
cooped up in my room reading about fictitious romances and adventures where everyone ends up as one big happy family. So I branched out a little, read some different things, made a few friends, and eventually I stopped relying on books so much.”

He smiles as she blushes at her own admission. “I don’t think I read any books when I was younger. I was too busy drinking and getting into trouble with Tommy.”

“So your bookshelves are purely decorative then?” She asks, grinning slightly.

“The ones in my room, yes,” he answers, “The ones in the library, however, are full of very real books.”

She stares at him for a moment before shaking her head. “Why am I not surprised? Of course you have a library.”

“Perks of being a billionaire,” he replies, keeping the light tone of the conversation going, “Access to hundreds of books I will likely never read. I do like to sit in the library sometimes, though. It’s quiet, and everyone is so used to the old me that they never think to look for me there.”

“How… strategic of you.” She pauses to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear before growing serious again. “But this isn’t going to distract me from the matter at hand. I admit you have a point, but your solution to me being in quasi-danger cannot be to move in here and sleep on my couch. Not only is it a dead giveaway, it’s also totally inappropriate.”

“I thought we settled this,” he sighs, “You are not in quasi-danger. Someone knows where you live and he knows you’re involved with me. If it takes revealing myself to protect you, I’d do it in a heartbeat, Felicity,” he says, his voice growing softer at the last sentence. He moves to stand across the coffee table from where she’s sitting and pauses briefly before addressing her last statement. “And what exactly is inappropriate about a friend sleeping on another friend’s couch when said friend is in danger?”

She looks away, and he can see a faint blush spreading its way across her cheeks as she gestures between them. “CEO? Secretary? How is that going to look? I mean, it will totally amp up the gossip in the office, which would be a good thing for the image I guess, but then I really couldn’t deny it to the few friends I have who believed me because… well… I can’t very well say you’re sleeping on my couch because you’re concerned for my safety after I was quasi-threatened by some creep behind a computer screen.” She takes a deep breath as she finishes speaking, determinedly keeping her eyes focused on everything else in the room except for him. “And I have to point out that having Digg stay here would draw far less notice, because no one really cares about the blonde assistant and the
He starts to answer before he catches himself and stops before he can utter a word. There is no good answer to that question. He can’t tell her it’s because, even though he trusts Digg to keep her safe, he doesn’t think he can handle being half a city away if something happens. He needs to take care of this himself, so that he can be here when she needs him. Instead of saying any of that, he offers some vague explanation about Lyla and not wanting to get in the way of Digg’s thus-far-successful relationship.

She scoffs. “Please. You know as well as I do that, as unfair to Lyla as it may be, Digg wouldn’t say no and he wouldn’t resent either one of us for it. We’re a team. We have each other’s backs. Just admit that it would be easier for him to stay here.”

“Fine, it would be easier, but the easier route isn’t always the one you should take. Besides, Digg lives closer to you than I do and can get here faster than I could.”

“You got here before him tonight,” she points out.

“True, but you called me first and I also broke about fifty different traffic laws on the way here. There’s no guarantee I wouldn’t run into problems in the future.”

She makes an aggravated noise in the back of her throat before throwing her hands up in defeat. “Fine! I give up! You can sleep on my couch and play protector, but for one night. One night, Oliver.” He opens his mouth to argue but she holds up a warning finger. “If he tries anything else, we’ll revisit this discussion, alright?”

“Fine,” he replies, sensing that continuing to insist would be pointless. For now, at least. She starts toward the bedroom at the back of the apartment before he calls out to stop her. He makes sure to inject every ounce of sincerity he can into the statement that follows her eyes snapping back to his, his voice softening with it. “Just so you know… I care about the blonde assistant and the black driver.”

He wakes later than usual in the morning, but still before Felicity. Reluctant as he is to leave her alone, especially after making such a big deal out of it last night, he decides that half an hour won’t hurt and hesitates only briefly before picking up her apartment keys and making a short trip for coffee and her favourite pastries. Hopefully the sight of them will soften any lingering irritation she
may have with him for imposing on her personal space.

When he returns, he can hear the shower running as he hangs her keys on their hook by the door and locks it behind him. It isn’t long before she emerges from her room, fully dressed and eyeing him suspiciously.

“So you think you can just bully your way into sleeping on my couch and then bring me coffee to make it all better?” She asks with a raised eyebrow. He can see the teasing glint around the edges, though, and knows she isn’t actually angry.

“No,” he responds before holding up the bag. “That’s why I brought these, too.”

He watches her try to maintain her angry façade before failing miserably and allowing a smile to grace her lips before dropping into the seat across from him. “That’s not fighting fair.”

“I never do,” he quips, grinning.

“I’m actually surprised you left me alone long enough to go get this,” she remarks, raising the coffee cup to her lips briefly.

He stiffens at her offhand remark, wondering if there’s anything lurking beneath it, waiting for another fight. “I won’t apologize for being concerned about you.”

She surprises him when she sighs and places her hand on his gently, looking straight into his eyes. “I’m sorry. I know I’m being really difficult, but I need you to know that I really do appreciate you putting your life on hold. I don’t mean to give you such a hard time about it. I just…” She pauses, searching for the right words. “I haven’t felt like this since… well, in a long time and I hate it. I hate feeling so helpless. I hate that you feel the need to sleep on my couch. I don’t want to be a burden.”

“You’re not a burden,” he assures, turning his hand so he can lightly squeeze her fingers to punctuate his words. When he continues, he makes sure his voice is lighter, “Besides, friends look out for each other.”

She raises an eyebrow at that. “You’d feel the need to sleep on Digg’s couch if he were quasi-threatened by some mysterious hacker from Russia?”
He gives her a lopsided smile at that. “I don’t know; that’s a pretty specific situation.”

She laughs, and he makes a split-second decision to allow them both half an hour to pretend the world outside doesn’t exist. So, instead of asking her what she plans to do in terms of tracking the hacker or trying another angle at connecting Whicker to the trafficking ring, he finds himself enjoying the comfortable silence that envelopes them as they sip coffee. He feels normal in this moment in a way he didn’t with Laurel in the restaurant. It feels real, sitting in Felicity’s kitchen in the morning drinking coffee without the need for words to fill the space between them. As soon as the thought appears, though, he forces it away. It’s too dangerous to start thinking like this. Just like that, the spell is broken and he stands abruptly, realizing as he does so that it requires him to pull his hand from hers. He hadn’t noticed that neither of them had pulled away from the contact and, judging by the colour now spreading across her cheeks, neither had she.

Digg is already at the foundry when they get there, guns laid out on the table in front of him as he waits. He’s set up a makeshift firing range behind the training mats. It takes Felicity all of three seconds to catch on and she sighs in resignation.

“Guns? Seriously?”

Oliver remains silent, deciding to let Digg handle this particular argument. It was his suggestion, after all. The idea of Felicity with a gun, of her being in a situation where she needs to use it, affects him in ways he isn’t ready to admit. When Digg brought it up, he told the other man that it was his call and that, if he could get her to agree, he could go for it. Oliver wants no part of watching her delve into their world of weapons. Learning to handle herself in a fight is one thing, but learning to shoot is quite another. Hand-to-hand is for defence, but her having a gun goes far beyond her line, something he’s sure she is now explaining to Digg.

When he comes back, he’s surprised to find she isn’t arguing as vehemently as he expected. Instead, she has a reluctant expression on her face and a gun in her hand, testing the weight. He stops short when he takes in how familiar she looks with the simple act of holding one. Digg looks surprised, too.

Catching the confused glance they exchange, she sighs and starts taking the gun apart, piece by piece as she begins to explain. She manages to ignore the growing shock on their faces as she dismantles the weapon with ease. “Before he… left, my father taught me how to shoot. I was fifteen when he came into my room and said we were going out. It had been a while since he’d tried to take me on one of his usually ill-fated ‘outdoor adventures’ so I was surprised, to say the least,” she tells them, concentrating on the gun instead of the two of them. When she finishes dismantling it, she checks the
pieces and starts the reassembly. “He took me out to a cabin our family had in the woods about an hour from our house and brought out this crate of guns,” she pauses to look up, “And when I say crate, I mean it was more like a trunk.

“But anyways, so he brings out these guns and tells me he’s got to teach me to shoot so I can protect myself. I didn’t understand, and I still don’t, but he told me it was necessary and there was no arguing. So, I learned to shoot.” She finishes her story with the punctuation of sliding the magazine home and heads for the target Diggle erected on the other end of the room, tossing the ear protectors Diggle brought out to each of them as she goes. Oliver fumbles a bit as he’s caught off guard, managing to recover and avoid bringing any attention to himself as he struggles to keep up with what’s happening.

She sets her stance with practiced ease, raising the weapon and firing five rounds at the target. He’s sure Diggle is feeling just as off-balance as he is when they see that all five bullets hit the target, three dangerously close to the center. She stares at the holes momentarily before walking back and placing the gun on the table in front of her.

He watches curiously as she seems to come back to reality when the metal is no longer in contact with her skin, jerking her hand back to her side with an almost disgusted expression on her face. Again, he’s struck by how starkly different the Felicity holding the gun was from the one currently stepping back from the table as though the firearms could spontaneously combust at any moment. She seemed colder, more calculating, with the metal in her hand, and now she just seems like his Felicity. He absolutely does not linger on the fact that he just referred to her as ‘his’.

“Yeah, so… I know how to shoot. I’m not as good as I used to be, but I know enough to handle myself, and I’d much rather be trying to find this Russian whack-a-doo and breaking up a human trafficking ring, so I’m just going to…” She trails off, indicating her computers before she makes a hasty retreat to the desk.

Oliver isn’t sure what to make of the whole thing. Digg is almost grinning in disbelief, but he’s still processing the sight of Felicity holding a gun. If there are two things in the world that he would never think to associate with one another, it would be Felicity and gun proficiency. She’s been so against guns and violence from the start that he’s pretty sure it will take him at least an hour to wrap his head around this new development. It reminds him a bit of himself when he was first stranded on the island. He was so opposed to killing that the mere thought of holding a weapon was repulsive. He learned quickly that he needed to revise his viewpoint given the circumstances, but the acceptance of the inevitable changed him. He can’t bear the thought that Felicity could be corrupted in the same way he was; she’s too good, too pure to be tainted by the violence that controls his life.

As soon as the thought enters his mind, he remembers their past conversation and his revelation that perhaps he’s idealizing her too much. He needs to stop thinking of her in terms of the ideal he’s placed on a pedestal and start seeing her for who she really is. Right now, she’s seriously conflicted.
He can sense it even as she sits at the computer, guns out of sight. He knows she’s only dedicating half of her concentration to the task at hand, the other portion of her mind trying to erase what just happened. It’s what he finds himself doing far too often when he’s trying to compartmentalize a particularly troublesome moment and get back to the reality he’d rather be living in. He understands the inner struggle to shove it back down and recognizes the signs in the blonde as she sits stiffly in her chair, radiating tension that clearly is meant as a sign for them to keep their distance. She said her father was responsible for teaching her to shoot, so that likely explains why she’s never mentioned it before. Forgetting her father would involve forgetting every unpleasant memory she has of him, and he’s sure that this is definitely an unpleasant memory for her.

Pausing in his train of thought for a moment, he wonders when exactly he started viewing reality as something he actually wanted to live in. Reality has never been a pleasant place for him. It has been too often filled with pain and regret. There was a time when he gladly gave in to his desire to delude himself with the fantasy world he constructed on the island, where he came back to find everyone waiting with open arms and he slid into the life he’d dreamed up. When did he start thinking reality was a better place to be?

“I found his pre-Russia hacker!” Felicity announces about an hour later. She looks more relaxed than before, and he vaguely wonders again how she is so good at compartmentalizing. “Frank Binton was paid monthly via wire transfer, which was disguised a bit more cleverly than everything else he did for Whicker, but not well enough to escape my notice. I think he would be very receptive to a visit, don’t you?”

Oliver can feel himself already pulling into Arrow-mode (another term coined by Felicity) as he nods, heading to change into his leathers. He remembers talking about it once, the way he becomes an entirely different person when he puts on the hood. She actually shivered when she told him that it was like he lost all emotion and humanity. Catching a glance of his reflection in the mirror, something he tries not to do, he realizes she’s right. His eyes are a dark and empty reflection staring back at him, his jaw squared and his lips pressed thin. Unbidden, an image of Felicity’s own facial expression as she was holding the gun flashes in his memory. He sees the same cold eyes and squared jaw of his own reflection, feeling a dull ache spread through his chest at the similarities. She isn’t that person, and she doesn’t deserve to be made into her, especially not at the hands of her own father.

Binton doesn’t know much of anything that could be useful. He reiterates that Whicker was indeed in Russia after the Undertaking and that when he came back he fired Binton, telling him that he’d found a better option.

“What did he have you do for him?” Oliver growls, arrow pulled taught on the bowstring and aimed at Binton’s heart.
Binton is shaking like a leaf, but manages a breathy answer. “M-Mostly financial doctoring, to h-hide
embezzlements and t-tax fraud.”

“What else.”

“I- I.” Binton pauses, looking around wildly but finding no other option than to keep talking. “He
had me hide transactions.”

“Like what.”

“I- I don’t know. L-like on trips to Russia and nights at hotels in Starling. He, uh, he went to Russia
on business at least once every couple of months, and there was always some back room dealing he
needed me to cover up. The hotel visits were about once every two weeks. Always a d-different
venue, b-but he was adamant about the payments being routed through an offshore account I set up
for him.”

Learning nothing else of value, Oliver finally relents and heads back to the foundry to see if
Felicity’s managed to uncover anything based on Binton’s limited information. It’s still early, so
hopefully she’ll find something before they leave tonight.

He doesn’t even need to ask before she’s spouting off more progress than he expected. “So based on
what Binton said, I went back and checked Whicker’s financials for anything with signs of
tampering similar to his credit card activity after the Undertaking. I hit gold. Whicker went to Russia
quite a bit, and Binton wasn’t quite good enough to bury the more sinister transactions Whicker
made. A lot of the payments Binton tried to erase were made to a club owned by Konn. It seems to
be his headquarters, so I’m assuming this was Whicker ‘romancing’ him, which is why there was no
evidence of Big Whicker’s connection to Little Whicker’s contacts on the surface. He was at least
smart enough to hide it, but he probably shouldn’t have relied so heavily on a mediocre computer
tech to do it. He could have at least used cash, but then again billionaires never seem to understand
that money is an actual, tangible thing, not just a plastic card.” She pauses, her words catching up
with her. “No offence.”

“None taken,” he assures her, his lips twitching upward despite the rather serious situation.

“So I’ve also been looking into Konn to see if I can find his Russian friend who seems so interested
in me. No real luck so far, but I expected that. The guy is good, so he wouldn’t be likely to leave a
trail, digital or paper, that connects him to Konn. I’m comparing Konn’s financials to Whicker’s to
see if I can find a pattern. What I can tell you is that some of my online acquaintances have gotten back to me.

“Usually hackers will leave some sort of signature behind when they pull off a job, you know, to let other hackers know it was them. There’s this one guy, though, who they say doesn’t do that. Instead, he leaves behind little personal taunts. He mainly operated independently, but was known to do work for Konn, and used personal information as a kind of insurance policy or a way to manipulate people instead of leaving a signature. He emptied some Russian politician’s bank account a couple of years back and left behind the name of his mistress as insurance that he wouldn’t pursue the matter. Apparently after the name came up, he hired a freelance computer specialist to look into it, and when she started digging, a video of him and his mistress popped up. He stopped digging, but it seems to be the kind of thing my stalker would do, doesn’t it?”

He clenches his jaw as she calls the guy her stalker, trying to control the blinding anger the term brings with it. “It does. Any leads on who this mystery guy is?”

She continues typing as she talks. “Here’s the interesting thing: the guy was by all accounts completely anonymous. No one ever encountered him at any of the usual hacker hangouts in Russia, but people were definitely aware of his presence. Apparently he’s like some kind of god over there he’s that good, but he came out of the woodwork so sporadically that I guess he’s kind of more like Big Foot or something. They call him the Ghost. Anyways… not the point. The point is that he’s been silent for longer than he normally is, according to my, er, contacts.”

“So you think he’s been silent because he’s working for Whicker?” Digg chimes in from where he stands at the table.

“I do,” Felicity confirms, spinning around to face them. “I think Konn recommended this Ghost to Whicker as a way to cover their tracks and he’s been exclusive to Whicker ever since. As to why he threatened me, it could have something to do with the fact that I caught on to what they were doing. Konn sounded really unhappy that Whicker’s false trail was discovered so quickly.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple, Felicity,” Oliver disagrees. As much as it pains him, he knows that nothing about this is simple. “He didn’t need to leave that footage behind, but he did. He wants you to know he’s watching you, and I don’t think it’s just because you caught on to him.”

“It doesn’t sound like he gets bested often,” Digg offers, “Maybe he’s challenging you?”

Felicity hums thoughtfully as she considers the idea. “It’s possible. Maybe he’s just trying to recover the hit his ego probably took. I mean, he’s really good, and him leaving that note and the footage is basically just him reaffirming that. He’s telling me that he’s been watching me. He knows way more
about me than I do about him, and that could be his way of reminding me of that and making sure I know I’m out of my depth. Unfortunately for him, he doesn’t realize that it just makes me want to find him that much more.”

Oliver feels his lips tug upward in a small smile at her determination before turning to head to the training mats.

“What are you doing?” Her voice trails after him. He looks back at her questioningly and she gives him her ‘isn’t it obvious?’ face before filling in the blank. “Family dinner?”

He lets out an aggravated noise as he lets his head fall back. He’d forgotten.

Oliver tries not to look at his phone as often as he’d like while Thea fills them in on a new promotion she’s thinking of introducing at Verdant. He’s anxious, and he’s sure his mother and sister can tell but are trying to pretend they can’t. So far, dinner has been stretching on far longer than he’d like. Usually, family dinners are a relatively relaxing occurrence for him, but with the current mystery he can’t concentrate on much of anything being said. He not only wants to prove Whicker’s involvement in the trafficking ring, but also get to the bottom of this mysterious Russian computer whiz threatening his own, and for the life of him, he doesn’t understand how it all connects. There’s a blank spot in the form of this woman that gnaws at him, and he can’t help but wonder if she’s the key to sorting it all out, or if finding her will only spark more questions. At least Binton helped put together some solid proof of Whicker’s under-the-table dealings in Russia, and they can use it to confront him, but it isn’t enough to break the entire thing open. They can link Konn and Whicker, but they don’t have the full picture.

“Ollie?” Thea’s voice permeates his concentration, bringing his attention back from where his eyes were glued to his phone under the table.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” He asks, trying to brush it off.

His mother fixes him with a look. “I thought we agreed no business during dinner, dear.”

He gives her a tight, apologetic smile and reluctantly tucks the phone away in his pocket. “Sorry, Mom. I’m just… expecting a very important call.”
Thea, however, isn’t as pacified. “Important, huh? Sure it’s business?”

Not this again. It’s all he can do not to strangle her from across the table. “Yes, Thea. I’m expecting confirmation of an investor signing on.”

“It’s kind of late to be hearing about investors, don’t you think?” She prods, a grin stretching across her face. “Sure it’s not someone else?”

“The business day never truly ends, Thea.”

His mother nods her agreement. “That, I can confirm. How are things going at the office, Oliver?”

Thankful for the diversion, he launches into a brief overview of the happenings at QC. All in all, things are going well for the company, if you don’t count Isabel Rochev still breathing down his neck. It’s making a rather nice comeback, especially considering the state it was in when Isabel first appeared on the scene. Despite what the investors say about him, he knows they can’t fault the company’s rebound performance, though most of them likely attribute that to Isabel’s influence.

He tries not to feel guilty at the look of pride in his mother’s eyes as he describes the steps he’s taking to expand the Applied Sciences division. She thinks he’s doing this out of desire and family loyalty, but she couldn’t be more wrong. He feels a degree of family loyalty, yes, but he has absolutely no desire to be behind the CEO’s desk at Queen Consolidated. He’s only there because Felicity and Digg came to get him from Lian Yu and forced him to see reason. It doesn’t stop him from feeling like a fraud sitting there, pretending to care while accountants and financial advisors drone on about the next best investment. He doesn’t like the CEO’s chair and all of the pressure and comparisons that come with it. If he could have convinced Walter to stay on, he’d be back to managing Verdant in a heartbeat. At least there weren’t any expectations to follow him around there. As abhorrent as being the playboy is, it’s a role he remembers and fits into well.

Of course, if he’s being completely honest, he’d say he feels most like himself when he’s in Verdant’s basement, not the main floor. Once the door closes to separate him from the curious, prying eyes, he can let go of all pretense and just be himself with Felicity and Digg. They have no preconceived notions of who he should be or any expectations. Well, that’s not entirely true, but their expectations make him better. If this morning is anything to go by, that ability to drop the acts around them has extended beyond the basement now, too. It worries him to think that he felt more relaxed in Felicity’s apartment this morning than he does right now in his own home, but he’s sure that’s partially to do with the green, leather-clad secret he’s keeping from his mother and sister. If they knew, he’s sure it would be different. Not the same as this morning, but still better than right now.
“What’s with the faraway look in your eye?” Thea asks, the same tone to her voice as earlier.

With an effort, he pulls himself away from the peaceful memory of this morning and focuses on his sister. “Just thinking.”

His phone doesn’t ring all through the rest of the meal, and he dedicates his effort to remaining engaged in the conversation while dodging Thea’s attempts to lure out the topic of Felicity. If there’s one thing she’s not, it’s subtle.

It isn’t until later that night, when he’s parked in the shadows of the alley across from Felicity’s building to check up on her that his phone vibrates. Irritated, he pulls it out, only to chuckle to himself as he dismounts from the bike.

**You know, if you’re going to lurk in the alley all night you may as well just come up.**
He can tell she’s trying to school her face into annoyance as she opens the door, but amusement hints at the edges. “For a guy who prides himself on stealth, your stalking could use some improvement.”

“I’ll try to remember that.” His lips lift in a small grin as he steps inside. Noting the black metal in her hand as she closes and locks the door behind him, he shoots her a raised eyebrow.

“Rental from Digg,” she explains, taking it with her to the couch and setting it on the coffee table. “I have to get the one my father gave me out of storage tomorrow, but he wouldn’t leave without knowing I had one.”

She’s staring at the television instead of him as he takes the seat beside her. Oliver nods, considering whether he should ask why she kept the gun despite her obvious dislike of her father, but she takes the decision away from him as she elaborates. “I got rid of most of the guns after… everything, so Mom wouldn’t find them. She knew he liked to punch things, but she didn’t know about the trunk. I didn’t want to ruin her memory of him even more by having her find out we were keeping secrets. I kept the one he gave me when I got accepted to MIT, though. It didn’t feel right to sell it, even if I couldn’t bear to look at it, so I keep it in secure storage and try not to think about it. At least he’d be happy it’s finally getting put to use.”

He doesn’t know what to say to that, a loss for words that’s all too familiar these days. Instead, he steers the conversation to more stable waters. “Did you find anything else?”

“Not unless you consider a lot of hotel room rentals something. I don’t know why Binton covered those up, but they were some expensive bills. Whoever he’s romancing is getting the five star treatment and beyond,” she answers, bringing a shift in demeanor with the shift in conversation.

“Is?”

She nods, sitting back against the couch. “It’s still happening. I guess his new computer tech either doesn’t know he’s using the same account for the transactions, or he doesn’t care. I’m betting on the latter, because it is not the computer tech’s job to keep track of your dates.”

He’s about to comment when she suddenly lurches for the remote and turns up the volume.
“…the news has shocked many in the business community, who were expecting great things from Ritter Limited. Projections had the company slated to take off in the next few years, meaning news of its collapse has left many an investor confused and angry,” the reporter is saying, “There has been no comment from the company on what caused the unexpected disaster.”

As the reporter starts in on identifying herself before throwing it back to the main anchor, Felicity presses the ‘mute’ button and drops back to her previous position. She looks surprised, and he can’t say he feels any differently.

“I thought you said-” He starts, only to be cut off.

“I did… They were doing well. This makes no sense…” She trails off, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. “It makes no sense… That’s it!” She sits upright with the force of whatever revelation has come to light and he automatically moves back to avoid whatever wayward limb will surely be flying in his direction as she gets herself amped up. “It makes no sense!”

“Yes… So you’ve said…”

“No, don’t you get it? Sudden collapse? It’s just like the others! I’d bet you anything that, if I were to look into it, I’d find out their database was corrupted and destroyed, sending the company into turmoil and their stock prices plummeting!” She claps her hands exuberantly and he tries not to feel the warmth growing in his chest at the sight of her. Where she was forlorn and withdrawn a minute ago, now she’s full of life and excitement, but he can’t linger on that feeling. He needs to remind himself, and her, where their priorities lie.

“I’m sure it would…” He begins carefully.

“But not until after the Whicker thing is sorted out, I know,” she finishes, “But Whicker did meet with the CEO, remember? So I can at least check into how much Whicker lost because of this. It’s bound to make him more desperate to move the side business along if he just lost whatever money he put into Ritter Limited.”

He concedes the point as viable, watching as she pulls her tablet towards her and starts typing on the attached keyboard. Recognizing the look on her face as completely focused on the task at hand, he takes the opportunity to glance around her apartment once more. She doesn’t even notice as he rises and starts to wander, taking in everything his eyes missed last night. He turns back to check on her before stepping into the kitchen as he sees her still in the same position. The room isn’t exactly what
he expects. There are spices lining the walls and shiny silver appliances lined neatly on the counters. It reminds him a bit of the kitchen in his house, but it’s still warm enough to feel like a home. The kitchen in the mansion is designed for professional use, and as such has a detached sort of feeling to it. He finds that he likes the little plaques with silly sayings hung on the walls and the colorful spatulas in the utensil container. They give the kitchen a homey feeling that his own misses.

“My mom and I used to cook together when I was younger.”

He jumps at the sound of her voice, turning to see her leaning against the counter. It’s rare that anyone can sneak up on him. “Sorry, I- You were-”

She half-shrugs. “It’s fine. I kind of left you to fend for yourself.”

“I like your kitchen,” he comments, leaning against the opposite counter and running his hand along the surface idly.

“Thanks. I don’t get much of a chance to use it anymore, what with our night job and all, but I like to cook. I like to experiment,” she responds, before her eyes widen slightly at the inadvertent innuendo. He waits to see if she’ll acknowledge it but she concentrates on maintaining a straight face instead.

“Most times successfully,” he teases. Seeing the amused glint in her eyes brings a genuine smile to his face and he finds himself wishing they could do this more. The ease he feels standing in her kitchen is strange but addictive.

“Just for that, you don’t get any Enchilada Casserole tomorrow,” she threatens, pointing a finger at him.

“If it’s anything like the soup you made last week…” He trails off at the look on her face and chuckles. “I’m kidding.”

She considers him for a moment, head tilted to the side. “You are.” Her voice is filled with awe. “Oliver Queen has a sense of humour… Who knew?”

He quirks an eyebrow. “You always say I’m too serious.”
“Oh I’m not complaining,” she hurriedly assures, waving her hands in front of her. She studies him for a moment longer before smiling softly. “You should smile more often. I mean, really smile. You have a nice smile.”

Warmth bubbles up in his chest at her words and he finds himself unable to push it back down. A grin breaks out on his face again as he shakes his head, dipping his neck to look at the floor. The silence that stretches between them isn’t exactly awkward, but he can sense Felicity’s growing nerves and embarrassment as what she said catches up with her. He raises his eyes to meet hers, the smile still lingering on his lips as he tells her he’ll try.

“Whicker was in for a lot with Ritter,” Felicity tells them the next night night while they wait none too patiently for Lance to give them the go-ahead. “Double the investment he’s made in any other company. I’d say he’s one stressed out human trafficker right about now. I mean, the Arrow’s on to his side business and paid him a threatening visit not too long ago, and now he’s lost a very large sum of money to something I’m still not convinced was an accident, so yeah. I’d say tonight is a perfect time to break him. With his financial ties to Konn’s club, he can’t say we have no proof anymore. It may not be the kind of proof that gets him put away for a long time, but it’s enough to cast doubt and launch a proper investigation.”

“She’s right,” Digg concurs as he leans against the desk beside her chair, “Man’s probably hitting the bottle pretty hard right now, and when he finds out the ring got busted up by the cops tonight… He’s gonna be a basket case. He could just confess and save the cops and lawyers all the trouble.”

Oliver gets his quiver out to make sure he has adequate supplies. “Good.”

“Anything to make the Lances’ jobs easier,” Felicity chimes in, but he barely hears her. He’s already slipping into his Arrow persona. He vaguely registers her and Digg trading comments but he pays them no mind. He has a job to do.

Whicker is definitely drunk. The man is staring listlessly at the fireplace when Oliver steals into the room, and doesn’t bat an eye when he recognizes his presence.

“I knew you’d come,” the man slurs in that same resigned tone he hears from suspects about to cave. The rug underneath the chair he sits in is different, and Oliver represses the urge to comment on the lack of burn marks in the new one.
“You’re finished.”

Whicker heaves a sigh. “So it would seem. I should have known better. Getting involved in this was a bad idea from the start.”

“Getting involved in what.”

“This,” Whicker elaborates, waving his hand vaguely around the room. The amber liquid in his glass sloshes dangerously close to rim, but he doesn’t notice. Oliver, however, notices everything, even taking in the sight of bits of plastic strewn about the floor that appear to be the remains of a cell phone. “All of it. I knew it was a bad idea, but I still… I let myself believe it was a good one. I should have stayed the hell away.”

“Why didn’t you.”

Whicker looks up at him then, his eyes dull and emotionless. “You’ve never let yourself get talked into something? Never believed that it would work out the way it was supposed to, even though every instinct you have is telling you to run for the hills? You’ve never fallen victim to a silver tongue and a pretty face?”

Oliver frowns at this. He’s expecting a confession of guilt, but this sounds more like an admission of participation.

“You have, haven’t you?” Whicker asks, almost laughing in some form of convoluted relief. “Let me guess, Binton sold me out, and you brought me the proof you had that computer expert of yours dig up for you?”

He stiffens at the mention of Felicity. “I don’t have anyone to help me.”

At this, the other man snorts, flapping his hand dismissively. Some of the liquid spills out of the glass this time and drips onto the carpet. He’ll probably need a new rug again. “Please. I know you’ve got someone. Whoever he is, he’s good.”

A small sigh of relief almost escapes Oliver’s lips. Whicker obviously doesn’t know who Felicity is,
but he tucks that particular revelation away for later examination, wanting to know why the man’s computer expert didn’t share her identity with his employer.

“You know the worst part of all this?” Whicker asks. “I actually believed her when she said she’d pro-“

The man’s words are cut off by the sound of shattering glass and a spray of blood. Oliver’s head jerks around, looking for the source of the bullet that just buried itself in the side of Whicker’s head, but all he sees is faint movement from the window behind him. Cursing himself for letting his guard down, he makes for that area of the wall at a sprint, Felicity trying to figure out what’s going on as he does so.

“The cameras you placed picked up some movement a few seconds ago but not much more than that,” Felicity tells him.

Using the information, he heads for the front of the compound. He’s fast, but not fast enough. All he sees as he gets to the street is a bike speeding off into the distance. He tries not to curse aloud but fails as he realizes that he has no idea what just happened or why.

“What the hell was that?” He snaps as he reaches the bottom of the stairs.

“I don’t know, man. Lance’s takedown went off without a hitch. Konn wasn’t expecting a thing. I let him make the call to Whicker before subtly pointing Lance in his direction,” Digg replies. He’d gone to the shipping yard to make sure no one escaped the bust, so at least one part of tonight went as planned.

Felicity sits silently, a frown etched on her face. She looks as frustrated as he feels as her fingers move across the keyboard at lightning speed. Deciding to give her some space, he heads over to the cabinet to put his weapons away and then to change. Interrupting her doesn’t seem like a viable option right now with all the stress she’s been under. It’s getting better, but she’s still clearly bothered by everything happening right now and he doesn’t want to make that worse by forcing his terrible mood on her any more than proximity demands.

Two minutes after he emerges, the sound of her typing freezes abruptly. He and Digg both look over to see her staring, wide-eyed, at the computer screen.
“It was the Russian hacker,” she says flatly.

“How?” Digg demands, moving to stand beside her. Oliver moves to take the place behind her chair, bracing his hands on the back.

“Whoever shot Whicker isn’t even on the footage. It was replaced with a loop from the night we planted the cameras at Whicker’s.”

“From- wait, what? How could he possibly know that?”

Felicity shrugs helplessly, falling back against his knuckles with a loud exhale. Without thinking about it, he moves his hands to cover her shoulders instead, squeezing lightly in reassurance. She stiffens in surprise at first, but relaxes under his palms as his thumbs swipe across the fabric of her cardigan. She sighs. “I don’t understand how this guy knows so much about us, or why he’s covering for whoever killed Whicker, or why he needed to be killed in the first place.”

“He said something…” Oliver trails off, trying to piece it back together. His hands slide off her shoulders and he starts to pace. “He said something about being fooled into this. It sounded like this woman we know nothing about talked him into getting involved and he was regretting it. He started to say something about what she promised. It sounded like she told him she’d protect him but she was setting him up.”

“So how do we find this woman?” Digg asks, turning to lean against Felicity’s desk.

“Another question we have no answer to.” Sighing in frustration, Oliver drops his head back and scrubs his hands over his face. “I’m sick of feeling one step behind on this.”

“You’re not the only one.” He looks down as his phone beeps. “That’s Lyla… You guys good if I…?”

Oliver nods curtly while Felicity bobs her head.

“I’ll let you know if we get anything more, but it doesn’t look like much will crop up. I’ve got some searches running for known female associates of Whicker and I called Lance to let him know what happened on our end,” Felicity says, “He said he’ll let us know if they find anything, but I’m guessing they’ll have about as much luck as we’re currently having.”
Digg inclines his head toward her in thanks and grabs his coat.

“We’ll start fresh in the morning,” Felicity tells him, her voice full of a conviction he doesn’t feel, “I’ll spend all day going over Whicker’s life with a fine tooth comb if that’s what it takes. We’re going to find this woman and we’re going to figure out what her role is in all of this, and we’ll take her down.”

His lips lift in a feeble attempt at a smile. “Always the optimist.”

“Yes, I am. I learned a while back that seeing the good in every situation is the only way you can keep putting one foot in front of the other.”

He knows she’s referring to her father, but chooses not to bring it up. He isn’t sure she can handle the extra emotional stress that would come with him prying into the past she desperately tries to repress tonight. As much as he wants to know, there’s a time and a place for it, neither of which is here and now. Instead, they remain in silence while she finishes up the searches she wants the system to run overnight and he double-checks his bow is stored away properly for something to do. When he turns to face her, she’s turned in her chair and staring at him while her teeth gnaw at her lip.

“So… Digg told me… About Laurel…” She says haltingly. He can feel the nerves radiating off her, unsure if she’s crossing the line. “I- uh… Sorry. For bringing her up earlier. I didn’t know.”

“It’s fine.”

She seems satisfied for all of three seconds before she turns back to him. “How- uh… How do you feel about it?” She pauses briefly before rushing on as he’s considering his words, obviously thinking she’s offended him in some way. “I mean, it’s just that she’s Laurel, you know, The Laurel. You’ve spent years pining after her and trying to get her to forgive you and see you as a better man and now she’s just… leaving. That’s got to make you feel something, right? Not that you don’t feel. It’s just that you don’t express emotion very often. You compartmentalize and you’ve been ever so helpfully been pointing out to me that that’s not exactly healthy so I just wondered if you… you know… wanted to… share… anything… about that…”

His lips twitch in amusement as her face burns red and she looks away. He takes another minute to consider his thoughts before speaking, causing her to jump. “I feel… better than I thought I would.”
She nods, obviously not expecting anything else, let alone what she got, but he finds himself compelled to say more as he leans back against the table across from her. This is a dangerous habit, but he’s too far in to stop now.

“There’s such a thing as too much history. Laurel was my symbol of redemption on the island. She was the reason I needed to survive, because I needed her to forgive me for being less than a quarter of the man she deserved. I wanted to be a better man than my father, and to do that I needed to be the kind of man who deserved a woman like Laurel. It was naïve to think she’d be able to forgive me for what I did, but I needed hope and her picture was the only physical representation I had of it.”

He thinks that’s the end of it, and so does she, judging by the way she’s wracking her brain for something to say. But saying the words felt… cathartic, and he feels like he can tell Felicity what’s on his mind without fear of judgement. Without fully thinking it through, he keeps going, feeling the weight of Laurel lift off his chest with each word.

“When I came back, I started to realize how wrong I’d been to hope she’d allow me to try and make amends, but she was the only way I knew how to become a better man so I kept trying.” He keeps his eyes trained on her. She’s sitting very still in her chair, almost as though she’s afraid that moving will scare him off. “Somewhere along the line, though, I stopped tying my progress to how accepting she was of me. When she told me she was leaving, I guess I realized that I don’t need her to feel like a better person, and haven’t for a while. Too much has happened between us for it to ever work like I once wanted it to, but I’m starting to think that’s a good thing. Laurel’s my past, and holding on to her only keeps me in limbo. I need to start enjoying my present, and she needs to start enjoying hers. So, yes, I’m feeling a lot better about her move than I thought I would.”

Felicity blinks in surprise and he shifts uncomfortably. He’s not used to sharing so much of himself and isn’t sure how she’s going to respond. When she finally manages to form a sentence, he feels the insecurity start to unwind. “Good. You deserve to be happy in the here and now, Oliver, regardless of what you may think about the so-called benefits of being a lone-wolf-martyr-type.”

Not for the first time, he wonders why she is so adamant in her belief that he deserves a normal life. He’s a murderer, and she knows it. How can she possibly justify his finding happiness, knowing what she does about him?

She reads the question on his face as usual. “Don’t try to say otherwise,” she commands, rising and making her way to stand in front of him. “You deserve it just as much as anyone else, and you can’t say you don’t because of all of this.” She gestures around the foundry before reaching out and squeezing his hand. “You’re doing this because you’re already a better man than you were before the island. That man may not have deserved it, but this man does.”

When she says it, he can believe it. He can feel the desire to have everything she says he deserves
and more as he looks down into her open, earnest gaze, but the startling realization is that he seems to already know who he wants it with. With that knowledge comes an awareness of how warm and strong her hand is in his, her thumb swiping over his knuckles gently, so sure he’s worthy of everything she’s saying. He has the sudden compulsion to touch her and reaches out automatically to brush a stray strand of hair back behind her ear. It’s not enough, though, and he feels an overwhelming desire to close the distance between them and capture her lips with his. Almost as though she senses the shift in his thoughts, her breath catches slightly. It’s the smallest stutter, but he still hears it, and that’s when the doubt returns full force. She can’t be telling the truth. There’s no possible way he could deserve something like what she’s referring to. He’s done terrible things, and he’d only put her in further danger if he were to attempt what she’s suggesting. Granted, he’s sure she doesn’t know exactly what’s going through his mind right now, so she doesn’t realize that his brain has already automatically chosen the subject of any experiment he may undertake at her encouragement.

So, Oliver does what he does best, and pulls away, closing himself off from her. He can’t afford the risk. Felicity means everything to him, and he’s just now realized exactly how deeply that runs. It certainly explains the tightness in his chest when she mentions Connor, and the looks he catches Digg giving him lately. He won’t allow himself the chance to ruin her like he’s ruined so many others, because he’s sure he will. It’s inevitable, and he can’t do that to her. After what she’s told him about her father, he wouldn’t be able to bear it if he were to add to that wound. She loved the man and he’d abused it to the point of no return. She’s managed to semi-recover from it (and by that he means she’s found a way to cope, much like he has) but he won’t put her through any more of it. He won’t be the reason she breaks.

He clears his throat, glancing in her general direction. “We should head out. It’s late.”

She swallows, coming back to reality and nodding quickly. “Yeah, we should.”

She stops when they get to her car and turns to reach up and ghost the back of her knuckles across his cheek. He’s been careful to control the habit of placing his hand on her back that seems to have developed, but the brush of her fingers negates the effort he’s expended. She smiles softly and, if he’s not mistaken, a little sadly as she looks up at him. “You may not believe me now, but you will. You deserve better than you let yourself believe.”

He wonders what she’d say if he told her everything that’s whirling through his mind right now, allowing himself to imagine what could happen if this wasn’t his life. But it is his life, and he refuses to make it hers so completely. She told him she won’t let the mission interfere with her life any more than it already has, and taking the step he so desperately wants to would do just that. She deserves the chance to have a life outside of him and the lies he’s forced upon her. In true Oliver Queen fashion, then, he says nothing, instead reaching around to open her car door for her stoically. She slides behind the wheel and he closes it softly behind her. As he watches her drive off, he represses the urge to follow her home, telling himself that the extra security he hired for her apartment building will be enough. He needs space as much as she wants him to give it to her, so he’ll trust her belief that any desire to hurt her would already have been carried through if it were serious.
He heads straight for his bedroom when he returns to the mansion, not in the mood to see anyone. About halfway there, though, he changes his mind when his brain won’t shut off. Maybe a distraction would be good. He redirects for Thea’s room instead, pausing outside to ensure he won’t be unpleasantly surprised by Roy’s presence before he knocks. At her permission, he turns the knob and takes a step into the room. She’s sitting cross-legged on her bed, a magazine open in front of her.

“You’re home,” she says, the surprise evident in her voice.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He asks, frowning.

She shoots him a look. “You haven’t been the past couple of nights, Ollie. I wasn’t really expecting to see you.”

Understanding dawns and he remembers Felicity’s words about not feeding his sister’s delusions when he announced he was staying over. “It’s not-”

Thea waves her hand. “I don’t want to hear your lackluster excuses. Whatever you decide to do with your secretary is your business.”

He raises an eyebrow at her. It’s not like Thea to give up so easily. She’s always poking her nose in where it doesn’t belong.

“I still expect an introduction at some point,” she tells him casually, shattering the reprieve she’s given him. This conversation is not at all the distraction he needs. It’s only pushing his thoughts further down the road he wants to avoid. “You know, one in which she’s not your secretary.”

Desperate, he changes the topic abruptly. “How’s Roy?”

Thea looks at him in surprise. “Wow, you really don’t want to talk about her, do you?”

“No. Why are you so hung up on the idea of this, Thea? I told you it’s not like that.” He shoves his
hands in his pockets and stares at her earnestly.

She shrugs. “I guess I just like seeing you happy and it seems like you started getting that way when you met Felicity. It’s like you’re afraid to let anyone in because you’re afraid of what will happen when they see you, but you seem to be opening up to her, even if you can’t do it with me or Mom. Can you blame me for wanting that to translate into something a little more… well, more? You deserve to be happy and to try to move on from what happened to you, and it seems like she’s helping you do that.”

“She is,” he answers truthfully, ignoring the way his sister’s words mirror Felicity’s. Whether she tries to or not, she is helping him move on. “Like I said, she’s important to me, but not in the way you seem set on thinking.”

“Yeah… You keep telling yourself that, big brother,” she snorts, flipping a page in her magazine. “And Roy’s great, thanks for asking. Oh, and Walter called while you were… out. He wants you to call him back tomorrow.”

“I’ll do that,” he responds, then remembers her earlier statement. He pauses on his way out, turning back to look at her again. “Wait. How did you know her name?”

Thea shrugs, eyes too wide with innocence. “It was on her name plate when I came by for lunch.”

He almost buys it, but then his eyes narrow. “She doesn’t have a name plate.”

She threw it out, in fact, as a protest when he promoted her. She told him that she in no way wanted her name associated with the position because it was an insult to the thousands of dollars she spent getting the degree she was no longer using. He and Digg found it rather amusing after the fact, but she was terrifying at the time.

At this, Thea shrugs, completely unabashed. “Ok, so I looked into her. Asked around. You check out my boyfriends; I’d be a terrible sister if I didn’t return the favour.”

Two minutes into the call with Walter the next morning, Oliver asks Felicity into his office. They need a rundown on the securities surrounding the company’s databases to ensure they aren’t at risk, and it seems inefficient to have to ask her later. It’s much too early for his brain to be functioning on
full capacity where business is concerned, much less remember all of the tech-talk that’s sure to be involved in this conversation. As much as he wants space, he can’t deny the advantage of having her in the room. Walter seems to agree with Felicity that these aren’t isolated attacks and, as such, got in touch with him to make sure they’re protected from a similar attack. The company is in enough flux that they could become a target.

“If they try it, they’ll be disappointed,” Felicity says, snorting, “The only way to access QC’s databases is internally. You need an executive code to be able to do the kind of damage to it that would cause it to self-destruct. The only people authorized are me, the head of IT, Oliver, and the second coming of Stalin.”

He tries not to chuckle at the image that conjures. He needs to stay professional. “You get access?”

“I did design it,” she points out.

Walter’s chuckle comes through the speakerphone. “She has a point, there. Felicity’s the one with the most intimate knowledge of the system. It makes sense to give her access to it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Steele. At least someone acknowledges my true talents in this office.”

“I promoted you,” Oliver points out.

“To your secretary.”

Walter laughs again. “It’s good to see you found someone who can stand toe-to-toe with you, Oliver. The sign of a good assistant is one who isn’t afraid to call their employer on his nonsense. And, Felicity, the sign of a good friend is one who can make sacrifices in the name of friendship. It doesn’t mean you have to let him forget about it, though.”

Felicity smiles fondly at the phone. “I’ll be sure to remember that, Mr. Steele.”

“Walter, please.”

They exchange a few more pleasantries before ending the call. As soon as Walter’s presence is no
longer between them, the strange tension from the night before starts to seep into the room. He knows he’s being unfair, suddenly pulling away like this, but the way she’s looking at him makes him think she understands. It’s making him a bit uncomfortable, to be honest, the way she’s regarding him so shrewdly.

She’s the one to break the silence. “Your schedule is clear until eleven. I’m heading out for lunch at noon but I’ll be back by one for the PR meeting.”

He can’t think of anything to say, and merely nods once in response. As she retreats to her desk, he tries not to allow the guilt to consume him. No matter how much she may understand, it doesn’t mean she isn’t still hurt by his abrupt emotional retreat. In return, her walls have rocketed back up to match his own, leaving him with the sting of regret he’s been living with for so long that he’s grown accustomed to it.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note as to why Oliver’s pulling away: I feel like I was kind of getting away from who he is with all the sharing, but it was part of the weird pull he’s feeling toward Felicity right now. He’s gotten comfortable with her and he’s been opening up, but he’s still struggling with the idea that she’s this “good” person to his “bad” one, and like Thea said, he’s afraid of what she’s going to see and he doesn’t want to end up damaging their relationship or the image he has of her in his head (and vice versa) with the sharing. He’s realized he wants more with her, but he’s also realized that having more with her exposes her to more of him, and a greater possibility of hurt for both of them, so he’s pulling away in a last ditch effort to stop what he’s just now coming to terms with. I hope that clears up anything I wasn’t too clear on. I'm always afraid people aren't going to understand what I'm trying to get across (I'm still growing and learning!) so I figured I'd maybe tack on a bit more explanation for his actions. Don’t worry, it is a very brief hiccup, I promise. (Like, next chapter it will be resolved, so please don’t abandon me and my snail-like pace!)
Correcting His Mistake

After a day at the office filled with careful politeness, Oliver can’t bring himself to subject them all to the same thing in the foundry. Instead, he heads out to check on Whicker’s place to see if anyone is lurking around. It serves double duty in clearing his head as well. His mind is overwhelmed lately with everything happening all at once. He finds himself wishing for a return to the calm he was so anxious about a few short weeks ago, when his chief concern was Felicity’s safety and trying to make sense of her strange behaviour. There’s nothing to be done for it now, though.

Lance called before he headed out, filling them in on the investigation as much as he could. Whoever killed Whicker had time to stage it as a suicide before the police arrived, and none of the lower level Russians are talking, confusing them even more. Clearly, there is more than one person in on this, but he’s baffled as to the mechanics of it all. Konn and Whicker operated the trafficking ring together, but he gets the impression that Whicker was the more public face of the operation. The mysterious woman reported to Konn, and Whicker got his digital sidekick from the Russian mobster, which makes him think that Konn is higher on the chain of command than Whicker. The dead man’s final words also make him think that maybe Whicker was recruited by this woman and set up to take the fall for the whole thing. Of course, they were counting on more time to operate their business before they were caught, but the fallout still holds the same results. Whicker takes the blame and then commits suicide in a fit of guilt or despair or however they sell it. Either way, the only one who could possibly refute the evidence pointing to Whicker is the man himself, and he ends up dead. Following this theory, Whicker was right: he got screwed over. The only way he would have willingly joined is if the woman promised he’d be protected, but she obviously lied to him.

The one thing he still can’t figure out is where the woman fits. Is she Konn’s underling, sent to find a patsy for the human trafficking business he wanted to start up again? Or is she the one who’s pulling the strings? Whicker trusted her, which lends itself to a deeper bond than just an underling sent to recruit an American willing to involve himself in something like this, but it doesn’t confirm it. The only way to find out is to locate the woman, but they’ve had no luck on that front.

The all-too-familiar frustration fills him to the breaking point and he lashes out at a couple of thugs trying to mug an older woman on the way back to the foundry. He uses more force than necessary, but it doesn’t even make a dent in his anger. As he leaves them tied together on the sidewalk and tells Digg, who’s taken control of the comms for the moment, to call Lance, he imagines the disapproval in Felicity’s eyes if she were here to see him leave the two battered men behind. The admonishment that would be in her voice rings in his ears as clearly as though she’s standing in front of him, but he does his best to ignore it. She’s become the voice in his head, though, and he can’t get rid of her no matter how much he knows he should.

When he gets back to the foundry, Digg beckons him over to the computers immediately. His stomach clenches with the hope that perhaps they’ve caught a break as he makes his way over,
careful to avoid standing too close to Felicity. If her posture is anything to go by, she notices and finds it utterly ridiculous, but he knows he’s gotten too relaxed around her lately and that needs to stop if he has any chance of pulling back now. She’s addictive, and he’s always had an addictive edge to his personality. Before, it was alcohol and other, less legal, substances. Now, it’s become the ease he feels around his blonde partner. Even before his revelation, he knows he relied too much on her bright optimism to pick him up on his worst days. He needs to separate himself from her or it will backfire on both of them.

“Found Whicker’s reaction after the fallout,” the other man says as Oliver crosses his arms to prevent himself from leaning over Felicity’s shoulder to look. “Listen to this.”

He doesn’t have to say anything in response before Whicker’s panicked voice is flooding the room.

“What?! How?! You’ve- you’ve got to be kidding me! How did the cops…?” A pause. “I thought we did, I swear. Usually the Arrow doesn’t act without solid proof.” Another pause, but when Whicker speaks again his voice is calm, controlled, and edged with anger. “Yeah, well I guess we were both wrong. Look, I need to make some calls, figure this out. I trust you can handle things on your end.”

Oliver starts to back up, not understanding why this is important. It’s clearly just Whicker finding out about the trafficking ring’s bust. Digg, however, draws his attention back to the audio recording, telling him it isn’t over. Felicity hits a few buttons to skip ahead in the recording a few minutes.

“The Arrow took down the ring.” Silence. “Yes, I know it’s weeks ahead of schedule.” Another pause, and then a heavy sigh. “Well maybe you should have been a little faster.” Yet another pause. “How is this my fault? Konn’s man was supposed to be better than whoever he’s got, and he wasn’t. If anything, this is his fault.” This time the silence is longer, punctuated by the steadily increasing pace of footsteps and heavy breathing. “What do you mean? You said you’d protect me! You said if I did this, I wouldn’t go away for it. I was just supposed to lure Konn into feeling secure until you gave the green light to expose him! You can’t- You can’t do this to me! You- You BITCH!” The words are punctuated by the sound of what he assumes is the phone smashing against the wall.

This time, the recording is done, and Oliver frowns at the computer as he tries to make sense of it. Pairing it with the words Whicker said to him before he was shot, he decides it’s reasonable to assume that he was talking to the woman. He told the Arrow that a female swore to protect him, the very words he shouted into the phone just moments before. Running his fingers through his hair, he sighs heavily and turns to face his two companions.

“So this woman is the one pulling the strings,” he finally says. “She convinced Whicker to get involved by telling him he’d only be making Konn feel secure, and then she betrayed him. Why?”
“Probably to cover her own ass,” Digg replies, pushing off from his seat beside Felicity. “Whicker takes the fall for the American half of the ring and Konn takes the fall for the Russian side, or Whicker just takes the fall for both. Either way, she comes out clean as a whistle.”

“It has promise, but if that’s true, why are they so concerned about the timeline?” Felicity chimes in, biting her lip as Oliver cuts his eyes to her. “It’s just… Well, they’ve made references before to how short of a time this ring was up and running before we caught them. Konn said it to Whicker when he came to visit him…”

“You drew attention to yourself too quickly. You were supposed to stay heedin longer.”

She continues talking as the recording echoes through his mind. “And Whicker just said it on the phone. He’s saying that she should have been a little faster. Maybe, if it was just Konn, I could understand,” she continues gnawing on her lip as she takes up the route Oliver took when he was pacing, “Because maybe Konn was promised a certain time frame but didn’t get it. But, if Whicker is telling this woman that it was busted weeks ahead of schedule and that she should have been faster? That screams sketchy to me. And it’s like they were expecting the Arrow to be on this. Most criminals don’t accept that inevitability, but it was like they were counting on us tracking them down.”

Oliver’s brow furrows and Digg nods thoughtfully as they consider her words. It makes sense, thinking about it. Between Konn and Whicker, it could be considered innocent, but the second referral when Whicker spoke to the woman brings it into a new light.

Digg is the one to ask the question this time. “At the risk of one, or both, of you ripping my head off, what does that mean?”

Despite his resolve to pull away from her, he stays to see her safely to her car. Just because he knows he can’t let himself explore any further down the path he’s discovered doesn’t mean he isn’t still concerned for her safety. She keeps a gun on her now at their insistence, despite her counter suggestion of a Taser or pepper spray, but he can’t bear the thought of someone attacking her when he’s not there.

“I can’t get anything else tonight,” she says, standing from her chair wearily and turning to face him. “I’m checking deeper into Konn but I don’t expect much, and the Ghost is too good to leave a way for me to trace the decoys from the missing persons reports back to a single IP address, so I think it’s
time to give up on that. I’ll see what I can get through the back channels in Russia on his history, but
it doesn’t look promising.” She sighs and runs a hand over her head, smoothing her ponytail in the
process as she picks up her bag. “I don’t even know where to begin searching for this woman. She’s
linked to both Konn and Whicker yet there’s no trace of a financial connection between any of them,
though I shouldn’t expect it to be obvious if this Ghost is the one handling the cover-up.”

He nods absently, heading after her to the door. Before she opens the connection to the main floor,
however, she spins back around to face him, causing him to stop in surprise, his face on an even
level with hers. He can’t help but think it’s intentional so she can look him dead in the eye.

“Look, I get that what you went through was painful and traumatic, and sharing even the small bits
of it that you did was probably beyond hard, but I’m not some china doll, Oliver. You don’t have to
pull back because you’re afraid I might break. What happened in your past is in the past. I’m sorry if
I touched a nerve bringing up Laurel. It won’t happen again. Just don’t shut me out.”

“I’m not-” He tries to deny it, but the way she tilts her head tells him that she won’t buy it. Instead,
he sighs, dipping his head to look at the floor briefly before flicking his eyes back to hers. “It’s not
about Laurel.”

She nods thoughtfully, studying him for a moment as though trying to determine if he’s being honest
or not.

The uncertainty in her eyes prompts him to continue, even though he wasn’t planning on
volunteering any information. “Our… friendship… is important to me. I don’t want to do or say
anything to jeopardize that.”

“So, naturally, the solution is to just stop saying anything at all?”

Put like that, it sounds stupid, but he knows that it’s the right thing to do. His track record speaks for
itself. She deserves more than he can give her, and he can’t afford to ruin her like her father did. She
could have a normal life with someone like Connor. They could fall in love and get married and have
2.5 kids, a white picket fence, and a dog. She could have everything she deserves in life with a nice,
safe man who doesn’t run the risk of shattering her like he could and probably will.

She’s still waiting for a response while he’s been absorbed in his thoughts, he realizes, and finally
settles on, “I wouldn’t… be able to forgive myself if I was the source of any more of your pain.”
At this, she scoffs lightly and rolls her eyes. “There you go with that china doll assumption again. I’ve survived emotional trauma and building collapses and psycho gunmen and being held hostage more times than I can count, and it was my choice. I could have quit, but I came back every single time because I know I can handle it. Am I different than when we started out? Yes. But that’s not necessarily a bad thing. People change. I’m a big girl, Oliver. I can take care of myself, despite the opinion of every male I’ve ever known…”

He wonders if her response is intentionally devoid of specificity, as his was, or if she really thinks it’s just about their friendship. It’s not, because he can’t deny that he doesn’t want to increase the temptation that will come with continuing to open up to her. She makes it too easy, and he knows that eventually he’ll give in if he keeps down this road. He won’t just ruin their friendship then, but he wasn’t lying when he told her it was important to him. Felicity is one of two people with whom he can shed his masks and he doesn’t want to lose her because of his selfishness. Is that very reasoning selfish? Incredibly. But Oliver Queen has always been selfish. He likes to think that now he’s selfish in ways that benefit others, not just his base desires. He’s selfish in order to prevent pain, not causing it as a result of the flaw, but he also needs to be selfish in order to keep Felicity in his life, no matter the capacity in which she stays. He can handle being her friend; he’s done it for about two years now. What he can’t handle is knowing that he broke her. He can’t stand to drive her away, never to return.

She doesn’t offer any elaboration to her comment, instead turning and finishing the walk to her car. As he starts to trail after her, she shoots a “don’t bother” over her shoulder, leaving him to stand in the club and wonder if it’s possible to feel any worse than he currently does.

He tries not to think about it for the next few days, instead taking out his roiling emotions on every piece of training equipment they have. Without an actual criminal to take his frustrations out on, the equipment has taken quite a beating, and if the looks Digg keeps shooting him are any indication, the older man has noticed his more aggressive approach. He also seems to have picked up on the strange tension between Oliver and Felicity, as he’s careful to keep the atmosphere in the foundry light and focused on the matter at hand.

“Heck, what’s going on, man?” He finally cracks, interrupting Oliver’s thorough beating of one of the rubber dummies. They’re alone, as they have been far too often in the past few days. Felicity’s been coming in a good hour or two later than usual.

Oliver wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, sucking in a breath and shaking his head. “What do you mean?”

Digg fixes him with a look to rival Felicity’s. “I mean one day I have to warn you to check yourself, and now you two barely say five words to each other. What the hell is going on, Oliver?”
“I- I just…” Oliver sighs, allowing his eyes to close momentarily before formulating an acceptable answer. “I realized you were right. I was blurring lines, Digg, and the result of that wasn’t going to be pretty.”

“So you stopped?” The other man inquires, folding his arms across his chest. Oliver gets the feeling this question has a right and a wrong answer.

“Yes,” he grounds out, stepping around Digg to grab his water bottle. “I shouldn’t have let the lines blur, so I stopped before it got any further. It’s better this way.”

Digg is shooting him an arched eyebrow when he checks out of the corner of his eye. “Is that what you’d call this? Better?”

He lets his head fall back in near exasperation. “It’s not what you think. I let myself get close for a fraction of a second, but I realized the damage it would do. This is me correcting my lapse in judgement.”

“That’s what you’re calling it?”

“What would you like me to call it?” He snaps back, irritated.

“Look, I may not have been on board at first, but whatever was going on seemed to be helping,” Digg replies, holding his hands up defensively. “Both of you.”

He can’t explain it in a way that will make sense, so he merely heads off to resume hitting dummies again. He’s starting to think, though, that there’s more to this than simply not wanting to hurt Felicity by getting any closer. He didn’t mean to push her away so abruptly, but he never meant for Felicity to come into contact with anything island-related. The possibility of the things he could tell her changing the way she sees him is a risk he can’t take. He needs her. He relies on her light to chase away his dark, and he’s now starting to see his fear that sharing that dark with her could taint the light.

But it’s already tainted. The voice inside his head whispers to him, curving around every excuse he has prepared. Tainted is the wrong choice of word, but the point remains the same. She said it herself: everyone has something. No one can be all light, all the time. There’s always going to be a dark stain in there somewhere. Felicity’s is her father, regardless of how well she hides it, and maybe
that’s the problem. She’s always been so cheerful and optimistic that he assumed she was the exception to the rule. He’s been completely caught off guard by this strange, darker version of the Felicity he knows, leaving him to question everything he assumed about her, and it’s shaken him. It could be why he’s sharing far too easily.

Or it could be something else entirely. Maybe he’s just tired of holding it all in, and watching her finally divest herself of some of the pain she’s been carrying around for six years has prompted his desire to do the same. Except he’s been through hell ten times over, and he knows that if he keeps it up, he’ll tell her pretty much everything. She may not be the china doll she so loathes, but he knows that a lot of what would eventually spill from his lips are things he never wants anyone to know, least of all her.

But she’s told him before that she’s perfectly capable of making her own decisions, and she knows what he is and she’s chosen to stay. He needs to stop putting her on this pedestal and let her decide for herself if she wants to hear what he has to say. He knows that he wants to hear what she has to tell him. He wants to help her, and he can’t expect her to open up to him if he’s not willing to do the same. The last few days are proof of that. He shut down, and she responded in kind. If he wants to undo the damage he’s done, he’s going to need to fight against this instinct to shield her from himself.

No matter how long he spends analyzing it, he’s still a selfish bastard, and the weight still settles in his stomach as she joins them in the foundry half an hour later, not even sparing a glance in his direction before she sits down and gets to work.

“You know, there’s still one avenue we haven’t explored,” Digg tells him, hesitation evident in his voice. They’re alone in the foundry once again, Felicity having stepped out to take a phone call from her mother. Oliver gets the feeling he won’t like where this is going. “Your Bratva contacts might know something.”

He’s already shaking his head. “I can’t go there. Not again.”

“We’re kind of running thin on options, Oliver.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he responds drily.

Digg shrugs. “I’m just saying. Might be they can point us in the right direction. They’d be familiar
with Konn, at least on some level.”

Oliver takes a deep, calming breath. The Bratva are a chapter of his life he’d like to put behind him if at all possible. That, and he’s not so sure the Starling chapter would be so welcoming to him again. He can’t push his luck with the mobsters, but Diggle has a point. They’re at a standstill, and the Bratva may be their only option.

“Digg’s right.”

Both men jerk their heads around to see Felicity at the bottom of the stairs. Neither heard her come in, and Oliver isn’t sure if it’s a tribute to the training with Digg or their distraction. Her tone indicates no surprise at the subject of their conversation and he takes a second to ponder why the mention of him holding connections to a Russian mob group wouldn’t shock her. He’s never told her anything about them.

“I’m not an idiot, Oliver,” she answers his unasked question with an eyebrow cocked challengingly as she crosses her arms across her chest. “You’ve been shirtless around me enough for me to see that tattoo. You may not have felt the need to share, but you think I didn’t look it up?”

He dips his head in acknowledgement. Felicity isn’t one to push curiosity aside, so it shouldn’t be surprising that she took it upon herself to connect the dots.

“I’m with Digg. The Bratva may be our best option. If not, we’re no further back than we already are.” Her face is set in determination as she raises her chin a fraction of an inch.

Oliver may be a selfish bastard, but he knows when to admit defeat. They’re right, really. The Bratva are their best option. “I’ll set up the meet.”

Oliver’s eyes move quickly, taking in his surroundings as he and Digg enter the rundown garage. It’s been a while since he’s been here, and while he remembers the essentials, the little things are often more important, so he catalogues each one of them. He takes in a total of five guys in the near vicinity, ready to react if needed. In theory, he and Digg can easily take five guys, but each of them likely has a gun, so that’s not really a smart idea. This time, they have the added bonus of Felicity watching the place on thermal, so he doesn’t feel quite as apprehensive walking in here. Captain or not, these guys can easily turn on him, and if that happens Digg will be caught in the crossfire, too.
“Oliver Queen! Long time, no see!” Alexi Leonov calls out as he approaches, his Russian accent not as pronounced as Konn’s. The too-cheerful smile on his face reflects just how delicate the situation is. The last time he saw Leonov, he was fleeing from the police as they interrupted Oliver’s meet with the Count. The possibility that Leonov has forgotten that is slim to none, regardless of the good terms on which he last parted with Anatoli Knyazev. Hopefully the leader passed down word that any interruption from the cops was unintentional.

“I’ve been… busy,” he replies carefully. “After the last time, I thought it best to avoid contact at all costs. I didn’t want to lead anyone to your doorstep.”

“Luckily, we managed to escape that situation mostly unscathed. Anatoli assured us it was by no fault of yours,” Leonov acknowledges, eyeing Oliver speculatively. “Vy are you here?”

He takes a deep breath. Obviously Anatoli ordered his safety should he ever contact the Starling branch again, though that doesn’t completely put him at ease. “I need information, if you have it.”

“Оn?” Leonov prompts, moving to sit on a stool beside a blue truck propped on one of the many lifts in the garage. He wipes his hands on a rag as he does so, but the rag is already so filthy Oliver’s not sure how much good it does.

“Aleksandr Konn. He was involved in a revival of Justin Whicker’s human trafficking ring, working with Brandon Whicker and an unidentified woman.”

Leonov nods slowly. “Aleksandr is no friend of ours. Not anymore.”

“But he was?”

“Да,” he answers in the affirmative of his mother tongue. “He thought he could do better, so he left. I have yet to see him surpass the Bratva as he claimed he would.”

“He was Bratva?” Oliver repeats, surprised that Felicity hadn’t dug that up.

“At the lower level for a few years about ten years ago. He split off when he didn’t climb the ranks as quickly as he desired. We can’t all jump straight to Captain.”
Oliver feels his stomach contract slightly at the mention of his elevated rank but ignores the slight tension. “Did he take anyone with him?”

“A couple of lower levels who were less than pleased. They vent with one of our higher ups who felt the same, and are still nothing more than mid-level mobsters today,” Leonov supplies with a chuckle. “Though I suppose Konn is more or less in charge of things now, so he sort of got his wish.”

“More or less?” Oliver clarifies, raising an eyebrow.

Leonov shrugs. “I hear things. Whispers. They say someone’s pulling Konn’s strings behind the scenes. Of course, it’s all unproven.”

He files the information away for consideration later on. “What do you know about their connections?”

“Vy do you ask?”

He can sense the suspicion behind Leonov’s question and immediately puts his guard up. He needs to tread carefully so he doesn’t give too much away. “Like I said, he was involved in a reboot of a human trafficking ring in Starling. I want to be sure I’ve got everyone responsible. I figured you guys would know something about the inner-workings, being the end-all-be-all of organized crime in Moscow.”

At this, Leonov grunts in amusement. “That ve are. Konn vas approached by Whicker a few months back with the proposal, or so my sources have said. Whicker supplied the merchandise, Konn supplied the... precautions.”

“Like a computer expert?”

A grin twitches at the edges of Leonov’s lips. “You already know the answer to that. Vy are you asking me? Tell me, Oliver Queen, vat do you really vant to know?”

“Exactly what you’re telling me.”
The older man shakes his head. “You know much of vat I tell you. You came here seeking specific information.”

Taking a deep breath, Oliver decides to honor Leonov’s unspoken request to get straight to the point. They may have gotten valuable new information out of the Bratva, but it isn’t what he originally came for. “I want to know if you’ve heard anything about a female associate of Konn’s, or this computer expert.”

“Ahh, the Ghost.” Leonov pauses to stand and advance toward them, his voice lowering. “It is said that he is more than just an average computer expert, that he hides behind his monitors to shield his true talents. It is said that he spent some time in Nanda Parbat.”

Oliver has no response for that, his mind trying to make sense of this new information.

Finally, Leonov laughs loudly, clapping him on the shoulder and stepping back. “You are too gullible, my friend. Those are stories told in hushed voices in the corners of Aleksandr’s club to dissuade anyone double-crossing him. You betray me, I set the Ghost on you. The Ghost is a mystery that few can say they truly understand. I cannot say I’ve ever seen his face. I doubt even Aleksandr has. He has been on the edges of our awareness for some time, but never has he been any cause for real concern. The Ghost is nothing but a man more comfortable to hide behind his screens than to face to real world.

“This woman you refer to, though, I have heard more concrete whispers of. The daughter of Viktor Svalov. Her return was of great note. She was lost for some time, until nine years ago she reappears to take her place by her father’s side. When he died three years later, it was thought that she would take over, but Aleksandr did instead. If you ask me, and you are, I would say this woman is Svalov’s daughter.”

“What makes you think that? She could be an American tied to Whicker,” Oliver points out.

“True,” Leonov concedes, “But Americans are not so easily welcomed into the fold of our types of organizations, as you well know. Aleksandr may have worked with Whicker, but he wouldn’t involve himself in a deal with two Americans. Too much potential for betrayal. If this is a three-person operation, as you say, this woman would be a Russian, and one Aleksandr trusts. He wouldn’t involve himself any other way.”
Oliver breathes out a hefty sigh as he turns the information from Leonov over in his mind again. While it helps connect some of the dots, there are still more questions than he’d like. Not for the first time, he wishes someone would just give him all of the answers instead of forcing this scavenger hunt. Felicity has completely abandoned her search for the Ghost, deciding the woman is more important for the time being. Perhaps finding the identity of the woman will help them make more connections to the elusive Russian hacker.

“Did you want something?” Her voice breaks through his thoughts, causing him to realize he’s been staring at her. For her part, she’s swivelled the chair to face him, chin propped in her hand as she balances her elbow on the arm rest, staring right back.

Giving himself a mental shake, he pulls his lips into a tight smile. “Sorry.”

She keeps her eyes focused on him as he turns away and walks to some indeterminate location before stopping and running his hands through his hair, interlocking his fingers behind his neck and exhaling loudly. She gives him a second before speaking. “The stuff Leonov told you about Svalov pans out like he said. He was an upper-level Bratva before he split off, taking Konn and a few lower level minions with him and forming an offshoot. It took a bit of digging, and without knowing what to look for I don’t think I would have found it. Probably the work of the Ghost. I can’t find anything about this daughter of Svalov’s, though. She’s about as invisible in terms of digital and paper trails as our friendly neighbourhood stalker. I can’t connect him to a daughter in any way, so I’m assuming she’s the product of one of what were probably many one-night stands. It’ll be nearly impossible to track her down, so hopefully something from Svalov’s past shakes loose soon. I mean, this could be any number of situations. Maybe she was put up for adoption, or maybe her mother raised her as a single parent and there’s no father on the birth certificate, or maybe she found a guy willing to claim the child for his own, or she lied to him and made him believe the kid was his, or-”

“Felicity,” he cuts her off when her face starts to turn slightly red from lack of oxygen during her rant. “Breathe.”

She does as he tells her, closing her eyes briefly. “Sorry. It’s just… this is my job. This is what I do and I feel like I’m not living up to my end lately. I can’t find anything!”

“Hey,” he says softly, moving to crouch in front of her chair, his hands steadying him on the armrests. “This isn’t your fault. You don’t have to have all the answers.”

“But it would make life infinitely easier if I did. I just don’t know how to make this all connect. I feel like it’s there, but it’s just beyond my reach. Every time we get an answer, five more questions pop up and I’m tired of it.”
“You’re not the only one,” he agrees, returning to his feet and taking a few steps away from her.

Neither says anything for a long while, but the silence isn’t as tense as it has been the past few days. He finds he’s missed the loosening of the knot in his stomach that comes with talking to the blonde. Studying her covertly as she turns back to her monitors, Oliver can feel his resolve to back away crumbling further. She’s been a part of this team for about two years, as she’s pointed out, and she’s been in danger far more often than he’d care to think about. Digg’s right, and so is she. Whatever was going on was helping, and it isn’t fair of him to decide what she can and can’t handle. He should leave it up to her and let the chips fall where they may. If he really wants to assuage his guilt, he can say he’s doing this for her. He wants her to know that she can be open with him and talk to him about what’s bothering her, regardless of whether that’s her father or just general stress, and to do that, he needs to demonstrate his willingness to do the same.

“I met Anatoli on a ship,” he tells her softly. The sound of her typing stops and he senses that she’s turned the chair around to face him again, but he studies the ground, his eyebrows drawn together. “I was taken prisoner in the second year on the island and he was in the cell next to mine. It was also where I found Sara again. I promised him I’d come back for him when she and I escaped, and I kept my word.”

He chances a glance at her to find her eyes wide in shock. He hasn’t really divulged much, but it’s more than he’s told anyone about his connection to the Bratva. He can still share things with her without delving too deeply. There is such a thing as too much information in this case, and he doesn’t want or need to go beyond an overview of what happened.

“That’s how I got my rank in the Bratva. I saved Anatoli from Ivo. He offered to take me off the island with him, but I had… other commitments by that time.”

She’s still staring at him with a deer-in-the-headlights expression at his second one-eighty of the week. He will fully admit that trying to keep up with him is probably enough to give her whiplash.

“I’m sorry,” he says, when he’s sure no response is forthcoming. “You were right. I shouldn’t presume to know what you can and can’t handle.”

So rarely is Felicity Smoak left speechless that he almost wants to laugh at the fact that he’s seemed to render her unable to find words. Her mouth opens and closes a couple of times before she resorts to continuing to frown at him.

“Now is the point where you say ‘It’s ok, Oliver. I forgive you,’” he prompts with a twitch of his lips.
“I- uh, wow. Did Oliver Queen really just admit to being wrong?” She finally asks, grinning.

“Yes, he did, but it rarely happens, so savour it.”

“Noted,” she responds with a sharp nod. “I’m sorry for jumping down your throat about it. My dad… he was overprotective to the extreme. He was always making decisions and telling me it was for the best or it was what I needed. He never trusted me to be able to figure out my limits myself and it drove me crazy.” She picks at a loose thread on her skirt as she stares at her lap. “I resented him for it right up until he… left. I mean, he wanted nothing to do with me and Mom, but he thought he could tell me what to do, who to be friends with, and dictate that I needed to learn to shoot a gun?” She scoffs in disgust and shakes her head, eyes shining as she glances up at the ceiling briefly. “He isolated me from everyone but him and Mom during my senior year. I skipped a couple of grades, so I didn’t have too many friends to begin with, but when he took away the ones I did have, telling me he was protecting me… I couldn’t get away fast or far enough. I was tired of being the quiet girl in the corner at school, and I was even more tired of trying to keep my fracturing family together. He didn’t even care when I just gave up and stopped trying. He said it was good that I wasn’t allowing myself to get emotionally involved anymore, like it was a good thing that I was shutting myself off from everyone.”

“I don’t mean to make you feel like I’m controlling you…” He sighs. For all of his good intentions, he’s still managed to hurt her. “I just…” His eyes search the surroundings, as though they’ll magically land on the words he wants to say. “Sharing is difficult for me. I’m not used to it. My natural instinct is to back away, but I want you to feel like you can talk to me, and to do that… I need to resist that instinct. I… I don’t want you to get hurt.”

She stands, closing some of the distance between them and looking him dead in the eye. “You aren’t going to hurt me, Oliver.”

Her ability to read between the lines bites him in the ass once more as he swallows thickly. Eventually, he drags his eyes from hers and straightens up. He didn’t mean to get straight back on this path, but it’s where he finds himself once again. It just seems natural, at this point, to be on this track. He isn’t sure he can go back from wanting her in this new capacity without completely shutting her out, and the frightening part is that he isn’t sure he wants to. For all the time he’s spent convincing himself it’s wrong, he keeps coming back to it. These past few days have been hell, and he has no desire to go back there.

She allows him to resume the habitual escort to her car, turning back to him abruptly after she unlocks her car door. “I… I get why you did it. I do. Sometimes it’s just easier to pull back and remove yourself from the situation.”
He remembers her saying something to that effect concerning her father’s drinking and nods. “Sometimes it’s better for everyone else that way, too.”

“That’s rarely the reality of the situation; it’s just what we like to tell ourselves as consolation for entering self-preservation mode. It’s what I told myself when…” She trails off, taking a shaky breath. “Well, let’s just say I’ve been there, and it didn’t really do much for me.”

“I’m starting to see the truth in that,” he admits, eyes raking over her face. Without fully realizing it, he reaches out and takes her hand in his gently, running his thumb over the back of it softly and drawing her attention back to his face. His gaze lingers on her lips for a fraction of a second before he meets her eyes, wondering once more what it would be like to close the distance between them. But he can’t, of course. “I, uh, I missed you- talking to you- these past few days. You know, without all the tension.”

She smiles slightly at that, squeezing his hand. “I missed you, too, even if I spent a vast majority of the time in your company.”

He shuts the car door behind her on much better terms than he did last time, and the smile lingers on his lips well after he returns to the Manor for the night.

His mother eyes him thoughtfully over her coffee mug a few days later. “You seem… happy this morning.”

He pauses, fork halfway to his mouth. “I guess I am. Isabel’s out of the office all day today.”

“Oliver,” she admonishes, but is smiling while she does so. “That’s no way to refer to one’s business partner.”

He half-shrugs. “I doubt she talks about me any more favourably, Mom. She did originally come in for a hostile takeover.”

Moira concedes his point, taking a sip of her coffee and continuing to peruse the newspaper in front of her. “I’m not entirely surprised with your attitude toward her. I was worried at first. She does have certain… charms.”
He chokes on a mouthful of his own coffee at her insinuation. She shoots him a knowing look at his reaction and he focuses on anything but his mother as he tries to compose himself again.

“I never trusted her, not even when your father first met her all those years ago. She was just a low ranking businesswoman starting out back then, but I knew something was… off. He managed to see her true colours in time, and I’m glad you have as well.”

“I didn’t realize Dad knew her,” he responds carefully.

“Oh, yes, he met her at some function or other. He thought she was an intelligent woman and tried to hire her away from Stelmoor. That last year, though…” She pauses thoughtfully, pursing her lips. “Whatever happened, I’m glad his rose-coloured glasses were removed where Isabel Rochev was concerned.”

Unable to come up with any kind of response, Oliver merely nods. He devours the rest of his breakfast quickly in an effort to escape the slightly awkward situation and meets Diggle outside fifteen minutes earlier than usual. The other man gives him a questioning look but he simply shakes his head and slides into the back seat of the car. For once, he’s eager to get to the office so he can forget all about that conversation.

The end of the day sees no further progress on any of the information they gleaned from the Bratva, earning a frustrated growl from Felicity. She’s been running searches on Svalov’s past, trying to connect him to a woman who could possibly have mothered this daughter Leonov seems convinced is involved, but hasn’t had any luck.

“He’s never made a single payment to any suspicious account I could connect to a possible child. In fact, his financials don’t indicate any hefty tampering until about three years before he died. Before then, it’s pretty obvious, kind of like Whicker’s. I don’t think Svalov was too well connected in the tech department before then,” she sighs. “These Russians are just breaking my heart with their ineptitude.”

“Wait,” Digg speaks up, leaving the training mat and heading toward Felicity. “Did you say three years before his death?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, why?”
Oliver catches on just before Digg answers, “Leonov said his daughter reappeared three years before his death.”

“You think his daughter brought the Ghost into the operation?” Felicity asks, eyes wide as she spins back around to face her monitors. “That could be possible. The Ghost supposedly only works for Konn and his organization. If he was brought in by Svalov’s daughter that loyalty would make sense. I was thinking, too… Leonov mentioned that Konn’s leadership was rumoured to be only on the surface. Who else do we now know likes to pull the strings from behind the scenes?”

“The woman. You think this woman, Svalov’s daughter, is actually in charge of the Bratva offshoot, but is making it look like Konn is?” Oliver realizes.

“Purely conjecture, but what else have we got at this point? For all of their technological ineptitude they’re remarkably good at creating unsolvable puzzles,” she grumbles.

His lips twitch at her words and Digg nods in agreement before calling Lyla and heading out for the night. The one good thing about this standstill is that they’ve had relatively early nights the past week.

Felicity’s phone starts blaring some song that he’s sure is popular right now, interrupting the silence between them. After glancing at the screen, she hits a button to silence it before turning back and hitting a few keys to set some diagnostics to run for the night. When she looks up to see him looking at her questioningly, she shrugs, mumbling something about her mother and calling her back later.

“What’s she like, your mother?” He asks suddenly, surprising himself. He’s curious about her mother, but he’s never wanted to push the issue in case he oversteps and scares her off. It took two years for her to feel like she can open up about her family and he doesn’t want to screw that up, especially not now that they’re finally getting back on track.

It takes her a moment to respond, but he recognizes the look on her face as one of contemplation rather than discomfort. “Warm. Loving. Strong. She has the best laugh,” she tells him finally, a soft smile of affection lighting up her face. “She always wants to be able to fix everything, which is why she tried so hard… with my father. She throws herself into everything. It’s always all or nothing. She always told me you can’t do anything halfway, or you’ll always look back and wonder. She always thinks the best of people, even when they give her every reason not to.”

“She sounds remarkable,” he says, a half-smile on his face. She sounds a lot like Felicity.
“She is. I always thought my father would ruin her, but she managed to pick herself back up. I offered to drop out of school to take care of her after… but she wouldn’t let me. She told me that she wouldn’t be able to forgive herself if I let it change my life so drastically. I think it was that conversation that made it click for me, really. Even in the thick of her grief she managed to make me see that there was more to life than one single event that seemed like it would end it all. She made me realize that it was possible to keep going, because if she could do it, so could I. I didn’t even like him at the end, and she was in love with him, so I really had no excuse.”

“He was still your father,” he points out.

“Yeah. I guess what I’m trying to say is that she made me realize that being angry wasn’t constructive. I was mad at him for ruining her, but she was getting past it, so I knew I had to, too. I couldn’t be mad at him for something he hadn’t done. I don’t think she meant for me to compartmentalize it all, but I did what I had to.”

He watches her for a second before she turns away and grabs her jacket. He automatically reaches out to help her, pulling her hair gently from the collar once her arms are through the sleeves, allowing his hands to settle on her shoulders. She turns to give him a quick smile of gratitude, bringing her face closer than either of them anticipated. Quickly, she turns back and puts some distance between them, heading for the door.

“She’s like that,” she says once she reaches the top of the stairs. Stopping briefly to pull the door open, she looks at him as she continues, “She can make you see beyond the here and now and get you out of your head.”

“That’s something you get from her.”

She looks startled at the comparison. “I don’t-”

“You do, Felicity,” he argues. They’ve made their way to the back door by now, and he holds it for her, his hand landing on her back as she passes him. “You may not realize it, but you… I was caught up in my past and the mistakes I’ve made, but then I met you, and you’re bright and full of life. You make me remember what it’s like to be present. You… For the first time a few days ago… You made me feel like I could have what you seem to think I deserve. You made me feel worthy of it, Felicity.”

They’ve reached her car at some point during his speech, but she’s turned her back to it, tilting her
head up to meet his gaze. He wonders briefly when their fingers intertwined during their walk, but decides not to question it.

“You are,” she tells him softly. Her eyes reflect her complete belief in the statement, and he feels his stomach contract in that strange way it does around her. “That’s why you really pulled away, isn’t it? What I told you scared you.”

He reaches up to brush his fingers across her cheekbone lightly as he nods, allowing his palm to cup her jaw as his thumb swipes across her cheek. He doesn’t respond at first, his brain warring with his desire to feel her lips against his. He can’t pretend he doesn’t think about it more than is appropriate, and he can’t pretend it isn’t all he wants to do right now, but it isn’t smart. There’s a ninety percent chance that he’ll break her. It’s why he backed away, but she’s managed to pull him back in despite his resistance. He feels comfortable with her. The way she looks at him makes him feel like he’s a better man than memory provides, and the selfish part of him doesn’t want that feeling to go away as it did after he pulled away from her last time.

Before he can formulate his thoughts into any kind of words, she’s speaking again, reaching up to wrap her fingers around his wrist, thumb ghosting over his pulse. “It shouldn’t. I meant what I said. You’re a good man, Oliver, and you deserve to be happy,” she tells him with a steady voice. “Sometimes you just have to take the leap,” she whispers after a beat, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. He assumes his eyes must betray the thoughts swirling in his mind, because the hint of a smile fades as her eyes frantically search his for any trace of his intentions.

And, because he’s a selfish bastard, Oliver follows his desire. It may be a bad idea, but he can’t go another second without it. Sometimes you have to take the leap. So he shuts his brain off and allows his instincts to take over as he moves faster than his mind can catch up. She gasps in surprise just before he presses his lips against hers firmly, his hand sliding back to wrap around the back of her neck and hold her to him. The hand holding his wrist falls away to land on his chest between them with the barest pressure as his momentum pushes her back against her car.

The moment she overcomes her initial surprise is clear, as her hand splays fully over his chest, sliding up to wrap around his neck and into his hair. He extricates his other hand from hers as she returns the pressure of his lips, moving to wrap both of his arms around her waist to pull her flush against him. He wants her as close as possible, nipping at her bottom lip as her other arm wraps fully around his neck. Oliver feels a blaze of warmth exploding in his chest and reaching to every extremity as he deepens the kiss. Her fingers run through his hair as they fight for dominance, and he surrenders first, admitting defeat as he pulls away for air. His eyes search her face, both breathing heavily to replace their oxygen supply. Her eyes flutter open after a second, meeting his, and there’s a surprising amount of uncertainty reflected in them.

“I- You- What just happened?” She finally stutters, eyes searching his.
He tries to answer, but can’t find the words to explain exactly what is going through his head. Before he can say anything, though, the same ringtone from before breaks the silence between them. Felicity breaks her eyes from his, looking off to the side before focusing on searching through her bag for her phone as he steps back and runs a hand through his hair.

“Sorry,” she apologizes, voice still a little breathless as she finally locates her phone. “She’s been calling all day. I can’t ignore her any more or she’ll hop on the next plane here to make sure I’m not laying on my apartment floor bleeding out or something. In case you haven’t noticed, I used to be pretty clumsy, and I fell a lot, so when I first moved out on my own she used to make me call her every night so she’d know I hadn’t tripped and knocked myself unconscious or—”

He stops her with a hand on her cheek, the phone still blaring the ringtone between them. “Felicity. Breathe.”

She obeys his direction, taking a deep breath as her ringtone stops and his starts, closely followed by hers restarting. He grits his teeth. Who in the hell is calling him this late at night?

“We’ll… talk… later, ok?”


He presses his lips together to keep from smiling at how truly awkward she sounds as the reality of what just happened hits her. Hoping to soothe whatever anxieties are bouncing around in her head, he leans forward and places a quick kiss against her forehead before opening the car door for her. She presses the button to answer the call as she slides behind the wheel, still looking a little dazed. As he closes the door behind her, he can feel a smile splitting across his face. Looking down, he sees Thea’s name lighting up his call display, and answers her call still grinning.

The next morning at the office brings a fresh bucket of perspective for both of them. Felicity shoots one quick glance in his direction before turning to her desk and resolutely staring at the computer screen. It’s like she’s trying to will the atmosphere to be less awkward, but he isn’t sure if it’s working for her. If he didn’t find it downright amusing, and more than a little adorable, he’d go put her out of her misery right then, but he has a conference call in ten minutes that he needs to prep for, and the conversation they need to have is going to take longer than that. Instead, he contents himself with watching her through the glass as she warily takes a sip of the coffee he put on her desk. The way her back straightens every time he glances up tells him she’s very aware of his gaze, but she’s
making a valiant effort to try to ignore the feel of his eyes on her.

Grinning slightly, he turns to the mail that was delivered this morning, hoping to get through it before the call. After sifting through several letters from investors and several more from people hoping to get him to invest, as well as a couple of financial statements, he reaches the final manila envelope on his desk. He slits it open with a letter opener after confirming that it is in fact his name typed on the front. Without giving it much thought, he turns the envelope to spill the contents onto his desk, his blood immediately running cold when he focuses enough to catch a glimpse of what’s inside.

Pictures. They’ve fallen in such a way that he can see a variety of different shots ranging from him and Felicity leaving her apartment in the morning, to them standing beside her car outside Verdant with their fingers intertwined late at night, her hand on his cheek, to last night’s embrace with his lips on hers. A stack of pictures, staring back up at him from the glass surface of his desk as he shoots an alarmed glance up at Felicity, still blissfully unaware of what he’s just opened. Because it isn’t just the pictures that make him feel like he can’t breathe. It’s the typed note taped to the topmost photo.

Stay away from Felicity Smoak.
An Overdue Conversation...Eventually

His eyes shoot back up to Felicity once more, as though making sure she’s still sitting in front of him. Without taking his eyes off her, he places a quick call to Diggle and then hits the button on his phone to connect to hers with fingers that are too close to shaking. How in the hell did he not realize they’re being watched? How were they tracked down? He watches her frown at the beeping coming from her phone before hitting the button a little reluctantly. His voice must reflect the anxiety crushing him from all directions when he asks her to come inside, because she tenses in the way she does when Arrow business arises before making her way quickly into his office.

“What’s going on?” She asks abruptly, closing the distance to his desk in record time. Wordlessly, he indicates the photos spread out on his desk and she recoils involuntarily, mouth falling open as she does. “How- Who-” She stops short as her eyes land on the note. “The Ghost.”

He swallows with more difficulty than he’d like, nodding slowly.

“How did he… most of those are outside Verdant. How did he track me there?” She asks, her voice barely more than a whisper. She looks frightened and uncomfortable, though she’s trying to hold it together, and he can’t blame her. This man is actively following her and none of them noticed. It’s his job to notice these things, and he’s failed her. “I’ve never noticed a tail before. I circle around the way Digg told me to.”

“Felicity,” he snaps, more harshly than he intends. He needs to get her attention, though. “Diggle will be back from checking with security about the delivery in a minute. How many of these do you want him to see?”

“I, uh, what?” She manages to focus on him with a frown.

“The pictures. How many of these do you want him to see? We can’t hide them all, but…” he trails off, indicating the photo from last night pointedly.

Her face flushes bright red as she gasps. The sound brings him back to the memory of a similar one escaping her lips last night, but he clamps down on the thought hard. “I- uh-right. Why don’t we just… put that one in your desk for now? Until we can shred it… or burn it… Um…” She circles around to get a better look at the pictures splayed over his desk. Awkward tension rolls off her in waves while she pulls a couple other photos out of the pile to put aside.
They’re left with five to show Digg, two of them leaving her apartment and the other three depicting them outside her car with the most minimal of physical contact. In one, he’s closing her car door, another they’re standing and facing each other, and in the final one, his hand is resting on her shoulder. Innocent enough, he decides. He isn’t sure if he can handle Digg’s reaction to their less than platonic nature on top of the revelation that the Ghost has managed to find Felicity outside the club. Considering that he’s revealed his knowledge of her extracurricular job, it stands to reason that he’s made the connection of Oliver’s as well.

Felicity seems to realize this around the same time he does, turning her eyes to his. “Wait… how much do you think he knows about you? If he’s found Verdant… What if he exposes you?”

He’s still gaping at her in disbelief as Digg makes his way into the office. “That’s what you’re worried about right now? Not that some guy is stalking you, but that he may have connected me to the Arrow?”

She bites her lip momentarily before chancing a glance at him. “Yes?”

Digg shakes his head as he chuckles despite the situation. It’s so like Felicity that Oliver almost wants to do the same, but he’s still struggling to breathe normally. Instead, he tells her to cancel his conference call.

“You’ve already rescheduled three times,” she tells him, fixing him with a look.

“This is-”

“Not going anywhere,” she interrupts firmly. “Take the call, get it sorted out. Digg and I will get started on this. If anything pops up I’ll come up with an emergency to cut the call short. Promise.”

He holds her eyes for a second before nodding reluctantly. Digg moves to the door, holding it open for her as he glances back at them expectantly. It takes her a few seconds to break the eye contact and follow the other man’s path out of the office, leaving Oliver to watch through the glass as they huddle together at her desk.
He gets the feeling this conversation they’ve reserved for “later” won’t be happening for a while. After he finishes up the conference call, Isabel comes to his office for an update and stays through lunch, which Digg brings in with an apologetic smile in his direction. Felicity doesn’t once interrupt him, leading him to believe that the pair have made no progress on how the Ghost managed to slip those photos into his morning mail. There’s no way he could have just mailed them; they wouldn’t have gotten here in time for the delivery. He had to do it personally, or have someone else do it for him.

The Ghost is stretching Oliver to the end of his patience. Not only has he demonstrated his skill in blurring the bigger picture of whatever is going on, but he’s now threatened him and Felicity. He’s watching Felicity. Oliver needs to find him. He wants to make him pay.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, he tries concentrate on the investor’s questions. The sooner this is over, the sooner he can head to the club’s basement and work off some of the frustration that’s been building all day.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Queen, Mr. Nellon, but we’ve just had word from Ms. Queen that she requires your assistance across town. It’s an emergency,” Felicity says, sticking her head in the door after a brief knock.

Oliver’s heart leaps to his throat at her words. His first instinct is to ask what’s gone wrong, and he allows himself to follow it since it’s part of the cover, but his brain catches up to his previous request for her to interrupt them if there’s a breakthrough and he manages to mostly silence the concerned brother inside his head. He rises, apologizing profusely to Mr. Nellon as he escorts him to his office door before Felicity takes over, telling the man to have his secretary call her to set up a follow-up meeting next week to clear up any additional questions. By now, investors are used to being pushed unceremoniously from the top office, so Mr. Nellon merely nods. The only signs of the man’s displeasure are the slight crease between his brows and the faint purse of his lips, but Oliver finds he really doesn’t care much. It’s hard to care about anything beyond learning whatever Felicity has.

“You looked like you were about five seconds from bashing his head against the desk and walking out…” She says after the elevator doors close behind Nellon. “Thought it was best to just save him from your wrath.”

“Wait, so you didn’t actually find anything?”

“Well, not really… But I did have a couple of ideas. Digg’s already gone to Verdant, though, and I had a feeling you wouldn’t take too kindly to me leaving on my own, so…”
She’s assumed correctly, of course. If she’d left on her own he probably would have left Nellon in a much less polite manner in order to follow her out. He can’t stomach the thought of her out there alone on a regular basis, let alone after receiving covert pictures of the two of them that morning. He tries to console himself with the knowledge that she still has her gun, but it does little to ease his anxiety. He doesn’t know what he was thinking, allowing himself to display his feelings for her so publicly. Anyone could have happened upon them, and that’s precisely what happened.

The elevator ride is tense, to say the least. He wonders briefly if they should address the very large elephant hanging between them, but it will only further complicate the situation and that’s not what they need right now. They need to focus on the more pressing issue at hand.

“I heard back from my Russian… associates,” she fills him and Digg in once they’ve all marginally relaxed. “They haven’t been able to tell me much more about the Ghost, so I think we’re pretty tapped out there. My searches on Svalov are still running, but I’ve started cross-referencing the meager results already returned to see if any of them can deliver something concrete. Lance called earlier and told me they had to release a couple of the Russians who have diplomatic immunity. They tried to hold them as long as they could, but there’s only so much red tape they can force the Russian consulate to cut through before they have to oblige. They should be leaving the country within the day, so the Arrow could probably pay them a visit before they scamper off. I’ve got the address here. While you’re doing that, I’m going to run Whicker’s financials again, see if I missed anything.”

Oliver nods. “I want you to consider staying somewhere else tonight.”

“Absolutely not,” she retorts, catching his meaning immediately. “Like I said, if he wanted to hurt me, he would have.”

“He could just be gathering intel on your routine, biding his time until he knows it well enough to snatch you,” Digg chimes in.

She shoots him a withering look. “Why let me know, then? He wants me to know he’s been following me. He wouldn’t do that if he wanted it to be a surprise. Not only do I know, but so do you two.”

“It could be a part of the plan. Lure you into false security.”

“I just… would you guys believe me if I told you I have a feeling he’s not out to hurt me?” Both men merely blink at her and she sighs. “Fine. I guess I could always go to a… wait a second!” She exclaims, bolting upright in her chair and whirling around to face the monitors.
“Want to share with the class?” Digg asks after it becomes clear that she’s not going to elaborate.

“A hotel. The hotel. Binton told us he’d covered up Whicker’s trips to different hotels in Starling, remember?” She asks excitedly. “There’s only a couple of reasons you go to a hotel in your own city: business, or hiding a sordid affair. Whicker trusted this woman, whether she’s Svalov’s daughter or not, right? A woman’s favourite way of controlling a man is through her… well… you get the picture.”

“So she sleeps with him to get him to trust her?”

Felicity nods, typing at lightning speed. “It’s what I’d do, you know, if I had the ability to do it and was an evil manipulative witch. Unfortunately, my past attempts at seduction have failed miserably. Please pretend I did not just say that.”

Oliver has to clench his jaw to prevent himself from reacting to the images that creates in his mind. He’s very sure that Felicity could not fail at seduction, but now is not the time to take that particular journey. Instead, he focuses on the productive information she’s conveyed. “That woman from the limo…”

“I’d bet anything she’s Svalov’s daughter. She was careful to hide from the cameras and Whicker had that spring in his step Digg so helpfully labelled as post-sex cheer. He probably meets her at hotels instead of his house to decrease the chances of them being linked. She was smart about it.”

Digg nods along with her. “Yeah, Whicker wouldn’t put that much effort into hiding just any relationship. It would have to have been her idea.”

“I’ve got a list of hotels paid for from his offshore and I’ll start pulling the security footage to see if I can find anything while you go talk to the Russians. Maybe she wasn’t as careful at the hotel as she was around Whicker’s house.”

The way she says the words makes it sound as though she’s just told him she’ll make dinner while he’s out chatting up some friends. He’s pretty sure friendly conversations don’t involve bows and arrows, though.
The underlings don’t know anything of consequence, only confirming that Konn often spoke on the phone to someone else. They couldn’t say much else about this other person besides the impression that they were in charge of Konn, even when they were back in Russia. Oliver considers this information alongside Leonov’s rumour that Svalov’s daughter ran the organization behind the scenes, fitting the pieces together but wondering why it all matters. He’s sure there’s something important here, but there are still too many variables to make solid connections.

He’s so busy turning the possibilities over in his mind, in fact, that he doesn’t immediately pick up on his tail. As he leaps from one rooftop to the next, a block from his bike, he notices the movement out of the corner of his eye. It’s just a flash of black, but it’s enough to alert him to the presence of someone who doesn’t want to be seen. Ducking quickly behind the next rooftop access, he waits until he hears the footsteps close enough to draw the arrow back and tense his muscles to spring. Just before the blonde hair comes into his sight, he steps forward enough to alert the woman to his presence.

“Sara?” He lets out, exhaling heavily and lowering the bow in surprise. He hasn’t seen her in months. Given Laurel’s move, he wasn’t sure he’d see her again at all.

“Ollie,” she returns. “It took you longer than I expected to realize I was following you.”

“I was… distracted,” he admits, grimacing. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to warn you to stop asking questions about the Ghost.”

“Ok, wait. Let me get this straight,” Felicity is saying as she paces in front of her computers back in the foundry. It seems to have become a habit of hers and it’s a bit unnerving. Felicity is always the calm, stable one in the basement, not the one pacing around like a cat. Digg is sitting in her vacated chair, eyes fixed on Sara where she’s leaning against the table beside Oliver. Oliver’s own eyes track Felicity’s movements across the floor, something he’s sure isn’t missed by anyone in the room, but also something he can’t bring himself to care enough about to stop. “The League has friends in Russia who have picked up on my… inquiries about the Ghost, and they sent you to make sure I stopped?”

“I volunteered,” Sara amends. “Others might not have been so… amicable.”

“Why is the League even interested in this guy?” Digg questions, leaning forward to rest his
forearms on his thighs.

“He… owes us a debt.”

“A debt?” Oliver pipes up, the first time he’s spoken since returning to the foundry an hour ago with Sara in tow.

She looks conflicted for a moment before sighing. “He made a deal with the League a few years back, offering his computer expertise in exchange for training. That wasn’t good enough for the League, so they extended the terms of the agreement to include service after the training was complete, both digital and… physical. He still owes us a year and a couple months, so his getting caught isn’t really an option.”

At this, Felicity swallows thickly, understanding the underlying meaning to Sara’s words. If they don’t stop, the League will force them to. The expression on her face only lasts for a second, though, before her eyebrows narrow and she fixes Sara with a look. Oliver takes a second to appreciate the way she can so easily stare down people she should definitely be afraid of before paying attention to what she’s saying.

“So he spent time in Nanda Parbat, then?” She asks, but it’s really more of a statement. Oliver remembers Leonov’s tale from their conversation and almost wonders how Felicity can make these connections so much faster than him or Diggle, but then recalls her IQ and brushes the thought away.

Sara’s shoulders slump. “Yes. Guys, just… stop, ok? I don’t want the League sending anyone out here to make you.”

“I thought the League didn’t make deals…” Oliver says to Sara, turning to face her. “Once you’re in, you’re in for life.”

“Sometimes they make exceptions. Depends on what you have to offer. I didn’t have anything that could be of use to them; the Ghost did.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that he’s in our city,” Digg reminds them. “He’s involved in this.”

“He’s right,” Oliver concedes. “He needs to be stopped. We can’t just let him get away with whatever’s going on.”
Felicity nods in a show of solidarity. “We need answers.”

Sara stares at the ground for a minute before she raises her head, eyes landing on each of them in turn before coming to rest on Felicity. “There are some questions you don’t want the answers to.”

Sara’s left them more at a loss than ever, especially with her refusal to give them any hint as to the Ghost’s true identity. Oliver suspects that she knows who the man is, or at least has a guess, but she’s refusing to divulge it. She’s at least offered to stick around for a few days, wanting to see her father before she heads out, but Oliver can’t tell if it’s to keep an eye on them or not. Regardless, the information she brought them only serves to confuse him more. The rumours are true. The Ghost spent time in Nanda Parbat and made a deal with the League of Assassins, making him even more dangerous than previously thought. Even if Sara claims the League has a hold on him, they’re still turning him loose to do as he pleases between jobs. He’s a danger to Felicity and he needs to be put down, the League be damned. He has to make Sara see that.

“You’re making the wrong decision here, Ollie,” Sara tells him. They’ve met at the clock tower she used to frequent for privacy’s sake, both dressed in their leathers just in case.

“I can’t make any other choice. Not only is he up to something bigger than just a human trafficking ring, he’s following Felicity. He’s a danger to her and needs to be stopped.”

Sara blinks, turning to face him quickly from her position by the window. “He’s following her?”

Oliver nods, hope flaring in his chest at the look in her eyes. He knows she understands how important Felicity and Diggle are to him, and he hoped that this information would sway her. It’s why he arranged the meeting. He just doesn’t want Felicity to find out he’s using her to change Sara’s mind; he has a strong feeling she wouldn’t like it. From the brief time Sara’s spent with his friends, he knows she’s also developed a soft spot for Felicity, because who couldn’t? She has the ability to draw even the most damaged and withdrawn of people to her. The light is infectious, and they all seem to want a piece of it to chase away their dark.

Sara’s eyes close momentarily as she struggles for control. “I’ll help you, on one condition. The Ghost comes with me once we find him. I’ll return him to the League.”

“Fine,” he responds. It’s not a complete win, but he’ll take what he can get. If Felicity is out of
danger, it doesn’t matter what happens to the Russian computer tech so long as he stays away from her for good. If the League can assure that, he’ll accept Sara’s terms.

“She’s important to you,” Sara observes, a shrewd tone in her voice.

“Of course she is.”

A small smile pulls at her lips as she clarifies. “In a way Diggle isn’t.” She holds up a hand as he’s about to protest. Why he’s trying to fool her, he’s not sure. “You forget how well I know you, Ollie. I saw the way you were looking at her last night.”

“I assume you have an opinion on the matter?” He asks, resigned. She quirks an eyebrow at him and he gives her a rueful smile. “Everyone seems to.”

Her answering smile is equal parts understanding and sympathetic. “I think it’s nice to see you healing, and I think she’s the reason for that. She’s… We went through a lot on that island, Ollie. It takes a certain kind of person to be able to break through that. I’m glad you found her.” Sara pauses in her speech and her voice loses its soft quality when she utters one last sentence, “Don’t let her get away.”

He allows a small smile to grace his features in response, but doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t want her to get away, but in truth it would be the best thing for her. He’s messy and damaged and complicated in ways she doesn’t deserve, not to mention selfish. But he’s made the choice to let her decide what she wants, and he’ll be good with whatever that decision is. Does the selfish part of him want her to choose him? Absolutely. Should she? Probably not. Oliver learned long ago that life doesn’t always turn out the way you plan or want it to, though, so he’s trying to stop himself from taking back the control he’s giving her. Having control doesn’t necessarily mean everything will go according to plan, and the last time he made a unilateral decision about her wellbeing she all but physically slapped him for it. This time, he figures that trying to give her control will show her that he respects her and her ability to choose for herself. Not that she knows she has that control yet… They still haven’t had that conversation.

When he returns to the foundry, he breathes a sigh of relief to see Felicity and Diggle both still present and circling each other on the training mat. At the sight of Oliver descending the last couple of steps, Digg’s attention shifts briefly to him, apparently giving Felicity the opening she’s been looking for. In a move that’s faster than he would have expected and perfectly executed, she sweeps the older man’s feet out from under him and sends him crashing onto the mat, flat on his back. The sheer joy and pride lighting her face at her success is infectious, and he finds himself grinning along
with her at the look of utter bewilderment on Digg’s face as Felicity pumps her arms into the air in triumph.

“Finally!” She cheers, smiling broadly before poking a finger down at him. “And you don’t get to say it doesn’t count because you guys are always preaching constant vigilance and awareness of surroundings and all that. You don’t get to ruin the first time I knock you on your back.”

Digg finally cracks a smile as he hoists himself to his feet while she tries to prevent the blush spreading across her face at what she just said. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

She meets Oliver’s eyes briefly as she goes for her water bottle, grinning more broadly than she has recently. Unable to help himself, he moves to stand beside her under the guise of returning his bow to its case. He notes the way she tenses almost imperceptibly at his proximity and finds himself grinning along with her once again.

“Nicely done,” he compliments quietly, sliding his quiver over his shoulder.

Her answering smile is just a tad cheeky, and he’s glad to see her return to her old self, especially after one of the training sessions she’s been so opposed to. “Thanks. Kind of cheating, but I’ll take what I can get.”

He discreetly flicks his eyes to the left, taking in her face flushed from a combination of physical exertion and lingering embarrassment at her verbal gaffe. Strands of her hair are escaping her high ponytail, and her breathing is still slightly laboured. His eyes linger on the long expanse of her throat as she tips her head back while she pours water into her mouth, captivating his attention far too thoroughly. Swallowing thickly, he tears his eyes away to see her returning his stare, face flushing for an entirely different reason before she swivels quickly and heads away to the computers. As Oliver automatically turns to watch her go, he catches sight of Digg staring at him impassively, except for an eyebrow just barely quirked upward. If he didn’t know the man so well he wouldn’t even notice it. Chagrined at being caught, he turns back to face the glass cabinet to regain control of his spiraling emotions. He can’t be so obvious about this… thing between them. Not that there’s a thing. He isn’t sure what there is.

“So far nothing on the hotel security footage,” Felicity alerts them, breaking through his thoughts. “I’ll keep running them against facial recognition to see if I can find Whicker and then take an hour on either side to see if I can find anything we can use. Maybe we’ll get lucky. On the financial side, I found something that’s pretty interesting. Not related to the human trafficking ring, but… I’ll let you guys decide for yourselves.”
Intrigued, Oliver heads over at the same time Diggle does, resisting the urge to place his hands on the back of her chair.

“Ok, so I’ve isolated some investments Whicker made over the past months. Notice anything?” She asks, pulling up the data on her screen. Other than the fact that they’re all made to companies he’s never so much as heard of before, except for Ritter Limited, he doesn’t understand.

“Now’s not the time for a pop quiz,” Digg replies.

“Right. Sorry. Um…” She pulls up another screen on the monitor beside the one they’re currently looking at. “Every single company on the list of Whicker’s investments matches a company on this list over here, which are those who’ve collapsed because of irreparable damage to their databases. I mean, maybe his investment in Ritter Limited can be explained away as a coincidence, but this many? And all of them went under within a few weeks of his investment."

“So you’re suggesting that Whicker had something to do with these cyber-attacks?”

“That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.”

Oliver can already feel the frown forming as he absorbs her words. “But why put his own money in a company he’s planning to collapse?”

“For exactly that reason right there,” she answers, pointing in his direction over her shoulder. “Who would believe he put his own money into a company only to collapse it and lose the funds?”

“Unless whatever he was promised was going to replace those lost funds and then some…” Digg surmises, his voice trailing off at the end.

Oliver takes a few paces away, turning his back on his partners to wrap his brain around it all. “So this could be the bigger picture, then. Why start up the human trafficking though? Why involve the Russians at all? What does all of this even accomplish?”

He turns just in time to watch Felicity deflate. “I haven’t quite gotten there yet… But I’m sure these are connected. Granted, Whicker hasn’t invested in each company on the list, but it would be foolish to have him do that. It would draw too much attention, be too much of a coincidence. Most people wouldn’t pick up on the connection if they weren’t paying attention, or had any semblance of a life.
Lucky for us, I both pay attention and have no life outside of this basement and Queen Consolidated. Not that I’m pathetic or anything… I just… Yeah, ok, I’m a bit pathetic.

“More to the point, most companies have some kind of safeguard in place to protect their databases from outside interference. A couple of these look like they were just hacked externally, which could probably be the work of the Ghost, which explains why they needed him. They were probably hoping they could do it all without leaving a trace, but as the company profiles go up, so do their security measures. I’m guessing investors gain access to the security codes, or at least the files where the codes are stored. So they needed an investor to get the information they needed to corrupt the information. In comes Whicker, already proven to be the perfect patsy. They get the codes from him and wipe the databases, decimating the companies since they’ve basically lost everything. Keeps Svalov’s daughter in the clear, and if part of the plan was to kill Whicker all along, he can’t expose them for it. The trail dies with Whicker, in theory.”

Digg shakes his head. “This is a big leap, Felicity.”

“Maybe,” she admits with a half-shrug. “A company’s database often holds all of its important information, from client files to business plans to product development information. It’s not a stretch to think competitors would want to get their hands on it. It’s why most important businesses have such complicated systems with limited access. The databases are literally what keep the companies alive, and as soon as they’re gone, so are the companies.”

“But what good does that do?”

“It destabilizes the entire system. Investors lose money and confidence, not to mention their information could be out there. There’s no way to tell if anything was taken from the system before the virus or whatever was used was implanted, so for all we know the Ghost could have taken whatever he pleased out of their databases before hitting the red button and sending them into chaos. It scares people and sends the economy spiralling if it’s done right.”

“The human trafficking could have been a distraction,” Oliver offers, “Whicker made it sound like they knew we’d be on to him, and he told Svalov’s daughter that she should have been faster. What if that was the plan, but we interrupted it? Distract us while they do what they really wanted to. We were so busy trying to connect those dots that we couldn’t focus properly on catching the other stuff going on right under our noses.”

“Could be,” Digg agrees, rubbing his hand across the stubble that’s starting to grow along his jaw. “Except we caught them a lot sooner than they hoped, which threw everything off.”
“Didn’t you say that these types of attacks are tested on small companies first?” Oliver asks Felicity.

She spins her chair around to face them as she answers. “Usually. I get the feeling they were supposed to get closer to their goal of big ticket companies than they did before Whicker and the ring were exposed, but Ritter Limited was a pretty high profile takedown. I’d say they aren’t going to stop just because we shut down the trafficking ring if they’ve gotten this far.”

“So how are we supposed to catch them?” Digg asks. “How do we know where they’ll strike next?”

“That is a good question.”

Yes, this has definitely become a full blown storm.

After another two hours of throwing ideas back and forth, but with no real strategy to tackle this new theory, the three of them decide to call it a night. They won’t get anywhere if they’re over tired and burnt out. Fresh eyes will be good for all of them, not to mention they need to fill Sara in the next morning. Perhaps she’ll have a better idea of how to deal with this. Digg and Felicity seem surprised that he’s convinced her to help them, and he’s sure they don’t buy his attempts to brush it off, but they’re tired enough to let it go.

“Am I ok to leave you two here alone, or will I come back to pieces of you guys strewn across the floor tomorrow morning?” Digg asks. He stands with one foot on the bottom stair, amusement hinting at the edges of his voice to take the brutality out of the question.

Felicity turns to give him a soft smile. “We’ll be fine, John.”

“Alright. Not too fine, though, yeah?”

Her face progressively turns a deeper shade of red as she whirls abruptly to check on her completely black monitors. It defeats the purpose when she’s already turned the screens off for the night, but she doesn’t let it faze her.

“He’s gone,” Oliver informs her when she remains standing in the exact same position for a few
minutes after the door has closed behind the other man.

She startles, turning to look at him instinctually before shifting her eyes away from his. “Right.”

Sighing, he steps closer to her as she makes to pick up her jacket but fumbles it with shaking hands. Taking the fabric from her, he holds it out for her arms to slide through, which she does after a slight hesitation. He pulls her ponytail from the collar as he did last night, allowing his hands to fall to her shoulders once the blonde tresses are free.

“Will you consider coming back to the mansion with me if I ask nicely?” He tries.

“Oliver Queen, are you trying to seduce me?” She asks teasingly, before seemingly feeling awkward about it and wincing. “One day I will actually learn how to think about the things that pop into my head before I say them.”

Deciding to ignore the last bit and play along, he leans in to whisper in her ear, “If I was trying to seduce you, you’d know it.”

He’s rewarded with a very visible attempt to control her reaction before he steps back and circles around to face her.

“In all seriousness, though. You said we’d revisit the conversation if he tried anything else. I don’t want you going back to your apartment tonight, and I’d feel better if you were at the mansion. It has extra security.” He omits the ‘and it’s close to me.’

“That’s supposed to be a selling point?” She quips, grabbing her purse and swinging it over her shoulder.

“Please?” He attempts, forcing a beseeching grin onto his face. “Humour me.”

She lets out a small chuckle as she shakes her head in disbelief. “Fine, Oliver. I’ll allow you to babysit me for the night. But just for tonight.”

“I didn’t take you for a one night stand kind of woman, Felicity Smoak.” He grins as she chokes on
her own air intake. “Relax, I’m kidding. But I do believe I owe you a conversation, right?”

Just like that, her demeanor shifts back to the awkward tension of this morning and he wonders if he’s completely ruined their relationship with his selfishness.

He takes her to her apartment to pick up some of her clothes and toiletries first. The remaining journey back to the mansion is filled with a tense silence and Oliver curses himself for not actually planning what to say to her. It always seems like words fail him at the most crucial of times.

He shows her to a guest bedroom two doors down from his, watching as she takes in her surroundings with a look of barely contained awe on her face. She’s seen the downstairs of the mansion several times, but never the upper levels, and certainly not the bedrooms. He’ll fully admit to being a bit awestruck himself when he first returned from the island. Five years away dulled his memories of exactly how grandiose his house was, but that didn’t mean he forgot how devoid of warmth it is. It still grates on him, the huge, empty spaces. Felicity’s own apartment is smaller, but also much warmer. It feels like a home, unlike this monstrosity.

“I can’t- I should go,” she stutters, trying to back out of the room but only succeeding in backing into Oliver’s chest.

He places his hands on her shoulders soothingly, his thumbs rubbing across the wool of her jacket. “I was guaranteed the opportunity to babysit.”

He feels more than hears her sigh of exasperation as her head tips back to fall against his chest without meaning to. He can tell because she jerks it back upright immediately after it makes contact. Smiling, he nudges her into the room and takes the suitcase she refused to let him carry on the way up here. He sets the small bag on the bench at the end of the bed, telling her that he’ll give her a minute to adjust and get her bearings. Knowing that she’ll come find him when she’s ready, he retreats to his room to attempt to get a hold on himself. He needs to figure out how to say what he wants to without totally ruining whatever is happening, but with his track record it isn’t looking good for him.

He’s rolling up the sleeves of his light blue button-down when she knocks softly on his door. She comes into view wearing an oversized MIT sweatshirt that falls to her mid-thigh and leggings, her hair hanging loosely around her shoulders instead of confined in an elastic. He turns to the fire to get a handle on whatever his facial reaction is to seeing her so dressed down.

“Wow. Your room is complete with a fireplace. That’s…” She lets the sentence die, waving her hand around lamely.
“Unnecessary? Yes,” he finishes, allowing the barest of smiles to pull at his lips. “Sometimes it helps, though, on the bad nights. The sound reminds me of the island. If I lay on the floor beside it…” It’s his turn to trail off, mesmerized by the dancing flames. It isn’t long before he feels her presence beside him.

“Everyone has their safety blankets; the things that make it easier to get through the tough days.”

“What’s yours?” He inquires quietly, still staring at the fire.

“This sweatshirt,” she replies, tugging on the bottom with her right hand.

Glancing down, he realizes it’s her only free hand; the other is tangled with his. He’s overcome once more by that natural feeling he seems to get around Felicity. It’s almost an ache in his chest, the desire to be normal, and she makes him feel like maybe he can be one day. Before he can think about it, he’s turning to face her, brushing her hair behind her ear when she turns her head to look up at him. Her lips part just enough to draw his attention while his hand curves around her neck of its own accord.

“Oliver…” She breathes, “What-”

He’s kissing her before she can finish the question, his fingers sliding up to tangle in her hair as her free arm wraps around his waist to pull him closer. It starts out gentle and light, but he wastes no time in deepening the kiss when she pulls her hand from his to rake her nails through his hair. Now free, his left arm bands around the small of her back, crushing her against him as the arm around his waist trails up his chest. It’s like an addiction, the feel of her lips against his. If he lets it, it could be worse than his compulsion to open up to her.

But they need oxygen and certainly have things to talk about, as evidenced by her eyes rapidly searching his when she pulls away. It takes him a second to realize that he can’t keep her held against him forever, as much as he wants to. They need to sort this out. He can’t keep resorting to physicality when he can’t think of any words. He’s been guilty of that in the past, preferring physical release to just talking about whatever’s bothering him, and it’s gotten him into a fair share of trouble. If he’s going down this road with Felicity, he needs to get it right, which means he needs to talk.

He takes a deep breath, allowing his eyes to close as he releases his hold on her. When he opens them again, he finds her sitting on the couch with her legs tucked under her, wringing her hands in her lap as she glances up at him apprehensively through her eyelashes. Fisting his own hands at his
sides, he joins her with measured steps, making sure to sit an appropriate distance away to give her the space she seems to want. It takes him too long to formulate a sentence as he sits there, elbows balanced on his thighs, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand against the palm of his left to give himself something to concentrate on. Now he’s the one who feels awkward.

“Felicity, I-” He starts, but his voice quits on him before he can say anything substantial.

“Oliver, what exactly is going on here?” She finally asks, taking pity on his inability to vocalize anything.

“I- I don’t- know.”

The blonde scoffs and rolls her eyes to the ceiling. “Of course not.”

“Look, I-” He stops again, searching for words that aren’t just right, but honest. “I’m not good at this. Obviously. I used to be able to spew whatever sounded good to any woman around. I could tell anyone what they wanted to hear; I still can. I’m just… I’m not good at finding the words when they actually matter. I never have been. Please, just be… patient with me, Felicity. You’re too… important. I’d never forgive myself if I screwed this up.”

“And what is this,” she probes, gesturing between the two of them, “exactly?”

He turns his head to look at her from where he’s bent over. “Whatever you want it to be.”

“I don’t get it,” she finally admits, a frown puckering her otherwise smooth face.

“I’m done trying to deny this to myself. It was stupid to try, and you’ve demolished every excuse I had. I’m giving you complete control here. You said I wasn’t letting you make your own choices, so this is me doing that. Whatever you decide to do…”

A knock on the door interrupts him and he nearly ignores it. If it’s not phones ringing… But it could be important, so he’s just about to force himself to get up and open it when whoever is on the other side makes the decision not to wait. That can only mean one person.
“Hey, Ollie, do you know why-” She stops short at the sight of him and Felicity on the couch, a blinding grin lighting up her features as her eyes zero in on the blonde and make the connection.

He sighs, running a hand through his hair in resignation as Felicity bolts upright off the couch in surprise. “Hi, Thea.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it took so long to post this! I actually thought I had already. Just a quick note: since this story only loosely follows up to 2.07 (I just wanted Russia to happen), Sara will not have been released from the League in this story, or have tried to leave them at any point.
His sister looks positively giddy at the sight in front of her, and Oliver can’t say he blames her. She’s been asking about Felicity since the diner, and suddenly she’s right in front of her. In his room. In a sweater and leggings. He’s pretty sure the ‘just friends’ explanation is out at this point. Though the fact that her belongings are in the next room works in their favour, Thea isn’t stupid. No, she’s very astute, and she’s currently asking for that formal introduction she demanded.

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his dress pants and resigns himself to this inevitability. “Felicity, this is my sister Thea,” he says, pulling one hand out to gesture toward the brunette. He notices that the blonde is a lot closer to him than before. They must have gravitated toward each other while Thea was eagerly eyeing her like a pair of rare designer shoes. “Thea, this is my…” He pauses, unsure of what to call her. They never really got to that part of the conversation. She’s more than his friend; Thea knows that. Introducing her as just a friend might go back on any progress they made, too. He remembers having this struggle at the hospital when she came to visit Walter. That time the result hadn’t been quite so hard to get to, though. Finally he just opts for, “Felicity.”

Thea’s grin stretches even wider if that’s possible. “Your Felicity, huh?”

He drops his chin to his chest as he returns his hand to his pocket, pressing his lips into a thin line. For her part, Felicity looks thoroughly amused by the whole thing, which surprises him. She was nervous a few seconds ago, and now she’s stifling a smile to rival Thea’s.

“You’ve seen her at the office, and you met her at the hospital after Walter…” He lets his sentence go unfinished since they both understand what he’s referring to.

“Nothing quite like a proper introduction to my brother’s Felicity, though,” Thea quips, still grinning far too widely.
“What did you need, Thea?” He asks pointedly, looking up at his sister.

“I was wondering if you knew whose stuff was in the other room, but I think I see the answer to that question now. Though as to why it’s in the other room…” She shrugs, trying to look innocent.

“A pipe burst in my apartment and Oliver insisted I stay here overnight while it’s getting fixed,” Felicity chimes in, the lie falling easily from her lips.

The fact that she’s such a good liar always manages to surprise him, since she’s such an open book. Although maybe that’s what sells it: no one expects her to lie to them. After learning what he has about her past and seeing this new side to her, though, he wonders how much she actually lies on a daily basis. He doesn’t think her personality is a lie, but a lie by omission still counts for something, doesn’t it? They’re more alike than he’s ever realized, each hiding away the pieces of themselves they don’t want anyone else to see. Granted, the pieces he doesn’t want to display are much larger than hers, but the point remains the same.

Maybe that’s what’s drawing them together. Up until now, they’ve both been keeping the worst parts of themselves hidden, but for some inexplicable reason, they’ve decided it’s time to stop. They’re trusting each other, opening themselves up in ways they haven’t before, and it’s deepening the connection that, if he’s being honest, has always been there. She’s been living in spite of her father for years, while he’s been living in the memory of his, but maybe together they can each find a balance. She can’t keep shutting out her memories and he can’t stay wrapped up in his. By this logic, he can almost convince himself it’s mutually beneficial, and not just his selfish side taking over. Whatever the reasoning, he can’t deny he wants this to work. He can see a future for the first time in too many years, and regardless of whether he deserves it or not, he wants it.

“Overnight?” His sister is asking, “You must have a good Super.”

Realizing the improbability of a pipe actually being fixed overnight, Felicity bites her lip. He can see her trying to come up with a decent explanation and tries not to grin. “Yeah, well, I may have been a little less than polite about his lack of dedication to the building when I called him. He’s trying to prove me wrong.”

“Right,” Thea responds, not looking like she believes a word coming out of the blonde’s mouth anymore. It’s sort of comforting, knowing that for all of her startling ease in deception, she’s not completely infallible in her excuses. When his sister speaks again, her voice is extra chipper. “Well, you kids have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”
To both of the Queens’ surprise, Felicity laughs. When she finally calms down, her face is slightly flushed as she takes in their expressions of confusion. “Sorry. It’s just… ironic, you saying that to Oliver. Not that he’s like that anymore, or that I’m like that, because I’m definitely not and neither is he. I’m well aware of how this looks, and it is not at all like that. This is all very above board and definitely not some flaky thing between a CEO and his secretary, not that there’s a thing to begin with. I didn’t even want to be a secretary but your brother can be very persuasive when he needs to be. Not in that way, of course- oh God, Oliver will you just hit me over the head with something already to put us all out of our misery?” She snaps, burying her face in her hands and shaking it as though the simple action will erase the last thirty seconds.

Thea is staring at her with raised eyebrows, but a smile tugs at the corners of her lips. “I like you,” she declares, “Anyone who can call my brother out on being a man-whore is good in my books!”

Felicity’s face is completely red by now and Oliver fixes his sister with a look before she retreats in an exaggerated tip-toe back through the door. She’s pointedly left it open, and Oliver crosses to push it closed, apologizing as he does so.

“She’s not usually so…” He isn’t sure what to call it, and thus resorts to waving his arm vaguely in the direction of the door.

She’s still hiding her face in her hands. “Oh my God. I can’t believe that just happened. What is wrong with me? Why didn’t you stop me?”

“I wasn’t really sure how,” he answers, trying not to smile.

“You’re an awful person,” she whines, but there’s no heat behind the words. “This was a terrible idea. I should not be here. Now your sister’s questioning what’s going on and neither of us even knows what’s going on.”

He remains silent for a moment, distracted by the fire. Finally pulling himself back to attention, he forces the words out. He’s a controlling person by nature, making it all the more difficult to be completely at her mercy. “I meant what I said before Thea came in here, Felicity. Where we go from here is up to you.”

“I- but why?”

He takes a deep breath before diving in. “Because I can’t seem to keep… whatever this is… platonic.
I tried because I thought it was best, but-” he raises a hand to stall her oncoming rant about making her own choices, “but, you told me I don’t know what’s best for you, and you’re right. Which is why you’re going to go to your room, sleep on it, and tell me what you think is best for you later.”

She looks like he just sprouted a second head. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He nods along with the word.

“And if I don’t need to think about it?” She throws back at him. Her eyes are darker than usual and he has to clamp down on the desire to close the distance between them.

“Humour me.”

Digg looks only marginally surprised to see Felicity descend the stairs with him the next morning, all three dressed less professionally than they normally would be during the week. For her part, she tries to play it off as no big deal. She overshoots a bit, but the effort is there, so Digg pretends it’s natural for her sake.

“He wanted to play caveman,” she says by way of explanation when they draw closer to the man. Once her words catch up with her, she squeezes her eyes shut and takes a few deep breaths. “I did not mean that in some kinky role play sort of way.”

Oliver nearly chokes on his own air intake as Diggle laughs outright. “I got what you meant, Felicity.”

“Right,” she says, lifting her chin a fraction of an inch in an attempt to move past the moment, “Let’s go. I want to see what my search turned up on the video footage and I want to check out investors in the other companies to see if there are any common names who deserve a visit.”

Digg nods once, starting toward the door with the other two following. They only get to the threshold before Thea’s voice echoes after them accompanied by the sound of her footsteps on the stairs.
“Bye Ollie!” She calls out, grabbing the bannister as she reaches the last stair to anchor her body as she spins around to face the door. Wagging her eyebrows, she adds, “Ollie’s Felicity.”

“Goodbye Thea,” he returns, his tone indicating his displeasure with the younger girl. She looks completely unaffected by it, however.

“Bye,” Felicity shoots off in her general direction before scurrying out the door. She’s already halfway to the car before Oliver turns to follow. Digg has hung back and is looking at Oliver with a raised eyebrow and tilted head, silently asking for an explanation he knows he won’t get.

True to expectation, Oliver mutters, “Don’t ask,” as he passes the older man.

The ride to Verdant is mostly silent, with Felicity already setting up the searches she wants to run next on her tablet to give them a head start and Oliver staring out the window while Digg glances back in the rear-view mirror occasionally to take note of the careful distance between the two. Oliver can tell he’s barely restraining his desire to ask what the hell is going on and he’s grateful for the effort. Diggle may have expressed hesitant support, but that doesn’t mean he’ll be one hundred percent behind them. The man has taken on a big brother attitude toward the blonde computer expert, and Oliver knows that whenever they sort this out, he’s going to be in for a lecture reminiscent of the one he received from Quentin Lance all those years ago. He can’t say he’s looking forward to that; he can only hope it has a better outcome.

Once they arrive, Diggle sets to checking over bits of footage Felicity sends to one of the monitors while Oliver catches himself up on QC e-mail. He gets about a hundred messages a day, and while it’s mind-numbing work, it needs to be done. He can’t completely shirk responsibility, even if it’s the weekend. One of the benefits of having Felicity as his EA, however, is that she was able to write a program filtering out the generic messages from the more important ones. Automatic responses are sent to any emails from worried investors asking after quarterly earnings, fiscal performance, or future plans, while inter-departmental memos sent to everyone in the building go straight to her own e-mail account for her to check over in her spare time for anything pertinent. It helps, not having to wade through the excess junk mail and just get straight to the point, but it doesn’t mean he has to like the job any more.

By the end of two hours, Diggle has managed to locate Whicker on five different nights, but has had no luck spotting the woman. Felicity, on the other hand, has managed to compile a list of investors common to at least three of the destroyed companies and is setting in on cross-referencing them with Whicker and Konn. Oliver is feeling the restlessness that comes with sitting in one place for too long and has taken to pacing as he types out responses to largely redundant e-mails from department heads and Isabel.

Felicity is the one to break the silence. “Ok, so the cross-reference on Whicker came back with
mostly innocent social connections. Nothing much deeper than mutual donations to charity fundraisers, some pictures from social gatherings. It looks like Whicker just knew some of these people through the regular channels, so I don’t think he’s our connection to anything more sinister going on.”

“What about Konn’s?” Oliver asks, thankful for the reprieve from the monotony.

“His is taking a little longer. I’ve been able to eliminate some of the investors but the results are still coming in. I probably won’t have anything useful until after lunch. Hopefully I can get you at least one person to arrow so you’ll stop prowling like a caged tiger.”

“He’ll never stop doing that,” Sara’s voice pipes up from the top of the stairs. Oliver’s been wondering if she’ll show today, and he feels a tiny pull of relief that she has. “Sorry I’m late. Dad wanted to do father-daughter bonding this morning. Not that you can really do much confined to an apartment because everyone else thinks you’re dead… Laurel stopped by for a bit, something about being in town for the weekend to get the rest of her stuff in order for the move, so I spent some of that time hidden in a closet. You think I’d be used to that but I guess the last time I hid from my sister in a closet was about seven years ago.”

Oliver gives her a tight smile in response to her dig at their past indiscretions. At least they can kind of joke about it. “It’s fine. We haven’t really gotten much done today.”

“I resent that tone,” Felicity scolds, pointing her finger waringly at him. “You can always go back to the sad state your system was in before you met me, and then you’d be here for weeks waiting for this stuff.”

He holds up his hands in surrender, a small grin playing at the edges of his lips. The blonde swivels back to face her screens in triumph, resuming her typing once more. Oliver turns to the other blonde then, and starts filling her in on their theory from the previous night. As he talks, he studies her face carefully for any sign of familiarity with his words. He trusts Sara, but he knows that her loyalty to the League has to come first in this situation, so she may not be able to be completely forthcoming.

“Start with Harvey Winman,” she suggests once he’s finished.

Oliver’s brow furrows. “You know something about this?”

Sara presses her lips together. “I wish I did. I’ve never met the man, but there are whispers about
him. The Ghost doesn’t tell us much about his independent dealings, but the League makes it their business to keep appraised of what’s going on. I hear rumours.” She shrugs. “Winman’s name was one of them. You’d find it anyways; this is just a shortcut.”

“Right,” Felicity murmurs, typing in a series of commands to modify the search. “Let’s see what Winman brings up.”

As the search starts, Felicity swivels in her chair a few times before finally announcing she’ll make a Big Belly run to kill time. After taking down everyone’s orders, she grabs her keys and heads for the door before realizing Oliver is following her.

“You aren’t going anywhere alone right now,” he tells her, leaving no room for argument. She looks like she wants to try for all of five seconds before sighing and giving in.

“Fine. But I’m still driving, and you’re paying.”

He says nothing, catching the look of amusement shared between Sara and Diggle as they ascend the stairs but ignoring it.

The drive to Big Belly is mostly silent, but it isn’t completely uncomfortable. Felicity concentrates on the road while he surveys the surroundings. It’s a habit he can’t shake, not that he’d want to. Knowing your environment is essential to survival. Not that there are any obvious threats at this moment. Aside from the usual groups of people milling about on street corners and the occasional car, the Glades are usually pretty quiet during the daylight hours. It’s when the sun goes down that extra caution is a necessity. One of the reasons he insisted Felicity park so close to Verdant, despite the danger of being spotted, is because of the plethora of street thugs and muggers waiting in the shadows. The less chance of her encountering one of them on the walk to her vehicle, the better. Like he told her, he’d rather their nighttime activities be exposed than her finding herself in danger because she parked too far away.

He makes it until they’re waiting for their order before he finally breaks and asks what he’s been wanting to all day. He knows that he told her he’d give her space to make the decision, but she hasn’t said anything, and it’s making him restless. “So… Have you thought about it?”

Her eyes shift in his direction, a thoroughly amused glint in them. “Thought about what?”

He fixes her with a look and she allows the smile she’s been fighting to tease her lips. She doesn’t
say anything for half a minute, instead choosing to turn her head back to the wall behind the counter as she leans her elbows on it. He’s aware of every tiny movement in that moment, from the pursing of her lips to the nervous tapping of her heeled toe against the tile floor. Her knee moves at a consistent rate, bobbing her foot up and down behind her in a nervous tick. She’s squeezing her hands together as though the mere action will give her the courage to say the words aloud.

Finally, without looking at him, she says, “I thought I told you I didn’t have to think about it.”

He turns away from her to mimic her position, their shoulders barely brushing as he counters, “I thought you’d appreciate my consideration for your ability to make your own decisions.”

She laughs, bumping his shoulder with hers playfully right as their food appears. He grabs the bag and they head out, his hand finding the small of her back as they do. This time, it feels different, but in a good way. There are a storm of emotions warring for dominance inside him, but it’s a good storm, unlike the other one they’re currently caught up in. Warmth explodes in his chest as she turns to grin at him briefly and he wonders why he ever thought this was a bad idea.

True to her word, Felicity’s computer dings right as they’re finishing their food. She pops up from her seat at the table, discarding her wrapper in the garbage as she heads for her desk. His eyes track her progress of their own accord, not even trying to hide the action anymore.

“Alright, so…” She starts. Her voice trails off as she enters a few commands and swivels her head to check out the other monitors before continuing. “Harvey Winman invested in three of our companies. He’s relatively new money, the pulled-himself-up-by-his-bootstraps type. He doesn’t have any criminal background but the interesting tidbit here is in his financials. He’s got a few rather large payments made to an offshore account that is, once again, poorly hidden. These guys really need to get better tech support. Maybe I can freelance, earn a few extra bucks…” She stops, shakes her head slightly to get herself back on track, and keeps talking as she types. “So these payments came from another offshore account that I am currently tracing the origins of and I will have that in 3…2…1… There! Um, wow. Ok. Here’s something I didn’t see coming. The payments came from a Russian businessman by the name of Adrian Bashmakov. He works for some mid-level investment firm in Moscow.”

“An investment firm in Russia?” Digg questions, standing and depositing his wrapper with hers.

“Looks like it,” she confirms, “I’d try to pronounce the name but we don’t need to be subjected to that.”
“What’s Bashmakov getting in exchange?” Oliver asks, splaying his hand flat over the table to prevent his fingers from tapping restlessly.

Felicity’s head swivels between monitors as she types feverishly. “It looks like… Holy crap.”

“What?” He asks immediately, jolting to his feet at her tone.

“The firm operates through employees selecting certain investments and putting client funds into those investments. Bashmakov selected a Russian company that’s been a consistently bad investment. It couldn’t seem to get off the ground… until just after Bashmakov’s investment. After he put his money into it, the company took off.”

Digg shrugs. “So they hit it lucky.”

“No, they didn’t,” Felicity says as she continues to scan the screen in front of her. “Their R&D department was stalled for months, but after Bashmakov’s investment they released plans for a new, ground-breaking energy sector that would, and I quote “rival America’s”. The important part of all this: the tech they’re looking to develop is vastly similar to Remcon Energy National’s.”

“Remcon Energy National,” Oliver repeats, rolling the name around on his tongue for any hint of familiarity. “Who are they?”

“They’re a starter company based out of Starling. They were looking very promising until a few months back. Guess what happened to them?”

“They fell victim to one of these cyber-attacks,” Oliver surmises, and Felicity nods in agreement. “So you’re saying that Winman invested in Remcon and then used his access to the database to have the Ghost corrupt it, collapsing Remcon, and then one of them sold the information to this Russian company?” She nods. “Then Winman gave Bashmakov a tip so he could make a huge profit?” She nods again.

“And in return for that, Bashmakov kicks a little back Winman’s way,” Digg finishes the train of thought.
Felicity glances to Sara over her shoulder, eyebrow raised. “Sound familiar?”

Sara purses her lips in thought. “I haven’t heard anything specific about it but it sounds plausible. I just heard Winman’s name a couple of times.”

It’s Digg who points out the obvious flaw in their theory. “But where does Svalov’s daughter fit in this? What’s to say Winman isn’t working with the Ghost himself?”

Sara shrugs. “I never heard anything about a woman, but didn’t you say the payments to Winman came from Bashmakov?”

Felicity double-checks before answering in the affirmative.

Sara taps her index finger on the table for a moment. “So what if Bashmakov just paid Winman for the tip? Winman might have been looking for some extra cash on the side. He could have found out what the Ghost was planning to do with the information and decided to branch out a little bit.”

Finally, they had something productive for him to do. “Why don’t I go ask him?” Oliver suggests.

Getting to Winman is easy. He parks in the company parking garage and is one of the last to leave at night, so there’s no danger of them being interrupted. Oliver waits behind the pillar Winman parked beside, wondering if he chose this spot in anticipation of this exact meeting. The garage is silent other than the comforting chatter of Felicity over the comm as she gives him a completely unnecessary play-by-play of the virus she’s implanting to crash the server. IT won’t be in to fix it until the morning, and with the computers out of commission, Winman won’t have any reason to stay any longer.

It doesn’t take long for the sound of footsteps to break through the quiet, and Oliver taps the comm once to let her know the target is approaching. The blonde falls silent, but he can practically hear the nervous tension through the link. She’s always been nervous when he’s out in the field, regardless of her attempts to hide it, but this time the nervous energy feels…stronger. He briefly wonders if it has something to do with their suddenly less ambiguous state of…relationship? He isn’t sure what to call it. He’s never really thought he could have a fully functional relationship, before or after the island.

He doesn’t have the luxury of pondering that question at the present time, however, so he shoves it
away for later and steps out to face the businessman. Winman looks appropriately shocked and fearful, dropping his phone and briefcase.

“We need to talk.”

“A-about what?” The man stutters, glancing frantically for an escape route or a witness.

“Adrian Bashmakov.”

“W-what are you t-talking about?”

“Bashmakov paid you for intel. How did you get it.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Winman insists, though Oliver can see the lie in his eyes.

Without hesitation, he reaches back and sends an arrow flying just right of his face. “How about now.”

Winman holds up his hands in a pathetic attempt at defence. “Ok, ok! I- I was working w-with this, uh, this c-comp-uter g-guy. He- He said that he w-wanted access to Remcon’s d-database and that he’d give me a share of w-whatever he m-made off it.”

“Off what.”

“H-He sold s-some of the information from R-Remcon to a Russian c-company,” Winman answers, still looking everywhere but at the green hooded figure in front of him. “I, uh, I thought I c-could get more out of the deal… if I gave the tip to Bashmakov. We’ve, uh, worked together in the past. I… I wasn’t s-supposed to.”

“Did you deal exclusively with the man.”

Winman looks confused, but there’s a touch of panic in his expression unrelated to his current
predicament. “W-What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Was there anyone else involved.”

“N-No.”

“Don’t lie to me,” Oliver snaps through the voice modulator, pulling back another arrow.

“Stop! Stop! Ok! It wasn’t just him!”

“Who else was working with him,” he demands, a little exasperated that he has to actually ask the question. Surely with your life on the line, you’d be a little more forthcoming.

“Aleksandr Konn!” Winman all but shouts in desperation. “Aleksandr Konn was the go-between! He set everything up! I was j-just supposed to invest to get the access information. Konn g-gave it to the c-computer guy and then he took w-what he wanted and s-sold it to the highest b-bidder. I got a p-portion of the profits for my help.”

“And Bashmakov?”

“He was on the side. I s-saw an opp-opportunity.”

Sensing he won’t be getting anything else of use out of Winman, Oliver finally releases the arrow he’s been holding at the ready this whole time. Winman shrieks in a very non-masculine manner as it penetrates the intended target. When the businessman finally looks up once more, he finds himself alone in the parking garage with an arrow sticking out of his phone.

Oliver stays out longer than he should, both digesting the information from Winman and burning off the remaining buzz of adrenaline in his bloodstream. He breaks up a couple of attempted robberies and uses a bit more force than necessary to stop an attempted rape before finding himself at the clock tower. Looking out at the city, he understands why Sara set herself up here; it has the perfect view from all directions, and is too high to hear the chaos of the streets below. He can almost pretend the city is peaceful.
After a few more minutes, he decides that he’s decompressed enough to head back to the foundry, and starts the descent back to the chaos.

Digg and Sara are sitting at the table when he returns, Felicity still in front of her computers. It’s almost like time froze while he was gone, save for the movement of Felicity’s fingers over the keyboard. Her posture shifts just a bit when he enters the room, relaxing, letting him know she’s aware of his presence. The other two heads swivel in his direction briefly as he walks over to rid himself of the bow and quiver before heading to change. It seems none of them have any desire to dance in verbal circles with what this means. Konn’s involvement as go-between hints at the involvement of Svalov’s daughter, whoever she may be. Regardless, the information still leaves them with a huge hole in the entire plot. Whoever this woman is, she wants to destabilize the United States economy, and she’s using corporate means to do it. They have too many W-questions unanswered at this point and it’s driving him nuts. They don’t know who is behind it all, they don’t know why she chose this particular method, and they don’t know when the next attack will be, or how to stop it.

By the time Felicity is ready to call it a night, because really she’s the only one doing anything at this point, the three of them are more than ready to agree. Sara leaves first, seeming to sense that the three of them want to have a private conversation. Once the door closes behind her, Digg turns to face Oliver, arms crossed over his chest.

“How much do you think she’s not telling?” He asks, getting straight to the point.

Oliver considers the question before finally admitting, “I’m not sure. I trust Sara, but she’s a member of League. I know she wouldn’t intentionally keep anything that could backfire on us, though.”

“She knows who the Ghost is and she won’t tell us,” the other man points out.

“I’m not sure if she’s one hundred percent sure on his identity,” Oliver hedges. “She said she’d never met him. Maybe she’s just formed an assumption.”

“Assumption or not, it would be helpful.”

“There’s not much we can do about it if she’s not sharing, now is there?” Felicity adds from her computer chair. “We just have to trust that, if she knew anything important, she’d tell us.”
Convincing her to come back to the mansion with him for a second night isn’t as difficult as he anticipates. He waits for a long list of arguments ending with her throwing his ‘one night only’ guarantee back in his face, but is subjected to only a half-hearted effort. She still asks what his definition of ‘one night’ is, though. In the end, it only takes half the time and counter-arguments he’d prepared to get her here.

They stand outside the guest room door, fingers loosely intertwined. Oliver leans forward to press his lips gently to her forehead, his eyes shutting as he does so. He’s surprised when he feels her free hand snake around the back of his neck, pulling his head down just enough for her to press her lips against his gently. It’s soft at first, and even as it deepens, the kiss remains slow. She pulls back after too short a time.

“Goodnight,” she whispers. Before he can reply, she’s disappeared through the door and left him alone in the hallway.

He spends the next two hours trying to fall asleep but failing. It isn’t like most nights, though. Usually he feels a sense of restlessness and dread when attempting to sleep. Oliver Queen isn’t afraid of much, but he fears what awaits him every time he closes his eyes. Tonight, however, his bout of insomnia is brought on by the never ending stream of thoughts buzzing through his brain. He can’t shut off the wheels turning in his mind, trying to put the pieces together. It’s strange, realizing that he can’t sleep because he’s too caught up in his present and not because he’s avoiding his past.

The knock on the door is so soft that, if he were anyone else, he wouldn’t have heard it. He pads over to answer it, glancing at the clock as he goes and seeing it’s nearly 3AM. Oliver can think of only one current occupant of the house who would still be awake right now.

Sure enough, he opens to door to find Felicity on the other side. She’s wearing actual pajama pants and a tank top tonight, with a black knit sweater pulled over her shoulders against the cold. Her eyes reflect her uncertainty as she tilts her head to look up at him.

“I- uh- I didn’t know if you’d be awake.”

His lips lift briefly in a half-smile as he steps back to allow her into the room, closing the door softly behind her once she steps past him. Her eyes linger on him from her seat on the couch as he turns around, and he realizes he isn’t wearing a shirt. Repressing the urge to smirk at her, he crosses to the couch and sinks down beside her. They seem to fall together naturally as his arm drapes across the back of the couch and she leans into his bare chest. His arm falls from the back of the couch to wrap securely around her shoulders as he leans into the corner formed by the back and armrest. His other arm comes to wrap around her waist, fingers dipping inside her sweater unintentionally and brushing...
the bare skin peeking out from the hem her tank top while his chin rests on the top of her head.

“Sorry, I just…” She trails off, her voice low.

“Couldn’t sleep?” He volunteers, his fingers tracing faint lines on her upper arm.

“My brain wouldn’t shut off.”

“Neither would mine,” he admits, allowing his eyes to close briefly. He feels calmer with her here.

“What was your father like?” She asks suddenly into the silence. “I mean, before all of the List stuff. I knew him as Robert Queen my boss, but what was he like as Robert Queen the father?”

The question surprises him, but he supposes it makes sense. They’ve only really talked about their fathers in terms of the men they resented, not as the men who raised them. He considers what he remembers of his father for a few minutes before finally deciding how to say what he wants to.

“My father was… happy, at one point. I don’t remember him smiling much, but when he did it was around me and Thea. I remember when Mom first had Thea. He looked so content to just hold her and stare down at her like she was the best thing in the world. Their marriage wasn’t the best at that point, but she brought them back to each other for a while. As Thea grew older, they grew apart again, but I didn’t really understand what was going on between them. I was more focused on my little sister and just being a kid. He used to play games with us on his days off, or take us to movies. He was just a dad on those days. As time went on, though, he started getting more reserved. He smiled even less than usual and he stopped taking time off. When he stopped paying attention to us… That was when I started acting out, begging for his attention. I didn’t understand why he suddenly just stopped wanting to spend time with us and, well, we both know how that ended.”

Felicity’s head bobs against his chest in a nod. Her fingers have absently started drawing random patterns over his skin, tracing figure eights and running over the scars he hates to look at. He likes that she doesn’t shy away from them, but she isn’t fascinated by them either. Most people stare while trying to look like they aren’t, even Laurel revealed a strange captivation with the evidence of torture covering his skin. It prompts curiosity in even the most controlled of people, and yet Felicity has never been fazed by them.

“What about yours?” He asks.
She draws in a deep breath and lets it out again. “He was… He tried. The truth is that we never fully clicked. He understood parts of me, but he spent a lot of the time trying to get me out of my comfort zone. I guess he thought it would toughen me up or make me a more rounded person, but a lot of his efforts fell flat. He just didn’t get why I was more comfortable tucked behind a book or a computer screen.”

“I thought you said he worked with computers, too,” he says, his hand stroking up and down her back. They’ve shifted over the course of their conversation so that they’re lying down, Oliver on his back and Felicity half lying on his chest between him and the back of the couch.

“He did,” she confirms, “But he wasn’t as in love with it as I am. To him, I think it was more of a job than a career. Maybe that’s why I love computers so much. I was always more electronically inclined, and some days he’d spend hours teaching me the ins and outs of computers. We’d take all sorts of electronics apart and put them back together again. Drove my mom crazy, but she let it happen because those were some of the few times our days together ended on a good note. Maybe I chose IT because it was a way to keep a good part of my father alive.” He can feel her smile against his chest and tightens his arms around her briefly. “The ice fishing wasn’t so bad, since I could bring a book, but then I fell in… That wasn’t so fun. Sometimes I would wonder if he knew anything about me, but then I’d remember the good days and I’d forgive him. It was easier to convince myself he was doing it out of love back then, and I did love him for it. Back when he was just my dad who tried too hard to get me out of my shell.

“But then it changed. He started drinking more and staying home less. He became this completely different person. I even started volunteering to go on ridiculous outings I had no interest in just to try to draw him out. Eventually I stopped trying, but Mom never did. Nothing we did seemed to help, though. We just watched him as he descended into this completely different person who would rather spend his nights hitting things and chasing away his demons with alcohol than try to sort it all out. I still don’t know what changed for him. One day he was excited to get a leg up in the business world and was taking my mom to fancy parties, and the next he was telling us that he wanted us to stay away from it all. He became this paranoid man who had to look into my friends and dates and then proceed to scare them off. He didn’t want us to get close to anyone and kept telling us it was for our own good. It was weird, but he wouldn’t explain what was going on so we were just left to watch it all unfold.”

“Is that why you said you were a different person when he was alive?” He asks hesitantly. He doesn’t want to pry, but he wants to know.

She nods against his chest again. “I let him push me into becoming this recluse who spent half of her time afraid of him and the other half insanely angry at him. I stopped trying to feel anything after a while because it was easier than balancing the whirlwind of emotions I couldn’t keep up with and he encouraged it. When he died, I kept letting him control how I acted, but after that conversation with my mother I realized I had to stop. It was hard, but eventually I realized that if I just tucked him away like he taught me to do with my emotions, I could be myself again. In order to be the best version of myself, I had to forget all about him, so I did. I compartmentalized him and only brought him out
once a year to help my mother grieve. It used to work, too, until…”

“Until I started prying?” He offers as she trails off.

He can feel her responding smile. “I wouldn’t exactly call it prying.” Her body shifts then, and she moves to prop her chin on one fist, balancing on his chest so she can look at him. “You were right, about the compartmentalizing thing. It’s not healthy. I have… a lot of unresolved issues surrounding the man and pushing them away doesn’t help me deal with them.”

“Well I have more than a few… unresolved issues of my own so I can’t really judge.”

He leans up to press his lips to hers before they shift back to their previous position, her head resting on his chest, and lie together silently for a few minutes. Eventually, when her breathing starts to even out and she relaxes completely against him, he realizes that she’s fallen asleep. He’s used to holding a lot of weight in his daily life, mostly mental and emotional, but the physical feel of her body resting partially on his is the first time the weight has been good. His mind drifts back to his earlier struggle to define what they actually are as he lays there with his arms wrapped around her. They’re obviously beyond friends, but he’s hesitant to call what they have a relationship, mostly because of his utter lack of success at them.

He and Laurel were definitely not what he would consider functional, both before and after the island. They were too busy clashing against their vastly different expectations. She thought she could change him, make him a better man. Maybe she did, but it wasn’t in the way she expected to. Looking back, it was almost as though she wanted to fix him, just so she could say she was the only one capable of doing it. It’s the only reason he can come up with for why she stuck around through so much. He was a spoiled little rich kid back then, only concerned about himself. He liked what she represented, and more importantly his father did, so he kept her around and mistreated her to his heart’s content. A small, petulant part of him had wanted to see how much she could take before admitting defeat. Apparently the answer was disappearing for five years on a yacht with her sister in a fit of commitment-phobia. So she couldn’t fix him like she wanted. It took a sunken yacht and five years on a not-so-deserted island to do that. Although fix isn’t the right word for what the island did to him (more like shattered), he did come out of it a better man.

After the island, they had been nearly as dysfunctional, coming together and pulling apart. Even after his wake up call, Oliver was still using Laurel for his own selfish purposes. He told himself that he’d know he was a better man when she accepted him once more, but that would never have worked. This time, they pulled Tommy into the middle of it, and he died for it, just like Laurel was sure Sara had. They both knew, then, that theirs was a toxic relationship, not the inevitability they once hoped.

His other attempts at relationships post-island were also failures. He pulled a Laurel and tried to fix Helena, putting Felicity in the crosshairs in the process. McKenna was an attempt at the first healthy
relationship he’d had probably in his entire life, on the adult equivalent of a dare from Felicity, but Helena had put an end to that. It wouldn’t have worked anyway. He had too many secrets to give himself fully to the cop, which is the very definition of unhealthy relationship. Then there was Isabel, which just sort of spoke for itself. Not really a relationship, but it was another sign that he wasn’t cut out for one.

With all of the evidence stacking up against him, he can’t in good conscience subject Felicity to a relationship with him, because inevitably that will end in failure. What he needs is a way to refer to it that doesn’t make him think about his other attempts, because she is nothing like them. He knows she’d understand his reluctance; she had a front row seat for each and every spectacular failure. He won’t associate her with his past, because for the first time about a week ago, he realized she is his future. He may not know what to call them, but they’re together, and for now that’s what matters.

He fell asleep that night and for once he didn’t wake until morning, even if it was only a mere four hours away. The nightmares still came, but they weren’t as vivid or consuming as usual, and he woke on his couch to find Felicity still wrapped in his arms.

She stays at the mansion for the following three nights, despite her initial attempts at protest, and eventually they find their way together. She’s made it a sort of game, seeing who falls asleep first. He knows it’s her attempt to help him sleep without outright saying it, and he’s grateful for it. She hasn’t won the game yet, but she’s determined to.

The only thing it’s managed to accomplish, though, is making her even more tired than usual. Digg and Sara have noticed, but they are blessedly silent on the subject. They merely sharpen weapons, spar, and look at video footage while waiting for Felicity to come up with something they can use.

“You know, you would think people would be just a little more careful about where they meet. I mean, this is a top of the line hotel. It’s bound to have security systems installed, meaning cameras,” Felicity vents as she runs the footage through the computer. They’re running out of backlogged video to watch, which means they’re running out of chances to catch sight of the mysterious woman. “I mean, as frustrating as it is, at least she’s doing a good job of hiding herself. Seriously, I’ve seen Congressman Marcus on here about five times already, meeting with hookers. If I wanted to, I could blow his career right- holy shit.”

All three heads snap to the blonde at the computers at her sudden change in tone. She doesn’t swear often, so whatever it is must be big. They’re on their way across the foundry when she holds up a finger behind her.
“Wait. No. You stay there. All of you. I have to make sure…” Her voice trails off as he and Digg trade frowns. She’s already busy typing and clicking and pulling up screens frantically. Her head is swivelling between monitors at a rate that should probably give her whiplash, but again she doesn’t notice. “Holy shit,” she finally breathes.

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Oliver’s head goes fuzzy for a split-second, trying to make sense of what he’s seeing. “That’s…” He
trails off, unable to complete the sentence.

Felicity is the one who finishes it. “Isabel.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you guys liked the Olicity happening in there. I’m going to try to make them
a bigger part of the chapters than they have been recently. Once I started writing longer
chapters, they became much more filled with plot so the Olicity has been suffering a bit.
I’ll try not to rob you guys of them in the future. Next up: they have to decide how to
deal with this new information and, well, Olicity did NOT heed the Ghost’s warnings,
and he’s not happy about that. Of course, there will be Olicity moments.
Previously…

_They watch as the video starts to play back. The woman appears on the camera, heading in the same direction as always, but this time a man bumps into her, knocking her off balance. She turns her head to glare at him, and that’s when they see her face._

“Holy shit,” Diggle echoes Felicity’s earlier statement.

Oliver’s head goes fuzzy for a split-second, trying to make sense of what he’s seeing. “That’s…” He trails off, unable to complete the sentence.

_Felicity is the one who finishes it. “Isabel.”_

His head is swimming. He can’t form a coherent thought. Isabel. Isabel Rochev is behind this whole thing. It doesn’t make sense, but in a way it does. No. It can’t make sense. He may dislike Isabel, but thinking she’s capable of something like this is a completely different ballpark. Maybe they’re wrong. There’s always that possibility. Isabel simply being in the hotel lobby doesn’t mean she’s… Svalov’s daughter?

“I’m running a background check on Isabel now,” Felicity fills them in as her typing resumes. It seems she’s read his mind. “I checked on her when she came in with her claws out, but I didn’t do a full history or anything. This time I’ll go deeper.”

The minutes it takes her to pull up the records are agonizing. He, Digg, and Sara fidget while they wait.

After far too long, Felicity makes a sound of disapproval. “Everything seems to be in order here. Born to Irina Rochev and subsequently given up for adoption. She was taken in by an American couple but kept her last name. She worked her way up in the business world to her current position… This is too clean.” She shakes her head. “This can’t be right. We know Isabel Rochev is
on The List. There’s no way she’s this squeaky clean.”

“She does have the Ghost on her payroll,” Sara offers.

“Right,” Felicity agrees, pointing a finger at Sara. “So… Let’s see if there isn’t a way to dig a little deeper.”

Oliver isn’t listening anymore. Somewhere along the line, his shock has morphed into full on rage and he needs to do something now, not sit around and wait for the computer to spit out results. He can get them faster. Without thinking about it, he strides over to the glass case and snatches his bow, testing the weight as he murmurs, “There’s a better way.”

“Oliver, what- No.” Felicity’s voice is firm when she spins to see him holding the weapon.

“She’s right, man,” Diggle agrees. “That’s a bad idea.”

“Why?” He demands, looking at each of them in turn. “We need answers, don’t we? I can get them faster than the computer.”

He tries to ignore the hurt flashing briefly across Felicity’s face before she sets her shoulders. “That may be, but running off half-cocked isn’t going to do anyone any good. You really want to tip our hand?”

“It won’t tip our hand if we finish it tonight,” he insists, now looking only at the blonde computer tech.

She pushes herself to her feet in frustration. “You really think she isn’t prepared for the possibility of you smashing through her window, arrows blazing? Who knows, maybe this is all a coincidence. A pretty amazing coincidence, yes, but it could still be just that. If it’s not, then we’ve tipped off the leader of a huge criminal operation that we’re on to her.” She’s closed the distance between them with her words and reaches out to squeeze his bicep gently. When she speaks again, her voice is softer. “We need more information, Oliver, and confronting her right now isn’t the way to get it. We’re a step ahead, but going out right now to find her… it will put us about three behind.”

He sighs in resignation, dipping his head to his chest in surrender. Her fingers trail lightly down to his hand, taking the bow from him and replacing it in the case. He knows she’s right, but he has the
urgent need to do something. He’s been sitting around in the foundry and dumping all of this on Felicity for far too long. They depend on her, yes, but he doesn’t want to be a burden.

“Whatever guilt-ridden thoughts you’re thinking, stop,” she commands him as she takes her seat at the computer once more. “If I didn’t want to do it I’d have left by now.”

He seriously doubts that, but he nods anyways.

It’s late when he looks up and realizes that Sara and Digg have left. He’s been buried in his own thoughts for too long while Felicity searches for a way into Isabel’s real past. The woman is relentless.

He stands wearily, making his way over to where she sits and dropping his hands onto her shoulders. “Why don’t you call it a night?”

“Just a few more minutes. I know I’m close,” she mutters back at him, still focused on her computers.

“Felicity,” he implores, squeezing her shoulders to emphasize her name even more. “You can start fresh in the morning.”

His fingers have started kneading her too-tense muscles of their own accord. She isn’t complaining, though. Her head falls forward and he feels her resolve crumbling. Grinning to himself, he slides his hands from her shoulders down to the armrests of her chair, shifting his weight forward to lean down.

“You know, I still owe you a bottle of wine,” he whispers in her ear. He’s rewarded with a shiver running down her spine as she sucks in a breath.

“You do not fight fair,” she breathes, her voice stuttering slightly.

He withdraws abruptly, heading to grab his leather jacket from the chair by the table. “I never claimed to. So, wine?”
She sighs, running her hands over her hair before giving in. She takes a moment to set up her system to ping her phone if it returns anything during the night and then turns to face him. Their fingers intertwine as they head for her car and he allows her to drive after a very spirited argument on her part, in which she points out that, if they’re pursued, she would be far more useful driving while he handled the car-surfing-counter-attack business. It’s unlikely to ever happen, but she gets points for creativity.

Once they arrive at the mansion, he leaves her sitting on the couch in his bedroom while he goes to get the promised wine. He’s only gone for five minutes, but when he nears the door he can hear feminine laughter coming from inside. He isn’t sure what to feel about the sight that greets him as he rounds the corner. His sister has joined Felicity on the couch and the two are facing each other, eyes dancing with laughter.

“What’s going on here?” He asks, looking from one to the other.

Thea smirks. “Don’t look so worried, Ollie. Your Felicity here was just telling me about her vindictive Super.”

He glances to Felicity for confirmation, but she only grins at him teasingly. He has a flashback to the diner, watching her laugh with Connor in a way she rarely does anymore. This appears to be one of those rare times. His sister has a way of doing that, though. She’s so young and carefree. Less-so now than before the island, but she still has that hint of youthful innocence that brings out the same in others.

He realizes as he moves fully into the room that it’s also part of why Felicity has been so different. Even before everything with her father, he’d noticed a slight shift in her when he’d returned from Lian Yu the second time. When he started to pay attention to it, that is. Seeing her with his sister now, it is startlingly clear that she lacks the same innocence he used to associate with her before the Undertaking. Perhaps that has something to do with both his new way of looking at her and her new way of seeing the situation with her father. Before, she seemed immune to the world he dragged her into, a bright spot in the dark. He didn’t think she could be affected by what happened, but clearly the Undertaking had more of an impact on her than he realized. He came back from the island too wrapped up in himself to notice Digg’s break-up, why should Felicity’s pain be any different? That night, she lost the innocence Thea still carries. But then again, Thea was out in the Glades that night, too, so maybe his younger sister is just better at pretending.

Though, Thea wasn’t on the phone with Lance working to stop it when it all went to hell. Felicity was. And then he left her for five months, left both of them for five months and then came back pretending nothing had changed. Maybe this whole thing about her father isn’t just happening because she’s overloaded. Maybe she lost the part of herself that thought it was possible to keep her
father separate from everything else. Maybe the loss of her innocence prevented her from continuing
to try.

“Oliver?” Felicity’s voice breaks through his sudden reverie.

“He’s got his guilt face on,” Thea says, her voice reflecting her resignation to the fact.

He frowns at her assessment. “My what?”

“Your guilt face,” his sister repeats. “You know, that face you get. It’s like…”

“All dark and broody, with a hint of introspection around the edges?” Felicity volunteers. Her tone is
lighthearted, but he can see the concern in her eyes as she looks at him.

“Yes! Exactly!” Thea responds, pointing her finger at Felicity.

Oliver finally allows his lips to twitch in a bit of a smile, heading toward them to sit on the chair
beside Felicity’s half of the couch. He sets the wine on the table and Thea eyes it with a single raised
eyebrow.

“No need to get me an extra glass, Ollie. I’ll just take the bottle and get out of your hair,” she tells
him innocently.

He sends her a look. “Last time I checked you were eighteen.”

“Oh please,” she responds, waving her hand at him and leaning back into the couch. “I run a club.
Your club, if you recall.”

“And yet that still doesn’t add three years to your life, Speedy.”

Thea gives a laboured sigh. “Fine. I guess I’ll just leave you two to do… whatever it is you two do.”
With that, his younger sister pushes herself to her feet and makes her way to the door, drawing back around to give him a suggestive look. He resists the urge to throw a pillow at her head as she ducks back and shuts the door. He settles for shaking his head in disbelief at her antics before starting to uncork the wine.

“Again, sorry about her…” He pours it into the glasses.

Felicity shrugs, accepting a glass from him, her fingers brushing his in what he feels is an intentional move. “It’s fine. I like her. She’s very good at pretending to believe me when I tell her my Super purposefully hired a sub-par plumber to fix my pipe, resulting in even worse damage, since I assume you’re still not allowing me to go back to my apartment.”

He doesn’t argue the point because he has no intention of allowing her out of his sight, not with the Ghost following her. He hasn’t been able to pick up on any tails, nor has he caught a glimpse of the guy, and it’s making him more nervous than usual.

They sit in silence for a bit, each sipping their wine, which she comments was definitely worth the wait. She seems to be warring internally about something before she finally looks at him and asks, “Where did you go, earlier?”

He balances his forearms on his thighs, the wine dangling from his hands to hang suspended between his knees. “To get this?” He tries, lifting the glass a bit to indicate the drink.

She tilts her head at him. “I’m serious, Oliver.”

When he makes no attempt to answer her, she moves the wine to the other end of the table, setting her glass down beside it, and perches on the now empty edge across from him. He doesn’t look up at her, so she gently places her hands over his, prying the wine glass from them to set aside with one hand, leaving the other to linger over his. By the time she turns back, he’s enveloped it between both of his. He plays idly with her fingers, running his palms over both sides of her hand. She gives him a moment before stilling his movements with her other hand.

“Oliver.”

When he finally looks up at her, he’s sure his eyes reflect the turmoil he’s feeling. It takes him a few false starts before he finally gets the words out. “Did I… I’m sorry I left. After the Undertaking.”
Her head jerks back a bit in surprise. “That’s what this is about?”

“I left you and Digg to deal with a lot. I bolted because it was easier to shut it all off, and to shut it all off, I needed Lian Yu. I was selfish.” He looks back down at their hands.

She removes the one covering his to touch his cheek, forcing him to look back up at her. The half-smile on her lips is a sad one. “You did what you needed to do to get through. I can’t fault you for that. I used to, when you first left, but then I realized that we all have our way of dealing with things. You couldn’t take this one out and use it as the Arrow; you needed time to heal, or at least come to terms with it. Digg and I had each other, and we got by, too.”

He brings one of his hands up to cover hers where it rests over his stubble, staring deeply into her eyes. His fingers curl into the spaces between hers, his palm to the back of her hand, turning his face to press a soft kiss to her palm. “I shouldn’t have left you.”

Her smile grows into a full one, less sad than the last. “You came back.”

“After you dragged me.”

“I prefer to think of it as strongly encouraged, and Digg was there, too.”

His lips lift in half a grin now. “Let’s not pretend he wasn’t there because you dragged him along.”

She tilts her head as she considers it. “Well he wasn’t too happy when I told him I planned to go skydiving and then hike through a deserted island by myself…”

He acknowledges the attempt at humour with a small smile before allowing it to fade once more.

“I wish you wouldn’t take on so much guilt,” she sighs, her head tilting as she considers him. Her thumb runs along the back of his knuckles.

“And what if some of it is actually mine to bear?”
“You can’t live your life buried in guilt. You had your own fallout to deal with.”

His eyes search hers for a moment before he relents. She’s just as stubborn as he is, so arguing about it won’t get them anywhere. Sensing that he isn’t completely satisfied, she leans forward and presses her lips gently against his. He knows she meant it to be more reassuring than anything, but he doesn’t fight the desire to follow her when she leans back, recapturing her lips more insistently. He releases her hands to tangle the fingers of one of his in the hair falling down around her shoulders, the other resting on her thigh. She’s the one who moves, her lips never leaving his as she transfers herself to sit sideways on his lap. His arms, displaced in the movement, fall to her waist and tug her more firmly against his chest as his hands begin to roam across her back and down her thigh. She gasps into his mouth when his fingers find the bare flesh exposed at the hem of her skirt and it almost dissolves his self-control.

But he’s been over this with himself already, and he won’t butcher this by going too fast. Instead, he pulls her bottom lip between his teeth slowly before pulling back altogether, resting his forehead against hers. His arms stay looped around her back, but his hold loosens to allow her room to pull back as well. Her breathing is laboured as she stares down at him, forearms resting on his shoulders, fingers lazily interlocked behind his neck. This new vantage point is interesting, looking up at her. He likes it.

He disengages the arm around her back to gently tuck one side of her hair behind her ear, allowing his fingers to ghost back along her jaw line. His thumb traces her lower lip. “You should smile more,” he tells her, an echo of a previous conversation in her kitchen. “Really smile.”

She allows herself half of one before she leans forward and kisses him sweetly. “I’ll try.”

It feels as though all of the air in the room has been sucked out, leaving him struggling to breathe as he looks down at the performance reviews. He and Isabel are in the middle of their monthly departmental personnel audit and it can’t end fast enough. Having the knowledge that she could very well be behind the destruction of several companies in what may or may not be an attack on the US economy (or perhaps just that of Starling City) and theorizing the implications of that is very different than physically sitting across from her and trying to act normal while your mind is reeling. In her eyes, nothing has changed since the last time they spoke, but in Oliver’s, the world has shifted sideways. He studies her when he’s sure she isn’t looking, wondering how someone he’s worked with for as long as he has, someone he’s… slept with… could be the mastermind of such an operation. It may make him a terrible person, but some small part of him hopes that it’s all a big mistake.

“Oliver?” The brunette’s voice sounds vaguely annoyed, as it always does.
“Sorry, what were you saying?” He asks, pressing his lips together as he drags his eyes up to hers.

“I was just telling you that I think we’re good here,” she answers, her eyebrows pulling together slightly in a show of annoyance as she stands. He joins her on his feet and walks her to the door as courtesy dictates, struggling to maintain the calm façade. “Ms. Smoak,” she nods at Felicity as she walks by, drawing a surprised look from the blonde. It’s probably the nicest thing Isabel has ever said to her.

“Ms. Rochev…?” Felicity’s answering farewell is phrased more like a question, but Isabel doesn’t comment. The blonde waits until the other woman is in the elevator before she turns to give him a disconcerted look. “Did you go and find her anyways last night and replace her with some sort of clone? Like, a nice one? Because that’s probably the one and only time she won’t glare at me condescendingly and oh my God I just realized that every time she makes a suggestive comment now…” She stops herself and takes two deep, calming breaths, her cheeks flaming as she studiously turns back to her monitor.

Intrigued by her tirade, he remains leaning in the doorway connecting their offices with an eyebrow quirked and arms crossed.

Finally, she cracks under his stare and her shoulders slump as she spins to look at him. “It’s just… Before, I could deny the rumours and know I was in the right, but now… Well, I can still deny it, but I’ll know I’m lying and being a massive hypocrite.”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “So don’t deny it.”

She blinks, opens her mouth to say something, closes it, and blinks again. “What?”

“You said you didn’t want to lie,” he explains, closing the distance to her desk in three quick strides. He spreads his palms over the surface and leans toward her. “So don’t.”

She blinks some more. “It’s… barely been a week. I think it’s too soon to be having this discussion.”

He backs away to his office then, hands raised in surrender. “Whatever you say. Remember, you’re in control.”
She snorts at that. “I haven’t been in control since the second you walked into my office- well, cubicle really- with that laptop.”

“What do you mean?” He asks, frowning now.

She sighs, clearly regretting her inoperable verbal filter. “I just meant… I can’t control… myself or… any of it. I just want to make sure that us… being together… that it isn’t just some passing thing. Don’t you want to make sure it’s a little more… permanent before you start telling the world that you’ve caved to the cliché of CEO and secretary?”

He considers her for a moment before deciding to let the matter rest. Lord knows he’s the worst with words, so he can forgive her a bit of trouble with them. “Fair point. You’re still in control here, though, if for no other reason than you’re the one of us who thinks rationally and logically about this.”

He doesn’t give her a chance to respond before he retreats to his office, letting the door fall shut behind him. He noticed that she didn’t call it a relationship either, and wonders what to make of that. Maybe it was unintentional, but something’s telling him it wasn’t. Either she doesn’t believe it’s a long-term sort of thing, or she’s just as wary about his track record with the word as he is.

Their night is mostly uneventful thus far, filled with training and waiting. His favourite.

He knows it’s coming when Digg offers to accompany him on the supper run. He’s seen the way the other man has been watching the two of them the past few days. Honestly, he expected it sooner, but Digg makes no attempt to hide his intentions as he accompanies him to the stairs and Oliver resigns himself to the drive ahead.

“So…” He starts out casually enough, and Oliver mentally braces himself. “You and Felicity… You guys sort things out?”

“Yep,” he responds, looking out the window. He can feel Digg’s eyes on him in the rear-view mirror but resolutely avoids looking back at him.

Digg heaves a sigh. “Listen, I respect you too much to beat around the bush like this. Whatever’s going on between you two, and I’m not saying I want a definition, please just keep it out of the lair
as much as possible, ok? Felicity’s like my sister. I don’t need to see that, man.”

Oliver glances up at his friend then, nodding once.

“And I think it goes without saying that, if you break her, I’ll break you, badass combat skills and all.”

At this, Oliver grins. “I’d expect nothing less.” He waits a beat before turning the conversation into more neutral territory. “She’s got you calling it a lair now, too?”

Her attempts to get an angle on Isabel have all failed, and he can tell it’s getting to her. She’s short-tempered and irritable, snapping at all three of them on a regular basis. As much as she tries to control it, holding in her irritation only compounds the problem. They’ve all suggested she try letting it out the way they do, through more physical means like sparring, but she’s still refusing. In fact, she’s pulling away from the training more than usual.

“Maybe we should just consider the possibility that her background isn’t faked?” Sara asks finally. She’s sitting on the table, swinging her legs back and forth in a rare show of youth. Usually her body is still and controlled; she rarely fidgets. Clearly, she’s just as restless as the rest of them.

A loud sigh comes from where Felicity has buried her head in her arms. “It’s the only option at this point. I can’t find any trace of tampering with her background, but there’s no connection between Irina Rochev and Viktor Svalov.”

“Well what if the Ghost didn’t tamper with Isabel’s file?” Diggle suggests. He pushes himself off from the chair he’s been sitting in while cleaning his gun yet again. It’s probably the cleanest gun in Starling City at this rate.

Felicity’s head jerks up and snaps around to stare at Digg. “You mean what if he tampered with Irina’s?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. Look how much time looking into Isabel bought them.”
“That’s…” She stops, scrunching up her face as she decides on an adjective. “Pretty damn genius, John Diggle.”

At that, he grins. “I try.”

Energy renewed, she sets off typing again at lightning speed, searching for any holes in Irina Rochev’s background. It doesn’t take long for her to set the searches and probes to test for any weaknesses, and when she’s done she spins around in her chair to face the rest of them, renewed hope shining in her eyes. There’s something a bit off about it, though, so when she excuses herself to head upstairs a few minutes later, he gives her a moment before following.

He finds her seated at the bar, chin propped in her hand and staring at the variety of alcohol bottles in front of her. He can tell she’s aware of his presence when her shoulders straighten for a split second before slumping back down to her previous position, fingers drumming aimlessly on the countertop. She doesn’t look at him.

“I just… needed a minute,” she says as he leans an elbow on the bar beside her. Her voice sounds about as tired as she looks, any energy she had now gone. He wonders if the whole thing was just an act, an attempt to raise the moral in the gloomy basement.

“I know what you mean,” he responds, eyes raking over her exhausted form. She shows no sign of turning from the alcohol, so he eventually lays his hand over hers to stop the distracting tapping. “You don’t need to hide your frustration, Felicity. From any of us. We’re a team.”

She exhales loudly, finally turning on the stool to face him. “I know. Sometimes I just feel like I don’t operate the same way you guys do. You get frustrated or angry and you immediately take it out on the equipment or each other. I can’t do that. I won’t. I don’t have the same instincts you guys do and I don’t…” Her breath hitches and her eyes slide away from his. “I don’t trust myself to be able to handle them.”

“Hey,” he says softly, dipping his head to catch her gaze. When she continues her efforts to avoid him, he brings his hands up to cradle her cheeks, finally drawing her attention. “Remember what I told you? I won’t let you become your father, Felicity.”

She takes a moment to just look at him before nodding slowly, sliding to her feet, and folding herself into his chest. Her arms wrap around his middle and his engulf her shoulders, his head perching atop hers. They stand wrapped together for a long while before her phone rings and ruins the moment.
Sighing, she pulls back to reach into the pocket of her skirt. Checking the ID, she sees “Lance” flashing across the screen and hits the speakerphone. It’s rare for Lance to call her directly anymore. Usually he just calls the burner Arrow phone.

“Detective?” She asks, confusion evident in her tone.

“Officer, Ms. Smoak,” Lance corrects.

She shakes her head a little bit. “Right. Sorry. What’s up?”

“Came across something you might be interested in. Your boy John Diggle’s got a warrant out for his arrest.”

Both of them blink in surprise and Felicity nearly drops the phone. It takes her a second to choke out, “What?”

“Yeah, it says he’s got a failure to comply on a restraining order? Thought it was a little strange, figured I’d pass it on.”

Oliver clenches his jaw as realization hits him. This isn’t directed at Diggle. This is aimed at them. Felicity seems to be thinking the same thing, judging by the murderous expression on her face.

“Am I right in assumin’ you’ll handle this?” Lance is asking.

“I- uh- yes. Thanks, Det-Officer,” Felicity manages before tilting her head at the phone. “How- uh, why did you call me with this?”

He can picture Lance shrugging. “I may be old, Ms. Smoak, but I’m not blind yet.”

“You know-” She starts, but Lance cuts her off.

“Plausible deniability, Ms. Smoak.”
“Right. Um, thanks, Officer.”

The line disconnects but they both stand staring at the phone in silence for another half a minute before moving. Lance knows. In fact, he’s probably known for a long while. It shouldn’t surprise him, Quentin Lance isn’t a stupid man, but it does. They may not be the best of friends, but Oliver wonders if the man’s grudging acceptance of him had anything to do with his piecing together his identity. In the end, it doesn’t really matter.

Digg looks bewildered when they tell him about the Ghost’s latest trick. Sara looks less than amused by the development, but lightens her mood when Felicity pulls up the mug shot.

“He could have at least chosen a better picture,” Diggle grunts in disbelief, shaking his head.

“Well, it doesn’t matter which picture he used because it… is… gone!” Felicity announces, hitting the ‘enter’ key to punctuate her pronouncement. She spins in her chair, triumphant grin on her face. “At least I got something done tonight. I can’t believe that…” She growls in frustration. “I mean, creepy, demanding, stalker notes are one thing, but fabricating an arrest warrant?”

Digg shrugs it off. “Nothing you can’t handle. He probably just wants you guys to know how far his reach goes.”

Oliver clenches his teeth. “I’d like to know why he’s so interested in Felicity. The first time it was a note, then pictures, and now an arrest warrant? How far is this guy going to go?”

Sara is the one who answers. “He’s already gone too far. He’s supposed to leave civilians alone; that was his agreement with the League. No innocents harmed.”

“Technically, I haven’t been harmed.” Felicity pipes up, though it does nothing to diffuse the tension, and then frowns. “And I’m not exactly… innocent.”

Unsurprisingly, her words are of little comfort to any of them.

They leave the foundry around midnight, which is pretty early for them. For once, he and Felicity
even leave at the same time as Digg since the searches are still probing Irina’s background. Felicity set them to leave no stone unturned, so she told them to expect results tomorrow at the earliest. With nothing productive left to do, he manages to convince her to leave before the sun comes up.

It’s strange, the role reversal. Usually she’s the one telling him to go home and take a beat. She’s preached separation of church and state (she admits that’s not exactly a good analogy, but she still uses it) since the beginning, and he feels like it’s a sign of how far he’s come that he’s now the one filling her shoes when she vacates them. Digg manages to hide his surprise when Oliver pulls her up from her chair and pointedly holds her jacket out for her. She fights him, but it’s a weak effort at best. She doesn’t even argue when he leads her to his car instead of hers, sliding in and leaning back against the headrest, tilting her head to stare out the window. She’s too quiet, and he can’t stop the worry from gnawing at his stomach as the silence stretches on.

He was concerned about her safety before, but the appearance of the Ghost and his interest in her has multiplied it exponentially. He’s not just concerned about her physical wellbeing, either, but also the emotional toll this is taking on her. She’s exhausting herself trying to keep up with it all and he can’t do a damn thing to fix it. Every instinct he has is telling him to lock her away in the foundry for her own safety, but he knows exactly what her reaction to that would be.

It’s her stomach growling from the passenger seat of his car that brings him out of his worries. Chancing a glance at her side of the vehicle, he sees her still in the same position. He almost thinks she’s fallen asleep, but then her arm reaches across to lay her hand on top of his where it sits on the center console.

“I’ll start training with Digg again,” she whispers, still staring out the window at the buildings whizzing by.

He says nothing, merely squeezing her fingers in silent gratitude. By the time they reach the mansion, he’s made the decision to set aside the mission for the night. Regardless of the topics of conversation they manage to cover at night, there are always references to the problem at hand lurking just below the surface. They’ve been enveloped in this tension for so long that he doesn’t remember what calm feels like. So, instead of leading her to the staircase, as he usually does, he redirects to the kitchen, eliciting a look of surprise from her.

“Don’t try to tell me you aren’t hungry,” he says by way of explanation, and she merely shrugs. “We’re taking a break.”

At this, she raises an eyebrow. “A break?”
“Yes,” he nods, “It’s this thing people do when they’re done work. They actually shut out all thoughts of their day and do something completely unrelated. Sometimes they relax. People have even been known to laugh.”

The sound bubbles past her lips before she can stop it and he allows himself a small smile of pride. He hasn’t been good at lightening the mood since his return from the island, but it’s good to know he can still make a semi-successful attempt at it.

“So what exactly does this break entail?” She asks, playing along with his jovial tone.

“Well, first…” He starts, rounding the corner into the kitchen and pulling out a stool at the island. “You’re going to sit down.”

“Can I stand?” She counters immediately.

“No.”

Her eyebrows tug together. “Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

She stares up at him, looking as though she’s going to argue for all of five seconds before exhaling loudly and hoisting herself onto the stool. “Now what?”

“Now, you’re going to sit there and I’m going to make food.”

She raises her eyebrows, hands flattening on the counter. “You’re going to cook?”

He nods, already turning to grab some spices. “Don’t sound so skeptical.”

There’s silence for a moment while he imagines she’s trying to put her doubts into nicer words. He expected this reaction, and it’s more than a little amusing. While she considers her options, he retrieves a pot and fills it with water. He’s definitely not a gourmet chef or anything, but he can
manage pasta.

The hesitant look on her face only magnifies when she sees the spices he’s put on the counter. “Um… what exactly are you intending to do with… cayenne, paprika, and… nacho cheese popcorn flavouring?”

He chuckles quietly, pulling the pasta down from the cupboard. “You’ll see.”

“I distinctly remember you telling me I’m in control. Multiple times.”

He circles around the island and she swivels to face him as he towers over her, invading her space. His hands brace on the counter on either side of her as he leans in and their faces are close enough for their breath to mingle as he stops just short of kissing her. He smirks at the very deer-in-the-headlights look she’s giving him as her breath stutters.

“What were you saying?” He asks her, his voice huskier than he originally intended it to be. The proximity isn’t just affecting her.

“I- uh- oh, this is so not fair,” she whispers, trying to get a handle on herself.

The smirk widens at her words, and though he intends to pull away, he finds himself unable to resist closing the distance between them. This kiss is different than the others. It doesn’t start off slow, sweet, or reassuring and build up to the desire. It cuts straight to the chase when her fingers slide around his back, her nails digging into the flesh through the fabric of his shirt while his fingers tangle in her hair. She pulls him closer, separating her legs for him to step between them as he runs his tongue over her bottom lip. Her lips part and their tongues tangle, fighting for control. For as emotionally intimate as they’ve gotten, this is a surprisingly new physical step. As a man who’s spent most of his relationships concentrating on the physical side, it’s strange to be exploring it so belatedly.

He’s just considering lifting her from the stool to the counter to reduce the height difference between them when a very loud exclamation interrupts them.

“What are- OH MY GOD! My eyes!” Thea’s voice shrieks.

He breaks away abruptly, trying not to laugh at the mortified squeak that Felicity lets out as she
shoves against his chest to make him back up. Her face is the deepest shade of red the world probably contains and she focuses on some spot on the ground in the opposite direction of his sister. While he does take the obligatory step back, his hand remains resting on the side of her knee as he looks to the brunette.

“I eat in here, you know!” Thea scolds after she removes the hand covering her eyes.

Oliver rolls his. “You’ve never eaten in here, Speedy.”

“Yeah… well… Now I never will,” she snaps, folding her arms across her chest.

Before he can say anything, the lid on the pot starts clanging, indicating that the water is boiling. He allows his hand to trail across the bare skin of Felicity’s leg as he steps around the counter to turn the burner down and add the pasta. The blonde is still avoiding looking at either of them, but her face is slowly losing the red flush as she gets herself back under control.

Taking pity on her, Thea steps toward him. She surveys the contents of the counter, her eyes lighting up as she realizes what he’s making.

“Ollie, you haven’t made your mac and cheese in forever!” She exclaims, clapping enthusiastically as she circles the counter to take up a stool beside Felicity.

He watches her with amusement. “I thought you said you’d never eat in here.”

“Yeah, well, that was before I realized what you were making,” she responds with a wave of her hand to dismiss his point.

“Wait,” Felicity’s voice cuts through their banter, skepticism firmly back in place, “You’re making… mac and cheese with that?”

A smile plays at the corners of his lips. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it,” he quips, turning back to stir the noodles. When he turns back, she still looks apprehensive.

“It’s amazing,” Thea chimes in, ever the shining endorsement of her brother. “You’ll love it. He’s
only made it once since he came back, for me and…” She trails off suddenly, biting her lip as she catches herself.

“Tommy,” he finishes, forcing a smile as he turns back to the stove once more to drain the pasta.

Felicity understands, as she always does, and is smiling softly when he turns back around. “Fine. I’ll trust you,” she relents, before looking at each of them in turn, “Both of you. But if you’re lying to me…”

Thea grins and starts in on a constant stream of chatter littered with far too many embarrassing stories while he finishes making the sauce. She’s just what they needed, his sister. Her hands wave around wildly as she imitates Oliver in his youth, and Felicity is laughing freely at her while he tries to repress a smile. This is what his life should have been, should still be. Maybe it’s possible for the Arrow and Oliver Queen to co-exist after all.

He sets plates in front of both of them, but neither he nor Thea take a bite until Felicity does.

“Can you both stop watching me? You’re making me nervous.”

“Then hurry it up and put it in your mouth!” Thea commands. Both women realize the cloaked innuendo at the same moment and their cheeks flush identical shades of pink. Oliver presses his lips together to stop from laughing as Felicity raises the fork to her mouth.

He raises an eyebrow at her in question as she swallows the pasta and she looks resigned. “Ok, fine, it’s pretty good.”

Both Queens shoot her identical grins before digging in to their own food. Thea keeps up a running commentary of stories he’s sure Felicity will later use against him, but he doesn’t mind. In fact, he finds his eyes straying to where she sits at the counter more often than they should if he wants to be discreet.

She fits here, sitting in his kitchen, even if she shouldn’t. He’s never seen Felicity as a part of the high society world he’s forced to live in. She’s too genuine for the fake smiles and over-the-top happiness that defines his life as Oliver Queen the billionaire playboy. She’s too good for that life, for him. Not for the first time, he realizes he doesn’t deserve her, not even a fraction of her. Yet she’s here, in his kitchen, laughing as his sister regales her with a story of his refusal to be anything except Captain America for Halloween three years running.
Felicity’s eyes sparkle as she glances over at him, her expression changing to a frown. She points a warning finger at him, but there’s lightness in her tone when she speaks. “Hey. No serious face. We agreed we’re taking a break, which means relaxation and laughter, not brooding mystery man.”

He tries to resist, but her expression alone coaxes a smile out of him as he takes the last bite of pasta off his fork. Thea is watching them with some mixture of glee and true contentment in her eyes before they cloud over with confusion.

“What do you guys have to take a break from?” She asks, looking between them.

They share a look before Felicity smiles again.

“Isabel,” they answer in unison.

For once, the answer isn’t a lie.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so hopefully you guys enjoyed that rather Olicity-concentrated chapter. I had to sneak at least some plot in there, but I needed a break from all of it as much as you and they clearly did. I just wanted to comment on the whole “new physical step” thing before I send you off to the review box. I didn’t necessarily mean just the whole ‘him standing between her legs’ thing so much as the desire-driven make-out that happened. They’ve been establishing this emotional and mental connection, and so far the physical side of their relationship has just been an expansion and a complement to that connection. I’ve seen them more as using physicality as a way to cement their connection, whereas Oliver has usually used it before as the basis of connection. For him, the process is a little backward, which is why this purely lust-driven bit is so different from everything else that’s happened with Felicity thus far and why he thinks it’s a ‘new physical step’ in their relationship. The desire has definitely been there, but it’s almost come as a by-product of the emotional and mental connection they’ve built. At that point in the kitchen, it wasn’t as much about feeling close and understanding each other as it was about simply wanting each other, something that up until this point hasn’t really been a major part of their relationship. It’s not that it wasn’t there, it’s more that it’s just been taking a back seat to the emotional connection and all the talking and sharing and now it’s coming out. Hopefully I’m explaining that right so that you understand where I was coming from with that.
Days at Queen Consolidated seem to drag on even longer, if that’s possible. Felicity does what she can from her desk, but as she repeatedly tells him, it’s easier to run the programs she needs at the foundry. He, on the other hand, is left to play CEO. Eight hours a day he answers the same emails, has the same meetings, tries to avoid Isabel at all costs, and pesters his EA for information she doesn’t have.

Her searches hit a roadblock, which is apparently a good thing. She told them it meant there was something to hide in Irina’s background, but to him all it signifies is that they’re playing the waiting game again while she attempts to find a way around it. He’s getting impatient, ready to take on Isabel as the Arrow once again. It’s Sara who stops him this time.

“You go after Isabel too soon and you’ll spook the Ghost, Ollie. He’ll go into hiding. Is that what you want?”

He doesn’t, so they return to the all-too-familiar holding pattern. It takes three more days before she has something.

“Yes!” She exclaims from her position in front of the monitors. They freeze in the middle of their three-way sparring session, abandoning their defensive postures immediately and heading over to the computer. “He tried to hide it but I’m more persistent than he gives me credit for. I’ve got him! Irina Rochev grew up in the same neighbourhood as Viktor Svalov. There’s no way that’s a coincidence. They’re around the same age and they lived within three blocks of each other. Irina would have been around sixteen when she had Isabel, Svalov would have been eighteen. It’s actually pretty clever,” she admits, shrugging and leaning back in the chair. “Eliminate that one little connection between the two of them and Isabel is golden. Unfortunately, he didn’t bury it deep enough, not that many people would spend this much time trying to make this connection in the first place.”

They’ve got the hard proof that they need now, but the question is what to do with it. Diggle and Sara still think it’s a bad idea to confront Isabel. They don’t know enough about her plans to be sure it wouldn’t backfire, but they can’t just sit around and wait.

Diggle’s the one to throw the question out there. “What’s her next move?”

At a loss, they toss some theories out before Felicity suddenly bolts upright in her chair. “QC.”
All three heads swivel to look at her.

“QC,” she repeats. They watch curiously as she mentally arranges her thoughts before speaking. “It’s got to be on the list of companies to hit. I mean, why else would Isabel be so interested in partnering up to run it? She needs the access to the codes, but the only way to do that is to put herself in a position of power. We’re easily the most well-protected database they’ve dealt with so far.”

Oliver considers the information for a moment before frowning. He remembers her telling him that the only people with access to the database were himself, Felicity, the IT department head, and Isabel, but something isn’t jiving for him.

“Why would she make herself that vulnerable, though?” Sara asks, voicing his doubts. “She’s kept herself well out of it until now. Why risk it all by putting herself in Queen Consolidated?”

Felicity taps a finger on her lips, thinking. “Well... She could have paid someone else to do it, but why not involve herself? QC will probably be one of their bigger targets, and if she goes down with a ship she was publicly seen as desperately trying to save, why would anyone suspect her? She’s got a reputation in the business world, and the Ghost has hidden her Russian mob connections well enough that no one is really going to find them.”

“Unless she wasn’t planning to destroy QC at all,” Oliver says, brain whirring. He starts to pace as he puzzles it all out. “What if she didn’t want to collapse the company? What if she wanted it to thrive in the wake of the disasters befalling everyone else? She could claim it was her doing and take it for herself.”

“What use is an American company to her if the economy is crashed, though?” Digg prods.

“Maybe she thought she could take it over to Russia. But she didn’t think Oliver would come back to fight for it,” Felicity jumps in, following his train of thought. “Remember when she got to town and started snatching up shares?” She shivers at the memory. “She looked like Christmas had come early until Oliver walked into that board room. And when Walter got involved? It slipped through her fingers.”

“So now you think she wants to destroy it out of some weird desperation? She can’t have it, no one can?” Sara clarifies, looking between Felicity and Oliver.
Oliver thinks on it for a second before shrugging. “It’s just a theory.”

“Psychotic huntresses, vindictive businesswomen… You sure know how to pick ‘em, man,” Digg whistles, before hurriedly adding, “Present choice not included, of course.”

Felicity shoots the other man a look despite the faint pink colouring her cheeks and Oliver scratches the back of his neck as he looks at everything in the room that’s not a person.

With a possible lead on Isabel’s grand finale, they set to trying to figure out the moves in between. Oliver and Diggle are convinced she’ll move up her timeline since the human trafficking ring failed, and Felicity defers to their strategic expertise. She’s set some searches to check for any companies that could be prime targets in the meantime and has beefed up the security surrounding their databases in the most inconspicuous ways she can manage. Hopefully, it will slow them down.

In the meantime, they’re back to waiting for Isabel to make a move, which means going on as though nothing has changed. With the lapse on the Isabel front, Felicity has returned her energy to taking one last run at the Ghost. None of them expect much success, but she insists on trying again on the grounds that she has nothing better to do.

“What if I asked him to meet?” Felicity proposes a couple of nights later.

“Absolutely not,” Oliver snaps. There is no way he’s ever allowing that to happen.

“Think about it. He doesn’t know we’re this close, or maybe he’s just pretending not to know… Either way, he’s been following me and leaving me little hints. Maybe he wants to meet. If I come at him with the Isabel stuff, he’ll have to take the bait. He’s clearly interested in me, for whatever reason. If I reach out, he’ll probably respond.”

“It’s not happening, Felicity,” he tells her flatly.

“And how exactly are you going to stop me if I decide to go ahead and do it anyways?” She challenges, crossing her arms in her chair.
Anger coils in his stomach at her defiance. “Try me and find out.”

That night things are a little tense between them.

Things remain tense the next morning, with both of them remaining mostly silent on the journey to QC. Digg glances back repeatedly in the rear-view mirror, taking everything in with his calculated glances. Oliver knows to expect an interrogation at some point in the near future, but he doesn’t have the energy to think about it right now. He didn’t sleep well last night.

Thea shows up at the office at quarter to noon, armed with her persuasive-face. He can see it from his desk as she approaches Felicity and immediately wishes Isabel weren’t sitting directly across from him. Whatever his sister is up to, it’s likely trouble. The fact that both women keep glancing at him does nothing to calm his growing nerves. It’s not that he doesn’t want his sister and Felicity to get along; he does. It just… makes him nervous not knowing what Thea is filling Felicity’s head with. She’d never say anything bad, but his sister knows pretty much everything about him (aside from his night job) and there’s no telling what she’d find amusing to share.

It strikes him how normal the anxiety is. Worried about what your sister will tell your… Felicity about your childhood. It’s so different from his usual anxieties that he takes a minute to savour it. Of course, he then has to acknowledge how strange it is to savour anxiety about embarrassment. All in all, he spends the last minutes of the meeting completely ignoring Isabel, not that she comments on it. He’s sure she’s used to the faraway look in his eyes by now. He may be coming to work on time, but that doesn’t mean she expects him to be the shining example of responsibility and dedication.

He stands on cue, not giving away his preoccupation with the scene outside his office as he follows Isabel to the door. She left a stack of files on his desk for his reading pleasure that he just can’t wait to dive in to.

“She, what are you doing here?” He asks when he’s pulled open the door. His tone is light, but he knows his sister can detect the faint hint of trepidation hidden beneath it.

“I came to take your Felicity to lunch,” she announces. Felicity cringes when Isabel raises a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at the way Thea refers to his EA. “And before you try to strong-arm your way into coming, you’re not invited.”

He’s taken aback by the flash in his sister’s eyes when she looks at him. What did he do? And why
does it require a lunch with…? Realization hits him. Thea must have noticed the… tension last night. He hadn’t thought she was awake when they finally made it back to the mansion, but she had her ways.

Isabel takes a moment to survey the situation before making for the elevator. “We’ll continue this next week, Oliver. Enjoy your lunch, Miss Queen, Miss Smoak.”

Felicity stares at Isabel’s retreating back like the other woman had grown a second head. “What the…” She mutters. He’s trying to make sense of the sudden pleasantries as well.

“Come on, let’s go!” Thea announces.

Felicity inhales, turning back to Thea. “I really shouldn’t. I have a ton of work-”

“No excuses,” the younger brunette chirps, grabbing Felicity’s coat from the rack in the corner. “We are going to lunch and we are going to have fun.”

Felicity sighs in resignation before turning to him somewhat stiffly. “We’ll be back in an hour.”

Thea shoots him a look over her shoulder as she ushers the blonde out of the office and he feels the anxiety return full force. He knows exactly what they’ll be talking about during lunch.

Felicity is all smiles when she returns, pausing before pulling open his office door and approaching his desk. He expects her to stop on the other side of it, to put some distance between them, but she doesn’t. Instead, she comes around to perch on the edge of it beside him. She tilts her head as she studies him, and he notices she’s removed her elastic.

“Have a good lunch?” He asks, deliberately keeping the question vague.

She nods before reaching out to cover his left hand with hers where it rests on the desk. “I’m sorry.”

He takes a breath before dropping his pen and leaning back in the chair. “I’m sorry, too.”
“No, I get it. I shouldn’t have reacted like that. You were just trying to protect me and I jumped down your throat about it,” she sighs, shifting her gaze to stare out the window behind his head. “It’s not an excuse, but I’m still trying to get a clamp on the whole over-protective-reaction thing.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Over-protective?”

He doesn’t miss the brief flash of annoyance in her eyes before they lower to his. “Yes. Over-protective. I know I’m not a fighter or a field agent or whatever you call it, but this guy is a hacker, just like me. I know how his mind works, and I know he won’t hurt me. He’s creepily protective, for one thing. Why go all caveman if he just wants to kill me? And I’m not a threat to him. At least not a physical one. He’d probably be more interested in recruiting me than killing me.”

He inhales sharply, looking off to the side to regain his composure. Her disregard for danger never ceases to amaze him. “He works for the League, Felicity. He is dangerous. He’s a trained murderer.”

She exhales loudly. “Ok, fine. You’re right. He’s likely very lethal. Can we just not take the idea totally off the table?” His eyes snap back to her, ready to protest before she holds up her hand. “Just as a last resort. We’ll see what Isabel does, and if nothing else, it can be our back-up plan.”

“Our back-up’s back-up plan,” he finally acquiesces, relaxing the tension in his shoulders.

She gives him a small smile and runs her fingers through his hair. He closes his eyes at the sensation, turning his cheek into her palm when it comes to rest on the side of his face. They stay like that for a full minute before she straightens and pulls her hand back. Humming in protest, he reacts instinctively and reaches out to recapture her hand without even opening his eyes. When he does finally look up, her eyes are filled with soft affection.

“I have to head down to IT for a bit. I’ll be back up before your next meeting,” she tells him, trying to pull her fingers away. He holds them firmly in his and she gives a breathy laugh. “Oliver.”

He doesn’t say anything, instead tugging her hand sharply forward. The motion surprises her and she lands unceremoniously in his lap, arms winding around his neck automatically to steady herself.

“Oliver!” She hisses, trying to pull back. He tightens his arms around her waist instead. “Glass walls!”
“Easily remedied,” he murmurs, leaning closer to grab a remote sitting on his desk. One touch of a button and the glass is tinting. Unsurprisingly, it does nothing to put her at ease.

“Because that wasn’t totally obvious.”

He leans in and presses his lips against her neck and she sighs. He can tell she’s losing the resolve to fight him and grins against her skin. They were fighting for barely a day but he finds that he still missed her during that time. When did he become such a lovesick sap? More importantly, when did his desire to be close to her start to overrule his sense of restraint? They’ve been mostly keeping this behind closed doors for a number of reasons, chiefly among them her safety (well, for him, anyways). After the Ghost’s warnings, he should have pushed her away, but instead he pulled her even closer. Yet another way she’s turned his world inside out. But he tells himself it doesn’t matter; he can keep her safe; he has to.

She finally gives in and presses her lips gently against his. Before he can realize what she’s doing, though, she’s disentangled herself and stepped out of his reach. Her eyes are sparkling with amusement as he sighs in defeat, leaning back in his chair once more.

“I’ll be gone for an hour tops,” she promises.

She’s already halfway to the door when he registers her words and starts to frown. “IT? You still go down there?”

She shrugs, turning back to look at him. “Sometimes. They’re lost without me,” she jokes. “I ran into Connor on the way back up here and he said they were having some issues with the accounting firewall, which usually means they’ll mess around with it until someone crashes the whole system. It’s a finicky one. Only seems to respond to my magic fingers, so…” She trails off, and he can see her fighting the urge to blush at her unintentional comment. “Anyways, I’ll be back.”

He watches her go, and if he’s not mistaken, he sees an extra bit of bounce in her step as she heads back to her old department.

It takes her two hours to return, an hour later than she originally told him, and he spends too much of it wondering how she’s doing. He knows they’ve already talked about it, but he also knows she loves IT. She may not resent him for ‘promoting’ her, but that doesn’t mean she suddenly prefers the
executive floor to her old cubicle. Felicity’s always been more comfortable behind a computer screen than in front of a crowd, and he understands why she’d jump at the chance to get back to it. He has to wonder, though, just how much she misses it. Does she miss it enough to throw everything else aside for a chance to return? If they end badly… would she quit on him and head back to her old job?

He’s just berating himself for being jealous of a computer (literally, a computer) when she re-enters the office. He looks up in relief to watch her through the glass (he has absolutely no clue what Legal is even talking about, that’s how all-consuming his jealousy of inanimate objects has been for the past two hours) but the relaxation of his muscles at her return halts immediately when he sees her face. She’s frowning slightly, looking more than a little confused as she drops into her desk chair. She doesn’t start typing right away as she usually does, either. Instead, she just sits there, chin propped on her hand, and studies her desk with furrowed brows.

“Excuse me,” he announces, rising even as he looks around for acceptance of his non-request.

There are a few cursory nods, even though it wouldn’t have mattered one bit if they’d refused. He’s already out the door by the time the meeting resumes without him.

“What happened?” He asks as soon as she’s within earshot.

Felicity jumps. Apparently she wasn’t aware of his approach. “Oliver!” She exclaims. He catches the faint wobble of nerves in her voice and narrows his eyes. “You should be in the meeting.”

“The meeting’s not important.” He dismisses her words quickly. “What’s going on?”

She looks uncomfortable, trying to laugh it off. “Don’t let them hear you say that.”

“Felicity.”

She sighs resignedly. “Alright, it’s no big deal. I’m still trying to sort it all out. I just… it took me by surprise. I was fixing the firewall and talking to Connor and he asked if we could have lunch next week and I felt really bad because I’ve been blowing him off for a while now and-” She stops, suddenly realizing something as her eyes go wide and her mouth hangs open. She looks up at him. “-is that something we talk about before I agree to it? Because I really didn’t even think of that…”
He tries to contain his amusement at her horrified expression. The thought that the cause of it is evidently her acceptance of a lunch date with Connor is enough to help him keep the smile inside. His first instinct is to let the jealousy (over a real person this time) reign free and tell her that he doesn’t want her going out with Connor. But then he looks at her biting her lip and he shoves his testosterone-fueled reaction back down. This is Felicity, a woman he trusts beyond a shadow of a doubt. She would never hurt him, and whatever Connor may feel toward her, he can be certain she wouldn’t agree to anything that would give him cause for concern. He can’t control who her friends are. He has to trust her judgement.

“It’s fine,” he assures her, pressing his lips up into a smile.

She bites down harder on her lip. “Are you sure? Because I can totally understand-”

“Felicity,” he interrupts her gently, making sure to look her dead in the eye. “I trust you.”

She exhales in relief. “Good. Ok, now that that’s covered… So I was talking to Connor and kind of absorbed in the whole ‘digital world’ thing and it was going well. It didn’t take much tinkering to solve the problem, really, but I will admit that I may or may not have written the code for that firewall and I may or may not have made some alterations I didn’t tell anyone about so every time it broke I’d have an excuse to go back down to IT and-’” She pauses, realizing what she just admitted, and blushes profusely. She’s getting increasingly nervous and it’s not helping his impatience. What the hell happened down there? “Ok, pretend I did not just say that because not only is it embarrassing I’m pretty sure you can fire me for it.” She gets up and starts pacing back and forth behind her desk as she talks, hands gesticulating around wildly as she verbalizes her thoughts. “Moving on. I finished with the problem and turned around to talk to Dave- IT Department Head Dave, even though he’s useless- and, well, Isabel was there.”

His posture straightens at the words, sensing that her point is near. Isabel in IT? What does she need down there? He wasn’t even sure she knew they had floors as low in the building as IT.

“So I try to just mind my own business, you know, because we don’t get along on our best days, but that woman is just full of surprises because she strikes up a conversation with me.”

“She what?” He interrupts, taking a step closer to her still-pacing form.

“She starts talking to me, asking me why they called me down here, asking Dave why they ever let me go if I was so valuable, that kind of thing. Then she asks me all these questions about my involvement with the company’s security protocols and how familiar I am with the firewalls and protections. Of course, Dave is right there to sing my praises and let her know exactly how involved
I am in them, which only piques her interest more. So she asks me, in front of at least four witnesses, to meet with her on Friday to go over some of the more intricate systems since she feels that, as CEO- not even co-CEO, just CEO- she feels that she should be better acquainted with them. I get the feeling she’d just been coming to ask Dave those same questions but he oh-so-helpfully steered her in my direction before she could. So, long story short, I have a meeting with Isabel on Friday at two o’clock and I have no idea what she wants or how I’m going to avoid giving it to her.”

Oliver can only stare once she’s gotten it all out. He doesn’t even know how to react to everything she just dumped on him. She’s stopped pacing to stare helplessly at him, but he doesn’t have any reassurances to give at this point. He’s just as taken aback by this development as she is. Out of all of the brainstorming they’ve done, not once did any of them consider Isabel approaching Felicity as part of it. Hell, maybe this isn’t part of it at all. Maybe Isabel has a completely innocent reason for requesting this meeting. Knowing Isabel Rochev, though, it’s better to assume guilt until innocence is proven.

In the foundry later that night, they manage to come up with enough of a plan to calm their racing adrenaline. He tried to get her to call off the meeting altogether but she flatly refused and he knows better than to argue this one. Even if Digg agreed with him, it was Sara who, surprisingly, stood in her corner and backed her up when she said she could handle it. With a stalemate, it was easier to just back down. He isn’t eager for another fight, and she did have a point when she told him she would be “literally in the middle of the Queen Consolidated office filled with people.”

Oliver can feel the charge in the air as they all realize that Isabel may be putting her endgame into play. It’s strange timing, given that no other companies have gone under recently, but Felicity is convinced that means at least one will be in the near future.

“They’d be foolish not to test it once more before they go for their goal. They have to be sure it will work on a larger scale,” she says. Her voice is distracted as she types away at her keyboard, head swiveling between monitors as she does. “I’m trying for known associates of Isabel to see if any of them have investments in potential target companies but she's a pretty well-socialized woman, so it's probably a long-shot.”

“So we’re stuck,” Digg says plainly, crossing his arms.

“I prefer to think of it as a minor obstacle,” Felicity hedges.

Digg snorts. “And what exactly would you call a major obstacle?”
“I’ll let you know when we get there.”

Sara’s lips quirk in the barest hint of amusement at the two while Oliver heads up to make an appearance in the club. He hasn’t been seen in the upstairs portion of the building in too long, and it’s a necessity, as annoying as it is.

Instead of taking the rounds, as usual, he makes a beeline for the bar. He can still be spotted without having to subject himself to scantily-clad girls draping themselves all over him.

“Why so serious?” A sultry voice purrs in his ear.

Or not.

The woman is a redhead, wearing probably one of the shortest black dresses in existence. He sighs, trying not to show his irritation. He can’t very well blow her off on the grounds of being taken, since he and Felicity aren’t public knowledge as of yet. So, polite disinterest it is.

“Why don’t I buy you a drink and you can tell me all about what’s got that gorgeous face of yours so sour?” She says, not deterred by his lack of response. She places her hand lightly on his forearm where it lays resting on the bar.

He presses his lips together a draws a deep breath. “Thanks, but I’m good.”

“You don’t look good. I bet you could be, though.”

He flicks his eyes up to the ceiling, willing his patience to remain intact. “I’m waiting for someone.”

“Whoever she is, she can’t be as fun as I am,” she whispers huskily, leaning in.

He takes a step back, clearing his throat right when he’s saved from having to respond.
“She is his sister. And she also happens to own this club, so scram Ginger Spice,” Thea snaps, stepping up beside him.

He presses his lips together to contain his smile as he ducks his head to look at the floor. When he looks up again, the redhead is gone and Thea is looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

“Can you go anywhere without getting hit on?” She asks, amusement in the outer edges of her voice.

“Apparently not.”

“What I’d like to know is why you didn’t just tell her you were taken?” She asks, leaning back against the bar as she surveys him. “Unless… She said she was the one who had to apologize, but I swear to God, Ollie, if you screwed this up—”

He purses his lips and leans on his forearms. “We both apologized and sorted it out. We’re just… keeping it quiet for right now. Thanks for the vote of confidence, though, Speedy.”

She smirks and flips her hair, heading around behind the bar. “Anytime. You’re welcome for rescuing you, by the way.”

He shakes his head, waving off the bottle of scotch she inclines toward him. She shrugs and sets it back in its slot.

“What are you doing here, Ollie?” She asks.

“I can’t come to check on my favourite sister?” He fires back, raising an eyebrow.

“You could, if you didn’t have better places to be and better times to do it. Shouldn’t you be with your Felicity, you know, making up?”

Her tone is suggestive to the extreme, and he can’t stop himself from chuckling in disbelief. “Why do you insist on calling her that?”
Thea shrugs, turning to hand a bottle of vodka to an approaching waiter. “It’s my job as your little sister to forever remind you of the awkward moment you introduced me to her.”

Of course it is. He shouldn’t expect anything less. It strikes him again how utterly normal this conversation is, and he smiles to himself. “Why did you take her to lunch today?”

Thea hesitates before responding with, “Why wouldn’t I want to take my brother’s Felicity to lunch?”

He fixes her with a look. “It’s nice you two get along and all, but you barely know each other, and you’ve never shown this much interest in my… personal life before. I was surprised.”

Thea shrugs before turning to him with a genuine smile. She reaches across to lay her hand over his. “I like this one, Ollie. She knows you, all of you, and she isn’t running away from that. Someone has to make sure she sticks around.”

He allows a small smile of his own before telling Thea he’ll get out of her hair and heading back for the basement.

When he gets to the bottom of the stairs, he heads to where Felicity is still sitting at the computers and leans on the desk beside her chair.

“Find anything?” He asks, eyes sweeping over her.

She sits back from the keyboard and swivels the chair to face him. “Not yet. I did watch this highly entertaining video of the almighty Arrow relying on his sister to save him from a drunken woman, though.”

He stiffens, unsure of how to respond to that. In retrospect, he should have been aware that she’d be keeping an eye on the main floor. She does it occasionally to check on Thea. “Felicity-”

She cuts him off with a grin. “Relax, Oliver. Like I said, highly entertaining. Who knew the man who puts the fear of God into criminals can’t even get rid of one persistent woman?”
He allows his head to fall to his chest. “I couldn’t exactly threaten her, now could I?”

She laughs. “No, your sister had to do that for you.”

He tries to look unamused, but he can’t help the smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he looks at her. Teasing doesn’t exactly come naturally to him anymore, so it’s always strange to feel the lightness in his chest. It’s no wonder, though. They don’t live in a world where levity comes along too often, so they have to take it where they can get it.

He paces the length of his office, unable to sit still, as they wait. It’s been exactly an hour and forty-seven minutes since Felicity disappeared to Isabel’s office for their meeting. An hour and forty-eight. An hour and forty-nine.

“Oliver, man, you gotta calm down,” Digg tells him for what feels like the fiftieth time. “She’s gonna be fine. Not only is she surrounded by people, but our girl’s much better at lying than you are.”

That stops his steps. He turns to Diggle and sighs. “Still doesn’t make her very good at it.”

“Point taken. Isabel won’t try anything in the middle of the office, though. So just sit down and do the paperwork Felicity left for you.”

Oliver glances over at the stack of papers Felicity left him to read and sign when she departed. It’s busy work, and all three of them know it. As grateful as he is that she knows him well enough to leave him something to occupy his time, he can’t focus on that right now. He can’t focus on anything beyond the fact that Felicity is downstairs, right now, with Svalov’s daughter, teaching her how to get past QC’s digital securities.

At that moment, the elevator door dings and he’s moving toward it much faster than normal. Digg stays a few steps behind, far enough to give him space, but close enough to ensure the blonde is safe.

He breathes a sigh of relief when she steps from behind the doors and sees her do the same. As much as he wants to close the distance between them, he knows she’d call it “over-reacting” so he waits for her to come to him. She stops close enough to be considered in his personal space and lets her hand brush his.
“Hi,” she says, forcing a smile.

“Hi.”

She gives herself another minute before stepping around him and continuing to the office. He lets his hand fall to the small of her back to guide her, needing the physical connection to remind himself that she’s fine. It was just a meeting with Isabel. She was in minimal danger.

“She bought it, I think,” she tells them once they’re situated in Oliver’s office. “I fed her the fake protocols and it’ll ping my system when she uses them. I suspect she’ll try your codes,” she says, looking over at Oliver. “She wouldn’t have the opportunity to get Dave’s or mine, and Dave is useless anyways so he’d make a pretty terrible patsy. Not that you’re much better in terms of tech-savvy, but you’re a big enough name that no one will question how you figured it out. They’ll be too busy crying ‘over-privileged one-percenter’ to care.”

“I don’t even know where my codes are…” Oliver admits sheepishly.

“That’s why you have me,” she tells him, smiling sweetly. “I have them written down and stashed in your safe. All of our codes are stored separately from the QC servers as a safety precaution. That was Dave’s request, and probably the only half-decent one he came up with.”

Oliver looks at her blankly. “My safe?”

She rolls her eyes as Digg chuckles.

“I swear you would be lost without me,” she sighs, getting up and heading to the only opaque wall in his office to show him the hidden safe.

As he stares at her, not in the least interested in the safe he’s only now realized he has, he can’t help but think how true her words are. He would be completely and utterly lost without Felicity Smoak.

Chapter End Notes
Ok, so I was going to continue, but I needed the next chapter to be a bit longer so I decided to move some of the stuff around and end it here. I actually wasn’t sure I’d get to 6000 words with what I had, so I added some more Thea near the end there and I got close enough to call it a chapter. I know the whole ‘drunk girl hits on him’ isn’t very original, but I wanted to illustrate that she trusts him as much as he trusts her, and I really wanted Thea to get all protective-sister, so it just kind of worked.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Monday comes, Isabel still hasn’t tripped the system. He’s getting anxious, waiting for her to attack, and it’s setting him on edge. Felicity spent the weekend trying to determine the next target for a strike and has managed to narrow it down to seven possibilities. It’s better than where they started, but it’s still too wide of a net. She can’t monitor all seven simultaneously, so they have to hope she gets lucky. Sara has been in touch with the League concerning the Ghost’s advances and they told her he’s dropped off the grid. He hasn’t checked in as he’s supposed to and it’s caused some unrest. They’ve given Sara the authority to take him into custody should she find him, but haven’t authorized any proactive action. The League won’t give her the resources to track him down until he makes a direct move against a civilian. Apparently stalking them doesn’t count.

It’s Tuesday night when something finally gives. They’re going about their normal routine of three-way sparring while Felicity sits at the computer, fresh off another training session with Digg while Oliver and Sara were out patrolling. Oliver doesn’t particularly like watching her train, especially now that she’s starting to hold her own against Digg. The older man still trumps her in experience and skill, but she holds out a little longer each time. She shouldn’t have to do this. He should be able to keep her safe. But basic self-defence isn’t going to be sufficient in this life, and he won’t always be there. He told her that he needed her to learn it, and he does. He needs to know she’ll be able to fight if he isn’t there. He needs to accept that, as much as he doesn’t want her to become a fighter, she has to for her own safety. Not on the level of he, Digg, and Sara, but she needs to go beyond her comfort level. He brought her into their life, and he has to make sure she has the skills to survive it. He may know all of this, but it doesn’t mean he has to like it. It doesn’t mean he has to watch.

“Guys.” Her voice is sharp and abrupt, drawing their attention immediately. “We’ve got a security breach at Huntington Corp. Their database is internal access only so this has to be it.”

“Is the Ghost there?” Sara asks, already moving to get changed. It’s not a question of whether she’s going with him.

“I’m not sure but I’d assume so,” Felicity answers, still typing. “If it’s internal access he’d have to go along.”

The two of them emerge seconds later in full gear. Felicity swivels the chair around briefly to survey the pair. “They’re still inside the building. The main computer terminal is on the twelfth floor.”

They both nod and head for the stairs with more purpose than they’ve had in a while.
“Guys?” She calls out, stopping them in their tracks. Their heads swivel back to glance at the blonde. She looks calm on the outside, but her eyes betray her anxiety. “Be careful.”

They both nod, but Oliver lingers a split-second longer than Sara before following her up the stairs. The last thing he sees is Felicity swiveling back to face the monitors while Digg slips a comm in his ear.

Digg is the one directing them through the streets to Huntington Corp as Felicity works on building extra security around their database and getting ready to try and push back when they access the information. This is as much her mission as it is theirs at this point.

When they get to the twelfth floor, the computer room is easy to find, both because of the blue light emanating into the hallway, and because the door is wide open. It’s too easy. Looking at Sara, he can see she’s thinking the same thing. The Ghost wouldn’t be so careless; the League doesn’t tolerate sloppy performance.

They approach the room warily, Sara’s staff poised at her side and Oliver’s bow with an arrow nocked. Sara enters first, but when Oliver follows her inside they’re greeted with a sight that makes both of them deflate.

“There’s no one here, Digg,” he says into the comm. “The room is empty.”

“What?” The other man snaps, and Oliver can hear the rustlings of Felicity trying to sort it all out.

“Crap,” she mutters over the comm, but offers no further explanation.

“Felicity?” He prompts, watching as Sara moves further into the room to survey the screens.

“Ollie,” Sara calls, her voice terse.

He makes his way over to her immediately, breath catching when he comes even with the monitor.
It’s a picture of Felicity and Thea sitting in a restaurant from the day his sister took her to lunch. There’s typed script at the bottom, reading: I won’t tell you again.

He’s heading back to his bike before Sara can even do so much as relay what they’re looking at to the two back at the foundry. He has to see Thea, to know she’s safe.

“She’s upstairs, Oliver,” Felicity tells him, sensing exactly what he’s feeling. “She’s in the office with Roy, going over invoices. The club is empty otherwise.”

“Find a way to get Roy to the alley,” he tells her through gritted teeth, already weaving the bike through traffic.

“On it.”

Her comm goes dead then, and he guns the bike. Sara can’t be far behind him, but he can’t wait for her. She’ll understand.

When he gets to the alley, Roy is loading boxes into the recycling bin, muttering to himself about ‘girl talk’ and stomping on the cardboard.

“Roy.”

The boy whirls abruptly, drawing a box cutter from his pocket and brandishing it as a weapon. He takes a moment to recognize the Arrow before relaxing slightly.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” the kid says, trying for casual.

“We need to talk.”

“And here I thought you just came to help me save the earth,” he quips, gesturing to the boxes.
Oliver clenches his jaw, trying to hold on to his patience. He’ll never understand what Felicity sees in his sister’s… Roy. She’s told him before that Roy just needs some direction and guidance, but all he sees is a kid with an authority complex that isn’t going anywhere. Nevertheless, he knows Roy will do anything to protect Thea.

“This is serious,” he finally bites out. “It’s about Thea. I need you to stay close to her. She could be in danger.”

That gets his attention. “What? From who?”

Oliver looks over to the side before facing the younger man again. “There is a… threat against Oliver Queen. He wants to make sure his sister doesn’t get caught in the crossfire.”

“What’s he done?” Roy demands, face contorted in anger.

“That’s what I’m trying to find out.”

He turns and leaves Roy in the alley to hurry down to the foundry to change into street clothes. He wants to see Thea for himself.

Digg gives him a nod as he passes through, knowing not to interrupt him. He’ll wait for Sara to return to get the full briefing on what went down.

His only thought is ensuring that his sister is indeed safe, so he feels the knot in his stomach loosen when he hears her voice. She’s laughing, as is Felicity, when he knocks lightly on the door. He enters to see Thea behind the desk and Felicity perched on a chair on the opposite side. It takes him a minute to overcome how normal they look, sitting there across from one another. He remembers Felicity’s words that it’s too soon to be having discussions about going public, and resolves not to let on what he’s been thinking lately. If it’s too soon to go public, it’s far too soon to be having these kinds of feelings and emotions. Even if they’ve known each other for two years, they’ve barely been together for a month. He shouldn’t be so serious already. It would be enough to send ‘Ollie’ running for the hills. Luckily, Ollie is a figure of his past, and Oliver has no desire to go anywhere.


Felicity’s head swivels to look at him, and he doesn’t miss the way she inspects every inch of him for
injury before letting out a breath. “Your meeting finished early.”

He takes the hint and nods, moving to occupy the chair beside the blonde. He lets his hand brush her shoulder as he does so, something that doesn’t go unnoticed by Thea. “Thankfully. Thought I’d drop in and check on my favourite sister.”

Thea rolls her eyes. “I’m your only sister. And if you keep dropping in on me like this you’re going to get an eyeful at some point. You should probably call first.”

He presses his lips together to keep from reacting as she smiles widely at him. She wouldn’t be his sister if she didn’t try to push his buttons. He just needs to keep reminding himself of that.

“Is it safe to-” Roy stops short when he sees the extra male in the room. “Oliver. Hi.”

“Roy,” Oliver nods in return. The younger man shoves his hands in his pockets awkwardly.

Finally, Felicity takes pity on them and stands up, drawing the attention back to herself. “Anyway, I really just came by to say thank you again. I should really be going.”

Thea smiles up at her. “It was my pleasure. And I meant it when I said we should double sometime. I mean, when you guys are ready to go public.”

Oliver and Roy stiffen simultaneously. The last time Oliver checked, ‘double’ meant double date. As in spending an entire night with his sister and Roy. That is not his idea of fun. From the look on Roy’s face, it doesn’t sound like a great time to him either.

Both girls laugh at their reactions. Felicity allows her hand to fall to Oliver’s shoulder before saying, “Maybe we should give them some time to adjust to that idea.”

Thea agrees and both men relax slightly.

Felicity squeezes his shoulder lightly. “I should get back. I’ll see you later?” She asks him, bending down to press her lips to his forehead or his cheek. He isn’t sure which because he tilts his head up at the last second and meets her lips with his instead. He can feel her surprise at his willing display
before he pulls back and nods.

He can see the flush in her cheeks as she heads back down the stairs, leaving him with his sister and Roy. He wishes he could go with her, but he committed when he showed up so he has to stay at least fifteen more minutes.

“I-uh- didn’t know you two were…” Roy trails off, scratching the back of his neck.

Oliver looks anywhere but at Roy as he nods. “It’s kind of new. We’re keeping it quiet.”

The kid nods for too long as a way to fill the silence.

Thea breaks the tension with a sigh. “See, this is why we need to go out. You two have to learn to talk to each other because this?” She gestures between them. “This is just painful for everyone.”

Sara still isn’t back by the time he gets to the basement. He looks between his two partners and senses that something is off. Felicity is typing as always, but her posture is stiff. Digg is concentrating on the monitors Felicity isn’t, speaking into the comm. Suddenly, Oliver understands. Sara is still out in the field.

“What’s going on?” He demands, stepping up to look over Felicity’s shoulder. She’s so absorbed that she doesn’t even react. Instead, she sits muttering to herself and shaking her head. He looks over at Digg, quirking a brow.

Digg tells Sara to hang on before turning to Oliver. “It was a decoy. Felicity tracked another interruption at Fenmore Tech a couple of minutes after you guys said the building was empty. She’s trying to block them out. Sara’s on the inside trying to get them to back off but so far no luck.”

Oliver’s stomach drops. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You needed to check on Thea. Your head wasn’t in the game. It doesn’t sound like there’s anything you could do, anyways. Sara’s been blocked for the past five minutes. She’s just about to retreat.”
“And the minutes that Felicity was upstairs with Thea? One of you should have said something.”

“Oliver, what’s done is done. She had me set the computer to run the initial hack into their system so she had the time.”

Oliver breathes deeply, turning to watch as Felicity mutters to herself and types. She’s completely wrapped up in her digital world. It doesn’t seem to be going well, if her increasingly pronounced frown is any indication.

“No, no, no,” she snaps to herself, increasing her pace. He didn’t think it was possible to type any faster. “I had you. I had you. How did you get out of that? How is that even possible?”

Five tension-filled moments later, she blows out a breath and slams back against her chair. Her fingers come up to rub across her forehead as she mutters, “Dammit. He skipped right over me. How did he do that?”

Neither he nor Digg have a response for that, but Sara enters the basement at that moment and manages to distract them from trying.

“How’s Thea?” She asks.

“Fine. You shouldn’t have-” He starts, but Sara holds up her hand.

“It’s family, Ollie. I get it. If it had been Laurel, or my father… Turned out to be a moot point anyways. There were too many of them guarding the room for me to get close. Huntington was just a distraction.”

Oliver says nothing, running a hand through his hair and bringing it to rest on the back of his neck. They should have realized it was a distraction from the start. It would hardly be the first time. He throws a sidelong glance at Felicity, still sitting in the same position. Digg lays a hand on her shoulder before he heads out and Sara looks as though she isn’t sure if she should do the same before finally opting not to and leaving as well. Oliver gives her a few more minutes before approaching and spinning her chair to face him. He kneels in front of her, placing his hands on her bare knees. That gets her to look at him.
“Oliver… This can’t…” She pauses, turning her eyes to the ceiling briefly before looking back down at him. “He threatened Thea.”

“I know.”

“I didn’t want her to think anything was wrong so I tried to act natural, but then you… She’s your sister, Oliver. I understand. I would never put her in harm’s way.”

He clenches his jaw before shaking his head. “I won’t negotiate with some guy behind a computer screen. I spent two years pushing you away when I shouldn’t have, and I don’t believe he’ll leave you alone just because I push you away now. I won’t leave you as an open target. We’re going to find him. We’re getting close. If we keep our distance in public and at the office, it should satisfy him.”

“But Thea-”

“I trust Roy to do everything he can to protect her, and Diggle’s hand-picking extra security to tail her tomorrow morning. I’m not taking the threat lightly, Felicity, but I won’t let it control my actions.”

She looks as though she wants to protest, but eventually nods.

“Hey,” he says, bringing his hands up to cup her cheeks. “If I thought it would take Thea off his radar, I would do whatever it took.”

He means it, as much pain as it would cause both of them. If he genuinely thought the Ghost would leave Thea out of this if he distanced himself from Felicity, he’d do it in a heartbeat, and she’s just told him she’d do the same. He isn’t convinced it will guarantee his sister’s safety, though. The Ghost is deliberate and well-trained. He wouldn’t level a threat lightly, and he wouldn’t pull Thea out just to get them to stay away from each other. It’s another message, not intended solely to drive them apart. Threatening Thea is about more than Oliver Queen and Felicity Smoak; it’s about sending a message to the Arrow and his partners. It’s designed to show them exactly how powerful of a threat the Ghost can be when provoked. It’s a command to back off, and they can’t do that.

By Wednesday, Isabel still hasn’t made a move. They’re trying to remain calm and natural, but the
more time that passes, the more difficult it gets. The fact that he and Felicity are keeping their
distance makes it even more difficult. He flat out refused to let her go back to her apartment, but he
hasn’t realized just how much he touches her in a day until he has to make a conscious effort not to.
He also hasn’t realized how much of his day is occupied with watching her through the glass that
separates their desks. Investors would probably leave QC in droves if they knew how much time the
CEO spent focussed on his EA instead of financial reports.

He’s drawn out of his thoughts by the sound of the elevator dinging, but he doesn’t turn around to
see who it is. Either Diggle is bringing lunch, or someone wants him to sign something.

“Where’s Felicity?” Digg asks as he lets the office door fall closed behind him.

Oliver heaves a breath and spins around to face his approaching friend. “Out to lunch with Connor.”

“And you’re ok with that?” Digg looks thoroughly taken aback.

Oliver shrugs, accepting the takeout bag Digg holds out to him. “I’m not going to tell her who she
can and cannot see.”

The other man lets out a huff of surprise as he eyes Oliver with amusement. “Look at you all
evolved.”

Oliver shifts his eyes up to glare at him. “It’s just lunch.”

“If you say so,” he snorts, heading back to the door. Oliver resists the very childish urge to throw the
provided fork at him.

It finally happens on Friday night. After their successful takedown of Fenmore Tech, Isabel and the
Ghost must be feeling confident enough to give QC a go, because Felicity’s computer starts making
what could possibly be the loudest buzzing sound he’s ever heard. It’s enough to make all four of
them jump and turn their attention to the computers. Felicity recovers first and bolts over to the
monitors from where she was descending the stairs. A few typed commands later and the alarm
stops, leaving an eerie silence.
“What the hell was that?” Digg asks, his tone a mixture of irritation and amusement.

Felicity looks at them sheepishly. “I wanted to make sure we heard it. I admit, I may have slightly overdone it on the volume. But now we know for next time?”

Oliver’s lips twitch, but Sara’s gaze has zeroed in on the monitors. She approaches Felicity as she asks, “Was that-”

“The alert telling us Isabel is up to no good? Yes,” Felicity answers before the question is even asked. “She’s following the false directions as we speak, but I’m going to keep an eye on her just to make sure she stays on the right trail. With the amount of times that woman has managed to catch us off guard… Well, let’s just say it would suck if she did it again.”

The rest of them silently agree, but the tension doesn’t diminish when Felicity swivels back to face her monitors. Even though she’s laid a false trail for Isabel to follow, it doesn’t mean the Ghost hasn’t discovered the lie and found the real access point. By tomorrow morning, Oliver could very well have nothing left of Queen Consolidated except a huge lawsuit pointed in his direction. It only makes sense that Isabel would use his codes for this; it kills two birds with one stone. Not only were they fairly easily accessible, but him taking the blame puts Isabel in the clear and pulls the company from his grasp all in one fell swoop. If she somehow finds a way around their safeguards and Felicity can’t stop her…

“Oh my God.” Felicity’s startled exclamation draws him out of his thoughts. “That is not possible. How did she-”

Sara asks the question neither he nor Digg can. “Did she get around you?”

Felicity remains silent for a long three minutes before finally diving for her purse. The three of them watch in confusion as she rifles through the contents before finally retrieving the small case containing her contact lenses. It doesn’t escape Oliver’s notice that she didn’t answer the question and he feels the knot of anxiety tighten as he watches her extract a small device with a USB hookup next. She pops the top on what he now realizes must be some sort of disk reader and opens the lid on the Right Eye half of the lens container. What she does next puzzles them all.

He tilts his head and frowns when she pulls the lens out of the solution and sticks it in the center of the disk reader, closing the lid and inserting the USB into the computer. She’s muttering to herself the entire time, but she still hasn’t seen fit to tell them exactly what she’s doing. Instead, she’s typing and her head is swiveling and she looks massively perplexed.
“She copied it. Son of a-”

He cuts off her exclamation with a rather well-timed, “Felicity.” She turns to face him and the look on her face is enough to send a fresh wave of anxiety through him. “What is going on?”

“She isn’t using your codes, Oliver,” she mutters, eyes avoiding his. “She’s using mine.”

“Ok, explain that again,” Digg sighs, rubbing a hand over his head. She lost the three of them about two minutes in. “This time, pretend we don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Felicity gives a weak smile at his tired attempt at joking before her face falls flat again. “I have literally no idea how this happened. Somehow, Isabel got access to my security codes. She’s setting me up to take the fall for this.”

“You said you keep them in your contact lens?” Sara asks, puzzled.

Felicity nods. “It’s relatively new technology to the public, but techies have been experimenting with it for years. An old friend from MIT found a way to implant information in a contact around the time I designed the database and I agreed to be his test subject. There were a few bugs, but I managed to sort them out. I figured a contact lens was inconspicuous enough. Who would think to look there? That’s why I can’t figure out how Isabel got access. She’d have to know, first of all, and then she’d have to find a way to copy the data, which is impossible without at least ten minutes of uninterrupted access.”

“What about your meeting last week?” Digg suggests as he leans back against the table.

Shaking her head, Felicity bites her thumb nail. “No, I didn’t take my purse with me. She wouldn’t have been able to copy the data anyways because she’d have to stick the lens in some sort of cloning device to take the information.”

“I’m still stuck on how the data got into the contact in the first place…” Oliver admits. For once, he isn’t pacing. After she cleared up that the database wasn’t in any imminent danger, he calmed down enough to stay leaning against her computer desk.
“It definitely wasn’t easy.”

“And you were the only person who knew the codes were in there?” Sara questions, eyebrows drawn together.

“Yeah, I-” Felicity stops midsentence, eyes going wide. “No, I wasn’t. Well, I was the only one who knew what was stored in the contact lens, but I wasn’t the only one who knew it had something in it.” Oliver stiffens and Felicity bites her lip before ploughing ahead. “I was having trouble getting a couple of the bugs out, so I had to ask for help. I didn’t want to draw attention to it or have anyone ask questions, so I went to one of the new hires because I knew they wouldn’t say anything. A superior asks you for something and you just do it. So I asked for a set of fresh eyes, got the bugs sorted out, and went on my merry way. We never spoke of it again, but… well, I was cagey about what the information was so it was probably a good shot that it was the databases codes. I just don’t understand how… or why… Unless Isabel…”

“Felicity,” Oliver interrupts with a hand on her shoulder. “Who did you ask for help?”

She looks up at him with shining, helpless eyes. “Connor.”

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Oliver is pretty sure he’s going to kill Connor Telman. Felicity can come up with false justifications for him all she wants, but the harsh truth of the matter is that Connor Telman betrayed her. Even if it was nothing more than offhandedly mentioning the contact lens to Isabel, he broke confidence and endangered Felicity. There’s no forgiveness for that in his books. He almost laughs at the irony of the situation. A couple of months ago she was telling him to back off her friendship with Connor, that he was a good guy, and now here they are. The next words out of her mouth wipe the humour of the situation away.

“I need to talk to him.”

“Absolutely not,” he snaps, but softens his tone at her expression. “We have no idea what the situation is here. He could be in deep with Isabel for all we know.”

She frowns. “Oliver-”
He cuts her off with an arched brow. “What was it you told me about going off half-cocked?”

When she blows out a breath he knows he’s won. Even better, he has rationality to back him up this time. It isn’t just some desire to keep her out of harm’s way fueling his refusal. They’ve just gained another piece of the puzzle, whether Isabel intended it or not. They have to play this smart. They have to-

“Then I need to confront Isabel.”

They have to not send Felicity into the lion’s den. “No.”

“Oliver-”

“Felicity, I mean it. What good can come from confronting her?”

She bristles, and he feels the dread hit his stomach. She only reacts like that when she has a nearly unbeatable argument coming. “First of all, she’s going to be suspicious as to why I led her on a wild goose chase. If I don’t follow up, she’s only going to be more suspicious. She may think I’m a whore, but she knows I’m not stupid. At least now she does. So if I ignore this, she’s going to wonder why. Eventually, she’s going to confront me about it when I don’t come to her. Secondly, we want to be in control here, right? We want to go on the offensive? What better way to go on the offensive than for me to confront her with my knowledge of her not-so-innocent online activities? And C, we have to do something and I really don’t think a visit from the Arrow is going to scare her off. Not to mention it will push the Ghost even further off his already wobbly rocker. The less we involve the actual Arrow in this, the better.”

Oliver lets his eyes fall closed. She’s right. Of course, she’s right. “But what good is telling Isabel you know? What does that give us?”

When he opens his eyes, she’s turned away from him, looking at the open space between Sara and Digg. “I wouldn’t just tell Isabel I know.” He really doesn’t like where this is going. “I’d have to sell it. She needs me for the real access trail.”

“No.”

“Is that really the only word in your vocabulary right now?” She snaps. Her expression is annoyed
when she glances up at him.

“I’m with Oliver on this one,” Digg tosses in. His expression is stony and Oliver knows he’s imagining all the possible ways this could go south.

Sara interrupts whatever argument is about to ensue. “It’s a good plan. The only one we’ve got.”

Both he and Digg whip their heads around to glare at the blonde assassin.

She shrugs one shoulder, though she looks a bit uncomfortable. “Well, it is. We need to stop Isabel and get to the Ghost. The best way to do that is from the inside. They’ll probably be expecting an Arrow attack, so they won’t be looking on the inside.”

“But the Ghost already knows Felicity works for the Arrow,” Digg points out. “He’ll be suspicious of her. So will Isabel for that matter.”

Another shrug. “Maybe, maybe not. Depends how well Felicity can sell it.” She turns to Felicity then. “Can you convince Isabel you’re really ok with destroying QC?”

Felicity takes a moment before nodding. “I can do it.”

“Then it’s settled. Look, my Dad’s expecting me for dinner,” she tells them, glancing at her watch, “but keep me in the loop.” She starts walking to the stairs but turns back halfway there. “There are some things I should probably tell you guys before you get yourselves in too deep, but I want to make sure of a few things first. You know, cautionary tales of assassins gone rogue and all. Just… let me sort it out before you get too involved, ok?”

The three of them look mildly confused but nod anyways before Sara departs. The foundry is completely silent after the door closes behind her.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry it's a bit shorter, but I had to cut this one in two and this seemed like a good place to leave it. We had a couple of bigger revelations happening in this one, and it won't stop there. The next chapter may answer one of the final remaining questions...
and we'll see an Isabel/Felicity showdown as well as Moira and Felicity coming face-to-face. I'm hoping it's believable that they stay together after the Ghost's threat. I didn't intend for the Thea threat to come out so soon but it just sort of did, and I did intend it to be aimed at getting the Arrow to back off the case as much as the whole Oliver/Felicity relationship, so the two of them breaking up wouldn't necessarily protect Thea since they'd still be investigating as Team Arrow. So, thoughts?
Alright, so here’s the next one! Sorry for the delay. Life got the better of me (more like vacation...) For the purposes of this story, Moira hasn’t really paid much attention to Felicity beyond the “secretary” role either.

“He grunts in response as he treks up the stairs at the mansion. She’s following behind him but he can picture the anxiety written on her face. “What else am I supposed to be.”

“Can you just try to understand my side of this? I don’t want to fight.”

He stops at her words, turning back to face her. His lips press together and he looks off to the side momentarily before refocusing on the blonde before him. “Then maybe you should stop offering yourself up as bait.”

She huffs in annoyance. “I am not bait. I’m… going undercover… sort of.”

He resumes his path down the hall and reaches his door, making to walk right on through without responding, but she catches his wrist.

“Oliver.”

“What?” He grounds out. “What do you want me to say?”

She doesn’t respond at first, eyes focused on the ground to her left. He doesn’t have the patience or desire to listen to whatever she’s preparing to say, however, and he ploughs ahead.

“You knew this would happen,” he accuses, glaring down at her. It’s times like this that he wishes
his Arrow persona affected her. “You planned for this to happen. When you took that meeting with Isabel, you knew it would result in you confronting her and joining her operation.”

He can tell from the look on her face that it’s the truth. She doesn’t even need to say anything. He paces to the couch and back, running and hand through his hair and clenching his fist before he comes to a stop in front of her again.

When she finally meets his stare it’s without any of her previous fire. In fact, she looks rather deflated. “I knew it was a possibility,” she hedges, wringing her hands as she rushes on. “Look, I sit behind computers every night and I help you, because that’s what I’m good at. And this? This is just another chance for me to help you, because I’m good at this. It’s what I do, Oliver, and you can’t deny it’s our best option.”

She’s looking up at him with wide, pleading eyes, and he knows she’s right. Logically, it’s their best option. If it was him, Sara, or even Diggle, proposing to go in, he’d jump on board. But it’s not. It’s Felicity and it scares the hell out of him. She was never supposed to leave the foundry.

“My life. My choice.” She takes a step closer and he lets his eyes fall closed when she rests her right palm gently on his cheek. “I’ll be fine.”

He reaches out blindly, curving his right arm around the small of her back and pulling her to his chest. The hand on his cheek curves around to rest on the back of his neck as he wraps his other arm around the middle of her back and her remaining arm circles his waist. Her thumb is rubbing soft circles on the nape of his neck and he presses a kiss to her hair as he concentrates on breathing. She’s right. He knows she’s right and he needs to let her do this. He just can’t get over the anxiety already starting to knot in his stomach at the thought of what’s going to happen.

“I should have been honest from the start.” Her voice is muffled by his shirt. “I’m sorry. I just… I knew what the answer would be if I said anything.”

He kisses her hair again, unable to stop himself, his hand now lightly rubbing up and down her back in a soothing motion. He isn’t sure if it’s for her or him, but he can feel the tension ebbing away nonetheless. After a long moment, he pulls back enough to look her in the eye.

“When I brought you into this… I promised Diggle we could protect you. We can’t do that if you’re right in the middle of everything,” he tells her, his voice low and teetering on hoarse. She looks like she wants to interrupt but he shakes his head and she closes her mouth. “You being out in the field… It scares the hell out of me, Felicity. I know you want to be able to protect yourself, and I know I can’t always be there… But I made this your life, and if something happened to you-”
“It would be because I made a choice,” she interrupts firmly. “I made a choice, too. I chose to get involved in this just as much as you chose to involve me, and I won’t have you adding me to your stack of things to feel guilty about.”

It takes him a moment, but eventually he nods in acknowledgement and grudging acceptance of her words. At this point, he’s grateful she hasn’t taken offence to the overprotective undertones of a moment ago. If this had been last month, she probably would have, and he takes it as a sign that she’s slowly getting better at dealing with the issues stirred up by talking about her father. They need to work on the whole open communication thing a little more, though. He doesn’t want her keeping things from him because she’s afraid of how he’ll react.

“I will *always* try to protect you, Felicity,” he tells her, making sure to inject every ounce of emotion he has into the sentence.

His hands come up to cradle her face and he takes in the darkening of her eyes before her lips are on his. It’s an apology and a promise all in one, her lips moving soundly over his and her fingers raking into his hair. He allows his hands to fall from her face so his arms can wrap around her waist, deepening the kiss. They stumble with the sudden intensity of it, Felicity’s back hitting the door behind her. He brings one arm up to brace himself so he doesn’t fall against her, palm hitting the door beside her head. She gasps at the impact and he uses the disconnecting of their lips to trail his down her jaw and neck, cataloguing the way her fingers clench in his hair at specific spots. When his lips find hers again, the hand that’s not in his hair trails down his chest, leaving a path of fire through the thin fabric of his white button down. His own hand slips beneath the edge of the shirt he hadn’t noticed had pulled out of her skirt, grazing the skin of her back.

They’re interrupted by the sound of the ringtone that disturbed their first kiss. He starts to pull back, knowing she’ll want to take the call, but she surprises him again by shaking her head and making a disgruntled noise of disagreement in his throat as he does, grabbing his neck with both hands to pull him back to her.

“She can wait,” she mutters against his lips before pulling his bottom lip between her teeth. He presses his body more firmly against hers.

Before they can progress any further, though, his phone joins the chorus. The songs clash against each other, effectively ruining the atmosphere. He pulls away to frown in the direction of his phone, confused.

“What is *that*?” He asks, turning back to her with a raised eyebrow.
She bites her swollen bottom lip with an overly innocent glint in her eyes and he tamps down on his desire to kiss her again. “I may have changed your ringtone when I was bored in the meeting today.”

He rolls his eyes at her good naturedly but can’t summon irritation. The phones fall silent simultaneously, but they both remain where they are, waiting for them to start back up. As if on cue, Felicity’s ringtone blares from across the room closely followed by his own. He ducks his head briefly, letting out a huff of amusement and glancing up at her without bringing his head back up.

It doesn’t surprise him to see Thea’s name lighting up his call display. She always has the best timing.

He wakes up on the couch the next morning, the familiar weight of Felicity sprawled on his chest. He looks down at where her head rests on his chest and can’t repress a soft smile while his fingers lightly trace patterns along her back. Waking up to her is quickly becoming his favourite thing, and his nights are growing less stressful the longer she stays. They’re far from nightmare free, but he rarely jolts awake and never thrashes about anymore. It’s almost as though his mind recognizes the feel of her body on his even in sleep and remains still to avoid disturbing her. She may not be able to outlast him, succumbing to sleep first each night, but she is helping to make what little sleep he gets more restful whether she knows it or not.

After their respective phone calls last night the charged atmosphere all but disappeared, leaving them to change into more comfortable clothing and curl up on the couch as usual, talking about everything and nothing all at once. She told him about MIT, and he shared a couple less crazy stories about his short-lived university days. He’s never realized exactly how little he really knew about her past until she started filling in the blanks. They were always more concerned with the present, which was something he appreciated until he realized it was limiting them.

Felicity never outright asks about his past, preferring to judge him by the man he is today. He still feels compelled to share pieces of it with her, though, and not just because he feels the need to return the favour. He wants her to know him, not just the man who wears so many masks, but who he was and who he is, and how he got here. Not the gory details, of course, but the sentiment remains the same. He wants to know the same about her.

She stirs, inhaling deeply and mumbling, “You’re staring.”

“I am,” he replies, unabashed.
She lifts her head, propping her chin on a fist to look up at him. Her lips curve up at the corners and he can’t help but return the expression. “Hi,” she says quietly.

“Hi.”

She takes another moment before she pushes herself up into a sitting position, his arms falling from around her waist as she does. “I should… go get dressed. I’ll be back.”

He nods as she makes her way to the door, sitting up just as she swings the wooden barrier open and stopping short. He frowns as she stiffens, eyes going wide and mouth opening and closing twice in shocked mortification. He’s just about to get up and see what’s got her so freaked out when she manages to find her voice.

“M-Mrs. Queen,” she stammers, “I-um- you startled me.”

He’s up and heading for the door at twice the speed once he realizes what’s probably about to happen.

“I was… just about to knock,” his mother’s carefully controlled voice sounds from the other side of the door. He can’t see her, but he can imagine the calculated, vaguely inquisitive look she’ll have once he can.

“Um… wow. This probably looks really bad…” Felicity mutters, and he can sense her panic growing as he comes up behind her.

He’s pulled a t-shirt on in the time it’s taken him to cross the room, but his mother’s gaze still shifts between them, trying to discern what is going on. They’re both fully dressed, though they probably look as though they’ve just woken up, especially considering they’re still in their pajamas. Before Felicity can start in on what would surely be an entertaining ramble, Oliver lays his hands on her shoulders and hears her mouth snap shut. His thumbs rub over the skin left exposed by her tank top soothingly as he forces a smile for his mother.

“Mom, what are you-” He starts, but with perfect timing, as always, Thea chooses that moment to exit her bedroom.
Taking in the scene before her, his sister grins and approaches them with far too much pep in her step. “Oh good, Mom, you’re meeting Ollie’s Felicity!”

Moira turns to face her daughter with a raised eyebrow while Felicity’s face turns completely red.

“You know, they keep telling me they’re still getting their footing and testing the waters, and yet I’m pretty sure your Super should have fixed that pipe by now,” Thea continues, giving Felicity an innocent look.

Felicity flushes even more, if that’s possible.

“That’s my fault,” Oliver jumps in. “I wanted her to stay a few more days just to make sure there aren’t any problems.”

“Right, and we all know how persuasive my brother can be,” Thea returns, grin widening. He shoots her a hard look.

“I’m just going to, uh, go…” Felicity stutters, “Leave you three to, uh, do whatever it is you came here for.”

Before any of them can say anything, she’s ducking her head and scurrying off to the room where her suitcase still resides. He had her clothes sent with his to the cleaner’s, and had Digg grab a few more things from her apartment since, but he’s expecting her to launch a complaint about the excessive amount of time she’s spent here any day now. This will likely be the catalyst.

“I came to see if you’d join us for breakfast, but I see now why you’ve been absent the past few weeks,” his mother says, drawing his attention back to the older woman. He can’t tell if her voice is disapproving or not.

“It’s been busy at the company lately. A lot of early mornings and late nights,” he explains.

“Late nights indeed,” Moira comments, revealing her tone to be one of disapproval. “I know you’re a grown man, Oliver, but your secretary?”
Oliver bristles, but surprisingly it’s Thea who beats him to Felicity’s defence. “First of all, Executive Assistant. Secondly, it’s not like that, Mom. Well, it is, but it’s serious, and Felicity’s good people. She’s not some gold-digging slut. I checked her out.” Thea punctuates her last sentence with a wink at her brother and he suppresses the urge to roll his eyes.

His mother turns her attention back to him curiously.

“Felicity has been there for me since I got back,” he tells her sincerely. “We’ve grown very close. She’s… remarkable.” He can’t help the soft up-twitch of his lips as he speaks.

His mother studies him for another minute before sighing. “Well, I can’t begrudge you your happiness. So long as you know what you’re doing.”

His smile widens. “For the first time in a long time, I know exactly what I’m doing.”

“If you’re going in there, I want to know more about Isabel,” Oliver tells her once they arrive at the foundry. Digg and Sara are nodding along, backing him up. “I want to know where she could have met the Ghost, why she was on the List, what her relationship was to my father, everything.”

Felicity swallows heavily. “You sure you really want to open that last can of worms?”

He looks at her for a second before nodding once. It doesn’t matter what he does and does not want to do. If she’s inserting herself into the middle of this he needs to make sure they’re at least armed with every piece of knowledge they can be. So, while she’s compiling the data obtained from her previous searches and cross-checking it with everything else to come up with a timeline, he’s going to talk to his mother.

He finds her already at the restaurant for the lunch they planned that morning and leans down to kiss her cheek before taking the seat across from her. They engage in the necessary small talk before she leans forward on her elbows, smiling.

“So, tell me. How long have you and Felicity been…?”
He pushes down the natural instinct to get defensive. “It’s been about a month. We’re… keeping it private for now.”

“You said she’s been there for you since you got back. When did you meet?” His mother asks, studying him curiously.

For her sake, he indulges her. She has no way of knowing what he plans to ask, so the least he can do is humour her with details of his life before this gets too uncomfortable. “We met shortly after I got back. I, uh, spilled a latte on my computer and Walter recommended I take it to her. There was… something about her. I just kept going back with questions. I guess she made me feel like it was possible to move forward from everything that happened on the island, and I liked that. It just… took me a while to see that I wanted to move forward with her.”

“And she became your EA because…?”

He chuckles. “She was not happy about that. She tore me a new one, but, well, like I said. She’s remarkable. I needed someone I could trust, and I managed to look pathetic enough that she took pity on me.”

His mother smiles softly. “She clearly means a lot to you.”

“She does,” he responds. He gives it a minute before finally broaching the topic he wants to. “Mom, I need to ask you… what exactly went on between Isabel and Dad?”

Moira looks appropriately startled. “Oliver, what… We talked about this.”

“You told me I was right not to trust her, but I get the feeling you know more than you let on. Please, Mom. I need to know everything there is to know before she makes a move.”

For a moment, she looks as though she’ll deny him, but then she glances around to ensure they have as much privacy as they can get before leaning further across the table. She speaks in a low voice. “Like I told you, we met her at a charity event years ago. Your father… he was impressed by her. They had quite the spirited debate that night, and by the end of it he was determined to hire her. I didn’t share his enthusiasm, but Malcolm did.”

“Malcolm?” Oliver interrupts, dread settling in his stomach. This wasn’t going anywhere good.
Moira nods. “The two of them got into a competition of sorts, trying to see which company she’d rather work for. I’m inclined to believe she would have come to QC, but thank heavens Stelmoor had her sign a contract with a non-compete. She couldn’t leave for three years, and if she chose to break the contract, she couldn’t accept a position at a competing company for five years. By the time her three years were up… well, your father was gone and Walter wasn’t so willing to welcome her with open arms. I’m not sure Robert would have been, either, given the way his attitude had changed toward her. He had nothing but good things to say about her up until she fell in with Malcolm. Sure, he was eager to introduce the two but they got along rather better than I think he expected.”

“What are you talking about?” Oliver prods, sensing she’s still holding something back.

She stalls, taking a sip of her water and smoothing her napkin before sighing. “When Robert first told me about the Undertaking… I was appalled. He was on board, at first, but when Malcolm revealed his plan for the collapse of the Glades… That was when he came clean. I urged him to go to the authorities, to put a stop to it, and he told me he would after he got back from your trip. When Malcolm came to me in the days following your disappearance and threatened Thea… I had no choice but to go along with him. When I went to that first meeting…” She pauses, drawing in a shaky breath. “Isabel was there.”

“Isabel was part of the Undertaking?” He feels like his world has shifted again. He was expecting an admission of an affair, not participation in a plot to murder thousands of people. Though, at this point, should he really be surprised?

His mother nods. “She was lower level, but she was involved. I’m not sure for how long. I know she worked in Stelmoor’s Russian office for a year about two years before you disappeared, but she came back for that last year and I assume she got in with Malcolm then. I think that’s what caused her falling out with Robert. He had this idealized notion of her and when she fell in so deep with Malcolm…”

She doesn’t continue, but Oliver doesn’t need her to. Instead, he reaches out, squeezing her hand in silent comfort.

The three of them look appropriately taken aback by the news when he returns. Felicity adds the information to the timeline she’s been working on and Oliver surveys her handiwork while she heads back to the computers. The larger screen that he’s never seen the purpose of until this very moment holds an electronic timeline. Everything from Isabel’s birth, to her adoption in America, to her attempt to take over QC. She transferred to the Russian office two years before the *Gambit* went down, just as his mother mentioned. That date coincides with the year Leonov told them Svalov’s
daughter reunited with her father. So Isabel met his father and Malcolm, got involved with them, went back to Russia and found her father, and then came back to Starling City a year later. Somewhere in her life she met the Ghost and developed enough of a relationship with him to bring him into the mob operation, either before or after he spent his time with the League.

Oliver is guessing the former, since he had to have trained with the League during the time Oliver was on the island or slightly before. It’s the only way it makes sense unless the deal was for more than ten years of service, which doesn’t seem plausible. When he confirms with Sara, she tells him that, according to the League, the Ghost had a four year debt. So Isabel had to have met the Ghost sometime between her adoption and her return to Russia for it to fit. Which meant he took time off from Isabel’s operation to train. Or that she sent him to Nanda Parbat. Which she would have learned about from Malcolm Merlyn.

He can’t keep up with it all.

“So,” Felicity grabs their attention, standing and making her way to the timeline, “We’ve got Isabel Rochev from birth to QC mapped out as well as I can. Born to Irina Rochev and Viktor Svalov, she was given up for adoption by her mother, who claimed not to know who the father was. My searches finally turned up the birth certificate with no father listed. At the age of ten, she was taken in by an American couple in Central City. They divorced soon after but still gave her really expensive, billionaire level private education- no offence- and she was a model student. She got straight A’s and graduated early, attending Harvard business school and once again graduating early. She spent her summers interning at various companies, eventually taking a job with Stelmoor and moving to Starling where she presumably met your father and Malcolm Merlyn. She went to the Russian office for a year, came back for another year right up until the whole yacht incident. Interestingly enough, she applied to work at QC after the three years your mother mentioned were up but Walter passed her over. Instead of sticking around, she went back to Russia. She stayed there full-time, but made frequent trips back to Starling for ‘business’. Viktor Svalov died six months after her return and she presumably took the reins. She kept a low profile in Russia until she showed up here, trying to take over QC.”

“Are there any consistent known associates during the time leading up to her first Russian exchange?” Digg asks, crossing his arms as he studies the screen.

Felicity shakes her head. “None that I could find. However she met the Ghost, they weren’t very public about their… whatever. But Oliver’s right. She had to have met him in either Central or Starling City. It’s the only way it makes sense.”

“So we’re thinking this guy is American then?” Digg clarifies. Felicity nods. “Ok, this may not be a very popular opinion, but what about your friend Connor?”
Felicity stiffens. “What about Connor?”

“No,” she repeats. Oliver can tell she’s wracking her brain for any plausible support to continue denying it. “It doesn’t fit. Connor’s a year younger than I am, and he came to QC after Isabel left the US. There’s no way they could have met. Unless…” She bites her lip. “Connor went to Harvard.”

Oliver stills, watching as pieces fall into place and her face drops.

“I always got the impression the Ghost was… older,” Sara chimes in. “It doesn’t sound like this Connor guy fits.”

“He could be lying about his background,” Digg points out. “Maybe he’s older than he told you. There could be any number of possibilities. If he’s the Ghost, he could have fooled a background check.”

Felicity hesitates before nodding. “I’ll, uh, look into it.”

“It makes sense that he’d know you, Felicity,” Digg tells her.

Oliver shrugs, wanting to give her some hope. “Not necessarily. Sara said he wasn’t supposed to harm civilians, so maybe he thinks he’s helping her by trying to get her out.”

“But he’s been watching her since she joined us at least,” Digg counters.
“Or maybe he was watching the Arrow and saw when we brought Felicity in.”

“Either way,” Felicity cuts across their argument, “I’ll check into Connor, if only for the purpose of elimination.”

It seems she considers the matter resolved, spinning back around to face her computers again. Oliver wonders if their first conversation about Connor is replaying in her head, like it is in his. He desperately hopes that Felicity can prove Connor’s innocence, at least in being the Ghost. No matter what they find, Connor still betrayed her, but to find out he’s been stalking her on top of it all… Oliver isn’t sure there’s a good way to respond to that.

She’s quiet for the rest of the weekend. Too quiet. Usually, she’s filling the silence that stretches between them with her rambling and chatter but of the four of them she manages to talk the least. It worries him, though he gets the feeling she wants space while she tries to discern whether one of her friends is secretly an assassin. So instead of pushing like he wants to, he contented himself with small brushes of her arm and squeezes of her shoulder in passing. He wants her to know he’s there when she’s ready to let it all off her chest.

She manages to stay composed until Monday morning. When they’re readying to send her into Isabel’s office she starts to show the first signs of nervousness. They haven’t quite made it out of the car yet, but her hand is tapping nervously on her knee as Digg pulls into the underground garage. Without thinking about it, he reaches out and lays a hand over hers, stilling the anxious movement. Her eyes fly to his abruptly. Apparently she hadn’t realized she was doing it.

“You’re going to be fine,” he tells her, forcing a smile. He can’t summon the real thing when she’s priming to head into the middle of the storm.

She forces a smile back. “I know. I just…” She swallows heavily. “I know.”

“Digg and I will be listening the whole time,” he continues, referring to the comm the men forced her to wear. She wasn’t too happy about it at first, but conceded when she realized it might actually be nice to have them with her.

Her smile becomes a tad more genuine and she brushes the hair she left down to conceal the device over her shoulder. She teases, “Don’t take anything I say too seriously. And please, if I start to
He chuckles, promising to do just that before pressing his lips quickly to hers. She takes a couple of deep breaths to calm herself before nodding confidently.

Preceding him out of the car, she straightens her shoulders and mutters, “Time to convince Isabel I’m a vindictive gold-digger.”

He and Diggle are left to stare after her, wondering what exactly she’s planning to say.

“Ms. Smoak,” Isabel’s voice sounds cold yet resigned. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“I figured,” Felicity responds. Oliver can almost imagine her clenching her hands in front of her. “Can I sit?”

It doesn’t sound like an actual question, and before Isabel can reply he hears shuffling, indicating Felicity went ahead and sat. Oliver rethinks his mental image of the nervous blonde. She sounds confident.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” Felicity says. He imagines Isabel has been stunned into silence at the transformation of his somewhat timid blonde EA. “You tried to break into the QC database Friday night using my administrator codes.”

“Did I?” Isabel’s voice sounds impressed and vaguely amused.

“I want in.” Felicity sounds sure and demanding. “Whatever you’re planning, I want in on it.”

Isabel laughs. “What exactly do you think I’m planning?”

This time Felicity laughs, although it’s got a more condescending tone to it. “Isabel, I’m not dumb. You know that. There’s only one reason to access the database using someone else’s admin codes. You’re doing something below the belt, and I want in.”
“You have no idea what you’re talking about, Felicity.”

“Oh, I have a better idea than you think. You’re trying to make a move against Oliver.”

“And why would his ever-loyal secretary be interested in playing along if I was?” Isabel scoffs. “If you think I don’t see right through this, you’re dumber than you look. Oliver thinks I’ll trust you so you can turn on me? I don’t think so.”

Felicity snorts. “You really think he’s smart enough to think something like that up? I haven’t said a word about your… extracurricular activities this weekend. I could, though.”

“You’re not fooling me, Felicity. I see the way you two look at each other. There’s no way you’d turn against him.”

“Then I must be a better actress than I thought.” Even though he’s prepared for Felicity to take this to the extreme, the words still cause his stomach to drop. They’re said with such cold precision accompanied by the faintest hint of amusement and they sound so real he almost believes them. “Do you have any idea how long I’ve been building this? Ever since that first time he came to my cubicle I saw my opportunity, but I couldn’t just come right out with it now could I? Oliver Queen may be uneducated, but he can see through bullshit a mile away. I mean, my reaction the first time was genuine enough, but then I decided to play the charade up a little.” He hears the clicking of heels and imagines Felicity has risen, walking around the office as she talks. He chances a glance at Digg, who looks mystified at the ease with which Felicity is currently lying through her teeth. “I had to be the perfect picture of genuine. I had to get the right balance: not too naïve, not too… single-minded. Just a hint of attraction and a lot of awkward. I imagined he’d find it refreshing, endearing even, and I was right.

“Well, not completely right. I got a little more friend-zoned than I’d intended, but that became an asset rather than a hindrance. Did you know he wired me money after he took off last year? I was in this for the short-term at first, the easy score, but once we’d built up a trust… well, who am I to slap the hand that feeds me? Being the trusted friend brings a far longer pay day than the flavour of the week ever would.”

“You’re telling me it’s all an act?” Isabel asks, her voice doubtful. “What makes you think I buy any of this?”

“The fact that I’m even telling you, for starters. You could run to Oliver and tell him every word.
Hell, you’re probably recording me right now. Why would I say anything that could be used against me so thoroughly?"

“You do have a point. It was stupid to say any of that.” Isabel pauses. “You’ve been a thorn in my side since the day I came to QC. You brought Oliver back right when I was poised to take over the company, and yet now you want to help me. Why?”

“Maybe I did feel genuine friendship for Oliver at one point,” Felicity sighs. “But I know when to cut my losses and change teams. Besides, you need me.”

A disbelieving laugh sounds over the comm. “I need you?”

“Well I did give you a fake trail to the database. You need me to get the real one.”

“You realize I can charm your supervisor into showing me if I needed to, right?”

“No, you couldn’t. Fun fact, Isabel: Dave has no clue how to access the database. Sure, he has the codes, but so do you and Oliver. Having them means nothing. Dave is useless. He’d always have me access the database for him whenever issues cropped up. Face it. I’m your only option.”

“Who says I don’t have my own computer savvy friend to figure it out?”

“The fact that you followed my fake trail in the first place. I designed the database, Isabel, and, contrary to public belief, I’m the only one who knows how to properly access it. You need me to take down the company, and I want a piece of whatever you’re getting for it. I won’t hang around to be dragged down by the sinking ship that is Oliver Queen. Pun intended.”

He flinches despite himself. Never has he expected Felicity to be capable of such cruelty, and he has to forcibly remind himself that it’s all an act.

Isabel’s laugh is slightly more genuine. “Even if what you’re saying is true, I would be foolish to trust you.”

“Oh, I’m not asking for you to trust me. You can doubt me all you want. It doesn’t change the fact
that I have what you need, and you are poised to get what I want. Think of it as a business transaction.”

“I’m going to want assurances of your loyalty to me if we are to proceed, of course.” Isabel says after a pause.

“Of course,” Felicity responds smoothly.

“So I’ll be using your codes to access the database.”

Another laugh from the blonde. “You think I’m that stupid? I already changed my admin codes over the weekend, Isabel. I’m not going down for this any more than you are.”

“And how do you expect me to believe you aren’t working for Oliver if you won’t put yourself at risk?”

“I can still prove that without giving you my codes.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” Isabel asks.

Felicity allows the silence to sit for a brief moment before she tells her. “I’m going to give you Oliver’s.”

Diggle moves silently around the room, sweeping for bugs and cameras with the device Felicity gave him the night before. Oliver says nothing, having taken out the comm when she stepped into the elevator. Her breathing had quickened the second she’d been out of Isabel’s presence and he felt like she probably wanted a moment to compose herself without anyone listening in. Instead, he watched his friend and partner work through his office and hers, making sure Isabel couldn’t hear or see them.

“Remind me never to get on Felicity’s bad side,” Digg remarks when he re-enters the office, giving the all clear.
Oliver simply nods, still trying to process everything they overheard. The last time he heard Felicity’s voice that cold she was referring to her father. He wonders vaguely if that’s how she managed to pull that performance out, followed on the heels by worry that it’s only compounded the effect of everything else going on right now. The last thing she needs is more emotional baggage to deal with in addition to the potential that Connor may not be as innocent as he appeared.

He rises when the sound of the elevator doors opening reaches his office. Felicity seems mostly calm by the time she enters, save for the faintest touch of anxiety around the edges of her eyes.

“That was… quite the performance.” The compliment is hesitant, and her lips twitch in response to it.

“Thanks. Think she bought it?” She asks, looking to each of them in turn.

“I think that if we hadn’t known it was an act going in…” Digg trails off, shuddering. “I pity the man who crosses you.”

The previous twitch of her lips grows into a cheeky smile. “As you should. I actually put one of my ex-boyfriends on the federal watch-list once,” she admits, laughing to herself at the memory. “Every time he tried to get on a plane they pulled him aside to search him.”

Digg laughs. “Yet another reminder that I should steer clear of your bad side.”

When the other man leaves to get the car for lunch, Felicity turns to him, bottom lip trapped between her teeth. He’s just finishing up a few signatures when she leans back against his desk, placing her hand over his where it holds the paper in place. The pen stills immediately and he looks up at her.

“I’m sorry I was so harsh. Especially about the whole shipwreck thing. But I had to be callous and… that was the best way I could think to do it.”

He gives her a tight smile. “I knew what you were going for.”

She sighs, pulling her hand back to run her fingers through her hair. “I should have warned you.”

He catches her hand when it drops back down, pulling her attention to him. “Felicity. It’s fine.”
He holds her stare until she finally nods in acceptance and squeezes his hand. Digg chooses that moment to text him, letting him know the car is ready. When they exit the elevator, they spy Isabel in the lobby, watching them with her usual calculating look. Felicity tenses, turning her head to shoot the other woman what he can only imagine is a rather cold look. He turns his head to feign oblivion to the exchange, hoping that they sort this out quickly.

He was right about Felicity wanting to return to her apartment, she just took a little longer to broach the subject than he expected. Monday night, she finally manages to convince him to accompany her so she can pick up more clothes. He flat out refuses to let her return on a more permanent basis.

“I mean, I appreciate Digg grabbing some stuff, but guys know nothing about fashion,” she tells him in the elevator. He knows she’s referring to Digg’s inability to pick out shoes to her satisfaction and fights a smile. “I’ve been staying at your place for like a month now, too. More specifically on your couch. Isn’t that a little excessive?”

He doesn’t respond since she already knows his rationale backwards and forwards. He won’t leave her on her own, and the Mansion has more security. It’s sound logic, though why they’ve been sleeping on his couch has no real reason behind it. There is a bed not even four feet from his couch, yet they’ve never once slept there. Maybe it’s some weird barrier they’ve constructed against going too fast. It can’t be too comfortable for her, but she’s always brushed him off when he brought it up. Once she went on a very entertaining tangent about not wanting to take using his naked chest as a pillow for granted.

She’s still muttering about how her apartment could have been burgled or her lease cancelled for all she knows as she unlocks the door. He stops her before she can step inside, though, entering before her to make sure it’s clear. It’s an instinct he’s never been more grateful for as he spies the shadow sitting on her couch.

Before the person can react, Oliver is across the room, shoving him against the wall by the throat. Felicity follows a few seconds later, flicking on the lights in panic.

“Who the hell are you?” Oliver grits out, tightening his grip.

The man coughs against the pressure, and it takes Oliver a second to understand that he’s trying to laugh. “I’m the person you’ve been looking for.”
“You’re the Ghost.”

The man’s eyes shift past Oliver to settle on the only other occupant of the room. “Hello, Felicity.”

“Don’t,” Oliver warns, shifting his gaze to make sure Felicity’s still unharmed. He does a double take and almost drops his hold on the man when he sees her face. She’s completely pale, eyes wide with confusion and panic.

When she finally speaks, her voice comes out as a strangled whisper. “…Dad?”

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so now I have some explaining to do. When I started this, I had no intentions of it going this far. It wasn't until around chapter 3 that the grand plan formed. As it is, hindsight is 20/20. Had I known how big this would get, I would have rotated POV from the start. That said, I am going to start introducing pieces of Felicity's POV starting next chapter, for obvious reasons. Hopefully this doesn't detract from the story in any way.
Chapter 16

She’s pretty sure she stopped breathing about ten seconds ago and she isn’t sure how to start again. Everything seems to be moving sluggishly and her head is spinning and her ears are ringing and this isn’t happening. This is some sort of trick, or a dream… That’s it. This is a dream. She’s dreaming and soon she’ll wake up on Oliver’s couch as she always does (they really need to talk about sleeping in a bed like regular people) and everything will be normal. Because this? This isn’t normal.

Her father is dead. Her father killed himself. Her father took his own life like the selfish bastard he is. He left them to grieve and struggle along without him. He left them to try to figure out how to survive without him for six years. He can’t be alive. Because what kind of father, what kind of person, does that? She may not have liked her father by the time he died, but she knows he couldn’t be capable of something like this. Could he?

She’s never wrong about much (one of the side effects of being a rather intelligent person), but she gets the sinking feeling she’s wrong about that. If this was a dream, she would have woken up by now. She wouldn’t still be standing here trying to make sense of the sight before her. No, her body would have already rejected the dream and she would be slowly coming back to awareness. But she’s not, which means that Oliver really is pinning her father to the wall by the throat. It means her father is currently in her living room, greeting her as if nothing is amiss. It means her father is really alive.

“Felicity?!” Oliver’s voice is loud and sharp, bringing her focus back to reality. He’s still got her father against the wall, but the older man doesn’t bat an eye at the situation.

“I-” She falters, her voice hoarse. It sounds foreign to her ears as she takes an unconscious step forward. “What…?” She stops again, brow furrowing as she tries to make sense of it all. “How is this possible?”

She isn’t looking at Oliver, her gaze solely focused on the man who raised her, the man who claimed to love her. Try as she might, she can’t wrap her mind around this.

“I imagine you have questions,” her… father says gently, “And I intend to answer them. But first…” He trails off, indicating Oliver.

She shakes her head sharply at his unspoken request. “No. He stays exactly where he is.”
Oliver has remained silent since regaining her attention, but now he looks at her with confusion and concern. How he manages to focus on her while simultaneously subduing her… her father (she’s never going to get used to that) is beyond her. She can multitask with the best of them when it comes to computers and technology, but the physical side of multitasking has never been her friend. She’s prone to tripping or running into people or… why is she thinking about this?

“Felicity, I’m not a threat. I’m your-”

She cuts him off. “My what? My father? The one who, up until ten minutes ago, was dead to the world? That one? Excuse me if that doesn’t exactly encourage me to trust you.”

He sighs. “You’re right. You have every right to be angry and to distrust me, but we need to talk and we need to do it alone.”

Oliver growls, literally growls, at the older man. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her father gets a gleam in his eye then, and Felicity’s stomach plummets. That has never meant anything good. The man turns to her, a smirk playing on his lips. “If you insist. I came to talk about Isabel.”

Felicity’s sharp intake of breath brings Oliver’s eyes back to hers. If they’re going to stay under the radar, they need to act as though Oliver knows nothing about Isabel. Her father’s got her beat.

“Oliver, can you give us a moment, please?” She finally asks, stomach churning.

“What’s he talking about, Felicity?” Oliver asks, playing along after a second.

“It’s nothing. Just… I’ll fill you in later, alright? Can you just excuse us for a moment? My suitcase is on the top shelf of my closet,” she tells him, insinuating that she in no way wants him to leave her apartment.

He studies her for a moment longer before nodding once and stepping back from her father. The man rubs dramatically at his throat and she rolls her eyes. Once Oliver is safely in the bedroom, she turns to face the man who once looked her in the eye and told her he’d never leave her. She’s been hating him for that lie for the past six years, but she feels fresh hatred boil to the surface staring at him now. He didn’t just kill himself. He didn’t jump in front of a train to end his suffering. He left. He chose to
live without them, because he thought it would get better. *They* were the true source of his misery, and he wasn’t even brave enough to admit that.

“You… you look good, Flick,” he tells her softly, smiling. “Despite your choice of friends, you’ve done well for yourself.”

“Talk,” she snaps, crossing her arms. “And don’t call me that.”

He concedes to her demand, holding his hands up in surrender. “I didn’t want you to find out this way, but I had to see you. I had to talk to you.”

She scoffs, moving to the other side of the room to distance herself from him. “And what would have been the best way for me to find out, huh?”

“Listen, Felicity, I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but you’re in over your head with Isabel. You need to back out now, while you still can.”

Her father knows. Right. Of course he knows, because apparently he’s the Ghost. He’s been stalking her and sending her and Oliver ominous notes. Though, he’s aware of just how close she is with Oliver, whereas Isabel isn’t quite as sure, and he could blow the whole thing out of the water.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she denies, stalling for time.

“Let’s not play games, Felicity. I’m your father. I deserve more respect than that.”

She actually laughs at that, a deep, cold rumbling in her chest. “Respect? You want respect? You spend years miserable and drunk and finally kill yourself, only to pop back up six years later to say ‘just kidding’ and you expect respect?”

“I’m still your father.”

She fixes him with a hard look. “No, you’re not. I don’t have a father. Now, say what you came to say and leave.”
The longer she stands there looking at him, the harder it is to maintain her calm, controlled façade. Inside, she’s freaking out, mind still trying to frantically piece it all together. But right now she doesn’t have the luxury of trying to sort it all out. Right now all she wants is for him to disappear.

“I did come to talk about Isabel. You forget who you’re talking to. You forget I know everything, even if Isabel doesn’t. Getting involved in this is a bad idea, Felicity, and if I have to expose the true nature of your relationship with both Oliver Queen and the Arrow to keep you out of it, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

“You’d really sell your own daughter out?” She asks, though she knows the answer to that. She’s also seething inside because he’s played her. He gave her hope that he didn’t truly know everything so she’d send Oliver away.

“It’s not selling you out if it keeps you safe,” he responds, taking a couple of steps toward her. She backs up the same amount and he stops his advance.

“You claim to know everything, but did you know that Isabel was planning for me to take the fall for QC’s collapse?” She challenges. “Not exactly staying out of it.”

He bows his head. “Yes, I knew her plan, and I had contingencies for that. I have a fake identity set up for you, a bank account to keep you comfortable. I was going to get you out before the police got hold of you, take you somewhere safe. I still can.”

“You actually think I’d go along with that?” She spits out, rage in the pit of her stomach. “You’d show up on my doorstep and tell me to pack a bag and I’d just go, no questions asked?”

“I had a plan!” He shouts. “I had a way to get you away from all of this. You’re not safe here with Oliver Queen and I can fix that.”

“On the contrary, I’m safest right where I am. With Oliver Queen. I’m not backing out of this. Isabel is a threat to the city and we protect it. She needs to be taken out. If you want to sell me out, go right ahead, but you better be prepared to call off her dogs, because once she finds out I’m as good as dead.”

He flinches, turning his back to her to look out the window. “I know that. It’s why I want you to back out of it yourself. Being my daughter won’t save you from her. It’s a miracle it’s kept her at bay
this long.”

Felicity freezes, feeling the tingling of earlier creep back in. “Isabel knows?”

“Yes.” His answer is simple and to the point, but it raises so many questions she nearly explodes.

She’s beginning to feel overwhelmed again with everything happening at once. Isabel knows. She’s known this whole time. Felicity is starting to feel numb. She wants to go back to the moment she demanded they come to her apartment tonight and take it back. She wants to erase this entire night from existence. She wants… She wants Oliver.

“You need to leave,” she blurts out suddenly, wrapping her arms around herself. Maybe she can hold herself together until he goes. She can’t fall apart in front of him. “I’m not backing out of whatever Isabel’s planning. We’re taking her down, and you can tell her or you can leave it be but I’m not backing out. I don’t care either way.”

Her father turns back to face her, expression softening when he sees her posture. “I know this is a lot to take in. I’ll give you some time and we can revisit this-”

“We won’t be revisiting anything,” she informs him coldly. “I want you out and I don’t want to see you again. If I recall, you seem to have no problem disappearing from my life.”

“I’ll give you some time,” he tells her gently, walking too close to her as he heads to the door.

She doesn’t take a step back, even though she desperately wants to. Instead, she sucks in a deep breath and tells herself he can’t control her anymore. He hasn’t for so long and it’s ridiculous to let him start again just because he’s suddenly alive. Alive. Her father is alive. After six years of thinking the opposite, of hating him for it, she still can’t wrap her head around the simple fact.

The second the front door closes, Oliver is out of the bedroom and standing before her. His eyes reflect his uncertainty of what to do in this situation, and she almost laughs at the thought that this is a new one even for Oliver Queen. Their lives are so ridiculous. It’s out of control; it really is. The desire to laugh grows stronger until she finally refocuses on his face and clamps down on it. Now is not the time. Laughter would be the most inappropriate reaction to this. Instead, she steps into him, wrapping her arms around his neck to pull his body against hers. Everything that just happened is too surreal and she needs to feel grounded again. She needs to regain control of herself. Her face presses into his neck when his arms tighten around her waist and she concentrates on breathing. Everything
“Tell me what you need,” he whispers into her hair, and she nearly breaks. His voice is tender but she can hear the pain he’s in on her behalf. She doesn’t want to be the source of his pain. He has enough already.

Once she feels like she’s gotten herself back under control, she pulls back slightly, trying to decide what exactly comes next. Her father is alive. How? Why?

She focuses on the question she best stands a chance to answer. “I need to go back to the foundry.”

He clearly isn’t expecting that. “The foundry?”

She nods in confirmation, taking a step back from the circle of his arms. “I need to figure out how this is possible.”

“Felicity, you just-” He stops mid-sentence, eyes searching hers before he nods in acquiescence. “Ok. We’ll get your stuff and then go to the foundry.”

She’s been silent since she started packing. Even now, almost at their destination, she hasn’t said a word. She’s completely shut down and closed off from him and he doesn’t know how to help. He has no idea what the protocol is for your… Felicity’s father suddenly coming back from the dead. He’s useless and it’s eating away at him.

When he parks the car she doesn’t seem to notice at first. It takes him a couple of tries to jar her from her thoughts, which he has no doubt are reeling. He remembers the first time he saw Sara after assuming she’d perished in the accident and shudders. This isn’t what he wants for Felicity, and he can’t help but wonder if… He shuts the train of thought down as he follows her into the club. This has nothing to do with him or the life he’s dragged her into. It’s about her, and he knows she’d tell him not to feel guilty about it. Logically, he knows the words are true, but it still nags at him. The ‘what ifs’ associated with his life are too plentiful. Would leaving Felicity out of this have meant she would never have to endure this? They say ignorance is bliss, and Oliver certainly agrees with that statement today. There are no guarantees in life, though, so he needs to stop dwelling on it. Ignorance may be bliss, but there are no guarantees that it’s best.
He expects her to make a beeline for the computers when they reach the bottom of the stairs, as she’s clearly on a mission. It’s a mission of distraction, of keeping herself busy so she doesn’t have to truly think about what this means, but he’ll let her do what she needs to. If that’s to come at the issue from a rational, logical perspective first, he’ll wait her out.

However, Felicity stops short when her foot hits the cement, causing him to nearly run into her. His eyes follow hers and he sees what’s stopped her. Sara is beating a training dummy into submission on the mats. For a second, he wonders if the other blonde’s presence will make Felicity second guess her plan, but when Sara notices them that thought goes out the window. She swipes at her forehead, pushing back hair that’s escaped her ponytail.

“Hey, what are you guys doing back so soon? I didn’t expect you until tomorrow.” If he didn’t know her so well he wouldn’t detect the faintly higher pitch of her voice.

It’s Felicity who speaks in a flat voice as she approaches the other woman. “The Ghost came to see me tonight.”

Sara’s face slips for a fraction of a second before she regains her composure and Oliver frowns. Did she…?

“You knew.” It isn’t a question, but Sara nods hesitantly, opening her mouth as though to offer an explanation.

SMACK!

He starts in surprise as Felicity’s hand makes contact with Sara’s cheek and then comes full circle to clap over her mouth in horror as she gasps. The three of them remain absolutely still, unsure how to proceed. Felicity is staring wide-eyed at the woman she just slapped, while Sara stares back with a look of understanding. She clearly thinks she deserved it, especially given that she could have blocked Felicity if she’d wanted to, which means she knew something before tonight and neglected to share.

“Oh my God,” Felicity finally whispers from behind her hand. “Sara, I’m so sorry. I didn’t-”

“It’s fine,” Sara assures her. Before anything else can be said, she grabs her water bottle and steps off the mats. “I’m going to head out, give you guys some space. You know where to find me.”
Felicity still looks mortified as the door closes behind the other woman. Oliver still isn’t sure what to do. He’s never seen Felicity lash out in a physical manner besides on the training mats, but that’s completely different. He’s sure the action is weighing heavily on her. She’ll see it as giving in to violent impulses within hours of learning her father is still alive. She’ll see it as losing control.

She still hasn’t moved, so he approaches quietly to avoid startling her. Her eyes flick up to his when she feels the warmth of his palms against her cheeks and her hand falls from her lips. She looks at him desperately, pleadingly. “I- I didn’t mean it, Oliver. I didn’t- I don’t know why I did that.”

“It’s ok. Sara will understand. She does understand. You’re in shock.”

He winds a hand around to cradle the back of her head, gently pulling her in against him. Whether she lets him because she wants him to, or because she’s too disoriented to resist, she still leans into him. Her hand splays over his heart while she tries to regain her shaky footing. After a minute, she pulls back again, the resolve once more in her eyes. He now recognizes it as her compartmentalization of the entire thing. She’s acknowledged the presence of weakness and she’s made the decision to push it away, to lock it tightly in her ‘father’ box. The idea brings a frown to his face, and she’s no sooner taken a step in the direction of the computers than he’s catching her hand and pulling her back to him.

“Just… leave that for tomorrow,” he urges. Compartmentalizing this will not help. He would support the casual avoidance of thinking about it for a couple of hours, but ignoring it altogether? He can’t let her do that. “Come here.”

He steps backward onto the mat, pulling her with him. She looks confused until he sheds his jacket and kicks off his shoes, at which point she recoils.

“No.”

“Felicity, you need an outlet.”

“No, Oliver, I don’t. I’m fine.”

He levels her with his best ‘bullshit’ look.

“I’ll be fine,” she amends, stepping backward.
“Hey,” he grabs her attention and her hand. “Trust me.”

She looks seriously conflicted for a long fifteen seconds. Her teeth gnaw at her bottom lip and her eyes dart around the foundry while she tries to make up her mind. There are so many things he wants to say, things he’s sure will convince her, but he needs to let her come to the decision on her own. If she doesn’t she’ll resent him for forcing her into it.

“Ok,” she finally says, jaw set.

She takes her first step onto the mats, kicking her own shoes off and ridding herself of her coat. They aren’t in any semblance of proper workout gear, but at least she wore pants today. He’s keenly aware that this is the first time they’ve been on the mats together, the first time they’ve really engaged in any type of sparring activity. Usually, he lets his Arrow persona take over when he’s training, giving himself completely to the machine he’d become on the island. It’s the most efficient way to fight, ridding oneself of all emotion, but he can’t do that now. He has to keep his head for Felicity’s sake. She doesn’t need the Arrow right now, she needs Oliver.

“So, how does this usually work?” She asks, trying for a bit of humor but falling short.

“Hit me,” he tells her, spreading his arms at his sides.

She snorts. “Like I’ll be able to actually hit you.”

“Try.”

So she does. She lashes out and he evades, she kicks and he dodges, and as the minutes go by something sparks inside her. He can see it in her eyes, the barely controlled rage working its way to the surface while she tries to fight it off. But her body and mind can’t resist simultaneously, and her brain is losing the battle. She’s throwing her anger behind her punches (which are actually quite good, he notes) and with each one, some of the tension leaves her body. They dance around each other, trading blows until finally, after a series of rather wild attacks, Felicity stops and collapses into his chest, sobs finally breaking forth. He’s been expecting it, so he only stumbles a bit when he catches her. His hands move to stroke her hair and rub circles into her back as she trembles against him, tears soaking through his shirt. All he can really do as she mumbles incoherent fragments like ‘why’ and ‘how’ into his neck is kiss the top of her head and hope that it’s somewhat comforting. Eventually, he carries her over to the couch she insisted become a part of the décor down here, maneuvering so she sits on his lap. She curls into him instinctively and he tightens his grip.
At some point the tears stop falling and her breathing evens out. She’s cried herself to sleep. When he looks down at her, gently pushing strands of hair from her face, she looks almost peaceful. His heart aches for her, literally. He didn’t think it was possible for something that cliché to happen in real life, but the sight of her like this actually hurts. Carefully, so he doesn’t jostle her, he lays her out on the couch and retrieves their shoes and coats.

It’s a bit tricky getting through the doors, but once he does the rest is simple. He’s cradling her bridal-style as he ascends the stairs to his room. Thinking they’re out of the woods, he pauses outside his door only to hear the creaking of another one opening up across the hall. He lets his eyes close momentarily before turning to face Thea.

She has a teasing look on her face that drops the instant she sees Felicity’s. “Is she ok? What happened?” His little sister asks immediately, closing the distance of the hall quickly.

“Family thing,” he explains shortly. It’s not a lie.

Without saying another word, Thea steps around him and opens the door to save him the trouble. He shoots her a look of gratitude as he passes her. Her soft, “Take care of her, Ollie,” nearly escapes his hearing. He nods with a soft, grateful smile at her before she closes the door.

It isn’t even a decision to lay her in the bed. They’ve spent so much time on the couch and she needs more than that tonight. She needs to feel safe and secure and… loved. He can give her that.

When he crawls under the covers beside her, she reaches out for him in her sleep. He draws her against his side, her hand immediately falling to rest on his chest like always. A deep, contented breath escapes her lips, and he can almost pretend this is any other night.

At first, all she’s aware of is the warmth of Oliver’s chest under hers, the steady thrumming of his heart soothing the initial disorientation that comes with waking. She flexes her fingers where they rest beside her head and groans in disapproval at the fabric they brush against. The soft rumble of his chest tells her that, not only is he awake, but he heard her automatic protest to his shirt. She would be embarrassed, but she figures at this point it’s no secret how she feels about his shirtless form.

The next thing she’s aware of are the blankets covering them. Her eyebrows puckle, confused. The only blanket she usually wakes up to is the afghan from the back of the couch which Oliver drapes
over them after she’s fallen asleep. And even then she’s usually warm enough in his arms not to need it. But right now there’s a sheet and a duvet laying over her and she has no idea why. Her eyes flutter open to try to discern a reason for the change, and what she finds startles her. They’re in the bed. Oliver’s bed. They’ve never actually slept in the bed before. Why-

And then she remembers. It comes back to her in a rush, slamming into her and knocking the breath from her lungs. She gasps, jolting upright and looking wildly around the room. By the time she focuses on Oliver he’s already at eye level, sitting up and drawing her into his side. His hand rubs along her arm soothingly and her eyes slam shut.

“It wasn’t a dream, was it?” Her voice is weaker than she wants it to be and she almost cringes at the sound.

He sighs, propping his chin on the top of her head and wrapping the other arm around her. She lets herself lean into him. “No.”

He doesn’t try to sugar-coat it with empty platitudes or motivational statements and she’s grateful. She isn’t sure she can handle the ‘everything will be ok’ speech right now. Everything will not be ok. Her father faked his own death and then randomly showed up at her apartment last night playing the concerned parent. Well, except for those couple of moments she caught a glimpse of the man behind the mask, the man who cares only for himself and getting what he wants. In all honesty, he’s probably telling Isabel everything right now. When she walks into Queen Consolidated this morning it could very well be for the last time. Isabel will have already called for someone to solve the Felicity problem by the time she comes up for her morning meeting. She’ll stare her down in that predatory manner and know-

“Hey.” Oliver’s voice, gentle and light, brings her back to reality. “Where’d you go?”

Felicity swallows thickly before shaking her head. “Nowhere.”

“If you’re worried about Isabel…” He trails off, reading her mind as he so often does. Blue bores into blue for a long moment, his hands cradling her face, before he gives her a reassuring smile. “Don’t be.”

She huffs out a laugh. “Easy for you to say. You’re not the one with the target on your back.”

“Technically I think we share that target,” he tells her. She can sense the care in his voice to carry the
light tone of the conversation and breathes a small sigh of relief. He’s letting her get away with ignoring the elephant in the room. Well, the elephant larger than Isabel, at least. Eventually, she’ll have to talk about it, but for right now she just wants to focus on the problems she can actually solve. Like what in her hastily packed suitcase says ‘please don’t murder me, Isabel. I didn’t mean get caught.’

With that in mind, she slides out of the bed and away from his grasp, feeling far too much disappointment at the loss of his warmth. If it were up to her, they’d both call in sick and just stay in the bed all day. It’s a very comfortable bed. But the world doesn’t revolve around her and her messed up family, so she takes a deep breath and heads for the room with the suitcase that was mysteriously brought up at some point between last night and this morning. It’s actually one of the only amusing things about staying at the Queen Mansion. The house itself is enormous and, well, really intimidating, but everything seems to happen as if by magic; one minute it’s there, the next it’s not. The staff are eerily ninja-like as well. They come and go before she even has time to register their appearance.

“Felicity,” Thea’s voice drifts across the hall and Felicity pauses to give her attention to the younger Queen. “How are you feeling? Is everything alright?”

She swallows to stall for time, having no idea what Oliver told his sister. Obviously, she’s been made aware of something happening, but Oliver wouldn’t have told her the whole truth.

Thea seems to sense her distress, drawing her arm around her shoulders and steering them in the direction of the room that’s technically Felicity’s for the duration of her stay. “I saw you get back last night. Ollie mentioned some sort of family emergency.”

She breathes a bit easier. She can work with a family emergency. “Yeah my, uh, my grandmother had a bit of a scare. She, uh, was in an accident last night. She’s going to be fine though. Just got word.”

Thea studies her and for a moment Felicity fears she won’t believe her, but then a smile stretches across her face. “Good. I’m glad.”

“So am I. Obviously. I mean, she’s my grandma. Why wouldn’t I be?” 3…2…1… “Sorry. Still a bit rattled, I guess.”

She smiles nervously as Thea squeezes her in a quick hug before telling Felicity to let her know if she needs anything and then rushing off to breakfast. Thea’s openly tactile nature still takes her by surprise. She’s known the girl personally for little over a month and yet she makes it feel like a
lifetime. In a good way. Definitely in a good way.

Felicity is dressed and ready to go in record time, operating on autopilot as she pulls her hair up and slides her feet into a pair of electric blue heels to match her dress. Funny, how it can feel like a regular day as she applies her bright red lipstick and massages lotion into the exposed skin below her knees. The morning routine feels normal, almost as though her world didn’t tilt on its axis last night. The only difference is the amount of concealer she applies to her puffy eyes.

When she sees Diggle waiting at the front door like usual, she balks. She hasn’t thought about what she’ll say to him. How does one go about explaining that their father has risen from the dead and is working with Public Enemy #1?

The strange look he gives her at her unmonitored reaction spurs her forward, forcing a smile on her face as she walks to the door. “Morning!”

Digg’s eyebrows pull together at her too-chipper tone, but he doesn’t call her on it. At least not yet. Instead, he raises one brow and teases, “Are you ever going to go home?”

She sighs dramatically. “I would, but I fear I’m being unwittingly held prisoner here.”

“Well isn’t that a tragedy,” he remarks drily, following her to the car.

“It is,” she replies solemnly. “I keep waiting for my Prince Charming to come along and save me from the big bad dragon but…” She sighs again.

Digg looks at her, straight-faced, for ten full seconds before busting out the grin. She returns it genuinely before they both turn to see Oliver staring at them with an expression fighting amusement. Climbing into the car, though, the jovial mood abandons her to stare out the window. Oliver tried to get her to take the day off, but she rejected the idea. She wants to keep up appearances. Halfway through the journey to QC, Oliver reaches out and squeezes her hand, pulling it into his lap. The patterns his thumb traces on the back of it soothe her growing nerves and by the time they pull into the garage, she’s calm once more. She knows Digg is confused, but he’s been very understanding about her reluctance to share thus far.

She waits until he’s finished with the now-daily bug sweep of Oliver’s office before she does it. He’s just heading back in, nodding his head with the all-clear when she takes the plunge.
“The Ghost came to visit me last night,” she spits out casually from where she leans against the front of Oliver’s desk, staring at her thumb nail as she picks at it. “Or you know, as I like to call him, Dad.”

She looks up in time to see Digg stop short and stare at her in shock. His mouth flaps open and closed a couple of times before he finally settles on a statement reminiscent of their trip to Russia. “Explain that sentence.”

“Which one?” Mentally replaying the words, she cringes. “Sorry, that sounded way less melodramatic in my head.” She lets her arm fall to her side with a heavy sigh. “But I guess what’s the good of having your father return from the dead if you can’t be melodramatic about it, right?”

He ignores her too-cheerful smile and remains serious. “What the hell happened last night?”

Felicity sighs, abandoning any pretense of humor as she relays the events to him in great detail. She leaves out absolutely nothing, including slapping Sara (which she still regrets), and waits with bated breath for his reaction. She knows it’s crazy, even by their standards, so she understands why it takes him a while to formulate a response.

“So Sara knew about him? And Isabel?” He finally asks.

Oliver rubs a hand over his hair and leans back in his chair. “Isabel does for sure. We’re not positive what Sara actually knows. She knew something.”

“Yeah, something she didn’t share,” Digg snaps. Felicity understands why he’s mad, really, but getting mad at Sara won’t help them right now.

“I want to go talk to her,” she says, drawing surprised looks from both men. Shrugging one shoulder, she explains, “She has information and we need it. She’ll be at the Clock Tower, right?” Oliver nods. “Then we’ll head there sometime in the next couple of days and see what she has to say. Maybe there’s a reasonable explanation for all this.”

Oliver huffs in amusement and she shoots him a questioning look. He merely smiles. “You are remarkable, Felicity Smoak.”

She smiles back slightly. “Thank you for remarking on it.”
Isabel asks her for a follow-up meeting on digital securities after her meeting with Oliver. She does her best not to panic as she agrees to meet the other woman in the afternoon while Oliver is in meetings with R&D. She’s surprised Isabel dared approach her in such a public setting, much less arranged a meeting in the office. Maybe she’s not as doomed as she assumed. Maybe her father didn’t…

She puts a halt to that thought immediately. Of course her father turned her in. He’s a selfish bastard at heart, and letting her collapse Isabel’s organization does nothing for him. Although… he did say he planned to spirit her away in the aftermath of QC’s collapse, so perhaps he does want out. Maybe he hasn’t told Isabel because he realizes he’s made a mistake abandoning them and he wants to make it right. Maybe-

No. She shakes her head to rid herself of the thoughts. She won’t allow herself to go back there. He left them. He’s been dead to them for six years. No man who loves his family does that. He doesn’t want them back, doesn’t want her back. He made that plain when he ‘jumped’ in Shanghai. She can’t let herself be fooled into thinking he cares because he obviously doesn’t. He hadn’t cared for years before he ‘died’ and he certainly doesn’t care years later.

Hold on. Her brain stops in its tracks, rewinding the past thirty seconds of her thoughts to land on ‘Shanghai’. She looks into the office and, seeing Oliver bent over some paperwork for the first time all week, resolves to ask Digg instead. The man is just standing there, after all. May as well be useful.

“Digg,” she calls him over quietly. If Oliver hears, the paperwork will never get signed and Larry from Legal (she loves saying that) will ream her out again. Diggle’s attention pivots to her from where he’s been aimlessly watching their fellow skyscrapers. “Nanda Parbat. It’s in Asia, right?”

Digg nods, pursing his lips. “Tibet, why?”

“My father…” She breaks off, biting her lip. “He supposedly committed suicide in Shanghai.”

“You think he joined up with the League after he faked his death?”

She nods, resting her forearms on the desk. “It’s too close to be a coincidence. We already figured the Ghost was trained while Oliver was on the island. My mom and I… we always wondered why
he would do it in China. He could have just as easily done it here. But getting to Tibet after having faked your death in America would probably be more difficult than if you faked it in China. No international waters to cross. My father was nothing if not efficient.” She lowers her voice in a terrible imitation of the man. “‘If you aren’t taking the fastest route there’s no sense doing it at all, Felicity!’”

“So he fakes his death and then heads to Tibet. But why did he go? Did Isabel force him, or did he volunteer? And why did he even need to go in the first place?”

Felicity sighs. “I have no idea. He was really into punching things the years before he left. Maybe he wanted to try his luck with less stationary objects.”

Digg drops down into a chair across from her and leans forward on the desk. “You said he taught you to shoot, right? Around the same time he started taking an interest in boxing?”

She nods, wondering where he’s going with this. He seems to work the idea over in his mind before voicing it, his lips pursing and his fingers squeezing together.

“Maybe it was all part of the bigger plan. He gets a little disillusioned with the safety of the world and starts trying to teach himself some self-defence, but he needs a more hands-on approach. Maybe Isabel tells him about Nanda Parbat and he decides to go. Maybe she needs him trained to survive a life in the Russian mob. He teaches you to shoot so you can defend yourself before he disappears off the face of the Earth out of fatherly concern.”

She snorts at that. “My father didn’t have any parental concern left in him by the time he disappeared.”

“Fathers always have parental concern,” Digg counters. When she remains silent, he reaches out to cover her hand with his. “Hey, you know you don’t have to hold it all in right? How are you really doing with all this?”

She lets out a humourless laugh. In all honesty, she still feels a little numb. It’s like she knows last night happened, but a part of her still can’t believe it. It’s true but she can’t accept the reality of the situation. But she doesn’t know how to say any of that without babbling in circles, so she settles for, “I’m dealing with it.”

Digg fixes her with a look as though he’s prepared to force her into elaboration, but then the phone
rings. Saved by the dead-end job.
Ok, so here we go again! For the purposes of this story, I’m making Isabel one year younger than Oliver, so she’s two years older than Felicity. We’ll start off in Felicity’s POV for now since she’s having a private meeting, and then head back to Oliver’s POV for a bit. Had I known I was going to go this far, I would have done interchanging POV from the start. I’ve planned to do interchanging POV in the sequel I’m planning to this.

Felicity can’t deny she’s nervous as she waits outside Isabel’s office for their meeting. She isn’t able to wear a comm this time, since her hair is in a ponytail, and she feels distinctly alone. Her phone is on, though, and Oliver insisted on putting a tracker in her skirt pocket. She rolled her eyes at him but indulged his protective instinct nonetheless. She can’t deny it will come in handy if Isabel decides to throw a black bag over her head and drag her off to parts unknown. Not that she would do that in a crowded office building… right?

“Miss Smoak?” The assistant calls, grabbing her attention. Felicity jerks upright. “Ms. Rochev will see you now.”

She nods sharply, heels clicking as she makes her way over to the door. Bracing herself for whatever happens on the other side, she turns the knob and heads into the office.

Isabel is leaning back in her chair, hands forming a steeple under her chin as she appraises her. It’s different from the last time Felicity was here. Last time, Isabel was looking over some paperwork when she opened the door. Last time, she had to convince Isabel to take her seriously. This time, Isabel already knows Felicity Smoak isn’t to be trifled with. The question is just how much she knows about the bigger picture. To determine the answer to that, though, she needs to appear confident, as though nothing has changed between the last time they met and today. At least, until Isabel indicates otherwise.

She moves further into the room without being welcomed, sitting across from Isabel and crossing her legs. “To what do I owe the summons?”

Isabel raises a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “I heard you had a visitor last night.”

Her heart stutters. This is it. “I did.”
“I have to say, I’m not exactly happy your father decided to reveal himself, but now that you know, it’s important we discuss what comes next,” Isabel tells her, pursing her lips.

Felicity nearly stops breathing. Did her father really not tell Isabel? Is she off the hook?

“Everything alright?” Isabel asks, and Felicity curses herself for her transparency before nodding quickly. She mutters something about being a little taken aback by it all and Isabel nods. “Understandable. You thought he was dead until a few hours ago, right?” Felicity nods, and Isabel allows a bit of a superior smirk to grace her features. “If it were up to me, you’d still think that, but I suppose there’s no stopping a man on a mission. I thought I’d convinced him you were better off, but he came back last night and told me he’d paid you a visit.”

“How do you know my father?” Felicity manages to choke out. She isn’t sure she wants to hear the answer, but it’s necessary. If she has to call Isabel ‘Mom’, though, she’s pretty sure she’ll vomit.

Isabel waves a hand. “Not important right now. What is important is that he mentioned Oliver was with you. In your apartment. Care to explain?”

Mind racing, Felicity tries to remain casual. This was so much easier the first time, when her brain wasn’t scrambled. “We’re friends. Friends hang out.”

“That’s not the impression I was given of your… relationship from your father,” Isabel challenges, crossing her arms.

Dammit. Her father may not have sold her out, but he certainly complicated things. Obviously he’s hoping Isabel shuts her out because of this. Well, she wasn’t raised by the man for nothing. Two can play this game. She sets her shoulders. “Turns out I’m not as friend-zoned as I previously thought.”

Isabel quirks an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Felicity shrugs. “Doesn’t mean I’m any less committed to this. If anything, I’m more invested in it.”

“I don’t follow.”
“I told you friendships don’t have an expiration date. Relationships do.”

Isabel considers her answer for a moment before finally nodding. It seems she’s earned some information with her little act. “I met your father when I was a summer intern with his company. My mother wasn’t interested in me and I hadn’t seen my father since the divorce. He sent money but, well, a girl needs a father figure in her life. Yours stepped up, took me under his wing. I appreciated it.”

The memory hits Felicity hard. She’d forgotten about it until this moment. “You’re the one he was talking about. He used to tell us about this intern he thought had a bright future. He wanted us to meet but I kept dodging him.”

Isabel’s look turns sour. “Yes, you did a rather good job at avoiding our introduction. He was always going on about how great you were with computers, how you got that from him. He was so proud, but he was always disappointed you didn’t inherit his business ambitions.”

Felicity tries to contain her frown but fails. Isabel sounds almost… jealous. It’s like she’s trying to belittle the esteem Felicity’s father held for his own daughter, to prove Isabel is better at something. She doesn’t understand the necessity of it, though. Honestly, she’s still trying to wrap her head around Isabel being the girl her father spoke of with such high regard at the dinner table, the girl Felicity will fully admit to being a little jealous of. As much as she and her father didn’t get along as she got older, she still craved his approval. It was why she went on so many of his outdoor excursions. He wanted to broaden her interests from computers and books and, even though they usually ended in anger and tears, she always held out hope that it would be different each time. It never was, and when he started talking about this bright young woman who shared his business ambitions, Felicity couldn’t help the stirring of jealousy in her gut. It was why she refused to meet her. She didn’t want to see the woman her father seemed to understand better than his own daughter. She didn’t want a face to put to the feelings of inadequacy.

Turns out it was Isabel this whole time. She really isn’t surprised when she thinks about it. Isabel is… well, she’s Isabel Rochev. Why wouldn’t she appeal to Felicity’s father? She certainly appealed to Oliver. In fact, there probably isn’t a man alive Isabel Rochev wouldn’t appeal to.

Giving herself a mental shake to clear her suddenly juvenile thoughts, Felicity looks back to Isabel. The brunette’s smile is predatory, like she knows she’s gotten to her. “So what, you have some twisted father/daughter relationship?”

“He’s the closest thing to a father I ever had,” Isabel remarks softly, and Felicity catches the genuine tone of her voice with surprise. “And I’m positive I was closer to the daughter he always wanted
than you. We understand each other. We protect each other. When I asked him to leave you and join
the League for me, he didn’t hesitate.”

It’s a verbal slap to the face and Isabel knows it.

Felicity wastes no time in standing, needing to escape. She’s finding it difficult to breathe. “I should
go. Oliver will be out of his meeting soon. I’ll get his codes by the end of the week and we can go
from there, assuming you’re still interested?”

Isabel grins triumphantly, recognizing the victory. “Yes. For whatever reason, your father insists on
us finding a way to work together. Maybe he hopes it will help us to finally bond.”

Felicity cringes. The last thing she wants is to bond with Isabel Rochev. Judging from the look on
the other woman’s face, she feels the same.

Once in the elevator, she takes two shaky breaths before swiping her ID card to take her to the top
floor. It’s thoroughly unsurprising to see Oliver standing outside when the doors slide open. She
knew he’d cut the meeting short in order to be here when she returned. At this point, she assumes the
entirety of QC just knows meetings will be cut short and plans accordingly.

The smile she puts on is obviously forced, but neither man calls her on it. “I’m still alive,” she tries to
joke. “I don’t think we need to worry about any snipers following me around, either.”

She waits for Digg’s second bug sweep of the day before relating the conversation to the both of
them, Oliver’s hand covering hers where it rests on the couch. It’s ridiculous, but it’s like the physical
contact is willing her to continue, to power through the discomfort. It doesn’t help that she isn’t used
to speaking so openly about her father. For so many years, she’s been repressing the very memory of
the man, making this blatant acknowledgement difficult. But Oliver’s hand is there, grounding her in
reality, reminding her that this is very real. Her father is alive, and he left her for Isabel.

He waits until they’re alone at the end of the day before pressing the matter. He’s sure she’s been
expecting it, judging from the look on her face when he sits beside her on the couch. His hand
brushes her hair behind her ear, arm falling across the back of the couch as it drops from her face.
His knee brushes her thigh as he tucks it up on the couch between them and she sighs, turning to
look at the fire.
“Talk to me,” he says simply. He’ll wait her out all night if he has to, but he won’t let her compartmentalize this. It won’t do her any good.

She blows out a breath before leaning back against the couch, her back brushing against his arm. Her eyes are still focused on the fire when she finally speaks. “I’m not sure what to say. Ironic, right? The girl who can’t stop talking can’t figure out what to say?”

He presses his lips together in a sympathetic smile, but remains silent. There’s nothing he can say that will make this any easier for her, as much as he wishes there was.

“I honestly don’t know what to feel, Oliver,” she says after a moment. The light from the fire flickers over the storm in her eyes, giving her face an eerie glow. “I spent so long hating him for preferring death to us, only to find out that’s not the truth. He didn’t feel desperation for escape from life as a whole. He didn’t think there was no other way. He chose to leave us, and he was too cowardly to tell us to our faces. He was too cowardly to accept our hatred. He’d rather live under the radar in some other part of the world, content with the knowledge that we were grieving for him. He- He watched me; he kept tabs on me. He had to see the struggle we went through after… And he didn’t even care enough to take it all back. He just stayed with Isabel. He left us, left me, for a woman he thought was a better daughter, and it makes me so angry to think that I wasn’t good enough. But-”

Her voice catches and she turns her head to face him, eyes shining. Gently, he reaches out to brush his fingers across her cheek. “But he’s still your father.”

She nods. “He is, and I thought he was dead for so long and now… Now he’s not.” She blinks rapidly, trying to clear the unshed tears from her eyes. Her gaze flits around the room before settling on his knee where it rests next to her leg. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to feel about that. Am I supposed to be angry? Relieved? And what am I supposed to say to my mother? Do I tell her he lied, or do I become a liar myself?”

When she looks up again, she’s lost the battle against her tears. Oliver’s heart clenches as he reaches out to swipe the moisture away and adjusts himself to gather her close to his chest. “I wish I could give you the answers,” he whispers, fingers stroking through her hair.

He really wishes none of this had happened. They should have just passed the case off to Lance when Digg suggested it. They shouldn’t have poked the bear. If he had known the consequences, he wouldn’t have. They would never have discovered Isabel’s intentions, but it wouldn’t have mattered in the long run. Losing his company would have been worth sparing Felicity this much pain. As much as she pretends to be fine during the daylight hours, he can see through the façade she puts up. He knows Diggle can as well, but he also knows neither of them can figure out the best way to deal with it. All they can really do is be around when she’s ready to talk about it, but the waiting kills him. He feels useless, only being able to hold her as she tries her best not to cry.
“You know the worst part of all this?” She mumbles, her voice muffled by the plaid button down he’s changed into.

“How?” He hums, continuing to run his hand through her hair.

“I can’t… I won’t be able to lie to Isabel as well anymore.”

He frowns, pulling back to catch her eyes with his. “What do you mean?”

She bites her lip, eyes falling from his as she searches for the words to explain. “The Felicity Smoak who lied to Isabel… That was the Felicity Smoak my father encouraged me to be before he died. No emotional attachments, no decisions made based on emotions, just an analytical mind looking for the best deal. A business mind. I played the part well for him, but he always knew my heart wasn’t truly in it. He knew I wasn’t the kind of person who could be something like that. Isabel is, and he clearly saw that. I- I don’t know if I can be her with him around. I don’t know if I can channel the anger and resentment I’ve always felt when I’m so confused. I can’t hate him for dying when he’s standing in front of me.”

He brushes her hair back from her face, bringing her eyes back to his. “You don’t have to. A lot has happened; you’re allowed to be confused. Just… talk to me, and to Digg, alright? Don’t shut it all away.”

A watery smile tugs at her lips and she nods, leaning forward to press her lips against his briefly. When she pulls back, it’s only to rest her forehead against his before he closes the distance and returns the gesture more deeply. She hums against his lips in contentment, her fingers spread through his hair.

They stay on the couch, trading kisses, for a while longer before Felicity stifles a yawn. Oliver grins. “Am I boring you, Miss Smoak?”

She smiles down at him from where she’s somehow ended up lying on his chest, hand splayed across his shirt over his Bratva tattoo. Her fingers graze over the area lightly, sending sparks of warmth across his chest as she leans down to capture his lips. “I can say with confidence that you are not boring me.” She stifles another yawn and he chuckles quietly when she groans, dropping her forehead to his chest. “Sorry. It’s just… been a long day.”
“Understandable. We should probably get some sleep.”

She nods, pushing herself off his chest to sit up before turning back to him. “For the record, no matter how comfortable you are, I’m not spending another night on this couch now that I’ve experienced the bed.”

He grins and concedes the point, overlooking her faint flush as what she said registers. Once they’re in the bed, she places her head in its usual spot on his chest. It doesn’t take long for her breathing to even out; she doesn’t even try to stay awake, leaving him to stare at the ceiling.

It’s different, lying in a bed together. She’s been essentially living in the mansion since they got together, and the couch was a way to slow everything down. It kept a bit of a barrier in an effort to contain the rapid pace they seem to have embraced, whether it was an intentional effort or not. Now that they’re sleeping in a bed, it feels startlingly more real. Last night wasn’t quite the same, given Felicity’s emotional condition, but tonight… Tonight Oliver is realizing exactly what this all entails. This will be their life, something that happens every night. It will become routine to brush their teeth and climb into bed together. They’ll each claim a side, and she’ll steal the covers in the middle of the night. He’ll wake up in the morning and see her blonde hair splayed across her pillow, a peaceful expression on her face as the light streams in. And he’ll smile and kiss her awake and she’ll grumble at him for pulling her from her dreams.

He’s startled to realize the trajectory of his thoughts doesn’t scare him at all. In fact, there’s warmth in his stomach growing the more he thinks about it. Somewhere along the way, he stopped fearing relationships and commitment despite all logic. He should want to push her away, not pull her closer, and yet he’s tired of being alone. He’s tired of sacrificing his happiness when she chose to live this life alongside him. Enemies would consider her a weakness whether they’re together or not, and she’s always been one to tell him to start living in the present. It isn’t just his choice, and she’s chosen him. The least he can do is give in to his desire choose her back until she comes to her senses.

The clock tower is silent when they ascend to the top level. It makes Felicity more than a little nervous, but she reminds herself that she has Digg and Oliver for back-up. She didn’t want to inconvenience them, but they insisted they’re a team and thus do things together. They want to support her, and for that she’s grateful. As strong as she’s pretending to be right now, she isn’t sure if she could handle talking to Sara alone.

“You didn’t take as long as I expected,” Sara remarks. She’s standing across the room, looking out into the city, but of course she heard them approach.
“We need answers,” Oliver says when it becomes clear she won’t say anything.

“Truthful ones would be nice,” Digg chimes in, his voice hard and unforgiving. He’s a lot more upset about the whole thing than Felicity can bring herself to be. She just doesn’t have enough room to be angry on top of everything else.

Sara turns, her eyes downcast. “I should have spoken up sooner, but I wanted to be sure before I did. I’m sorry.”

“Just… tell us now,” Felicity urges, taking a step away from Oliver and toward the other woman.

Silence stretches between the four of them, no one willing to break it just yet. Felicity uses it to survey her surroundings, from the plastic hangings to the plywood floors, and wonders why Sara chose this place out of every possibility in the city. When she draws nearer to where the other woman stands, she thinks she may understand. The view from the opening is magnificent. It gives a full view of most of the city, but is still high enough to eliminate the majority of the sounds from the bustling streets below. It’s a good strategic location.

“All I knew about the Ghost before I volunteered to come here was what I told you,” Sara finally says with a deep breath. “He was an asset who owed us a debt and couldn’t be caught. But, well, the League specifically told me he was to be kept away from you, Felicity, and when I asked Nyssa about it before I left… She said that he knew you, but that under no circumstances were you to know that. I knew what that meant. Whoever he was, he didn’t want anyone to know he existed, which meant he had disappeared in the eyes of everyone who knew him.

“When Ollie said he was following you… It was obvious he was contemplating making contact and the League wouldn’t approve of that. The idea of faking your death is to stay dead, after all. If he brought himself into the open he’d outlive his usefulness to us. So I dug a little deeper, made some inquiries about why he was so interested, thinking I could head him off before he did. I thought he’d be an old friend or something until I heard you talking about your father one night. Then I started to think about everything I’d heard about the Ghost: that he was older, that he’d been with the League for six years now, and I started piecing it together. I asked Nyssa and she confirmed it. I was going to tell you; I just had to figure out how.”

Felicity nods, taking it all in. She can understand wanting to be sure before blowing her world to bits. What she can’t understand is not at least giving her a heads up that she knew the Ghost. It would have been helpful to know her stalker was someone she knew.

“When?” Her voice is hoarse. She almost doesn’t want to know how long Sara kept it a secret, but
she needs to know everything. “When did you find out?”

Sara blows out a breath, eyes flicking to the ground before she refocuses on Felicity. “A few days before you did, but I suspected for longer than that.”

That explains why Sara was acting so weird. Felicity doesn’t pretend to know who Sara is or how she acts normally, but the Sara they’ve been working with the past few weeks isn’t the same Sara she first met. This Sara has been cagey and distant, battling with her allegiance to the League and whether that trumps helping them. From what Felicity’s heard in the past few minutes, the League was about to lose. The consequences of that choice are not lost on her. She’s pretty sure blatantly disobeying the League would have some pretty dire fallout. Can she really blame Sara for being conflicted as to how to go about blowing up both of their lives?

Making her decision, Felicity takes another step forward. “Look, Sara, about before, I shouldn’t have-”

Sara cuts her off before she can continue. “It’s fine. I deserved it.”

She shakes her head, reaching out to Sara before thinking better of it and letting her hand drop lamely to her side. “But it wasn’t… It wasn’t right. I’m not that kind of person.”

“Everyone can be any kind of person given the right circumstances,” Sara says simply, her lips twitching in a sad half smile.

The truth of the other woman’s words ring in her ears long after they’ve left the clock tower. Sara promised she was done with the lies. From here on out, it’s complete honesty despite the League’s insistence otherwise. There isn’t really much they can accuse Sara of, anyways, now that her father has revealed himself. That doesn’t stop Felicity from wondering at the true meaning behind her words. She gets the feeling they were as much about Sara, and even Oliver, as they were about Felicity herself. Those five years transformed both of them, turning them into hardened warriors where they were once naïve teenagers. It is, Felicity supposes, the ultimate proof of the power of circumstances. If anyone had asked her seven years ago whether she thought Oliver Queen would one day be a bow and arrow wielding vigilante she would have laughed in their face. Now, she would probably struggle to contain her reaction for fear of giving it away. She may be a good liar, but only when she’s had time to prepare.

The first time she met with Isabel, she’d had the time to get herself ready for what she would need to do. She had time to realize that she’d need to let herself become the Felicity Smoak she tries so hard to forget, and she had time to prepare herself for the feeling of self-loathing that would accompany it.
The circumstances dictated what was necessary, even if that was something she never thought she could do again. The day she bought that box of blonde hair dye, she decided to leave her father and the girl he made her in the dust. She vowed to only see the light, to only think of her father for her mother’s sake. She resolved to be a different person, a *better* person, but circumstances have changed. She can’t be the same girl she was when she was growing up, but she also can’t be the equally naïve young woman who thought she could repress the memory of the man. She has to be both, and she has to figure out how to do that.

She sighs, and the warmth of Oliver’s hand covers hers on the seat between them. She turns her palm over automatically, lacing their fingers together and looking up at him with a small smile. Whatever her struggles, she doesn’t have to tackle them alone.
Alright, here we go! I am so sorry it took me so long! This one’s a bit more plot driven and answering some questions. I wasn’t planning for so much Felicity POV, but it turns out she just kind of took control and is hogging all of the words now…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It takes her three days to work up the courage to confront Connor. Every time she thinks of going down to the IT department, she magically finds something else to occupy her until the end of the day or the beginning of the next meeting. Oliver knows what she’s doing, but he hasn’t commented. She suspects it’s because he doesn’t want her talking to Connor, but she appreciates that he hasn’t said anything to that effect. They’re both working on the overprotective thing.

It’s slowly getting easier to control her instinctual reaction to it, and to his credit he’s trying to clamp down on his instinct to overreact. At first, it reminded her too much of her father and the life she’d tried to leave behind, but now she sees it for what it is. It isn’t Oliver trying to control her, as it was for her father. It’s Oliver’s way of showing he cares. He wants her safe, and she has to admit she doesn’t exactly hold the same view of safety as everyone else. She’s probably too willing to place herself in harm’s way, an urge she’s trying to curb for his sake. It’s too late to do that on some fronts, though, so she needs to deal with the mess she’s gotten herself into.

Taking a deep breath, she steps off the elevator and heads toward Connor’s cubicle. When the blond man looks up at her, she sees the guilt in his eyes straight away. He clearly suspects why she’s here.

“F-Felicity, hey.” He tries to remain casual and cheery, but the smile on his face is too wide. He turns his focus quickly back to the monitor and presses a few keys. “I just have to finish this up. Give me a second.”

She presses her lips together and leans over the wall of his cubicle, balancing on her forearms. Watching as he works, she wonders what could possibly have made him betray her like this. He sold her out to Isabel when even her own father wouldn’t. What had she offered him? Was he in it from the beginning? How much of their friendship was a lie?

“I was thinking we could get lunch. Talk,” she tells him as he finishes up and pushes his chair back. “I know I’ve been kind of… preoccupied lately.”
He swipes his palms over his thighs and forces a smile. There’s a hint of relief around the edges that makes her think maybe he’s convinced himself she doesn’t know. “Sure. Sounds good.”

She doesn’t feel even a little bit bad about lying to him.

She waits until they’ve finished their food from the cart down the street before she starts in on the point behind the lunch. She’s spent the majority of the meal outside QC observing his behaviour, cataloguing the nervous ticks and wondering how she didn’t notice them before.

“So, let’s talk about Isabel,” she blurts out, subtle as ever.

Connor pales. “W-What do you mean?”

She lets her head fall to the side in exasperation. “Let’s not play this game, Connor. You owe me more than that.”

“I’m not going to apologize,” he finally tells her firmly. “I did what I had to do to keep you safe, Felicity.”

That confuses her. “What are you talking about?”

“Isabel… I’m assuming this is about… What is this about?” He asks carefully, crumbling a napkin in his hand nervously.

“This is about you stealing the data in my contact. The data you helped me put there.”

He sighs, visibly deflating. “Right. Look, Isabel came to me after that day in the office. You know, when she asked you all those questions about the digital security. She… she noticed we were close. She thought I could help, said she needed some information from you, and that if she had to get it herself she’d…” He pauses, eyes flitting over the people milling about. “She said she’d hurt you, Felicity. She told me that if I couldn’t help her, she’d have to take the information from you by force. If I didn’t help her, if I couldn’t get her the information… I did it for you.”
She recoils, not expecting that. She’d braced herself for him telling her he was never her friend, that he only got close to her for Isabel, or that he’d turned to the dark side when Isabel offered him something he couldn’t refuse. To have him tell her he only betrayed her in the interest of keeping her safe… She isn’t sure what to do with that.

Connor’s hand reaches out to her before he seems to think better of it and brings it to run through his hair instead. “She told me the information would be something you guarded closely and I knew exactly where it was. I- I never meant for you to find out. She said you never would if I helped her.”

She laughs humorlessly. “It’s a bit late for that. Isabel wasn’t exactly subtle. I knew she was up to something and I… Well, let’s just say I’m involved.”

“I never wanted that. You have to believe me,” he pleads, his eyes reflecting truth. “I only wanted to protect you. I- Felicity, I-”

“Don’t,” she cuts him off, holding up a hand. She has a feeling she knows what’s coming and she can’t bear to hear it or let him say it. “Connor… Oliver and I… We’re, well, a we.”

Her friend deflates yet again. “Oh.”

Silence stretches between them as they both digest the revelations of the conversation before Connor turns to study her again. The breeze blows his shaggy hair across his forehead, making him look even younger as he flicks it away with a jerk of his head. He seems so innocent in this moment, so unaware of the dangerous game he’s inadvertently gotten involved in, that it nearly breaks her heart. He swallows, eyes flitting to the ground before coming back up to bore into hers in an imitation of intensity. Maybe, in another life, it would have reached the full thing for her, but after seeing Oliver look at her in the same way everything else pales in comparison.

“I still wouldn’t change anything. I would do anything to protect you, even if that means going behind your back to keep you safe.”

She breathes deeply, trying to control her sudden desire to snap at him. Ever since her world exploded she’s been fighting to regain the control she long ago mastered, though if she’s being honest it isn’t totally a result of her father’s reappearance. She was struggling before all hell broke loose, starting with the Undertaking. She couldn’t see the positive she was so accustomed to seeking out, but who can find any good in their failure bringing about 503 deaths? It was then that she knew she’d been kidding herself these past years, pretending to be impervious to darkness. She wasn’t
incorruptible and it was foolish to try. She may have been naïve when her father was alive, but she’d become a different kind of naïve after he died. The Undertaking made her realize she had to embrace reality, even if that reality sucked.

Right now, the reality is, even though Connor made a unilateral decision about her life and well-being, it wasn’t an attempt to control her. He thought he was doing the right thing. He thought he was saving her. He fell victim to Isabel’s game the way they all did. The last thing he needs right now is her taking her issues out on him. Instead, she takes another breath and finally focuses on him again. “What else do you know about all this?”

He remains silent, eyes back to roaming the surrounding area.

“Connor,” she says softly, reaching out to lay her hand over his. “If you want to help me, this is the way. I need to know what Isabel told you, and I need you to be willing to back me up if it comes to that.”

It takes him a few more seconds to make a decision. “She didn’t tell me anything specific. She just said she needed information that you had and it would be in both of our best interests if I helped her. I don’t know what she wanted with it. If you’re involved… are you… are you working with her?”

Felicity bites her lip, unsure how to answer. She can’t trust that Connor isn’t just acting right now, ready to report back to Isabel. “I shouldn’t answer that.”

His face falls. “This wasn’t what I wanted for you.”

“Since when is that your decision to make?” She snaps, giving in to temptation. She clearly has some work to do on that front. “Last I checked, I’m a grown woman capable of making my own choices.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” he backtracks, eyes wide. “I just meant that… you’re better than Isabel Rochev, Felicity. You aren’t a criminal.”

“She didn’t tell you she planned to use that information to incriminate me, did she?” She asks, smiling ruefully.

The look on his face answers the question before his words do and Felicity sighs. If he’s a plant, he’s a good one. Everything she’s gotten from him since starting this conversation rings true. It’s a relief,
really, to know that Connor isn’t some nefarious big bad of the week. He’s still the same naive boy she met a few years ago, trying his best to do the right thing and protect the people he cares about.

“Felicity?” He calls after her as she rises to go. She turns back to find him looking at her apprehensively. “Are we ok?”

She takes a second to consider it. “We will be.”

Oliver isn’t nearly as forgiving. In fact, he’s downright sour about the whole thing when she fills him and Digg in later that night. She can feel his angry face from where she sits across the foundry, checking what her searches turned up about her father. He managed to hide himself very well, but she’s determined. She will find his mistake.

“I don’t trust him,” Oliver grounds out from where he’s pacing. Digg chips in his agreement but Felicity is undeterred.

“I don’t either, but I do believe him.”

Oliver huffs but says nothing else. Even if he had, he would have been interrupted by Sara’s entrance. It’s a cautious one, but she’s lived up to her end of their agreement by appearing nonetheless. Not that she has anything to share with them at this point, having just made the League aware of her father’s disregard for their arrangement.

“I managed to get a few more weeks to track him down, but they’re sending reinforcements if we don’t have him soon.” She leans back against the table, a slight frown on her face. Clearly, the League’s decree hasn’t made her happy.

Felicity tries to control her instinctual question, telling herself she doesn’t really want to know, but when has she ever successfully stopped herself from speaking? “What will happen to him?”

Sara turns her full attention to Felicity, searching her face as though determining whether she really wants to know. She lifts her chin an inch and Sara’s eyes reflect her acquiescence to the request. “The League will likely take him back to Nanda Parbat. They’ll revise the agreement and shorten the leash. He was given free reign because he demanded it, but now that he’s abused the privilege…”
Felicity nods, unsure how she feels about that. Once they stop Isabel and her father, the man will just disappear again. He’ll be gone, but even if she never sees him again, she’ll still know he’s breathing somewhere in the world. She won’t be able to properly look her mother in the eye again knowing what she does. It’s going to be awkward and it will probably drive a wedge between them that her mother won’t understand the origin of. At least she put a stop to her visits home this year, so she doesn’t have to feel guilty about that on top of everything else next year.

“Hey,” Digg’s voice breaks through her inner conflict, bringing her back to the present. Oliver and Sara have moved to the training mats, where he’s taking out his obvious aggressions on her. “You good?”

She nods automatically, but Digg levels her with a look and she transforms the motion into the opposite answer. “I’m handling it. I just need to wrap my head around it all.”

He nods. “Listen, if you ever need someone to talk to… I know I’m not your first choice, with you and Oliver doing… whatever it is you’re doing, but-”

Her head snaps up to focus on her friend in surprise. He looks hesitant and a little awkward at the mention of her romantic life, and it would have made her grin if it weren’t in this context. Instead, she stands to even out a bit of the height difference and places her hands on his shoulders. “It isn’t a contest, John. I’m not choosing one over the other. You know that, right?”

Digg grins down at her softly, bringing his hand up to the side of her face and running his thumb over her cheek. It’s a friendly gesture, unlike when Oliver does the same. “I know. I just meant that I’m here if you need an additional ear.”

For some inexplicable reason, his sentiment brings tears to her eyes. She blames the emotional overload of the past few days as she crushes him to her in a grateful embrace. Digg seems to be caught off guard initially but recovers enough to return the gesture after a few seconds. Inhaling the scent that is uniquely John Diggle, she takes a moment to fight back the tears and regain her equilibrium before pulling back and shooting him a weak smile.

“Thank you.”

“That’s what friends are for, right?” He replies, clapping her shoulder. She nods and turns away before the moisture can return.
The words have answered her confusion over her sudden wave of emotion. She hasn’t given herself so completely to friendships since before her father’s downward spiral; she’s forgotten what it feels like to have so much support. For the longest time it’s just been her and her mother, even with the wedge of their differing feelings regarding her father’s ‘suicide’ between them. Her mother has always been her constant, no matter the number of superficial friendships she’s built through the years with people like Connor. No one has known her as thoroughly as Oliver and John in a long time, even before she opened up to them about her father. She’s always been a closed off person, disguising her walls with a bubbly personality that creates the illusion of openness. Somewhere along the line, though, she let them sneak through the cracks. Maybe she was just tired of being so alone, even surrounded by people, or maybe they were just the ‘right’ people in a sea of the ‘wrong’ ones. Either way, they’re here and for once she knows they aren’t leaving. Not without a fight. She can lean on them without fear that they’ll throw themselves in front of trains one day when it all becomes too much. Or, you know, pretend to do so before jetting off with Isabel Rochev.

A pair of hands land on her shoulders and she relaxes into what can only be Oliver’s touch. She isn’t sure how long it’s been since Digg stepped away from her, but a quick glance at the clock tells her it’s past midnight. When she swivels her chair, it’s to find the foundry empty save for Oliver and herself.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, making to stand. “I must have lost track of time.”

He twines his fingers through hers after she shrugs into her coat and squeezes gently without saying anything. She knows he saw her exchange with Diggle but he won’t ask about it. It’s one of the things she lo- likes most about him. He gets that sometimes space is necessary, as much as he may not want to give it to her, and he’s rather patient (for Oliver, at least) in waiting her out. This time, he doesn’t have to wait long as she runs her thumb absentmindedly over his where their fingers are still intertwined in her lap while he drives. She doesn’t want to hide anymore; she wants to be open and honest. No more holding back like she did with her plan to infiltrate Isabel’s operation. It’s not fair to either of them.

“Connor and I were never that close,” she begins, feeling his hand twitch in surprise at where she chose to start. She covers the back with her other hand, sandwiching his between hers. “I had a lot of friends before my… promotion, and I had friends at MIT, but none of them were ever lasting. We’d hang out, get coffee or meals, but it was never… You and Digg… You’re the first real friends I’ve had in a long time and I guess I forgot what it feels like.”

He turns to her when he stops for a red light, eyes boring intensely into hers even in the dark of the car. “We’re not going anywhere, Felicity.”

She smiles, turning back to face the front as the light turns green. “I know.”
They hit a snag in trying to decide how best to collapse Isabel’s operation. Felicity will fully admit she probably should have thought the entire thing through before jumping in. She’s always prided herself on thinking things through before acting, something her father drilled into her, yet she’s neglected to think about what she’ll do once actually in this position. She’s here because they can’t use the Arrow to intimidate Isabel, but what exactly is she supposed to do aside from prevent Isabel from corrupting the database? And now that she knows it’s her father she’s up against, can she even do it?

He trumps her in experience and skill, that much is apparent. However, one thing he taught her (coincidentally, so have Oliver and Digg) was that every enemy has a weakness. She has to find her father’s and exploit it. Not that she knows where to start. She hasn’t seen the man in six years, and even before that she doubts she ever really knew him. She has no idea what could be used against him.

“Start with yourself,” Digg advises when she raises the topic.

She scoffs, but Sara nods, picking up Digg’s thread of advice. “You’re his daughter. It’s only logical you’ll be a blind spot. He’s already protected you from Isabel how many times? And he’s gone against his commitment to the League to warn you away from her. You don’t betray the League lightly.”

Felicity gets the sense she isn’t just talking about her father anymore.

After a moment, Sara continues the thought. “He could have told Isabel the truth but he didn’t. He obviously wants to protect you. We can use that to our advantage, see how far that instinct extends.”

“Or maybe he’s just playing me again, lulling me into false security before setting me up for a fall,” she counters, leaning back in her chair. She refuses to believe her father cares. After all, the past six years (probably even more than that, really) do prove her point. He chose Isabel over her; what’s to say he won’t again?

This time it’s Oliver shaking his head as he steps off the training mats. “You said he created an entirely new identity for you. He obviously cares.”

“Fine, say you guys are right,” she concedes, still not fully believing it. “How does that give us an
advantage? He knows I’m not truly on Isabel’s side, and Isabel made it pretty clear they have a bond.”

“Maybe he wants out. Maybe he’ll let you do what you need to,” Digg suggests. “Or maybe he’ll just put in half the effort so he can save face with Isabel. Either way he won’t willingly see you hurt in this.”

“He’s too much of a wildcard to be able to trust in that, though,” Oliver points out. The other two nod and Felicity sighs in relief, glad that at least they acknowledge the unpredictability of her father.

“It’s all moot until we figure out how to take Isabel down, anyways,” Digg admits, looking to Oliver. They’re a team, but they usually defer to his judgment on how far they go for the take down. Unless he’s wrong, at which point she proceeds to tell him so in no uncertain terms while Digg stands silently by. It’s nice to see some things will never change.

“What about Lance? Is there a way to get information to him about Isabel?”

He’s looking straight at her and Felicity pulls her bottom lip between her teeth. She doesn’t miss the way the action draws his attention momentarily before she answers. “I could probably find a way to compile a file or something. He already knows something’s going on, what with the fake warrant for Digg, so I’m sure he’d be willing to lend a hand.”

“I can give him whatever you get,” Sara volunteers. “He already knows I’m connected to the Arrow, so it shouldn’t raise eyebrows.”

Felicity nods while silently deciding to send an electronic copy to Lance as well, all traces of its origins erased, of course. She isn’t entirely trusting of Sara given recent revelations. The other woman has no reason to want to prevent them from exposing Isabel, but if it also exposes Felicity’s father in the process… Well, the League can’t want that. What Sara probably doesn’t consider is that Felicity doesn’t want that either. If her father’s involvement were to be uncovered, her mother would have to learn the whole ugly truth. It’s better she continue to remember the man she fell in love with than the one who left her for greener pastures. Her mother deserves that.

Making the decision to keep what she knows from her mother is easier than she expected, but that doesn’t make her feel less guilty. She’s condemned her father for his lies and controlling behavior for years and now here she is, doing the same thing. She’s making a unilateral choice to keep her mother in the dark, justifying it by telling herself it’s for the best. Never has she felt more like her father, and never has she been filled with such hatred for it. It’s not good enough for him to upend her life; he has to force her into the one place she never wanted to be: his shoes.
She’s out picking up food with Digg when he slides onto the stool next to hers. Digg is in the back talking to AJ while they wait and, really? It’s Big Belly Burger. Why would he choose here, of all places?

“Because I didn’t want you causing a scene,” he responds coolly to the question she didn’t realize she’d asked aloud.

“What makes you think I won’t?” She challenges, immediately on her guard.

“I know you, Flick. You want to hear what I have to say. You have questions. If you cause a scene, you won’t get answers.” His voice is confident and she clenches her fist in anger because he’s right.

“Don’t call me that,” she grinds out.

He bows his head in contrition, clasping his hands on the counter. “Sorry. Old habits die hard.”

“Kind of like you,” she snaps, unable to resist. “What do you want?”

“To give you those answers,” he replies, turning his head to look at her. She doesn’t miss the way his eyes sweep the diner.

“Digg won’t be out for another ten minutes, if that’s who you’re looking for,” she informs him sharply, staring resolutely at the wall. A horrifying thought crosses her mind then. “Unless…”

Her father’s lips lift up without humor. “Don’t worry, your John Diggle is safe and sound talking to his nephew. I haven’t touched him.”

The words hold a hint of threat she can’t ignore and it feels like the walls are starting to close in around her. “What do you want? What’s your angle?”
“I’m worried about you. Why do I have to have an angle?”

She snorts. “Because you’re you. It’s been six years. You let us think you were dead for *six years*. There’s no way I buy that you’ve suddenly reappeared just because you’re worried.”

“It’s the truth, Fl- Felicity. You’re my daughter and I need you safe.”

“I thought Isabel fit better in that role.” She really tries not to sound bitter as she picks at her thumb nail, but fails.

Her father’s hand reaches out to cover hers and she jerks away from him. He sighs. “Isabel and I… We have a complicated relationship. She’s like a daughter to me, yes, but that doesn’t mean you *aren’t* my daughter.”

“Do I get a vote?” She snaps. She’s pretty done with this conversation, and almost wants to go find Digg, but something’s holding her on the stool. Some compulsive need to hear what he thinks could possibly make everything alright again. “Because I’d rather not be.”

“I suppose I deserve that.”

She clenches her teeth, swivelling her head to face him. “You *suppose*? Wow, you’re delusional. You really thought I’d welcome you back with open arms and tears of joy? Was that the reason you didn’t tell Isabel? You thought I’d come around? That I’d want to bond with her and make some happy family?”

Her father swallows, glancing at the clock and realizing their time is almost up if he wants to remain undetected. If he thinks she’s going to keep this little invasion of space private he has another thing coming. “I want you to come to terms with this on your own time. I know you’re in shock, but I think that, once you get used to the idea, you’ll see that I only want what’s best.”

She laughs a little too loudly, drawing glances from the other patrons. “And you think that’s playing house with you and Isabel?”

“I think it’s *not* playing merry band of vigilantes with Oliver Queen and John Diggle,” he bites back firmly, getting to his feet. “I don’t want to cause an uproar in public, so I’ll excuse myself before he comes back, but we’re not done here, Felicity.”
She doesn’t say anything, tears of anger stinging the back of her eyes as she glares resolutely at the wall. She won’t look at him. She won’t let him get to her. Digg will be back in a minute. It will all be fine. She repeats the words to herself as a mantra until the man reappears, grin falling from his face when he takes one look at hers.

“What the hell happened?” He asks, by her side in a split second.

She doesn’t say anything, just shakes her head. Once she starts, she won’t stop, and she doesn’t want to have to say it twice.

“What happened?” Oliver demands the second they come into view. He stops moving immediately, ducking out of the way of Sara’s fist as it continues its trajectory toward his head. Both are covered in a thin sheen of sweat, moving to grab towels before they step off the mat. Sara hangs back to give the team a minute.

After assuring him that she’s physically unharmed, she sidesteps Oliver’s inspection and sets to distributing the food. She needs something to keep her hands busy while she explains what happened. Hopefully that way they won’t see them shake. A quick glance at Oliver’s face tells her it hasn’t fooled him, but he’s going to let it pass for now.

“You were in the back?” He asks Digg harshly once she gets it all out.

“Oliver,” Felicity admonishes, pushing the last straw into Sara’s drink. He doesn’t tear his eyes from the other man, index finger rubbing against his thumb in a show of anxiety.

“No, he’s right,” Digg tells her softly. “I shouldn’t have left you alone.”

She rolls her eyes and sets to unwrapping her burger. “Oh for crying out loud, how many times do you guys need to be told I don’t need a babysitter? I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I’m still here, aren’t I? How were any of us supposed to know he’d decide Big Belly was a good place to have a father/daughter heart-to-heart?”

They can’t argue that point, and she takes a healthy bite of her burger to close the conversation. For
now, she just wants to decompress and satisfy the craving for burgers she’s had for a couple of days. Simple. Nothing convoluted or complex about it. Just four friends eating burgers. Or a couple and their two friends… It’s still weird thinking of herself and Oliver in relationship terms, even though they are very much together. It’s just so different from anything she’s experienced previously (which, admittedly isn’t exactly a lot) that she’s hesitant to label it the same way she would any other relationship she’s had. It’s a completely different level from everything else, and it feels wrong to categorize it the same way.

She starts at the sensation of a hand sliding over her knee under the table and squeezing reassuringly. It calms her frayed nerves, and she catches Oliver’s eye to send him a grateful twitch of her lips, slipping her left hand under the table to thread her fingers through his. If Digg and Sara notice, neither comments.

He lets her get away with it until they’re lying in his bed, not even bothering with the couch anymore. She should have known he wouldn’t let it rest long, but she’s been savouring the moments until she’s reminded of just how crazy her life has become. She’s also not looking forward to sharing her latest idea with him. It won’t go over well, but she needs to tell him.

The light track his fingers are taking as they trace a path up and down her arm distracts her from her original purpose and she sighs, snuggling further into his bare chest. Her arm stretches across his stomach, fingers lightly tracing the defined lines of his abs out of instinct. She’ll never pass up an opportunity to touch them now that she’s allowed. She has the sudden desire to run her lips over them but clamps down on it. Now isn’t the time. Later on, maybe. Until then, she’ll have to content herself with running her fingers and nails over the flesh. If the small quake of his body is anything to go by, he won’t be complaining about her antics anytime soon. She grins against his skin before placing her lips to his chest and propping her chin on her fist to look up at him. The half-hooded eyes she meets almost make her want to postpone this conversation, but he catches the purpose in her eyes and turns serious.

“I want to talk to you about something, but I don’t want you to freak out or go all ‘grr’ on me, ok?” She tells him.

His lips twitch in amusement and he nods, bringing the arm wrapped around her waist up to brush her hair behind her right ear before returning his hand to rest on her hip. “I’ll try.”

Having extracted the closest thing to a promise she’ll get, she pushes herself to a sitting position. His arms fall to circle her waist loosely as she takes a deep breath. “I need to meet with my father. On my terms.”
As expected, he stiffens, but she takes it as a good sign that he doesn’t automatically say no. He raises himself to her level, his right arm pulling back to splay his hand on her thigh. She struggles to maintain her train of thought as his thumb strokes back and forth. He doesn’t even seem to be aware he’s doing it, but it’s leaving a small path of heat in its wake that’s making it hard to focus. On second thought, maybe he *does* know what he’s doing. It’s never been a secret, the effect he has on her.

“Look,” she tries, blowing out a breath, “If I don’t do this, he’ll keep popping up and taking me off guard. I need a controlled environment.”

He purses his lips in that way he has, gaze falling to land on his hand as he mutters a soft curse in Russian. Finally, he nods and looks back up. “You’re right.”

“I am?” Her eyes widen in shock. She wasn’t expecting it to be that easy. She expected a rather lengthy and taxing fight.

His lips give the barest of twitches before he sobers. “I don’t want a repeat of tonight. Thinking about how easily he could have-”

She understands, then, and reaches up to lay her palms on his cheeks. The stubble scratches against them and she has to work to focus on what she wants to say. “But he didn’t. He wouldn’t. Like you guys said, I’m his daughter. He won’t hurt me. At least not physically. He’s got some sort of misguided delusion that, given enough time, I’ll decide to play happy family with him and Isabel.”

“So you want to play into that?” He confirms.

“You said find his weakness.” She pauses, leans in and presses her lips to his briefly and rests her forehead against his. “I need answers. I’ll be fine.”

“I… I get it. I do. I don’t like it, but I understand.”

“Besides, if I show some sort of interest maybe he’ll back off Thea.” For as much as they’ve avoided talking about it, the lingering threat to his sister lurks in the back of her mind. She doesn’t want to believe her father would deliberately harm an innocent civilian, but he hasn’t exactly given her reason to have faith in him. He’s been a member of the League of Assassins for six years, and that has to take a toll on one’s humanity. One look at Sara tells her it takes a toll on your emotional well-being at least.
Before he can respond, the shrill ring of his phone cuts through the air. Grimacing, he pulls back from her to snatch it up and flip it open. “Yes, Thea?”

She bites her lip in an effort to stifle a grin. Thea has thus far proven to have the best timing, and it looks like that’s a habit she won’t break any time soon. Oliver’s jaw sets in annoyance, a look only his sister can bring out in him, before he’s telling Thea he’ll go check and pressing a soft kiss to Felicity’s forehead. She watches him pad out of the bedroom, leaving her truly alone inside for the first time while he goes to run his errand. Last time, he wasn’t gone three seconds before Thea was sweeping in to ‘keep her company’.

Unable to sit still, she disentangles herself from the sheets and wanders around the room, fingers brushing over the books lining his shelves. They don’t look like the ones adorning her own shelves, and her lips tick upward at the memory of him saying his bookshelves are purely decorative. It was so much simpler then, back when they just thought she was being stalked by some random hacker. Back before this became such a mess.

Sighing as she reaches the end of the bookshelves, her attention is drawn to the door leading to his closet. She wagers a silent debate with herself before curiosity wins out and she gives the door a tug. It wasn’t fully closed, anyway, she reasons, and it’s not like he’d be hiding anything nefarious in there. Besides, he’s seen the inside of her closet. Her internal rationalizations stop the second the smell of Oliver hits her. Stepping further inside, it surrounds her and she feels the remaining tension ebb away. His presence is always soothing, but there’s something about being assaulted by his scent that puts her at ease when he’s gone. Without thinking about it, she reaches out and runs her fingers over the different dress shirts on one side, and then the more casual clothing on the other. She spends a moment in silent indignation that he has more clothing than her before she realizes she’s been running her fingers over the same sweater for the past thirty seconds. Studying it, she realizes it’s one of the zip-up hoodies he keeps in the foundry, giving it the added element of smelling both of him and the basement. It’s oddly comforting in a way the other shirts aren’t, and before she can think it through she’s pulling it off the hanger and wrapping herself in it.

When she emerges from the attached room (because really, that’s the only word for it considering how large it is), Oliver is still MIA. Inhaling deeply, she makes her way to the next set of shelves. It’s strange, how much the room doesn’t resemble Oliver at all even after all this time. It’s too careful, too meticulously decorated. It’s almost like a museum, with its never-opened books and knick knacks lining the shelves. Stopping in front of one shelf in particular, she frowns as she stares at a ship in a bottle. Why on earth…?

“Tommy gave that to me when I got back,” Oliver murmurs. She jumps and spins around as she registers his voice is right behind her. “His own personal attempt at a joke.”
His lips are twitched in fondness at the memory and she finds herself responding to it in kind. Her hands reach out to interlock their fingers halfway between them. She doesn’t have to ask why he kept it, not when Tommy met the fate he did.

It takes him a minute to come back to the present, but she waits him out. When he does, it’s with a sweep of his eyes down her body. They’re darker when they return to hers and she gulps.

“I, um, kind of raided your closet while you were gone,” she fumbles for words, eyes downcast. “S-sorry-”

She’s cut off by his lips claiming hers. He swallows whatever she was about to say, pulling her arms around his waist by their joined hands. He lingers in the position for a second before bringing his right hand up to tangle in her hair, pulling her lips more firmly against his as he tilts his head and trails his other hand lightly up her arm. She sighs and leans into him, her hands starting to explore his bare back before coming around to splay over his abs. In response, he runs his tongue over her bottom lip, left arm pulling her tightly against him by the waist when she allows him to sweep his tongue over hers. Kissing Oliver isn’t something she thinks she’ll ever get used to. It’s an explosion of sensation in the best possible way, leaving her body humming and craving more.

Her hands run up his chest, one stopping over his heart while the other continues its track up to run through the hair at the base of his skull. He doesn’t hesitate in bringing his own hands down to grip her thighs, lifting her effortlessly. If she weren’t so enraptured with everything else happening right now, she’d probably be impressed when he doesn’t miss a step. The last time she tried this, her college boyfriend (her very short-lived college boyfriend) dropped her. She’d laughed it off at the time but- Now is not the time to revisit Luke.

Her eyes flutter open as Oliver lowers her to the bed, hovering over her with the same gaze darkened by desire.

“Ty krasivaya,” he mutters in Russian, and there’s something so insanely sexy about the foreign language passing his lips. She pushes up to meet him in another hungry kiss before he pulls away to trail his lips down her neck. She gasps when he pushes the sweater out of the way to let his teeth nip at her collarbone, his hands finding the bare skin of her stomach under her tank top. If she’d known this would be the result when she put on his sweater she would have done it a lot sooner.

Up until this point, with the exception of those couple of minutes in his kitchen, Oliver’s been… restrained. It’s almost like he’s afraid she’ll break. Seeing her in his clothing must have sparked something, because this is rather different from how they usually spend their nights in his room. Not that she’s complaining. Nope, not complaining at all.
The shrill ring of his phone breaks through the haze eventually and Oliver stiffens before deciding to ignore it and pressing his lips to hers again. The ringing cuts off and he smirks triumphantly until the restart of the tone wipes it off his face.

She can’t help it; she laughs breathlessly as irritation flashes through his eyes when he glares at the offending object. He glances back down at her, eyebrow quirked in that way he has and she sobers immediately. Or, at least, she tries to. The grin still threatens to escape and she can tell he’s trying to control his own amusement. Finally, he sighs, and reaches over to collect the still-ringing device. When his eyes flick to the caller ID, he immediately rolls them to the sky and heaves himself onto his back beside her. She immediately misses the weight of his body on hers, rolling to the side and tucking her arm underneath her head to watch him. She’s sure she looks rather dishevelled, but she can’t keep the light smile off her face.

“What now, Thea,” Oliver grinds out, staring up at the ceiling. There’s a pause in which Thea babbles something in a cheery voice. Then, “Thea.” The sound of babbling continues, oblivious to her brother’s irritation. He tries one more time before finally, “Thea!” Silence, then the voice gets meek. “I was… busy.” Felicity immediately blushes. There’s no way Thea won’t catch on to that. As if on cue, his sister’s voice becomes rushed, not unlike her own when she makes a rather uncomfortable sexual innuendo. To her credit, though, she hasn’t been doing that as much anymore. After a few more seconds, Oliver clicks off and turns his head to look at her.

There’s a glint of something close to mischief in his eyes and she tries to remain stern. She can’t give in to temptation. It takes her all of three seconds to lose the battle and she laughs loudly, rocking back slightly before the momentum carries her forward into his chest. His arm wraps tightly around her waist, hugging her to him as he kisses the top of her head, chuckling along with her.

“Ya tebya lyub-lyu,” he breathes out between the musical sound of the laugh she never hears enough of.

The way he immediately stiffens catches her attention and she lets her laughter die out, looking up at him. He blinks down at her, and she gets the feeling that she just missed the moment she intended to see, the moment in which his eyes revealed exactly what he’d been thinking before he could cover it up.

“What does that mean?” She asks tentatively, staring up at him.

He swallows before looking back down at her. His eyes are a mixture of emotions, none of them negative but all of them overwhelming. He has a couple of false starts before he manages to get any sound out. “You are… remarkable. You astound me. After everything… You’re still smiling and laughing. You’re still the bright spot in my day, still…” He stops, seeming to fumble for words before resorting to Russian once more, “Sol-nyshka moyo.”
Her breath catches, but only momentarily. “That didn’t really answer my question. It just added another.”

His lips tug upward slightly and he glances down to meet her gaze again. It’s soft, tender, and something warm spreads through her gut and out to the extremities of her limbs. She has a feeling something just shifted between them, but she can’t determine what exactly.

“You know, I can just ask Sara,” she threatens, raising a brow.

His lips twitch again. “Sara doesn’t speak Russian.”

“That you know of.” Really, she has no idea if Sara does or not, nor does she have a clue how to pronounce the words he uttered. She’s banking on him caving to her threat.

He doesn’t. Instead, he leans up and presses his lips to hers gently. “One day I’ll tell you.”

After another few seconds, she lays her head back on his chest, his fingers stroking a soothing path through her hair. She decides to let it rest for the time being as sleep starts to pull her under. It’s probably moot anyways. She has a pretty good idea what he said.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so I’m going to leave it there. The Russian will be translated in the next chapter! That said, I used Google Translate so it's probably wrong anyways. I chose to use the version spelled out so you could read it as it sounds rather than just pasting random Russian words into it.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Ok, so only 5 chapters left of this after this one. I'll try to be better about posting! We’re going to start off with some cheesy Oliver. It’s not my fave, but I needed a way to translate that Russian.

He wakes first, as usual, though this morning it’s with a knot of trepidation in his stomach. Usually there’s an aura of peace fogging his brain until he’s forced to get up and face the world outside his bedroom door. After last night, however, that peace has been shattered. He can’t believe he let himself lose control like that… He’s been careful up until now to be sure not to move too fast. Scaring her off with the intensity of his feelings for her is the last thing he wants, but the sight of her in his sweater and the way her entire face lit up with laughter despite the war they’re currently waging… He couldn’t help himself.

Perhaps it has something to do with their proximity since they’ve met. They’ve spent more time in each other’s presence than out of it since Felicity learned his secret; he’d even go so far as to say she knows him better than any other person in his life. The emotional connection they’ve developed as a result clearly deepened his feelings for her, but he’s been conscious of that from the beginning and has thus far managed to keep a lid on it. Last night he slipped.

Ty krasivaya.

You’re beautiful. True enough, and certainly not the problem he’s currently facing.

Ya tebya lyub-lyu.

I love you. Words he wasn’t sure he’d ever say to a woman other than Thea and his mother again. Words he’s never felt so compelled to say, especially not so spontaneously. Words he’s never meant so thoroughly, as unfair as it may be to admit that.

He’s pretty sure he didn’t understand love until that moment last night. Looking over at Felicity with her dancing eyes and musical laughter, he was so overcome with the emotion he couldn’t contain it. Before he knew what was happening, the words were escaping his lips on an exhale, as though they were as natural as breathing. And that isn’t even the frightening part. He isn’t afraid of loving her, as he thought he would be; he’s afraid of the vulnerable position it puts him in. There’s a part of him that’s terrified of giving himself over to what he knows will consume him, and he isn’t sure he can handle losing her now that he’s finally said the words aloud and made it real. He doesn’t want to scare her off, not when he’s just managed to allow himself the luxury of loving her.
Oliver hasn’t felt this emotionally vulnerable… ever, really. Even with Laurel, he was never in the position of not knowing where he stood. Perhaps that was the problem. “Ollie” was always too sure of himself, thriving on the adoration of others. Laurel provided that in spades, and he revelled in the knowledge that she would always be there, no matter how many times he screwed up. He’d never felt truly vulnerable with Laurel in the way he does right now. Sure, he revealed pieces of himself to her that he’d never shown anyone before, but that didn’t mean he was as ‘all in’ as she was. Ollie was always one foot in, one foot out, something he’s always regretted. Laurel deserved better than the half-assed effort he gave her. He just wanted someone to see the real him, just once, to prove that he was lovable. It was incredibly unfair of him, but Ollie didn’t know any different. He justified it by telling himself he loved her, when really he just loved the feeling of acceptance her forgiveness brought. He loved being loved.

Now, though, he knows without a doubt that he’s in love with Felicity Smoak and it terrifies him. He’s in Laurel’s shoes, certain of his own feelings but unclear on where Felicity stands and he doesn’t like it one bit. She’s it for him, and the idea that he might not be the same for her…

The one saving grace is that the words came out in Russian, as his more intimate thoughts tend to. He’s never really understood why his other languages surface when they do, but he’s noticed it’s usually in times of intense emotion. Hopefully Felicity will let the matter of translation go for now. He isn’t ready to tell her in English yet. It’s too soon.

He’s saved from further spiralling by the subtle shift of Felicity’s body against his. It’s easier to forget his insecurity when she’s looking at him in that way she has. He can’t describe it, but it’s intoxicating. All he wants when she isn’t looking at him is to draw her attention back so he can capture her eyes with his once more. He’s pretty sure he could get lost in her given the opportunity.

“Morning,” she says, a half smile on her face as her fingers stretch across his bare stomach.

He replies in kind and they lapse into a peaceful silence, savouring the last few minutes before the world erupts around them.

They run into Thea on their way downstairs. His sister hesitates, as though unsure whether she should stop or not before finally planting her heel-clad feet and pasting a smile on her face.

“Morning!” She chirps.
Oliver tries not to cringe, his fingers flexing against the small of Felicity’s back. “Morning, Speedy.”

“Ugh, seriously with the nickname?”

He grins, glad it still pushes her buttons. The first time he called her that, she thought it was cool. Her own personal nickname from her super-awesome big brother. Over the years, it understandably lost its appeal, especially in front of her friends. Not to mention the unwitting double entendre it took on during her drug phase shortly after his return. Now, though, they’ve gotten to a place where it’s a source of affectionate banter, different than it was before the island, but better. It reminds him of the life he led prior to his shipwreck, but not painfully so.

“Hey, it could be worse,” Felicity offers in his defense.

“Oh really?” Thea challenges, raising her eyebrow. “What does he call you?”

Felicity’s cheeks tint pink as she stumbles around the answer. Her fingers toy with the material of her black and white plaid skirt, a tell of anxiety he’s picked up on recently.

“Usually I just go with Felicity,” Oliver saves her, grinning in amusement at her discomfort. “Since, you know, that’s her name.”

“And yet you insist on ignoring mine,” Thea shoots back, tilting her head. “Anyway, sorry about… interrupting last night. Though I think I owe you at least one for all the times you’ve interrupted me and Roy…”

Felicity’s blush deepens and Oliver clenches a fist at his side at the insinuation. He’s slowly coming around to the idea of Roy as a permanent fixture in his sister’s life; he doesn’t need the idea of everything that entails to accompany it just yet. He prefers to think of his sister as a celibate entity. Completely unrealistic, but he’ll keep thinking it for as long as possible.

It takes Felicity’s sharp chuckle to bring him back to the present. Looking around, he realizes Thea is gone.

“You’ve had the same expression on your face for the past two minutes. Is it really such a bad thing
that your sister’s happy?”

He presses his lips together, considering the question for a moment with a slight tilt of his head. “Yes.”

Felicity rolls her eyes, preceding him down the stairs. “You’re just saying that because it’s with Roy.”

“I fail to see the problem with that,” he counters, smoothing his tie.

She turns her head to shoot him a look over her shoulder, reaching the bottom of the stairs but not turning to wait for him to catch up. Instead, she greets Digg brightly and tells him coffee is on Oliver this morning. Unable to suppress a grin, because coffee is always on him, he shoves his hands in his pockets and follows her to the car.

Digg is about as thrilled with the idea of Felicity initiating contact with her father as he was, but eventually she convinces the other man to come around to her way of thinking with Sara’s help. He isn’t sure how he feels about Sara and Felicity’s newfound… whatever it is. Not really companionship (Felicity is far too wary of Sara to call it that), but more like Sara having her back. Maybe it’s just the assassin’s desire to contain Felicity’s father and her certainty that Felicity is the only one who can accomplish that, or maybe she’s overcompensating to make amends. Either way, Sara is quickly becoming Felicity’s largest supporter.

“Fine, but one of us should go with you,” Digg concedes. Oliver can’t help but be grateful the other man is the one to suggest it.

Felicity looks like she wants to argue, but Sara cuts her off. “I agree, but if it’s either of you, it will scare him off.”

Diggle crosses his arms, looking suspicious. “And you won’t? You’ve been dispatched to take him into custody.”

“He knows I can’t take him alone. I’d be a fool to try.”
The words are said casually, but Oliver understands exactly what she’s saying. Not only is the Ghost on her level, but he’s surpassed it. He’s better than her, enough so that she needs another person to effectively neutralize him. That’s not all she’s saying, though. She’s more or less assured them that she won’t get in their way by taking him down before they’ve given the go-ahead. She’s choosing them, even if it comes a little late.

Sara sighs. “I know I haven’t exactly earned it, but you guys need to trust me on this. I told the League you’d agreed to help me take him down when it became clear he wouldn’t go willingly. That’s the only reason they’re not storming the city right now. I’m on your side.”

It’s Felicity who steps forward, face set in determination. “Then I guess it’s time to prove it.”

And just like that, it’s decided that Sara will be the one to accompany Felicity to her meeting with her father. While it doesn’t make him happy, he knows he can’t always be the one by her side. They can’t be together all day, every day, as much as he may enjoy that… And despite Sara’s wildcard status since she reappeared, he trusts her to keep Felicity safe. Sure, he’s still making sure she carries the gun with her and she’s been steadily improving in the training with Digg, but the added security of Sara is enough to allow him to breathe a little easier.

When he tunes back in, Felicity is already poised in front of her computer, chattering away as she explains her plan to contact her father and set up a meet for tomorrow night. If he didn’t know her so well, he’d say she’s just being Felicity, babbling away and using words none of them understand without realizing it. A quick glance at Digg tells him the other man isn’t fooled either. Even Sara is watching her with a knowing look as she types at rapid-fire pace and tries in vain to act normally.

“I’m going to hack into Isabel’s QC computer and leave a message in there that only he can find. She’ll likely have some sort of alert set up to detect any attempts to breach the system so he’ll check it out and when he does…” She spins her chair around after pressing a couple more keys, the grin on her face a bit too wide to be genuine. “I haven’t gotten anywhere on determining how exactly he managed to stay off the grid for so many years, but I’m guessing the League doesn’t have a Facebook page or anything so it was probably pretty easy for him to stay off the radar. I’ve got some programs running to probe into the Ghost’s origins. I’m not sure what it will be able to tell us, but it can’t hurt. We at least know he had an online presence during those years so it probably isn’t as futile.”

“How’s the file for my father coming along?” Sara asks, hooking her thumbs in the belt loops of her jeans.

“I’m compiling data now; I just have to figure out the best way to put it together so it isn’t inadmissible or anything. I just need a few more days to get the rest of what I need and then we can hand it over. It should be enough to set up some sort of sting for when Isabel finally tries to collapse
QC. Hopefully I can keep my father interested enough in trying to bond with me that he doesn’t realize what we’re doing.”

Oliver blinks at her matter-of-fact tone. Not once has he considered she’s reaching out to her father to distract him. He really didn’t think it was a strategic move so much as one driven by her need to understand exactly what motivated her father to go down this road. Hearing her refer so casually to the idea of using herself as a distraction… It’s jarring.

“Stop giving me that look,” she tells him quietly. Sara and Digg have turned to start sparring on the mats, leaving the two of them alone by her computers.

“What look?” He asks, frowning down at her from where he leans against her desk.

She tilts her head in the same way she did when they first met. “That pained look you get when you’re regretting my involvement in all this. How many times do I have to tell you this is my choice?”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I just… Part of me wonders if you’d have to go through this if you weren’t involved.”

She gives him a sad half-smile, reaching out to place her hand over his. “I’d rather know my father’s alive, as hard as it is to wrap my head around. Does it make my life more difficult? Absolutely. But given the choice I’d always rather know the truth, even if that makes me a hypocrite.”

His frown deepens, but before he can ask what she means by the statement, she elaborates.

“Keeping the truth from my mother when I say I’d rather know… I just can’t bring myself to destroy her memory of him like that. My memories really weren’t all that great to begin with, so I like to think it doesn’t hurt me as much. But her? It would destroy her, and I can’t do that.”

He doesn’t say anything, just leans forward to press a kiss to the top of her head before making to grab his Arrow suit. He needs to burn off energy and get out of the basement. As he ascends the stairs, though, he can’t help but wonder if she realizes she’s deluding herself in thinking she’s as fine with this as she says.
Her phone rings right on cue as she’s allowing her father to fight her back out of the system. The message is planted, and she’s put up a token effort to determine how he tackles threats. As she half expects, he goes straight on the offensive, obviously hoping to startle the attacker into reverting to defence. That knowledge will come in handy when she eventually has to stop him from decimating the QC database.

“Isabel!” She chirps into the phone, her smile taking on a genuine note for the first time in a few hours. Passing the comm to Diggle, she swivels in her chair, turning on a recorder on a whim. Who knows what Isabel might say when provoked? “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Mind explaining why you just tried to hack into my computer?” Isabel’s voice comes over the line, clearly unimpressed.

“I was bored. Thought I’d test company security,” she returns flippantly. Never would she have thought she’d have so much fun antagonizing Isabel. Is it petty of her? Yes, but she loves the idea of using Isabel to set up the private meeting with her father. It’s happening right under the smug Russian’s nose and she has no idea.

“As cute as your little stunt was, I fail to see what you hoped to accomplish. Were you looking for Daddy’s attention?” Isabel asks, voice too innocent.

Felicity laughs. “Yes, Isabel, I am so desperate for my father’s attention that I hacked into your QC server so he’d be forced to counteract me.”

Isabel is silent for a beat before seeming to regain her composure, and Felicity takes a second to revel in catching her off guard with her sarcasm. “What exactly is your play here, Felicity?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t like playing games,” Isabel bites out.

Felicity deliberately waits for five seconds before sighing heavily into the phone. She catches Sara’s eye as she swivels around again and smiles slightly at her, trying to ease the tension between them one friendly gesture at a time. “Fine, you caught me. I was testing you. I wanted to be sure you guys knew what you were doing before I fully committed. Sue me for wanting to be careful.”
She can almost see Isabel pursing her lips. “I think you need to remember who’s in charge here, Ms. Smoak. I have successfully orchestrated the destruction of fifteen companies in Starling City. What have you done aside from falling into Oliver Queen’s bed? A feat, I must point out, that is not so difficult to accomplish.”

Anger coils in her stomach at the insinuation, but she can’t deny it… can she? It’s probably best to start playing meek at this point, anyway. “Isabel-”

“No, you listen to me. You are not in charge of this operation. I am. You are nothing more than an inconvenience to me; a bug I cannot squash no matter how much I may desire to do so. I may need you to access the database, but let’s get one thing clear: that does not give you free reign to walk all over me. Your genes will not be enough to protect you forever. Soon your father will see what a waste you are and come around to my way of thinking.”

The phone clicks off and Felicity blinks, stunned by the sheer ferocity of the words. Just when she thought she had the upper hand, even if most of it was the knowledge that Isabel is oblivious to her true intentions, the woman finds the one place to hit that hurts like none other. Regardless of her triumph at getting a recording of Isabel admitting to the leadership role in all of this, she’s left breathless with the overwhelming rejection she feels in this moment. Isabel’s right. Her genes will only protect her for so long; there’s an expiry date on playing both sides of the fence. If she keeps poking the bear, her father will turn on her. That’s the one part Isabel was wrong about, though. He won’t realize soon that she’s a waste, because he already knows it. If he didn’t, why would he have left?

Shaking her head in an attempt to get rid of the sudden funk, she turns to her computer to upload the recording and add it to the file for Lance. Once that’s done, though, she’s at a loss. She doesn’t want to take back control of the comm, not when Oliver will be able to tell so easily that something is wrong, but she can’t just sit idle either. She needs something to do, but with no scans or updates to run she’s out of luck.

Then she hears the steady motion of Sara’s fists hitting the training dummy. Before she can stop or tell herself it’s probably the worst idea she’s ever had, not to mention the thoughts of her father it brings to the surface, she’s rising and making her way to the blonde assassin. Sara doesn’t stop until she’s standing beside her, and then it’s only to look up at her with a question in her eyes.

“Want a partner?” Felicity asks.
When he gets back, he looks to the computers first, expecting to see Felicity seated beside Digg, engrossed in the computer. Instead, he sees the man sitting alone, attention focused on the training area with an unreadable expression. Turning his head to follow his stare, Oliver immediately understands. Two bodies move on the mats, attacking and defending and circling each other in ways he wishes he didn’t associate with either of them. Before he met them, before he got involved with them, both women were perfectly normal. Now, they’re locked in a combative dance that, had he been watching years ago, he would have found incredibly sexy. Now, he’s cataloguing their every move with an analytical eye. The way Felicity’s steps are a tad too small, and the way Sara is holding back to give her a chance at a fair fight. What a difference a few years makes…

“Felicity asked her after she got off the phone with Isabel,” Digg answers his unspoken question.

Oliver isn’t sure how he feels about that. Felicity’s aversion to violence is something he’s convinced is unhealthy, but does that mean he should be glad that she initiated this sparring round with Sara? Is it a good thing that she’s seeking out the violence she avoided like the plague mere months earlier?

He’s spared further thought by Sara swiping Felicity’s feet out from underneath her. The blonde falls to the mat but recovers quickly, using the momentum to flip over into a crouch. He hasn’t actually watched her fight since the first few training sessions with Digg, his only indication of how she’s progressing being Diggle’s reports and their short-lived sparring session the night she discovered her father’s lie. As he watches her now, he’s struck by how graceful she is. It’s not a reaction he expects, but if he ignores the fact that she and Sara are sparring and focuses solely on the movement, it’s actually kind of beautiful. Only Felicity could get him to look at fighting this way.

Eventually, Sara knocks Felicity down one too many times and she doesn’t get back up. Instead, she lays on her back on the mat, chest heaving as she tries to recover her breath. Sara bends over at the waist, hands on her knees, for a couple of seconds before heading over to Felicity and extending her hand down. After a moment, Felicity takes it and rights herself, still breathing heavily. She turns her head to the side, seeming to notice him for the first time and stretching her lips into a half smile. He returns it after the briefest of hesitations, shaking off his uncertainty and heading to the back to divest himself of his green leather suit.

She’s seriously starting to regret this. Whose bright idea was it to confront her father, anyway? Oh, right, hers. Maybe she should have let Oliver and Diggle talk her out of this one. She chose her apartment for the meet in an attempt to give herself some semblance of security but maybe it was the wrong choice. Perhaps she should have chosen a neutral location, one she won’t associate with her father’s presence after he departs.

“Are you alright?” Sara asks from where she leans against the wall beside Felicity’s door.
She gives the other woman a shaky smile and adjusts her position on the couch. “Yeah, just nervous I guess, and when I get nervous I tend to ramble so I’m trying to keep quiet because once I start I really don’t stop… Or maybe I should just get it all out now, y’know? I don’t want to ramble in front of him. I don’t want him to see me off balance.”

Sara’s lips stretch in a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry about all this. If I’d known…”

She holds up a finger. “Don’t say you would have told me right away. Betraying the League is a big deal. I get it.”

“You’re a lot more understanding than I would be, were our positions reversed,” Sara muses with a tilt of her head.

Felicity shrugs, picking at her nails. “In light of everything else… It just doesn’t seem like as big of a deal.”

The silence that follows is loaded, both women caught up in their own thoughts. Felicity is lingering on the irony of the whole thing, but she expects Sara’s thoughts are trending more towards her past.

“You know, we aren’t so different, your father and I,” Sara finally says, her voice distant with memories. “We both let our families think we were dead.”

Her expression is haunted, a look Felicity recognizes all too well from Oliver’s own face when he’s caught up in the past. Whatever she’s thinking about right now, it certainly isn’t pleasant, and Felicity finds herself wanting to reach out to the other woman.

“The difference is that you’re doing it out of love. You don’t want them to look at you and see someone different. You don’t want them to hate you, or be disgusted by who you’ve become,” she tells her, smiling softly before continuing. “Which is ridiculous, because I may not have known you before all of this, but I like who I see.”

Sara frowns at her, another expression similar to Oliver’s. The way Sara’s looking at her now, it’s almost as though she’s trying to ascertain how Felicity is capable of seeing anything good in her when she sees only darkness the rare times she looks in the mirror. Felicity can remember that feeling. Not to the degree they do, but she recalls looking in the mirror and hating her reflection. If she can try to help Sara and Oliver overcome that same feeling, she’s certainly going to.
Just as Sara is about to respond, a sharp rap at the door startles both of them into action. It’s show time.

Her father controls his surprise well when Sara pulls the door open. There’s only a brief flicker of it in his eyes before the mask is back in place, and Felicity has to steel herself against the way she remembers Oliver’s eyes doing the exact same thing when she first met him.

“Felicity,” he greets with a nod of his head. His eyes flick to Sara briefly. “I didn’t realize you were bringing a friend.”

“She wanted to meet you,” she replies, working to steady her voice, “and you can never be too careful.”

He perches on the edge of the couch as Sara heads to the bedroom to give them some privacy. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say he was nervous. “You really think I’d hurt you?”

“I don’t know anything about you,” she tells him crisply, smoothing down her dress and looking everywhere but at him before muttering, “I’m starting to wonder if I ever did.”

The man is shaking his head before she even finishes. “No, no. This isn’t you talking. This is Oliver Queen filling your head with nonsense. You know me, Felicity, just like I know you.”

Her eyebrows pucker at that. “You don’t know me; you never did.”

“You’re my daughter.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” she snaps, clenching her hands into fists where they rest on her lap. “My childhood was spent struggling to please you by placing myself in situations that made me uncomfortable. You never understood me.”

“That’s not true. I knew you preferred your computers, but hiding behind a screen isn’t healthy. I wanted to help you, to make you a well-rounded person.”
She scoffs, rolling her eyes to the ceiling. “Coming from you. All you’ve ever done is drive the importance of business and making connections.” She stands and begins pacing to work off her nervous energy. “There’s nothing well-rounded about that. You can’t say you tried to make me a better person; all you wanted was for me to conform to the daughter you always imagined. When I couldn’t, you moved on to someone who could. You chose her because she fit into your ideal better than I did. You weren’t willing to be flexible or well-rounded.”

“That’s not true.” Her father’s voice is almost pleading as his eyes track her rapidly moving form. “I wasn’t trying to change you. I saw so much potential in you, Flick. I just wanted you to live up to it. You can’t waste yourself on this life. It isn’t what I wanted for you. You’re so much better than this.”

She doesn’t even waste the energy snapping at him for the nickname. “Better than what? Working in IT? Being Oliver’s EA? Saving the city every night?”

“All of it. You deserve better than this. You can be better. You just have to let me help you.”

Felicity stops abruptly, turning to face him with a finger jabbing in his direction. “Don’t you dare say that. What we do matters. I can’t be better than helping to save the city from the likes of Isabel. Especially when the alternative is helping to destroy it.”

“Just… hear me out. That’s all I ask. Let me explain, and you’ll see that I did this for you. I did this because I chose you, Flick. Because I love you.”

She swallows hard, clamping down on the desire to tell him he doesn’t know the meaning of the word. This is getting out of hand. She’s supposed to be convincing him he has a shot at flipping her. She’s supposed to be calm, cool, and collected. It’s not supposed to be so emotional. It isn’t supposed to hurt this much.

But it does. As much as she tries to tell herself she can handle approaching this with a level head, the evidence speaks for itself. She told Oliver this was just supposed to be a distraction, but she was lying to him and to herself. This isn’t a distraction. This is over twenty years of rage and hurt breaking to the surface. This is her realizing she isn’t as over the whole thing as she pretends to be.

Taking a deep breath with closed eyes to steady herself, she clenches her fists twice more before shaking out her fingers and exhaling. “Fine. Explain.”

It takes him a couple of seconds to understand that she’s just given him permission to do what he’s
been saying he wants to since he showed up in her apartment. Once he does, he slides back on the couch, elbows propped on his knees. It’s almost as though he’s unsure where to start.

“I never wanted to hurt you. You have to know that. This, everything I’ve done, it’s what’s best for you. I couldn’t take care of you the way you needed me to, not as physically incapable as I was, but I’m better now. I can protect you like a father should protect his daughter.”

“I don’t understand…” Felicity says, perching on a chair. She can’t bring herself to sit too closely to him, but she doesn’t want her knees to give out if she can’t handle all of this.

“I met Isabel during my time at Kord Enterprises, as she told you. There was something about her… Something that reminded me of you. Maybe it was the hint of innocence buried deep within her. I could see it, even though she presented a cold exterior. She thought things could get better, and I wanted to help her.

“I mentored her, tried to show her the good in the world. We connected. But then… I took her to one of those fundraisers your mother hated. I remember how glad she was when I told her I’d take Isabel instead. Now… I wish I hadn’t. She met Robert Queen, and I could see right away how enchanted she was. He was everything she aspired to be, and everything I wasn’t. He was successful on a whole other level. She started falling in with him. I could see her slipping away, so I-” He pauses then, dipping his head in something akin to shame. “I offered her the one thing I knew she wanted. The one thing I could give her that Robert Queen couldn’t. I told her I could find her birth father.”

Felicity rears back. “You used her father to keep your relationship going? She meant that much to you?”

“She’s like a daughter to me, Felicity. I wasn’t going to let go of her that easily.”

His words hit a nerve, even if they weren’t meant to. “But it was ok to let me go?”

He shakes his head. “It was never intended to be permanent. I was always planning to come back for you once I was ready. After Isabel returned from Russia, she got involved in the Undertaking. She brought me in on it, and that was when I realized what the world was really like. I knew I needed to protect you from it, so when she suggested the League of Assassins… It was my opportunity to take it to another level.”

“That’s why you started drinking and training in the garage,” she says, realization slamming into her.
“It’s why you told me I had to learn to shoot.”

He nods, looking up at her and pleading with her to understand. “I only meant to protect you. Leaving you behind, pretending I was dead, those were Isabel’s conditions. I didn’t want to lose either one of you; I still don’t.”

She blinks, unsure how to respond. Logically, now would be a good time to tear up and give him the forgiveness he obviously craves, but nothing about this is logical. She can’t force her lips into a watery smile and throw her arms around her father. She can’t even move. It’s too much all at once and she isn’t sure how to handle it. Whatever she expected, it wasn’t to be told he thought he was faking his death for the best. She didn’t think he would confess to doing it for her, and she isn’t sure how that admission makes her feel.

Part of her recoils in disgust at the idea that he thought she would be fine with all of this. Another part is relieved that he didn’t kill himself to escape from her. He didn’t choose Isabel over her, not really, but does that even make a difference?

“I decided to wait until my debt was paid to contact you, so that you wouldn’t be exposed to what I’d become. I didn’t want you to live as the daughter of an assassin. I didn’t want you to see me like this. I wanted to wait until it was over and I’d healed.”

“What changed your mind?” She rasps.

“I found out you fell in with Oliver Queen.”

She sighs loudly, her head falling back in exasperation.

“He’s putting you in danger! How can you not see that?” Her father cuts over her.

“He’s not doing anything to me,” she snaps, purposefully ignoring the way the words sound and ploughing on. “This is my life. My choice.” She inhales deeply before frowning. “And what makes you think you’re any better than him, any safer? I’d be in just as much danger on the run with you as I am here, probably even more.”

“I can protect you from that. I can train you.”
“Oliver is training me.”

“After how many years of keeping you in a bubble? He may have told you he would protect you but the evidence speaks for itself. He has no interest in keeping you safe. He only wants you for what you can give him.”

She laughs without meaning to. “Oh, here we go, back down this road. You’d think after six years we’d be past the whole controlling parent thing. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

“Obviously, you can’t. You’re still making the same bad decisions you did years ago, except this time it could get you killed.”

“Oliver would never-”

“Oh really? The Dodger? The Dollmaker? The Count? Want to continue that sentence and tell me how he’d never put you in any danger?” His voice is getting dangerously loud now, his eyes flashing as he leans toward her.

“Like I said,” she bites back, her voice wavering slightly, “My life, my choice.”

“It is your life, and it’s important to me, dammit! I want to make sure you keep it. That’s why I did all of this: to keep you alive. I won’t have you throw my sacrifices back at me.”

She takes a deep breath, trying to reign it all in. She used to be so much better at this. Her eyes flick up to the ceiling, shutting out the knowledge that Sara can hear everything being said right now. The most painful aspect of her life on full display for a woman she barely knows. Fantastic.

Her father sighs, rubbing his palms on his thighs before pushing himself to stand. “Look, we aren’t getting anywhere anymore. Just… think about what I’ve told you. Please. I love you, Flick, and if you come with us after all of this is over, I’ll show you every day.”

“What about Mom?” She blurts out when he’s halfway to the door.
"What about her?" He doesn’t turn back to face her.

"What was your plan? Were you going to tell her? Or did you think I’d let you fake my death, too?"

"It’s better if she thinks we’re both gone. If she doesn’t, she’ll never stop looking."

His words infuriate her more than anything else he’s said tonight and before she can stop herself she’s advancing on him and forcibly spinning him to face her. It’s likely the element of surprise that allows her to get the upper hand long enough to back him into the door with a finger poked into his chest.

“If you think I would ever put her through that kind of pain again, you’re more delusional than I thought. There is no way in hell that I would willingly let her think I was dead.”

It takes him a few seconds to recover, but when he does he raises an eyebrow. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t you willingly allowing her to think I’m dead right now?”

She opens her mouth, closes it again, and finally manages to string together a coherent defence. “That’s not the same. Telling her you’re alive will only hurt her more.”

He tilts his head at her, a small smile tinged with sadness and something unidentifiable playing around the edges of his lips. “You know, you’re a lot more like me than I ever thought. Maybe my death was exactly what you needed to embrace who you really are: a person willing to do whatever it takes given the right circumstances.”

It doesn’t matter that Sara said something very similar recently; the words coming out of her father’s mouth take on a whole new meaning. They repulse her and she recoils from the man who raised her, the man she spent years trying to impress. Ten years ago, she would have been overjoyed to hear him compare himself to her. She would have relished in finally accomplishing her absurd desire to be like him. Instead, the moment is finally here and she wants to vomit.

“I am nothing like you,” she hisses, clenching her fist.

His grin widens and she finally identifies the unnamed emotion as pride, though that knowledge doesn’t settle her stomach. “That’s where you’re wrong. In time, you’ll see it. And when you do? You know where to find me.”
With that, he slips out the door, leaving her to the internal battle he’s stirred inside her.
Chapter 20

Sara drives her to the mansion, and for once she doesn’t protest the help. She has enough on her mind that she really doesn’t think she could concentrate on driving right now. In testament to that, she doesn’t even realize when the car stops. It’s Sara’s hand on her arm that jolts her back to the present and forces her to put one foot in front of the other.

It isn’t that she’s shocked or anything, but she’s having difficulty processing everything that just happened. There’s so much information bouncing around in her head that she doesn’t know where to put it all. If she’s being honest, she’s itching to pack it neatly back in her Father box and pretend it never even happened. The temptation is there, clear as day, and she’s having a hell of a time ignoring it as she steps into the room that still holds her suitcase. Everything would just be better if she could forget about all of this. All she has to do is just shut it away, and she can go into Oliver’s room and they can act like they’re a normal couple for the night. They can pretend he isn’t a masked vigilante and her father doesn’t exist. They can make out and get interrupted by his sister as always seems to happen…

Felicity’s train of fantasy stops in its tracks when she spies a folded piece of paper atop her suitcase which, now that she thinks about it, wasn’t zipped shut this morning. Immediately, she’s on guard, mind reeling as she tries to figure out how her father could have gotten in here. Oliver has been literally right next door the entire time she’s been gone. In fact, she’s surprised he hasn’t come barging into the room to lay eyes on her yet. He has to have heard her enter. What if her father somehow got in here? What if-

She exhales in relief as she takes in the loopy scrawl on the paper. It looks nothing like her father’s, or Isabel’s for that matter. This is all just a result of her paranoia. Nothing is wrong. Silently berating herself for being so quick to jump to conclusions, Felicity snatches up the paper and snorts when she sees the contents.

*I found this in here this morning and I have NO idea why. If it remains here tomorrow morning, I may just have to donate it to Goodwill, since it IS in a room with no occupant.*

*xoxo,*

*Thea*

*P.S. My brother has a bigger closet than me. The least he can do is share it.*

The note is so normal, so *Thea*, that it brings Felicity back to herself. Laughing quietly, she unzips the suitcase and changes into pajamas one last time in the guest bedroom. *Thea* has even packed Oliver’s sweater, which she was wearing this morning, into the bag. After a moment of consideration, she pulls it over her tank top, breathing in his scent and automatically feeling twice as relaxed. The anxiety threatening to pull her under moments ago is mostly gone, replaced with a
yearning to be surrounded by the real thing, not just the cheap imitation of the grey sweater.

When she pushes the door open after the softest of knocks, she catches Oliver mid-pace. It looks like he’s been wearing a path in the carpet since she left. Now, though, he stands perfectly still, looking unsure of himself as he always seems to where her father is concerned. It doesn’t surprise her; emotional situations have always put him off balance. It’s like he doesn’t know what the right thing to do is, and he’s so afraid of doing the wrong thing that he’d rather sit back and wait for someone else to make the first move. So she does, crossing the room at a carefully measured pace and reaching up on her toes to press her lips to his gently. He reciprocates, looping his arms around her waist loosely. When she pulls back to rest her forehead against his, she smiles slightly, a small quirk of her lips to let him know she’ll be ok.

“So…” She drags the word out, tracing a pattern on his chest with the fingers of one hand. “Your sister is about as subtle as you.”

He blinks, clearly not expecting that. Felicity chuckles quietly before handing him the note and trying to take a step back. She’s stopped by the arm still around her waist pulling her more tightly against him and she exhales happily at the knowledge that she doesn’t have to step back quite yet. Instead, she fits her head into the crook of his neck as he reads, feeling the rumble of his chest at his amusement while his hand starts rubbing her back absentmindedly. She allows herself one brief moment to close her eyes and savour the feeling of absolute safety before reality comes crashing back down on them.

“This isn’t subtle at all,” he comments, a smile in his voice.

“Exactly my point,” she counters, adjusting her position so she can look up at him again.

The frown on his face would be adorable if he wasn’t Oliver. She just can’t bring herself to call him that. “I’m subtle.”

She snorts out a laugh at that, not concerned in the least about how unattractive it probably sounds. “Sure you are.”

“I am,” he insists, his eyes glinting playfully at the edges.

“Keep telling yourself that.”
She backs away then, gravitating toward the fire he’s lit in her absence. It’s a relatively warm night, not exactly calling for a fire, and she’s about to ask him why he felt the need when she recalls their previous conversation regarding safety blankets. Her lips twist into a sad half-smile when he steps up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her back against him. Her hands come up to cover his where they rest on her stomach, her right rubbing lightly along his arm in what she hopes is a soothing manner.

Allowing herself to relax back into his body, she twists her head to the side so her temple rests against the side of his chin. “Rough night?”

“I was… a little anxious,” he returns, his voice low.

“I-” She starts, immediately overcome with guilt. This was her doing. It was her idea to put herself in that situation, her idea to cause him this much anxiety.

“Don’t apologize,” he cuts her off, tightening his grip and turning to press his lips to her temple.

“But-”

“Felicity.”

She sighs, admitting defeat and turning in the circle of his arms to face him. Her fingers ghost over his face from temple to chin, scrubbing along the stubble on his jaw and drawing his eyes to hers.

“Can I at least apologize for worrying you?” She asks softly.

He looks down at her and she nearly gasps at the slight darkening of his eyes. “Depends what kind of apology you have in mind.”

He’s teasing her, she realizes, and she can’t help but grin up at him mischievously while she reaches up to hook her hands behind his neck. She pushes herself onto her toes slowly, leaving a millimeter of space between their lips to whisper, “What kind would you like?”

He closes the gap between them, claiming her lips with his and pulling her flush against him. She
hums in contentment, savouring the deft movement of his mouth over her own as he slants his head, changing the angle of the kiss. Eventually, he pulls away, lips twitched in a smile. She returns the expression before the mood soberes and he steps back, running a hand down her sweater-clad arm as he does so.

“What happened to the MIT sweatshirt?” He asks, brows drawing together in confusion. “Not that I’m complaining, but…”

Felicity bites her lip, eyes falling from his as dread fills her. She’s been hoping to avoid this question, but she supposes turnaround is fair play. She did ask about the fire. “It… uh, it belonged to my father. He’s an MIT alumnus. That’s part of the reason I went there, actually. I wanted him to be proud of me. When I got in, it was actually one of the few times we really connected…” She trails off, turning back to face the fire and hoping to get a handle on her emotions. Oliver’s hands land on her shoulders and she takes a deep, shaky breath. “Anyway, when he died, I found it in his closet and it reminded me of the good man he could be. I wanted to keep a piece of that with me, to remember who he was as my father, not the stranger who killed himself. In light of everything… Just the idea of trying to draw some kind of comfort from it… He’s not that man for me anymore.”

Once the topic of her father is broached, she finds it easier to dive straight in and fill Oliver in on everything that was said. Somewhere along the line, he leads her over to the couch to sit down, but once she starts she doesn’t plan to stop until she’s through it all. To his credit, he sits silently and supportively, hand alternating between squeezing hers and rubbing circles on her knee.

It’s strangely cathartic, getting it all out in the open like this. She can feel the weight of the interaction leaving her with every word, can feel her breath coming more easily as she speaks. Talking about it is proving to be much more effective than her desire to shut it all away.

Finally, she runs out of words and they fall into a comfortable silence staring at the fire. Her head drops onto his shoulder, their fingers knot together, and Felicity finally fully relaxes for the first time after setting the meeting with her father. She’s so relaxed that she catches herself starting to drift off still sitting upright on the couch. Stifling a yawn, she feels Oliver shift beneath her, but doesn’t realize what he’s doing until she’s hoisted in the air cradled against his chest.

“I can walk,” she protests, but her words are cut off by yet another yawn.

She can’t muster the energy to look up at him, but she gets the sense he’s smiling. “I know.”

Her head barely hits the pillow before she’s asleep.
Motion pulls her from her dreamless slumber and she blinks into the darkness, confused. Her first thought is that Oliver is either getting out of bed, or getting back into it, but then she realizes what’s really going on. Her head is pillowed on his chest, either the by-product of her own movement in her sleep, or his re-situating her once he got himself settled (she’ll reluctantly admit that she was out cold before he even climbed in the other side of the bed), and from her position she can feel the motion of Oliver’s body beneath hers. It’s subtle, not outright thrashing about, but a contained restlessness that finds his head tossing on the pillow and his arms tightening around her.

“F’licity,” he mutters, his voice strained as he draws in a deep, panicked breath. Looking up at him, her heart clenches to see his face contorted in a painful frown and she automatically reaches up to soothe the lines etched on his face.

Lifting herself from her position flat against his chest, she allows the fingers of one hand to trail the side of his face, coming to rest cupping his jaw before the other travels lower to rub soothing circles on his chest and bicep. His arms squeeze her more tightly to his body, but his head has stopped its panicked tossing on the pillow, and she takes it as a minor victory.

He still wears a pained expression and she longs to drive it away, not even able to imagine what nightmare he’s facing tonight. She’ll never tell him, but she’s awoken to this sight a few times in the past. The first time she nearly woke him up; in fact, she was attempting to do so in the nicest way possible before her efforts seemed to relax him more than they drew him out of his mind’s version of Hell. She’s never asked him about it, both because she knows how private nightmares can be, and because she doesn’t want to see that guilty look on his face that he gets when he thinks he’s inconvenienced someone. She knows he’d be full of apologies if she were to tell him, and he has nothing to apologize for. In fact, she’d rather be woken in the dead of night by his demons than to have to live with the knowledge that he’s facing them alone.

“Shhh,” she whispers, hand still rubbing soothingly on his taut bicep.

His grip is nearly painful tonight, and she figures this one must be worse than the others. She lowers her lips to press a soft, prolonged kiss to his Bratva tattoo, breathing a sigh of relief when his grip slackens infinitesimally. When he turns his head to bury his face in her hair and inhales deeply, she allows her lips to twitch into a smile of relief, knowing that he’s through the worst of it.

When morning finally comes, the only indication of his less than peaceful night are the hint of
shadows under his eyes. At any rate, he’s looking far more rested these days.

Heading down the stairs, Felicity is already compiling a mental list of everything she needs to do to prepare for the upcoming war. As crazy as it’s likely driving Oliver, this one’s all on her. The Arrow can’t do much of anything to put a stop to this. QC’s fate depends on her ability to outmanoeuvre her father, which she’ll never admit is freaking her out. It’s a ton of pressure, especially given her failure to stop him so far. If she can’t devise a way to keep him out of the database once she hands over Oliver’s codes…

She shudders and feels the warmth of Oliver’s hand settle between her shoulder blades. It trails lightly down to her waist, tugging her into his side as they walk to the door, enjoying the last few seconds they can be openly close before facing the public eye.

“Oliver!” Moira’s voice stops them in their tracks and Felicity takes an inconspicuous step away from him.

He glances down at her quickly, the expression on his face clearly letting her know she hadn’t succeeded at subtlety, before turning his attention to his mother. “Morning, Mom.”

“Felicity,” Moira greets with a small incline of her head in Felicity’s direction.

Her mouth goes dry and she nods her head jerkily back. “Mrs. Queen.”

She really wishes Digg wasn’t running late at this point. Anything to escape the awkward situation unfolding in the foyer.

“I’ve been trying to catch you two for the past few mornings, but we always seem to miss each other,” Moira comments, her tone walking the line of judgement.

Felicity shifts uncomfortably, hating the insinuation in the words. Even if it wasn’t intentional, the expectation that they’re sleeping together is there, and she can’t shake the feeling in her gut that makes her want to squirm. This is Oliver’s mother and she lives in this house. She is currently staying in the Queen Mansion with Oliver and his sister and his mother… It’s easier to forget that with the odd hours they keep, but it’s a reality. A very awkward reality.

The fact that his mother assumes they’re much more… physical than they are is even more awkward,
but she’s sure Moira wouldn’t believe either of them if they were to deny it. When all is said and
done, she’d rather just pretend Moira doesn’t have opinions on what they’re doing behind closed
doors.

Not that that’s a whole hell of a lot… They’re taking things slow, not that she’s complaining. She’s
never known Oliver Queen to take anything slow, and if she were less secure, she might be afraid of
what it meant, but she’s confident in what they’ve developed and are still developing. They have all
the time in the world to have sex. When it’s right, it will happen. Until then, she’s still enjoying the
knowledge that he’s hers.

“Felicity?” Moira’s voice snaps her back to attention.

Apparently they’ve been conversing while she’s been panicking internally. A quick glance between
them tells her that whatever is going on has Oliver supressing irritation and Moira looking to her for
some sort of decision. On what, she can’t say.

“Yes?” She asks, meaning to get some clarification.

Instead, the older woman beams and reaches out to squeeze her arm gently, taking it as an answer.
“Lovely. I’ll see you both tonight.”

She shoots her son a look on her way back to the dining room and Oliver gives her a forced smile in
return. It turns to a grimace as he focuses on Felicity.

“What did I just agree to?” She asks, already dreading the answer.

His expression darkens. “Family dinner.”

To say she’s nervous is an understatement. If she’d known she was agreeing to family dinner at the
time she… well, she probably still would have agreed to it. There’s no saying no to Moira Queen.
Doesn’t mean she can’t wish she had.

“You know, I can just call her and tell her we’re in meetings. She’ll understand,” Oliver tells her for
what’s probably the hundredth time. They’re sitting in his office going over the latest security reports from IT to make sure everything is at top efficiency. They need all the help they can get.

She tilts her head at him. “That’s not an option and you know it. Besides,” she continues, keeping her voice carefully light, “Thea already texted to thank me for roping her and Roy into a family dinner, so if we duck out…” She trails off, allowing him to imagine his sister’s reaction before ploughing ahead. “At least Roy will be there.”

He opens his mouth once, closes it, and then frowns. “I fail to see how Roy’s presence improves the situation.”

“Well, he’s… he’s kind of like me. You know, not brought up in all this,” she waves her hands around to indicate the office, “I mean, my father may have liked to take my mother to all the corporate functions, but we were not a part of the one percent by any means. Compared to you, your sister, and your mother, I’m pretty classless. Having Roy around will make me feel less out of place,” she admits, feeling her cheeks heat up.

If there’s one thing she hates (well, there are several things she hates, but right now this one’s at the top of her list), it’s admitting weakness. Especially with everything going on father-wise in her life, the last thing she wants is to feel out of her element like she knows she will tonight. Alas, they can’t really tell Moira that they have to bow out because she’s having Daddy issues, so the only other option is to power through.

“Besides, with you two in the same room, maybe Thea will find more entertainment value in making you uncomfortable rather than me. Her text messages implied she’d be painting a rather large target on my back for agreeing to this and making her, I quote, ‘suffer through a fate worse than three Justin Bieber concerts back-to-back.’ And do not ask me who Justin Bieber is,” she winds down, seeing that spark of confusion in his eye that he gets when she makes a pop culture reference. “You really need to catch up on real life, Oliver. You can’t use the island excuse anymore.”

He blinks, looking surprised at her cracking an island-related joke. For a split second, she wonders if she should apologize or take it back. Maybe it’s too soon to refer to that time in his life so casually. Just as she’s about to open her mouth and say something that she hopes will make this better, he frowns over at her once more. “Since when do you and Thea text?”

It’s her turn to be surprised, but she manages to shrug. It’s not that they hold long conversations or anything, but they exchanged numbers during their lunch (or rather Thea commandeered her phone and put her number in as The Queen). Usually the most she hears from her is the occasional smart-ass remark and, when Felicity replies, Thea immediately wonders why she has time to respond at work (doesn’t my brother keep you busy enough? No. Then he obviously isn’t doing it right ;P).
Instead of saying all that, though, she opts for a cheeky, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

A knock on the door interrupts them, and they turn their heads simultaneously to see Isabel standing there, looking unimpressed as always.

“Sorry to interrupt, but I’m having some issues with my computer and was wondering if you’d come take a look at it, Miss Smoak?” She asks, her tone making it clear that she expects no opposition to the demand.

Oliver visibly bristles. “I wasn’t aware that Miss Smoak had resumed her duties in the IT department, Isabel.”

The other woman fixes Oliver with a cold stare. “Wasn’t it you who said part of the reason you promoted her was for her technological savvy? It’s much more convenient to come up one floor than to wait for IT to send someone up to mine.”

Felicity swallows nervously, recognizing this for what it truly is. Isabel isn’t having computer trouble; this is about their arrangement. She flattens her hands over her thighs and uses them to propel herself to a standing position.

“Of course, Ms. Rochev,” she says politely, turning back to Oliver. “I’ll only be a few minutes I’m sure.”

Oliver nods, though it looks like the last thing he wants to do, and Felicity dutifully follows Isabel to the elevator. The second the doors slide closed, she shifts to face her, opening her mouth to ask just what the hell she wants so urgently when Isabel cuts her a look.

“Not here,” she snaps, leaving Felicity to stew in silence as they travel down the one floor and hallway that lead to Isabel’s office.

Once they’re both seated, Felicity lets out an impatient breath. “Where’s the fire?”

“No fire, though you and Oliver didn’t seem to need one to get all cozy just now.”
She sighs. “Where is this going, Isabel?”

“Your father seems inclined to believe that you’re willing to give Oliver up when all this is over. You certainly convinced me of that our first meeting, but just now… I’m wondering if you’re having a change of heart?” Isabel questions with a raised eyebrow.

“Why would you think that?” Felicity asks, trying to maintain her calm. She can’t have come this far to give it away now. Not in the home stretch. “I can’t suddenly freeze him out just because I’m trading up. Wouldn’t want him getting suspicious.”

The brunette studies her for a solid minute and Felicity wills herself to stare right back. She won’t fidget. Eventually, Isabel’s shoulders relax slightly and Felicity lets out a small breath. “Then what’s the hold up on the codes?”

It’s now or never. “No hold up,” she says, reaching into the pocket of her skirt and pulling out the folded paper. “They’re right here. I couldn’t very well tell Oliver I wanted to go down to your office, now could I? I mean, he’s already confused as to why you’re being so nice to me.”

“I’m not being nice to you,” Isabel retorts, brow furrowed in confusion.

“Compared to how you normally act, it’s like you’re suddenly my best friend. He’s noticed,” she comments, examining her nails briefly before standing and placing the codes on her desk. “You should work on that. I’d be happy to give you some tips, if you like.”

Flashing a wide grin and winking at the speechless Isabel, Felicity swivels and heads back the way she came, glad the meeting ends on her terms for once.

To say his mind isn’t really on the impending dinner is an understatement. Family dinners have always been a rather painful experience, even when he first returned and tried to appreciate his ability to attend them. They’re always filled with the same questions, the same answers, and the same attempts by Thea to make him uncomfortable.

He can tell tonight will be no exception when he and Felicity enter his room to find a dress laid out
on his bed. There’s a note attached from Thea, telling Felicity that she thought it would calm her nerves. It is either the world’s best or worst coincidence that it’s forest green.

If he thinks it’s bad just looking at it on the bed, the second he steps out of the bathroom and sees Felicity struggling with the zipper his mouth goes completely dry. It’s fitted to her body, ending just above the knee. The sweetheart neckline and cap sleeves give it a more refined look, making it more appropriate for a family dinner than it would be if it were sleeveless, but there’s still enough skin showing to cause him to swallow audibly when he manages to recover his composure. Yes, Thea’s tradition of doing everything in her power to make family dinners the epitome of torture is definitely continuing tonight. And he’s actually been tortured.

“Here,” he interrupts her struggles to reach her back, his voice rasping slightly against his dry throat, “Let me.”

Felicity freezes immediately, tensing before blowing out a breath and nodding her consent. “Thanks.”

He’s helped numerous women zip their dresses over the years, so this really shouldn’t affect him the way it does. Nevertheless, seeing his colour against her skin ignites a similar primal response to her in his sweater. As his fingers spread over her back to brace the fabric while his other hand pulls the zipper into place, he can’t resist the urge to lean forward and touch his lips to the curve of her neck. She sighs at the feather-light touch and leans back into his chest, his hands landing on her hips as his lips continue their path up her neck.

She hums in satisfaction before mumbling, “We should go downstairs.”

“We should,” he nods, but makes no move to step away. Instead, he allows his right arm to snake around the front of her waist and pull her more tightly back against him.

She gasps at the sudden movement accompanied by a soft nip of his teeth on her ear. “Seriously, we should go before your mother and sister track us down and murder us.”

“I think I can take them,” he whispers hoarsely in her ear.

She lets out a shaky breath before turning in his arms and tugging his face down to hers in a searing kiss. Her fingers card through his hair, connecting their mouths more firmly as she angles her head beneath his and his tongue sweeps out over her bottom lip. He pulls her hips against his sharply
before his hands wander up to the zipper he just secured.

His lips disconnect from hers to trail down her neck and he grins as she lets out his name on an exhale. Just when his fingers toy with the metal, her hands come up to push his arms back down to settle on her waist.

“You are not undressing me right now,” she admonishes.

He smiles, leaning back slightly to look her in the eye with a raised eyebrow. “I’m not?”

The look she fixes him with clearly displays her displeasure with his response. Her hands run up his arms to settle on his shoulders. “We need to go.”

He hums his disagreement, leaning in to capture her lips once more. She leans back, trying to avoid him, but he’s faster than her and she’s left to laugh against his lips as she gives in. It’s nice, being able to just fool around and be normal for a few minutes, to forget about the problems waiting for them on the other side of the door.

“Hey, are you guys planning- Oh my God! Again? Seriously?” Thea’s voice effectively kills the mood.

They pull back simultaneously, and Oliver takes far too much pleasure in watching Felicity press her lips together in an attempt not to laugh. Leave it to Thea to interrupt them again.

“Don’t you knock?” Oliver asks his sister, annoyed. He’s pretty sure she’s just interrupted what was shaping up to be his ticket out of family dinner.

“Don’t you lock the door?” She shoots back loudly.

“It was closed. Logic dictates-”

“That you shouldn’t be making out when you have family obligations? I agree.”
He pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to get a handle on his irritation. Sometimes he wishes he was an only child.

“Come on,” Thea says, addressing Felicity. “Let’s go reapply the make-up your little teenage act messed up.”

“I can just-” She starts, pointing back over her shoulder at the bathroom.

Thea’s shaking her head before she gets a chance to finish. “Oh, no,” she says, closing the distance and practically dragging Felicity to the door by the arm. “You think I’m leaving you two alone again? I am not suffering through this alone.”

Felicity shoots him a helpless look over her shoulder but he can only grin as she’s pulled from the room.

He makes his way downstairs after taking a moment to collect himself, leaving his sister and Felicity to their own devices. If he’s going to get through this dinner, he should probably start drinking now. It always ends up being more formal when significant others are present, and he’s not sure he can stomach that right now. Not to mention the very real temptation of seeing Felicity in that dress. It’s enough to drive him over the edge.

“Oliver, I didn’t expect you to be the second one down,” his mother says when he passes through the doorway. Looking around the dining room, he sees Roy seated uncomfortably at the table, one seat between him and Moira.

Oliver forces a tight smile and makes his way over to claim the seat directly to his mother’s right. “Thea took Felicity to do something feminine. I thought it best to make myself scarce.”

“Yeah, Thea said something about dresses and I bolted,” Roy chimes in, though he looks like he regrets that choice now. Oliver can’t disagree. He loves his mother, but being in a room with her and Roy? It’s a little awkward, especially when there are several things he’d rather be doing right now.

Luckily, the pained silence doesn’t last for long. Moira makes polite conversation with Roy, inquiring after Verdant and Sin, and Roy takes large gulps of water and tries to answer articulately. Oliver suspects Thea would be less than pleased with his lack of participation in the conversation but she isn’t here to give him her patented judgmental glare so he sticks to the comfort of observing.
“Alright, let’s get this party started, shall we?” Thea’s voice rings clearly from the doorway, where she stops for dramatic impact. Felicity obviously hadn’t expected the sudden stop and she skids a bit in her heels in surprise.

Oliver regrets raising his glass to his lips as he glances over at the pair, just barely managing to swallow without choking. If possible, she looks even better from a distance. When his eyes finally travel back up to her face, it’s to see that he’s been caught staring. Felicity bites her lip against a grin and makes her way over to his side of the table when Thea releases her. It takes him a second longer than it normally would to rise and pull out her chair for her, and he catches Roy doing the same for Thea across the table. Clearly, his sister is training the kid well.

As the food starts coming out and the conversation begins, Oliver reaches under the table and places a hand on her knee to steady its nervous bouncing. The second his hand makes contact with her bare flesh, he realizes his mistake. All intentions of giving the dinner his undivided attention vanish. He doesn’t hear a lot of what is said, instead captivated by the warmth of her smooth skin under his palm. The rest of the night is spent focusing on not dragging her back upstairs in the middle of the meal.

Until Thea looks across the table with a devilish smirk, that is. The look in her eye is downright diabolical and he has to suppress a groan.

“So, Ollie’s Felicity,” she begins, her Cheshire grin only widening as he glares at her, “How’s that plumbing coming along?”

Felicity tenses nearly imperceptibly at the mention of the lie that originally brought her here. Neither of them have paid much attention to how it must look now that it’s been over a month with no signs of her leaving. Not that Oliver wants her to. He’d rather she stay as close as possible.

Roy frowns. “Um, is that supposed to be some sort of… euphemism? Because I really don’t want to hear about that…”

Felicity chokes on the gulp of water she’s taken to calm her nerves. “Oh, God no!” She exclaims, pressing her hand flat over her chest. “My, uh, there was a leak in my apartment last month and, uh, well Oliver offered me a room while it was getting fixed, and then insisted I stay a bit longer to be sure there were no problems, which was completely un-”

“Don’t tell me it was unnecessary,” he cuts her off, sensing the direction she wants to take this.
“It was a little excessive,” she tells him. Her eyes are locked on his, sparkling in amusement, and he can’t help the responding grin that slides onto his face.

He inclines his head toward her slightly, shifting to face her more fully and forgetting about the other occupants of the room for a second. “And what happened three days after I made that request? As I recall, the pipe not only burst again, but your apartment flooded.”

“Yeah, well… So you were right, big deal,” she grumbles as Thea clears her throat. Felicity starts in surprise, turning back to his sister. “Right, so yeah, the plumbing took a turn for the worse.”

Her cheeks are a rather adorable shade of pink as Thea’s grin widens. Clearly, she considers her purpose complete.

“Well feel free to stay as long as you like, Felicity,” his mother chimes in. All four of their heads snap to the woman, having forgotten her presence altogether. She looks amused, her smile soft and affectionate as she looks at them. “It’s good to see Oliver smile again and actually mean it.”

He blinks, surprised at her choice of words. He hadn’t realized his faking it wasn’t so great. Well, Felicity always said she could see through it, and Digg didn’t buy his playboy act for a second, so maybe he’s not as good an actor as he thinks. He came back feeling pressure to be the Ollie his family lost, and it wasn’t until Felicity and Diggle helped him to see that it was time to move on from the past that he really started to relax in his attempts to be the man he thought they needed. Apparently they were right, because his family doesn’t seem to want or need Ollie. They need Oliver.

A squeeze from Felicity’s hand under the table brings him back to the conversation at hand. They’ve moved on to discussing family, a topic that’s understandably making her a bit uncomfortable.

“My mom’s been my greatest supporter all my life. I, uh, I owe her a lot,” she says. He can tell she’s trying to keep it brief without being too obvious about it.

“And your father?” Moira asks.

“Mom-” He cuts in, trying to steer the conversation away from the topic that’s opened fresh wounds over the past weeks.
She squeezes his hand again, this time in reassurance. “It’s fine. He, um,” she pauses, eyes flicking to the ceiling as she searches for the right words, “He died when I was in university.”

His mother looks embarrassed, apologizing profusely while Felicity assures her it’s no big deal. For his part, Oliver is shocked at how she’s referred to her father. Before she found out he was alive, she was careful to say he “left” them. He knows now that part of it was because she believed he committed suicide, *choosing* to let death take him from his family, but hearing her tell his mother and sister that her father is dead when she knows he’s alive… It’s not the first time she’s done it in recent days, and he tucks it away in his mind for later.

“We were never very close,” she continues, trying to power through the heavy silence as only Felicity can. “So, Roy,” she says, changing the topic as abruptly as she changes her tone, “Thea tells me you also fear needles. Something we have in common.”

She punctuates her statement with a wink. Roy’s face remains impassive, trying to determine where she’s going with this. Judging by the glint in her eye, this is heading down the road of payback.

“I’ve been trying to find the best way to distract myself when I have to go in for shots. Any tips?” She asks, smirking as Roy looks distinctly uncomfortable.

Thea is looking at Felicity with an expression he recognizes. It’s a mixture of embarrassment and grudging concession, and he can’t help smiling at the fact that Felicity has managed to put herself back on even footing with his sister with whatever she was alluding to. Obviously they’ve talked even more than he realizes if they have private stories. He isn’t sure how to feel about that, but judging from the way Roy is steadily reddening, he should be concerned.
Much to his chagrin, the moment they manage to escape to his room, Felicity heads straight for the bathroom to change. It’s probably a good thing (that dress is far too distracting for its own good), but he still mourns the loss of opportunity to remove it himself. He doesn’t even want to think about the fact that it actually belongs to his sister.

When she emerges in her pyjamas, hair secured in a side-braid and his sweater half-zipped over her tank top, she looks just as beautiful as she did moments ago. He’s sure she sees the way he swallows just a tad too hard at the sight of her but can’t find it within himself to regret that. They’re past the point of him trying to pretend he isn’t affected by her. He’s pretty sure she gets a bit of a thrill from the knowledge that she can drive him mad.

He’s taken the time she’s been gone to discard the stifling suit he wore to dinner, leaving him in pyjama bottoms and a grey undershirt. Judging by the look in her eye, she’s just as keenly aware of his body as he is of hers, and he wonders if that factors into her decision to drop onto the opposite end of the couch, throwing her feet up in his lap lightheartedly. He chooses not to comment, lightly gripping her ankles and absentmindedly running his thumb over her skin.

“I take it you want to talk,” she finally says into the silence. How she can read him so well, he’ll never understand, but he nods regardless. Her eyes flick away from him as she presses her lips together before nodding along slowly. “I figured when I saw you on the couch.”

So she’s noticed the couch’s strange affiliation with them taking a step back as well. Before dinner, things got a little intense, and he knows that if she were any closer, he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands away from her long enough to have this conversation. His control slips further and further away with each day, and he’s sure that he’ll cave soon. It’s the natural next step, one he’s sure his mother and sister (and probably Diggle and Sara, but he’d rather not think about that) assume they’ve already taken. Like with everything else concerning Felicity, though, he gets the feeling that this is vastly different from his previous attempts at relationships. So much of their intimacy comes from emotional and mental connection that taking the physical step seems somehow more important than all of the previous times he’s done it. He feels pressure to make sure it’s right, not just some heat of the moment thing to satisfy their baser desires. He’s surprised to find it matters to him how it happens. It never has before.

He studies her for a moment longer, trying to shake his thoughts from clouding his goal, before speaking. “I just want to know how you’re doing.”
“I’m… dealing,” she answers, sighing heavily. Her fingers find the edge of his sweater and begin twisting the fabric every which way to occupy themselves. “It was… unexpected, hearing him say that he did it because he loves me. Totally twisted logic, but to spend all this time thinking it was because he didn’t…” She pauses, turning her face to the ceiling briefly in the search for her next words. “I don’t know what to do with that. What if he’s lying? What if it’s all an act designed to lure me in? But then what if it isn’t? What if he’s being honest? I mean, he’s still doing awful things and he’s still involved with Isabel, and he has no intention of stopping either of those things, so does it even matter?

“The man I met with… he isn’t my father. The man who was my father disappeared a long time ago.” Another pause. “I lied tonight, when I said he died when I was in university. He died long before that.” Her voice catches but she powers through. “But then I try to look at him and see only what he’s done and I can’t. I see his face and I want to hate him but I’m too confused to understand what I feel. He’s done terrible things and he’ll keep doing them, but when he looks at me and tells me he only wants what’s best for me… I believe him, even if our definitions of the word clash to the extreme. I know we need to stop him, but beyond that… I’m lost.”

She looks it, he thinks, as he leans across the couch to brush away the stray tears that have escaped her tenuous hold on composure. Felicity closes her eyes and leans into his touch so he leaves his hand on her cheek, hoping it’s enough to lend her the strength she’s lacking.

“Sometimes there’s no easy answer,” he finally says, thinking back to the five years he spent away. “It’s rarely black and white.”

She huffs out a short laugh. “It would be so much easier if it were.”

Oliver silently agrees with her. Life would be easier if everything were cut and dry, but then he probably wouldn’t be the man he is today. If Felicity hadn’t shown him the grey area in the first place, he would have lived his entire life in the black.

“He said I was like him,” she tells him suddenly, pulling away from his hand. He lets it drop to her shoulder and glide down her arm. “He said that his death made me embrace who I truly am, that I’d do anything given the right circumstances, just like him.”

“He’s wrong,” he immediately objects.

Felicity’s eyes fly to his, the panic in them clear. “There’s no way you can know that. Ever since he died I’ve been afraid of letting myself become like him. Obviously, it was because I knew, given the chance, I would do it. I would become my father if I gave into the darkness he pushed on me. It’s
always been there, waiting to be let inside. Once I give myself to it… There’s no going back. He
knows it, and he can see it starting. He can see the darkness he’s brought back into my life, the
shadows I’ve fought so hard against these past six years. It’s why he can see himself in me.”

“Felicity,” he interrupts gently, sliding along the couch until he’s close enough to take her face in his
palms. Her knees are now bent over his thighs, her toes twisting nervously down into the couch
cushion where he was seated moments before. “Anyone is capable of anything, but that doesn’t
always have to be a bad thing. You are not like him. Letting the memories in and using sparring as
an outlet… That doesn’t mean you’re tainting yourself. You’re still you, the woman who can find the
light in even the darkest of people and situations. You can look at your father and see past the things
he’s done to the decent man you remember from pieces of memories years ago. You are capable of
anything, but that doesn’t mean you’re like your father. It means you’re the exact opposite.”

It’s no secret he’s terrible with words, but by the time he’s finished, Felicity’s eyes are glistening with
what he hopes are happier tears. As though on cue, she breaks out into a watery smile and leans
forward to close the distance between them. It’s a slow, deep kiss, meant to convey the gratitude she
seemingly can’t put into words. Once they break apart, she wraps her arms tightly around him and
buries her face in his neck. Turning his head, he presses soft kisses into her hair, once more
overcome with love for the woman who’s brought more light into his life than anyone else.

“Ya tebya lyub-lyu, sol-nyshka moyo,” he whispers into her hair, tightening his arms around her
shoulders.

Her hands rub his back lightly as she asks into his neck, her breath tickling his skin, “What does that
mean?”

It’s the second time he’s said it, and the second time she’s asked. This time, the words are falling
from his lips before he can stop them. “I love you.”

So much for not rushing things. His heart is in his throat as he waits for a reaction, anything to
indicate exactly how far past the line he’s gone.

He breathes a sigh of relief when her arms tighten around his waist. She presses her lips to his neck,
his jaw, and finally his own lips before she pulls back and gives him a blinding smile. “I love you,
too.”

She doesn’t comment on the fact that it’s only a partial translation. Those three words are the only
ones that truly matter. The rest can wait.
With Oliver in a board meeting that’s running late and Diggle out with Lyla for the night, Felicity finds herself alone in the foundry for the first time in a while. Ever since this mess started, there has always been at least one of her men in the basement with her. The silence surrounding her in their absence is rather refreshing. Aside from the potential for Isabel to breach the QC database, it’s a slow night for crime, and she intends to use that to her advantage.

Her father was her first tutor in all things computer-related, meaning he was the one who introduced her to the wonders of hacking. Of course, she’s worked with various other… influences over the years, but her basic habits were passed along from the man who raised her. If she stands a chance at catching him off guard, she needs to work on diversifying her approach. He’ll be expecting three quarters of her knee-jerk reactions, possibly more than that if he’s been watching her as long as she suspects.

In order to get the upper hand, she’s decided to try her luck with some of the Russians she made contact with in her earlier pursuit of the Ghost. Hopefully, they’ll drop some hints about what his strategies are so she can start working on counter-attacks in advance. Cracking her knuckles, she settles in for a long night of re-education.

She’s so engrossed in her monitors, trading information and methods with various online “acquaintances” in multiple countries, that she doesn’t notice the comings and goings of her teammates. It’s been a long time since she’s lost herself in the digital underground and she’s missed it more than she realized. Not since college has she interacted in such an anonymous manner. There’s just something about the idea that, somewhere in Russia and China and New Zealand, there are three other people sitting at monitors trying to outmanoeuvre her. They’re failing, but they’re putting up a valiant effort. It gives her a surge of confidence she’s been lacking lately, what with her revelations concerning her father throwing her off balance.

Finally, she calls it a night when she realizes just how stiff her neck is. She isn’t used to sitting in one place for this long. Usually her Arrow-related hacking permits breaks and distractions, most often in the form of Diggle or Oliver asking questions or bringing food. Looking to her left, she sees a Tupperware container resting on the desk. Frowning, she steps over to it, pausing to get accustomed to the shift in position from her seat.

“Ollie dropped that off a few hours ago. We tried to get your attention but…” Sara’s voice startles her from trying to puzzle out the appearance of the food.

“Sara!” She exclaims, hand clutching her chest. “I didn’t know you were…”
“Here? I know,” Sara smiles gently. “You were a bit lost in your own world.”

Felicity rubs the back of her neck a bit awkwardly, feeling self-conscious that Sara’s probably been here for hours while she’s been oblivious. Obviously she isn’t doing any better with the constant vigilance Diggle’s drilling into her.

“What were you doing?” The other blonde asks curiously, untwisting the cap on a water bottle and taking a swig.

“Just… practicing. It’s been awhile since I’ve really faced a challenge. That was actually part of the reason I signed on to the Arrow mission in the first place, but there’s a big difference between hacking the FBI and trying to best an actual person,” she answers, before cringing. “I didn’t mean for that to sound arrogant.”

Sara shrugs. “Don’t apologize for speaking the truth about your skill. If you aren’t confident, you lose some of your edge.”

Her lips twitch without meaning to and she moves to lift the lid on the container, stomach rumbling loudly when she sees the contents.

“Wow. Ollie’s mac and cheese. He must really like you,” Sara teases, peering into the container over her shoulder.

Felicity lets out a laugh of surprise at Sara’s tone, not expecting the comment. Sara has been so serious since she’s come back into the picture that Felicity finds herself revelling in the opportunity to hear and see her let go of her tough exterior even for a second. It reminds her of the Oliver she first met in that cubicle, longing to smile but not really recalling how. And when the humour does break through the surface, at first it seems tentative, almost foreign, like riding a bike after years of avoiding it for fear of falling.

Rummaging in a drawer in the med bay, Felicity secures two plastic forks and passes one to Sara in silent invitation. She hesitates, but reaches out to accept the fork and pulls up a chair across from Felicity at the table.

“Do I want to know why you guys keep forks in a drawer filled with gauze?” She asks, stabbing a few pieces of macaroni.
Spearing her own bite, Felicity shrugs. “We eat down here a lot. It seemed like a good idea, and we don’t exactly have a lot of drawer space.”

“Fair enough,” Sara concedes, eyes sweeping the foundry walls. “It’s… You guys have a good thing set up here.”

“We like to think so,” Felicity responds, her eyes moving around the room as well. Eventually, they make their way back to where Sara is focused on the tabletop. “You know… If you ever want out…”

Sara’s head jerks up, eyes suddenly guarded. “I can’t leave the League.”

“There has to be a-”

“There isn’t,” Sara cuts her off, voice soft and sad. “I didn’t have anything of value to bargain with like your father. All I had was my soul and they took it gladly. There’s no getting it back now. Once we find the Ghost, I must return to Nanda Parbat.”

Dismayed, she searches for something, anything to say. All she comes up with is a stuttered, “Well… After this long… There has to be something good, some light in all the dark.” She catches the miniscule uptick of the other woman’s lips and smiles encouragingly. “Or maybe someone.”

“Nyssa. She’s the one who found me, the one who convinced Ra’s to give me shelter and train me. She’s the reason I survived.”

It’s the closest she’ll get to an admission from Sara, she knows, and to her credit she thinks she controls the surprise pretty well. Of course, she knew Nyssa and Sara were close based on her previous references to the other assassin, but she wasn’t sure until this moment that the connection runs deeper than friendship.

“See?” She finally says, smiling brightly. “There’s a silver lining in every situation.”

It takes a second, but Sara’s lips twitch in a returning smile, her eyes filled with the same awed disbelief from her apartment. “Ollie’s lucky he found you. I don’t think he’d survive without
someone there to remind him to bask in the sunlight every now and again.”

Not knowing what to say, Felicity jabs her fork into the container once more. Silence falls between them, though it isn’t awkward. Eventually, Felicity remembers what she’s wanted to ask Sara for quite some time, and swallows her bite of pasta to finally put the question out there.

“This is random… But do you speak Russian, by any chance?” She inquires, trying for casual and failing.

“I may have picked up a few words and phrases in my travels. I’m not fluent, but I get by.” Sara’s eyes take on a mischievous glint and she raises an eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

She can already feel her face heating, briefly wondering if this is going too far. Is she crossing a line talking to Sara about this? There’s obviously a reason he hasn’t told her, but she did warn him she’d ask Sara if he didn’t translate… Throwing caution to the wind, she blurts out, “I was wondering if you could tell me what something means. It’s… well, I don’t know what it is. Maybe a description or a comparison? It’s…” She pauses, trying to wrap her tongue around the unfamiliar language. In the end, she probably butchers the words, but the fact that she gets anything resembling them to come out in the first place is a triumph in her books. “Sol-nyshka moyo?”

The other woman ponders the words for a moment, a look of deep concentration etched on her face. After half a minute, a slow smile stretches across her face and Felicity thinks this past hour is probably the most she’s ever seen Sara Lance smile the whole time she’s known her. She looks… younger when she lets the expression take residence on her face. It’s almost as though she hasn’t gone to Hell and stayed there, though her eyes tell a different story. Right now, it’s muted, but if you know to look for it, it’s there.

“It’s a term of endearment,” Sara explains, “Well, that’s the closest thing I can think to describe it. It means ‘my sun’.”

Felicity is pretty sure her heart melts just a bit at that.

She feels out of place, entering the mansion alone and in the middle of the night, but she has no desire to be anywhere Oliver isn’t and she’s pretty sure he’d go ballistic if he awoke in the morning to find out she’d stayed the night in her apartment alone. Leaving her to find her own way back here was a pretty big step for him since the start of his overprotective streak and it would be unnecessarily
mean to push her luck.

“And just where have you been all night?”

Felicity freezes with her hand on the knob to Oliver’s room, eyes slamming shut at being caught sneaking in. This is a whole new level of uncomfortable. At least it’s just Thea and not Moira, but still. Reluctantly, she turns to face the brunette, who is standing in the perfect imitation of her mother when she was caught sneaking back in from the only high school party she’d ever attended (the next morning, her father had found out and forbade her to leave the house for anything aside from school for three months. He then proceeded to both drop her off and pick her up from school for those three months.).

“This isn’t what it looks like,” she immediately blurts out. She was never very good under pressure. In retrospect, she should have prepared a lie for this very situation on her way over here.

“And what does it look like, exactly?” Thea asks, eyebrow raised.

Felicity hesitates. “I’m… not sure. But whatever you’re thinking, this is totally not that.”

The girl studies her for a solid minute, almost to the point of making her squirm under her intense gaze, before she cracks a smile. “Relax, Felicity. Ollie told me you were working late. I was just messing with you.”

Felicity exhales in relief, shoulders slumping with the release of tension.

And then, because the situation isn’t weird enough, Thea keeps talking. “I see the way my brother looks at you, even before you two got together, and I see the way you look at him. I fully trust that I will never have to worry about infidelity on either of your parts.” She must look perplexed because Thea grins and elaborates. “You’re the first serious, long-term one Ollie’s brought home in a long time. You’re good for him. If he ever did anything to screw it up, I would totally kick him out and keep you around.”

She blames her exhaustion for the tears that spring to her eyes at Thea’s proclamation. The brunette looks startled and hurries to fix what she thinks she’s broken. “Hey, no, I didn’t mean… Ollie would never actually…”
“No,” Felicity interrupts, shaking her head, “It’s not that. It’s just… I’m an only child and I never had many friends. I guess I’m just… not used to mattering to people.”

Thea’s eyes fill with sadness then, and Felicity thinks maybe she’s chosen the wrong words. She didn’t mean to come off as a pathetic, lonely woman with no self-esteem.

“I, uh, just meant that… I…” She stutters, trying to avoid becoming an object of pity.

“You’ve felt isolated for so long that you’ve forgotten what it feels like to be cared for?” Thea supplies.

Felicity blinks, meeting the younger girl’s eye and understanding at once. Thea gets it. She went through the same thing after losing Oliver and Robert. She’s heard the stories, the whispers that Moira shut herself away after the Gambit went down. Oliver himself filled in a lot of the blanks about Thea’s struggles with drugs and trying to feel better when her entire world was ripped apart. Of course she would empathize with the feeling of isolation.

She nods mutely, not trusting herself to speak. Sure, she’s been a member of Team Arrow for over two years now, but beyond her mother, she’s always kept a very firm wall between herself and the rest of the world. After her father’s decree that anyone who wasn’t himself or her mother was unsafe for her to associate with, she was left with friends she only saw at school, and eventually they drifted apart. She ended up finishing high school pretty much alone, one of the many nameless faces crossing the stage at the ceremony who wouldn’t be attending the reception afterward and who wouldn’t be missed for a moment. Once her father ‘died’, she kept her walls firmly in place, this time to avoid anyone from hurting her the way he did. Aside from her mother, she didn’t trust anyone to stay, didn’t trust anyone to care. Until now.

Now, she has Oliver, Diggle, and apparently Thea. Even Sara to an extent. Despite her best efforts to keep herself from getting too attached, she has. Just like with Oliver and Diggle, she knows Thea won’t leave. There’s something about the Queens that she trusts inherently, and she can’t bring herself to doubt that.

Instead of saying any of that, she spares Thea an explanation of her messed up psyche and settles for, “Thank you.”

Thea shrugs it off, lightening the mood instantly. “Hey, I figure one day you’ll be my sister-in-law so I may as well get a head start on all the sisterly duties, right?”
Felicity blinks again at the confident tone of Thea’s voice. Honestly, she’s never thought that far ahead, or even thought something like marriage would be in a future for her and Oliver. She loves him, yes, and he loves her, but marriage? Was that even possible with the lives they led? Did it even make sense?

By the time she wraps her head around the idea and subsequently dismisses it as too soon to be stressing about, Thea has disappeared into her room, leaving Felicity alone in the hall. Sighing wearily, she turns back and enters the room, eagerly anticipating sleep. It’s nearing four in the morning, and as she pulls on her pyjamas her mind briefly flits to why exactly Thea was still even awake, but she’s too tired to care at this point.

She sighs in delight as she slips beneath the covers of what has become her side of Oliver’s bed. Surprisingly enough, he’s remained sleeping for the duration of her bedtime routine (which tonight just consisted of changing and brushing her teeth), but when her weight dips onto the mattress, he shifts. With the exception of his nightmares, Oliver usually doesn’t move during the night, so the action startles her. At first, she assumes he’s awake, but when she turns toward him, she’s met with his still-closed eyes. It only takes her a split second of confusion before his arms reach out, finding her waist and tugging her toward him in his sleep. She can’t stop the small smile that breaks onto her face as she settles in her usual place at his side, one arm splayed across his waist with both of his wrapped around her securely. As she drifts off to sleep, she’s sure she catches a deep sigh of contentment falling from his lips and her smile widens.

The first thing she’s aware of is the bright stream of sunlight piercing her eyelids. It’s more insistent than she’s used to, brighter, and she scrunches her face in confusion. Usually the room is much darker when the alarm goes off.

Shifting slightly, she feels the warmth of Oliver’s chest still beneath her head, his abs beneath her arm, and sighs contentedly. For a moment, she forgets her disorientation and merely snuggles closer to the warmth he emits, eliciting a chuckle from the man beneath her.

“What time is it?” She mumbles, refusing to move.

His hand runs lightly up and down her arm as he answers, “Almost ten.”

That gets her attention. She jolts upright in the bed, gasping and spinning to grab her phone. One click of a button proves his statement correct. Felicity can’t even remember the last time she slept past seven. Usually she’s at…
“QC!” She exclaims, looking down at him in alarm. “Isabel! The database! Why did you let me sleep?”

“Everything’s fine, Felicity,” he assures her, lips tugging slightly in a grin. “If anything had gone wrong I would have woken you up. What time did you even get back?”

She cringes. “Late. Or early, depending how you look at it.” She checks her phone again, stomach dropping when she sees the e-mails she’ll need to respond to. “We are insanely late. We should-”

“We are not doing anything,” Oliver insists. “The CEO and his EA are taking a day off.”

She shoots him a look that she’s sure tells him exactly what she thinks of that idea. “Because that sends a good message.”

He shrugs, looking far too carefree for the situation. “You shouldn’t care so much about what people think.”

“It’s not about what people think.” She rolls her eyes, turning her attention back to the bedside table, switching out her phone for her tablet. She can feel herself giving in and sighs. “Fine. If we’re playing hooky from QC I should at least set up-”

Felicity freezes mid-sentence, staring at the subject line of the third message from the top. It looks like run-of-the-mill spam, but she can tell immediately it’s from her father. Memories from years ago, ones she cites as proof her father was a decent man at one point, flood her mind without warning and she drops the tablet onto the bed.

“Felicity?” Oliver’s voice sounds far away, and she barely registers him sitting up beside her. “What’s going on?”

Flashes of her childhood assault her all at once as she remembers the day they came up with her code name. It was one of the first things he told her about being a hacker: every good one has a name. She’d thought it was all fun and games, choosing a silly name to use on the web so no one would know who she really was, but he took it very seriously. He told her that the name she chose would follow her online for the rest of her life (a bit dramatic looking back), so she had to choose carefully. When she asked him what his was, he’d smiled and told her Apollo. Of course, she was too young to fully understand at the time, so he’d explained that the name held symbolic significance. Apollo was
the patron of Delphi, an oracular god who established the Temple of Apollo, which housed the Pythia, or Oracle of Delphi. Apollo was said to have inspired the prophecies made by each Pythia.

After some thought, Felicity chose to call herself Pythia. When her father asked why, she told him that it was so that she’d always remember who taught her what she knew. She wouldn’t admit it at the time, but she also liked the idea of being likened to an oracle. Her eleven year old mind thought it was cool.

Now, as she relays the story to Oliver, she thinks it’s probably something she probably got from her father. After all, the man named himself after a god.

Sighing, she clicks on the email link and tilts it so Oliver can see. His chin is resting on her shoulder, his arms wrapped around her waist to pull her back against his chest while she was talking.

“Vacation in Greece?” He murmurs. She can tell he’s trying to connect the dots but not succeeding. After all, if it were obvious to everyone, her father wouldn’t have sent it.

She leans her head against his as she explains, “Apollo’s temple was in Delphi, Greece. It’s a message from my father. He wants to meet. Today, according to the date the contest closes.”

He doesn’t question how she knows, doesn’t ask if she’s sure that’s what it means. He only nods, presses a kiss to her shoulder, and says, “If you’re sure.”

She meets him at her apartment with Sara once again, the other blonde waiting down the hall this time to give them more privacy. She can’t go with Oliver or Digg, not until she knows what this is about, and if Sara’s too close he won’t be candid enough for her to get what she needs. He’s not stupid; regardless of Sara’s inability to take him down herself, he knows her loyalty lies with the League. He won’t open up, not if she’s within earshot, and Felicity needs him to be as unguarded as possible. She’s gotten Isabel to slip, now she just needs her father to tell her when it’s happening so she can be prepared. In truth, she expected it to happen within a couple of days of her handing them over, so the fact that there hasn’t been a peep from him is making her nervous. It’s a fine line she’s been walking, and tonight could very well bring it all crashing down. Whatever her father wants, it can’t be good, but she’s resolved to use the situation to her advantage as much as possible.

He looks much the same as the last time she saw him, sitting on her couch like he belongs there, his sandy hair neatly combed and his dark-rimmed glasses ever-so-slightly askew on his face. In her
memory, it’s always the glasses that make her remember her father. They’re a piece of imperfection on an otherwise smooth, cold exterior; a window into the warm, welcoming soul beneath.

“Why did you change your name to the Ghost?” She asks suddenly, surprising herself. The purpose of this meeting was supposed to be determined by him, given he called for it, but she’s overwhelmed by a desire to know.

He blinks, turning his head to look at her standing hesitantly by the door. “I didn’t,” he says simply, rubbing his palms slowly against each other and turning to stare at them as he continues, voice soft with honesty. “Apollo didn’t exist anymore. I became nothing more than a shadow, so they called me the Ghost.”

She nods after a second, accepting the answer and taking a few steps into the room. She leaves a respectable distance between them, wary of getting too close. He may look like her father right now, but she can’t be too sure he’ll stay that way. As much as it kills her, she can’t trust him like a daughter should trust her father.

“Why did you stop calling yourself Pythia?” He shoots back.

It takes her a moment to decide how best to answer that question. She hadn’t stopped hacking when her father died, so she can’t use that as an excuse. Instead, she decides on the truth, since he did her the same courtesy. Of course, he could just be a really good actor, but there’s something about the way he said the words, the way he wouldn’t look her in the eye. First and foremost, her father was a cowardly man, preferring to hide from the reality of his problems, and she’s glad to see that hasn’t changed. Though, he’s sitting here right now, so maybe he’s taken some steps in the right direction since he left.

“You were always about knowledge and control, and you used your technological skills to get both,” she finally tells him. “I wanted to connect with you, and being Pythia was one of the only ways I knew to do that. Once you were gone, I didn’t need her anymore. I didn’t want to be all about power and control, so I distanced myself from the name.”

“And what about now? What do you call yourself?”

Felicity’s gaze shifts to the window, surveying the lights of the city as she sinks down on the other end of the couch and answers. “I don’t need a name. What I do for the Arrow isn’t something I want recognition for. I don’t leave a name or a calling card, and I certainly don’t need people to attach me to him. The only important thing is that the criminals pay. They don’t need to know every person who had a hand in it.”
Her answer seems to displease him, if the twist of his lips is anything to go by. “And yet you’re willing to leave all that behind?”

She sucks in a breath. “I didn’t say that.”

“You gave Isabel the codes. Am I wrong in assuming that means you’ve chosen a side?”

It surprises her that he’s jumped to that conclusion. She expected him to call her out and tell her he can see right through her, yet he seems to want her to choose him badly enough to ignore her utter repulsion of the idea. Or maybe she’s been better at controlling her gut reactions than she thought. She doesn’t think so, though. Try as she might, she’s never been quite able to muster the Felicity she shows Isabel behind closed doors. Perhaps it’s because she doesn’t expect to fool her father for a second, or maybe she’s just too exhausted with trying to hold herself together in his presence to worry about trying to lie to him on top of it all. Either way, his confidence that she’s chosen him is startling.

“I know you, Flick,” he ploughs on, reaching out to catch her hand. She resists the urge to pull away. “Maybe you didn’t realize it at the time, but when you gave those codes to Isabel, you made a choice. It might take you a bit to see it, but you made the right one.”

She takes a shaky breath, mind reeling. *Play along. Play along.* “Did I?”

“Of course you did. The Oliver Queens of the world will come and go, but I’ll always be your father. You, me, and Isabel. We’ll be a family, like we were meant to.”

“Then why haven’t you done it yet?” She challenges, turning to face him. “Why haven’t you destroyed the database and set it all in motion?”

“I just need a bit more time to get our identities in place. We won’t just be hiding from the rest of the world. They need to fool the League as well. They need to be perfect,” he tells her, almost muttering to himself near the end. He scrubs his hands through his hair before looking back up at her. “I’m so glad you saw reason, Flick. Now all I need to do is convince…”

Her eyes widen. “Have you not told Isabel yet?”
“She’ll understand,” he responds, though it seems more like he’s trying to convince himself of that fact.

Felicity rears back. “She’s not going to just go along with this. She’s got a good thing going with the Russians. Why would she give that up?”

“Because she loves me!” He fires back. “We’re family, and you do anything for family. I certainly did for her. I found her father, joined the League, left you… I helped her do all of this!” He exclaims, flinging his arms out widely. “I helped her with the Undertaking! I stood by her when she joined in on her father’s scheme to disrupt the Chinese economy with Edward Fyers!”

“You what?!” Felicity exclaims, the name catching her attention immediately. She’s heard Oliver talk about Fyers in connection to his first year on the island, none of it good. She can’t even imagine her father being involved with him. The man she knew would never… But he’s not that man anymore. He was rarely the man with the crooked glasses, and she needs to stop trying to convince herself those brief flickers of him can be extrapolated to the entire man.

“That was how she planned for me to fake my death,” he explains, voice softening as he calms down. “I was supposed to be on the plane Fyers shot down, except he never did. I’m told we have Oliver Queen to thank for that.”

“You were… you were involved in that?” She’s pretty sure she’s about to be sick. Her father was in on the plot with Fyers. Her father knew the man who’d put Oliver through so much pain and suffering. Suddenly unable to sit near him, she rises and puts the entire room between them, hands pressed flat against her stomach in an attempt to settle it.

“I didn’t want to be. I tried to tell her how wrong it was, but she wouldn’t listen. And when her father failed… she was convinced she could do it better. She hatched this plan, choosing Queen Consolidated as the company she’d use as her flagship. It was supposed to lead the turn-around after the Russians bought up controlling interest in each company we decimated, eventually making Russia the new economic powerhouse. She said it would be an ironic sort of justice, using the Queen name to succeed where it had torn her father down before. So I helped her work out the details, starting with gaining Oliver Queen’s trust. When we met during your business trip to Russia, she said she was on the right track, but by the time I got back to Starling things had taken a bit of a turn. She was afraid of failing, of the consequences she’d face if she dropped the ball after pushing the scheme through. Her father hadn’t wanted to try again so soon after his failure when she first brought it to him, but we took care of it… If she were to fail after all that… she’d be done for.”

“You helped her kill her father,” she clarifies, unable to even muster shock anymore. This is getting out of control. She never expected confessions of this magnitude when she came here. She never imagined…
“It was what she wanted. He didn’t believe in her, not the way I did. She deserved better, and I knew it would make her happy,” her father says, voice imploring her to understand. “I just want you both happy and safe.”

“So, naturally, you became an accessory to murder and an international assassin,” she snaps. She’s a good actress given proper preparation, but there’s only so much she can push beneath the surface. As much as it would help the mission, she can’t act like she’s alright with any of this. Any doubts she may have harboured about her father’s commitment to Isabel’s cause are long gone. If he’s willing to participate in all of this, and sit here justifying it to her as acts of love, he’s further gone than she thought. There’s no redemption from this. If her father hasn’t lost himself to the darkness, then he’s certainly lost himself to the delusions. She’s not sure which is worse.

“Flick, don’t-” He pleads, rising half out of his seat as he registers the look on her face.

She recoils even though he’s nowhere near her. “Don’t touch me. Don’t ever call me that again. Don’t even look at me again.”

He stares at her, eyes wide in surprise and she laughs bitterly.

“You know, I thought that maybe there was something of the man you used to be left inside. I thought maybe I could justify you doing any of this, but I can’t. I can’t excuse this. I’m done.”

“Flick-”

“I told Oliver I wasn’t sure where I stood with you,” she keeps talking as though he hadn’t interrupted, turning her head to the ceiling in an attempt to hold onto her composure. “I was so confused. When I thought about you leaving, what you’re doing with Isabel, it was easy to hate you, but then I’d look at you and your stupid glasses and I’d remember the man who told me the story of Apollo while we took apart the computer. I’d remember the man who shared a secret smile with me when Mom came home and ranted and raved at us for destroying every electronic the house had to offer. I’d remember when you were my dad, not the overbearing man who forced his ideals on me. Those rare moments of connection between us, they made me think that maybe, just maybe, that man was still somewhere inside you. But he’s not, is he?

“You aren’t my dad, and you never can be again, because Isabel took you from me.” She holds up a hand to stop his denial. “It’s true. When you got involved with her, you started losing yourself piece by piece, whether it was to the Undertaking, the League of Assassins, the Russian mob, or all three.
You aren’t the man I remember; you haven’t been for a very long time, and I’m naïve for thinking you could be again one day.”

“I never stopped being your dad,” he argues. “I wasn’t being overbearing for the sake of it! The world is a dangerous place, and Isabel showed me exactly how dangerous it can be. She made me see that you needed to be able to protect yourself, and that, if it came down to it, I couldn’t save you like a father should. I needed to be better for you and for her. I couldn’t waste my life drinking and I wasn’t getting anywhere teaching myself to fight. I needed help.” He throws his hands in the air in an exasperated motion. “God, how many times do I have to say it? I left because I love you and I want to protect you. I wasn’t ready before, but I am now. Why do you think I’m doing this? Why do you think I let you find Isabel on that footage in the hotel? I wanted you to uncover all of this, to find me. I wanted to be a family again, Flick, because I’ll always-”

“Don’t!” She cries, tears threatening to spill over. After a couple of calming breaths, she continues in an even tone, finger pointing threateningly in his direction. “Let me make this clear. There is no choice to make. What you are doing is wrong and I’m going to stop you.”

Her father stands in stunned silence for a full thirty seconds before she sees the mask come down over his face. For second, he almost looks heartbroken before the cold exterior slams into place. The man draws himself up to his full height and squares his jaw.

“Have it your way. Just know that I won’t be pulling any punches.”

“Neither will I,” she retorts, ice in her voice. Without waiting for a reaction, she brushes past him and out the door. She ignores Sara’s confused expression in favor of the elevator button, abandoning the contraption for the stairs when it takes too long to get her away from the man who used to be her father.

She didn’t think it would hurt so much, admitting to herself that there’s nothing redeeming about the man. After all, she’s spent the past six years telling herself exactly that. But to see proof of it… A sob escapes her lips on a gasp and there’s not enough air in the car Sara has at some point ushered her into. She can’t remember anything past bolting down the stairs in her building. Her breath is coming in sharp gasps that won’t fill her lungs and her head is spinning and her brain is whirling and she can’t-

“Felicity! Felicity, hey, look at me.” Oliver’s voice is trying to break through the haze and all she can think is where did he come from? Last she remembers they were still driving, but apparently they’ve stopped. Oliver’s eyes are directly in front of hers, clouded in worry, and his hands are framing her face. Hands that Edward Fyers probably tied behind his back to torture him.
Just like that, her stomach finally rebels against everything she’s learned tonight and she rips herself from Oliver’s gentle grasp to vomit on the street. Luckily, they haven’t quite made it inside Verdant yet. As she empties the contents of her stomach, all she can think is that her father, the man who makes up half of her genetic material, helped to hire Edward Fyers, the man who tortured Oliver. Oliver, who is currently holding her hair behind her head and rubbing soothing circles on her back and telling her it’s going to be alright. He has no idea. Nothing is ever going to be alright again, not after she tells him. He’s going to pull away from her the instant the words leave her lips, because how can he not? Her father is indirectly responsible for his first hellish year on that island. For all she knows, he called Fyers up himself and arranged it all as the middle man.

“Don’t,” she manages to finally rasp out once she straightens. She tugs herself from his grip, putting space between them as she moves to stand closer to Diggle. All three of them are studying her with concern she knows she doesn’t deserve. “Don’t touch me, please. I don’t- I can’t-” She stutters around it, trying not to break down again at the utterly lost and hurt look in Oliver’s eyes. He doesn’t understand, but he will. “My father and Isabel hired Edward Fyers to shoot down that plane six years ago.”

Everything goes still. Even the city seems to freeze around them as they digest the information. Sara’s eyes widen, Diggle’s slam shut, but Oliver’s… They glaze over like they usually do when he’s retreating to the island in his mind. Her words have taken him back to whatever torture Fyers put him through, whatever torture her father enabled.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers into the silence, her voice breaking. A single tear spills over, streaking down her cheek. She has no right to cry; she’s not the one who’s been wronged here, but her heart is aching for the pain she’s caused Oliver with her revelation.

A heavy hand lands on her shoulder and she glances behind her to see John standing closer than before. “Why are you sorry?” He asks.

“I had no idea he was capable of something like that. He’s not innocent, but what he’s done goes so far past what I thought…”

“This isn’t your fault,” Diggle tells her with so much conviction that she believes him. “You are not your father.”

She lowers her gaze to where her fingers are twisting nervously. What he’s saying makes sense, but her mind is working on overdrive and she can’t shut it off.

“He’s right,” Oliver speaks up. Her eyes fly to his, glad he’s managed to pull himself out of the past.
He closes the distance she put between them in three strides, but doesn’t reach out to touch her. “You are not your father. You aren’t responsible for his actions, and you aren’t responsible for what Fyers did.”

Diggle and Sara have somehow melted into the background, perhaps retreating to the basement to give them a moment. Wherever they’ve gone, the alley is now empty save for her and Oliver.

“I know that in theory…” She admits, avoiding his eyes again. “I… I don’t want you to look at me and see him. I don’t want you to associate me with what happened to you, and I guess I’m just afraid that-”

“Felicity,” he cuts her off gently, tilting her chin up to meet her eyes, “I would never think of the island when I look at you. Nothing you can say or tell me will ever change that.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. On some level, she knows the very notion of Oliver blaming her for her father’s actions is highly ridiculous, but she can’t help it. The five years he was lost are undoubtedly the worst of his life, and if she in any way brings a reminder of that… She would understand him wanting to distance himself from it.

Instead of doing that, though, he pulls her closer, presses a soft kiss to her forehead, and wrap his arms tightly around her, telling her without words that her father won’t come between them. She returns the hug, relaxing against him and taking his support.

“I’ll be here until you’re not,” he murmurs against her hair.

The words sound so bizarre that she laughs, the sound muffled by his shirt, and pulls back to look him properly in the eye. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Later, when they’ve all reconvened in the foundry, Felicity’s alarm sounds. The four of them look up from where they’ve been sitting at the table going over what they’re going to send to Lance, Felicity immediately bee-lining for her monitors. After a few clicks and taps of the keyboard, she bites her lip and turns back to face her three companions.

“He’s breached the firewall.”
Ok, and we’ll leave you there with that nice little cliffhanger. So, the next chapter will be all about her online battle with her father and the struggle for Queen Consolidated. Before canon debunked it, I always thought that Isabel was the legs seen during the Fyers stuff. I had planned for that to be a larger revelation, but a lot of things about my plan for Isabel, Felicity, and her father changed from my original intentions, so that really wasn’t fitting as a big revelation the way I wanted it to. Instead, it serves as the final straw in Felicity’s hope that her father is a decent man beneath all the terrible things he’s done.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Ok, here we go! So, again, I’m not that good with computers, so this will kind of skim over that stuff in that it’s largely from Oliver’s POV so I won’t have to try for too much detail about what she’s doing specifically.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His index finger rubs against his thumb as he watches her at the computer. Every part of him is yearning to approach, to massage the tension out of her shoulders and kiss the frown off her face, but he knows those are distractions she can’t afford. The singular focus she gets when she’s zoned in is something she needs right now, and he has no right interrupting that, as good as his intentions may be. His company depends on her success, and he’s starting to think her emotional well-being does as well. She’s been struggling ever since her father revealed himself, and after everything she learned about his connection to Fyers…

It’s been a long time since fear gripped his heart so completely as it did when he saw Sara pull the vehicle to the curb and rush around to open the passenger door, revealing a very distraught Felicity. His breath caught in his throat and he nearly stopped breathing himself, thinking she was wounded at first. Looking back now, she was hurt, just not physically as he assumed. One of the things he knows from experience, though, is that the emotional wounds are the ones which take the longest to heal. If he wasn’t evidence enough of it himself, he’s seen it reflected in Diggle for as long as he’s known the man. Granted, Digg’s wounds have had longer to scar, so they aren’t as outwardly noticeable as his own, but Oliver can see them lurking beneath the surface.

He’s never noticed Felicity’s, whether that’s because he didn’t want to see them or she didn’t want him to, but now that he’s paying attention… The signs are there. She hadn’t even had time to properly deal with her father’s death before the man barged back into her life, claiming he never stopped loving her and throwing her into turmoil. Now, she has brand new wounds stemming from everything she’s learned about the lengths her father has gone to over the years and Oliver isn’t sure if they’ll ever fully heal.

His fist clenches of its own accord. She deserves better. A father is supposed to do everything in his power to protect his child from the evils of the world, not become that evil himself.

But is he really one to judge? He returned from the island shrouded in shadows, but convinced the end justified the means. Isn’t that essentially what her father is doing? From what she’s told him, her father believes the darkness is worth it, just like he did at one time. Felicity pulled him back from that, showed him another way when he didn’t think there was one. She saved him from himself, made him a hero when he was certain he was a monster. How any man could look her in the eye and
“Oliver?” Digg’s voice jerks him back to the present. Oliver’s head snaps to give his friend his full attention. Digg claps a hand on his shoulder. “She’s strong. She’ll get through this.”

Oliver nods, grateful to Diggle for understanding, but the doubt still lingers in his mind. There’s only so much a person can take before they break permanently.

“We need a plan,” Sara says firmly, and Oliver feels a rush of gratitude toward her as well. She knows he needs to focus on something, to talk strategy.

“We’ve got Felicity’s file to give to Lance,” Digg contributes, shoving his hands in his pockets. “That should nail Isabel, especially with her confession.”

Oliver nods along, though all three know this isn’t the part of the plan that needs discussing. “Provided it doesn’t get thrown out as inadmissible. All that’s left is taking down the Ghost…”

Sara looks past him, eyes focused on Felicity as she asks, “Are you guys sure you want to do this?”

She told the League they’d help her bring the Ghost in when the time came, but only Oliver has given her his word on the matter. Diggle hasn’t committed one way or the other, so it’s really only his answer Sara is looking for.

Digg is silent for half a minute before nodding. “Felicity’s right. He needs to be stopped.”

With that out of the way, the three of them make their way over to the table to decide how best to take him out.

“How did he get so good so fast anyway?” Diggle wonders, tapping his fingers on the table in frustration. It’s a question Oliver’s found himself pondering on multiple occasions. Sara’s one of the best he’s ever encountered, and she should have a slight time advantage on the man.

Sara shrugs. “When you have nothing to do but train you tend to lose yourself in it. I was that way at first, but then I remembered that there was more to life. I don’t think he ever got that. Every time I
heard them reference the Ghost it was always in connection to a mission. It seemed as if he buried himself in work and training to forget about his past.”

“So, basically, you started slacking and he didn’t?” Digg surmises. His tone is light and teasing, a rare occurrence in such a dire situation, but an obvious olive branch.

Sara’s lips twitch. “Essentially.”

They let the moment settle over them before Oliver reluctantly breaks it with, “So what’s the best way to do this?”

Sara’s lips purse in concentration as she turns the possibilities over in her mind. “Well, I would say that our original plan of having Felicity lure him out isn’t going to work out so well anymore… I could probably contact him myself, but he’ll be wary of that.”

Their theorizing is cut off by an exclamation from Felicity. They pause in their conversation for a minute, but when she makes no move to offer explanation, they turn back to face each other. It’s going to be a long night.

She’s never felt this much desperation to succeed. A lot is riding on her ability to outsmart her father, and she still doubts that’s possible. She knows nothing about the man, but apparently he knows much more about her than she thought. Every attempt she’s made to skirt around him, he’s cut off and countered as though he expected it all along. In comparison, she knows so little about his methods. The tips the Russians were able to give her haven’t been of much use, since apparently that was just the tip of the iceberg. She always thought her father was above average in the tech world, but right now, trying to best him, she’s realizing his skill is far above what he showed anyone. Even when he was trying to bond with her, he refused to reveal himself completely.

Setting one of the programs to run on auto, she pauses to push her glasses up and rub her eyes. She used to be able to stay up three days straight when she was in college, purely absorbed in her computer. Those days are long gone, though. Sure, she often runs on “sleep deprived” thanks to her two full-time jobs, but that’s easier to stomach with the added knowledge that her lack of sleep means the city is safe. She used to love hacking, the challenge and puzzle it presented, but after spending two years working with the Arrow, she realizes how pointless the life of a hacker truly is. What does it really accomplish? If she had remained Pythia, what life could she really have led? She wouldn’t feel nearly half the sense of accomplishment she does each night she helps Oliver and Digg navigate through the streets.
In fact, if she’d remained Pythia, she’s sure she would have become something like her father, and the man is not someone she wants to be like in any capacity. Funny, how she spent so much of her life wanting him to be proud of her and now the very thought of doing something to spark his pride makes her want to vomit.

“I wanted to be like my father until we were in that life boat and he told me what he’d been a part of. Sometimes I wish I could go back to a time when the only thing I wanted was to be like him. It was easier then. Now, the very thought of someone saying that I remind them of my father is… He’s the last thing I want to be.”

Oliver’s words from what feels like an eternity ago ring in her head and she squeezes her eyes shut against them. The parallels are uncanny. What are the chances that both of them would have such similar experiences? Maybe that’s what finally pushed them across that line they’d been dancing beside since they met. The shared understanding that’s only deepened given everything she’s learned about her father in the past weeks. Before, she wasn’t sure she could compare her situation to Oliver’s, but it turns out her own father has been involved in things just as unsavory as his.

She’s ashamed to admit it, but a small part of her held out hope that the man who used to be her father still remained inside the stranger he became. If there’s one thing she regrets in her last conversation with the man, it’s revealing her naivety in the matter. She tipped her hand to him, showed him that she isn’t as unaffected as she’d like to be. She proved she’s vulnerable where he obviously isn’t.

*Always find the weakness in your opponent.*

*Why?*

*So you can exploit it.*

It’s her father’s words this time, echoing inside her skull far too loudly for her liking. He’s certainly found her weakness, but she has yet to find his. Digg, Oliver, and Sara remain convinced it’s her, but after everything… she can’t believe it. No father who loves his daughter puts her through this and then actively opposes her efforts to do the right thing by thwarting him. No matter how delusional he may be, she can’t forgive him for this, and she can’t believe his good intentions make up for it all.

Felicity groans in frustration, hands raking through her hair and effectively ruining her ponytail. She roughly tugs the elastic out to start over again, breathing deeply in an attempt to regain her calm. The
program she set up should finish soon, and she needs to be back in the right headspace to come at this from another angle. Trying to predict what her father will do next is proving to be nearly impossible, though.

Around three, Digg takes a coffee run, noticing their shortening attention span. Even Felicity looks like she’s starting to give in to exhaustion. Oliver can’t blame her. She and her father have been battling it out for nearing four hours now. It doesn’t sound like they’ve gotten any closer or farther from determining an outcome, though. He knows absolutely nothing about what’s going on, but it seems to him as though they’ve hit a stalemate.

If the tension in her shoulders is anything to go by, she doesn’t think this is a good thing. Regardless of Felicity’s negative opinion on the matter, he thinks it’s pretty impressive that she’s kept the man at bay this long. They’ve heard nothing but how formidable the Ghost is in the underground tech world. From what Felicity passed along, he gets the impression the Ghost isn’t someone who encounters a lot of people on his level, so for the battle to have gone on this long… Either he’s pulling his punches or Felicity is much better than she gives herself credit for. It may be biased, but he’s willing to bet it’s the latter.

Another sigh of frustration carries over to the training mats from the computer desk and Oliver breaks his concentration on the pull-ups he’s been doing to glance over at her. Sara has stepped out to call Nyssa and fill her in on the plan to have the Ghost in custody soon, so they’re alone in the foundry.

He’s debating the wisdom of approaching her when she spins in her chair, head tilted up to the ceiling.

“I’m getting nowhere,” she snaps, fingers clenching on the arms of the chair.

“Neither is he,” Oliver points out. It probably doesn’t help, but it’s the truth.

She brings her head back down to look at him. “What good does that do any of us if I can’t find a way to lock him down? At this point it’s a contest of stamina and I don’t think I’ll come out on top.”

He can’t help but raise a teasing eyebrow at her phrasing.

She flushes a deep red. “Not a word.”
He holds his hands up in surrender, palms outward and grin barely suppressed as he makes his way toward her.

“I just… I don’t have anything left in my bag of tricks, Oliver. He knows everything about me and I know nothing about him. He’s my father, and I can’t predict a single thing he’s going to do.”

“So don’t.”

She opens her mouth to respond and then closes it abruptly, frowning. “What?”

He leans back against her desk, arms crossed. “I may not know much about the tech aspect, but I do have some experience in trying to outsmart an opponent,” he offers. “When Slade was teaching me to fight, he used to purposefully use the same manoeuvres so that I’d grow to expect them. After a while, I started to anticipate them and planned my counters accordingly. One day, he changed it up and I hit the ground hard. As he was helping me up, he told me that familiarity can be both a blessing and a curse. It may make it easier to predict the moves, but it also makes it harder to react when the moves change.”

Frown still in place, she tilts her head. “So you’re saying go back to square one? Forget he’s my father, forget he’s the Ghost, and just look at him as another nameless, faceless opponent?”

Lord help him… “Yes. Think about him objectively. Who is he? What makes him tick? What can you use to your advantage?”

She considers for a moment before her eyes light up briefly. Her head is shaking faster than he can ask what she’s thought of, though.

“No,” she protests. “I… Look, I get that the obvious answer is to use his daughter against him. That’s immediately what my mind jumps to, considering it objectively. I just can’t jump on that train, Oliver, not knowing what I do. How am I supposed to believe I’m his weakness?”

Oliver remains silent for a moment, reaching out to brush a strand of hair behind her ear. The action draws her attention back to him, allowing him a glimpse of the turmoil lurking beneath the surface. The emotion finally gives him an answer for her. “Because you know what you do. If he was as done with you as you want to believe, he wouldn’t have reached out. He wouldn’t have created a world in which you forgive him for everything. He wouldn’t have told you he was alive. Your father
loves you, Felicity, even if he has a warped way of showing it. You know it; you just don’t want to admit it.”

Her eyes flash. “And why not?”

“Because,” he answers, smiling softly if a little sadly, “You don’t know what to do with the idea that he can love you and hurt you at the same time.”

She’s silent, but he can feel her sudden anger ebbing away with each passing second. Eventually, she sighs and pulls away from his hand to whirl back to her screens. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe not. Either way, I’ve really got nothing to lose at this point, do I? Nothing I’ve tried so far against the Ghost has worked, and none of his tricks as Apollo have panned out for me, so what else is there? I may as well try the Hail Mary and see where it gets me.”

She’s sure there’s going to be a permanent indentation in her bottom lip from where she’s gnawing on it. Hopefully Oliver won’t mind.

As nervous as she was before, she’s doubly so now. Approaching this as herself was hard enough, but to come at him as Pythia? It’s risky, and there’s a very real chance it will backfire, but it’s her last chance at catching him off guard. After expressing her present disdain for the moniker, it’s likely the furthest expectation from his mind. Pairing that with his view of Pythia as an inferior, she hopes his arrogance will trip him up. It’s the first thing she’s been able to determine has always been present in her father. Whether it was muted during her formative years, or practically shouted from the computer screen as the Ghost, her father is used to being the best. Always the corporate climber, he’s used to dominating in his field, never content to stay in a mid-level position. She expects nothing less than for him to sink into the trap she’s currently setting. His avoidance of her previous attempts to kick him out of the system are a result of his logical, emotionless thinking, but she’s aiming to taint that.

As the Ghost, he’s melded new approaches with ones he used as Apollo, and it’s time she starts doing the same. She needs to combine Felicity with Pythia in order to draw him in. She needs to remind him of his daughter, the one he spent hours training on the computer before totally ruining the moment with some controlling remark or a plan to introduce her to Isabel the following week. She needs him to forget about being the Ghost or Apollo for that one split second she needs to slam the door shut in his face.

During the time they spent at the keyboard, Felicity would always fall into one particular trap. It happened time and again, until one day, her father told her that mistake would likely cost her
something extremely important in the future. He told her a novice would spot the error a mile away and use it to take her down, so was he just wasting his time trying to teach her if she obviously wasn’t learning? They’d had a massive fight, him yelling at her to use the intelligence she was throwing away on a computer science degree at MIT for once (he’d supported her decision to attend the school, he just wanted her to become an engineer instead) and come up with a way to fix the problem she kept having. She countered, screaming at him that no matter what she did, she wasn’t ever going to be good enough.

He’d died three days later.

Their last conversation had been a fight to pretty much end all fights, and the guilt of it weighed on her just as heavily as her hatred for the man who pushed her to reach unrealistic expectations before removing himself from the equation when she failed to meet them. In her anger at the man, she spent weeks on the computer, perfecting the fix to her perpetual mistake. Finally, she found a way to turn it into a trap, and when she did, the first place she went was his headstone.

*You thought I couldn’t, but I found another way in spite of you. Now, maybe I can start to move on and let you go. Maybe I can even find a way to love you again, for Mom’s sake.*

Her version of loving him turned out to be shoving him into a locked mental box, but up until now it’s helped her survive. At this point, though, compartmentalizing is pointless. She can’t keep separating the two halves of herself. She’s been saying she isn’t his daughter, but she needs to be in order to pull this off. Hopefully, in his arrogance, he’ll fall for the eternal mistake of Pythia the instant he recognizes it. She can already picture the smirk spreading across his face as he mutters some version of “I told you so” right before she hits him out of left field.

The only question left is if she’s cold enough to go through with it.

It’s clear that her focus is back on the screen in front of her, so Oliver gently squeezes her shoulder, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head before retreating to the training mats. It’s killing him, not being able to do more than plot out a strategy to take her father down after it’s all said and done. He knows she’s on board with the plan to return him to the League in theory, but will she still feel the same way afterward? Once she’s had time to process, she may feel very differently about the whole thing, and then every time she looks at him, she’ll see the man who helped send her father back to Hell.

No, he tells himself, lashing out and hitting the dummy with a hard jab. He follows with a cross, nearly grunting with the force of his punches. He can’t believe she’ll let this come between them,
especially after she was so worried he’d hate her when she told him about Fyers. He has to trust in what they’ve built.

Diggle returns with the coffee, setting Felicity’s a fair ways away from her keyboard to prevent accidental spillage. Sara follows soon after, inhaling appreciatively and thanking the man as he hands her the travel cup. Oliver glances over at the computer desk to see Felicity reach blindly for the coffee she’s somehow aware of despite her oblivion to everything else. A lopsided smile breaks out on his face at the confirmation that caffeine truly does trump all in her life.

“What’s to say Isabel won’t hop a flight back to Russia the second she fails?” Sara inquires, drawing patterns on the table with her index finger. It doesn’t escape Oliver’s notice that she’s phrased it as a ‘when’ rather than an ‘if’. “If I were her, I’d want to get the hell out of Dodge before everything hits the fan.”

Oliver’s thought of that possibility himself, but dismissed it just as quickly. He shakes his head. “That’s not Isabel’s style. She’s arrogant; she won’t think we have anything on her, and she’ll want to stick around to deal with Felicity personally.”

Digg’s jaw clenches. “She’ll definitely be out for blood, and she’s proven she likes to be in charge. She won’t leave anything to chance. We just need to grab her before she comes for our girl.”

“So what if we hit right after Isabel’s arrest?” Sara asks. “My father will likely hit up the office sometime in the morning with the warrant and take her into custody, and it won’t take long for him to hear about it. We need to hit before he disappears again.”

“So we get Felicity to track him and go take care of him at the same time Isabel is being arrested?” Digg suggests, taking a pull from his coffee and grimacing. “Sorry it tastes like crap; Thea really skimped on the brand.”

Oliver half-grins. “That’s what you get for ordering coffee in a bar.”

“We should get a machine down here. Lord knows we have enough late nights to use it.”

“I’ll put it on the list.”

Digg raises an eyebrow. “There’s a list?”
He nods in confirmation. “Why do you think we got the couch?”

Silence envelopes them for a long while before Felicity breaks it, pushing herself away from the computer and standing for the first time in hours. The three of them turn to face her, Oliver taking in the grim set of her mouth and knowing instantly what she’s about to say.

“It’s done.”

Her head is resting in his lap, his fingers trailing lightly through the hair she released from her elastic after sinking down into the cushions of the couch in the foundry. It’s almost… peaceful. Even though the three of them have been awake just as long as she has, her battle of wits with her father has left her far more visibly exhausted. They’ve been strategizing and sparring, but that doesn’t take the same toll as the consistent mental engagement she’s been subjected to. He isn’t sure how her brain functioned for that long without her losing her edge, but her fatigue is finally showing as she sighs contentedly, her fingers trailing over his thigh beside her head lightly.

“Hmm, that feels nice,” she mumbles, yawning. “This couch was the best idea I’ve ever had.”

He smiles down at her adoringly, chuckling silently to himself. Digg is watching with an amused brow raised while Sara’s face is lit up with a small smile. They aren’t much for public displays; in fact, this is probably the most openly intimate Digg and Sara have ever and will ever see them.

“You want to get out of here?” He murmurs down to her, stroking the hair from the side of her face. “Get some sleep?”

She yawns again, but shakes her head. “No, no. We still have stuff to figure out. Like how to get him into custody.”

“We’ve taken care of it, Felicity,” Digg assures her. “You don’t need to worry.”

“You’ve done your part,” Sara agrees.
And she has. She’s managed to best her father, despite her doubts she could. He doesn’t think it’s really registered at this point, though. All she seemed capable of doing after she uttered those two words was slouching down on the couch, curling into his side and eventually shifting down to their current position when he sat beside her. He’ll give her some time to decompress; she obviously needs it.

“He’s probably really angry right now,” she replies sleepily. “He didn’t think I could be so cold, but I did what I needed to given the circumstances… Guess I was his weakness after all…”

The words send up a flare of alarm in his mind, but now isn’t the time to have that discussion. Perhaps tomorrow, after Isabel’s been arrested and her father is on his way back to the League. Right now, her breathing has evened out and he doesn’t want to pull her from the moment of calm she’s found as the storm passes.

Not wanting to move her, he stays in the same position while telling Digg and Sara to head out and grab a couple hours of sleep before they reconvene in the morning. They want to give Isabel some time to feel secure so she doesn’t spook. He’s sure she’ll spend the first couple of hours at QC monitoring the security feeds, ready to flee at the first sign of the cops. After that, she may relax enough to go about her day normally (well, as normally as she can while lying in wait to corner Felicity for her role in the collapse of her scheme). That’s when they strike. She can’t see the cops ascending to her floor. She can’t have time to escape.

Besides, they may as well wait and see if she even shows up. For all they know, Sara could be right in supposing she hopped the first flight to Russia. He doesn’t think so, but nothing is guaranteed. There’s no point in Lance coming to arrest her if she isn’t there. No matter what the department’s techies are able to dig up on her, it does them no good with no criminal to charge for the crimes.

No sooner has the foundry emptied than Felicity stirs. It takes her a moment to get her bearings before she pushes herself to a sitting position, running her fingers through her hair and looking over at him.

“Any chance that was all just a really bad dream?” She asks, half-heartedly joking.

He smiles sadly, shaking his head and reaching out to squeeze her hand. She turns her palm up to intertwine their fingers.
“What time is it?” She asks, her voice still holding traces of sleep.

“Almost six,” he answers, rushing to reassure her when she shoots him a panicked glance, “Isabel’s arrest won’t be until eleven or so.”

“We should go, then.” She looks around her, starting to shrug off the spare sweater of Oliver’s that Diggle draped over her before he left.

“Felicity. Hey,” he interrupts her motions with a soft hand on her forearm. “We have time.”

She sighs, dropping back down on the couch beside him and running her hand through her hair again. When she turns to look at him, her eyes radiate concern. “How are you?”

He blinks. “What?”

“Well…” she hedges, fidgeting and twisting her fingers in his. “I brought up all that stuff about Fyers and then kind of disappeared for hours on end. I just… I want to know you’re ok.”

Oliver huffs in disbelief. She’s just spent her night trying to counteract her father’s attempt at cyberterrorism and she’s worried about him. He reaches out for her, disentangling their fingers to draw her into his side with an arm around her shoulders, rubbing his hand from shoulder to elbow. “I’m fine, Felicity.”

He can tell she doesn’t believe him. It shouldn’t surprise him, her seeing through the obvious attempt to brush off her attention. She probably thinks it’s because he doesn’t like admitting weakness, but now that’s only part of it. The other part of him is more concerned about her well-being, his own taking a back seat.

“I’ve been better,” he relents, “But that’s not important right now.”

She pushes against his chest to raise her eyes to his. The anger in them surprises him. “How can you say that? How can you think you’re less important than me?” He opens his mouth to respond but she plows ahead. “You aren’t. You are just as important to me as I am to you, so don’t you ever say otherwise.”
Stunned, all he can do is nod. It seems to be an adequate response, because she settles back down in her previous position.

“Felicity-” He starts, meaning to broach the subject of her father.

“Can we just… Can we not talk about it right now?” She asks, and the vulnerability in her voice nearly breaks him.

She sounds so young and weak in that moment that he’ll do anything she asks. So, instead of pressing the matter, he kisses the top of her head and settles back into the cushions. They spend the rest of the morning in a comfortable silence until she finally decides they need to get back to the mansion for a change of clothes.

“I don’t get why this is necessary,” he objects yet again. He didn’t want to come back here. It’s too risky with her father’s whereabouts unaccounted for as of yet, but she insisted.

“I need new clothes,” she answers, completely unconcerned. “Jeans and your sweater are not appropriate work attire.”

“You had a change of clothes from yesterday in the foundry,” he points out, still not understanding why she was so adamant.

“I hate wearing the same thing two days in a row. Too much potential for gossip.”

“You know, we could just put an end to all the whispers and give them the confirmation they’re looking for,” he shoots back. It’s been a while since he’s visited the topic of them going public, but after today, he really doesn’t see much of a reason to hold back anymore. Isabel is two hours from being arrested and her father will be off to the League by dusk. There won’t be anything standing in their way anymore.

She stops on the stairs and turns to face him. For a second, he’s startled by the reduction in height difference before she’s planting her lips on his sweetly. He barely has time to reciprocate before she whirls back around and continues, tossing an, “I’ll think about it,” over her shoulder.
It’s better than he got last time.

He’s so absorbed in his thoughts that he doesn’t notice her change in demeanor right away. He only notices when she bolts down the hallway that she’s running to a crumpled body.

“Roy!” She’s yelling, grabbing his face between her hands and trying to jolt him to awareness. “Roy, can you hear me? C’mon… Roy!”

Immediately, Oliver is on guard. Leaving Felicity with Roy after scanning the area, he ducks through the doorway Roy is sprawled in front of: the door to Thea’s room. His head swivels to take in the surroundings, from the toppled coffee table to the ripped curtains, and his stomach turns to lead. After a very thorough and panicked sweep of the room, he determines that Thea is gone.

“Oliver!” Felicity’s panicked, wavering voice grabs his attention and he’s out to the hall in a second.

Roy is starting to come around, groaning and clumsily reaching for his head. Felicity is now on her feet, phone in hand, and all of the colour has drained from her face. With shaking fingers, she holds it out to him and he nearly drops it when he gets a glimpse of the screen.

*I warned you.*

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaand it’s not over until the psycho sings. Or kidnaps someone. Whichever works for you! Hopefully this isn’t just creating drama on top of drama (in a bad way, I mean), but I thought about it a lot, and really all that computer stuff felt anti-climactic to me, especially since a lot of it was a psychological battle. I ultimately decided to go with both sides of the coin. She won the psychological battle, but can her father win the physical one? Stay tuned to find out *evil laugh*
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Ok, so this is the second last chapter guys! This one will wrap everything up and then Chapter 24 will be more of a fallout/setup for the sequel. Now, I have very specifically NOT said where Felicity grew up during the course of this story. Most of that was because, when I started, we didn’t know where she was from and I didn’t want to diverge too far from whatever was revealed. Now, however, I’d say that ship has sailed to the other side of the world. I’ve been doing this in a way that Felicity’s father at least saw Robert Queen at a company function, which means it has to be at least close to Starling City. So, in the interests of keeping with that, I’m going to hereby invent a smaller city that is very close to Starling City. This is officially where Felicity grew up in this story. I will probably not name it because I’m not creative enough for that.

Anyways, read on!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He’s in motion before he can even think about it, barreling down the stairs and nearly making it to the door before a small hand grips his arm. Stopping automatically in response to the pressure, his fists clench and unclench, trying to keep the rage he’s feeling from escaping. His control is hanging by a thread, so much so that he doesn’t trust himself to turn and let Felicity see his expression.

It doesn’t end up mattering, as she circles around to face him in the next second. He focuses on a spot above her head, not willing to let her break his single-minded focus on finding his sister and- and what? What exactly is he planning to do to the man who raised Felicity? He can’t kill him; that’s not exactly what he’s feeling anyways. It isn’t a desire to murder him clawing its way to the surface; it’s a need to see him brought to his knees, a desperation to save his sister from the crosshairs of a fight that isn’t hers. He needs to protect his own, and that includes Thea. Strange, how that stopped meaning sticking an arrow through his heart and seeing the life leave his eyes. He would wonder when, but then his eyes flick down to Felicity’s of their own accord and the question is answered before it can fully form.

“Oliver, you need to slow down and take a breath,” she urges, voice eerily calm. “I know, it’s Thea, but we need to take a step back and come up with a plan. You won’t do anyone any good running off half-cocked.”

He shifts impatiently, jaw ticking, but her hand comes up to direct his eyes back to hers.

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“Oliver. We need a plan if we stand a chance. We need to pacify Roy, we need to call Digg and Sara, we need to fill Detective Lance in, and we need to get Thea back.”
Swallowing with some difficulty, he nods as much to convince himself as to show agreement. They don’t have time to say anything else as Roy finally makes his way to the top of the stairs. He still looks a little dazed from the head wound, but his movements are remarkably deft for someone who’s just suffered a hit to the head severe enough to knock him out.

Felicity squeezes his hand before making her way up to meet the young man. They whisper in hushed tones before she brings her hand up to ghost maternally over the cut on his head. The expression on Roy’s face indicates he’s humouring her while his strained posture shows just how restless he is. Felicity’s eyes are earnest as she reaches out to grip his forearm briefly in reassurance and then she’s returning to Oliver’s side. Their fingers tangle together, combining whatever strength they have left to face the unexpected aftershock that’s been thrown at them.

They’ve convened around the table, though none of them can actually stand still long enough to say it’s very central to their meeting. It’s more like two of them take turns pacing around and beside it while the other two lean against it, desperately trying to determine where Thea could be.

“It has to be some sort of warehouse,” Digg decides, surveying the map. “There’s no other place that would fit, is there?”

Felicity shakes her head, teeth sinking into her lip as she puzzles it out. Something’s not right. It feels… off to her. The Ghost would choose a warehouse, no doubt. He would pick a building based on a strategic location and he’d set it up to his advantage. But she doesn’t get the feeling that’s the case in this particular circumstance. This is an attack on Oliver, not on the Arrow. This is personal. This is about her. And then it hits her.

“He’s not at a warehouse,” she insists, voice loud and confident. Oliver and Sara stop pacing and turn to look at her. “He’s not even in the city.”

Sara frowns, stepping even with her shoulder and following her gaze down to the map spread on the table. “How do you figure?”

“He’s had who knows how long of a head start on us. He doesn’t have to be within city limits; we just assumed that because it was convenient.”

“Then where is he?”
She bites down on her lip again. This is the part she isn’t sure of, but it’s a risk she needs to take. “I grew up an hour and a half out of Starling. The city was just big enough to have companies like Kord Enterprises, but there was still the occasional function in Starling that my father would attend. I assume it was one of those at which Isabel met Robert Queen. She’d likely never met so many big wigs before that night, and she was probably a little star struck by it all, realizing the business world was bigger than mid-level men like my father. That was when everything went to hell…” She muses to herself. When she looks up, she meets Digg’s eyes and realizes she’s gotten off track. “Sorry. My point is that this is my father doing this, not the Ghost. He wouldn’t choose a location out of pure strategy. I beat him by injecting emotion into it and now… He isn’t acting on cold calculation. He’s acting on rage. I betrayed him; I hurt him. I chose Oliver Queen over him… He isn’t thinking like the Ghost right now… He’s thinking like my father.”

“So where would your father go?” Oliver asks, moving over to her other side.

She sighs, fingers curling into a fist on the table. “My family’s cabin.”

“The one where he taught you to shoot?” Digg asks, eyebrows drawing together.

She nods. “The two sides of himself are merging; the Ghost is trying to become my father. When my father started trying to become the Ghost he took me to that cabin and handed me a gun. He was desperate to keep me safe, and ever since he’s come back into my life he’s only been concerned for my safety. I’m sure it’s where he’d go.”

“How far is the cabin from the city? Could he make it there in time?”

“I… I think so. It works out to around two hours outside Starling. He’d…” She gulps, avoiding looking at Oliver as she continues. “He’d have to drug her to keep her unconscious for that long.”

She can see his fist clenching in her peripheral vision and reaches blindly to cover it with her hand, hoping to soothe some of his anger. He has every right to be angry, but he needs to keep as clear a head as possible right now. His fingers relax slightly under the pressure of her own as she points to the spot on the map where her family’s cabin resides.

“I can have a chopper ready within the half hour,” Oliver says, tone clipped. If this were any other situation, either she or Digg would comment on his ability to just charter a helicopter out of nowhere, but this is Thea, and this is her fault. She can’t shake the overwhelming guilt she feels knowing that her father wouldn’t be doing any of this if-
“Stop that,” Digg tells her, drawing her from her thoughts.

“Stop what?” She tries.

He shoots her a knowing look, crossing his arms.

“Ok, ok. I know, I shouldn’t blame myself for what he’s doing but…” Felicity searches for the right words. “The stuff with Isabel and Fyers is different than this. He’s doing this because of me. He wants a trade: me for Thea. I know it.”

“Wouldn’t he have called you by now and told you where to meet if that were the case?” He throws at her, testing her theory.

She shakes her head, leaning back against the table. “My father lived to test me. Everything was a new challenge, and every time I failed he never missed an opportunity to tell me how disappointed he was in me.” She pauses before confiding, “I failed a lot.”

“So you think this is just another test?”

Her head bobs up and down. “It’s something he would do. He wants me to prove I’m worthy, and he knows this is the perfect test. If we make it in time, I trade myself for Thea, and if we don’t, then Thea dies for me. No matter the outcome, I lose Oliver. In his mind, there’s no other way.”

John steps closer, clapping a hand on her shoulder and bringing her attention up to his face. “You know Oliver won’t let either of those things happen, right? None of us will. We’re getting both you and Thea out of there in one piece, and then we’re shipping him back off to the League to serve out the rest of his debt.”

She allows a ghost of a smile to break onto her face before she looks past her friend to focus on Oliver. His face is set as he talks in low tones into the phone, radiating authority and power. It’s almost a turn-on, if circumstances weren’t so dire.

“Have you guys talked about the… about your father’s intentions?” Digg asks, interrupting her inappropriate ogling.
Her stomach plummets. “Not exactly. He’s got enough to deal with right now.”

“Remember how well it worked out last time you told yourself that?” He points out. She has to admit he’s right. If Oliver hasn’t already put the pieces together himself, she needs to get him on the same page as her and John.

“Oliver…” His name spills hesitantly from her lips once he hangs up the phone. His eyes immediately find hers and she draws in a sharp breath. “We need to… We need to talk about what’s going to happen when we get there.”

“We?” He closes the distance between them, stopping just inside her personal space.

She tries to ignore the effect his proximity is having on her but it’s pointless. No matter. She’ll just have to power through. “Yes, we. I’m not staying here while you three run off to save the day. He sent the message to my phone. He expects me to be there. It won’t… It’s safest for Thea if I’m there and we go ahead as he intended.”

The look in his eyes tells her he has, in fact, connected the dots. “No. Absolutely not. I won’t let you-”

“Oliver,” she cuts him off, raising her hands to frame his face gently. “It’s Thea. I won’t let him hurt her. If it takes trading myself for her, I’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

The conflict is clear in his expression as his eyes search hers frantically. It’s obvious he can see the logic but is trying to find a way to subvert it. The second he fails is apparent. His jaw clenches and his head dips down, his forehead coming to rest against hers. “I won’t let it happen. We’re getting both of you out of there in one piece.”

She nods against his forehead, desperate to convince herself that it’s all going to go according to plan. Their plan, not her father’s. She managed to outsmart him once, there’s no reason the four of them can’t do it again.

Is there?
He grips Felicity’s fingers perhaps more tightly than is necessary, but she doesn’t seem to mind. She’s staring out the window, lost in her head just as he’s been lost in his while Digg flies the helicopter. Sara stares grimly out the front windshield where she sits in the co-pilot seat, surveying the landscape with a calculating gaze. Oliver knows he should be doing the same, but all he can focus on is the warmth of Felicity’s small hand in his and the way her shoulder just barely brushes his. His senses are heightened with anxiety and anticipation, but not in a necessarily good way. He needs to get a grip before they land. They can’t afford for him to lose focus, not with so much at stake.

“Hey.” Felicity’s voice over the headset draws his attention. He turns to take in the reassuring smile lighting up her face. “It’s all going to be fine.”

How she can even think so positively at a time like this is beyond him, but he appreciates the effort nonetheless. She is truly remarkable. Instead of trying to find words to respond, he merely squeezes her hand in silent gratitude. They remain staring out the windows for the rest of the short flight.

They step out of the chopper silently, Oliver keeping hold of Felicity’s hand for as long as possible before he has to release her to strap on his quiver.

“My father notified the local PD to be on the lookout for any suspicious activity out this way,” Sara says, referring to the tip-off she gave Lance before they took off. This may be out of his jurisdiction, but that doesn’t mean he can’t get the right people on the lookout if anything— or anyone— slips through the cracks.

“We’ll be right outside the entire time,” he tells Felicity, testing the security of the strap. “We’ll all have comms on, and the second you give the go ahead, we’ll be on him. You just concentrate on getting Thea back here.”

Felicity nods, but he isn’t sure if it’s agreement or an attempt to convince herself of her own conviction that everything will be fine. His own intentions as he reaches out to brush his thumb across her cheek are murky as well. It could be he’s trying to reassure her, or maybe he’s trying to remind himself that she’s right there in front of him, not going anywhere despite the plan to play along with her father. Maybe it’s a combination of everything, but as he leans in and presses his lips to hers softly, he gets a startling feeling that this night won’t end on a completely favourable note.

Felicity tries to control her trembling as she separates from the team. They agreed, looking at the
map, that they would split up ten minutes from the cabin and she would proceed alone from there. She knows there’s no way her father thinks she’s showing up alone, but her goal is to appease and distract him as long as possible. With any luck, she’ll be able to talk him down without any drastic measures. Of course, luck has rarely been on her side these past months, but there’s always the chance that could change.

The wooden building looks just as she remembers, though it takes on a slightly more ominous aura in the shadows of the trees. It may still be daylight, but this deep in the forest it seems more like dusk. She struggles to push the happier memories to the back of her mind, focusing only on the shooting lessons. Her father had been tense back then, high-strung. It hadn’t taken much to set him off, and she remembers making a conscious effort to execute his teachings flawlessly.

When she reaches the porch, her fingers brush the railing where they carved the name “Smoak” into the wood. Without meaning to, she stops to look down at the mark, almost smiling at the memory of the day he’d done it. That was one of their final ‘good’ days as a family that she can recall. It was the tenth anniversary of her parents buying the cabin, and her father decided they needed to mark it as ‘theirs’ so that, even if they sold it, there would always be a piece of them to remain. They’d laughed that day, and her father hadn’t tried to make her fish or chop wood or go on a hike. Instead, they stayed inside and played cards and Monopoly. The next day, it was like the whole thing never happened, as her father insisted she take an introductory business class in school the next year. It was a bit advanced for her age, but he insisted that, with her intelligence, it would be a walk in the park.

“Just think how many doors this could open for you. Once you get your engineering degree... You’re smart enough to do it, Flick. You just have to want it.”

“That’s the problem, Dad. I don’t want it. I don’t want to go into business. I don’t even want to be an engineer.”

Her nostalgia turns sour as she remembers the fallout of that particular conversation. It wasn’t pretty.

Giving herself a mental shake to get her head back in the game, she proceeds up the steps. After the briefest of hesitations, she turns the knob and pushes the door open. She can’t think about her childhood or her father or any of it right now. All she needs to think about is Thea and getting her safely out of here.

When the younger woman comes into view, Felicity nearly gasps. Resisting the urge to rush to her side, she instead takes in her surroundings. The furniture is covered in the white sheets she and her mother brought out here after her father’s death, save for the single chair occupied by Thea. It smells musty and abandoned, the silence only adding to the effect.
“Felicity, what-” Thea starts to ask, but she’s stopped from speaking further by a sharp, male voice.

“You came.” Her father emerges from a dark corner. Felicity can’t decide if it’s just a happy coincidence, or if he purposefully sat there in order to create dramatic impact.

“You didn’t leave me any choice,” she spits at him, glancing down to Thea. “Let her go.”

“Not quite yet. I want to be sure we’re on the same page first,” he counters, reaching out and trailing his hand through Thea’s hair. She flinches away from him, fear invading her eyes.

Felicity draws a sharp breath. “I understood what I was signing up for when I came: Me for Thea.”

“What?” Thea’s alarmed voice cuts in. Fresh panic coats her face as her attention snaps to Felicity.

“I’ll go with you, but you have to let her go,” she continues calmly, as though the interruption hasn’t happened.

“Felicity, no! Don’t-”

“It’s ok, Thea.” She tries to smile reassuringly at Oliver’s sister, but it probably comes out as more of a grimace.

“No! You can’t! Don’t give him what he wants!” She cries.

Felicity’s father laughs, the sound cutting straight to the bone and making the hair on her arms stand on end. “I filled her in on most of the juicy details while we were waiting for you to figure out where we were. I hope you don’t mind. I just figured she had a right to know why she was kidnapped; don’t you? Pity she doesn’t really see it my way. But I guess that’s the Queen family for you… Always assuming they’re in the right.”

Felicity gulps, biting back a retort. Antagonizing him won’t help. As she learned with Isabel, there’s a time to play meek. “It doesn’t matter what she thinks. She’s just a means to an end anyways, right? She was just to get me here, wasn’t she? Well, I’m here. I’m here and I’ll leave with you right now.”
“And what’s to stop your merry band of vigilantes from taking me out the second we leave here? I know you didn’t come alone.”

“But you did,” she points out, edging ever so slightly to her right. Her father is still standing behind Thea’s chair, but maybe she can draw him away. “You didn’t come with any back-up. Why?”

“I couldn’t raise any suspicion,” he answers. “Isabel wants your head on a platter for your interference, but if you come with me now, we can leave the country before she realizes you’re gone.”

“And all the back-up you could have brought is loyal to Isabel,” she deadpans the reality of the situation her father is ignoring.

Her father doesn’t answer, instead reaching out to cut the ties binding Thea to the chair. She cries out in alarm when she sees the knife plunging for her wrist, breathing rapidly as she massages the irritated flesh once it’s free. The threat of the weapon keeps her seated.

“So what’s the plan, then? We’re just going to disappear to another continent and hope Isabel doesn’t track us down? Are you really willing to leave her for me?”

Her father blinks then, sadness colouring his expression. “I don’t want to leave Isabel, but if I have to for a little while in order to keep you safe…” He trails off, and when his eyes come up to meet hers again, they’re completely bare of any deception. “It’s you, Flick. It’s always been you. You are the most important person in my life and I will do anything to keep you safe.”

Something stirs inside her at the words. It’s what she’s been longing to hear him say all her life.

She swallows thickly, trying to remind herself that none of this is real. Her father is delusional at best. She can’t take anything he says seriously. “I believe you.” She isn’t sure if she’s lying to him or not. “They’re only with me to ensure Thea’s safe return. They won’t track us when we leave.”

“The Arrow will really let you go with me?”

“It’s not his choice to make,” she responds firmly. “Now let’s stop beating around the bush and get this over with. She walks first.”

“In time, you’ll see this is for the best, Flick. You’ll thank me for saving you once you can think clearly.”

He sounds so sure of himself that her stomach turns. All she can muster is a tense reiteration. “She. Walks. First.”

The man sighs, waving his knife in Thea’s direction. “Well then? You heard the lady.”

Thea hesitates for a fraction of a second before jumping up and scurrying forward. When she’s halfway there, Felicity takes her own steps toward her father, trying to keep herself calm. She can’t reveal how afraid she is when Thea can still see her.

When they meet, Thea stops, eyes meeting hers. “Felicity, please.”

Felicity raises her chin an inch, projecting confidence she doesn’t feel as she reaches out and squeezes Thea’s hand for a split second. “Everything’s going to be fine, Thea. You’re going home.”

It’s the code phrase, only to be uttered when Thea is safely out of her father’s reach. Within seconds, all hell is breaking loose.

The instant the words crackle over the comm link, Oliver is in motion. He smashes through a window to Felicity’s left while Digg comes from the right. Sara attacks from behind. Their weapons are drawn, but they only want to incapacitate the man, not injure him. To his credit, Felicity’s father only looks surprised for a second before recovering well enough to block Sara’s attempt at a headlock. The two assassins grapple before he flips Sara to the ground with a resounding thud. He catches Felicity wincing out of the corner of his eye and hisses at her to leave. The words seem to shock her into action as she rushes back to grab his sister and herd her to the door.

With that taken care of, Oliver advances on the pair of League members while Diggle heads out to ensure the man wasn’t lying when he said there was no back-up on the way. An unpleasant surprise
The Ghost is an excellent fighter, Oliver has to give him that. The man holds his own against the pair of them rather well, but he’s giving it his all while Oliver and Sara are going at three-quarter speed to conserve energy. If all goes well, they should be able to outlast him and gain the upper hand.

Unfortunately, all does not go well. He isn’t quite sure how it happens, but the other man manages to catch Sara off guard, sending her careening into the fireplace. She tries to catch herself, but fails as she crashes forward, whacking her head soundly on the mantle. Her body falls limply to the floor, the impact being enough to knock her out cold. Oliver grits his teeth, fighting against the instinct to run to her side as he launches a fresh attack on his opponent. Hopefully Diggle will return soon. He should have been back already.

They face off for another few minutes before Oliver falters. Sara has begun to stir in the corner, and the movement draws his attention for the instant that is his downfall. Before he realizes what is happening, something is hitting his head and he’s flying across the room, much like Sara was a few moments ago. The breath is knocked from his lungs all at once and he can see stars, leaving him struggling to right himself. He’s exhausted, his bow is across the room, and all he can do is watch as the man advances on Sara’s stirring form. He can see the menacing expression on the man’s face from where he’s trying to clamber to his feet. It feels clumsy, trying to get his feet under him when he’s so dizzy and disoriented, but he has to get to Sara. He has to stop him from-

*Click.*

The all too familiar sound of a gun being cocked brings a halt to all movement. Oliver breathes a sigh of relief and collapses back against the wall, knowing Diggle has finally returned. But then-

“Don’t take another step.”

Awareness and ability slowly returning, Oliver swivels his head to the doorway. “Felicity?”

She doesn’t even glance at him, a hard glint in her eye as she steps further into the room. “Back away from her. Now.”

Her father looks marginally surprised to see her holding the gun, but he covers it well. It’s clear from
his demeanor that he doesn’t actually expect her to use it, though. She’s not entirely sure if she can prove him wrong about that. She’s been trying to forget the weight of it ever since she slid it into the waistband of her jeans before they left the foundry.

She’s still wearing Oliver’s sweater, the bulk preventing any of her team from noticing she brought it along in case of a moment just like this one. As soon as she and Thea were far enough away from the cabin for the silence to engulf them, she knew she couldn’t just leave them to fight her battle. This was her fault, and she had to fix it. So, she’d sent Thea ahead and doubled back. Apparently, she’s gotten here just in time.

“Felicity, don’t-” Sara’s voice is weak, scratchy. It’s such a contrast from the strong woman Felicity’s spent time with over the past months that it startles her. She’s never thought of Sara as vulnerable in any capacity, but now, watching her slowly rise to her feet, Sara looks just that.

She gulps, refocusing her attention on her father. The man who looked as though he was about to kill Sara in cold blood. The man who probably would have turned and done the same to Oliver next. The man who isn’t her father. Not anymore. “It’s over. You’re done.”

He stares at her in silence, and for a second she thinks he’s given up. But then he laughs. A full belly laugh that honestly just makes him appear even more insane. And when he finishes laughing, when the sound dies from his lips, the smile remains. “What are you going to do, oh daughter of mine? Are you going to shoot me? With the gun I bought for you? Do you have it in you?”

She adjusts her grip on the gun, willing herself to block it all out and focus on the emptiness like he taught her. It’s getting increasingly difficult, though. She blurred too many lines and now she can’t sharpen them again. “This isn’t a test. It’s not some game we’re playing. You’re going back to the League, where you belong, and I’m staying here, where I belong.”

“How can you even say that?” He snaps, eyes flashing. “You belong with me, not with him. He will never bring you anything but pain.”

“That’s not true,” she bites back, glancing to where Oliver is now standing. He’s slightly hunched and his breathing is laboured, but he’s on his feet.

“It is. He doesn’t care about you. All he cares about are money and power. He’s using you, Flick. Why can’t you see that?” He looks frustrated as he starts pacing, hands pulling at his hair. It’s getting erratic and starting to worry her.
“Stop it!” She finally yells, waving the gun to emphasize her point. “Stop pretending you know anything about my life or about Oliver! You don’t, and you lost any right you had to comment on it when you left! So just.” She stops, takes a deep breath, and refocuses on remaining calm. “Stop talking.”

The Ghost stops his pacing immediately, leaning back on the table, his hands between his back and the place they shared countless family dinners. She blinks away the memories and brings her attention back to his rapidly hardening face. “Fine. You don’t want to talk anymore? We won’t.”

With that, he brings one of his hands up, brandishing his own gun that he must have had strapped to the underside of the table. She expects him to point it straight for her, so when it veers to the left she doesn’t even think before throwing herself in front of it.

“Felicity!” Two voices ring out: one male, one female. Oliver’s hands fly out to use her momentum against her and shove her behind him while Sara goes for the Ghost.

Unsurprisingly, the assassin isn’t caught off guard by his female counterpart, flinging out his arm and catching her in the chest at the last second. She’s sent to the ground in a heap of already weakened, sore muscles, and stays down. The gun stays trained on Oliver, who has situated himself in front of Felicity, while Felicity’s hangs at her side.

Ever so carefully, she starts to edge herself back into the line of fire. She can’t believe he’ll shoot her, despite everything that’s happened. No matter how cold and calculating he reveals himself to be, no matter how many times she denies he is her father, she’s still his daughter. He still thinks of her as someone he needs to protect. Oliver, on the other hand, is the man standing in the way of their imaginary happily ever after. Oliver is a danger, one that he won’t hesitate to put a bullet in.

As though sensing what she’s doing, Oliver reaches a hand to hers to try to stop her progress. She ignores him, nudging her shoulder in front of his to reclaim her position staring down the barrel of the gun. Raising her own to meet it, she sends her father a challenging glare. “I won’t let you kill him. What are you going to do? Shoot your own daughter?”

Her father hesitates. Felicity can see Sara about to seize the opportunity, having had enough of playing meek on the floor, when they’re interrupted.

“He won’t, but I will.”
All occupants of the cabin whirl to find Isabel Rochev standing in the doorway, hatred in her eyes and her own gun held to Thea Queen’s head.

Felicity is suddenly light-headed with fear. Not for her own safety, but for the young woman she left in the woods. She shouldn’t have left her alone to come back here. She should have hidden her away somewhere safe. She should have-

“Isabel!” Her father interrupts her quickly derailing thought process. “What are you doing here?”

Isabel’s upper lip curls into a sneer as four armed men follow her through the door. “I should ask you the same question. Imagine my surprise to find no trace of the little traitor when I went into work this morning, only to hear you’d also gone MIA.”

“How did you find us?”

“I had a tracker injected into your boot.”

“You don’t trust me.” He looks crestfallen at the revelation.

“Do you blame me? Especially now, seeing you here, trying to save her,” she snaps. It sounds as though she’s trying to keep herself calm, but the anger and hurt are seeping through. The fingers holding the gun shake with the force of her emotion. “What has she ever done for you? I’m the one who lived up to your expectations. I’m the one who helped you reach your goal. Not her. All she’s ever done is disappoint you, and yet you choose her over me?”

“I didn’t choose either one of you!” He implores, dropping his gun and taking a few hasty steps forward. Isabel tightens her grip on Thea and the young woman whimpers. “I love you both. Equally. You’re both my daughters.”

Isabel snorts at the same time Felicity does, and she sees her opportunity. “Isabel, this is between the three of us. Why don’t you let Thea go? She’s innocent in all of this.”

“Innocent?” Isabel snaps, a humourless laugh tripping from her lips as she turns her ice-cold eyes to
Felicity. “Her father is the reason all of this is happening. Her father helped set everything in motion, and then he backed out at the last second. He was supposed to be my way out, but he cast me aside like everyone else. Tell me, Felicity, why is it that everything I want seems to end up yours?”

“What are you talking about?” She bites out, readjusting her grip on the gun she now has trained on Isabel. “I don’t want anything to do with that man.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! The father I always wanted chooses you, Walter Steele hires you, Oliver Queen pursues you,” she lists bitterly, pressing the gun harder into Thea’s temple with each point. Thea winces and bites her lip in an effort to stay quiet. “And you take all of it for granted! You trade your respected position to become a secretary to a man you probably don’t even love and you disown the man who raised you. Yet everyone still adores you! Oliver Queen keeps chasing you, blinded by his feelings, Walter Steele has nothing but praise for the washed up IT specialist, and your father betrays me, the daughter who supported him through everything just to save you! What makes you so special?” She hisses through her teeth.

Felicity takes a deep breath as Oliver tenses beside her. He’s restless, wanting to leap into action but unable to because of the danger to Thea.

“So this is between you, me, and him, then,” Felicity replies, almost succeeding in keeping her voice steady. “Thea hasn’t done anything to you. She isn’t her father, Isabel. Just let her go and we can figure this out. You guys can leave, and we won’t stop you.”

“No, we can’t. You’ve ruined it. All of it. I was supposed to have it all,” she snaps venomously. “I was supposed to take down the Queen family, surpass the Bratva, and finally show your father what a waste you are. But you couldn’t let me, could you? You and your stupid band of vigilantes had to get in the way.”

“We only did what was right.”

Isabel laughs, a chilling sound that causes the hair on her arms to stand on end. “And yet your father still chooses you! After you betray him! You all but spat in his face and yet here he stands, going behind my back to whisk you away and leave me behind.”

“No, it’s not like that,” he pleads, taking yet another step forward. “I was going to come back. I was always going to come back for you. We just needed time, so you weren’t blinded by rage and could think clearly. It’s not Felicity’s fault, Isabel. She’s been brainwashed by the Queens.”
“No I haven’t,” Felicity snaps, cutting her eyes to her father for a brief moment.

“As fun as this little chat is,” Sara cuts in drily. “I have a solution that will work for everyone here.”

Isabel’s eyebrow quirks in her direction. “Continue.”

“The Ghost still owes the League a debt. Let me return him to Nanda Parbat. Neither of you will have to see him again,” she proposes. The words send a chill down Felicity’s spine.

“I will not return willingly,” he protests.

“Who said anything about willing? You will return, one way or another.”

“An interesting proposal,” Isabel muses, “but I’m afraid I must decline. It’s not part of my plans for him to return to the League.”

Sara looks as though she might say something, but John Diggle, bless his heart, chooses that moment to reappear. There’s blood trailing down the side of his face and he’s favouring his left leg, but he barrels through the door nonetheless, taking out one of Isabel’s men. Chaos erupts for the second time as the darkness begins to fall around them. Thunder cracks somewhere in the distance as Oliver and Sara leap into action, engaging the other three men. In one fluid motion, Isabel pushes Thea to the side, bringing her weapon up to point at Felicity.

“Choose!” The brunette looks to the man caught in the middle.

“I- I don’t understand,” he stutters, eyes wild.

“Me or her. Choose.”

The words are nearly lost in the sounds of struggle around them, and Felicity’s breath catches in her throat. Digg and Oliver have taken out one man, Sara is on the verge of finishing hers off, and Thea has rushed back to the door to stay out of the way. She’s eyeing the three of them in the center of the room with horror etched on her face.
Felicity vaguely wonders if her father ever predicted his family reunion would turn out like this: his ‘daughters’ pointing guns at each other, demanding he choose between them.

“I can’t do that,” he says softly.

“You can and you will!” Isabel screeches. “It’s her or me! Make a decision!”

She punctuates the last three words with three jabs of the gun in Felicity’s direction and the blonde sucks in a breath. Isabel isn’t joking around here. There’s no universe in which this is a ploy. The Russian will literally shoot her if she so desires.

She needs to diffuse the situation, get Isabel to calm down and off the crazy train she’s boarded. Oliver, Dig, and Sara are still occupied, the final two men putting up more of a fight than expected. It’s up to her to deal with this. Clearly, talking hasn’t worked. The only other option is…

Bang.

She pulls the trigger before she can second guess it. Always find your enemy’s weakness, and Isabel’s weakness has always been going on the defensive. She’s a confident woman, used to taking what she wants and striking first to get it. She doesn’t operate well from a place of disadvantage.

Thea screams at the sound of the gun and Isabel shrieks in pain, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. The remaining lackey tries to use it to his advantage, but Sara clocks him over the head with the staff she’d somehow retrieved during the fight. If the situation weren’t so dire, Felicity would laugh at how easily he ended up being dispatched. She allows the gun to fall to her side, not having any use for it now.

As for Isabel, the brunette crumples to one side, hand pressing into her shoulder as her gun hangs loosely from her now useless arm. When her head snaps up to meet Felicity’s eyes, her own radiate fury.

“You. Missed.” She snaps, deathly quiet.

“I never miss,” she shoots back, making sure every occupant in the room understands she didn’t
shoot to kill. She isn’t that person. She shot to incapacitate.

“Neither do I.”

Apparently, Isabel isn’t as incapacitated as expected. Before any of them can blink, the gun has been transferred to her other hand, and she’s raising it as though she’s using her dominant hand. Felicity has no time to react before the gun is even with her chest. All she can do is stare in surprise as Isabel pulls the trigger. A loud bang echoes through the cabin for a second time, cries of her name coming from all directions as Oliver dives for her.

*He’s not going to make it,* she thinks, but it doesn’t scare her like it should. Everything slows down around her as she waits for the impact, her eyes shutting of their own accord. When it finally comes, she doesn’t feel anything but numb as it knocks the wind out of her, sending her crashing to the ground.

And then everything goes black.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, I know that was really mean… But I couldn’t help myself leaving you with a cliffhanger right there… It was so perfect! So the next chapter will be the last. It will wrap up everything that happens here, and will leave you with a bit of a springboard into what the sequel will deal with. Oh, and they’ll finally get some uninterrupted time to consummate that relationship of theirs… There will be LOTS of Olicity to make up for the rather deprived last couple of chapters. As always, please review and let me know what you thought! I’m not very good with action sequences, so some feedback would be greatly appreciated!
Chapter Notes

Ok, and here we go! Just a couple of quick notes before we get started:

I can’t remember if I mentioned that Sara is in costume as Canary, so Thea doesn’t know who she is.

I also just wanted to thank you guys for sticking with me through this. Your support means a lot and I’m glad you’re still reading and still enjoying (or at least I assume you are since you’re still reading…). This will jump around a bit, mostly to show snippets of the aftermath without dragging it out too long. Most of it is Oliver’s POV, with a small section of Felicity because it didn’t feel right skipping over her closure. I will talk about the sequel and such below, so please read on and (hopefully) enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Felicity? Felicity! Can you hear me?” Terror knifes through his chest when he realizes she isn’t responding. In a frenzy, he runs his hands down each of her limbs and over her stomach, checking for a wound he failed to save her from. The bullet didn’t hit her, so what’s the cause? Why isn’t she opening her eyes? Why is she unconscious?

“Hey, relax, man,” Digg’s voice is low but urgent, taking care to ensure Thea doesn’t overhear. “She hit her head when you guys went down. She wasn’t shot.”

Oliver’s jaw sets as he glances to his right, at the body crumpled on the floor covered in blood. “No, her father made sure of that.”

Digg says nothing in return, and the silence is filled with the sound of Isabel’s struggles. She seems to be caught between grief and anger as Sara restrains her and places a call to the police. He can vaguely hear her arguing over the line, something about it being Felicity and there’s no way the Arrow is going to leave her for the cops. She must wear her father down, because she nods over at them in confirmation as she clicks off the call. At that moment, a soft groan sounds from the woman lying next to him, reclaiming his attention.

Felicity’s eyes pinch shut, as though she’s trying to continue to shut the world out instead of rejoining it. Her hand comes tentatively to the back of her head, feeling the tender spot she must have hit, and he has to resist the urge to touch her as he wants to. Thea is still in the room, after all. Felicity groans again, eyes finally blinking open.
“Thea?” She inquires, and he can’t quite fight the smile her words bring to his lips. Trust Felicity’s first concern to be someone else.

“She’s fine,” he assures.

“How bad is it?” She asks, voice thick with confusion.

“What?”

She frowns up at him, her hand now assessing herself for injury as she struggles to sit up. He gently pushes her back down, allowing his hand to stroke over her hair after a covert glance to ensure Thea is otherwise occupied. Luckily, it appears Sara has taken her outside after numerous assurances that Felicity will be fine.

“Isabel shot me?” It comes out more as a question, and he shakes his head in response. “Wh- How? She… she pulled the-”

The rest of her sentence dies on her lips when she turns her head to see her father’s limp form on the ground a few feet away. Her mouth opens and closes a few times before he takes her face gently in his hands and turns it away from the sight. When her eyes focus back on his, they’re shining with unshed tears, grief mixed with confusion.

“He jumped in front of the bullet when I tackled you,” he explains, watching the pieces click into place.

“It was you…” she whispers. “ You made it… I thought it was… I thought I was dead, but it was you.”

Her words don’t make much sense, but it must settle some internal debate she’s been having, because her expression clears a bit. Tentatively, experimentally, she moves each of her arms and legs, searching for discomfort but apparently finding none aside from her head. She presses her palm to her forehead briefly, grimacing, before trying to raise herself into a sitting position once more. This time, he doesn’t stop her, instead using his hands to gently support her.

Still disoriented, she turns her eyes up to his again, finding them under the hood as she always seems to. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”
He swallows thickly before nodding. “Yes.”

The word doesn’t appear to have any effect on her. Where he expects her to tear up once more, she merely nods, an expectant look on her face. “I thought so.”

He gives her a moment to fully absorb the information, pressing his lips softly to her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She asks, trying too hard to keep her voice neutral. “Not your fault. At least now I won’t have to worry about lying to my mother when we talk about him being dead.” He frowns, sees Digg do the same, but she hurries on before either can comment. “You guys should get out of here before the cops come. That is, assuming they’re coming to pick up Isa-bitch and her minions?”

Digg nods, reaching out to assist her as she slowly rises to her feet. “You’re coming with us. We’ve got the story worked out with Lance.”

“Good,” she nods once before looking at each of them in turn and forcing a smile. “Let’s go home.”

Neither tries to contradict her as she takes her first tentative steps toward the door, nor do they comment when her eyes linger a bit longer than necessary on her father’s body as she passes it.

Thea and Felicity are checked into a joint private hospital room under the Queen name to ensure discretion and to keep up appearances for Thea’s sake. They can’t very well take either of them down to the foundry, and his sister will ask questions if Felicity isn’t admitted alongside her. It serves double duty in eliminating the need to make two stops when Oliver Queen is finally alerted to their safe recovery. He goes to the hospital with Roy, the younger man shooting him questioning, suspicious looks every few seconds. Oliver can tell the questions are on the tip of his tongue, taking all his self-control to restrain: Why is he pretending he doesn’t already know? Why did he ask the police questions he clearly already had the answers to? Why wasn’t his first call when all this started to 9-1-1 instead of the Arrow? And how on earth does he have connections to the hooded vigilante?

Right now, Thea is obviously Roy’s only concern, but Oliver expects a full interrogation later about his connection to this whole thing. He isn’t sure how he’ll handle it, honestly. Felicity has made it clear she respects and trusts the kid, and he’s sure Roy wouldn’t hesitate given the option… But is he ready to reveal himself to another person? Does he want to expand their ranks? They work
seamlessly the way they are now, so why mess with a good thing?

He doesn’t have any time to consider the matter further as they arrive at the door to the room. Schooling his expression, he pushes inside, beeline for his sister and wrapping her in his arms.

“Speedy,” he sighs into her hair, pressing an affectionate kiss to the top of her head. She returns the gesture, whispering assurances of her safety into his shoulder.

When he lets her go, she forces a smile up at him before looking past him to Roy. Without hesitation, Roy closes the distance between them, pulling her tightly against him and burying his face in her neck. They stay that way for a long time, and Oliver moves to the other side of the room, where Felicity is pretending to sleep. She continues the ruse, acting as though she’s stirring when he sits on the side of the bed and brushes his fingers down the side of her face. Her eyes flutter open slowly and she gives him a small smile when her eyes meet his.

“Oliver,” she sighs contentedly, turning her face into his palm.

“Hey,” he whispers tenderly, unable to stop the small smile on his lips at the sight of her still with him. If he stops for too long, his mind lingers on the moment he thought he was going to lose her, when her eyes closed in acceptance of her fate. She was ready to die, but he wasn’t ready to lose her. He never will be.

Her hand comes up to catch his wrist, thumb slowly stroking the skin. No matter what her father did in his life, Oliver will always be grateful to the man for using his final moments to save the woman beside him. He isn’t sure he’d survive without her. Certainly, he wouldn’t be the same.

He leans down, unable to resist any longer, and covers her lips with his softly. In response, she tightens her grip on his wrist, bringing her other hand (and the IV by association) to rest on the back of his head, keeping him in place. When he pulls back slightly, it’s only to whisper “I love you” against her lips. She responds in kind before pulling him back in for a deeper, more thorough kiss.

He laughs when they’re interrupted by the sound of a throat clearing across the room. Thea strikes yet again. Reluctantly, he presses one last kiss to her lips and forehead before sitting upright once more. He doesn’t leave her side, though. Pulling her right hand into his lap, he holds tight to her fingers, enveloping them in his while his right arm braces over her, splaying on the bed beside her left hip. They’re only keeping the two of them overnight, but he has no intentions of leaving. Judging from the way Roy has settled (wisely) into a chair beside Thea, the young man has no other plans either.
“Felicity told me that you called the Arrow for help when you realized I was gone, and that she left on her own to try to save me. Looks like he got there just in time,” Thea comments into the silence, filling in the blanks of the story he hasn’t quite worked out yet. Leave it to Felicity to tie up the loose ends for him.

Oliver nods. “I still wish you hadn’t put yourself in danger,” he directs to Felicity before half-smiling, “But I understand. In the end, you both came home to me, and that’s what matters.”

He can see the small flicker of emotion in Felicity’s eye as she nods along with him, but only tucks it away for a later date. She’s been through a lot, and doesn’t need any more emotional upheaval right now.

“What I’d like to know is how you know the Arrow,” Thea persists.

Oliver barely suppresses a cringe. “I don’t. I just know he’s saved you before and hoped he’d do it again.”

“So you gambled our safety on the emotional conscience of a crazy guy in a hood?” Thea deadpans.

It brings a grin forth from him. “Glad to see you’re still you, Speedy.”

“Oh, there is no way I’m letting some psycho get to me,” she returns, before realizing the psycho she just referred to is Felicity’s father. “Speaking of which, who knew Isabel had a first class ticket on the crazy train? I mean, I never liked her, but it’s one thing to be catty and quite another to have a penchant for cyberterrorism and murder.”

Perhaps she senses she isn’t helping, so she shuts up. When Oliver glances back down at Felicity, she’s withdrawn, her eyes glazed over with some recollection or other. He adjusts himself to bring his right hand up to cradle her cheek, thumb steadily stroking the soft skin beneath. At his touch, her eyes refocus, locking on his and softening. He brings her right hand up to his lips, gently pressing a kiss to her fingers before replacing them in his lap.

By the time he looks away, it’s to see Thea with a mixture of disgust and affection on her face. “I can’t tell if I want to squeal or vomit at the waves of adorable coming off you two right now.” Oliver blinks. “No, seriously, I have never seen you this mushy before. It’s… weird. I don’t know what to do with it.”
Roy laughs, reaching out to squeeze Thea’s hand. She catches it before he can pull completely away, sandwiching it between both of hers and situating the pile on her lap contentedly. Oliver tries not to glare.

“So… does this count as that double date we were forced to agree to?” Roy wonders. “I mean, we’re all here, we’re holding hands, the girls are in dresses… I think this counts, don’t you?”

Oliver recognizes the out Roy is giving him and jumps on it. “Definitely.”

Thea only glares and shakes her head.

It takes a lot of arguing, but he finally convinces Felicity to return to the mansion with him when they’re released. After a quick stop to the lair, of course, to check up on her ‘babies’ and bid goodbye to Sara. He keeps her fingers interlaced with his own the entire journey, still feeling the aftereffects of the danger she’d been thrust into. It may be slightly easier to clamp down on his desire to place her in a protective bubble, but that doesn’t mean the anxiety he feels when she places herself in danger is any less. It’s been consuming him ever since that incident with the drug lord that started his journey to her.

Before, his nightmares, normally featuring some combination of Shado, Slade, and the island, would occasionally transfigure to Felicity lying on the ground covered in blood. It started slowly, happening infrequently enough that he could assume it was passing concern. After all, he’d had similar dreams about Laurel after her various abductions following his return. It was when the Felicity dreams started to outnumber the Laurel ones, creeping up on Shado, that he started to take notice. It was always worse after Felicity had been placed in immediate danger, and he used that as his rational explanation for it. Naturally, he would be sensitive to her mortality after she nearly meets it, right?

Honestly, he stopped kidding himself the second his lips touched hers. In that instant, he had no reason to deny why her lifeless body featured so prominently in his worst nightmares. She was and is one of the most important people in his life and if he were to lose her… Well, he isn’t sure what he’d do. It’s why he held out for so long, why he pushed her away despite her magnetism drawing him endlessly back in. Once he admitted he never stood a chance against her, though, the nightmares started to quiet. They lost their force when she slept in his arms. Having her close, knowing she was safe, helped immeasurably.

Now, having been confronted just yesterday with the very real possibility of her death, he’s a bit
jittery. He may be getting better at controlling his outward overprotective instincts, but the anxiety hasn’t gone away. He suspects it never will. Not with all the people he’s watched slip through his fingers over the years. She seems to understand, though, her thumb softly stroking over his hand every so often to let him know she’s still there.

When they close his bedroom door behind them, he can see the protest in her eyes even before she opens her mouth.

“Don’t tell me this isn’t necessary,” he interrupts before she can even start.

She crosses her arms, quirking an eyebrow. “Well, technically it isn’t. The threat is… gone. My apartment is safe again. I just have a bit of a concussion.”

“Fe-li-ci-ty.” He drags her name out, reaching to free her hands and gripping them tightly. “I’m not insisting for you, ok?”

He doesn’t elaborate, but he doesn’t need to. Her eyes widen infinitesimally at his confession, somehow seeing everything he isn’t saying. After a moment, she eliminates the space between them, pushing herself up on her toes to brush her lips over his softly before slowly lowering herself to regular height.

“Ok,” she responds simply. Just like that, the matter is dropped.

He vows to give her three days before launching into the questions, but in the end she only needs two.

They’re sitting on the couch, Felicity leaning back into his chest with his arms wrapped around her waist, talking about unimportant things. It’s a nice change from the past months, a return to the calm he so desperately wanted, even if it’s always been a little off kilter. She’s been compartmentalizing the events of the day, not wanting to deal with them, he suspects. So when Thea yells from across the hall that she needs him, the last thing he expects to walk back in on is Felicity staring despondently down at a piece of fabric.

His weight settling on the couch startles her, and her head snaps up at the same time his gaze falls to look at the sweater she’s holding. The red letters MIT stand out against the grey background and he
presses his lips together knowingly.

“I feel like I’m back at the beginning again, you know?” She starts, huffing out something resembling a laugh. “My father’s dead and I have no idea how to feel about it.” She drops her gaze to the sweater in her lap. “The only difference is this time he died for me instead of himself. Does that even make a difference?”

He doesn’t respond, getting the feeling she has much more to say.

She shakes her head, turning her eyes to the ceiling briefly. “I spent so much time convinced he didn’t love me, that he couldn’t love me, only to find out that maybe he did. But does it matter? He did terrible things, and deluding himself into thinking they’re justified doesn’t magically make it better. He was an awful man who brought out the worst in me; I should be happy he’s gone.”

“He didn’t-” He starts, but she cuts him off.

“He did, though. My sole purpose after he died the first time was to distance myself from the girl who shut out all emotion. I wanted to feel everything. I figured if I did that, I could never become the cold, calculating person he was. But look where it got me,” she sighs, running her hands over the fabric of the sweater. “I used a father’s affection for his daughter to my own advantage. I held a gun to him. I was prepared to shoot him! If that’s not cold and calculating, I don’t know what is.”

He shakes his head, reaching out and covering her hands in his. “Felicity, whether you want to admit it or not, your father made you who you are.” Her head whips to look at him but he powers through firmly. “You would never have made half the choices you did if it weren’t for him, and you’re stronger for it. You only did what was necessary, and that isn’t a bad thing.”

She doesn’t look like she believes him, eyes falling back to the fabric on her thighs covered with their hands. He removes one of his to catch her chin and direct her eyes back to his.

“When you pointed that gun at him, were you thinking of killing him?”

She whispers a barely audible, “No.”

“You weren’t driven back to the cabin by a desire to put a bullet in him?”
“I… I didn’t want any of you hurt.”

His lips turn up in a soft smile and his hand glides to cup her jaw, thumb brushing her cheek. “You aren’t heartless, Felicity. You didn’t do any of that stuff because you wanted to, or because you thought it was justified. You did it because it was the only option you saw. You didn’t make a choice, you reacted to his choice.”

She sighs, trying to move her head from his grasp, but he brings the other hand up to frame her face.

“I’m beautiful, strong, and remarkable. You are not your father. Don’t doubt that for a second.”

Finally, she releases a watery smile, closing the distance between them almost faster than he can blink. Her lips claim his with almost reckless abandon, her fingers slipping into his hair to pull his mouth more firmly against hers as she adjusts herself to get a better angle. Once he recovers from the surprise of it all, his arm winds around her back, pulling her closer and sweeping his tongue against her bottom lip. He feels her bracing herself, vaguely wonders why until her leg swings over his and she settles herself straddling his lap, opening to allow his tongue to sweep slowly inside. He groans as she presses herself closer, sliding one of her hands down to his chest.

His lungs are screaming for air, so he threads the fingers of one hand in her hair and tugs gently, tilting her head back and parting their lips in the process. Attacking the newly exposed skin of her neck brings a sigh of pleasure forth from her and her nails scrape his skull deliciously. He bites down gently on her collarbone at the sensation and she sucks in a breath, fingers twitching against his chest and wasting no time relocating to the buttons of his shirt. She fumbles with them, something he finds rather endearing as he lets his hands wander under the hem of her shirt. Finally, she gives up, abandoning her pursuit and bringing his lips back to hers instead.

In a motion so abrupt it elicits a squeal from Felicity, he lifts and flips her so she’s lying underneath him. He takes a second to just look down at her, lips slightly swollen, breath coming in gasps large enough to bring her breasts into the barest of contact with his chest, and eyes dark with desire he’s sure is reflected in his own. She’s beautiful, and she’s his. The next time he lowers his lips to hers, it’s gentle, tender. He takes his time exploring her mouth with his, her body with his hands. Her hands go for the buttons, trying once more. She manages three before she growls in frustration and, taking hold of both sides of the fabric, rips as forcefully as she can manage. He can’t stop the chuckle that escapes his lips and she gives him a self-satisfied smile, attacking the finally exposed flesh with her fingers. The sensation sends electricity coursing through his veins and his fingers dip beneath her shirt once more, slowly lifting the fabric higher. Just when his fingers brush the bottom of her bra-
“Hey, Ollie, where did you say- Oh my god! Seriously?! Again?!” Thea squeals from somewhere behind the couch. Oliver squeezes his eyes shut, halting the progress of his hands and allowing his head to drop to Felicity’s neck. “You two really need to lock the door!”

He sighs in exasperation, not bothering to look up as he replies, “The door was closed, Thea. Most people would take that as a sign to knock.”

Needless to say, the mood is effectively killed.

They spend the next night at her apartment, and just from the look on her face when she eyes the couch, he can tell she’s still got some adjusting to do. For all the brave face she puts on with him and John, it’s obvious she’s still struggling with how to feel about her father’s death. He can’t blame her. It’s barely been a week, and yet she seems to think she should already be back at work as though nothing happened. Eventually, he and Diggle admit defeat, acknowledging they may not be able to give her what she needs. Luckily, they know one person who can.

They meet her out front, Oliver not letting himself think about how odd it is to be meeting under these circumstances. He doesn’t quite know how to introduce himself in the context of his place in Felicity’s life, doesn’t know how much the blonde has shared, but the knowing smile on the woman’s face suggests she knows he’s plenty more than a ‘good friend’.

The surprise on Felicity’s face is unchecked when they usher the woman through the door first, and he smiles softly when she meets her mother halfway, arms squeezing her tightly. When she opens her eyes, still wrapped in her mom’s embrace, she mouths a ‘thank you’ to both men before returning her attention to the woman in front of her. Silently, they retreat, closing the door and letting the women talk it out. They can only hope it helps in ways they haven’t been able to.

Usually, when they talk about her father, it disintegrates into fighting. This time, though, it turns out to be exactly what she needs. She’ll never understand how Oliver knows what will help even before she does, but she’ll be forever grateful for that particular quality. It trips her up for a second, the way she thinks about him in a ‘forever’ context. It’s been three months since they’ve been together at this point, but that’s far too soon to be having the feelings and thoughts she’s having. There’s no way they’re ready for the level of intensity they’ve reached. Is there?

“How long did you and Dad date… before you got married?” She asks out of the blue. It’s the first
time she’s inquired about her parents’ love story, the first time she’s cared enough to think there even was a love story. For years, she assumed the man was incapable of love, but he did die to save her, so there must be some morsel of the emotion in him.

Her mother’s lips stretch in a knowing smile. “We were friends for years before we got together, so that helped speed up the process. I think that, if you’re friends first, you have the potential to feel much more deeply more quickly. You don’t have that ‘getting to know each other’ phase other couples do. So you shouldn’t worry so much about the pace of your relationship. Whatever feels right for you and Oliver is exactly where you should be.”

She blinks at her mother, shifting uncomfortably. “How did you…?”

“He seriously chartered a helicopter?” She deflects, raising an eyebrow. Her mother only stares back, undeterred. Eventually, she gives up and sighs before launching into it.

She tells her mother everything about her confusion regarding her grief, opening up about her struggle in a way she hasn’t before. Felicity has always been guarded with her grief, preferring to get angry and condemn the man for his overbearing nature. It was easier to hate him than to love him, especially when he gave her far more ammunition for the former. Yet a nagging part of her still says he’s her father. Despite everything he’s done, all the choices he’s made (even the ones she can’t tell her mother about), she’s firmly back at square one. It’s six years ago all over again, but this time, she’s going to do it right. She isn’t going to stand in silence while her mother cries over his empty casket. She isn’t going to suffer alone, telling herself she’s only indulging in ‘the good days’ for her mother’s sake. This time, she’s going to be honest.

Two days later, after her mother has returned home and she’s curled up with Oliver in her bedroom (they’ve now agreed to rotate where they stay the night), she disentangles herself from his arms to kneel facing him.

“I never did thank you,” she tells him. “For flying my mother out here, I mean. She told me about the helicopter.”

He doesn’t look the least bit abashed at her subtle rebuke of his unnecessary measures. “Did it help?”
She takes a deep breath before nodding. “Yes. There were… a lot of things I’ve never really told her before about… how I deal with him dying. It was good to get it all out there and really talk to her about him. We always used to just skate the surface, remembering the good times but glossing over the bad. Whenever the bad times did come up, I’d get angry and go on the offensive and she’d automatically go defensive… It wasn’t a good way to deal with it. I think… Talking to her helped me realize I did it all wrong last time. I didn’t think anyone understood, so I pushed everyone away. I isolated myself and picked a side so I wouldn’t have to be confused. And this time… it doesn’t really feel like I lost him, y’know?” She asks, not really expecting an answer. His hand has reached out at some point to rest on her thigh, his thumb moving back and forth over the skin exposed by her shorts. She concentrates on the soothing rhythm as she continues talking. “I didn’t have enough time to really get used to the idea of him being alive, so him being dead again… It doesn’t feel any different. I just have more information to sort through, more ammunition to fuel the anger.”

“Felicity,” he catches her attention, “Your father did love you. Maybe it was in a way you didn’t understand and can’t make sense of, but it was there. He was still, at his basest instincts, a father who would do anything to protect his daughter. No matter what he did in the years leading up to his death, he was still a good man in the end.”

She remembers saying those very words to Oliver what seems like so long ago. They’re true, she knows, but it may take time before she fully believes them. Hopefully one day she can get there.

Two days later, they’re sitting in the foundry and arguing about what to tell Roy. The kid has cornered him three separate times, a determined set to his jaw that indicates he wants those answers. So far, Oliver has been able to evade him, but the time has come to make a decision.

“I don’t think he’s ready,” Oliver argues yet again, leaning back against the table.

“He’s not ready, or you’re not?” Digg questions. He’s standing in the middle ground, between Oliver and where Felicity sits in her computer chair.

“We don’t need him involved in all this, especially not if it puts my sister in any extra danger,” he tries again.

“So then Thea and I shouldn’t be friends anymore?” Felicity asks drily, spinning her chair around.
He shoots her a look. “That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Look, Oliver,” she sighs, pushing herself to her feet and closing the distance between them. “It’s ultimately your call, but I think the purpose would do him good. He’s out there fighting street thugs anyways. Why not give him a better arsenal to protect himself?”

He sighs, running a hand down his face. The arguments against this are running thin. However, he’s saved by the bell, so to speak.

“Hello?” He answers, thinking that this is actually the only good timing Thea’s had in weeks.

“Ollie, we need to meet.” The voice doesn’t belong to Thea.

“Sara?” He frowns. “What’s going on?”

“We need to meet. All of us. Right now. Come as the Arrow.”

She gives him a rooftop address and hangs up before he can ask what it’s about. Puzzled, he disconnects his end of the call and relays the instructions to his two partners before heading to change.

Felicity raises her eyebrows as they ascend the stairs to the roof. “Is this usually how you get up here? Because in my head it’s much cooler.”

He chuckles quietly despite his current uniform. “I assure you, it usually lives up to the expectations of your head.”

Then everyone stops as his words register. Digg looks like he’s going to bust a gut and Felicity actually does, bending over at the waist and leaning against the wall for support.

“Oh… Oh my God it’s contagious! I’m contagious!” She exclaims between gulps of air expelled in laughter. It’s nice, seeing her laugh again. When she finally calms down and Oliver feels recovered
enough from the mortification of the words he just uttered, they continue their journey upwards. What they see on the other side of the door stops them in their tracks.

It isn’t just Sara. He can spot her blonde wig among them, but the majority are decked out in various black leather costumes. In all, there are at least ten of them standing on the roof in a group, looking every bit as deadly as the League of Assassins is proven to be. Oliver instinctively moves a half step in front of Felicity, shielding her from them. He can feel the nervous tension rolling from her in waves. To his left, Diggle stiffens, hand resting on the gun in his waistband. From the ranks, one black clad warrior steps forth. The face is obscured, so they can’t tell it’s a woman until she speaks.

“I am Nyssa Raatko, Heir to the Demon, and I come on behalf of my father, Ra’s al Ghul.”

“What do you want?” Oliver grounds out. He doesn’t like this at all, especially since Sara won’t look at him.

“We have come to settle a debt owed us,” Nyssa answers, voice calm and measured. “Our asset perished before he was able to live out his sentence.”

“I fail to see how that is our problem.”

Behind him, Felicity lets out an unsteady breath.

“In the League of Assassins, when one fails to carry out a debt, the responsibility falls to the next of kin.”

The words hit him like a sucker punch to the gut. It’s all he can do to remain standing upright and appear unaffected. There’s no way in hell that is happening.

“No way,” he bites out, hearing Digg’s voice echoing his.

“A year is owed us, and we always collect,” Nyssa responds, voice still even. “The debt must be paid.”

He’s quickly realizing there is no way out of this, no compromise to be made. If there was, he’s sure
Sara would have tried. As angry with her blindside as he may be right now, he can’t believe she wouldn’t fight the League on this.

“Fine. If someone has to pay the debt, I’ll do it,” he says, voice teetering on the edge of fury.

“Ol-No!” Felicity protests, barely catching his name in time. She reaches out to grip his arm but he takes a step forward and out of her grasp.

“You won’t have to waste time training me.”

Nyssa remains silent for a long while. Finally, “Ta-er al-Sahfer said you would volunteer to take on the burden for the one you love. It is a romantic notion, if not a foolish one.”

“I won’t allow it,” a strong, nearly unrecognizable voice says from behind him. Before he can stop her, Felicity is standing even with his shoulder. She looks far more confident than he’s sure she feels. “He was my father, and that makes this my responsibility.”

“Felicity,” he hisses, going against his instinct and turning his back on the League to catch her attention. He trusts Diggle to keep them unharmed.

“Oliver.” She keeps her voice low enough so they won’t overhear. “I can’t let you do this. It isn’t your burden to bear. It’s mine.”

“No, it’s not,” he argues desperately. She can’t do this. There’s no way.

Her eyes flash. “Do you say that about The List? The mission your father left you?”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s not. It was unfair of your father to put that responsibility on your shoulders, but you took it anyway. I won’t be the one to add another unjustified weight. The List was the legacy your father left you, and this?” She indicates the group of assassins. “This is the one mine left me.”
“Felicity-” He tries once again, sure his voice and eyes reflect the full on terror coursing through his veins. This is his every nightmare come true. She’s standing before him but slipping right through his fingers as he stands by, powerless to do anything but watch.

“Felicity, don’t you dare,” Digg’s voice snaps him from his haze of alarm. The man is much closer than when he last checked.

“John, I have to. This… My father broke commitment after commitment. Logic follows that one day it would come back to haunt me. I won’t let anyone else fight a battle that’s mine.”

He recognizes the look in her eye, the one that says she won’t change her mind and clenches his fist on his bow in frustration. “There has to be another way. We’ll find another way.”

Her eyes meet his morosely and she brings her hand up softly to his cheek. “There isn’t.”

With those words, she steps past him, squares her shoulders, and raises her chin to meet Nyssa’s eyes. “I will go with you and serve the remaining year of my father’s debt.”

Nyssa inclines her head. “Ta-er al-Sahfer also said this would be the case. She has indicated that she owes you a life debt. While this does not absolve you of your father’s debt, nor does it permit her to serve the debt for you, it will eliminate any debt your training would incur, as she has volunteered to train you herself as payment. She tells me it will not take as long as usual, since you have already begun.”

Blood is pounding in his ears and Oliver can’t focus on anything happening around him. Beside him, Diggle looks just as numb with shock. This can’t be happening. Felicity is turning herself over to the League without so much as a protest. How is this happening?

“…you have until the end of the week,” Nyssa is saying when he tunes back in. The assassins turn away after that and scatter from the rooftop, leaving only Sara behind.

She stops a few steps from them, cautious as ever. “You shouldn’t have done that,” she tells Felicity.

“Yet you knew I would,” Felicity throws back.
Sara nods. “I did. I knew you could never let Oliver take that on.” She pauses, debates her next words. “For what it’s worth, I tried to have your father’s debt added to mine. I don’t think they were interested in having another assassin, though.”

“What do you think they want?” Diggle’s query is on Oliver’s mind as well, but his thoughts are moving too slowly to accomplish much of anything at the moment.

“I think they want the best. Felicity’s proven herself against her father, so she’s his natural successor.”

“So then what happens when this debt is up?” Digg presses, crossing his arms menacingly. Felicity is growing paler by the second.

Sara shrugs. “We’ll have to wait and find out. They could find a way to prolong her service, or they could release her. It all depends on if Ra’s has any use for her once the time is up.”

“So you’re saying he has a use for her right now? He has a plan that he needs her for?” Really, it’s like Diggle is Felicity’s boyfriend right now, not him. He’s just standing here passively while the other man interrogates Sara. When Felicity’s hand reaches for his, however, he emerges from his stupor enough to pull away abruptly. Hurt flashes in her eyes but he just can’t stomach the idea of touching her right now when he knows she’ll have all but disappeared by week’s end.

“Yes. I don’t know what it is, but Ra’s has something up his sleeve that he needs a computer expert for, and none of his current members have the required skill.”

“But Felicity does.”

Sara nods in the affirmative. Nothing more to say, an uncomfortable silence falls between them as they contemplate what Ra’s al Ghul could possibly need from Felicity.

When they finally separate, Sara holds him back with a gentle hand on his arm. Meeting his gaze, she promises, “I’ll take care of her, Ollie. I’ll make sure she comes back to you.”
He doesn’t ask her to follow him home, but she does anyway. Taking two strides to his one, she manages to keep pace with him and prevent him from slamming the bedroom door in her face. To say he’s pissed is an understatement.

“Oliver, I-”

He holds up a finger to silence her, shaking with the effort it takes to keep the anger controlled. She immediately closes her mouth. “You handed yourself over to the League of Assassins,” he finally says, his voice a pretty good imitation of Nyssa’s calm.

“I-”

He shakes his head sharply, bringing the rest of his fingers up to join the first. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tries to regain control of his scattered emotions. He can’t. Eventually, he surrenders and just stares at her helplessly. “How could you do that?”

She opens her mouth and closes it again, eyes wide with too many emotions to identify one in particular.

“How could you just turn yourself over to them like that? What were you thinking?”

She steps toward him, encouraged when he doesn’t step back. “I was thinking that I couldn’t let someone I love pay the price I owed. I was thinking that you’ve been through enough, and I couldn’t ask you to go through that.”

“But I can go through this?” He snaps, gesturing between them. “I can go through-” His voice breaks and he tries to remember the last time it did that. “I can go through losing you?”

Her eyes widen and her mouth pops open in an ‘o’. “Oliver… you aren’t going to lose me. I’m coming back.” She steps fully in front of him, taking his face in her hands and meeting his eyes fiercely. “I am coming back. This is not over. We are not over. I am not leaving you. Not forever.”

He rips his face from her hands, stepping back. “Do you even understand what’s going to happen? You’re going to become a member of the League of Assassins, Felicity. You owe them a year of service. How is that not leaving?” He doesn’t mean to sound petulant or needy, really, but for so long now he’s been pushing the fear of losing her aside, telling himself it’s ridiculous, and now it’s
staring him in the face. “You could die.”

“Sara won’t let that happen, and neither will I.”

“She can’t always be there to protect you!” He shouts.

“Well neither can you!” She returns just as loudly. “I need to do this, Oliver! I need to do this for myself as much as anything! I can’t always rely on other people to fight my battles!”

“And I guess I can’t rely on people to stick around!” He retorts, the remark flying out before he can filter it. Once it’s out, though, he knows it’s true. This is his real problem with the whole thing. She’s been a fixture in his life, one of the only people he can count on, and she’s leaving just like the rest of them. His voice is soft as he continues. “You’re one of the most important people in my life… I can’t lose you.”

He doesn’t object as she wraps her arms around his neck tightly, but he doesn’t return the embrace either. “You aren’t going to lose me. It’s only for a little while,” she whispers into his neck. He gets the sense she’s trying to reassure himself as much as him. “I will come back. I promise.”

Slowly, ever so hesitantly, his arms come up to encircle her waist. Gradually, he relaxes into her, tightening his grip and burying his face in her neck while she combs her fingers through his hair. His eyes are wet with unshed tears that he’s failing to blink away but he doesn’t care anymore.

He feels her sigh against him and suddenly she’s saying exactly what he wants to hear. “I’ll do some digging this week. See what I can find. It’s a long shot, but I’ll try.”

That night, they sleep with their positions reversed. His head cradles on her shoulder, his arm thrown over her stomach and her arms wrapped around his shoulders, fingers soothing him to sleep with their consistent rhythm against his scalp. Just before he drifts off, the thought occurs to him that this is the first time she’s managed to stay awake longer.

They spend the remaining time either with Digg, searching feverishly for a way out, or alone in one of their rooms, curled into each other and savouring the last few days of calm before the next storm hits. If there’s one thing he knows, it’s that the League always gets what they want, and for some reason they want Felicity. Maybe her going willingly will work in her favour. Then again, letting her
go could end up being one big regret on his already too-long list. He has to have hope, though. They’ll find a way.

Two nights before she’s set to leave, the atmosphere contains an undercurrent of melancholy he wishes weren’t present. When he imagined the aftermath of Isabel’s take down, he never would have predicted this. If he were the type, he would laugh at the irony of it all. Instead, he sits silently on the couch, arm wrapped around Felicity as they stare at the fire he’s lit.

He doesn’t know how long it is before she pushes herself up to stare at him, nibbling her lower lip before finally leaning forward and kissing him. Surprised at first, it takes him a moment to respond in kind, his hand coming up to the nape of her neck to hold her in place. She pulls away too soon, eyes a deep blue as they search his.

“Hey, we’ve still got time, alright?” She murmurs, thumb stroking his cheek. “We’ll figure it out.”

He nods, trying to convince himself as much as he is agreeing with her. She gives him a sad smile before pressing her lips to his again, more insistently this time. When her fingers pull at his shirt, he understands immediately, his body heating with desire. They’ve been avoiding this by unspoken agreement, but sitting here, staring into her eyes as she pulls back in silent question, he doesn’t want to refuse her. He should, though. He should tell her no and they can go back to their G-rated evening of cuddling on the couch and trying not to think about the fact that they only have two days left to find a way out. Or they could just forget it all for tonight.

Decision made, he rises from the couch, leaving her alone and trying to cover her disappointment. When he reaches the door, he pauses before pushing it fully closed with his palm and, remembering all the other times they’ve tried to do this, slides the lock home. He turns back around to see her eyes wide and focused on him, anticipation clear as she lifts herself off the couch.

As much as the memory may haunt him if she goes, he needs one night to love her in every capacity he can, to know what it is to fully and completely love her. It’s the only thing running through his mind as he returns to her, stopping to brush a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I love you,” she whispers, eyes brimming with tears. It’s the first time she’s initiated the words and he finds his heart breaking a little bit at the revelation.

“I love you, too.”
And then his lips are on hers.

It isn’t the first time he wanted for them. It’s not the first time he wanted to share with anyone, especially not her. It was supposed to be different, and while this is certainly different, it is in a decidedly bad way. Everything is tinged with a layer of desperation and sadness at first, from the way she unbuttons his shirt (successfully this time) to his hands brushing down her sides to grip her thighs and carry her to the bed. When he lays her down and pauses to just look at her, hair sprawled across his pillow, he can see the love in her eyes threatening to explode. It’s then that everything changes. This is their first time, and there’s nothing saying it will be their last. He won’t let the shadow looming over them taint it. It isn’t over yet; there’s still fighting left to be done.

The next time he kisses her, it’s slow and deep. He takes his time the way he wants to, exploring every inch of her as they shed their clothes. She, in return, somehow flips them over and takes her own turn, running her lips over his scars, lingering on his abs in a way that has him groaning impatiently as her tongue traces the defined lines. She’s grinning as she makes her way back up to his mouth, teasing him before sitting back. He raises himself to a half-sitting position to reclaim her lips with his, losing himself in her completely.

After, she curls into his side, sighing contentedly as her fingers stroke over his skin in random patterns. He wraps his arms around her, placing kisses to the top of her head as she drifts off to sleep, a smile etched on her face. Eventually, he allows himself to slip under the heavy veil as well. His sleep is deep and dreamless, and he’s thankful for that. Maybe the nightmares sense that he’s dealing with enough in his waking hours, making their presence unnecessary at night.

They wake twice more during the night, the fire dimming progressively until complete darkness engulfs their entwined bodies. She is remarkable, in each and every sense of the word, and she’s his. He refuses to think otherwise as he drifts off yet again with her wrapped in his arms.

The next time he opens his eyes, the sun is streaming through the curtains and Felicity is gone.

Chapter End Notes

*Ducks* Please don’t hate me for this. I kind of hate myself. Ok, I REALLY hate myself. I know, that was a cruel thing to do to you all… But there’s a sequel! I promise!

So, sequel. It will be called Chasing the Sunlight, and I will post an additional chapter
onto this story when I’ve worked out enough kinks to start posting it. I’ll also give you a preview at that time, if you haven’t all burned me at the stake by then. There will be a time jump, and it will pick back up when Felicity/Sara reconnect with Oliver/Diggle. So it will basically explore what happened while they were separated, why Ra’s al Ghul wants Felicity, as well as what happens now that they’re back together. (Yes, that means flashbacks!)

This story has been my most ambitious undertaking in writing thus far, and I really do want to thank you for sticking with me. I really hope I haven’t killed every ounce of faith you had in me, and that you’ll stay tuned for the sequel. Every time I write something new, I try to up the ante and keep growing, and I think my plans thus far for the sequel will do that. This story and the support from you readers has given me a huge confidence boost in my abilities as a writer.

So, one more time, please review! You are welcome to throw rotten fruit, but I don’t like fire, so please no flames.

Thank you!
Sequel (finally!)

Hey there! Long time, no see. If anyone is still out there... This is your official notice that I am posting the sequel to this story. Yes, I know, I'm FINALLY doing this. I don't want to try offering excuses, but this past year has been absolutely horrendous for me on a personal level. Plus, the back half of season 3 obliterated my desire to write anything Arrow-related. I still get that nasty knot of disgust in my stomach thinking about the stupidity of that whole string of episodes. Thankfully, my faith in this show has been (mostly) restored, and I am back!

In regards to SATC, I got a lot of great reviews, some of which were anonymous and thus prevented me from replying. I do want to say a few things before we close out the SATC chapter and move on to Chasing the Sunlight.

I did want to keep as much of the final chapter of SATC in Oliver's POV as possible, so Felicity didn't get a whole lot of closure. We didn't get to see much of her side of the decision. I made the choice to save that for the flashbacks and such in the sequel. The main point I wanted to get across in this one was that she felt she had no other option than to go. Ra's wants her, and as Nyssa said, the League always collects. Sara hinted that Ra's didn't want just any assassin. He wanted Felicity in particular, and I feel that the Felicity I presented looked at things very logically. She tried to find another way, but eventually she just gave in and decided to go see what Ra's wanted her for. If he wanted her badly enough, he'd find a way to get her regardless.

Now, that probably did come off as a bit cold and taking Oliver for granted, and that won't be disregarded. I think not having Felicity's POV in there kind of hurt that a bit, but the chapter was getting super long. Oliver will by no means just welcome her back with open arms and a kiss. He's going to be seriously hurt. Not only did she tell him they'd find a way, but she then left a day early, when he wasn't expecting it. There are other things that will come into play when we pick back up that amp up his hurt and anger as well. So they'll have a lot to work through if they're going to get back to stable ground, especially after they went through the whole "holding back" thing with her plan to infiltrate Isabel's plot earlier on.

So yes, this was a bit of a regression for Felicity in just up and leaving, but in her mind she's doing the right thing. The honourable thing. To her, Ra's wants her and there's no avoiding that. She doesn't want to hide or have Oliver save her. She wants to take care of herself and fight her own battles.

We saw some of her struggle to avoid becoming her father after his death, but the flashbacks in particular will sort of deal with her trying to avoid that darkness when she's right in the thick of it. We saw Felicity really struggle when she became a part of Oliver's world, with the darkness around the edges that she didn't have pre-Oliver, and how it brought her father out of his little mental box. But what's going to happen when she's surrounded by it? In this story, she realized that she can't just shove her memories aside. She has to embrace who she was in order to fully heal and move past it. Now, part of the struggle is not losing herself to the darkness when it consumes her. She has to resist it on her own, without Oliver there to pull her back from the edge. Oliver was her safety net, in a way, allowing her to feel secure in exploring a side of herself she'd long tucked away, but once he's gone does that change? She said she drinks to prove to herself she won't let it control her life, and now she has to make a similar choice with the physical aspect. Can Sara train her without it taking over her life, or will she lose herself to it? Does she turn off the emotion to survive? Or can Sara keep her from losing it? Can she keep hold of herself even if the easier option is to give up?

And really, what about Oliver? He finally let his guard down and trusted her, and she left. He
opened his heart to her and she essentially stomped on it. So he's going to have his own turmoil going. He talked a lot about not being able to handle losing her and how he wouldn't be the same without her, so we'll see that loss take a bit of a toll on him emotionally. But when she comes back, can he really trust her again? Should he? Should he trust anyone in that capacity?

I'm getting off track now, so the short answer is yes, there will be a lot of hurt and anger on Oliver's part, and Felicity will be just as hurt because leaving broke her heart, too. But ultimately, she's the one who messed up here, and she's the one who now has an uphill battle to win Oliver's trust back. She's the one who has to put in the effort. She has to stay.

Anyways, I'll stop rambling now and let you go look for the sequel! Chasing the Sunlight.

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