Sins

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Summary

Oliver Queen is alive.

After being presumed dead in a violent shipwreck five years ago, Oliver Queen returns to Starling City determined to right the wrongs of his family. But the billionaire playboy’s homecoming stirs more than feelings for joy; it threatens secrets someone is determined to keep buried. Secrets that threaten the life Oliver has just reclaimed, and the lives of those he loves the most.

Vowing to protect his family at any cost, Oliver digs deeper, bringing danger to his doorstep, and leaving him with the shocking realization that the sins of the past are rooted much closer to home than he ever thought.

When friends may be enemies, when enemies may be his best allies, when love is used as a smokescreen to hide the most vicious hate, Oliver isn't sure who he can trust. He just knows that he'll do anything to protect those he loves... even it means dying all over again.

Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on May 30, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

Hopefully things will become clear as you read. And thanks for reading, by the way. I
appreciate it. You've all been wonderful and supportive.

WARNING: Please note that this story does contain potential trigger material concerning miscarriage.
~ Julie
Chapter 1

Oliver Queen was alive.

Even though he was right in front of her, separated only the glass insert of the hospital room door, Felicity Smoak couldn't seem to absorb it.

Five years. Five years of questions; of conspiracy theories that insisted the accident at sea that claimed the Queen's Gambit was really just a cover story. The truth, the tabloids insisted, was that the billionaire playboy had really been killed during a kidnapping attempt gone wrong, been committed to rehab after a drunken altercation with paparazzi nearly landed him in prison, or indoctrinated into a cult somewhere in Utah.

Five years, Felicity thought with a bitterness that soured her mouth, of her insides turning colder and colder as each passing day smothered hope. Of trying to keep a tiny ember of faith alive as everyone around her told her she had to move on. And all that time he was still out there. Still alive. Waiting for someone to find him in a world where everyone had stopped looking long ago.

Then one random fishing boat changed everything by stumbling across some unmapped island in the North China Sea. Five days later, Oliver Queen was home.

She drank in the sight of him even though he'd yet to turn away from the large window that overlooked Starling City. Beyond him, the lights of the city twinkled in the night, diamonds scattered across the inky blackness. He was so still. So quiet.

The tattered, ruined clothes he'd been found in were gone, swapped out for a simple white t-shirt and light blue scrubs bottom. According to the nurse, several inches of tangled hair and beard had been sheered away, leaving him clean and neat, his jaw faintly shadows by stubble.

Did anyone really think it would be that easy to erase whatever he'd endured?

He did look the same, Felicity realized with an odd sense of unease. She took in his broad shoulders and the strong, straight line of his back. The same but… different. Like a stranger that had borrowed her best friend's body.

She lifted a hand toward the glass that stood between them but stopped herself. She toyed nervously with the top button of her white blouse instead. One miracle. The Universe had gifted them one. Oliver's father, however, hadn't been so lucky. According to the police, Robert Queen and the entirety of the Queen's Gambit crew had perished when the yacht sank in a storm. Her heart squeezed, tight and fast and painful, in her chest. Tears burned her eyes and nose. Five years alone. God. How the hell had he survived?

"Twenty percent of his body is covered in scar tissue," the doctor behind her murmured. "Second degree burns on his back and arms. X-rays show at least 12 fractures that never properly healed."

Felicity faced the physician. She had to swallow several times before she could ask, "Has he said anything about what happened?"

A shadow of sympathy passed over the man's face. "No," he said gently. "He's barely said anything." He hesitated. "Please don't take this the wrong way but… I expected his family to come."

Felicity flinched. "His mother's on safari in Africa. It took several days to find her. She's flying back tonight and should be here by morning. No one was sure how Oliver was…" She glanced back at
Oliver through the window. "No one wanted Thea to do this alone until they knew."

Knew what, Felicity wasn't sure. Knew if Oliver was sane? Knew how badly he was hurt? Knew if he'd gone crazy sitting, alone, on some frigid rock in the middle of the ocean for five years? Or had decided if he was a danger to himself, let alone anyone else? Hell, even now, only a few feet from him, Felicity wasn't sure she could answer those questions.

The doctor inched closer. "Ms. Smoak. I'd like you to prepare yourself." He touched her arm. "The Oliver you lost might not be the one they found.

She swallowed and somehow managed a nod.

He opened the door and stepped inside, leaving her to follow a step behind. "Mr. Queen?"

Oliver turned, the light slipping away from his face to leave it cloaked in shadow. Felicity's heart stuttered as a shiver – part joy, part fear – seemed to breeze through her body. God, he looked older. Taller, too. So much harder and leaner.

The five years apart had cut away any softness in his face, carving a strong jaw, sharp cheekbones, and eyes that were… Felicity searched them, not sure exactly what she saw there. Different. That prickly feeling that she was meeting a stranger scraped the back of her neck before slithering down her spine. She shivered.

The doctor cleared his throat. "I'll give you two some privacy. If you need anything, Ms. Smoak, I'll be right down the hall."

She nodded without really hearing him, didn't move even as the physician exited the room and closed the door firmly behind him. She couldn't take her eyes off Oliver. As stupid as it sounded, it felt like, if she looked away, if she even blinked, he'd vanish again. She tried to say something, anything, but her heart – suddenly beating far too fast – seemed lodged at the base of her throat, a cork between the words and lips that could only tremble slightly apart.

He seemed to change then. His eyes softened. The tension fell from his mouth. His lips spread into a thin, unsure smile. "Felicity."

"Oliver," she breathed.

She wasn't sure who moved first and, as soon as her arms closed around him and his around her, Felicity didn't care. She clung tight, her face against the crook of his neck. His scent filled her – the warm, masculine smell that was Oliver Queen now tinged with antibacterial soap and a strange, new undertone of earth. She breathed it in deeper, desperate to feel something. Anything. Desperate for that scent to warm parts of her soul that hadn't felt warm since the Queen's Gambit has been declared lost.

His arms tightened, bruising in their power, but she didn't care. It was familiar. It was foreign. It was change.

It was home.

She sobbed, just once, and Oliver cradled the back of her head with his hand. His fingers slipped into her curls, the tips grazing her scalp. Felicity didn't know how long she hung on to him, but a sense of coolness began to sink through her relief and bleed away that joy.

Suddenly awkward, she drew back. She dipped her head as she sniffled and wiped the back of her hand across her wet eyes. Her laugh was thin, too high and nervous, before she forced herself to look
at him. A billion questions crowded her brain but none made it passed the tip of her tongue. It was too soon. Too raw. They had plenty of time to talk and she would let him take the lead when he was ready.

Oliver peered down at her. When had he gotten that tall? She felt dwarfed by him. Something low in her belly tightened at that, sending an odd sizzle through her blood. Her next breath wasn’t so steady. She eased a step back.

His blue eyes searched hers. A corner of his mouth curved upward. "Smoak, huh."

"What?" She blinked. "Oh. I… Yeah."

He nodded.

"It's kind of…” Complicated. Weird. Inconvenient. She closed her eyes as she gave her head a little shake. "We can talk about it later."

"Sure."

"I talked to your mother before I got here. She called on her way back from Africa. She'll be here as soon as she can. And Thea…” She laughed a little as she smoothed her moist palms over the black fabric of her skirt front. "Thea was practically bouncing off the walls, she wants to see you so badly. They can't wait to have you home."

He nodded again, just a faint bob of his head, but his hands closed into fists. His eyes sparked.

Felicity's throat went dry. Her stomach did a little flip. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "The doctors said all the test results should be back in the morning. You should be able to leave then. I've already arranged for a car…"

Oliver's jaw clenched. His nostrils flared. "Felicity," he ground out, sounding as if she'd tried his patience as far as it could go.

"Sorry," she said automatically. She raised trembling hands to tuck her blonde hair behind her ears. "Sorry. I'm just… This is…"

"Jesus," he growled as he reached for her. His hands framed her face a second before his mouth claimed hers.

Fire ignited the moment his lips touched hers, melting her. Felicity could only cling to the front of his shirt as she pushed up against his chest and opened her mouth to him. His groan vibrated through her, thrilling her, turning her wanton and hungry and desperate. Too many clothes. Too many barriers. She wanted skin. Hot. Naked. Sweaty.

She wanted him inside her.

Felicity whimpered as she twisted against him. Dimly she was aware they were moving – two quick steps – and there was the wall, sturdy and solid at her back, while Oliver leaned, hot and solid, against her front. Her breasts grew heavy, her nipples tight. Every shift of his chest against hers zapped electricity between her thighs.

She sighed as he nipped her chin, her jaw; moaned as he strung searing, open-mouthed kisses down her throat. She dropped her head back, granting him better access, and slid her hands to his shoulders. He bit the delicate cord of her throat, a stinging, hungry bite that made her cry out as her nails sank deep into his shoulders.
He groaned, part pain, part primitive pleasure, and a whip of desire made Felicity pant. Oliver's breath fanned across her flesh in hot bursts as he dragged his hands over her breasts, down her belly to her hips. He bit her again as he pressed one strong thigh between hers. Felicity wiggled against the wall as she fought to widen her stance.

Oliver's palms – rough and callused and hotter than they'd ever been, pushed under her skirt to touch her bare thighs. He stroked her smooth flesh before shoving the silky black material out of his way. He slipped his fingers under the edge of her panties.

Felicity's lungs locked. Her eyes opened. Oliver, his nose a whisper from hers, watched her as he sank his index finger between her wet folds. Her lashes fluttered as he stroked her. She didn't care that she was embarrassingly wet for him. Didn't care that there was no disguising how much she wanted him. She just wanted more. Now.

"Harder," she gasped as she rolled her hips into his hand.

He swore under his breath. Wait. Was that Russian? Oliver spoke Russian? But then he whisked her panties away, curled his hands around the backs of her thighs and lifted her. She barely had time to brace herself before he was inside her, and when he was, Felicity didn't care if he started talking Martian.

She sighed her pleasure as he sank deeper. He stretched her. Filled her. Possessed her. Her body protested, sending a confused signal of pain and pleasure. Felicity ignored it and tightened her legs around him. One of her high heeled shoes slipped off and clattered to the floor as she locked her ankles together and used the hold to pull him closer.

Oliver buried his face against her throat. His hands clamped around her hips, forcing her to stay still.

He was trembling, Felicity realized. Afraid he'd hurt her? Having second thoughts? No. She forced the thought away, slid her fingers into the thick hair at his nape. She couldn't stop herself from arching her back, making him slid deeper into her as she moaned. She needed this. Needed the hot, hard length of him inside her. Finally. After all those years…

His muscles turned to taut steel a second before he thrust into her again. The strength of it stole the air from her lungs in a shocked gasp. Her nails stung the back of his neck. He shuddered as he cursed, then began to move, each thrust hard and fast. She cried out. She couldn't help it. It didn't matter where they were. It didn't matter who could hear. It sure as hell didn't matter that he was taking her against a wall in the middle of a public hospital. All she knew was she needed him. Needed this. Intense. Scorching. Raw.

More. She tried to thrust back but Oliver's fingers tightened on her hips, keeping her still as he drove himself into her. She needed more.

Oliver groaned, the noise rough and erotic, making her wonder if she's said that plea aloud. Any doubt vanished when he caught her behind her knees and lifted them higher. His next thrust went deeper, seemed to send shockwaves through her bones.

She raked her nails down his neck, his back. Her back arched as he pushed into her again and again. Her womb clenched. Her toes curled.

The orgasm hit her hard, dragging a scream from her throat that would, tomorrow, probably embarrass her. But as Oliver pumped into her once more… twice… then came inside her, Felicity couldn't care. Pleasure spun her up, higher than ever, and she let it.
Warm. Finally. After so many years… she was alive again. Breathing. Feeling.

She was still trembling when Oliver finally lowered her several minutes later. Her feet touched tile, the chill of it stinging her bare foot. Felicity sagged back against the wall to keep from falling on her ass. She was still riding the waves down as Oliver began to methodically straighten her clothes, then his.

He didn't look at her.

Her vision blurred. Her nose stung. A tear escaped to streak down her cheek before she could stop it. She'd never been a crier after sex. Not ever. But this… Her body was sore. It ached. A wonderful, delicious, frightening ache. Even though it wasn't unbuttoned, Felicity clutched the front of her shirt between her breasts, feeling strangely vulnerable. This was different. She was different.

She started to wipe the tear away but Oliver was suddenly there, cradling her jaw with one hand and using his thumb to wipe the tear from her cheek. He dipped his head, nuzzled her nose with his for a moment before his mouth touched hers.

Heat unfurled inside her, slower this time, gentle, and Felicity sighed she looped her arms around his neck. It was a tricky, deceptive warmth, a voice in her head warned. Seduction of a different kind.

This was the man she knew, Felicity told herself as she kissed him. This was Oliver Jonas Queen, the man she'd loved and lost and mourned.

Now he was alive. He was back. He was her miracle, her second chance, and she would do whatever it took to make sure she never lost him again.

Oliver drew back. He brushed a curly tendril of her hair away from her cheek with a familiarity that made her heart swell. "Don't cry," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

"I'm not," she said even as another tear flowed.

He half groaned, half laughed before he placed a lingering kiss to her brow.

Felicity held on to him, afraid even now that he'd leave her. Terrified she's wake up, realize it was all just another stupid dream, and have to lose him all over again and face yet another day knowing she was alone. Again.

She sniffled and wiped her eyes. "Oliver."

A cart rattled in the hallway and Oliver pressed a quick kiss to her lips. "Later," he promised.

He swept her underwear and the lost shoe from the floor and held them out to her.

Telling herself she wasn't blushing, Felicity jammed the panties into her purse before she shoved her foot back into the shoe. She needed distance. She needed a few minutes to compose herself and feel like she had something solid beneath her feet again.

"I just…" She motioned to the door. "I'll be right back."

She made it two steps before Oliver caught her arm. Though she didn't turn, she was aware of the heat of him behind her. His presence alone was overwhelming, as if his aura was smothering her own. His thumb caressed her arm, making her quiver, and Felicity squeezed her eyes shut.

How could one man, one who hadn't touched her in five years, make her this weak?
"Tomorrow," Oliver practically purred in her ear, making her shiver again, "put the damned ring back on."

Felicity snapped her head around to stare at him over her shoulder. "I—"

He shook his head, a quick gesture of total dominance that uncharacteristically shocked her into silence. "Tomorrow," he said again. He leaned closer, filling her vision. He brushed gentle fingertips against her cheek before he dropped his hand away. "I may have been gone five years, Mrs. Queen, but you will always belong with me."

[Image: Sins: what are you guilty of?]

~*~

[Read More About the Olicity Challenge]
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Oliver Queen returns home to find that time not only changes everything... it buries secrets and lies deep.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on June 7 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

"Your room is exactly as you left it," Moira Queen declared as she swept into the foyer of the Queen family home. She put her purse down on the entry table before tugging off her beige cashmere-lined leather gloves. "I never had the heart to change a thing."

She was right, Oliver Queen decided as he stopped in the double-wide doorway of the mansion and took in the elegant wood paneling and regal furniture. The house looked exactly the same. Everything did.

When the Bentley had turned onto the long, curved driveway, allowing him only glimpses of the looming stone mansion through the trees, he'd been struck by how untouched it was by time. Ivy still grew along the south wall. Perfectly manicured dwarf hedges still dotted the approach to the massive covered carport. The same stone lion statues crouched on the garden banister, watching as Oliver climbed out of the car and fetched his one true belonging – an old, heavy, hinged green crate – from the trunk.

Five years ago he would have felt pride, Oliver thought as he stood in the foyer, taking in the graceful sweeping stairways, heavy curtains, and thick plush carpet. The forty-room home, built in the Scottish baronial style, a Gothic revival style made popular in the Edwardian period, was a source of envy from anyone who ever passed it. Oliver, certainly, had felt that pride at that time just knowing it belonged to him. The estate was just another symbol of the Queen Family's affluence, power, and influence.

Now… Oliver sighed as he set the long, narrow carrying case down at his feet. Now he saw it through different eyes. Saw cold and gray and stoic. Even the trees around the house were bare, their spindly limbs devoid of any foliage, as if even the slightest hint of color were forbidden.

The people had changed though. He lingered on his mother as she set her gloves on top of her purse and absentely touched the gold frame on one of the family photos that crowded the table. There were wrinkles at the corners of her mouth and eyes where none had been before. A few gray hairs. Maybe a few pounds thicker around the waist. She was, however, as stunning as ever. Even after having only touched down from weeks in the African bush, Moira Queen still managed to look Jackie O
immaculate. With her trim, boxy cut beige suit, classic pumps, and pearl necklace, all she lacked was the hat and oversized sunglasses.

Memories filled the house, too. They flooded out of every corner, every shadow, and crowded Oliver's head in a kaleidoscope of images that threatened to overwhelm his senses. Behind each and every memory were lies and secrets worth killing for.

He forced the thought back with a slight jerk of his head. Not now. Not here. Later. He would deal with the realities and betrayals later. When he was alone. Right now he just wanted to be home. To be Oliver Queen, the man, and reunite with those he loved.

Could he even be that man again?

"Oliver!"

He straightened as a distinguished, bald black man in an expensive blue suit, came forward to greet him. When Oliver remained silent, the man paused, his brow crinkling. "It's Walter," he said as he held out his hand.

Oliver took it, more on reflex than anything, and glanced at his mother.

"Walter Steele," the man continued, obviously sounding like he hoped the context would jar Oliver's memory.

Moira smiled at Oliver as she moved closer and wrapped an arm around him. The smile she offered was too big, too bright to be real. "You remember Walter. Your father's friend from the company."

A flicker of movement beyond them drew Oliver's attention to the plumper, dark haired woman who seemed to hover, uncertain, near the fireplace. More memories came then, pulling him forward, and Oliver smiled as he approached her. Warm cookies, cold milk. A soft hand to hold. A calming, loving voice in the middle of the night when he'd still been young enough to be frightened of thunder and lighting and believed that the bad things that went bump in the night lingered in the halls of the house.

He smiled at the housekeeper. "It's good to see you, Raisa."

Her smile was instant and beaming. The breath she released was nervous as she said, in her thick Russian accent, "Welcome home, Mister Oliver." She looked to Moira and Walter. "Mr. Merlyn phoned. He wants to join you for dinner."

"Wonderful," Moira said.

A door opened somewhere upstairs, closed again. Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Oliver moved to the bottom of the stairs. An odd sensation went through him in that moment. Happiness? Excitement? Maybe even joy. He wasn't sure. They weren't feelings he'd had much of over the last few years.

That's when Thea Queen – all seventeen years of her thin, reed-like self – bounded around the corner, her thick, dark hair bouncing around her shoulders as she jogged down the steps. She stopped the instant she saw him, one hand shooting out to brace against the railing next to her. Nothing dreary there, Oliver thought dimly as he drank in all the changes. His little sister had grown up while he was gone. The rambunctious kid forever tagging after him everywhere had apparently channeled all that energy into stylish fashion. Her breezy blue and white blouse and matching blue cropped pants looked fresh and young in such staid surroundings. She'd also, he realized with a start,
become a beautiful young woman, complete with large, green doe eyes that would eventually spell some unsuspecting man's doom.

Oliver grinned up at her. "Hey, sis."

Joy lit her eyes, illuminating her face, as she rushed down the last of the steps. "I knew it! I knew you were alive!" Thea cried, breathless with happiness. She flung herself at him. Her arms laced around him. "I missed you so much!"

Oliver hugged her tight. Emotion clogged his throat, turning his voice to sandpaper as he whispered, "You were with me the whole time."

When she drew back enough to peer up at him, Oliver couldn't help but give a tendril of her hair a playful tug.

Thea's smile faded a little as she searched his face. "You saw her?"

He didn't have to ask who. He nodded.

Thea shifted her hands from his shoulders to his forearms and squeeze lightly. "Does that mean—"

"Thea," Moira interrupted. "Why don't we let Oliver get settled. He's probably very tired."

"I'm fine," Oliver told her. He looked back at his sister. "It's fine."

"Fine," Thea echoed.

He nodded.

"She didn't go with Mom to bring you home."

"I think she wanted to give Mom and me some time alone, that's all."

Thea frowned. "Oh."

Oliver glanced down the hall when a shadow flickered. Felicity, dressed in a soft gray sweater and purple skirt, stood by the grandfather clock, her arms folded across her middle. Her diamond wedding ring winked at him. Their eyes met and held. Felicity's chin inched upward.

"I thought maybe…" Thea shifted. "You didn't fight, did you?"

Oliver held Felicity's gaze. Memories rushed forward again. This time, though, they were barely twelve hours old. Memories of Felicity's mouth under his. Her nails digging into his flesh as her legs tightened around him as her wet, hot, tight body took his. Heat rolled beneath his skin. The muscles of his lower abdomen tightened.

Felicity was thinking about it too. He could tell by the high flush of her cheeks, the way she moistened her lips with a quick sweep of her tongue and her lashes fluttered down, secreting her gaze from his. She still wanted him. At least physically.

"No," Oliver murmured. "We didn't fight."

Thea sighed with obvious relief. "Oh, good. I thought maybe she told you…"
Now Oliver did look at his sister. "Told me what?"

Thea opened her mouth to answer, but Moira got there first. "Thea," she said, touching her daughter's arm. "You should go upstairs and get ready for dinner. Tommy's coming. He's going to help us celebrate."

Oliver hugged his sister again, but his gaze strayed back to the hall. Felicity was gone. She must have slipped up the narrow staircase there and to one of the upper floors.

"Go," he told his sister. "Mom's right. I am tired."

Moira patted his arm as Thea headed back up the steps. "I'll have your things taken up to your room."

"Leave it," Oliver said, the words sounding a bit too quick, a bit too harsh, to his ears. He forced himself to smile. "I can do it."

Moira hesitated before shrugging. "Whatever you'd like. While you get settled I'll have fresh towels brought to your room."

"I don't need people to bring me things, Mom."

She cupped his face. "My baby boy is home. Let a mother spoil him."

His heart softened. No matter how much time had passed, no matter what had happened to him or what he'd done to survive, one thing could never change: the bond between mother and child. "Okay," he murmured.

Moira kissed his cheek, then paused to wipe her lipstick away. "Go. Take whatever time you need. We're all here if you need us."

Oliver nodded before walking back into the foyer for the wooden case. He hoisted its weight easily and carried it with quick steps toward the staircase. He was halfway up then when his mother called his name. He paused and turned back to her.

"If you need anything," she said, looking obviously hopeful he would; clearly frightened he'd push her away. "Anything. I… I'm here."

He nodded again before continuing up the steps. The case weighed on him. Not because of the pounds it carried, but because of what its contents meant. The responsibility it carried.

Oliver tightened his grip on the carrying strap, listened to the heavy metal lock scrap against the wood as he took each step. He'd been so wrong just a few minutes ago. Just because things looked the same didn't mean they were. Appearances meant nothing. He knew that better than anyone. *Everything* had changed because *he'd* changed. The things he'd gone through, the hells he'd survived… No one could go through that and stay the same.

He might have slept through most of the college classes that didn't outright flunk him, but now he understood the true meaning behind Thomas Wolfe's cautionary words: You can't go home again.

Oliver's throat constricted. The walls seemed to squeeze in on him, making it hard to breathe, and he fought to retain composure. It didn't matter if he fit here anymore or not. That hadn't been why he returned. Expectations didn't matter. He was here for one thing and one thing only – to carry out the promises he made his father before his death.
He reached his old bedroom door, gave it a nudge and watched as it slowly swung inward to reveal the interior.

The same bookshelves flanked the same large window overlooking the garden. His desk, all his papers and books still carefully arranged there, stood spotless and dust-free in the glow of the setting sun. On the other side of the room was the same furniture, carefully arranged to form a sitting area. On the other side, a massive, four-poster king-sized bed.

It looked like he'd never left. Everything was exactly as he remembered it – totally untouched as if time had stopped on the other side of the threshold while the rest of the world continued to spin around it.

It was nostalgic. It was sweet. It was desperate and sad and, Oliver realized as a strange chill bloomed into his belly, creepy as fuck.

He squared his shoulders and forced himself to step inside. It wasn't until he was sliding the wooden crate beneath the bed that he realized he'd been home for less than thirty minutes and his plans were already going to hell.

He really thought, when he'd returned to Starling City, that he was emotionally ready for it, but he wasn't. Once Felicity walked into his hospital room, all he could think about were five years of long, cold, black nights. Five years of regrets. Of all the ways he and Felicity could have ended that day without him getting on the Queen's Gambit. Things could have been so different.

But he had gone down to the waterfront. He had made the choice to get on that boat. Then he spent the next five years fantasizing of being with her again. Dreaming of all the things he wished he'd done and said. Then, last night, she'd been right there. In front of him. Older. Warier. Sexier. But he knew her. Behind all her bravado was fear. Fear he wouldn't recognize her, wouldn't want her, and would reject her.

Five years of want overtook him in the split second before he'd kiss her. Intentions? Gone. Plans? Vanished. All he wanted in that single, intense, burning moment, was her, and in true Oliver Queen fashion, he'd simply taken without thinking of the consequences.

Oliver scrubbed his hand against the back of his neck. The island he'd been stranded on couldn't have had a more appropriate name. Lian Yu. Mandarin for purgatory. He'd suffered there, for sure, suspended in between life and death, suffering for sins in demand of atonement.

He'd dreamt of rescue every night with one thought and one goal: Survive. Survive and return home. In order to do that, he'd had to make himself more than what he was. To forge himself into a weapon. Now he returned to Starling City, not the boy who was shipwrecked, but the man sworn to bring justice to those who poisoned his city.

That quest required sacrifices. He'd known that even then. He'd told himself he was ready for the reality of it. Now he knew that, too, was a lie. He wasn't ready to sacrifice everything. He hadn't returned for just one mission. Yes, he wanted Justice, but he also wanted his damned wife.

Somehow he'd fooled himself into believing he could let her go. But now? Now he couldn't imagine it. Surely there had to be a way to right his father's wrongs and reclaim Felicity, too. Why couldn't there be room for both vengeance and love? Surely he could keep the vows he made the day he married Felicity and the ones he made the day he buried his father.

He would find a way, Oliver promised himself. Because right now all he could think about was how much it irked him that Felicity hadn't come back the hospital. How it angered him off she wasn't in
the car. How it freaking pissed him off she wasn't there with the rest of the family when he'd come through the doors.

She was hiding from him.

The Felicity he knew didn't hide. She challenged. She confronted. She showed no fear when standing up for what she believed in. It was that tenacity, that strength, that drew him to her in the first place when they'd met.

He'd been a cocky, arrogant, rich asshole. She'd just taken an entry-level job in the IT Department. He'd tried to charm as usual. She saw right through it. He tried harder. She mentally assessed him as the player he was and dismissed him without interest. As Oliver had watched her go, he knew – somehow, on some level, in that moment – he'd never be the same again.

Oliver gave the wood case one last shove beneath the bed before he dropped the comforter back in place, secreting the box from view. Well, he wasn't the only one about to be confronted with change. Felicity was about to learn something too. She could try to hide all she wanted in the cavernous halls of the Queen mansion, Oliver fumed as he rose to his feet, but she was about to discover her husband had become very, very good at hunting.

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The Queen Family shrine occupied three quarters of the entryway table. There were no rosary beads or candles, but it was a shroud nonetheless. Every picture there captured a memory of a family that didn't exist anymore and now, with confirmation that Robert Queen was dead, never would again.

His father wasn't the only one gone, Oliver told himself again. That Oliver Queen no longer existed either. Every passing moment with his family, in this house, confirmed it.

He lifted one of the frames and studied the black and white picture of himself with his father. He was how old in it? Six? Seven? Totally happy and utterly oblivious to what really went on in the world around him. A sort of sadness shifted in him, a mourning, and Oliver gently set the picture down to rejoin others of Thea, Moira, and several, old, group shots of the four of them in happier times.

The sound of the front door opening behind him made Oliver tense. There was a heartbeat of silence and tension.

"What'd I tell you?" Tommy Merlyn said, his voice warm and happy yet a little unsure. "Yachts suck."

Oliver grinned as he faced the taller, thin, dark haired man who had been his best friend for as long as he could remember. He looked the same, really, but then the eternally charming usually did. Oliver's smile widened. "Tommy Merlyn," he greeted as he embraced him.

Tommy hugged him hard. "I've missed you, buddy." He stepped back, seemed to search Oliver's face for sign of change or visible toll. "How are you?"

Tired. Angry. Reborn. "Happy to be home."

"I'll bet." He glanced around the foyer. "To be honest, I'm surprised any of them left you alone this long."
Oliver opened his mouth to tell him the one person he wanted to see was avoiding him when Moira appeared in the threshold opposite them. "Oliver. Tommy. We'll be serving shortly. Come. Join us."

Tommy smiled hard, obviously trying to keep from laughing. He wrapped his arm around Oliver's shoulders and steered him toward the dining room. "Oh, yeah," he murmured just loud enough for Oliver to hear, "we're definitely busting you out of here. Pronto."

~*~

"Okay, what else did you miss?" Tommy asked some time later, after most of the dinner dishes had been cleared. He plucked the last dinner roll from the tray. "Super Bowl winners: Giants, Steelers, Saints, Packers, Giants again."

Oliver managed a small smile. Seated at the foot of the table, he had an unobstructed view of the rest of the table. He didn't like his back to the door, but that was hardly a habit he wanted to explain in the somber dining room. The dark wood paneling did nothing to alleviate the unease that prowled the room, as if no one wanted to do or say the wrong thing, but knowing they were only one second away from doing it anyway. The candlelight, however, did its best to ward off the gloom.

Moira sat at the head of the table, occupying the chair normally reserved for Robert. The fireplace behind her framed her in a golden light. Walter sat to her right, in her old seat, automatically offering and refilling her wine glass as she smiled at him and laughed softly at something he said.

"A black President," Tommy continued, pointing at Felicity across the table from him. "That's new."

Thea nodded.

Oliver studied his wife's profile. She'd made it easy since she'd gathered her hair into a tight, utilitarian ponytail. She'd opted to wear her glasses instead of her contacts, something she often did, and the dark frames seemed to make her skin look softer, her pink lipstick even pinker. He found himself staring at her mouth. He always had liked that color.

If Felicity sensed his scrutiny, she didn't show it. She just kept her gaze riveted on her plate – only looking up to smile at one of Tommy's jokes – and her hand, still adorned with her wedding ring, stayed firmly wrapped around her wine glass as if she didn't know what else to do.

Or perhaps, Oliver mused, making himself look away, she was worried he'd try to touch her.

"Oh, and Lost?" Tommy tipped the bread toward him. "They were all dead. I think."

Thea leaned forward suddenly to rest her clasped hand on the tabletop. Her attention fixed on Oliver. "What was it like there?"

Moira and Walter froze. Tommy stopped mid-chew. Felicity set the wine glass down.

"Cold." Oliver gave the only answer he could.

The siblings eyed each other before something flickered in Thea's eyes. Disappointment? Confusion? Or maybe, Oliver thought as she finally broke eye contact with him, she'd glimpsed the darkness he kept tightly chained beneath the surface.
Tommy came to the rescue.

"Tomorrow," he said. "you and me. We're doing the city. You have a lot of catch up on."

"That sounds like a great idea," Moira agreed.

"Good," Oliver agreed, "then I was hoping to swing by the office."

Walter went still, his glass at his mouth.

Moira tipped her head as she made a soft sound that was part surprise, part agreement.

"Well, there's plenty of time for all that," Walter said as he set his drink down. He offered a forced smile. "Queen Consolidated isn't going anywhere."

Shadows flickered around the room. Lies too, Oliver decided as Raisa moved toward the table with a bowl of fruit. She was at his side when her toe caught something, the carpet, the leg of his chair, he didn't know, but as she pitched forward with a startled gasp, Oliver steadied her with one hand and caught the bowl of fruit with the other.

Raisa flushed as she hurriedly stepped back. "I am so sorry, Mr. Oliver."

He shook his head. "It's all right," he said automatically. "It was an accident."

The silence rushed back. The fire crackled. Dimly Oliver was aware everyone was looking at him with open surprise.

"Dude," Tommy said, breaking the silence. "You speak Russian?"

Fuck. Oliver tried not to cringe. He'd slipped into the foreign tongue again? He'd done it so often over the years he didn't think about it anymore. Habit, he warned himself again. They were dangerous, dangerous things. He glanced at Felicity. She didn't look confused like the others. No. Her wide, blue eyes were filled with curiosity and Oliver could practically hear the gears in her head begin to turn the way they always did when a puzzle caught her interest.

She never had liked mysteries. They bugged her and needed to be solved.

Oliver dragged his attention back to the table. He needed to change the topic. Divert focus. Now.

"I didn't realize you took Russian at college, Oliver," Walter said, unknowingly becoming the easiest target.

"I didn't realize you wanted to sleep with my mother, Walter."

The dining room fell silent. Walter blinked. Any warmth in Moira's face drained away, leaving her in only a pale mask of mortification.

When she looked to Thea, the teenager let out an exasperated sigh and leaned back in her chair. Thea shook her head. "I didn't say anything."

Tommy looked away.

"She didn't have to," Oliver told them.

Moira nodded. She reached for Walter's hand and he automatically reached back. She caught it tight. "Oliver… Walter and I are married."
Oliver tried not to look at Felicity and failed. When he did, she shifted in her chair and drew her hands into her lap. That simple gesture felt like she’d picked up a dinner knife and plunged it straight into his chest. He turned his gaze downward, tried to breathe through the sudden pain, only vaguely aware that his mother was still speaking. That Tommy was looking at Felicity. That his wife was looking back.

Oliver ground his teeth together and forced himself to focus on Moira’s voice. He let her tone – soft and gentle and calm – wash through him and push everything else aside.

"I don't want you to think that either one of us did anything to disrespect your father," she told him.

"We both believed," Walter said, "that Robert, like you, was… uh… gone."

Felicity and Tommy exchanged another covert glance before she swallowed and looked away. She seemed to fixate on a spot on the far wall and stay there.

"It's fine," Oliver bit out. He made himself meet his mother’s eye, offer a reassuring nod a moment before he stood. He felt old and beaten and tired. He squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. "May I be excused?"

The request clearly surprised Moira. She managed a slow nod and Oliver paused to take a pear from the bowl before he stepped away from the table.

"Hey," Tommy said as Oliver passed behind his chair. "Don't forget about tomorrow, buddy."

Oliver patted his shoulder, tossed a wink at his sister, who watched with far too much worry, far too much knowledge, and way too much fear for his liking.

As he exiting the dining room, he carried the weight of their stares on his back. He also, he realized, as he started up the stairs and thunder rumbled in the distance, bore the realization that his wife had plenty of secrets of her own.

~*~

Somewhere in the night, in the lightning and thunder and driving rain that pounded the side of the house, past and present blurred. Wind peeled bedroom walls away as water – cold and black and bottomless – closed around him, pulled him down further and further, away from his home. Away from his family and Felicity. Darker. Deeper. Colder. Then it seemed like all he could feel was the grit of island shore against his hands, gulp nothing but the stench of its jungles. Of its death.

No.

No!

"Oliver?"

Something touched his shoulder, gripped tight.

"Oliver, wake up…"

He woke with a start, struck out to catch that arm and twist that flipped his assailant head over heels. They landed flat on their back on the floor, the strong edge of Oliver’s hand at their throat, poised to deliver a strike that could debilitate or kill depending on his whim.
"Oliver!" Walter Steele barked from the doorway.

Lightning flared, filling the room with harsh white light, as storm winds carried slashes of rain through the window that had long ago blown open. The last of the nightmare fell away and Oliver could only stare at the other man and his mother, who hovered behind him in the hall.

He looked down again, painfully conscious of the soft flesh beneath his hand, the heartbeat that pulsed against his flesh.

Not an assailant. Not an assassin.

Felicity.

Sprawled across the damp carpet, her blond hair spilled around her head, she stared up at him like she'd never seen him before. Like he was a stranger. Like he terrified her.

He'd almost killed her.

Disgust and fear exploded in his gut. Oliver snatched his hand back as he flung himself away from her. He scuttled backwards until his back hit the wall. Lightning flashed again. Thunder roared through the air, shook upwards through the ground. The rain fell faster now, slashing through the open window and lifting the curtains into the air to twist and snap.

Coughing and gasping for breath, Felicity cradled her bruised throat with a hand as she dragged herself into a sitting position. When Walter took a step forward, she waved him away. She opened her mouth to speak, but all that came out was a raspy wheeze.

The older man hesitated, but when Felicity waved him off again, he spun around, caught Moira's shoulders and eased her back down the hall, away from them.

Oliver gripped the arm of the chair next to him, both to steady himself and to reassure himself that this was reality. This wasn't the island. He was home. He was supposed to be safe here. His disgust morphed into horror, leaving him ashamed as the rain continued to slap at his back. He'd never once considered whether they'd be safe with him.

He shook his head, not sure if he was rejecting what he'd just done or trying to clear lingering remnants of the nightmare from his brain. "Felicity. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..."

Felicity shifted to her knees. The silky white robe she wore had come loose in the struggle, showing the thin, matching gown beneath it. The wrinkled fabric pooled around on the floor as she dropped her hand from her throat.

He couldn't look at her. He couldn't handle that fear or disgust from her. Not from her. He couldn't meet her eye and have her confirm what he already knew. That after five years, everything that was once familiar was now unrecognizable. That the face he saw in the mirror was now a stranger to both of them.

He could not survive seeing himself through her eyes, knowing that, when she looked at him, all she would see was the animal. The monster.

The killer.

Oliver pressed himself back harder, as if he could just vanish through the wall. Maybe he never should have come back here. Maybe it would have been better if he never let them know —
"Oliver," Felicity whispered, her voice a rasp nearly lost completely in the sound of the storm. She reached toward him, her hand trembling. "I-It's all right… You're home."

Surprised, his head jerked up. Lightning flashed in the room again, illuminating her face and grief-filled eyes.

She stretched further. "You're home."

Oliver didn't remember reaching for that hand, but something in him seized on to it, knowing instinctively it was a lifeline he couldn't let go of. Not now. Not tonight. Not without losing himself forever. This time, when he carried her to the floor, his hand cushioned the back of her head.

He took her with him, rolling smoothly away from the wind and the rain until he lay on his back with Felicity sprawled over him. He cradled her against his chest and stared up at her, as he raked her damp hair away from her face. She didn't seem to care how closely they were pressed together or that his legs were tangled with hers. She just stayed there, stroking his hair as she soothed him with soft, reassuring sounds.

Oliver didn't know how long they lay like that before Felicity shivered – or was that him? – and drew away. She didn't go far, just to the window to pull it shut. Water dripped from the curtains to the floor in fat, loud drops. She padded, barefoot, back to him, and eased herself down at his side again.

Her head found his shoulder, her hand that perfect place in the center of his chest. It was home, Oliver told himself as he drew her closer and stared up at the ceiling hidden by darkness. Thunder still prowled in the distance, but the lightning had almost faded completely, barely mustering the energy to light up the blinds anymore.

Felicity's cool fingers touched his jaw to trace the stubble there.

Oliver captured her hand, pressed a quick kiss to the heart of her palm before carrying it to his heart. The storm rolled further away. Downstairs, the grandfather clock struck three.

"When were you going to tell me?" Oliver murmured.

Felicity propped her chin on his shoulder to watch him in the dark. "Tell you what?"

He traced the hills and valleys of her knuckles. "That you don't live here anymore."

She flinched.

"You didn't change for dinner. There's no clothes in this room. And I'm pretty sure that nightgown just came out of a suitcase."

"There wasn't a good time to tell you," she whispered.

"Now is good."

"Okay. I moved out."

"When?"

"Four years ago."

"Why?"
Her lips parted, pressed back together, then parted again on a sigh. She crimped a shoulder. "It was time. I needed to be on my own. I needed…"

That pain was back, a quick slice to his gut that made Oliver sound more bitter and angry than he had any right to be. "To move on with your life."

Felicity's eyes narrowed. "You don't get to judge me, Oliver." She struggled to push away from him. "You have no right…"


"What do you want?"

He shifted his hand to her hair, brushed it back and smiled fondly at the industrial piercings he revealed. That was Felicity. Surprising in every way. He allowed himself to trace the backs of his knuckles over her cheek, down her jaw, before he dropped his hand down to cover hers again. "I don't want to hurt you."

Felicity studied him for a moment longer before she lay back down. She rested her cheek against his shoulder. "We're all trying to adapt. It'll just take some time. You'll see. I guess dinner didn't make it easier. I should have told you about Moira but she was just so adamant…"

"It was her secret to tell. Not yours."

"I don't know. Secrets have a way of coming out. Does it really matter whose they are if you knew and said nothing?"

Good question. Oliver stroked her hand with his thumb, traced the large diamond of her wedding ring. The size of it, the coldness, made him frown.

"I moved out," Felicity said, "because I couldn't live here anymore."

The words were so soft and low Oliver strained to hear them. He felt her swallow; felt her breasts press firm against his side as she took a deep breath to go on.

"Everywhere I went, everywhere I looked, every time I turned around… you were there. Haunting me." Her voice grew thick and unsteady. "I kept thinking I'd seen you from the corner of my eye. Smelled your cologne in hallways I knew you hadn't been. It got to the point I just couldn't… I couldn't breathe here."

He tightened his arm around her.

"When they called off the search for the Queen's Gambit and declared everyone lost, I…" She squeezed her eyes closed and shuddered. "I thought I'd die. I wanted to."

Oliver groaned as he turned his face into her hair, pressed a kiss high on her forehead.

She curled her hand into his still-damp t-shirt. "I wanted to believe there was still hope. But every day that went by… Holding on to that hope was slowly killing me. Every time the news said there were new leads or new witnesses, I'd hope all over again. Then it would be nothing and I'd lose you all over again. No one understood that keeping that faith alive was rotting away from the inside. Every time I tried to let go, even a little, Moira would just…" Felicity took a breath that sounded a lot like a sob. "It felt like betraying you. I couldn't anymore. I just… I had to get out. I had to…"
Oliver squeezed her. Hard. Telling her he understood. Hating the pain he'd caused. Hating that she,
too, had suffered all these years, enduring a pain that could never truly heal.

"So you left," Oliver concluded.

She sniffled and nodded. "I took an apartment in town. I went back to work at QC. Walter took me
on as his executive assistant. I think it was of keeping an eye on me and protecting me."

Score one for Walter, Oliver through grudgingly.

"And… Smoak?" he made himself ask.

"People forget about you a lot faster when you're not a Queen anymore."

He'd never forget.

"Plus it avoided a lot of questions whenever I introduced myself. It just seemed easier."

What about Tommy? Oliver wanted to ask. Had moving on with her life including moving on to his
best friend? Given the covert looks the pair exchanged during dinner, it was clear something had
happened between them. Oliver scowled. Did he have a right to ask about it? It didn't seem like he
did. He'd been dead for five years, not Felicity. Were dead men entitled to answers? To jealousy?

Silence stretched between them for so long he thought she'd fallen asleep until Felicity shifted
languidly against his side and murmured, "Why were you sleeping on the floor?"

He tried not to stiffen and occupied himself with running his fingertips through her soft, curly hair. "I
can't. I haven't in so long that it feels… I just can't."

"Okay."

"I'm not used to—"

"It's okay." This time when she pulled away from him, he let her go, not sure if she would reach the
door and keep walking, if she'd stop, or if he'd give in and ask her not to go.

But she didn't cross the room. She didn't go to the door. She went to the bed where she grabbed one
of the pillows and wadded a blanket up against her arm. When she came back, she dropped the
pillow next to him, took a moment to fluff out the blanket and drape it across him before settling
down again.

Oliver let out the breath he didn't even know he was holding. She felt right next to him. Always had.
Like coming home. No matter what, at the end of the day, it had been like this between them.
Together. In the dark. Reaching for each other, just to touch, to talk and connect. Even when they
argued they somehow ended up laughing. He'd never had that with anyone else. Was it selfish to not
want to lose it?

Felicity turned on to her side and tucked her hand beneath her cheek. "I'm sorry about your dad."

Oliver rolled over to face her. His hand found hers on the blanket. "Me, too."

She studied him for a long time. "Will you tell me?"

"There's not much to tell," he lied.

"But will you?"
"Maybe. Someday."

A soft smile curved her mouth. "I'm glad your home."

"So am I." He laced his fingers with hers, partly because he couldn't stop himself, but mostly because he didn't want her to pull away when he said, "I'm sorry too." He searched her face. The weight he'd carried with him for five years seemed to press harder on his chest, forcing a long, heavy sigh. "Felicity."

"Hmm?"

"About that day. The day I... The day we fought."

Her hand jerked reflexively in his, but Oliver anticipated it and held on.

"I shouldn't have gone," he told her.

"Don't." The word was ragged and raw. She squeezed her eyes shut briefly. "Oliver, no. It doesn't matter."

But it did. It had mattered every day for five years, so he ignored her. "I left to prove a point. A stupid, shallow, selfish point. I was so worried about proving I was still Oliver Queen, billionaire playboy, who could go out, party, get drunk, and do all those stupid things."

All of which were intended to show the world that that getting married hadn't changed anything. That he was still wild and unpredictable and fun. But most importantly? To make it clear that his wife had a ring on his finger, not through his nose.

Getting on the yacht with his father had been one stupid act of rebellion designed to rub his independence in Felicity's face. He'd wanted to make her understand that no one owned him. No one told him what to do. He'd done it to tell her that she could love him all she wanted but that he belonged to – and cared about – absolutely no one more than he did himself.

It was his way of showing Tommy, his friends, the paparazzi and the world obsessed with his every move, that Felicity hadn't domesticated him. His balls were still made of brass and affixed exactly where they should be – between his legs – and not in his wife's purse.

The look on Felicity's face when the Queen's Gambit left port had haunted Oliver every single night since, and he hated himself for it.

"I'll never be able to make that up to you," Oliver told her.

Felicity propped herself up on an elbow and cupped his face. "I don't want you sorry, Oliver Queen."

He curled his hand around her wrist, grounding himself and finding the same solace, peace, and clarity he always did when he was with her. "What do you want?"

She offered a soft smile even though a shadow moved deep in her eyes. "I think I've used up all my wishes for this lifetime. Besides, I got what I've been asking for these last five years. You're alive. That's good enough for now. No matter how this turns out."

She kissed him then, a soft, tender, far-too-short kiss that made his soul ache, before she stretched out beside him once more. It would be, Oliver would realize later, the first time in five years he slept without nightmares.
Read More About the Olicity Challenge
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Oliver Queen discovers the island wasn't the only place danger lurks.

During his five years on the island, Oliver knew a lot of dangers, not the least of which was illness and infection. In a town like Starling City, the cure was simple — a quick visit to a doctor, an antibiotic to swallow, and problem solved. On Lian Yu, however, even the smallest cut could fester into a life threatening disease that could spread and spread until the only way to stop it was to amputate the limb.

He’d also come to realize that Starling City was under a similar attack. There was a cancer growing in the city — his city — and unless someone stopped it, it would keep growing and destroying and killing until there was nothing left to be saved.

Oliver leaned forward in the desk chair to study the news website on the computer monitor in front of him. The digital archive's headlines confirmed what he already knew. Adam Hunt, CEO of Hunt Multinational, was part of that cancer.

Hunt didn’t look like much, just a small, balding man in a thousand dollar suit, but Oliver knew what the rest of the world didn’t — or perhaps what law enforcement simply chose to ignore — that Hunt was as ruthless as he was rich. Oliver absently touched the worn, ivory leather cover of the small notebook next to the keyboard. Hunt didn’t just amass wealth and power. There was a body count behind his riches. Blood on every single dollar laundered through his company.

He opened the book and thumbed almost halfway through the handwritten pages until he found the right one. Though the pages were water-stained, some of the ink bled away, each and every name contained in it, written in his father's distinctive hand, was legible.

Adam Hunt's fell halfway down the page.

Oliver glanced at the screen again. The courts had taken another swing at Hunt, accusing him of swindling hundreds of people out of their homes and life savings, and — like the dozens of lawsuits preceding it — failed.

Hunt walked. Families suffered. Starling City slid closer to the edge of no return.

It had to stop.

He had to make it stop.

"You are different," Raisa said, announcing her presence as she stepped into the doorway of his room, a breakfast tray in her hands. "It’s not like you to read a book," she teased with a crooked smile as she moved forward.

Oliver pulled the screensaver up with a click of his mouse. He rocked back in the chair and smiled at her. "I missed you, Raisa."

Her grin widened. "No kitchen on the island."
"No," he agreed. His humor faded. "No friends, either." He shook off the sudden melancholy, stood, and came around the desk to take the tray from her. "Thank you."

As he went to set it down on the table behind him, he couldn't keep himself from asking, "Do I really seem different?"

The maid clasped her hands together against her starch white apron of her uniform as she studied him. "No," she said finally. "You're still a good boy."

Oliver winced as he came back to her. "Oh, I think we both know I wasn't."

Her face softened and she touched his arm. "But a good heart."

"I hope so. I want to be the person you always told me I could be." The person Felicity saw, too. The one both women made him want to be but that he could never quite believe he was.

Starling City needed that man. He needed to be him. There was just too much to lose if he failed.

"If you weren't that boy, that man," Raisa corrected, "this house wouldn't have mourned you when you were gone." She glanced toward the pillow and blanket still on the floor. "Is Mrs. Oliver back?"

Good question. It was the same one he had when he woke up that morning to find her, still asleep, next to him. "I don't know," Oliver admitted.

Felicity had looked ridiculously young and vulnerable next to him. The sun had just peeked over the horizon, its first rays filtering into the shadowy room. They flushed her skin a pink down, set off tiny sparkles in her hair, and cast delicate shadows beneath her lashes. She looked soft and warm and for a moment – just a single moment – those five years didn't seem to exist. They were just Oliver and Felicity. Sharing a morning, any morning, together. Easy. Simple.

Oliver had given in to the need to touch her, gently brushing her hair over one creamy shoulder and lowering his lips to the curve, as he breathed in her scent – still familiar, still welcoming, still reminiscent of orange blossoms, ginger, and honey-sandalwood. Then he saw the bruises. Dark. Violent. Ugly. The purple marks bracketed the slender column of her throat like a collar. The shape of a hand was unmistakable.

No. Not "a" hand. His hand.

He couldn't get away from her fast enough after that. A shower seemed the easiest way and, when he returned, Felicity was already gone, leaving nothing but a tangled blanket and a dent in the pillow behind.

"She was here last night," Raisa said as she bent to pick up the pillow and blanket. She tossed the first back onto the bed before shaking out the second. She slanted Oliver a sideways look. "This is a good start, no?"

"No. I mean, I don't know." Oliver stared at the floor, oddly discomforted by how quickly last night had been erased. In a matter of minutes it was like Felicity hadn't been there at all.

Maybe it was for the best. He needed her, yes. He wanted her like hell wanted fire. But he'd hurt her – physically, emotionally – and he'd keep on hurting her. He knew that. He didn't like it but it was the reality. Felicity deserved better than that and he would cut his hands off before he ever left another mark on her again.

Five years of survival wouldn't be erased easily. Could he really promise it wouldn't happen again?
That, in the grips of some nightmare or flashback or instinctual response, he wouldn't confuse the past with the present and simply lash out? If he couldn't promise that, he had no right letting her near him.

His heart ached. Oliver absently rubbed his chest, feeling as if his soul were suddenly hollow. "It's Smoak now," he told her. The name felt foreign on his tongue. "Felicity Smoak."

"Is it."

He nodded.

"Odd. That's not what her driver's license says. Or the mail that comes here."

Oliver frowned.

"Let me tell you something about husbands and wives, Mr. Oliver," she said as she started to fold the blanket. "They do many stupid things."

Oliver laughed. "That's deep."

She silenced him with a look. "They do these things, not because they don't love anymore, but because that love makes them fear. And fear? Fear finds ways to push away those we long to hold the closest."

Oliver's throat grew so tight it hurt. He clenched his jaw and tried to ignore the sudden grit that seemed to make each blink burn. "I can't make her stay."

"What makes you think she doesn't already want to? The only reason she left was because it was too painful for her here. She had no peace only…" Sadness dimmed her eyes and Raisa occupied with folding the blanket over her arm. "Sometimes people run because it becomes too painful to stay. It doesn't mean they don't still long to return."

"Felicity doesn't live here anymore, Raisa." Sometimes he wondered if Oliver Queen did, either.

She harrumphed under her breath. The look she threw him as she draped the blanket over the foot of his bed clearly said she doubted his intelligence.

She crossed to him and took his face between gentle palms. Her eyes were wise and deep and full of sorrow. "Listen to me, Mr. Oliver, and hear me… not with ears that fear, but with a soul that loves. No matter what – luggage under this roof or not, Smoak or Queen… A woman always lives where her heart has found its home. Only a foolish man lets his fear evict her."

Before Oliver could respond, she dropped her hands away and hurried across the room, her sensibly soled shoes nearly silent on the floor.

She paused in the doorway to turn back. "There are many things in this world to fear, Mr. Oliver. Love should never be one of them."

~*~

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Oliver stopped on reflex, his fingers closing tight around the arrowhead shaped stone in his hand. He glanced over his shoulder at the hall behind him expecting to see... He didn't know what. The tone,
however, he knew well. That was Felicity's very unhappy, very angry Loud Voice reserved for special occasion jackasses like him when he made the mistake of trying to end one of their first fights with, "Must be that time of month, huh."

But nope. There was no angry wife bearing down on him. In fact… Oliver turned back to his sister's bedroom door and winced when he heard Felicity's voice again. Yep. Only a Queen could make her that mad.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall and rolled the stone between his fingers.

"How many times do I have to tell you?" Thea demanded. "It's not mine."

Felicity sighed. "Come on, Thea. I'm not stupid."

"Why doesn't anyone trust me? I'm the only one not lying around here!"

"Where did you get them?"

Oliver heard a faint rattle. Silence ticked by for several seconds before Thea said, "They're Janet's."

"Uh huh."

"They are. She must have left them in my bag when she was over the other day."

More silence. Oliver could practically picture Felicity tipping her head and arching a single brow in that way that said, "How stupid do you seriously think I am?"

"What?" Thea demanded. "Now you don't believe me? Then why ask me in the first place?"

Plastic clicked against a hard surface and something that sounded a lot like the rattle of Tic Tacs floated into the hall.

"I really want to believe you," Felicity said, "but you're not making this easy."

"That's funny coming from you. When was the last time you even told the truth in the last twenty-four hours?"

His sister's snide tone set Oliver's shoulders. Thea had always been determined and single-minded but she'd never been outright disrespectful.

"Quit trying to change the point."

"Oh, I think we're getting to the point. Why haven't you told Ollie?"

Oliver stared at the door as if effort alone would allow him to see through it.

Felicity groaned. "Thea. Please. I can't discuss this with you again."

"Can't or won't? He has a right to know, Felicity. Expecting me to not tell him—"

"What difference would it make?" Felicity demanding, the words practically exploding out of her. They were loud, but not angry. More like desperate. "Honestly, Thea. What? It would only hurt him. Is that what you want?"

Oliver's brows inched upward. Emotional blackmail. Felicity had apparently learned a lot while he was away. Shouldn't surprise him. The Queen Family always knew how to push buttons.
"It's over," Felicity said firmly. "It's done."

"How can you say that?" Thea asked. There was no meanness in her tone this time, just pain. "I was at the table last night. Ollie was sitting right there. I saw it, and it was clearly not done."

Floorboards creaked and Oliver could practically count the steps it took Felicity to cross from one side of his sister's bedroom to the other.

"Thea. You promised."

"Yeah? Well you promised not to snoop through my things anymore, too. I guess that makes us both liars."

"Thea, wait!"

Knowing he was about to be busted, Oliver pushed away from the wall, stepped forward and reached for the doorknob. Before he could touch it, Thea yanked it open from the other side. He blinked in fake surprise as his sister did.

She was dressed for school in the classic Starling Academy blue blazer, matching blue and green skirt, white dress shirt and tie. Given the hour, she was also very late.

Felicity stood behind her, on the other side of the room near the desk and window. She was dressed for work in a plain pink blouse and black skirt. Her glasses were perched on her nose and her hair was up in a ponytail she hadn't bothered to flatiron the curl from. Though Oliver waited for it, she never met his eye.

Thea darted a quick look at the other woman before sweeping her dark hair behind her ear and facing him again. "O-Ollie."

He made a face. "Nobody's called me that in awhile, Speedy."

It was her turn to grimace. "Ugh. Worst nickname ever."

"What? You were always chasing after me as a kid. I thought it fit pretty well." Though he was pretty sure Felicity didn't realize he'd noticed, he watched her palm something from the desktop and drop it in her purse. He looked back at his sister. "Maybe it still does."

Thea hesitated. "I should... go. School. I'm late..."

"Before you go, I have something for you," Oliver said as he held up the stone.

"You did not come back from a deserted island with a souvenir."

The corners of Felicity's mouth curved upward.

"It's a Hōzen," Oliver said. "In Buddhism it symbolizes reconnecting. I kept it in the hopes that one day it would reconnect me..." He held it out to Thea. "...with you."

Her face softened as she took it from him and pressed it to her chest. There was no snarkiness in her now. Just adoration and love and Oliver forgot about being cheezy or overly sentimental. She was suddenly just the little girl who chased after him and he was the big brother who secretly adored it.

Reconnection. Who said a simple stone couldn't perform magic?

Felicity dipped her head and turned away. Oliver could have sworn he saw her wipe her eye. It
wasn't until she turned back that she seemed to realize he was watching her. She offered a small smile, as if supporting his effort to reach out to his sister, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

Oliver's brow furrowed. She acted as if, in watching him with Thea, she'd lost something somehow. Hell. Hadn't she? She never talked about her family. He knew they weren't close. When they'd married, one of the things she liked best was how close the family was. She'd gained loving in-laws, a sister she seemed to dote on as if Thea were her own. Once the Queen's Gambit sank, it seemed all of that sank with it. His death was just the beginning of the total loss she'd endure.

Felicity averted her eyes and slinked sideways, as if she could ease around the siblings without them noticing.

"A rock," Tommy Merlyn said as he breezed out of the hall and into the bedroom, "that is sweet."

Felicity retreated two steps, so fast she bumped her hip into the corner of the desk.

Tommy grinned at Oliver, winked at Thea. "I want one of those t-shirts that says, 'My best friend was a castaway and all I got was this crappy shirt.'"

Thea shook her head. She ticked her finger toward Oliver. "Don't let him get you into too much trouble. You just got back." She rose up on her toes to kiss his cheek as she hugged him. "Take it slow."

Oliver nodded and waited until she'd grabbed her book bag and rushed out the door before he gestured after her. "The city awaits."

Groaning, Tommy hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. "Sadly it does not wait for me."

"What happened?"

"My father summoned me to the house for brunch. He probably wants to lecture me on the error of giving my Centurion credit card number to Nigerian businessmen via email." He shrugged. "Who knows. You know how he gets. Sorry, man, but I can't get out of it."

Oliver waved it away. "That's okay. Do what you have to do."

"But I will make it up to you," Tommy said, already backing out of the room. "Tonight. A party. Anywhere you want to go. You tell me where and when and I'll take care of everything for your welcome home bash."

"My what?"

"You came back from the dead. This calls for a party." Tommy pointed at him, then at Felicity. "And you two kids? Totally not off the hook. Felicity'll take you out instead. Shopping. Lunch. The whole tour."

"What?" Felicity jolted. Was it his imagination or did the color drop instantly from her face. "Wait. No. I have work…"

"Already cleared it with Walter. Even made lunch reservations. I texted all the info to your phone. Oh, and for my sake, Felicity," Tommy continued, "please make the man buy something Gilligan and the Skipper never wore."

Her eyes narrowed. "Tommy—"
"No coconut bras or grass skirts either," he said as he disappeared into the hallway. He popped his head back around the corner. His dark eyes twinkled mischief. "Those are strictly reserved for the babes tonight. Speaking of… Oliver? Have you noticed how hot your sister's gotten?"

Oliver took a step toward him but Tommy was already gone, his laughter ringing in the hallway.

Oliver glared after him for a moment before he forced himself to face Felicity. He curled his fingers into his palm, flexed them straight again. "He means well," he told her.

"I know."

She sounded miserable. She looked miserable. Was a whole day in his company really that unthinkable? Oliver eased back a step. He lifted his shoulders and let them fall again. "You know, we don't have to do this. If you have work…"

Felicity shook her head. "No. No it's not…" She bumped her glasses higher up on the bridge of her nose with her forefinger. "I'd like to go. It'll be nice."

Oliver couldn't help it. He smiled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said as she passed him on her way to the door. "I just forgot what a bad liar you are."

"Says the guy who once came to me because he said his computer picked up a virus browsing websites on kittens."

"How was I supposed to know they meant a different kind of pu—"

"Oliver!"

Satisfaction rolled through him as she turned pink. Ha! He could still make her blush.

He was still grinning and she was still blushing when he bumped into her. Later, maybe, she'd question the awkward move that sent her purse to the floor. But it did exactly what he wanted. The bag dropped, hit the hardwood, and disgorged its contents like an overstuffed shark.

As they both crouched to pick it up, Oliver's knee bumped Felicity's, nearly tipping her over. He caught her elbow, righting her. "Sorry," he said as he shoved her wallet back in her bag.

Felicity snatched a small, brown bottle from the floor by his shoe. She took a hasty swipe at the hair that had fallen over her shoulder. "No harm done."

She stood quickly and thrust out a hand.

"What?"

"Don't pretend you forgot the rule, Oliver. You made it." She wiggled her fingers. "If you're shopping? You're not driving."

He chuckled and tossed her keys to her. "So what's it gonna be, Speed Racer? The Porsche or the Mercedes?"

"I have my own wheels, thanks." When she realized he wasn't following her to the door, Felicity stopped in the threshold, her hand on the jamb. "Aren't you coming?"
"Yeah. I just need to grab my jacket. I'll meet you downstairs in a minute."

When she was gone, Oliver stood there a long time trying to figure out if proper etiquette demanded he inquire why his baby sister was taking Demerol – in a dosage high enough to sedate a man three times her size – before or after crab cakes.

~*~

Felicity's car was neither a Mercedes or a Porsche. It was a tiny, two door, chili red, Mini Cooper complete with racing stripes and spoiler. If he'd had one on the island, Oliver was pretty sure he could have pushed it into the water – because it would have undoubtedly floated – and paddled his way home.

Oliver shifted in the passenger seat. That the mountain of shopping bags in the back hadn't flipped the car over like the giant ribs in the Flintstones cartoon was actually impressive.

When Felicity came to a stop at a red light, Oliver adjusted his seat belt. "Seriously? Millions of dollars and you bought this? Where's the windup key?"

Felicity tossed him a dry look. "Don't pick on my car."

"I'm sorry. Did you call this a car? I thought it was a shoe on wheels."

"Weren't you the one who told me it wasn't the car but the driver that mattered?" She pursed her lips as she tapped her thumbs against the black leather steering wheel. "Of course, you were driving some flashy Mercedes-Benz sports model at the time."

"You liked that car."

She rolled her eyes. "You liked what we did in that car."

"Who knew two people could be that flexible."

She turned her face away but not before he caught her smile. It didn't last long, though. Her mouth firmed. Her hands tightened on the wheel. "Man, this city's gone to crap."

Oliver followed the direction of her stare to the derelict building across the street. Graffiti littered the worn brick façade, clearly marking the street corner the territory of one gang or another. Boards covered windows Oliver figured had been broken long ago. The sidewalks stopped being walkways and were now prime real estate for makeshift cardboard houses. Their residents stood near a metal drum turned makeshift fire pit. Shopping carts stood nearby, crammed full of clothes and plastic bags, keeping their meager belongings portable for whenever Starling City's finest decided to roll through and clear them out.

Across the street stood the remnants of the old Queen Industrial Inc., steel fabrication and welding plant. The once noble looking factory that employed thousands of workers was no more. The pristine white building was now dingy and rusted. A menacing fence barricaded the perimeter and probably did a good job keeping squatters out.

Felicity watched an obviously homeless mother lead her dirty-faced daughter, no more than five, across the street and into the soup kitchen the local church had set up there. She lingered on the door
long after they were gone.

Finally, she looked back at the light, which was still red. "Your father closed the factory here and the whole neighborhood went into a tailspin. Fifteen hundred employees got laid off. The finance guys even found a loophole in the union contract so they didn't have to pay severance packages or pensions. They all pretty much lost their homes. It was awful."

Oliver stared out the window.

"Now," Felicity sighed, "nobody feels safe enough to drive through here at night, let alone work here anymore. Even the cops only come through when they have to." She swept her gaze over the street from one side to the other, shook her head as sadness pinched her face. "I hate this place. Why did you want to drive through this neighborhood anyway?"

Oliver dragged his attention away from the factory. "No reason." He nodded to the traffic light. "It's green."

Felicity shifted the car into drive and hit the gas. She guided the car into an easy turn, taking them away from the factory and back toward the heart of the city. "So," she murmured, clearly lightening her tone to lighten the dismal mood. "What did you miss the most? Steaks at The Palms? Drinks at The Station?"

"You."

Felicity's foot slipped off the gas pedal. The wheel jerked left. She recovered quickly, but glared at him anyway. "Damn it, Oliver!"

He shrugged. "You asked."

She blew out a harsh breath. "You could have said ice cream."

"I missed that, too. I just missed you more."

"Funny, you didn't feel that way when you got on the boat."

Oliver didn't respond.

Felicity swore under her breath. "Sorry. I didn't mean that. That was a shitty thing to say."

He studied her. "Why does hearing that I missed you bother you? You were my wife."

She took a deep breath but didn't answer.

"Even before we were married, we were friends, Felicity. I could talk to you about anything. *Everything*. How could I not miss that?"

She shifted and muttered something under her breath.

"What?"

Her eyes closed, just for a second, as if she was steeling herself, and then she blurted out, "We're still married."

Oliver stared.

Felicity shifted again. "Don't look at me like that."
"We're still... How did... Then why did you..." Married? They were still married? She was living on her own, under another name, without a ring on her finger... and they were still... Oliver twisted in the seat to face her more fully. "We're what?"

"You were gone five years."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"It takes seven years before you can declare someone legally dead."

"The estate could have just declared death in absentia."

She winced before swallowing. "Moira didn't want to do that."

Moira didn't want to. Did that mean Felicity did? Did Tommy have something to do with that desire? Was that why Felicity had moved out of the house? Oh, son of a... Oliver barely resisted the urge to smack his forehead into the window. That's why Raisa said Felicity was still getting mail at the house. That's why she said Felicity still had the name Queen on her driver's license. They were still fucking married.

Felicity wiggled in her seat. "Your Power of Attorney granted all the rights and powers back to the estate anyway, so it didn't interfere with the business —"

"Screw the business. When were you going to tell me?"

"I'm telling you now!"

"You let me think I'd been declared legally dead."

Her jaw dropped. "I never!"

"Okay, technically you never said—"

"You assumed!" she shot back.

"Don't get semantical with me, Felicity."

"That's not even a word!"

"Oh, no. You're not getting out of this by going all M.I.T. on me."

"Try not dropping out of college four times."

"Felicity!"

"What!"

He groaned as he propped his elbow against the car door and pressed his thumb and forefingers against his closed eyelids. He couldn't help it. He laughed.

"This isn't funny," Felicity snipped.

He dropped his hand. "It kind of is."

"It's serious."

"It's a little funny," he insisted.
"It's complicated."

Oliver held his fingers a whisper apart. "Funny."

"Inconvenient. Can we agree on inconvenient?"

The hell it was. Maybe it was inconvenient for her but for him… Oliver cocked his head. "So you're seeing someone."

"I'm… No!"

The denial came quick. Maybe too quick. Oliver wasn't sure. Jealousy had a good habit of getting in the way of reading anyone clearly.

"Okay." He sat back in the seat, straightened his blue wool and cashmere pea coat with a brisk tug. "Good." He considered that for a moment. He frowned. "Why not?"

Disbelief washed over Felicity's face as she threw up a hand. "Why? Did you want me to be dating someone?" A quick shadow cut across her face. She glanced at the road, at him, then back at the road again. "Did you… I mean, it's easily taken care of..."

"I don't think we should jump into anything right now. The family's going through a lot. I don't think divorce is a pressure we want to add at this point."


At no point, really, if Oliver had his way. He leaned his head against his fist and eyed her. "Any other secrets lurking around you want to confess, Mrs. Queen?"

Oliver could have sworn he heard her molars grind. He couldn't help it. He smirked. "So?" he pressed. "Are there?"

"Are there what?"

"Any sins you'd like to confess."

Instead of answering, Felicity pulled the car into the turn lane in front of a neat row of modern looking shops with emerald green awnings. The one closest to their parking space was a trendy looking café with Asta's scrawled above the door in white script.

As they rolled passed and around the corner to park in the alley, Oliver said, "Hey, I know this place." He hooked his thumb back toward the building. "This used to be Cygne Noir."

Felicity released her seat belt. "Did it?"

"Yeah. Wow." He looked around the neighborhood. Cygne Noir. He hadn't thought about that restaurant in years. He'd taken Felicity to the swank French bistro on their first official date. It was a BYOB place then. They'd dined on warm brie drizzled with honey, apricots, and almonds, roasted rack of lamb, and blueberry-lavender ice cream. Felicity had discovered an unknown love of wine when he poured her a glass of 1982 Lafite Rothschild. He'd discovered she spoke French far more fluently than he did.

"This whole place has changed," he realized with a pang of sadness. "When did they rip it all down and rebuild?"
"A couple of years ago." She shoved her door open. "Things change, Oliver. No matter how much we don't want them to. People, too."

Oliver unconsciously rubbed his shoulder. He caught himself and stopped. He climbed out and slammed the door, waited for the telltale tweet of the car alarm when Felicity pressed the button on the fob.

"So," she said, already walking ahead of him, as she fumbled with her purse, "if you're not too sick of fish, they have wonderful sushi. What do you say?"

Oliver opened his mouth to answer but the screech of tires against pavement interrupted. A dark van, unmarked, with no license plates, lurched into the alley and hit the speed bump with enough force to bounce its rear end off the pavement. Felicity stumbled away from it as Oliver reached for her arm to pull her back.

"What the hell?" Felicity gasped.

The van stopped short and hard, the tires leaving marks on the cement. The doors rolled open. It was, however, the two men in toothy red demon masks that emerged from the dumpster behind them that caught Oliver's attention. That, and the guns they held.

*Pop!*

Felicity gasped, part surprise, part pain, as her hand lifted to her neck. Her eyes rolled back as her knees buckled.

*Piff!*

The stinging bite of the tranquilizer dart caught Oliver by surprise. He reached up automatically to yank it free, but the drug was already numbing him. The world spun. The ground came up to meet his knees.

The side door of Asta's opened as a fat man carrying a large garbage bag stepped out. He jerked to a stop. "Hey!" he yelled. "What the hell are you…"

Demon Mask 1 whirled around, raising the semi-automatic rifle as he turned. The spray of bullets that cut across the brick wall, through the man in the doorway, and across more brick, was punctuated by the high pitched rat-tat-tat of the weapon.

The man's body jerked as the bullets sliced through him, blood blossoming forward across his chest and gut, and then he fell face down on the cement stoop.

Oliver toppled. The asphalt grated his forearm as he landed. The drugs clouded his head, threatened to suck him into an abyss he didn't know he'd come back from. One of the men crouched next to Felicity. Fear surged through Oliver, anger, too, but his drug-deadened limbs refused to move. To fight.

The Demon was back, standing over him, his gruesome head tilted as if contemplating how Oliver was still conscious. His vision swam. Then came the stinging zap of tens of thousands of volts of electricity to the back of his neck, and Oliver Queen knew no more.
The smell of damp, burnt dog hair pulled him from the abyss.

He opened his eyes to blackness that called to him. The shroud was ripped away, replaced by a shock of light that made Oliver wince.

The taunting voice came back, this time accompanied by a demonic red face with hollow eyes and a toothy white devilish grin. The stun gun appeared before his face. Electricity jumped from one contact point to the other as the weapon snapped and popped the unspoken threat.

"Mister Queen!" the devil called again, forcing Oliver back into the world of the conscious.

The last of the cobwebs cleared from his muddled brain, allowing him to take in the dark and dank warehouse and narrow line of windows high on the walls that let a scant amount of sunlight in. Long fingers of light slanted across the wet concrete floor. They drew Oliver's attention to the rough wood pallet in the center of the room. To Felicity who lay, unconscious, across it on her belly.

Her eyes were closed; her face bruised and her bottom lip blooded. Her hands, like his, were bound with a zip cuff behind her. She didn't move.

His heart beat surged. His chest rose and fell as his lungs pumped harder. He glanced right. Left. Forward. His chin dropped. The sound of heavy, panting breathes seemed to echo in the warehouse, but Oliver couldn't tell, over the drum of blood in his ears, if they were his or the man's in front of him.

That red demon face was back, floating too close, grotesque in its wide grin as that disembodied voice growled, "I ask the questions. You give me the answers."

Oliver clenched his hands into fists. The zip cuffs and wooden chair he was strapped to both creaked.

This time when the stun gun snapped, it bit. The electric fangs sank straight into his chest, right above his heart. Pain ripped through Oliver's blood, up into his brain, into his eyeballs, down through his feet. The current forced his muscles to contract, lifting his feet off the floor, arching his back and neck and ripping a howl of agony from his throat that seemed to shake the rafters.

The shock ended almost as abruptly as it began. The sting, however, still zipped and burned along every nerve ending in a slower fade that left Oliver gasping and panting through gritted teeth.

Demon shoved his masked face closer, cocked his head in an attempt to make Oliver look at him. "Did he make it to the island?" he demanded. "Did he tell you anything?"

Oliver huffed for air, couldn't control the snarl that curled his lips away from his teeth or dug deep lines in his brow. The pain of the electrical shock had faded almost entirely, but with it went the rigid control he'd been hanging on to since coming home. The tight collar he'd shackled on instincts honed over five brutal years loosened…

The stun gun pushed hard against his chest once more. The electric whip sliced deeper, stayed longer, until Oliver could taste the acrid burn in his mouth, feel it in his teeth and bones. His teeth clacked together. His jaw locked. A roar of impotent rage ripped from his soul.

…that tether slipped…

The electrical current snapped off. Aftershocks rocked through him, leaving Oliver shaking, heaving
for breath.

…began to fall away…

The pounding in his ears increased even as Oliver wrestled his heartbeat and breathing slower. He sucked in deep breathes through his nose, focused on a single spot on the floor, as he let the last of the pain fade and the cold, hard, blessed feeling of icy nothingness unfurled from its confines inside him to stretch. To keep on stretching until it slithered through every muscle, every limb.

"Yes, he did," Oliver managed to get out, the words surprisingly steady. He gave his head a small shake of surrender as that darkness in him began to steal control.

His tormentor nodded, seemingly satisfied by that surrender. He leaned down and closer, his hands resting on his thighs. "What did he tell you, Mr. Queen?"

Oliver exhaled, long and low, the heat of it turning to fog in the chill of the warehouse. The beat in his ears turned slow. Steady. He looked to Felicity. She still hadn't moved. Hadn't even opened her eyes. Was she even breathing?

The beast in him howled.

Oliver drew a shuddering breath. Resistance crumbled. He let loose the internal leash and the monster in him seized the freedom. It leapt forward, lifting Oliver's head, twisting his features into a dark, lethal mask of primal rage.

Instinct pounded though him, driven by every beat of his heart. The beast's needs were simple. Find. Stalk. Hunt. Catch. And then, finally…

Oliver's nostrils flared. His chest rose and fell like bellows as that soullessness bled into his eyes, leaving them black and flat. "He told me I'm going to kill you."

His tormentor laughed. He glanced at the other two, armed, masked men behind him before he bent toward Oliver again. "You're delusional," he sneered, leaning so close to Oliver's face it was all he could do not to surge forward to sink his teeth into any part he could latch on to. The man eased back. "You're zip cuffed to that chair."

Oliver eased his freed hands out from behind his back. Time seemed to still. "Not anymore."

Weapons arced up. His captor swung, but Oliver was already up and moving. He caught the chair, swung it up to block the impact of the rifle swung at his head, then thrust it forward, jamming the seat edge into the man's throat.

Oliver snapped one of the spindles as the chair dropped. He pivoted as he swung the makeshift stake back. The wood sank deep into the minion's chest, breaking through his breastbone, easily puncturing his lung. Oliver twisted the stun gun from him and stabbed it into the man's throat and pulled the trigger. The voltage spasmed through him, glowed bright white in the scant space between his and Oliver's body.

Boots scuffed the ground behind him, giving Oliver only a second to wrap his arm around his captor's throat and jerk him in front of him. Gunfire filled the room. The bullets shredded through the masked man's chest, jerking him backward, but sheltering Oliver from the spray.

The shooter panicked. His finger left the trigger. The barrage of bullets stopped a split second before the shooter turned and fled.
Oliver let the body drop. Two running steps had him at Felicity's side. He crouched, his fingers going to her throat even though his eyes never left the door where his quarry vanished. Felicity's heart beat against his fingertips. Once. Twice. His own seemed to echo it.

Alive. That was all the monster in him needed. It bellowed for revenge, yanked Oliver away from Felicity in bounding steps. Within seconds he was on the man's heels, chasing him through the twisting, dark corridors.

Heavy PVC slit curtain slashed at Oliver, momentarily blinding him as he burst through a threshold. Bullets punched the wall next to him, kicking splinters into the air. Oliver twisted sideways, caught the beam of the floor joist above him and hauled himself up onto the walkway above him.

The shooter ran for the exit. He threw himself against the door, practically fell out onto the deck. As he bolted down the stairs, Oliver cut across the slanting roof. He leaped at the edge, easily vaulting a water pipe, and using his momentum to sail toward the roof. He landed in a tight tuck, let gravity carry him toward the next edge as the gunman whirled around and fired. Bullets kicked off the metal, ricocheted in wild directions.

Oliver landed solid on his feet, kept running as the gunman fled down the narrow wooden stairs toward the alley below. Oliver's strides didn't slow as he neared the building's edge. He leapt, stretched for the wall edge opposite him as he fell. His fingertips caught. The impact kicked all the way to his shoulders, but Oliver didn't feel it as he planted his feet hard against the wall and used the force of impact to springboard him backward. He twisted mid-air, caught the opposite wall, and then dropped the shorter distance into the alley.

There was panic in the air now. Oliver could scent it.

The gunman cut a sharp right, ducking back into the building, and he followed. A simple leap took Oliver to high ground and he streaked toward the end of the walkway, trying to gain enough ground to get in front of the other man.

Fear made prey stupid. This one was no different. He stumbled to a stop before he ripped off his mask. He spun around and brought the rifle up. This time the line of bullets didn't greet Oliver, they could only pursue him as he leapt off the platform and caught the heavy chain hanging from the ceiling.

The chain swung him out, up, and away, then around and back, depositing Oliver less than a foot in front of his attacker. Oliver spun, drove his elbow back into the man's face. Bone snapped bone. He followed the strike through – latching his arm around the man's throat from the front and using the hold to bend him backward, off balance, over his thigh.

Oliver squeezed harder, cutting off the man's air supply. The gunman gurgled, could only clutch and flail as the pressure on his neck and spine increased.

Oliver didn't hear him. Didn't care. He shifted, increasing the pressure on the vertebra. "You killed that man at the restaurant."

The gunman shoved at his elbow, trying to loosen the grip as he choked out, "Y-You don't have to do this…"

"Yes. I do," Oliver said. "No one can know my secret."

And then he snapped his neck.
Read More About The Olicity Challenge
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of the kidnapping brings new problems, new suspicions, and a few new players to the Queen household.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on June 21 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

Please note that this week's update will be posted in 2 parts. I thought the chapter break here made sense. The second chapter will be posted (airquotes) soon.

As lies went, Oliver had told some doozies in his day. *No, Mom, that joint wasn't mine. Of course she's a good girl from a respectable family. Would I date anyone who wasn't?* And his favorite through high school and most of college: *I'll call you.*

To accept those lines, however, the recipient needed to be one of two things: gullible or far-too-trusting. Detective Quentin Lance fit neither of those categories.

The tall, trim, dark-haired cop leaned forward in the antiqued spider-backed chair to rest his elbows on his knees. The police artist's sketch – honed by Oliver's description – lay on the leather-topped mahogany coffee table between them. A sketch, Oliver had to admit to himself, looked a lot like Errol Flynn in Robin Hood's, well, hood.

So far no one had reacted to Oliver's story of rescue. Not Felicity, who sat next to him on the couch in faded jeans and his old, bulky U of SC sweatshirt, or Moira, or Walter, who both sat opposite them on the other couch in the Queen mansion's drawing room. Even Raisa, who stood near the window like a guard at Buckingham palace, had not offered so much as a scoff of disbelief.

Oliver forced himself not to fidget as a Lance's partner, Detective Lucas Hilton, paced the length of the room. Oliver clasped his hands loosely between his spread knees. Maybe five years scraping for survival had simply made him a better liar.

"So that's your story," Quentin Lance said. He gestured to the sketch. "A guy in a green hood flew in and single-handedly took out three armed kidnappers."

Felicity fidgeted. She hugged one knee against her chest and tucked her other leg beneath her. She kept her gaze downcast.

"I mean... who is he?" Quentin continued. "Why would he do that?"
Oliver shrugged. "I don't know. Find him and you can ask him."

Quentin flicked his attention to Felicity. He plucked the paper up and turned the sketch toward her. "What about you? You see the hood guy?"

Felicity seemed to still as everyone, including Oliver, looked at her. She hadn't said much since regaining consciousness. Oliver certainly hadn't ascertained what – if anything – she remembered. Finding out she saw something, anything, and blurted it out in front of cops would certainly be unfortunate.

"I saw…" She shrugged before adjusting her glasses. Her eyes shifted, just a little, just enough to meet Oliver's. They stalled there. "Just movement," she said finally. "Everything blurry. I was kind of out of it."

"Yeah," Quentin drawled. His lips twisted to the side as he turned his attention to Oliver again. "It's funny, isn't it. One day back and already somebody's gunning for you. Aren't you popular."

Moira straightened. "Where you able to identify the men?"

Hilton paused his pacing long enough to glance at his notebook. "Scrubbed identities. Untraceable weapons. These were pros."

Felicity shifted.

"Yeah, they probably figured you'd pay a king's ransom to get your boy back," Lance told Moira. "Or a Queen's ransom, as it were. After all, a parent would do anything to keep their child safe." He cocked his head, gave Felicity a disbelieving look. "You don't remember anything?"

She swallowed and looked away. "I remember waking up long enough to see them strap my… Oliver to a chair. He was still unconscious with a black bag over his head. I don't know if I said something or made a noise or…" She closed her eyes for a moment, gave her head a small shake as if forcing back some memory. When she opened her eyes again, she look straight at the cop. "He punched me in the face."

That tightly tethered beast snarled inside him and Oliver found himself staring at Felicity's bruised cheek and cut lip. She'd done nothing to conceal either. The flesh was clearly swollen, the colors stark purple and green. It was bad enough he'd marked her flesh, but someone else looking to hurt him? Someone willing to hurt her… to kill her… to get to him?

Oliver fought to take a steady breath and keep shoulders relaxed. He didn't like being forced to kill but right now – looking at those wounds, knowing it could have been much, much worse – he couldn't be sorry either.

Felicity smoothed her hand down over her shin. "I don't remember anything after that."

Lance grunted.

Moira frowned, a deep line appearing between her brows. "Why do I get the feeling you don't believe my son, Detective?"

"I didn't say I didn't." He raised a brow. "Do you not believe him, Mrs. Queen?"

"I find your tone inappropriate."

Walter stood. He buttoned the single button of his dark gray suit coat. "If Oliver can think of
anything else, he'll be in touch. Thank you, gentlemen, for coming."

Lance sat there a heartbeat longer before he chuckled and placed the sketch back in the leather portfolio he'd removed it from. He zipped it as he stood. Oliver rose too. The cop stepped closer. "You're luck never seems to run out, does it."

"This way, please," Raisa said, leaving neither cop little choice but to follow her unless they wanted to create a scene in the middle of the Queen's antique French Aubusson area rug. Moira and Walter, always the polite hosts, followed to see them out. Firmly.

Oliver went to the window and watched as Lance and Hilton emerged through the front door, stood on the steps exchanging formalities and business cards with Walter. Oliver knew the drill. Call if you can think of anything, if anything new pops up, if you have any reason to suspect your kid is lying and actually had something to do with his own kidnapping, the assault on his wife, or hey, played a role in the dead man with the broken neck we have down in the morgue. Day or night. Really. It's no bother.

Instinct played a big part in survival. Oliver had learned that during the time he was missing. Too many people discounted that prickly sensation of unease and distrust that crept down their spine when they suddenly realized they were somewhere too dark, too alone, too isolated and something flickered in the shadows.

They always found a reason to dismiss it though – an overactive imagination, too many horror movies as a kid, or just outright paranoia. Oliver, however, knew that ignoring those feelings – ignoring those shadows – could get him killed. In the jungles of the island, he'd come to think of those feelings, and the almost ghostly form they took inside his mind, as a harbinger; a prophet that foreshadowed a coming event.

Right now, as Oliver watched Lance go to the battered brown Ford in the driveway, that harbinger was back. In his ear. Whispering.

Lance glanced up at the house. Oliver didn't step back from the window. Their eyes met.

Watch that one, the whisper warned. He's on to you.

Oliver didn't retreat.

In the end it was Lance who looked away. He got in the car and, a few second later, the automobile drove off. The front door opened and closed. Moira and Walter's voices faded as they wandered into another section of the house.

Oliver turned away from the window to find Felicity, still seated on the couch, watching him over the rims of her glasses with that same appraising, intense curiosity he caught a flash of at dinner the other night.

He stopped. Felicity said nothing, but her eyes narrowed slightly.

That harbinger screamed back then, digging its claws into Oliver's back and shoulders to find perch as it leaned in, its breathe hot against the back of his neck as it hissed into his ear, Careful. She doesn't believe you either.

~*~
She didn't believe him.

Standing in his bathroom, wearing his robe, still damp from the hot water in his shower, and smelling like his soap, Felicity braced her hands against the bathroom vanity and stared at her reflection in the fogged-over mirror. The woman staring back felt like a stranger. A cynical, untrusting, bitter stranger, and she hated it.

She sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. The bitch of it was she couldn't put her finger on why she thought Oliver was lying. Hell, she didn't even know what she thought he was lying about. She only knew that, when Detective Lance asked if there was anything else, it felt like Oliver held something back. But… why would he?

Did Oliver know something about the kidnappers? Had they said something to him? Or was it simpler than that? Was he merely covering for the man who'd come to their rescue, reluctant to hand him over to the cops after he'd saved not only Oliver's life but hers as well? Now that would be classic Oliver Queen.

No matter what his reputation, Oliver had always been a man of honor and loyalty. If he called himself your friend, he'd always have your back. It's why he and Tommy had been friends since before kindergarten. So if Oliver believed helping their rescuer escape was somehow repaying a debt of honor? No doubt he'd stay silent and let the cops squirm. It would be Justice. Not necessarily Law, but definitely righteousness.

Maybe the bigger question was why had she lied? Felicity sighed as she tightened the robe's belt with a sharp tug. She glared at the woman in the glass who stared back just as hard. Felicity Megan Smoak-Queen didn't lie to cops. She didn't keep secrets. She didn't believe in shades of gray. Things were right or they were wrong. Period. But that was before. Before Oliver died. Before he returned from the grave. Now it seemed like every time she was in a room with him it was all shades of gray; half truths and hidden meanings.

She swore under her breath and wiped the fog from the glass with a strong sweep of her hand. Screw it. It wouldn't have mattered if she'd told Lance her kidnapper questioned her before knocking her out again. The questions were ambiguous. Even she didn't understand what they meant. What did he tell you? What do you know?

Felicity assumed the 'he' was Oliver but that didn't make any sense. What could Oliver know about anything? He'd only been back in Starling City a few days. He'd barely even been out of the house. She, however, knew one thing: whoever the kidnappers were, they didn't want money. They wanted information.

Felicity shivered as water dribbled from her wet hair, under the collar, and down her back. She pulled the lapels of the white robe closer around her throat. Working side by side with Walter Steele taught her a lot of things over the years. One of them was that people who wanted to know things were dangerous. Knowledge was power. Power was control. The right knowledge, in the wrong hands, could move mountains or topple kingdoms. It all depended on the whims of the person in the control.

Such control wasn't without dangers, though. Obtaining information was risky. Move too fast and you risked exposing your hand too soon and your opponent had time to strike first. Too slow and you gave the opponent time to cover their tracks and the information, and edge, vanished.

She folded her hands together and brought them up to press against her lips. Whatever was going on,
something had changed today. It oddly felt like a new player had entered a game no one knew they were even playing.

She could have died. Oliver could have died. The people who’d kidnapped them had killed someone in order to grab them. The odds of that scenario ending in anything other than their corpses in the water weren’t good. Telling the police everything was the logical move. Yet neither she, nor Oliver, had done it.

Felicity shook her head at the women in the mirror. "Why the hell did you lie?" she whispered.

The woman didn't answer.

Felicity released a long, slow breath as she made herself stand taller, commanded her hands to stop shaking, and lifted her chin upward just a notch. She gave that woman one long, last look before she said, "You better know what the hell you're doing," and opened the bathroom door.

~*~

She was wearing his robe.

Oliver couldn't stop his slow perusal from Felicity's wet, wildly curly hair, across her delicate profile, down her throat to where the flaps of his robe overlapped between her breasts, down to her narrow waist, flared hips, and long, trim legs all the way to her delicate bare feet with their brightly painted toes. Hot pink.

He liked how right she looked wrapped in the thick fabric, how it felt to see her in his room, and in his home. Some primitive part of him liked knowing that – if someone looked at her right here, right now – they would absolutely know she was his.

Felicity, still without her glasses, didn't seem to notice him near the window. She emerged from the bathroom to take the few steps to his dresser, and then stretch for the comb that sat on the top. The skirt of the robe parted, offering a long, tantalizing look at her shapely calf and knee.

Oliver tipped his head to get a better look. The robe slipped back even more to showcase the smooth, creamy flesh of her inner thigh and the beauty mark that dotted it. He drew a deep breath. His mouth went a little dry. God, he loved those thighs. He loved the numerous nights spent between them. The nights held tight by them. He loved those long, lazy Sunday mornings in bed, kissing that beauty mark – and points north – while Felicity mock protested she was trying to do the New York Times crossword puzzle. In pen.

They'd ruined more sheets with ink stains than he could count.

Felicity tugged the robe back together as she drew the comb through her hair and turned.

Oliver waved.

Felicity jumped.

"Oh my God," she gasped, slapping a hand to her chest. The comb stayed stuck in her dripping, tangled hair. She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. When they opened, they flashed irritation. "Don't do that!"
"I didn't sneak up on you."

"I didn't see you."

"Get glasses."

She stuck her tongue out at him before going to do just that. She went to the nightstand to grab them and slipped them on. "What are doing here anyway?"

"Um. It's my room."

"No. I mean…" She seemed to remember the comb in her hair because she let out an irritated sound and tried to pull it free went to pull it free. "Don't you knock?"

"Again. My room. Not the ladies room."

"I was taking a shower."

His gaze slid over her again. "So I noticed."

She tugged on the comb, winced when it yanked her hair. "You're not making this easier."

"I am your husband." And damned if he didn't like reminding her of that.

"So that means you have to be hard all the time?"

Oliver opened his mouth to respond but stopped. He rolled that around in his mind for a moment. It didn't sound any better on replay.

"Oh, God," Felicity groaned, "forget I said that."

"Let me help you," he said. He nudged her hands away from the comb's handle, then bent closer for a better look as he started to work its teeth free from the curling strands.

He worked in silence for awhile before Felicity grew restless. She jammed her hands into the pockets of the robe. "I hate this hair."

"Well, hold still or you'll make me pull half of it out."

"I should just chop it off."

He grunted. Over his dead body. He loved her hair. He loved the inexplicable way it twirled and twined and always, no matter what was done to it, bounced back to its original shape. He'd never seen hair so well-suited to its owner in his life.

"I'm serious," Felicity said. "Or maybe I should go to a salon and have a Brazilian blowout."

"They put wax there?"

She tried to turn. "Wha— Ow!"

He caught her shoulder. "Hold. Still."

"Not a Brazilian wax. A Brazilian *blowout*. You know, chemically straighten the hair and then hot iron it like supermodels do."

"I didn't exactly keep up with Cosmo the last few years."
She ignored that. "But there's a problem."

Oliver tipped his head to get a better look at the comb. He'd had burrs and splinters less embedded than this thing. How the hell…

"I know what some salons use for those treatments," she went on. "Did you know the FDA actually put out a warning for them? They can contain formaldehyde. Up to ten percent. That's the strength used by funeral homes for embalming."

Oliver gently unwound a long curl of hair from the prongs, then another, revealing a large snarl. He eased the comb free before giving Felicity's shoulder a slight tug, making her turn to face him. He tipped her face – her pretty, battered, bruised face – up with a simple nudge of his index finger beneath her chin. "Felicity?"

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"Of course I am."

He waited.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

He arched a brow.

"Oh. You mean because of the kidnapping."

He nodded.

"Well, it was an ordeal. I mean, we were dragged to some warehouse on the waterfront where they tied us up and were going to do God knows what to us. But we're fine, right?"

"Right."

"We're okay because some nameless, faceless guy in a hood showed up, killed everybody, and saved us. All so the cops could come here and question us like we did something wrong. Hooray, tax dollars."

His brows inched higher.

"I mean…” She tried to run her hand through her still-wet hair, frowned when her fingers got stuck, and gave a vicious tug. "You were there. In the living room. You heard them."

Oliver caught her hand and disentangled her fingers. "They were doing their job."

"They were calling us liars."

"They were just asking questions."

"Fine. They were asking me questions. They were intimating you were lying."

Oliver studied her. "Did you think I was?"

She searched his gaze. "Why would I? Why would you? Lie, I mean."
The teeth of the comb bit Oliver's palm and he glanced down at it as he forced his fingers to unclench. Tiny circles dotted his palm. "Exactly. So. See? Nothing to worry about."

Felicity said nothing.

"Unless you were lying."

Her eyes narrowed, just a bit. "Why would I?"

"Why would either of us?"

"That's a good question."

They fell silent again.

Why did it suddenly feel like they were two cats circling the same injured mouse? Oliver tapped the comb against his thigh. Did Felicity remember something? Had she seen more than she let on? If she had, why not tell the cops about it? Why not ask him about it, here, in private, right now?

Felicity drew her wet hair over her shoulder, combed through the curling locks with her fingers. "Raisa took my clothes to wash them. She said they're done, so once she brings them, I can go home and —"

"Whoa. What do you mean go home? You're not going home, Felicity."

Her jaw angled upwards as her hands sank to her hips. "Yes, I am."

"Felicity, someone just kidnapped you. You're staying here until we know it's safe."

"They were after you."

"Maybe."

She rolled her eyes.

"Okay. Probably. But until they find whoever was behind this, you need to stay safe."

"Lance's partner already told me they'd have a car drive by the apartment to keep an eye on things. I'll be fine tonight."

"Damn right you'll be fine. Because you'll be with me."

"I already told you —"

"And you've already forgotten. The thing Tommy's throwing tonight. That Welcome Home thing."

Her forehead wrinkled. "I'm going to that?"

"You're not going to that?"

"I didn't know that you wanted me to."

"You're my wife. Of course you should be there."

"Oh. Because…" She gestured back and forth between them. "We never really got to talk about… If you wanted…"
He'd always wanted. Wanting wasn't the issue. The kidnapping had drawn a big red bull's-eye around the problem. He was a target. People would be after him. To hurt him. To kill him. Eventually they would come for revenge. Because Felicity mattered to him, because he loved her and because people knew she was his, that meant she became leverage to use against him. They could hurt him by hurting her. He couldn't possibly ask her to stand in that crossfire and risk her life just because he needed to right the wrongs done to Starling City. He wouldn't.

Hell, he shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have gone looking for her when she vanished upstairs. He shouldn't need to see for himself that she was all right. He definitely shouldn't need to touch her to reaffirm she was safe. Yet here he was. Back with her. It was a habit that would get one of them killed.

If he knew she was safe, Oliver knew he could let Felicity go. Right now, though, she wasn't safe. After what happened today, it was clear someone was out there. An enemy. A dangerous one. Until Oliver found out who they were and made sure they never, ever came near Felicity again, he couldn't just walk away.

After that… Oliver couldn't stop himself from reaching out to twine a damp curl around his finger. Sadness tightened his chest, made his eyes scratchy. He smoothed the lock between his thumb and forefinger. After that, he would find a way to let her go, even if that meant making her hate him.

Felicity swayed toward him. She licked her lips. "If you really want me at the party…"

"Of course you should be there." Oliver dropped his hand. He couldn't lie and touch her. "People will expect it."

Her eyes dimmed a second before she eased back half a step. "I've never been the one who cared what people thought."

He refused to flinch even though pain cut through him. His stomach went hollow as sickness crawled up the back of his throat. So this was how it felt to pull the wings off a butterfly.

She reached to take the comb from him but Oliver didn't release it. "I'm sorry," he said.

"We seem to keep saying that lately. I'm not exactly sure what we're apologizing for."

God, what wasn't he apologizing for? Sins of the past, mistakes of today, betrayals of tomorrow. All he'd ever wanted to do was love Felicity. Now it seemed like the most impossible feat.

He caught her chin and touched a gentle thumb to her cut mouth. She flinched and he winced. "Sorry."

"It's okay," she told him. "It's just a little sore."

"I hate that you were hurt because of me."

"It wasn't your fault."

"It was. You wouldn't even have been there if —"

"Life isn't safe, Oliver. Anything can happen to anyone at any time. You, of all people, should know that. Besides, they weren't after me. They were after you. That's who you should be concerned about. This?" She gestured to her face. "This is nothing a little makeup won't hide until it heals."

"I might have something to help with that. I used some herbs on the island. I can mix you a salve."
"No Neosporin on the island, huh."

"Nope."

Let her go. Stop touching her. Stop offering to help her. Stop being there. He knew that. All of it. He just couldn't obey. Maybe he just didn't want to. Touching her comforted him. It was selfish as hell, Oliver knew that, too, but he'd suffered hallucinations before, and touching was the only real affirmation that Felicity really was okay, and he needed to know that.

Felicity's mouth pinched downwards. "What's wrong?"

Damned that x-ray vision. Did it come with her glasses out of a cereal box or something? Oliver offered a weak smile. "You're starting to look like Bozo."

She lifted a hand to her hair and scrunched a fistful of corkscrew curls between her fingers. "Ugh! See? Why do you always distract me when I get out of the shower?"

Because he liked her warm and flushed and wet. Somehow Oliver didn't think she find that charming. He tugged her toward the bed. "Here. Come're. We can fix it."

She dragged her feet. "Uh-uh. No way, Queen. We both know that doesn't 'fix' anything."

"That can actually fix a lot. But that's not what I meant." He wagged the comb at her. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Queen. Come on." He patted the mattress. "Let me help."

She eyed him with obvious suspicion as she climbed on to the bed. Oliver slid up behind her. He waited until she removed her glasses and put them on the nightstand before he started to work the comb through her hair, stretching the curls to loosen them, and using his fingers to fluff them into softer tumbles.

Felicity shivered when his fingertips grazed her scalp. She twisted her fingers together in her lap as she turned to try to look at him over her shoulder. "So what's the verdict? Is it too late?"

It was too late the minute the Queen's Gambit sank. Too late the minute the fishing boat appeared on the horizon. Far beyond 'late' when Felicity walked into his hospital room and he'd pounced on her like some starved animal.

Oliver smoothed the comb through her hair a few more times before gathering a section and brushing it forward over her shoulder. "I think we got it just in time."

"My hero."

He went back to brushing. Eventually he noticed she'd relaxed. Every stroke of the comb drew her head back, just a little, and every now and then she'd release a contented sigh. The robe was so big it seemed to sag around her. The wide collar spread wider to frame her shoulders.

Oliver found himself mesmerized by the glints and highlights that glittered with each stroke. He drew the comb through once more, couldn't stop himself from sliding his fingers through the blonde silk.

This was, he realized as her scent wrapped around him and beckoned him closer, one of the dumbest freaking things he'd ever done. Tomorrow didn't matter. Yesterday couldn't be changed. Forget good intentions. Screw noble. Fuck the altruistic.

After five long, damned years of hell – of dreaming what he'd do when he here, just like this, with her – he was too fucking weak to stop himself from threading his fingers through her curls again.
From taking a deep, erotic satisfaction in the way the delicate strands clung to his fingers before slipping down to tease his knuckles.

"You have," he practically growled, "such beautiful hair."

Felicity's eyes were closed now, as if he'd somehow hypnotized her with those brushstrokes. Her lips slightly parted. "Mmm."

Oliver couldn’t help it. He leaned in and inhaled. She smelled hot and wet; a complex mixture of her own natural scent, water, soap, and shampoo. His soap. His shampoo.

He closed his eyes, nuzzled the back of her neck, and let the aroma enchant him. It was bright citrus zest and leaves. It was deep and dark with berries and oak. Contrasting essences of yin and yang that somehow found a way to merge together into one.

Oliver brushed his lips against her flesh, felt a zing of satisfaction when she sucked in a quick breath and shivered. He kissed the hollow beneath her ear. The side of her throat. Lower. Dusted kisses across that tender spot where her neck curved gracefully into her shoulder.

Felicity shivered again. "Oliver?"

He tasted her flesh this time, a leisurely glide of his tongue, a cat tasting cream. "Hmm?"

She swallowed as he strung more, hot, open mouthed kisses along her shoulder. He savored her softness with his lips. His hand slid from her hip to the knotted robe belt resting low against her belly. The tie stood little chance against Oliver's agile fingers and in seconds he had it undone and was slipping his hand beneath the fabric.

He splayed his fingers and palm flat against her stomach. Her muscles contracted, instantly drawing taut at the touch.

Oliver traced the bottom curve of her naval with a fingertip before sweeping it lower. He turned his face into her neck and groaned when he encountered nothing but flesh. His Felicity was going commando.

Her head fell back against his shoulder. "What are you doing?" she whispered.

He nuzzled her ear before he touched his lips to its shell. "I think I'm seducing my wife."

"Don't you think…" She gasped when he went back to that tantalizingly scented spot at her nape to nibble. She trembled and her legs moved, suddenly restless, against the comforter. "I-I mean… Don't you think we should… talk… first?"

"Nuh-uh"

"N-No?"

"Absolutely not." He paused to tug the robe lower. The robe would have fallen to pool around her waist if Felicity hadn't caught the front on reflex. "Because when we talk…" he kissed one shoulder blade, "we fight." He shifted to kiss the other shoulder bone. "I don't want to fight."

"We don't always fight."

He smiled as he brushed tendrils of baby fine hair away from her back and dipped his head to touch his lips to her spine. "Are we fighting about fighting?" he teased.
"Oliver."

A simple twist had her flat on her back on the bed. The robe flared open to spread like angelic wings against the bedspread to show off those sexy legs. Definitely commando, Oliver thought as his knees bracketed her thighs. He caught her wrists in a gentle, easily breakable grip and pinned them against the mattress high above her head. The move brought them flush and Oliver watched her pupils dilate as he moved sensuously against her, letting her feel his arousal.

She didn't protest this time as he lowered his mouth to hers. Mindful of her bruised mouth, he kept his kiss soft. It was Felicity who lifted her head to increase the contact and pressure; Felicity who lifted her hips beneath him.

Oliver hissed as he squeezed his eyes shut. He dropped his forehead to hers. "You're killing me here."

She nipped his bottom lip. "You started it."

"I can finish, too, if you keep moving like that."

She laughed as she relaxed completely beneath him.

He liked that laugh, Oliver decided as he slid his palms into hers and laced their fingers together. Loved it, in fact. He lingered on her lips and didn't lift his head again until that laugh turned into a moan.

He stroked her thumb with his. "You're not wearing your ring."

"Oh." Felicity twisted her head on the bed to look toward the bathroom. "I took it off for the shower. I left it on the sink in the soap dish." She looked up at him again. "You know how paranoid I am about losing that thing."

Oliver nodded. She'd never wanted that ring. Too big, she'd protested on their honeymoon. Too flashy. She'd lose it, chip it, or have it stolen off her finger. He'd talked her into it. Queens could afford it, he'd assured her. Queens always got the best. People expected the wife of a Queen to wear a ring like that.

He sighed. All Felicity had ever really wanted was him, and once he was gone, she'd returned to some apartment and a little car, a job at QC. Just Felicity Smoak. Then he blasted back into her life and in what? Less than twenty-four hours had nearly gotten her killed. She got grief with him in her life, grief with him out of it. Was there one good thing she got out of marrying him?

Felicity tightened her grip on his hands. "Stop it."

He blinked down at her. "What?"

"That. Thinking. I told you. It wasn't your fault."

Fuck. Was he that transparent? He sometimes forgot about this part. About Felicity's ability to peer into him and read his mind.

He bent his head and touched his lips to her chest, directly over her heart. When he straightened, he met her surprised gaze. "You are the best thing I've ever done in my life."

A flush stole over her face, turning her cheeks bright pink. "Oliver."
He shook his head. "I don't think you understand what it would do to me if something happened to and it was my fault."

Her eyes turned bright. Too bright. Tears swam along her lower lash line.

Oliver cursed himself. Couldn't he ever say the right goddamned thing once in his life? Why was he always making her cry?

When she tugged against his hold, he let her slip one hand free. Felicity touched his face. "You can't control what other people do, Oliver. What happened today? What happens tomorrow? You can't stop that. That's why the only thing that matters is what we do with right now."

She slid her hand to the back of his neck. Her fingers slipped into his hair and she clenched them there, used the hold to guide his mouth down to hers. As he kissed her, as she parted her lips for him and made that soft sound of surrender he knew so well, Oliver couldn't care if this was right or wrong. It was home.

"Oliver?" A sharp knock echoed through the room. "Oliver?" Moira called from the hallway. "Are you in there?"

Felicity's arms flopped to the bed, making the down comforter poof on impact.

Oliver raised his mouth from her enough to groan, "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Don't look at me," Felicity whispered, clearly afraid his mother would hear them and know exactly what they were doing. Laughter made her eyes twinkle and lifted the corners of her mouth. "If I've said it once, I've said it a hundred times: Oliver Queen, you have got to move out of your mom's house."

He chuckled as he levered himself off of her. He took his time smoothing his hair and shirt, giving Felicity opportunity to do the same. When she slipped her glasses on, instantly morphing into sexy, rumpled librarian mod, it oddly made Oliver hotter. He forced himself to walk away.

He opened the bedroom door, but not wide enough to be taken as invitation to enter.

Moira smiled as she clasped her hands together in front of her. "Oliver, I've brought you protection."

Oliver scowled. "Excuse me?"

Behind him, Felicity most definitely giggled.

"I want to introduce you to someone," his mother explained.

She sidled sideways and motioned behind her, drawing his attention to Walter and the tall, broad, African American man who stood next to him. Military. Oliver knew it instantly from the way the man stood, all square shouldered, tall, and proud. Solider didn't explain the eight hundred dollar Burberry suit though. Custom tailored, obviously to fit his wide shoulders and arms. The short, sheered haircut, shoes, and watch, however, all said Special Forces.

"This is John Diggle," Moira said. "He'll be accompanying you from now on."

"Uhhhh." Oliver shook off his shock before cramming every ounce of charm he could muster into a smile. "Mom, I don't need a babysitter."

Moira shook her head. "I disagree. You could have been killed today. Clearly you need someone
Felicity suddenly appeared behind Oliver. She put one hand on his back, the other on his arm as she peeked around his shoulder into the hallway. Oliver did not miss the flicker of his mother's eyelids at his wife's sudden appearance.

Felicity greeted the bodyguard with a waggle of her fingers. "Hello."

John Diggle acknowledged her with a brisk bob of his head. "Ma'am."

"Ooh." She grimaced. "No. Not ma'am. Please. Never ma'am. Miss Smoak —"

"Queen," Oliver interrupted to correct. "Mrs. Queen."

"Or Felicity. That's just fine." She studied the man before nodding, just once, and patting Oliver's arm. "I like this idea."

Oliver slowly looked down at her.

"He looks very capable." Felicity looked back at the guard as if he'd back her up. "You're very capable, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She opened her mouth to obviously correct him but somehow managed to stop herself. "See?"

Oliver glared.

She glowered back.

"If he makes you feel safer," Oliver told her through gritted teeth though his tone was pleasant, "maybe he should be your bodyguard."

"Oh, no. I'm not the one in danger. The kidnappers were after you."

"She's right," Moira interrupted. "You're the target. That means where you go."

She pointed. "He goes. He comes very highly recommended. You couldn't be in better hands."

Walter stepped up behind her and touched the small of her back. "Darling, Oliver's a grown man. If he doesn't feel that he needs our protection, we should try—"

"Then maybe he should try to understand that this is something I need," Moira said without so much as glancing at her husband.

Walter's mouth shut.

Oliver glanced at John Diggle, who was still silent. Still tall. Great. This certainly complicated thing. He gave the guard the universal man-nod of acknowledgement. "So." He gave the guard the universal sup man-nod of acknowledgement. "What do I call you?"
Sins

what are you guilty of?

~ 4 ~

Read More About the Olicity Challenge
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The burden of Oliver's secrets weigh heavy as he confronts the impact of his lies on those he loves the most.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on June 21 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

As previously mentioned in the Chapter 4 update, this is part II of this week's update for the challenge prompt.

If it was one thing Quentin Lance could be credited with, it was honor. True to his word, a patrol car sat opposite Felicity's apartment building. Still, Oliver insisted on seeing her to her front door, waiting while the bodyguard checked the interior, waiting again while she locked said front door – securing both deadbolts and the chain – before going back to the car and allowing the guard/security/chauffeur to take him home.

Oliver relaxed further into the camel-colored leather backseat of the black BMW. It wasn't part of the Queen fleet, but a car provided as part of the protection services. The sedan was luxurious, of course. It was also big, boxy, and – judging by the tight cornering, deep bass sound of the motor, and the reduced road-noise – sporting a custom V8, 400 plus horsepower engine, modified suspension and braking system, security glass laminated with polycarbonate, and a steel sheath lining capable of withstanding an assault from an AK-47, if not armour-piercing weapons and explosives.

The city rolled by outside the tinted windows. The setting sun bathed the city gold and cast long, dark shadows that jutted out into the streets and alleyways. Only the occasional streetlamp illuminated the car's interior.

John Diggle, or "Dig" as he suggested Oliver call him, drove with a steady hand and calm exterior, though Oliver knew he was far more alert than his cool exterior portrayed.

One thing the bodyguard was not was a talker.

"You're ex-military," Oliver said.

It was more a statement than a question but Diggle glanced into the rear-view mirror and confirmed it with a brisk, "Yes, Sir" anyway. "Hundred and Fifth Airborne out of Kandahar. Retired. Been in the private sector a little over four years now. I don't want there to be any confusion, Mr. Queen. My ability to keep you from harm will outweigh your comfort. Do we have an agreement, Sir?"
Oliver released his seat belt and reached for the car door.

A small shove, a simple tuck and roll across the pavement that had him narrowly avoiding a honking taxi cab before he wound up on his feet next to the bumper of a parked Lincoln, and he was free.

Oliver stood, tugged his jacket straight, dusted a scuff of dirt and a couple of dead leaves from his sleeve before he headed for the alleyway. Behind him came the squeal of car brakes. Once the darkness of the alley welcomed him, folding around him, his steps became running strides, then a leap up onto a dumpster, another to catch the bottom rung of the fire escape ladder.

In only a few seconds he was on the roof, looking down at the street. The BMW sat at a dead stop in the inside lane, both front and rear driver's side doors wide open. John Diggle stood next to the car, clearly scanning the street for any sign of his ward.

"Sorry," Oliver said as he stepped away from the edge. He flipped the collar of his coat up to ward off the chill of the coming night. "But this? I do alone."

~*~

Hours later, Oliver took the backstairs of the Queen Mansion to the top floor. The house was quiet and still, but there was an edge in the air. A tension that prickled the back of his neck like the calm before a storm.

He'd gotten a lot accomplished. More than he'd thought he would. He pulled his cell phone from his inside coat pocket and tapped the screen a few times to pull up the alarm clock app. Another tap set it for midnight. He rounded the corner in the hallways as he slipped the phone back into the pocket. His steps slowed.

Felicity stood in front of his bedroom door. Leaned back against it, actually, with her arms folded tight across her chest, her ankles crossed, and her head tipped back against the hard surface. Her eyes were closed.

In the low light of the hall, she seemed almost ethereal. She'd gathered her hair up in a casual knot that left several wispy tendrils free. The day's clothes had been swapped out for a short, sleeveless, pink champagne colored cocktail dress that seemed to turn her skin peaches and cream.

The fitted bodice cut low in a dramatic v-neckline that showed more bosom than Oliver was accustomed. The skirt was light and flirty, three tiers of pleated fabric with ruffled edges that reminded him of tropical flower petals. The skirt ended several inches above her knees, and Oliver couldn't stop himself from perusing the lean curves of her thighs, down to her calves, all the way down to the strappy, silver stiletto heels braced against the carpet at her feet.

His heart did a strange stutter in his chest. Damn, but she was a beautiful woman.

"Do you know," she said, not moving, not even opening her eyes, "how much of an ass you are?"

And busted.

Oliver scratched his eyebrow. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Felicity lifted her head away the wood panel. Her lashes rose. Those blue eyes – glittering like ice –
snapped at him. "I didn't expect to *be* here. Then Mr. Diggle showed up on my doorstep with a problem." Her brows arched, high and round. "Would you like to hear about Mr. Diggle's problem?"

Oliver cringed as he rubbed his ear. "I can probably guess."

"Oh. No. No, I wouldn't want there to be guesswork involved here. Let's be explicit."

She pushed away from the door, uncrossed her ankles for firmer footing as she faced him. "Mr. Diggle – the bodyguard your mother hired to protect you after you were kidnapped… after three men killed someone in order to kidnap you – came knocking on my door," she said, splaying a hand against her chest, "to tell me that my husband ditched him in the middle of Kriesberg Drive. Just…" She flicked her hand in the air and added a little spirit finger flick in there for effect. "Right out the backseat."

"I said I didn't want a bodyguard."

"I had some things I needed quiet time alone to process," he told her.

"Really."

"Yes."

Felicity dropped her head to the side.

"I had some things I needed quiet time alone to process," he told her.

"Really."

"Yes."

Felicity dropped her head to the side.

"I had some things I needed quiet time alone to process," he told her.
That was as loaded a question as *Do these jeans make me look fat?* There was only ever one right answer. But when it came to Felicity that answer also happened to be the truth, too. She wasn't dumb. She was the smartest person he knew. Not merely in IQ and test scores, but in life and in the understanding of people. She'd always been sharp. People underestimated that because of who she was and what she did, but that was always their mistake.

"You look beautiful," Oliver told her.

"Damn right I do."

"Glad we agree."

"So, then, you just **think** I'm stupid."

"I, most definitely, do not think you're stupid."

"Because I can say the alphabet backwards."

Oliver didn't know what that meant, so he simply nodded.

"I can figure out the day of the week based solely on the date."

"I'm sure that's very handy."

"I even once memorized all the lines in Macbeth in a day."

"Okay."

She locked her arms across her chest again. Her fingertips drummed against her biceps. Those blue eyes glittered dangerous fury. "Okay. Good. Then you know I am not one of those dim-witted buckle bunnies you and your friends liked to screw around with in college."

Buckle bunnies, he mouthed.

"So cut. the. crap. Oliver," she ground out, advancing a step on him with each word. Those spiked heels sank deep in the carpet. The fluffy layers of that skirts shimmied. She poked him in the chest. Hard. "You tell me what is really going on or so help me…"

Gauntlet thrown. Oliver couldn't deny the challenge spiked heat through his blood. He couldn't help it. She was infuriating and sensuous all at the same time; wielding her brains and sexy shoes the way others did weapons. But Oliver had his own arsenal. He straightened to his full height, squared himself to her, and staked his ground. He scowled down the length of his nose at her. "Or what?"

"Or I'll tell your mother on you."

Oliver couldn't help it. He laughed. "Felicity? I'm not a six. Threatening to tell on me to my mom is…" He stopped. Crap. That would be hell. Moira would be up his ass in an overprotective mode that would leave him unable to come and go as he pleased, let alone have a single moment of privacy. If it was one thing he didn't need it was more scrutiny paired with questions.

Felicity tipped her head as she cupped her ear. She fluttered her lashes in mock confusion. "I'm sorry. What was that? I didn't couldn't hear you over your mommy issues."

He scrubbed his hand over his jaw before latching it around the back of his neck. "You're right. What I did was thoughtless."
Her expression went comically slack. "Are you kidding me?"

"And temperamental."

"And immature and selfish and reckless and potentially life-threateningly dumb."

The heat in his blood turned to annoyance. Oliver loomed over her. It was less intimidating since Felicity's high heels closed the height distance between them, but he still managed to tower over her. "So now I'm dumb?"

Felicity didn't back down an inch. If anything, she jerked her chin up even more. "I'm not sure if this is pinnacle of dumb things you've done or if that's still reserved for when you stole a taxi cab, got arrested, and then peed on the arresting officer."

"I was nineteen."

"And drunk."

"And very drunk," Oliver agreed.

Her groan was part exasperation, part anger. She dropped her face into her hands and massaged her forehead with her fingertips. "Oliver," she grumbled into her palms.

"Felicity."

She dropped her hand. Her eyes softened as she searched his. Her fury seemed to drain away in an instant, leaving her looking worn and a little sad. "You don't have the excuse of being that kid anymore, Oliver, and I don't ever want to go through what I did tonight when I opened my front door and saw Mr. Diggle standing there – alone – telling me something had happened to you."

Pain speared through Oliver's chest. It brought clarity, too, and he saw beneath Felicity's anger and manipulation to the fear beneath it. His shoulders slump and that temper in his blood fizzled.

He edged closer to her and cupped her face. His thumbs stroked her baby soft cheeks. "You're right. I didn't think."

"Then, please, don't do it again. Please. Let Mr. Diggle do his job."

He pressed his lips to her brow. "I didn't mean to upset you."

She clutched his forearms, either for physical or emotional stability. Maybe both. He wasn't sure which. "Oliver, someone tried to kidnap you. Maybe even kill you. Of course I'm going to be upset when you disappear again without saying anything to anybody."

"I wasn't lying before when I told you I needed some time to myself."

She lifted her head and this time there was a new fear in her eyes, one she tried to hide but that was so raw and so vulnerable it actually cut him to see wash across her face. Her mouth trembled until she pressed her lips together to still it.

"Is it that horrible here with us?" she managed to ask, her voice husky. "Did I — Have we done something…?"

Oliver instantly shook his head. "No. He tightened his hold of her face, just a little, as he bent to look her directly in the eye. "No. That is not —"
"But you feel like you can't be here. That we're, I don't know. Expecting something you're not ready to give?"

They were expecting something. Oliver knew that. Whether anyone wanted to admit it or not, they expected to look at him, despite his ordeal, and see the same man they once knew. They expected him to be changed, but in a way they anticipated – a way that bettered him – not in the way that actually was.

They wanted a matured Oliver Queen. Traumatized, sure, but still innocent. Still human. How could they ever understand that what had come home to them wasn't anyone of those things? He was scarred and twisted and broken. Not innocent. Not even really human anymore. At least, not in a way they'd understand. Hell, Oliver couldn't understand it himself.

The Oliver Queen they knew was dead. He wasn't ever coming back. The man here, in this hallway – the one that ached to be that person for them, ached to be the boy he could never be again – was all that remained. And all that was left was dark and ugly, and they'd be horrified by what he'd actually become.

"Sometimes I can't breathe," he admitted, his voice gravelly. "I've been alone for so long that sometimes things press in on me."

Pity filled her eyes and he hated it.

"I've been on my own, making my own choices, having to do… things… to survive. Sometimes, here, when everyone pushes, it feels like…"

Suffocation. Death by crowded isolation. Like a lion netted, shoved in a crate, shipped halfway around the world to wake up in a tiny cage surrounded by people all pointing and talking as flashbulbs went off in its face while, all the while, all the lion could remember was the vastness of the open plains and the scent of freedom in the wind.

Oliver could only shake his head. "Like…"

"We're suffocating you," Felicity said, clearly miserable.

"Sometimes."

She looked away.

He stroked her hair. "So I leave before I go crazy. But this is my thing to work through, Felicity. You can't fix it. This is not because of you."

She nibbled her bottom lip. "Would you, when you feel that way… Do you think you could find a way to let the bodyguard go with you? Maybe he could keep a distance. Maybe he could keep you in eyesight o-or something. Find a way to make this work so you can get that space without risking your life?"

Could the lion ever truly be roam free while tethered?

"Nothing is going to happen to me," he told her.

Her sigh was unsteady. "You don't know that, Oliver. I lost you once. I can't... I cannot go through that again."

"Hey."
She shook her head and swallowed so hard he could see the chords and tendons in her throat before she said, "You told me earlier that I didn't understand how you'd feel if something happened to me. But I know. I know, Oliver, because it *did* happen. It happened to me. It happened the morning I got the call that they'd lost contact with the Queen's Gambit. It happened again when they found signs of wreckage, and again when—"

"Shhh." Oliver cupped the back of her head and tugged her forehead to press her face against his coat-front. He rested his chin against her crown, smoothed his other hand down her back as if he could absorb the hurt of those memories. He would if he could. He'd take it for her, carry it for the rest of his life if he had to. She didn't deserve it. He did. Hell, he was used to pain now. It had become a close and constant companion.

Felicity curled her fingers into the coat. "Promise me," she whispered, her voice hoarse and muffled. "Promise me you won't put your life in danger like you did tonight. Please."

Oliver closed his eyes. He couldn't do that. The truth was he would take that risk again, that and much, much greater before he'd rectified the damage inflicted on the city. Someone had to make it right, and no matter how much he loved her, Oliver couldn't turn his back on the debt he owed Starling City. Not even for her.

As if sensing that reluctance, Felicity lifted her face from his chest. "At least promise me you'll let Mr. Diggle do his job. Let him protect you when you need protecting."

That he could do. Not that he found himself in many situations where he couldn't protect himself. Oliver nodded stroked her hair again. "I can try to do that."

Felicity nodded. "Good. Okay. Thank you."

He slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her more securely against him. "How about a proper thank you?"

"You have a party to get to. We don't have time for that kind of proper."

"I can be very quick."

"I don't think I'd brag about that if I were you."

Hands on Felicity's hips, Oliver steered her backward toward the corner at the end of the hall where great-great-great grandfather Thaddeus Queen's oil painting kept watch over a potted fern on a pedestal. He eased her into the shadows until her back bumped the wall, then fumbled for the zipper at the side of her dress. "Quick, efficient, and amazingly thorough."

"Amazingly, huh?"

"My wife never had any complaints."

"Uh huh."

"One way to prove it."

"Oliver," she said, warning ringing in the single word even though she let her head fall back to expose her throat to his lips.

He kissed her throat, nipped her jaw. His fingers fumbled at the side of her breasts. Finally, he swore under his breath and pushed his hand under her skirt. She sucked in a startled breath when he cupped
her between her legs, rocked the heel of his palm against her.

She gasped as her head thudded back against the wall and her fingers sank into the thick fabric covering his shoulders.

Somewhere nearby a door closed.

Suddenly Felicity wasn't clinging to him but shoving at him, trying to brush his hand out from under her skirt. "Oliver. Oliver, wait!"

He caught her waist to steady her and peeked around the fern as Thea appeared at the other end of the hall.

His sister missed a step before she recovered and strolled toward them, apparently confident she wasn't about to see anybody naked or embarrassed. "Hey, hey," she chided, "Behind the ferns action is strictly for maids and butlers only in this house."

Felicity blushed and tugged at the front of her dress even though it hadn't budged and didn't reveal anything. Well. Oliver eyed the tight nipples beaded against the pretty fabric. Almost nothing. He caught himself raising his hand before he could rasp his knuckles over one of those tight peaks.

Felicity shot him a stern look and shook her head.

Naughty later. Oliver jammed his hands into his coat pockets and fisted them there. Right.

Thea hooked her thumb toward the stairs. "Your driver's out front ready to take you to the party." She stopped and eyed Oliver. "Wait. Aren't you supposed to be with him?"

"I had him drop me off at the backstairs so I could come up and change." Oliver checked his watch. "He's early."

Thea smirked. "Obviously he doesn't know the Queens like to be fashionably late for everything."

Felicity smoothed her hands over her skirt, touched her hair to make sure it was still secure. "I should go down and tell him you'll be a few minutes." She gave him a knowing look. "Make your apologies."

Oliver didn't bother to nod since he knew Felicity would do it whether he liked it or not. Thea went with her, leaving Oliver alone to change. When he emerged from the house, a black limo sat under the stone carport. Night had long since fallen, but the house's entryway lights and the glow of the car's headlights gave Oliver more than enough light to descend the steps and make his way to the rear passenger side door.

The interior illuminated as soon as he opened the door. Felicity sat behind the driver, her legs crossed, her silver shoes winking in the dim light. But it was the man seated opposite her that made Oliver stop and stare.

John Diggle didn't smile at him from the bench seat. He greeted him with a faint nod and a stern, "Put on your seat belt, Sir."

"After all," Digg continued, "we wouldn't want you to miss your party. Sir."

Oliver climbed in to sit next to the man, slammed the door behind him, and laughed as he reached for...
Tommy Merlyn threw a hell of a party. The banquet hall – for which the entire building had been rented exclusively for the event – was open only to Oliver's closest two or three hundred friends. Since Tommy was in control of the list, that meant more than half of the guests were leggy, silicone enhanced, and short-skirted. It also meant the 'entertainment' was a quartet of shapely, scantily clad women in halters, short-shorts, and fishnets grinding on raised platforms behind the DJ's box.

Lights pulsed across the packed dance floors, spun away wildly only to come back and crisscross at the bar, illuminate the twisted columns of pearlescent white and black balloons that stretched from floor to ceiling. There was food. There was drink. And, if Felicity knew Tommy Merlyn as well as she thought she did, plenty of indiscriminate sex in the bathrooms.

Oliver took Felicity's hand and drew it to the crook of his elbow before they proceeded down the stairs toward the main floor. John Diggle remained behind, standing vigilante at the top where he could probably best monitor who came in and out, while overseeing the space below.

The lights zipped around the room, flashed in Felicity's eyes, making her squint and duck away on reflex. The music beat so loud she felt it vibrate up through each step, up through her legs where it seemed to land low in her belly to beat and jump and pulse.

Or maybe, Felicity admitted as she stole a peek at Oliver, the jittery sensation was her husband's fault. She lingered on the hard line of his profile, oddly liking the leaner, more rugged cut of his jaw, chin, and cheekbones.

The five years had changed him. Oh, he'd been handsome before, absolutely, but his time away had honed him. Even though she hadn't seen him naked yet, she'd felt strength in the squarer, more masculine cut of his shoulders, arms, chest, and waist. Every time he stood or moved she saw strength in his thighs and calves. His ass sure as hell looked good in the dark slate trousers he wore.

He'd gone for the casual billionaire look – unbuttoned suit jacket, no tie, collar left undone two or three buttons. Slightly rumpled. Definitely sexy. It was a seductive combination of money, fame, and don't-give-a-fuck.

Felicity resisted the urge to fan herself. Sex with Oliver had always been good but since he'd returned wanting him felt like a full-time job. It would have been embarrassing if he didn't seem to want her just as much.

Seem being the operative word.

Hot, then cold. There, then distant. One minute it was like he couldn't not touch her, the next it was like he couldn't get away from her fast enough.

*Sound familiar*? a small voice in her head asked.

Felicity gave it a mental swipe but it buzzed right back.

*Just like old times. Wants you like he wants that new car, that racehorse in Spain, and that ski lodge in the Alps. Then, once he has you...*
She absently fingered her wedding ring.

*Where'd that get you, Smoak?*

Stop. She didn't want to think about that. She wouldn't think about that. Not tonight. Tonight was supposed to be fun. It was supposed to be a new start and, after the conversation at the house before they'd left, it felt like she and Oliver were actually moving in the right direction this time. Together.

Felicity darted another look his way, frowned when she saw him checking the time on his cell phone. She leaned in close so he'd hear her over the grinding music. "What's the matter?"

He looked at her as if he'd forgotten she was there. The smile he flashed didn't ring quite true. "Nothing," he assured her. He dropped the phone back into his pocket. "We're late, that's all."

"Since when do you worry about that?"

He covered her hand on his arm. As they neared the bottom of the staircase, Felicity spotted Tommy in the crowd. It was a good thing Thea wasn't around, she couldn't help but think as she counted no less than five sexy women practically fawning for his attention. It would probably crush the girl's heart.

Men. They could be such dopes.

Tommy seemed to spot them too, because a wide smile instantly spread across his face. He downed the last of his drink before abandoning the glass on the bar, and hurrying toward them. He raised his hand over his head, made a quick slashing motion, and the DJ instantly killed the music.

"Everybody!" Tommy yelled as he jogged up the handful of steps to reach them. He clapped as he yelled, "Hey! Hey, hey, hey! Here he is!" He slung his arm around Oliver's shoulder, slapped him on the chest. "Man of the Hour!"

The crowd cheered. Glasses surged upward. The spinning lights glinted off hundreds of rims.

"Let's give this man a proper homecoming," Tommy said as Oliver stepped down, into the crowd, to shake hands and kiss cheeks.

*We Are The Champions* boomed through the room.

"Ah, look at that," Tommy sighed as he leaned close to Felicity. "The man back in his true element. If I were a sentimental man, I might be misty-eyed."

Felicity slanted him a sideways look. "Tommy, the only thing that makes you cry are breast reduction surgeries."

"That's true. Brutal, but true." He watched as two blonds flanked Oliver and lead him deeper into the crowd. His smile faded a bit. "Are you sure your okay with this?"

Felicity nodded. "I am." When he looked doubtful, she said, "I am. Really. After everything Oliver's been through, he deserves to have some fun. Besides, he's Oliver Queen. He's always going to have beautiful women around him begging for a picture or asking him to sign their boobs." She shrugged. "Part of the fame and fortune. I've always known that." And Oliver had never touched. Not ever. She'd always known she could trust him in that.

"Speaking of fame and fortune. I heard about what happened." Tommy touched her arm. "Are you two okay?"
"We're okay. We're better than okay." She frowned lightly. "I think."

Intrigue lit his face. "Really? Tell me all about it. You know I pride myself on knowing all the gossip long before TMZ."

"There's not much to tell. I don't even know what to tell myself yet. But it's been nice."

"Nice," he echoed.

She nodded.

"So then you haven't…"

Felicity pinned him with a hard stare. "Haven't what?"

Before he could answer, Oliver's voice rang through the room. Both Felicity and Tommy watched as he climbed the stage in the center of the room, held his hands up to silence the crowd.

"Thank you!" Oliver called out above the cheering crowd. He high-fived several people in the crowd. "Thank you very much for coming!"

Someone, somewhere in the crowd passed him a shot a shot glass.

He knocked it back without even hesitating, didn't even seem to flinch as he swallowed. His grin was wide and cocky as he lifted the empty glass in a toast to the crowd, tossed the small glass to a cute red-headed waitress, then yelled, "I missed tequila!"

The crowd screamed. The music erupted again from the speakers again as Kesha warned the place was about to blow.

Felicity sighed as Tommy muttered, "Maybe I should've just taken him to Big Belly Burger."

~*~

An hour later, the banquet hall doors locked. In Tommy Merlyn's world, there were four time zones: Unfashionably Early, Punctual, Fashionably Late, and Loser. Anyone not at the party now would only experience it via gossip columns in the morning paper.

The abrupt termination of in and out foot traffic also apparently allowed John Diggle to reposition himself on the main floor. He stood out of the way, near a column, but in reasonable distance of Oliver at all times. He looked at everyone, talked to no one, and rarely seemed to blink.

Getting away from him, Oliver decided as he sipped a club soda with lime and pretended to listen to the very excited, very pert and bouncy blonde, was going to be a bitch.

Tommy appeared then and the blond, taking the subtle hint, shimmied off to join the throng on the dance floor.

Tommy gestured to the bodyguard. "Does he wipe for you, too?"

Oliver grimaced.
"Now," his best friend said, "by my estimate, you haven't had sex in one thousand eight hundred thirty-nine days."

Oliver took another sip of his drink.

"Meanwhile, you're standing here and you're wife is..." Tommy looked around until he spotted Felicity way on the other side of the room. He pointed. "Way over there. At this rate, it will be another eighteen hundred days before you get laid. I don't know what your plans are tonight, but I intend to end my dry spell with Carmen Golden tonight."

Oliver followed Tommy's nod toward a trio of women moving in a ridiculously slow rhythm to much-too-fast music. "Which one is she?" he asked.

"The one who looks like that chick from Twilight."

Oliver frowned. "What's Twilight?"

"You are so better off not knowing."

The crowd shifted around them, pulling together tight before easing apart again, and when it did, Oliver saw a familiar face. One that definitely did not below. Thea. Seventeen, going on twenty-two judging by the short, tight, dress.

He didn't recognize the friends she was with, but none of them looked old enough to be the Twenty-One and Older club. One of them, however, was old enough to master the subtle passage of tiny pill packets. His eyes narrowed as Thea palmed it as expertly, and then turned, using the motion to discreetly slip the drugs into her small clutch.

Oliver pushed away from the bar. "Back in a minute."

He didn't care that Diggle shadowed him as he shouldered his way through the crowd to his sister.

Thea pivoted to face him as he approached. Her face glowed happiness and exertion from dancing. "Ollie! Hey!" she greeted as he grabbed her arm and used the firm hold to lead her several steps away from her friends. "This party is sick!"

"Who let you in here?" he demanded.

Her amusement grew. "I believe it was someone who said, 'Right this way, Ms. Queen.'"

"Well, you shouldn't be here."

The happiness drained from her face along with her smile. "Ollie, I'm not twelve anymore."

"No. You're seventeen."

"Ollie, I love you, but you can't come back here and judge me, especially for being just like you."

Oliver forced himself to take a deep breath and a firm hold on his temper. "I know that it couldn't have been easy for you when I was... away —"

Thea rocked back, her long brown hair shimmering around her shoulders and down her back. "Away?" She laughed. "No. You died. My brother and my father died. I went to the memorial services we held at the house."

Oliver clenched his jaw. "I know."
"No. You don't know. Mom had Walter, Felicity was…” She lifted a shoulder. "And I had no one. You all act like it's cool. Let's forget about the last five years. Well I can't." Her voice wobbled but she kept going. "For me it's kind of permanently in there, so I'm sorry if I turned out some major disappointment. But this? Me? It's the best I could do with what I had to work with."

She whirled around and went back to her friends. "Let's bounce," she said, and the followed, leaving Oliver to stare after them.

They hadn't gone very far when Thea fumbled for her purse, paused to dig around inside it. She looked confused for a moment, but Oliver didn't stay to see what happened next. He didn't care. He shouldered his way through the crowd toward the bar.

Thea was right. Oliver couldn't deny it and he hated it. His death – the death of his father – had changed everyone it touched. It wasn't fair to think he could step in and pretend he was Oliver Queen, dutiful son, brother, and husband when that wasn't at all what he was. Lying to them was cheating them, and sooner or later, when the truth came out as it inevitably would, they'd lose him all over again.

He couldn't do that to them. He wouldn't do it to Felicity. Seeing her expose her fear to him over his vanishing act from Diggle's car drove home the point. He was being a selfish bastard and it needed to stop. Tonight.

Oliver rounded the bar and stopped long enough to push the flap of the trashcan in and dump the drug packet inside. When he looked up, Diggle was only a few feet away. Watching.

The music became nonsensical screeching that seemed to tear at his brain and scrape every nerve. The crowd pressed in tight until it felt like he couldn't move an inch in any direction without bumping into someone. The bodies rolled as one – rising, falling, swelling again – like ocean waves. The stench of perfume, sweat, and booze hung thick in the air as the lights spun and spun and the black-painted walls leaned in.


"Oh!" Felicity gasp as he plowed into her.

Oliver's hands shot out to catch her arms before she could topple. The walls receded. The lights went back to lazy loops around the room. The crowd settled back into a gentle flow as crisp, clean citrus and sunshine teased his nostrils.

"Sorry," he said, easing his grip on her. "I didn't see you."

"That's okay. I was just going to sneak off and get out of all this noise for a few minutes."

"That sounds like a great idea." He slipped his arm around her and guided her toward the exit.

A simple, "I'm Oliver Queen" had the banquet hall employee scrambling to open the door to the atrium where chrome and glass railings framed the escalators that led to the lower lobby. A holographic planet Earth spun high above their heads, encased by the glass dome ceiling and the blackness of the night sky and a billion stars it contained.

Here the music was reduced to a distant rumble, like a storm somewhere beyond the horizon, and the air was cooler.

Felicity let out a relieved sigh as she rested one hand on the chrome railing and wiped a fine sheen of perspiration from her forehead. She tipped her head back. "Oh, that's so much better. Whew. I
couldn't hear myself think in there."

"Yeah. Tommy always knew how to go big."

She chuckled. "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"It's great. The music. The people. It feels good. Like I never left," Oliver lied. Except that his sister was doing drugs, his wife was helping cover it up, he couldn't remember if the blond he'd been talking to at the bar was sane Mandi C or crazy Mandi M, and he'd rather be somewhere — anywhere — than mobbed by hundreds of people who'd really only showed up tonight so they could tell all their friends tomorrow they'd hung out with "that island guy."

He could lose three fingers on his right hand and still be able to count the actual number of people who'd showed up to celebrate the simple fact he was alive.

Felicity shifted closer. "You know. Oliver. About earlier."

"Thea's seventeen, Felicity. She seen couples making out before."

"What? Oh. No! Not that!" She smacked his arm with her purse with a laugh. She sobered just as quickly. "I meant about what you were saying before. I've been thinking about it and I realized I never… We haven't really, I mean, I haven't asked."

Oliver tensed.

"I realized that you might have thought that meant I didn't… I wanted you to know it's not because I don't want to know or that I can't handle it. I can. It's just…" She fiddled with one of the industrial piercings in her ear as she shifted her weight to her other foot and back. "If you ever want to talk to someone about what happened to you… I'm here."

Oliver's cell phone buzzed in his pocket. It buzzed again and he sighed as he reached into his jacket to pull it out.

Felicity shifted. Her gaze dropped away.

Oliver ignored the flashing screen and tapped the alarm cancel button. The screen went dark but he still stared at that screen.

"Something wrong?" Felicity asked.

Lots. He'd set the alarm to remind him of the time, but now that it had gone off, it told him of something else, too. He couldn't do this — couldn't avenge Starling City and have a normal life. He wanted that. He craved it. But it was an illusion. He needed to accept it.

He dropped the phone in his pocket. "I asked someone to do something for me. They didn't do it."

"Oh."

Oliver took half a step back. "Felicity."

God he hated this. He didn't want to do this. It was going to kill him, but she was too close. Wanting her wasn't an excuse for putting her in danger. It wasn't a reason to fool himself into believing there was a future here. It wasn't fair to her and it wasn't right.

Waffling wasn't his style. Since he'd been back, that's all it felt like he'd done. Hell, it was what he was doing. He meant to push her away but ended up pulling her closer. He vowed to let her go, then
somehow found himself telling her he wanted her. He liked the ring on her finger but their marriage couldn't last.

Self-control hadn't been an issue in five damned years. Yet every time he got around her, he had absolutely none.

He didn't want to hurt her, but hurting her seemed the only way to put distance between them. He was too weak when it came to her. He loved her too much. Every time he got too close to her, he gave into what he wanted instead of what he knew they both needed.

But Felicity had pride. Once stung, she wouldn't beg to be bitten again. That distance would allow him close enough to physically protect her until he found out who'd kidnapped them while keeping her emotionally far enough away to make sure she stayed alive. It was a method he'd have to apply rigidly to everyone in his life from here on out.

It was an ugly truth, but then reality usually was.

"You always saw the best in me," Oliver said. "Right now. All of this?" He motioned to her, to the building, to the doors that kept the party at bay. "That's what you're doing. You got scared and I gave in to make you feel better and because I felt guilty."

She slow-blinked

"Now you're looking at me wondering if that island changed me somehow. If it made me a better person." He set his jaw. "It didn't."

It was Felicity's turn to take a step back. "I thought…"

"What? That because we happen to still be married you could dictate how things were going to be? How I was allowed to behave or what I could feel? I'm still the same guy that got on that boat, Felicity" Oliver said, lying again even as every word squeezed his heart and kept on squeezing.

He backed away from her. "Sorry if that sounded harsh, but you wanted me to talk, so I'm talking. Now." He tugged the lapels of his jacket, gave them a brisk tug. "I gotta roll. I've got five years of partying and drinking to catch up on."

Felicity shook her head. "You know what, Oliver?"

He tried not to flinch at the ice in her tone. He deserved it. Every single freaking ounce of it. He braced for it. He did not, however, expect her to close the distance between them with three smooth strides.

Her eyes were cold fire, her voice pure frost that froze him to the bone when she said, "You're wrong. That island did change you. At least now you're honest. So stop apologizing when you don't mean it. Stop pretending to be sorry when you're not. Stop acting like you care about me, this marriage, or whether or not I'm wearing this hideous wedding ring. Because that's not what I want from you."

"Then what the hell do you want?"

"I want you to —" She stopped herself, but it was too late.

"What? Change?"

"That's not what I was going to —"
"Yes, it was. Newsflash, Felicity. This is me. It's always been me. It's never going to change, so quit trying to force it. Now, you can either come back inside with me or you can go home. It's up to you."

She released a heavy breath as she passed her purse to her other hand. "Then I guess I'll go home. I think I've had all the…celebration… I can stomach for one night."

Oliver let her go. Not because he wanted to, but because he had to. Every clip of her high heels against the marble floor felt like a bullet in the chest.

He accepted the pain because he deserved it. Because he knew he was strong enough to survive it. When she was gone, Oliver glanced over his shoulder, expecting and finding his babysitter's disapproving glower.

Oliver cleared his throat as he headed toward the other man. He buttoned the single button of his jacket. It was hard to look composed and unaffected in the wake of his public jackassery, and Oliver couldn't help but wish John Diggle was a normal guy – a man not trained to shelve the human decency – who'd have turned away and given Oliver a little privacy to pull himself together in the face of abject humiliation. But Diggle wasn't normal, and Oliver couldn't let himself forget that.

Diggle straightened. "Something I can help you with, Sir?"

"Just need a few minutes alone with the Missus."

"I would believe you, Mr. Queen," he said as he slid his hands into his pants pockets, "if you weren't so full of crap." He swept his hand toward the banquet hall doors. "Party's this way."

Oliver managed a thin smile as he reached for the doorknob. He jiggled it, shrugged and stepped back. "It's locked."

Diggle tried it. It twisted easily beneath his palm and the door swung in. The guard started to turn, to obviously question, but Oliver planted a firm foot in the man's ass and shoved him inside, sending him sprawling across the floor. The door swung shut with a bang.

In the few seconds it took for Diggle to roll to his feet, yank the door open, and step into the lobby again, Oliver Queen had done what he did best. He vanished.

~*~

Twenty minutes later, when the Starling City Police Department raided the banquet hall – killing the music and turning on the lights to a chorus of boos – John Diggle was still fuming and mentally cursing Oliver Queen in Pashto for being a spoiled, arrogant, pain in his ass. SWAT gear wasn't exactly proper formal wear, so the instant the cops merged into the crowd, Diggle straightened.

Detective Quentin Lance took the lead, pushing toward the bar and parting the partygoers like Moses and the Red Sea.

"Party's over, kids!" he bellowed. He pointed at the SWAT team members, gestured a sharp left and right. "Search the building roof to basement. Find him!"

Lance moved deeper into the room and, when Tommy Merlyn turned away from the back, let out a snort. "Oh, Mr. Merlyn," he greeted with obvious disdain. His lip actually curled upward. "Imagine
my shock at finding you here. Did you roofie anyone special tonight?"

Tommy laughed and flashed a bright white smile, but his dark eyes sparked anger. The smile faded too slow.

"Detective!" Oliver Queen jogged through the crowd.

Diggle straightened as he mentally backtracked Oliver's path to figure out where he'd come from.

"It's a private party," Oliver told the cop.

Lance flicked his attention away from Tommy to Oliver. "Yeah, well, there was an incident across the street at Adam Hunt's building tonight. You know anything about that?"

"Who's Adam Hunt?"

"He's a millionaire bottom feeder, and I'm kind of surprised you aren't friends."

Oliver shrugged. "I've been out of town for… awhile."

"Yeah. Well. Hunt just got attacked by the guy with the hood." He ticked a finger at Oliver. "The guy that saved your ass the other day."

"The hood guy?"

The cop nodded. "Took out most of Hunt's guards and pretty much leveled his office before he jumped out the top floor window and swung away."

Oliver frowned. "Swung away like… Tarzan?"

"That's right. And guess where he landed?" Lance pointed straight the ground. "Right here. On the roof of this very building."

"Wow. You know what? To help you find him? I'm gonna offer a reward." Oliver turned to the crowd, raised his hand to draw their attention as he called out, "Hey, everybody!" He flashed two fingers. "Two million dollars to anybody who can find a nutbar in a green hood!"

The cheer that went up was deafening and more like, Diggle decided, Oliver Queen has launched a bizarre scavenger hunt than tacked a bounty on some murderous whackadoodle in a hoodie. The rich and powerful, he mused as watched Quentin Lance and Oliver Queen literally stand toe to toe. They were their own special edition freak show.

"I see your wife isn't here, joining you on this fine evening to celebrate your resurrection," Lance said. "What's the matter, Queen? Trouble in paradise? The little woman realizing maybe she was better off with your smug, self-entitled ass lost on Fantasy Island?"


The cops disappeared back into the crowd, but Diggle – unlike the party guests – didn't watch their departure. He watched Oliver. Maybe it was the twirling lights, maybe it was his imagination, but he could have sworn he saw a darkness wash over the man's face. Grief cracked that smartass billionaire playboy exterior, letting the shadow of loss and pain seep through. Diggle had seen that look before. Haunted souls with wounds no one could see and that never really healed. Then it was gone. The
smooth, shiny veneer morphed back into place with a flex of Oliver Queen's shoulders, a cocky tilt of his head as a smile curved his mouth and he bound up the stage steps.

"It's way too quiet in here!" Oliver yelled to the crowd as he lifted his arms away from his sides. "This is a party!"

The music kicked back to life as the crowd cheered and screamed, toasting the sentiment with drinks that never seemed to stop flowing. Diggle rested his elbow against the bar and rubbed his mouth as he watched Oliver descend the steps again.

Tommy Merlyn met him at the bottom. The host, who seemed to always wear a cocksure grin, wasn't smiling now. Diggle was too far away, the music too loud, to hear him when Tommy said, "Some coincidence. You asking to have your party here and Hunt getting robbed right next door, and by the same guy who rescued you and Felicity at the warehouse?"

"If I were you, Tommy?" Oliver patted his shoulder. "I'd just be glad to be alive."

Tommy eyed him. "What happened to you on that island?"

"A lot."

The two men stared at each other until Oliver turned and walked away, leaving Tommy staring after him.

Diggle followed, of course, partly because he was paid to, and partly because his client suddenly didn't fit with the crowd. It was, he decided, the first interesting thing about Oliver Queen he'd seen since taking this job.

~*~

This time, when Oliver climbed the steps of the Queen home to his floor and turned the corner in the hallway, Felicity was not waiting at his door. He doubted she ever would again.

His steps turned leaden. The heart he swore had turned to stone long ago ached hard enough to make him rub his chest. When he reached the bedroom door, he didn't open it. His hand rested on the knob but wouldn't turn it. Oliver sighed, part acceptance, part fatigue, and let his head drop forward until his forehead thumped against the hard wood.

He felt it tonight. Every day, every mile… Every scar and hurt and injury sustained over the last five years. They piled high inside him like rocks that threatened to never let him move again.

Eyes closed, Oliver long, low, slow breath. For five years the thought of returning home – of returning to Felicity – had kept him alive. Her picture, one of the few things to survive the wreck of the Queen's Gambit, had been his lifeline, not only to that home, but to sanity.

He'd used it as a touchstone to remind himself there was something to live for. Something worth the suffering, worth riding out every new torture, every new wound. He'd used it as something solid to hold onto and fight for in a wasteland that could drive a man to put a gun barrel in his mouth and seriously want to pull that trigger.

Oliver still wasn't sure if his inability to blow his brains out meant he was strong or simply a coward.
Either way, Felicity had become his hope and humanity. His guilt and regret. She was a tangible to
fight for. An ethereal to dream about.

Survive. It was as simple as that, and her picture had become hope in a place completely devoid of it.

And it was all a lie.

Oliver's throat drew tight, hurt as if he'd choked down shards of broken glass. Only a few days back
and he'd taken a sledgehammer to that connection reduced it to rubble. He'd destroyed it. Destroyed
her. On purpose and with cold, detached calculation.

Tears dampened his eyes and Oliver clenched his jaw hard, pressed his lips until the edge of his teeth
cut them. It had to be done because he couldn't let it go on like this. He couldn't let her continue to be
that hope for him. Wouldn't let her stand in the fire simply because he was back to that weak,
sniveling boy in a cave, gun trembling against his front teeth, unable to find the strength to pull the
goddamned trigger and end it.

Oliver inhaled sharply, trembling. He would not listen to the hope in Felicity's voice that said she
believed, one day, she'd get through enough to save him.

But he didn't need saving.

Felicity needed to know that. She needed to accept it. So he'd stripped off her blinders, and her
innocence, and ground her face in the stark reality of who he was and who he would always be.

He didn’t want her help, or her pity, or her tenderness. He didn't want her. And he didn't need saving
because there was nothing inside him worth saving anymore.

Oliver screwed his eyes shut tighter. His body ached. His soul – the tiny scrap that was left, anyway
– withered even more. There wasn't pain as much as there was numbness now. That was probably
the most frightening thing.

Anger, he could deal with. Pain was fuel. But the nothingness? The bitter, burning cold? What was
he supposed to do with that? The frigid chill had wormed its way inside him the day the life raft
touched the island shore. Every day after felt like a constant war to keep it from consuming him. It
was a battle he was losing. So much so that, when he saw his own reflection, he saw little of the man
who once was and far too much of the monster he was becoming.

Oliver flexed his fingers on the doorknob, squeezed it hard enough he swore he'd dent the metal. On
the island he'd never needed to suppress those dark urges. If anything, he'd given them free reign
because he needed them. They were everything. They were life and death and survival. But now?
Now he had to hide them. He needed to keep them in that deep, black, seemingly bottomless cavern
with him where secrets were buried and dangerous impulses prowled.

The problem was they didn't want to stay there. The beast inside wouldn't let them. Those forces
escaped when Oliver least expected. Reared up when he least wanted. They crept into his mind
during even the most mundane moment, wanting to react, to strike, to take before someone could
take from him. They commanded he claim and destroy, ravage and burn.

And kill.

Oliver opened his eyes without really seeing the door in front of him. Oh, yes. They wanted blood,
and he'd given them blood. He'd killed and he knew he'd kill again.

Tonight he'd let those forces loose on the one person he swore to cherish. He'd let them savage
Felicity – the one innocent person caught up in a storm of innocence – not to kill, but to save. Salvation through savagery.

He scoffed as he straightened. Well didn’t that just make him a goddamn fucking hero.

Oliver shoved the door open, not caring that he pushed too hard or that it banged into the wall. He reached for the light switch.

"Oliver?" Moira called out from behind him.

He hung his head on a sigh before he straightened and turned to face her as she approached. "Mom," he said as he faked a small smile. "What are you doing up? I thought you'd be in bed hours ago."

"Late night conference call with Beijing. You're home early."

"It's two a.m."

"Like I said…"

He nodded.

They fell silent for several beats. Finally, Moira motioned to the steps. "Did you want something to eat? I can have Raisa —"

"It's two a.m.," Oliver repeated.

"Oh. Right." She twisted her fingers together, pulled them apart before smooth her hands over her hips. "I feel like I'm doing everything wrong here. Someone needs to write the Dummies Guide To Parenting A Shipwreck Survivor."

"Mom —"

"I know my relationship with Walter was a shock for you. I tried to find a way to go on living after losing you and your father. And now…" She flapped her hands. "No I feel like you want me to choose between you and Walter —"

"Mom," Oliver said again. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I don't want you to choose."

She took the contact as an opening to hug him. Maybe it was, Oliver thought as he hugged her back. Maybe he needed the comfort and contact too. Maybe the magical powers of Mom would ease the hollow ache of loss.

Moira patted his back before she drew back and offered him a smile tinged with reluctant hope. "I think Walter and I would like it if you came by the company tomorrow. You'll like the new offices."

"I'm sure I will." His sigh was weary as he rubbed his eyes. "I'm gonna turn in. Get some sleep. It's been a long couple of days."

"Of course. Of course." She cupped his face and kissed his cheek. "We'll talk more later. Sleep well, Oliver."

He nodded even though he knew he wouldn't. Once she was gone, he went into his room and closed the door behind him. He didn't bother with the wall switch. The faint moonlight that spilled the gap between the curtains was enough to allow him to maneuver across the room to the desk.

A click of the mouse pulled the monitor out of sleep mode. A few taps on the keyboard brought up
all the screens and confirmations he needed. Adam Hunt's forty million dollars was gone, stripped from his account and redistributed to the hundreds of people he'd swindled.

By the blue glow of the monitor, Oliver opened the center desk drawer and removed the notebook. He rifled through the pages until he found the one he wanted, then struck Adam Hunt's name off the list with the bold swipe of a pen.

This, he vowed returning the book to the drawer and sliding it shut, was only the beginning. Tomorrow was another day. Another name. Another chance to balance the scales in Starling City.

Felicity said the island changed him. She had no idea how much. There were many more names on the list. Those who ruled his city by intimidation and fear.

Every last one of them would wish he'd died on that island.

Oliver stripped the suit jacket off and tossed it on the bed, undid the buttons at his wrists, started to work the ones on the shirtfront as he headed for the bathroom. Right now all he wanted was a shower hot enough to chase the chill from his blood and wash the grime of the day – of his choices – off of him.

He flipped the bathroom light on and then turned back to the room. It looked different now, though nothing had changed. Or maybe it simply felt different. Oliver pulled the shirttail free of pants, worked the belt loose. Everything was neat and tidy. Perfectly staged. Like some glossy picture in those home and garden magazines his mother often thumbed through. It was clearly as fake, Oliver realized. An entire room for show. It wasn't him. It was a façade. Another illusion. Another way to trick people into seeing one thing while another went on right beneath their nose.

For those people the room was normalcy. For him, it was simply another prison. It had prettier trappings but it was still a prison. One of his making this time.

Oliver started to turn away when light flickered in his peripheral, making him stop. He tipped his head as the tiny glitter winked in the shadows again. He moved toward it slowly, came to a stop next to the nightstand and bed.

Turned out he was wrong. Felicity had been here tonight.

Oliver bent to pluck the ring from the nightstand. The diamond twinkled between his fingertips. As farewell gestures went, this one was pretty complex. It was surrender and defeat. It was Fuck Off, You Win, and I'm Done all rolled into one. But the message was the cleanest Oliver had ever seen.

Felicity didn't want the promises it represented when he'd put it on her finger, nor did she want reminder of the vows she'd made him when she accepted it. She didn't want it anymore. She didn't want him.

Oliver went to drop it in the trashcan but stopped himself. He shifted the band between his fingers, watched the light flicker and spark within the large, flawless icy stone. Color, cut, clarity, and carats. The big 4Cs, the jeweler who'd sold it to him promised.

The diamond flickered again and Oliver slide it over the tip of his middle finger, whipped around, and flicked it away. The ring cut through the air, a shooting star in the dark, before it crashed back to earth, pinged off the wall, hit the dresser top, bounced, and landed in the leather coin tray there.

He'd donate it tomorrow. Find some bell-ringer on a street corner and drop it in the bucket. Let it be someone else's future now.
Minutes later, Oliver stepped – naked – into the large shower stall. Hands braced against the stone wall, he shoved his head under the pounding flow of hot, hot water, letting it beat against his shoulders and back as the thunderous sound deafened him to everything except the lone, grief-stricken wail of the beast within.

~*~

Lucan Holbrook preferred the dark. Night made it easier to move, easier to operate and hide things that needed to remain hidden. He paused at the top of the terrace, scanned the gloom of the shadows for figures and shapes that shouldn't be there. Habit had him unzipping his jacket and slipping a hand beneath the black leather jacket to touch the gun holstered to his side.

The massive stone house stood silent behind him – and oppressive overseer. The windows stayed black and empty. Nothing moved, not even the wind through the ivy vines that had slithered and crawled along the exterior, reaching up to the roofline and down and around the railings.

Satisfied, he made his way quickly down the steps to the landing at the bottom. "The police failed to identify the men I hired to kidnap Oliver," he announced as he left the stair," and they never will." He glanced around the grounds again, slid his hands into his coat pockets. "Should we arrange another abduction?"

"No," Moira Queen said as she rested her gloved hands against the cement banister and surveyed the misty gardens spread out before her. She set her mouth firm. "There are other ways of finding out what my son knows."

Read More About the Olicity Challenge
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Oliver's lies take an unexpected toll, Felicity finds herself drawn into a mystery, and Thea makes an observation that just might change everything.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on June 27 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

Moira Queen had always been an early riser. Overseeing the world as ruled by Queen Consolidated was a task she took seriously, from negotiating corporate deals and organizing charity fundraisers, to chairing Starling City's Women's Foundation and sub-chairing no less than three foundations for children, including Starling City for Children, Children of Starling, and Starling City Services for Families and Children. Yet, somehow, she still managed to oversee the house, keep tabs on one currently wayward daughter, and apparently notice when her son – freshly returned from the dead – not only missed breakfast, but also managed to duck his bodyguard. Again.

Oliver winced as Moira's voice – tight and terse – echoed in the foyer. She was too far away but, having spent the first twenty-some years of his life under the same roof, Oliver knew that tone. That was the you-have-fucked-up-so-bad-I'm-going-to-take-away-your-Porsche-and-this-time-I-mean-it tone.

He shifted the morning newspaper to his other hand, glanced at the headline declaring another "Mysterious Hooded Vigilante" sighting, and headed for the drawing room.

His mother was in full "together" mode – a strategy she'd learned from her mother before her – perfect hair, perfect jewelry, immaculate beige suit, and heels high enough to even the psychological, if not physical, ground between her and her opponent. She stood at the fireplace, her back to the room, her hand braced against the mantel as she glared into the fire that had already been lit to ward off the chill of the morning.

Oliver hesitated in the hallway. Oh yeah. He knew this setup. His father used to start man lectures in that position. Oliver tipped his head, trying to see who else was in the room. Usually he was the recipient of such lectures, but given Thea's behavior at the party the other night, it wouldn't surprise him if his sister was following in these unfortunate footsteps too.

Moira dropped her hand and turned. It wasn't a sharp turn but a slow one. Oliver winced. Clearly her anger had moved beyond the eruption phase into the slow boil of sarcasm and calculation.

"I hired you," Moira said as she moved away from the fireplace to the other side of the room, "to
protect my son."

Oliver groaned and leaned his shoulder against the wall.

"Now, I'm not a professional bodyguard," she continued, "but it seems to me that the first requirement would be managing to stay next to the man you're hired to protect."

Oliver grimaced. Ah, yes. There was the sarcasm. He leaned forward enough to glimpse the bodyguard.

Diggle stood as he always did – tall and square – his hands in the pockets of his black suit pants. His jacket was unbuttoned, an uncommonly relaxed state, but his tie was perfect and straight and tightly knotted. His eyes, however, turned toward the ceiling as if he'd discover patience there. He took a deep breath. "With all due respect, ma'am, I never had a client who didn't want my protection."

Moira came back to him with solid, measured steps. She angled her chin upward. "I hired you. That makes me the client."

Diggle's jaw tightened.

She dismissed him with a simple turn. She folded her arms across her chest, paced out another three steps – a technique used to give her opponent a few seconds to appreciate their predicament and decide truth was the smarter option than lies – before she faced him again. She arched a brow.

"Now. Where do you think my son is going on these chaperonless excursions?"

To his credit, John Diggle didn't even blink. "Ma'am, I truly do not know."

"Annnnd he truly doesn't," Oliver said as he entered the room. He tossed the newspaper onto the table.

"Then perhaps you'd like to share with me, you know," Moira said, "where it is you run off to."

Oliver laughed as he shuffled awkwardly. There weren't many lies he could tell that would explain these absences without creating more questions. Except one that no mother wanted to pry into. He slid his hands into his pockets. "I've been alone for five years."

Moira sighed. She closed her eyes for a moment. The sarcasm vanished from her voice, leaving behind a strained patience when she said, "I know that, Oliver, but —"

"Mom."

She stopped.

He gave her The Look, kept purposeful eye contact, and repeated, slower, "Alone."

Diggle looked away.

Moira blinked. "I thought you and Felicity were…"

He shook his head. "No. That's…" A fantasy. A selfish desire he'd allowed himself to believe he could keep while facing the ugly realities of what had to be done. Yeah. He'd taken a flamethrower to that last night by purposefully leaning on Felicity's fears, by repeating the same behavior and attitude that had pushed her away the last time. It was like pulling the pin on a grenade and lobbing it straight into her heart. Now there was no going back. It was just… "Done."

Moira nodded slowly. "I see."
"But I promise to introduce you to her if it ever gets to the…" Oliver made a vague gesture. "Exchange first names stage."

"No. What I'd rather," she said as she crossed to him, "is that you promise to take Mr. Diggle with you on your next rendezvous. It's not safe."

Oliver frowned and started to argue.

Her expression tightened. Her voice hardened. "You've already been abducted once. There's a maniac out there hunting the wealthy."

"That maniac saved my life."

"This isn't a game," she ground out, her voice thickening with emotion and looming tears. "I lost you once and I am not going through that again."

Staying true to Man Code, Diggle looked down, as if not looking directly at female during tearful emotional outbursts saved them from the manipulative power. Like avoiding being turned to stone by avoiding Medusa's gaze.

But Oliver did look. He did see the tears. He saw the fear. And, unlike Polydectes, he was not made of granite.

He couldn't avoid hurting Felicity. That needed to be done to protect her. It had been the right thing. She could still have a normal life. Be with a normal man. But his mother? His sister? They weren't going anywhere. They couldn't. They were blood. That meant they would always be in his life and, right now, under the same roof, in the same house. He had to find a way to make it work. If that meant allowing Diggle to shadow him, he'd do that. There were other ways to deal with the guard than blatant ditching. He just had to be more creative.

"Okay," Oliver said, nodding gently. He looked to the other man. "Dig's my guy."

Moira swallowed. Those tears still glistened. "Thank you," she said in that way only mother's could manage that somehow made you feel even lower and more ungrateful.

As she departed, Diggle rubbed his mouth as he sighed. Oliver wasn't sure if it was because he'd witnessed the legendary Oliver Queen reduced to little boy status by his mom or because the guard didn't buy shit coming out of his mouth. Either option wasn't pleasant.

Oliver offered him a small smile. "Sorry to give you so much grief."

"I served three tours in Afghanistan, Mr. Queen, you don't even come close to my definition of grief." Diggle said as he buttoned his jacket. He strode across the room to his side, his steps smooth and fluid. He paused next to him. "But I'll tell you what. You ditch me one more time? No one will have to fire me."

More eye contact. More Man Code in the form of a mutual head nod of understanding. Then the guard was gone, crossing the threshold as Thea breezed in.

Oliver frowned at his sister. Though she was dressed for school, her shirt wasn't tucked in, her tie wasn't tied, and her jacket was missing. "Aren't you supposed to be at school?"

She barely glanced at him as she dragged her hair back into a ponytail and secured with several loops of a black elastic band. "Overslept. I'm getting a ride in." She glanced at the newspaper on the table. "Geez, this guy again? He runs around putting arrows in people. What's the fascination?"
"I know. He gets more press than the Kardashians."

"Five years on an island and you still know who they are?"

"I've been catching up."

She snorted as she grabbed her backpack from the floor next to the couch. She went to sling it over her shoulder but stopped. Her eyes widened. "Oh. Did you..." She plunked it on the table and caught the zipper tab. "Did you want to search this? Maybe pickpocket this stash too? Feel free. I mean, it won't do you much good because tonight? I'm going to go out, find somewhere loud and smoky, and get drunk instead."

It was designed to hurt. Oliver knew that. But that didn't stop the taunt from delivering that stinging combination of truth laced with guilt.

"Thea..." Oliver pressed his lips together as he approached.

How was he supposed to lecture her when he'd done exactly the same crap at her age? How was he supposed to convince her that lashing out might hurt their mother, might hurt him, sure, but that, in the end, she'd be the one to pay the price? How was he supposed to explain that when that moment of implosion came — if she was lucky, truly lucky — no one else would get caught in her blast radius. Because that? That couldn't be undone with a simple apology. It dug into the soul and it stayed there, and someone — someone like Quentin Lance — was always there to feed it and keep it alive.

Oliver had returned to save the city from his father's mistakes. How the hell could he do that if he couldn't even save his own sister?

He stopped at the other end of the couch and curled his hands into fists in his pockets. "You think this is what dad would want for you?"

"Dead people don't want anything. It's one of the benefits of being dead."

"I was dead. And I wanted a lot."

Thea rolled her eyes as she pulled her blazer from the back and tugged it on. She flipped the end of her ponytail from beneath the collar before she started to knot her tie. "Except for your family. You've been home a week and all you do is avoid mom, ignore Walter, and judge me." She tipped her head, gave the tie a smart tug before dropping her hands to her hips. "Do you even want to talk about Felicity? You know. Your wife? Or maybe I should call her your ex since I heard you tell Mom you were out whoring around last night."

Oliver shifted his jaw.

"That certainly didn't take long, did it," she continued. Her voice hardened and her eyes flashed. "Maybe you should have given her that stupid rock and tried to reconnect with her. I hoped that you... but you haven't changed, Ollie. So don't you dare come back here and dictate how we behave. You don't get to tell us how to live." She shook her head and zipped her bag shut with a quick tug. "I guess Felicity was right. There's no point telling you anything. You know everything. You're always right. It's everybody else that's screwed up. Though I didn't think you'd ever cheat on Felicity. Maybe that's why she and Tommy —"

"Thea!" Felicity's voice cracked through the room like a whip, making both the younger girl and Oliver snap around on reflex.

Felicity stood, framed, in the doorway, looking like someone had just slapped her. Her eyes were
wide behind her glasses, her face too pale, and her lips bloodless. The simple, belted, gray dress she wore seemed to leech all the color from her except the high pink flush of her cheeks. And her eyes… Oliver tried to search them but she wouldn't look at him. The stack of files she held against her chest seemed more like armor than simple paperwork and drew attention to the rapid rise and fall of her breasts beneath the fabric.

Thea glanced at Oliver, back at Felicity before taking half a step toward her. "Felicity…"

"It's getting late." She adjusted her glasses with a hand that trembled. "We need to go. I have contracts to get back to the office for Walter. Please go to the car and wait for me."

Thea didn't argue. She didn't look at Oliver either as she grabbed her bag, swept her shoes from the floor, and darted out of the room. A few seconds later the front door slammed.

Silence crushed down.

Felicity's gaze flicked up to meet his briefly before falling away again. Breath punched out of Oliver's lungs. He closed his eyes and dropped his head. Fuck. She'd been in the house. She'd heard. Not just what Thea had said. Not just what he'd said… She'd heard it all. His argument with Moira, his disagreement with Diggle. His bullshit claim of nameless sex. His verbal piss on his marriage. His dismissal of Felicity as a goddamned human being.

Oliver squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Felicity."

"I don't care."

Her quiet declaration brought his head up. She was looking at him now, her expression neutral, her eyes dim. She didn't look angry. She didn't look upset. She didn't even look sad. She just looked tired. Oliver stepped toward her. "I'm—"

"Don't." She retreated that same step and hugged the files tighter as if they were some kind of armor. "Just… don't. I don't want to do this right now. I have work. Tell Walter I'll have the contracts ready for him when he comes to the office later. I'll also call the attorney and have him draw up dissolution papers. I'll keep them simple. I don't want anything from you."

Oliver flinched as if she'd cut him. He had to curl his fingers into his palms to keep from reaching for her. "This isn't how I wanted things to end."

"Funny," Felicity said as walked away from him, "it's exactly how everyone told me it would."

~*~

From the moment they stepped out into Sterling City society as an official couple, Felicity and Oliver's lives were not their own. The women who'd lusted after Oliver either envied Felicity and loved her or were instantly jealous of her and hated her. Websites tracked their movements, posting photos of them around town and calculating a Hot Or Not ranking based on analysis of their latest PDAs.

Most weeks Felicity ranked above most of Oliver's previous girlfriends, though she never could crack the perfect ten of that Russian model he dated for an entire weekend. The gossip sites accredited her popularity to the shifting image of the modern woman. She hit all the categories:
younger than Oliver by several years, educated, employed, and normal. No blue blood in her family tree; only blue collar. She was average. The girl next door who somehow caught the rich boy's eye.

They were, Mimi Maldonato declared in her gossip column, the closest thing Starling City would get to its own personal version of Prince Charles and Lady Diana. The tabloids touted them as some non-Hollywood version of Brad and Angelina, going so far as to mish-mosh their names into a cutesy online handle 'Olicity' that even Larry King knew.

To some she was the beauty and brains that tamed Oliver's beast; domesticating his wild streak and moving him toward a stronger, more mature and successful man. To others she was a manipulative, gold-digging whore. Some wanted to see their relationship succeed while others counted the days til they'd crash and burn just so they could dance on the ashes and sing the I Told You So song.

Paparazzi would stalk her to the local convenience store just to snap pictures of her before trying to bribe the clerk into telling them what she bought. Meanwhile Oliver couldn't even shake hands with another woman without the tabloids announcing that a secret love child was on the way and that Felicity had dumped him.

It was a never-ending barrage of media hell. But when she and Oliver were alone… When they closed the door and shut out all the craziness… She was just Felicity. He was just Oliver. They were just in love. Crazy, illogical, impractical, inconvenient, all-consuming Love.

It didn't matter what anybody else thought. It didn't matter how many people warned her he was a charming playboy looking for something different and who would wander on to the next sparkly thing once he got bored. Felicity trusted him. She knew that – no matter how quirky, unpredictable, awkward, or cerebral she was – he looked at her like she was the most beautiful, intriguing thing he'd ever seen.

He challenged her. She grew with him and found that she loved those dares. Suddenly her life wasn't about her boring cubicle but about the whirlwind of fun and impulsiveness that demanded she leave logic behind and color outside the lines for once.

She was a better version of herself with him, just as she liked to believe Oliver was with her. She felt bolder and more confident. Days weren't just days. They were adventures she embraced without fear because Oliver was always by her side. Because they were partners.

She liked the version of herself she was with him. It felt like forever since she'd seen her. She missed her.

She missed Oliver.

She missed being that Olicity.

What the hell had happened to them?

A car honked behind her, yanking Felicity out of the past and slamming her back into the reality of the driver's seat. She automatically pressed on the gas pedal. The engine revved, but the car didn't move. Grumbling, she shifted out of neutral and rolled through the intersection.

Next to her, Thea rested her temple against the fist she'd propped against the door. Her other hand fiddled with the strap of the backpack in her lap, twisting the strip of material around her finger, letting it slide free, twisting again. She sighed and slanted Felicity a sideways glance. "Why do men suck?"

Felicity frowned. "What? Men don't suck."
"They suck. They suck and they're stupid." Thea's mouth tightened and her gaze veered out the side window. She released a harsh breath. "And I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"What I said at the house. I should have kept my mouth shut. I lost my temper. I didn't realize you weren't in the office with Walter anymore. I should have —"

"Thea."

The younger woman went back to twisting the strap. This time she wound it so tight it turned her fingertip white.

Without taking her attention off the traffic, Felicity reached over and covered her hand, stilling it. "What's happening with me and Oliver isn't your fault. It isn't anybody's fault."

Thea gaped at her. "Are you kidding me? How can you say that? Oliver cheated on you!" She paused and cocked her head. "Wait. Is that what happened? Is that why Oliver left with Dad on the Queen's Gambit? Did he cheat on you?"

"Thea."

"I mean, I know what the papers and stuff said back then. I was twelve, but I still remember. Is that why you fought? You found out —"

"Thea!" Felicity sighed and rubbed her forehead. "This really isn't something we should be talking about."

The teenager shoved her backpack off her lap. It hit the floorboard with a thud and she kicked it away from her foot as she folded her arms tight across her chest. "Because I'm a kid, right? Because I couldn't possibly understand."

"No. Because Oliver is your brother and you love him and what happened between us is…"

She rolled her eyes. "Adult."

Surprised, Felicity glanced at her. "No. It's just really complicated."

"I'm almost eighteen, Felicity. My dad is dead. My brother is back from the dead. My mom is —"

"Okay."

"My entire life is complicated. I think I can handle —"

"Okay," she said again, stronger this time. Felicity took a deep breath and gripped the wheel. "Let me be very clear about this. Oliver never cheated on me, Thea. Ever."

"How can you know that after what he —"

"Because I knew him. I trusted him. Because…" A sudden lump clogged her throat, making it hard to talk. Felicity leaned back in her seat. How did she explain the trust that came with love? How did one quantify the simple knowing that Oliver loved her and respected her so he would never hurt her that way?

Oliver Queen had done a lot of dumb things growing up, but he wasn't cruel. He was a good man under all that bullshit bad boy crap society seemed to love so much. But he'd never once hurt her.
Not on purpose. Not until that day on the docks.

Felicity forced that lump down. "Because I loved him and he loved me. He never cheated. That's not your brother."

"He liked to party. He liked woman. I was twelve, Felicity. Not blind."

"I know."

"And Mom always said he wasn't very discriminating."

Felicity cringed.

"Sorry. That didn't come out right." Thea picked at the hem of her skirt. "Was it something else then? Was it… Did you…"

Felicity braked for a red light. Tension crept into her shoulders, up into her neck. "Are you asking me if I cheated?"

Thea turned red. "Sorry. It's none of my business. I shouldn't have asked."

"I need you to understand something, and I need you to really hear me," Felicity waited until the girl met her eye. "I never slept with Tommy Merlyn."

The red flush of her face stained deeper. Her jaw dropped. "Oh my God! I didn't ask—"

"But you wondered." The light changed and Felicity checked the intersection before driving on. "I can't blame you, I guess. Tommy and I spent a lot of time together after…" she trailed off.

After. That's how life seemed best described. Everything before the yacht went down seemed like a different life. Everything after was some strange, twisted stasis that still didn't seem quite real.

Felicity checked Thea's reaction, but the girl's gaze was downcast. "Tommy and I are just friends," Felicity said. "I would never do that."

Thea shrugged. "I don't even know why you care what Oliver thinks at this point."

"Forget Oliver. I want you to know. Nothing happened."

"Me?" She fidgeted in the seat, went back to picking invisible lint off her skirt. "Why would I care?"

Felicity fell silent. She tipped her head back and forth as she tapped her thumbs against the wheel.

Thea dropped her head back against the rest with a groan. "Oh, God. Is it that obvious?"

"Well, I'm not a guy, so… yeah."

She covered her face with both hands. Her palms muffled the sound of her moan of humiliation.

Sympathy filled her and Felicity touched her arm. "If it's any consolation, he doesn't have a clue."

Thea groaned again as her hands dropped into her lap. "Terrific. So he's dumb as a box of rocks and totally oblivious to the fact I'm alive. That just makes this day so much better."

"It might be better this way."

"Why? Because he's my brother's best friend? Because I'm just a kid and it's a stupid crush and it'll
fade over time as I get older and realize how dumb I was to every think a guy like Tommy Merlyn could love someone as messed up as me?"

Felicity frowned as she darted a quick look at the road and then Thea. "No. Because Tommy is… Tommy. He's charming and flirty and fun but he runs from commitment fast enough to break a cheetah's land speed record."

Thea laughed even as she nodded her agreement.

"But," Felicity said, emphasizing the single word, "he's a good guy, too. Losing Oliver changed him just like it changed all of us. He was a good friend and I learned a lot about the type of person he really is. I just don't know if he's ready to accept that person yet, and when… if," she corrected quickly, "something happens between the two of you, I don't want you to get hurt."

"You're serious. You're totally okay with the idea that Tommy and I might… ya know."

"Okay, first of all? If you call having sex with someone 'ya know,' then you definitely shouldn't be doing it. Drug stores don't sell 'ya knows' at the counter."

"Felicity!"

"Second, why wouldn't I be okay with it? I like Tommy. I like you. I want you both happy."

"I don't know," Thea murmured as she toyed with the end of her ponytail. "I just thought after what happened today, you'd be telling me to run in the other direction."

"You can't blame an entire gender for what one person in it does. Tommy isn't Oliver."

The look Thea shot her was dry and cynical. "Oh, come on. They've been best friends since kindergarten. They act the same. They do the same stupid things. Tommy was always right there when Oliver was getting into trouble. Hell, half the time I think Tommy talked him into it and Oliver just covered for him when they got caught. They did everything together. Clubs. Drinking. Girls."

The funny thing was, Felicity thought as she turned onto the street that led to Thea's private high school, those habits had changed too after Oliver's death. Oh, Tommy still partied, and drank, and still had a gaggle of pretty, scantily clad women on his arm every night, but losing his best friend changed him. Those changes hadn't gone unnoticed either. In fact, they'd spawned quite a few rumors. Rumors of a serious dry spell.

Not that women weren't willing. Felicity doubted there were many in the city that would kick Tommy out of bed for eating crackers. No. The willing flesh part wasn't the problem. The problem, rumor had it, was Tommy Merlyn.

Everybody had a favorite theory. Some speculated his drinking and past drug use had finally caught up with him. Others figured it was an embarrassing bout of some STD. Still others theorized his abstinence was therapy on the QT to address a secret sex addiction. Whatever the reason, Tommy's lack of action between the sheets had earned him a nickname uttered only behind his back: Merlyn the Monk.

Felicity, however, had suspicions. Oliver's party was a perfect example. Tommy had boasted – loudly and often – that he was going to break his slump. He was a consummate showman. He knew exactly what people wanted and how to give it to them in the biggest, brightest, most dazzling way. Carefully crafted illusion. That was Tommy.

But Felicity had heard afterwards from a friend that all said dry spell breaking Twilight Girl
Wannabe got at the end of the evening was a chaste kiss, a I-had-fun, and cab fare home. Alone.

That made Felicity wonder how much of Tommy's behavior that night – the same behavior he exhibited every night since he'd danced with Thea Queen in the grand ballroom of the Starling City Plaza Hotel on her seventeenth birthday – was real… and how much was carefully constructed to keep anyone from seeing the real man behind the curtain.

It was amazing how one simple moment, like a turn around a dance floor, could change someone's entire perception.

"People change," Felicity murmured.

Thea scoffed. "Everybody tells me I'm too young to be in love."

Felicity checked the side mirror as she flicked the turn signal on. "Yeah, well, I can't throw that particular stone. I wasn't that much older than you when I met Oliver. Besides, I don't know that age dictates a person's ability to love. I think life and experience ages us faster than days on a calendar."

"Are they looking for a poster child for that slogan? Cause you should totally audition."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're not that much older than I am but you act like Mom."

"Excuse me?"

"You go to work. You go home. It didn't used to be like this. You used to be fun."

Stung, Felicity sat up straighter in her seat. "I'm fun. I am still fun."

"We used to do all sorts of things together," Thea reminded her. "We went to the movies. We'd go shopping, get our nails done, get lunch, and just hang out. And then…” She flapped her hand in the air. "Poof. Just like that you stepped back. I remember because I had my first freshman dance and had to shop for a dress with Mom. It was awful. There was a butt-bow involved. I still haven't forgiven you for that."

Felicity pulled into the drop-off zone and put the car in park. Her hand stayed curled around the keys in the ignition. "You're right."

"It was like losing my brother and my sister. I mean, it got better after awhile. You came back but it was…"

"Different," the two women said at the same time.

They looked at each other.

Thea finally looked away. "That's not really fair. I know you were dealing with stuff. I just… I guess a missed you."

And just like that those seventeen years fell away, leaving Thea looking very young and very lost. She was that same little kid who idolized her brother, once asked Felicity if it was true kissing involved tongue, and who barely ate for a week after the Queen's Gambit was lost and cried herself into laryngitis when rescue crews gave up the search.

So many mistakes, Felicity chastised herself. At the time the choices seemed like the right ones but each one was a pebble into the stream, creating ripples no one could have foreseen. And for what?
Everything was still a mess. It was too late to go back, impossible to go forward. She'd made her choices and now she was stuck with them.

Felicity caught herself reaching out to stroke her hair like she used to, then let herself do it anyway. "Oh, Thea," she sighed.

The teenager shrugged. " Doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters. You matter. You always have and I never meant to hurt you. It's just that, sometimes, when things hurt too much, it's easier for me to deal with it by withdrawing. For me, that means burying myself in work. I should have been there for you more."

"You had your own life. I get that."

Life. Felicity wanted to snort. What life? Everything then had been consumed by one thought. Day in, day out. It distracted her when she was awake, obsessed her even in sleep. There was no life, only one simple question: Why?

Thea laced her fingers together in her lap, looked down as she rubbed her thumb across her palm. "I do understand wanting to disappear into something when your own brain is so loud that you can't think. I can't exactly blame you for doing the same thing I did." She offered a crooked smile. "At least you didn't end up high at some nightclub that ratte you out to your mother so she could dump you in rehab."

That rehab, Felicity wanted to point out, had probably saved Thea's life. Instead, she put her hand on the girl's shoulder. "Drugs don't stop the hurt, Thea. They just numb you to everything, including the things that make you want to live."

"I'm not doing drugs."

Felicity waited.

She sighed. "Okay. Fine. I'm not doing it all the time. It's just once in a while. Sometimes I just need to shut everything out and that's the only way —"

"There are other ways."

"Right. Sure. Like filing and typing."

"Find something."

Thea rolled her eyes and turned away.

"I mean it," Felicity said. "I love you, Thea, and I am always here to help you. But I won't lie for you. Neither will Oliver. And I don't want to see you get into a jam you can't get out of. You keep reminding people you're not a kid. That you're almost eighteen. Well, being eighteen comes with a whole new set of problems. One of which is not being a minor anymore, and I really don't think prison orange is your color."

"They says it's the new black."

"Not funny."

Thea shrugged.

"Look, I know that losing Oliver hurt you and I know that I didn't handle things well. But you do
have people who care about you and are here to help you. That's never going to change."

"Right," Thea murmured, "because nobody ever leaves."

"That wasn't Oliver's choice."

"But it was Mom's. You know how she was after Dad and Oliver disappeared." Thea glared at her. "Maybe it's just easier to push people away than to let yourself care about them. What happens after you let them in, huh? They see the real you and they can't stand it."

"There is nothing wrong with you."

"Right. Sure. That's why Mom's always looking at me with that permanent air of disappointment and regret."

"That's not true. Moira loves you."

"She doesn't even know me," Thea shot back. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath as she curled her hands into fists on her thighs. "Felicity, I'm angry all the time. I'm selfish and thoughtless and I do and say things to hurt people when I don't mean to, but sometimes I can't stop myself. Then they're disappointed and hurt and they leave. That's the reality. At least, like this?" She gestured to herself. "I'm ready for it. I can protect myself. And let's face it... I'm doing them a favor by showing them what they need to see so that they can walk away before I really hurt them. Then I can go back to being alone. It's easier to survive that way."

Felicity blinked and slowly sat back. Illusions. Protection. Survival. She frowned. Maybe Tommy wasn't the only one adept as creating personas that kept people from asking too many questions.

The school bell rang and Thea swore under her breath as she leaned forward to peer through the windshield at dark brick building. She made a face. "God, I want to blow this day off. It already sucks." She looked to Felicity. "We could go shopping. You know, get some retail therapy. There's a new Zac Efron movie playing. I know you think he's hot."

"I would actually love to," Felicity said, surprised by how much she meant it. Leave it to the Queens. They all had that innate wild side that somehow became contagious. "Unfortunately I think Walter would be less forgiving with me than Moira would with be you if I ditched and didn't get these contracts filed."

"Ooh, yeah, he'd get all uptight Brit on you. That's never good."

"Rain check?"

Thea grabbed her backpack from the floor. "I'm going to hold you to that."

"Promise?"

"Absolutely."

Thea scrambled out of the car. She slung her pack over her shoulder, went to slam the car door shut, and then paused. She bent down. "You still love Oliver, don't you."

"Sometimes," Felicity said, "I'm not sure I even know him."

Thea offered Felicity a sad, understanding smile. "Look on the bright side. At least he knows you exist."
She slammed the door before darting around the car to the sidewalk, waving to Felicity as she darted up the school steps and disappeared into the building just as the second bell rang.

Felicity sat there a long time before she started the car and pulled back into traffic.

~*~

Queen Consolidated still stood at the heart of the city, a gleaming, thirty-six story high compass of steel and glass. It was still one of the biggest employees in the city, one of the dominant companies in the world. In the last five years it had diversified into everything from transportation and shipping to manufacturing and even electronics, technology, and applied sciences.

As the elevator doors, luminescent panels of amber glass and pieces of art in and of themselves, opened, Oliver was confronted by more steel, more glass, and slabs of green marble. Walter Steele led the way, stepping out of the car and onto the penthouse level that housed the senior executive offices. Oliver followed, his mother at his side, her hand tucked in the crook of his arm. Diggle – the ever present shadow of inconvenience – followed a respectful five steps behind.

"As you can see, Oliver," Walter said, "we've modernized quite a bit."

Oliver figured he was supposed to be impressed, so he whistled. It turned into an sound of appreciation when two shapely, attractive women hurriedly stepped aside for their bosses to pass.

Moira laughed as she leaned closer and put her other hand on his arm. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Yes, I am."

"I remember when your father used to bring you here as a boy," Walter said as turned the corner that led to the CEO's office. He nodded to Felicity, who sat at her desk there, before he pushed the large glass doors open and held it for them to enter. "You were always so excited."

Oliver tried not to look at Felicity as he passed but did anyway. Not that it mattered. She swiveled her chair around, presenting him with her back as she went back to typing. He pretended not to notice. She pretended he was invisible.

Oliver's step faltered as he cleared the doorway. He knew things would be different. Five years was a long time. But knowing and seeing were two different things. Every piece of Robert Queen was gone – the massive, dark carved wood desk, the oil painting above his chair, the bronze horse sculpture he loved so much. All of it. Gone.

Now the office was trim and tight, industrial styled furniture of chrome and black leather replaced the warm, wood antiques. The room was all modern shapes. Modern lines. Oliver lingered on the small table behind the desk and the framed family photographs displayed there. None of them contained Robert Queen but there was one of Moira and Thea with Walter.

Out with the old… Oliver glanced at Walter and Moira. In with the new. He forced a smile. "Dad used to let me drink soda in the office."

"Ahh," Moira said, clearly amused, "so that's why you enjoyed coming."

Walter placed his briefcase on one of the chairs before he moved to stand next to his wife. He
clasped his hands in front of him. "Queen Consolidated's success of late is a result of its targeted diversification. We have been making impressive inroads in cutting edge fields like biotech and clean energy."

"That's neat," Oliver said in a way that clearly said he didn't care. He shifted his attention to the clear glass wall dividing Walter's office from his executive assistant's desk. He raised his hand as he raised his voice and called out, "Excuse me."

Felicity back went ramrod. Her shoulders square. She braced her palm against the edge of her desk and pushed to swivel her chair around to face him.

"Can I get a, uh…" he made a tippy cup motion, "a sparkling water or something cold. Please?"

Felicity's eyes narrowed and for a moment Oliver thought she was going to grab the stapler at her elbow and chuck it at his head. Instead, she stood, stared at him, and walked away.

Moira gestured for him to come closer. "Sweetheart. Oliver. Walter and I have something to discuss with you." She patted the back of one of the leather chairs in the sitting area. "Come. Please sit."

Oliver didn't move. "Mom, it makes me nervous when you ask me to sit down."

Both Moira and Walter stopped. She frowned and darted a quick look at Walter. He clasped his hands behind his back, took a deep breath, and said, "The company is about to break ground on a site for the Applied Science Division, and we would like to honor your father by dedicating the building in his name."

Oliver nodded. "Nice."

"And," Moira said as she stepped forward, drawing Oliver's attention to her, "we'd like to make an announcement at the dedication. That you will be taking a leadership position in the company."

"No."

Moira shook her head as she moved toward him. "No. Your… Your company."

Water splashed against marble and all three turned as Felicity turned red. "Sorry. Sorry," she said as she crouched, the half-empty glass of water still in her hand. She darted a quick look at Oliver, then Diggle who stood only a foot away. Her blush deepened and she scrambled to blot the water from the floor tile with a flimsy paper napkin. "The, uh, glass is… uh… a little slippery."

Moira ignored her. She closed the distance between her and Oliver, but he retreated as many steps. "Oliver —"

"No. I don't want to lead anything," he argued. "Besides, Walter is doing a very good job here."

Moira folded her arms beneath her breasts as she angled her jaw. "Everyone here understands that this transition is really difficult for you."
Oliver tilted his head to the side. Just a bit. "Thank you, Walter." He paused. "Which part though? Everyone fantasizing that I got my MBA while on the island? Or the fact that my father's CFO now sleeps down the hall from me?"

Felicity stood.

Walter's shoulders sagged.

Moira shook her head and walked away.

Damn it. Oliver closed his eyes and let his head drop.

His mother only made it a few steps before she turned back. "You know, five years ago you're irresponsibility was somewhat charming. It is a lot less so now."

Felicity hurried out of the way as Moira swept toward the doors, then through them, leaving Walter to follow only a few steps behind. She seemed to realize she still held the glass because she set it on the side table next to her. As she wiped her damp hand off on her skirt, she glanced at Diggle. "Would you bring Mr. Queen's car around, please? I believe he'd like to leave now."

Diggle hesitated, but when Oliver gave him a faint nod, he exited. The glass door swung shut behind him, leaving the office silent.

Oliver moved. He couldn't stay still any longer. He dragged his hand over his head, down his neck, to hook around its back as he prowled the width of the room to the windows. He braced his hands against the ledge and stared down at the city but he didn't see it. All he saw was the ghost of himself in the glass. "Don't ask me to apologize."

"I wasn't going to."

"I suppose you think she's right." He raised his head and stared out at the bridge and the harbor that lay beyond it. "You think I owe it to my father's memory to join the company. Take my rightful place on the throne."

"I didn't say that."

"But you were thinking it. Everyone's thinking it."

"Since when have you ever cared what anyone thought?"

He faced her, leaned back until the windowsill pressed hard against his spine. He folded his arms over his chest. "You know, after five years on the island, I have plans. I have things I have to do. I can't do that if I'm..."

"Attending board meetings and stockholder briefings," she finished for him. She shot a quick look at the glass doors before she reached up to fiddle with one of her earrings. "Everybody lives with expectations, Oliver. It doesn't mean you have to live your life to please other people. You have to do what's best for you. What you can live with. You have that right."

He blew out a breath and let his head thud back against the glass. "Maybe that should go in a memo to my mother."

"Maybe you should try being who you are and let people figure out the rest for themselves."

Oliver let his head lull sideways. His brows pulled together. "Why are you being nice to me?"
"So you won't suspect I spit in your water."

He laughed, the sound of it echoing loud in the office. It turned into a groan as he rubbed his hands over his face. "This is not how I wanted this to go. Any of this. I expected something… different."

"Expectations are funny things. A friend reminded me of that today. What's the saying? 'Expecting is my favorite crime. Disappointment my punishment.' Maybe it's time we all stopped punishing ourselves and started really looking at reality."

Something in her words, in her tone, made Oliver uneasy. He lowered his hands to the sill. "What reality is that?"

Before she could answer, the phone on the desk buzzed. She crossed to it and pressed one of the buttons. "Yes, Mr. Steele?"

"I need to see you in the conference room, Ms. Smoak," the Brit said, his voice flowing from the speaker. There was a heartbeat of silence. "Alone, please."

Felicity darted a quick look at Oliver. "Yes, Sir." She released the button as Oliver straightened. She grabbed a pad of paper and a pen from the desk. "Mr. Diggle should have your car ready downstairs. I can have security walk you to the door if you'd like."

"I think I'm safe getting from here to the front door."

She nodded and hurried to the door.

"Felicity."

She glanced over her shoulder.

"You never said what the truth was."

She studied him, seemed to search his face for something before she said, "I don't know. But you know me, Oliver. I hate mysteries." She yanked the door open. "They always need to be solved."

She left, leaving the door to swing shut softly behind her, and leaving Oliver with the distinct impression he'd just been warned.

~*~

Walter Steele could run the world from anywhere. All he needed was a laptop and a WiFi hotspot. Something, Felicity realized as she entered the conference room and hurried around long table toward him, they had in common. Of course Walter stayed within strict ethical guidelines while conducting his business. She, on the other hand, had been known to bend a law or two in her cyber pursuits.

She took in the papers and laptop and ledger books scattered across the table around him before she checked her watch. "Uh oh. Someone forgot their lunch appointment with their wife."

"Slight change of plans," Walter said. He removed his glasses and set them aside. "Something came up that needed immediate attention, so I sent Moira ahead. The restaurant is holding our table."
"Is something wrong?"

He leaned forward to rest his elbows on the edge of the table. "Compliance Department's tagged something. Two-point-six million dollar withdrawal from one of our Vancouver subsidiaries."

When he nodded toward one of the files, Felicity picked it up. He waited while she opened it and skimmed the first past. Shit. Shit, damn, and crap. Her hand trembled as she turned the page. She moistened her lips. "Do you… Are you saying someone embezzled two-point-six million dollars from the company?"

Walter loosened his gold tie. "It's probably a bookkeeping error but Compliance is understandably worried about an IRS audit."

"Of course. You don't just lose millions of dollars."

"No. You don't." He stood. "That's why I need you to look into this for me."

Felicity almost dropped the file. "Me? I… Walter, I'm not an accountant."

"No. But you were… still are… the most valuable people in our technical division. I want you to look into the failed investment from three years ago and find out who authorized it."

"You don't know?"

His sigh was troubled. "No. Everything was done by electronic transfer. Accounting is having problems finding all the records."

"Oh."

"I was hoping you could find out some of the details of the transaction for me."

Felicity nodded as she turned more pages. The IP address on the emails were all routed through Queen Consolidated. Not that those were hard things to mimic. "Find out," she echoed.

"Dig up," Walter ordered. "Discreetly."

Felicity snapped the file shut. "I'm your girl."

"Felicity."

She peered over her glasses at him.

"I need your word that this stays between us. I would prefer to keep this as quiet as possible until we know exactly what happened."

No surprise there. As CEO, Walter was responsible for everything that went on within these walls. This kind of transaction, if not explained properly, could land him in front of the Board of Directors, have the IRS crawl up Queen Consolidated's backside with a microscope, and even result in potential criminal charges.

"Confidentiality is my middle name." She fiddled with the corner of the folder. "What about Moira? Does she know?"

"No. Not yet. I didn't want to worry her until I had to. Oliver either."

"Understood. I'll get right on this." She checked the clock again. "And you should go to lunch before
it turns into dinner."

Walter stood. He closed his laptop and took his jacket from the back of his chair. "Thank you for this, Felicity. I knew I could count on your discretion."

When he was gone, Felicity dropped the file onto the table and sank into one of the empty chairs. She tugged her glasses off and tossed them on to the table before she dropped her head into her hands. The blurred words on the pages seemed to swim before her eyes.


"What the hell am I going to do?" Felicity whispered.

No one answered, though, because there was no one there.

She was utterly and completely alone.

~*~

The jackals were at the door. Rabid, slobbering, barking questions, snapping accusations, and all the while shoving microphones and cameras in his face as Diggle shouldered them aside, clearing a path for Oliver from the steps of Queen Consolidated to the private car at the curb.

Once inside, even the tinted windows couldn't completely dim the unending flare of camera flashes. The questions kept coming though, a barrage of noise that Oliver did his best to tune out as Diggle settled onto the seat next to him.

The guard looked out the side window, the back, before relaxing into the seat. He unbuttoned his jacket. "The driver should be here in a minute."

"Okay."

"Reporters. They'll ease up when something else catches their interest. Some pop star getting out of a limo without underwear. Some senator caught banging his underage intern. Then you'll get your life back."

Pretty much no chance of that. The life he had was over the minute the Queen's Gambit left port.

"Hell," Diggle continued, "this hooded freak keeps running around town putting arrows in one percenters, I guarantee he'll grab more headlines than you. Did it again last night by getting Marcus Redmond to refund the pension plans he stole from. Rumor had it this vigilante helped take Martin Summers down, too. All of a sudden the cops have a recording of him confessing to murdering a witness. A witness that would have testified Summers was working with the Chinese Triad to smuggle drugs into the city."

"Sounds like this hood guy thinks Starling City's a DC Comic."

"Maybe."

"You don't approve of what he's doing?"

"I think it's a dangerous road. A lot of people start out doing the right thing for the right reason but
this kind of fight? This kind of war? It can twist a man into the very monster he thinks he's trying to fight." Diggle fell silent. He watched the reporters swarm around the car for a few minutes before he said, "I spent the first twenty-seven years of my life in Starling City, the next five in Afghanistan. You wanna know what I learned?"

More flashes. Most yells. Someone pounded on the window next to Oliver's head. He didn't look. "There's no place like home?" he guessed.

"Just the opposite." A flash of disgust washed over the guard's face as a reporter practically climbed onto the hood to get a shot. "Home is a battlefield. Back home they're all trying to get you. Get you to open up, be somebody you're not sure you are anymore." He studied Oliver's profile. "You know, I could be wrong. Maybe after five years alone you're not as messed up in the head as you have every right to be."

Oliver didn't answer. He couldn't. Because that answer would make everybody think he was even crazier, and there were far too many people – scum like Redmond and Summers – left in Starling City that needed to pay for their sins.

what are you guilty of?

Read More About the Olicity Hiatus Challenge
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The old adage holds true: follow the money. Moira makes stakes a claim (and makes a promise). Felicity gets a piece of not-so-friendly advice, and Oliver makes a starling discovery. Or two. Maybe even three. #gamechanger

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on May 30, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow’s season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

The end of Oliver Queen's marriage came marked with a Post-It note. A lime green one. The three inch by three inch slip of paper tacked to the front of the divorce papers held simple instructions. Sign here. Date there. Initial there. Review page three for terms. Return to address on last page. If agreeable, dissolution could be finalized in two weeks. The note was simply signed with a gently flourished F.

Oliver tossed them onto the entry way table. He flipped to the last page before holding out a hand. "Got a pen?"

"Oliver."

His attention shifted from the papers to Felicity. She was still in the gray dress she'd worn to the office that day only now she'd added a soft pink cardigan to cope with the chill of the evening. She'd pulled her hair back at some point during the day, securing it with a simple band at the base of her skull.

Hands still wrapped loosely around the double handles of her black leather laptop tote she held in front of her, she gave him the look – that slight tip of the head, raised brow, stern eye over the tops of her glasses that clearly said stop being an idiot.

"You need to read them first."

"No, I don't."

"Yes. You do."

"Are you saying my lawyer is trying to screw me?"

"Of course not."

"Are you trying to screw me?"
Her mouth tightened. "You should never sign anything without looking at it first. I don't want there
to be issues later."

"Fine." He folded them up and reinforced the heavy tri-fold crease with a slide of his thumb and
forefinger. "You didn't have to come all the way out here to deliver them. I could have gone to the
office tomorrow."

She sighed as her gaze strayed up toward the ceiling. This time the look was all the-ego-on-this-guy.
"I didn't. Walter asked me to come. We still have an insane amount of prep work left on the Unidac
bid and —"

"The what bid?"

"Unidac. Unidac Industries. They went into receivership while researching alternative energy. The
owner died and now the whole thing goes up for auction in a few days. Since Queen Consolidated
has ventured into that market, we need to solidify its bid package. Walter asked me to come for
dinner so we could start reviewing it right after. That's why I'm here." Her chin edged upwards. "The
only reason I'm here."

"Well," Oliver said as he slipped the papers into his jacket and tucked them in the pocket there, "I
didn't think it was for my charming wit and personality."

Her smile was tight and sharp but her eyes stayed cold. "I considered delivering the papers in person
a personal perk."

He tried not to wince. Logically he knew he had no right to be angry. This was his doing. His
choice. It was the right one, too. Felicity had said it that night, his mother reaffirmed it shortly after.
Loving him, caring about him, being around him… that couldn't happen without inflicting more pain
and making them go through that loss all over again if something happened to him. Which it could.
He was a pragmatist above all else. Sooner or later his quest to save Starling City would get him hurt,
if not killed. He had no right to drag Felicity through that again. Not after she'd confessed she
couldn't take it.

Loving her didn't give him the right to destroy her, but it did mandate letting her go.

"To be honest," Felicity said, "I wanted to see the look on your face when I did it."

Ouch. Oliver nodded, had to swallow before he could say, "I suppose you deserve that much."

"It was… enlightening."

Oliver paused. Felicity's expression was guileless. But her eyes… Oliver searched them, trying to
decipher the guarded shadow even as she seemed to be doing some searching of her own. The
divorce papers suddenly felt heavier. He took a breath and stepped toward her.

"Felicity, there you are," Walter said as he strode into the entryway. He was too busy looking at the
tablet computer in his hand to notice that both Oliver and Felicity took a step away from each other.
He tapped the screen with his fingertip a few times. "I think we might want to consider increasing
our bid projection. I'm picking up some interesting chatter online about James Holder's interest in
Unidac. He seems to be rattling his saber. I think he could be a problem."

Felicity adjusted her glasses. "You're talking about his comment this morning at his shareholder's
meeting where he talked about exploring energy security and independence even in the wake of
natural disasters."
Walter paused and looked up. "You heard about it?"

"Of course."

Oliver couldn't help but smile. Of course she heard. Being ahead of the game was Felicity's job. She always took that seriously and, with the assistance of the internet, there wasn't anything she couldn't track down, find out, or keep a cyber ear open for. If Queen Consolidated and Felicity were joining forces, this Holder guy didn't stand a chance.

His smile faded. "Holder. Why do I know that name?"

Walter hesitated. "There was an unfortunate incident a few years ago —"

Felicity made a rude noise. "Unfortunate is Walter's polite way of saying that the Holder Group put defective smoke detectors in low income housing in the Glades. There were a lot of fires and way too many deaths but, like a lot of people in this city, he bought his way out of all the trouble."

"Holder claimed he didn't know about the defects," Walter said. "He claimed some supervisor dropped the ball and didn't tell him. The supervisor said Holder knew. There were rumors of bribes and disappearing documents but…" He shrugged.

"So he walked," Oliver concluded.

Felicity nodded. "The court dismissed the lawsuits filed against him. It was all over the news a few days ago. That's probably where you heard his name."

That wasn't the only place Oliver had seen Holder's name. It was one on his list. One near the top, actually. Since the courts had failed to get justice for the city, maybe it was time he and Holder were finally introduced.

Walter tapped the screen of his tablet a few more times and, when it went dark, he tucked the slender pad under his arm. "I think we can put that aside for now, enjoy dinner, and then get back to work."

He lingered on Oliver. "I believe Thea made other plans this evening."

Yes. Smoky, loud, drunken plans. Oliver swore silently. He knew how his mother handled rebellions since he'd seen how she handled his. More space was always her answer. What he'd learned was he could have used a lot less freedom and a lot more parenting. Someone had to do something with Thea or she was going to end up hurt, in jail, or dead.

"Yes, she did." Felicity set her tote on a nearby chair and rummaged inside it, pushing aside her own tablet and its attached keyboard, until she found a piece of folded, blue paper. She pulled it out and handed it to Walter. "That's where she is and where she'll be spending a lot of her time for the next few weeks in case you need to get in touch with her."

Walter unfolded it. "The Starling City Aquarium?"

"A friend of mine heads up their promotional department. She's organizing a fundraiser to help finance their new program to work with underprivileged kids. With all the funding cuts, they're really short-staffed, so she needed someone who could help her get everything organized."

Walter looked skeptical. "And Thea…volunteered? Without a judge ordering her to?"

Oliver scowled at Felicity.

"Thea's had a few run-ins with the law the last couple of years. Minor things," she hurriedly
explained, briefly touching Oliver's arm as if to reassure him. "Some shoplifting. Speeding tickets. Things like that. Moira generally negotiated it down to community service since Thea's a minor."

Oliver tried not to let his irritation show. When he was Thea's age, his parents let him get away with murder. If they weren't careful, one of Thea's reckless actions – especially if she was high on whatever pills she managed to pilfer out of somebody's medicine cabinet or buy in some club – could cost someone their lives. That was a weight he wouldn't wish on anyone.

Felicity zipped her bag shut. "Once Thea understood working with the aquarium would give her practical experience, fulfills her volunteer credit requirements, and looks good on a college resume… All for planning a high society party?" She smiled. "She loved the idea. It'll cut into some of her free time with her friends, but I got the feeling she was okay with that."

"Thank you, Felicity," Walter said. He refolded the paper with care. "That was very thoughtful of you. I'll let Moira know," He checked his watch. "Speaking of, we should join her at the table before she thinks we all ducked out for burgers. I, uh, also have some other things to discuss. With just the four of us here tonight, I think it might be the perfect time."

Oliver frowned at Walter's back as he disappeared down the hall toward the dining room. Felicity went to follow and, as she passed Oliver, he caught her arm and brought her to an easy stop. She looked down at his hand, then at him, but Oliver didn't release her. He leaned in closer.

"Thank you," he murmured.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Thea." His thumb stroked her arm through the soft, fluffy pink cashmere of her cardigan. "That was very nice of you."

"It's just a volunteer job, Oliver. It's not like I gave her a kidney."

He dipped his head, waited until she looked at him. "We both know it's more than that. She's struggling. You gave her a safe place to go. A place with someone used to dealing with at risk kids. Someone who can help Thea succeed in building something she can be proud of. This friend… she's a community mentor."

Felicity didn't even try to deny it. "Yes."

"Does Thea know?"

That made her blink. Her frown was immediate. "Of course. I don't manipulate people, Oliver. Lying to Thea isn't going to help her, it would only give her another reason to distrust everyone." She glanced down at his hand again. "The last thing she needs is more lies."

"Not all lies are bad," he felt obliged to point out. "Sometimes they're necessary. To protect people."

"Lies are lies." Her attention seemed to drift toward the dining room. "We all tell ourselves we're doing the right thing but in the end? The lies always catch up to us. Then we have to pay the price for the secrets we choose to keep."

Oliver eased closer. His thigh bumped her hip. "What other secrets are you keeping, Felicity?"

A chime sounded in the house, then another.

"Yes."

"We should...go."

"Yes."

"Oliver..."

He released her as if holding on to her a second longer would burn him. He curled those fingers into his palm, rubbed his thumb across the tips, but could still feel her softness, still feel the faint shiver that had gone through her when she said his name.

He offered her a lopsided smile. "Thank you for caring about my sister."

"Caring's never been my problem." Felicity hurried away. Even though she was several steps down the hall, Oliver still heard her when she muttered, "It's figuring out how to stop that's the hard part."

~*~

They were halfway through the roasted prime rib with pink and green peppercorn crust and red wine pan sauce when Walter wiped his mouth with the white linen napkin, cleared his throat, and sat a bit taller in his chair. Oliver half expected him to tap his knife against his wine glass and propose a toast. But this, he thought as he glanced around the quiet dinner table and watched Moira watch Felicity push potato and porcini gratin around on her plate, was no celebration. Nobody wanted to be here. He tried to muster a small smile when Felicity darted a glance in his direction. She didn't return it and went back to poking potatoes. Or maybe, he amended, they simply didn't like the company.

Walter laid the napkin next to his plate. "There's something I need to talk to both of you about."

Felicity abandoned her fork as she pushed her chair back. She started to stand. "I should —"

"No. Please. I'd like you to stay."

She sank back into the chair.

Walter clasped his hands together at the edge of the table. "As I informed Felicity earlier today, the Compliance Department notified me of a two-point-six million dollar account discrepancy at Queen Consolidated."

"What?" Moira gasped as Oliver looked to Felicity, who didn't look at him.

"I asked her not to needlessly worry either of you," Walter went on, "until Compliance and Accounting could look into it further. By the end of the day, they informed me the money is, indeed gone. Records of the transaction are missing, but they can't determine if that's a system error or indication of a cover up."

"You mean if someone stole it," Oliver said.

The blunt comment seemed to land in the middle of the table with all the grace of a pig.
"That's impossible," Moira said, already shaking her head. "No one could take that much money without someone noticing."

Walter reached over to pat her hand. "Exactly. It's probably an account error, but I didn't want to upset you or concern Oliver, if I didn't have to. Now it seems like you both need to know."

Moira glared at Felicity. "You knew?"

She inhaled quickly to answer, but Walter got there first. "I informed her, and I ordered her not to say anything to anyone. Including the two of you. I thought the news would be best coming from me."

Moira's mouth puckered. "I see. I would think family would take precedent over business for her. Or maybe, given the current situation, she doesn't feel that obligation anymore. Perhaps I should have considered that. Or maybe just expected less."

Walter frowned at Felicity. "What is she —"

"Oliver and I are getting divorced," Felicity told him, the words flat.

Walter's gaze pierced Oliver, conveying unhappiness, disappointment, and judgment all in one. The parenting trifecta. Apparently he'd learned a lot since stepping into Robert Queen's shoes. Oliver, silent, stared back.

Walter turned back to his wife. "Regardless. Felicity was following my order and I'm telling you now. It could be nothing but I wanted you to hear it from me instead of from some office rumor later."

Oliver leaned back in his chair. "Do you have any idea where the money went?"

"No. It was transferred out of our Vancouver subsidiary and we lost track of it after that."

"But Compliance and Account are following the money trail?"

"As far as they could, yes. Unfortunately they've been hitting a lot of brick walls." Walter tipped his head toward Felicity. "That's why I've asked Felicity to bring her special skill set to the task and investigate on her own."

Three sets of eyes turned Felicity's way. She reached for her water glass and took a big gulp.

Special skill set. Oliver knew precisely what that meant. Before receiving her promotion to the position of Walter's executive assistant, Felicity cut her teeth in the I.T. Department. Sure, she solved the normal troubleshooting issues about error screens and printer problems, but in a company like Queen Consolidated, she also tackled cyber terrorism, sabotage, and attacks. Felicity knew all the tips and tricks—legal and illegal. Walter Steele obviously wasn't above asking her to venture over that line, and Felicity felt loyal enough to him, to the Queen family, to do it.

Moira propped her elbows on either side of her plate and massaged her temples. "I can't believe this. When did all this happen?"

"Three years ago," Walter told her.

"And nobody noticed? How could that…" she trailed off. She dropped her hands. "Wait. Three years ago? And it was how much?"

"Two-point-six million dollars," Felicity said, sounding as if her potential inability to find the money
would cause QC to dock it from her paycheck.

"Oh, no." Moira closed her eyes and sagged in the chair. "Walter. I think…” She pressed a hand to her chest. "I think I'm the culprit."

"What?" Felicity fumbled her glass. It would have tipped for sure but Oliver caught it, resulting in only a bit of water sloshing over the rim. He rightened it as Felicity mopped the moisture from his hand with her napkin.

Walter stared at Moira. "You? Are you sure?"

She looked chagrined. "Well, it is rather a specific figure. That's the exact amount the company invested in a friend's startup venture three years ago."

Walter chuckled.

She held up her hands. "I know. I know. Never invest with friends. I should have known better. The whole thing was a disaster in the end anyway. I don't think the thing even got off the ground." She leaned over to touch Walter's arm. "I will call Accounting in the morning and get the whole thing straightened out. See? Mystery solved."

He smiled at her. "Compliance will be very happy to hear it. Now they can stop having nightmares of the IRS storming the building."

Moira chuckled as she picked up her silverware and returned to slicing her prime rib. "I'm glad I could help. Now you can give that Unidac auction your undivided attention."

"With you and Felicity at my back, I have a feeling Queen Consolidated will be unstoppable."

Moira smiled a dazzling smile at him. "That's what family is for." She turned that smile on Felicity and Oliver was suddenly aware of the teeth in it. The sharpness. Like a shark. "After all, you know the old saying: Family is your greatest strength."

Oliver shifted his attention to Felicity as she peered back at Moira over the rim of her water glass. She set it down slowly before she flicked her gaze back up to meet the older woman's. "Also your greatest weakness."

Oliver eased back in his chair, the wood creaking faintly beneath him as he looked back and forth between the two women. Then he noticed Walter was watching too. Not Felicity. Not Moira. But him.

"To family," Walter said, raising his glass.

"Family," Oliver agreed. Nobody lied quite like them.

~*~

During the course of their marriage, Oliver learned a great many things from Felicity, the least of which was how to do his own laundry, the greatest of which was love. But somewhere along the line – between folding fitted sheets, grocery shopping, and some seriously awesome sex – Oliver also learned a little something about hacking. A guy couldn't be married to a computer expert like Felicity
and not pick up a few tips and tricks along the way.

Lifting her tablet and keyboard from her bag while she was in the office with Walter, however, was a skill he'd picked up all on his own.

It didn't take much to bypass the password. He'd seen her enter it before and, using the code on the back of her employee badge, he now had access to the higher security levels in the Queen Consolidated network. He also had all the administrative system access that went with it.

Oliver rested his arms along the edge of his desk as he studied the screen. Queen Consolidated was definitely light almost three million dollars. One day it was there, the next? Gone. Accounting and Compliance had a right to be concerned. Though Moira claimed the money went to a friend, Oliver couldn't find trace of who got the funds. No one was that sloppy. That kind of carelessness was only achieved by careful, deliberate forethought.

She'd lied.

It didn't make sense, but there was no other explanation. His mother lied about the money or – at the very least – what she'd done with it. Why? Queen Consolidated was her company. She had every right to invest funds as she saw fit. Oliver rubbed his hand over his mouth. Unless she didn't want people to know. Unless she was ashamed or doing something illegal or... Scared.

It always came back to family for her. Her husband – be that Robert or Walter – and her children. Oliver propped his chin in his hand. Felicity had mentioned Thea had been in trouble over the years. Was that how Moira got her out of it? Had she taken the money to settle something out of court or keep it from the paper? Paid off some club owner or, hell, even a cop, to keep Thea out of jail? He wouldn't put it past her.

He shook his head as he scrolled down the webpage. That didn't explain the one thing he did find. One name. Tempest.

The offshore LLC didn't fall under the Queen Consolidated banner. There wasn't anything registered under the Secretary of State, no federal tax records, no patent applications filed. There was, however, one public record documenting the purchase of land. A warehouse, to be exact. Bought in 2009.

Right here in Starling City.

~*~

Even in the low light of the Queen's foyer, Felicity knew that backside anywhere. Apparently five years on a deserted island had not only tightened and toned it, they made that ass look really, really good in a pair of jeans.

Felicity leaned her shoulder against the wooden newel at the bottom of the stairs. He'd changed after dinner, ditching the more formal clothes for the denim and a black, tight weave sweater that clung in all the right places. She lingered on the strong, defined line of his back, the carved muscles clearly visible in his arms. Mmm. Lordy. The man didn't seem to have an un-right place on his body these days.

She gave herself three more seconds to enjoy the view before saying, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"
Oliver twisted around to peer at her over his shoulder. His hands remained where they were – in her tote bag. Elbow deep, to be precise. He glanced down at the bag, then back at her. "Oh. Um." He straightened and flashed her the grin that always used to have her panties off in less than five minutes. "Hey."

She smiled back without meaning an ounce of it. "Hey." She looked pointedly at her bag. "Something I can help you find?"

"What? Oh. No. I was just... Um..."

"Rummaging through my shit?" She pushed away from the column and crossed the foyer to his side with easy strides. She planted two fingers against his triceps and nudged him away from the chair and bag.

"I was looking for a mint."

Felicity hooked a finger into her bag and tipped it toward her to peek inside.

"Too much horseradish with the prime rib."

"It was a wine sauce, Oliver."

"Too much wine, then."

She sighed and reached into her tote to pluck a bundle of papers out from under her tablet. She held them up. "What is this?"

He didn't have to answer, of course. Felicity knew what they were. The damned post-it note was still attached to the top sheet.

"Did you even read them?" she demanded as she flipped straight to the last page.

"Of course I did. You've been working with Walter for hours. Plenty of time to go through them. It's fine. I agree. Good terms. The lawyer earned his five hundred bucks an hour."

"Six." She slapped the papers into his chest and pinned them there with her hand. "You didn't sign them."

"Oh. Right." That smile flashed again as he covered the divorce papers, and her hand, with his. "No pen."

Felicity narrowed her eyes. "I thought you were looking for a mint?"

"I was looking for both."

"Oliver."

"Felicity."

She really should pull her hand away. She knew that. But his thumb was stroking the back of her knuckles and his hand was warm and she could feel the steady beat of his heart beneath her palm. It did weird things to her insides, made her knees feel unsteady.

She watched that thumb sweep down, then back up. "Why are doing this?"

"What?"
"This." She tugged her hand away. Her skin still tingled. She squared her shoulders. "Is this fun for you? Some kind of game? Because you never used to enjoy hurting me."

His eyelids flickered. His hand tightened around the divorce papers before dropping to his side. "I still don't."

"Really? Then what is this?" She flicked her hand back and forth between them. "Because I don't get it. You're the one who pushed me away. You're the one who put the line down and pretty much left me no choice but to step over it."

"You're right."

Damn right she was, and damn right he had. That's what was bugging her. That and what Thea said in the car. Because Felicity knew Oliver. She did. She hadn't lied to Thea. Oliver never once cheated on her while they were married. Not because he didn't have the chance. The opportunity was always there, and there were hundreds, if not thousands, of women who wouldn't hesitate to jump in the sack with him. Oliver never cheated for the simple reason that he loved her. She had been the only woman he wanted.

So what was this? Why cheat now? Why, after five years on some island in the middle of nowhere, after coming home… after jumping her bones in the freaking hospital less than an hour after their reunion, did he throw it all away for some one night stand with a woman whose name he didn't even know?

She wasn't fool enough to believe their marriage didn't have issues. That's what put him on the damned boat in the first place. But a wandering eye hadn't been the problem. Oliver's resistance to domesticity, on the other hand, was. He valued his freedom. Felicity had always known that, always feared that – in the end – the need to prove to himself and the world that mused if Oliver Queen, brash, bold, billionaire playboy, was losing his edge, would be the one thing their marriage wouldn't survive.

They both knew each other's mutual fears because they'd talked about it. Fear was part of every relationship. Opening up to another person, letting them in completely… that wasn't easy. But somehow, in the dark, they'd managed to at least talk about it. That kind of trust and respect didn't just vanish.

That meant that either Oliver hadn't changed or that the doctor at the hospital was right and the husband who'd come home wasn't the one she'd lost.

Felicity wasn't sure which one scared her more.

Was that the problem? Was that why she was looking so hard and seeing what she wanted to see? Was she so tired of being afraid, so tired of being alone, that she was looking for a reason – any reason – to trust Oliver and be able to confide in him?

Oliver focused on the divorce papers in his hand as he turned them over and over. "I'm the one who said things wouldn't change." His jaw tensed. "They can't change. You deserve better than that. Better than this."

Her heart ached as her chest grew tight. "I never wanted better. I just wanted you."

He brow creased as he nodded, kept turning those papers. "I know."

"But you don't want that. So…" She let out a small breath and motioned to the legal papers. "Read them. Sign them. Give them to the lawyer or mail them back to me. My address is on there. Then
you'll have what you said you wanted. Complete and total freedom. After that you can have sex with half the city if you want to. I won't care."

He flinched.

"That's what you want, right?"

His hands stilled. The papers stopped turning. He nodded again, his eyes still downcast. When he finally looked at her, it was more like looking through her. "Yeah. Sure."

This time it wasn't hurt that spiked through Felicity's chest. It was astonishment. It actually rocked her back on her heels. "You —"

"Oliver," Moira called out as she came down the stairs. She paused on the landing to curl her hands over the railing and look down at them. "Are the two of you going… out?"

Felicity snapped her mouth shut.

Oliver slid the papers into his back pocket. "No, Mom. Felicity and I were just talking about some of the papers the lawyer sent over."

"Oh. That was quick."

Felicity zipped her bag. "They're paid to be efficient."

Oliver retreated. "I'll look them over and get them back tomorrow."

She nodded as he headed up the stairs, paused to kiss his mother's cheek, and then disappeared upstairs.

Moira watched him go, too, and once he was, returned her attention to Felicity. "Thank you for helping Walter with the bid. I know he appreciates your help with these things."

"I like Walter. He's been a good friend." Felicity fiddled with the straps of her bag. "Speaking of friends… It's funny. I don't remember anyone coming to you for startup capital."

"Yes, well, that was right around the time you withdrew from this family. You couldn't be bothered with me or Thea, let alone with the goings on in this house." She lifted her brows. "Why would you possibly remember?"

Felicity didn't wince. She didn't even feel the barb. Straight for the jugular. That was Moira Queen. It's why the business world feared her, even after Robert Queen was gone. He might have built the empire, but she was definitely the woman behind the man's success.

"There's only one thing you need to remember about me, Felicity," Moira declared from the platform above her. "Family is everything to me, and nothing matters more in family than trust and loyalty. Sadly, you have proven you have neither. So let me warn you." She leaned forward. "People do not come after my family and walk away. You've chosen your side. It isn't Oliver's. It isn't mine. Hurt him? Hurt this family? I will bury you."

A shiver slithered down Felicity's spine. Her palms turned moist. Somehow she managed to keep her voice steady as she said, "You seem good at that, Moira. Burying things. Old habits, perhaps?"

Moira's face darkened. "Just remember, Felicity." She turned away from the railing and started up the steps. "Old habits tend to die the hardest."
The Tempest warehouse was a useless, hulking white concrete building too far from the waterfront to be of use for shipping, too removed from the business district for useful storage. A narrow, pockmarked road served as the only access, ending at a nine foot fence that enclosed the entire perimeter.

In case that didn't signal a lack of desire for visitors, the owner topped the barrier with barbed wire and hung a high voltage warning sign on the chain-link. Cameras, constantly in motion, patrolled the surrounding grounds and a high tech security system had clearly been installed given the illuminated keypads at all the entry points, including two massive loading bay doors.

All the security assumed, of course, that visitors would be polite enough to use those front doors. Nobody ever thought about the roof. Though to be fair, Oliver admitted as he stood on the edge of the building and surveyed the dimly lit parking lot, most people didn't travel with their own zip-lines and grappling hooks either.

Wind rustled by, fluttering the rim of his green leather hood and Oliver watched sheets of crumpled newspaper skitter across the concrete and into the overgrown weeds that lined the fences and hugged the warehouse walls. The gardener apparently was on vacation. As were the security guards, dogs, and cleaning crew. Hell, there were no living eyeballs on anything here. Usually that meant one thing: whoever owned this property was doing something very, very bad.

Oliver stepped back and, ignoring the roof access door, crouched next to the air vent. It didn't take much effort to remove the cover and the metal slats below. Cavernous blackness yawned beneath it.

Oliver pulled two glow sticks from his pack, cracked them, and then dropped them through the opening. The luminescent green lights tumbled through the darkness, smaller and smaller until they hit the floor. The plastic sticks bounced on impact and rolled away from each other, creating a ghostly, glowing landing zone.

It was a deceptively deep drop, clearly showing that the warehouse extended even below ground, hiding an impressive amount of storage room well below ground level. After securing the line to the hook on his belt, Oliver dropped the rope next. The coils barely had time to straighten before he followed.

There were no brakes applied, no tentative rappelling. The rope practically sang through the chassis and Oliver's booted feet hit pavement in only a matter of seconds. He stayed there, crouched with one knee against the cold concrete, his head down, one hand on his bow, the other lifting to touch an arrow notch in the quiver strapped to his back.

The silence rushed him, leaving only the steady in and out of his breath, his heartbeat in his ears. He shifted forward, one gloved hand falling away from the quiver to brace against the floor as he peered into the surrounding void.

Nothing. Tension bled from his shoulders and Oliver eased to his feet. Years of survival had honed an almost sixth sense in even the darkest of hours. Predators – on four feet or two – rarely attacked in the brightness of day; preferring the shadows of night to disguise their attacks. It wasn't cowardice, it was camouflage. Night was the best ally of the hunter… and the worst enemy of the hunted.
Oliver pulled a small LED tactical flashlight from his belt and flicked it on. The beam sliced through
the black, punching a hole of white clear through to illuminate the wall and the large rolling metal
door of the docking bay. Huge hook blocks cast wicked looking shadows against the cinderblocks
and drew Oliver's attention up, past the catwalk, to the thick wire ropes and the hoists they
suspended from.

He aimed the flashlight toward the ceiling, revealing massive, yellow metal girders mounted on
equally impressive metal beams. The whole system trolleyed from door toward the heart of the
warehouse, and there wasn't just one overhead crane. There were two. No, three. Oliver flicked the
flashlight left and then right, further toward the opposite side of the roof. More than three. At least
eight, each one stenciled with position and serial numbers.

Christ. What the hell? People didn't need equipment like this unless they were moving the hundreds
of tons that was freaking King Kong.

Oliver moved deeper toward the center of the building as he drifted the beam of light back toward
the floor. It struck metal, bounced back like sunlight off a car mirror, making Oliver reflexively
squint and jerk his face away. He inched the beam lower, killing the glare, and when he looked
again, his hand went slack around the flashlight grip.

Scaffolding. Miles of it. The pipes and platforms fitted together like giant Tinkertoys set. At first that
was all he saw. Metal rails, supporting beams, the wooden planks that formed walkways at least
seven tiers high. Maybe higher. Then he saw the structure behind it begin to take shape. Bulky, boxy
shape. Battered and broken, it seemed twisted into some almost abstract thing.

Oliver cocked his head even as his brain identified it. His feet stopped moving. His hand shook. The
flashlight wobbled.

Boat. The entire fucking mid-section of one.

No. No, a vessel this big – even when clearly broken into three distinct chunks – was clearly a yacht.
At least a hundred and ninety feet in total length. Super yacht. Just like… Oliver jerked around,
veering the flashlight to one side before he snapped it back to aim the beam toward the other end of
the warehouse.

More scaffolding. More wreckage. The entire aft section this time. Oliver's heart pounded, the sound
of it producing a dull roar in his ears. The light fell across the stern.

*Queen's Gambit.*

The two words sent the room spinning and landed Oliver on his ass. Bile – hot and acidic – burned
the back of his throat and the lingering stench of oil and gasoline filled his nose. The flashlight
clattered across the floor, rolling away from him as it spun and spun, turning the world around in a
fast circle that not only seemed to displace the floor and ceiling, but time as well.

This time, the blackness that folded over his head wasn't just dark; it was waves. Cold, bottomless,
endless ocean waves that dragged at his legs, threatening to suck him down and down even as he
clawed for the surface, terrified the frigid water would take his strength before he could make it, that
the burning need for oxygen would make him gulp for air only to swallow gallons of seawater.

His clothes were too heavy. His shoes iron weights. Lightning jumped and danced above him,
delighting in nature's fury as thunder clapped when his fingers broke the water's surface, his head…
He choked on the water and the wind and the driving rain, managed to grab three gasping breathes
before another ocean swell crashed down him and forced him back beneath the surface.
Thunder cheered as the entire ocean grabbed hold of him and pulled, yanking him back down in a violent corkscrew that left every limb screaming.

The light above him grew dim. Unconsciousness blackened the edges of his vision.

He was going to die.

Felicity.

He reached upward again… kicked…

Oliver propped his forearms against his updrawn knees, gulped the cold warehouse air as present rammed the past back where it belonged. Despite the chill in the air, sweat slickened his skin and made his palms clammy inside his green leather gloves.

He huffed the next breath through clenched teeth, made himself lift his head as he grabbed the flashlight and pointed it toward the Gambit once more.

This time the memories stayed where they belonged.

He rolled to his feet and approached the yacht's mangled rear. Time and tide, literally, had taken its toll on his family's yacht. He angled the light higher, taking in the tattered side of the boat, the jagged edges that curved outward like fangs, and markings someone had sketched on the hull in bright blue chalk – circles to mark damage points, Xs to frame various areas of destruction, even notations of the height and width of breaches in the exterior – as if analyzing. Calculating.

Documenting.

Oliver squeezed the flashlight as fury sizzled through his brain, down his spine to radiate outward in one hot flash. He yanked the light beam back to the hole torn through the Gambit's side.


Oliver dropped the light to his side, but the image had already burned itself into his mind. "Son of a bitch," he growled.

This was no accident. A storm didn't take the Gambit down. Only one thing created damage like this. An explosion. He stepped back, glanced at the other two large pieces of the ship. Explosions, he corrected mentally. One probably around the engine or the boiler room. The other somewhere closer to the front, around the captain's wheelhouse.

The Queen's Gambit had been sabotaged. The entire accident staged. His father, the entire crew of fifteen dead.

Murdered.

A ripple seemed to stir the air as his father's voice whispered, "You can survive this, Oliver. Make it home. Make it better..."

Oliver flicked the light off. "Make them pay."

Metal clanged in the distance and Oliver dropped, automatically crouching in the thick shadows. The warehouse went silent again. Another faint gust breezed through the room. Another clang. Doors, Oliver realized as he freed his bow and lowered it parallel to his thigh.

Rhythmic squeaks, faint at first, then louder. Footsteps. Rubber soled shoes against the floor. He
was definitely no longer alone.

An electronic beep echoed through the warehouse, followed by the faint whirr and click of an electric lock opening. A door opened on the wall opposite him and light spilled in, casting a silver rectangle across the concrete floor.

Oliver rocked forward. His head dipped below the line of his shoulders. The muscles in his legs tightened and bunched. The beast within shifted its weight back and forth, snarling, ready to pounce.

A figure moved in the doorway, nothing more than a silhouette and too far away to see properly.

*Capture*, the beast snarled. *Kill. Avenge.*

Oliver held it off. Not yet. Too soon. Closer, he commanded silently as the figure cleared the threshold and took a tentative step into the room. The guy needed to be closer…

The man stopped. Oliver didn't know why. Maybe survival was just as instinctual for others as it was in himself. The figure moved again, but this time it was away from him, a few steps toward Oliver’s original access point.

The glow sticks. The tiny luminescent sticks popped back into Oliver's head a second before the figure turned and ran. Oliver launched after him, the beast in him howling with freedom as he sprinted toward the door.

The metal fire door swung shut a split second before Oliver slammed into it. He grabbed the handle. The green light on the security pad blinked red. The electric bolts – three of them from the sound of it – snapped into place with a *bam!* *bam!* *bam!*

Oliver whirled around, dashed back to the center of the warehouse. He ignored the glow sticks, caught the rope and, as he wrapped it around his forearm and gripped it firm in his hand, he pressed the button on the remote at his waist. The winch on the roof snapped to life, winding the rope back up, and lifting Oliver back to the roof in seconds.

He pulled himself back through the vent opening, rolled onto the gravel surface of the flat roof, and onto his feet again. As he ran for the edge, he reached back for an arrow, nocked it as he skidded to a stop, and drew the bowstring back.

Whoever the guy was, he was fast, or maybe fear and adrenaline gave him extra speed. Either way, he was already at the car parked at the warehouse's front door. Oliver aimed and released. The arrow sliced through the air, hit the pavement in front of the car with a sharp metallic crack. A second later, hooks stabbed outward, anchoring it, and the zip-line connected to it snapped taut.

His prey jumped at the sound, whirled around even as he yanked the car door open. The dome light blinked on, illuminating his face.

*Her* face.

In the span of a heartbeat they stared at each other, though Oliver knew she couldn't see his face, only the backlit shape of a man in a hood. The man with the bow and arrow who'd come to hunt in the city.

Then she was gone, scrambling into the car and stomping on the gas pedal hard enough to send the car fishtailing before it rocketed toward the gate. The fence entrance opened automatically, rolling back as the car approached, then gliding shut again as the automobile sped down the road.
She never once touched the brakes.

Oliver didn’t give chase. He didn’t need to. He slid down the cable to the ground below and watched as the car vanished around the bend. He knew exactly where to find her. He had her address. His wife had always been thoughtful that way.

Sins

what are you guilty of?

~*~

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Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The police have unsettling news for the Queens. Oliver wrestles with his shocking discovery, and Felicity's hatred of mysteries comes back to bite her.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on June 12, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

As mornings went, Oliver had had better and he'd had worse. Better was waking up to an armful of amorous blonde spouse kissing her way down his chest and under the sheet. Worse was a gut shish-kabobed by a several inches of steel blade with mosquitoes and flies feasting on his blood and flesh while he screamed.

If Oliver used that criteria to judge Raisa showing Detectives Lance and Hilton back into the drawing room at nine o'clock the next morning, he'd rank the return as tame to downright dull.

Lance managed a polite nod at Moira and Walter on the couch. When his attention shifted to Oliver, his mouth tightened. His eyes went cold. He barely looked at Diggle when the bodyguard positioned himself in the arched doorway and stayed there, looking solid and stoic and unmovable as Army Special Forces were apt to look.

As Lance settled into one of the tapestry covered armchairs, Hilton hovered behind him, his wet, gray trench coat dripping water on Moira's favorite antique carpet. The pair brought the gloom of the cold, rainy morning into the house with them. The dark clouds kept at bay by the trees seemed to crawl closer to the house and dim already shadowed rooms. Tree branches bowed outside the window, occasionally tapping against the glass as they wept.

Lance reached under his coat to produce a soggy copy of the morning newspaper. He tossed it on the coffee table. "I assume you know why we're here."

Oliver didn't bother to step away from the wall he leaned against as both Moira and Walter leaned forward. He didn't need to. He already knew what it said. Being up on all the news was one of the benefits of rarely sleeping.

In the last twenty-four hours, he'd discovered his wife was a liar, his sister could be only a few pills away from flushing her entire life down the tubes, his mother was way too satisfied that his marriage was over, and that the Queen's Gambit had been purposely sunk, not wrecked by a category two storm, which meant his father – in essence – had been murdered. Now the cop who hated his guts
was in his house, glaring at him. Lance looked like he hadn't seen a bed, a shower, a razor, or a cup of coffee in that same period. Even with all of that, Oliver figured he was still having a better day than James Holder and Carl Rasmussen.

"Dead," Walter as he stared at the newspaper. The headline summed up the report of Rasmussen's death in the lone, bolded word visible in the headline. Murdered. Walter glanced at Moira. "I can't believe it. I saw Carl the other day. He was at the club with his wife and three kids."

Moira covered one of his hands. "It's a great loss," she told officers. "Carl was a titan."

Detective Hilton flipped his black leather notebook open. "A titan that was looking to buy out Unidac Industries?"

Walter made a sound of disagreement as he stretched his arm out along the back of the couch. "Industries is something of a misnomer. UI's recent activity was actually looking into alternative energy."

Lance rested his elbows on his knees and laced his fingers together between them. His dark brows bowed downward. "I think the point my partner is trying to make is that Carl Rasmussen was the second bidder in less than two days to lose his life."

Moira and Walter exchanged looks. She gave her head a small shake. "I'm sorry. I thought... The news said there was evidence the vigilante killed James Holder. We assumed he murdered Rasmussen, too."

"Oh, the vigilante paid them both visits," Lance confirmed. "We got complaints from Rasmussen and Holder about that hooded freak. After he got through Holder's security – and I mean that literally. I was in autopsy when the coroner pulled the arrows out of them. But these fine, upstanding corporate giants? He stabbed his index finger toward the paper. "These two were both shot to death."

Moira cocked her head. "And that precludes this vigilante... because?"

"People generally don't change their patterns," Hilton said. "We know this guy has a thing for bows and arrows. He likes to be up close. Personal."

Lance nodded. "And whoever killed Holder and Rasmussen did it from a distance. That guy prefers to be a ghost. No one sees him come. No one sees him go."

Oliver folded his arms across his chest. "You said he killed from a distance. How far are we talking?"

Lance and Hilton exchanged looks.

"Far," Hilton said.

From the corner of his eye, Oliver saw Diggle step closer. Not that it surprised him. As Special Forces, Diggle had to know that a shot like that wasn't made by the average street thug. Hell, that wasn't even the average killer. Police had pulled Holder's body out of his rooftop swimming pool. If Rasmussen's death was similar, the shot had to come from one of the surrounding buildings. A shot like that required skill and precision. It took surveying potential nests, calculating sightlines, winds, down and updrafts between buildings. The killer wasn't run-of-the-mill hired muscle. He was someone with special training. A professional assassin.

"That's why you're here." Oliver straightened and stepped up behind the couch, closer to his mother. He touched her shoulder. "You don't think this is some average murder. You think someone paid to
have Holder and Rasmussen killed."

Moira frowned up at him before looking to the detective. "I don't understand. Are you..." Her scowl deepened. "Are you implying something, Detective?"

"Well, only that your husband was looking into buying Unidac Industries and the competition seems to be dropping like flies. Holder. Rasmussen. Patel."

"Warren Patel?" Walter shook his head. "Patel's death was an accident. His helicopter crashed."

"We're looking into it," Lance said. "We're also reopening the investigation into the death of Unidac's owner. Another... accident. That's an awful lot of coincidences, and I've never been fond of those. The deeper we dig, the more bodies just keep popping up around you people."

Moira's mouth tightened. She shifted her hand to Walter's leg. "And I'm sure your veiled accusations have nothing to do with how you feel about my family."

Oliver winced. Pain flashed over Quentin's face and he grunted as he rocked back in the chair. Wow. Way to lob that grenade in the center of the room. His mother never had been one for subtleties. Sometimes, though, he wished she'd realize throwing stones at a wasp's next didn't run the wasps off. It only made them angry.

Stirring up Quentin Lance would have the same result and – given his justifiable hatred of all things Queen – when Lance struck back, it would be with almost a decade's worth of rage and grief behind the blow. That was the risk taken, Oliver had accepted long ago, when you killed someone's only daughter and walked away unscathed. The inevitable payback was bound to be a bitch.

Walter cleared his throat. "Unidac is in receivership, Detective. Ownership is subject to a liquidation auction, so that means there are many prospective buyers, and the auction's tomorrow. So, if I was taking out the competition, I'd have a lot of killing to do in a very short amount of time."

"We're just making the rounds with the interested buyers," Hilton assured him. "Let them know to be careful."

Moira shifted on the couch to cross her legs. "Oh yes. And I'm overwhelmed at Detective Lance's concern for our safety."

"In the interest of that safety," the African American cop continued, "we should also inform you that toxicology tests found poison on the bullets."

Oliver felt Moira tense under his hand. "What kind of poison?" he asked.

"Um." Hilton flipped pages in his notes. "A neuro-toxin called Strychnos toxifera."

Flying Death. How appropriate. Apparently their sniper had a sick sense of humor. Clearly the assassin knew that South American Indians, like the Orinocos, Macusi, and Peruvian tribes, dipped the tips of their arrows and darts in the sap to paralyze prey – both animal and human. Once the poison entered the bloodstream, it left the victim unable to move or swallow, let alone breathe. Death, in the form of respiratory failure, was almost immediate.

Moira shook her head. "I-I don't understand. What is that? Is that arsenic? Cyanide?"

"It's a plant-derived toxin. You probably know it by, uh..." Hilton flipped more pages.

"Curare."
The room went silent. Oliver wasn't sure if it was because John Diggle barely said three words to anybody at any time, or if they'd simply forgotten the man was even in the room. Either way, the single word managed to surprise his employers, surprise Hilton, and earn instant suspicion from Lance.

From Oliver, however, he earned instantaneous curiosity. The South American jungles were a long way from the desert landscape of Afghanistan. War – no matter what soil it was fought on – tended to favor bullets and bombs over blowguns and darts. People like him, people like John Diggle, didn't pick up that kind of information off some final round Jeopardy question. They picked it up for survival.

Diggle shifted his weight to his other foot. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. His jaw locked tight enough to make the small muscle beneath his right ear tick.

Oliver's eyes narrowed. No, this wasn't about survival. That meant it could only be one other thing. It was personal.

Diggle glanced his way. The two men eyed each other. The melancholy in the room deepened. Something passed between them. A knowing. An understanding? Perhaps the simple awareness of one warrior passing another. Whatever it was, it was fleeting. A simple blink and turn of Diggle's head and it was gone, but definitely not forgotten.

"Well," Walter said as he stood, "thank you for your concern, gentlemen. Our security consultant, Mr. Diggle, will take all the necessary precautions."

Oliver almost smiled. The message was clear. Meeting over. Get out. Nobody cleared a room with fewer words than Walter Steele.

Lance rose, too, but only because he had no other choice. He shook Walter's hand. "I hope you're right, Mr. Steele, because you never know. If this whack job really is targeting competition for Unidac, he might decide to scare the Queens off bidding next. A nice family like yours..." He looked from Walter to Moira to Oliver to the family photos, including Thea's, that littered the bookshelf, and back. "It has a lot of targets."

Moira snorted. "Your concern is touching."

"Oh, I have no doubt the Queens will manage to survive. I'm more concerned about the innocent people caught in the crossfire of another Queen family drama."

Hilton stepped forward quickly, shoved his hand at Walter for a quick shake, then Moira. "We appreciate your time. Thank you." He nudged Lance's arm. "We should go, Sir."

"Yeah. Right. Well, if you need us..." He followed Hilton toward the door, paused, and turned back. His arms lifted from his sides, causing his suit coat to open and show off the bright gold badge at his belt. "We're just a 9-1-1 call away."

~*~

As days went, Felicity had had better and she'd had worse. Better was waking up in a private, ocean-side villa at Parrot Cay on the Turks and Caicos with a wedding ring on her finger and Oliver Queen asleep on the pillow next to her. Worse... Wow. Worse was a three-way tie of misery, grief, and loss.
that she didn't even want to try and compare. Pain was pain. Each of those days had left deep scars.

If Felicity used that criterion to judge the current evening – a night where black clouds shrouded the city skyline, obscuring the tops of the buildings, and rain never seemed to stop falling – she wasn't sure where she'd rank it. Ultimately it would depend on whether she lived to see morning or got herself murdered.

She nibbled her thumbnail as she paced her apartment. The track was a continuous loop from the kitchen to the living room, down the hall to her bedroom. A sharp left turn took her through the Jack-and-Jill style bathroom, into her office, down the other hall, and back into the kitchen where she started it all over again.

Murdered would suck. She wasn't dumb enough to think only bad people ever got themselves killed, of course. Lots of good, well-intentioned people got themselves whacked every day. But if she polled her co-workers and friends about the most likely way she'd meet her end, murdered wouldn't make the top ten. She was too nice, they'd say. Too cheerful and helpful and…

"Too damned curious," Felicity muttered as she twisted her fingers together.

This time she didn't ferret out some indiscretion or uncover a white lie. No. This time she was going to get herself skewered. By an arrow. Right through her heart. She pressed her hand over the still-beating organ, the flannel pajama top soft and worn beneath her palm. Wait. Did people get murdered in pink flannel dotted with cute, fluffy white sheep? Oh, God. She was going to die in sheep PJs with her hair knotted up in a grubby scrunchie and socks that didn't match.

Maybe she should call 9-1-1.

She touched her smartphone on the kitchen counter. It wasn't the first time she'd thought about calling. Throughout the day she'd catch herself fiddling with the phone. Three short key touches. That was all it would take. But she always talked herself out of it. Why? Because calling the police was dumb. Even if she talked to Quentin Lance, what would she say?

"Hey, Quentin," Felicity said, mocking herself as she moved through the dining room and into the living room. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled, low, in the distance. "You know that guy you've been after? The one who saved Oliver and me from kidnappers, snapped that one guy's neck, and then started running around putting arrows in people? I saw him last night. Nice hood. Very stylish. I think he wants to kill me."

She jerked to a stop. "Oh, God," she groaned as she covered her face, her hands sliding under her glasses to push them high on her forehead. She flopped onto the brown leather couch behind her. Her head dropped back as her hands fell limp against the cushions. "Where did I see him?" she asked the white ceiling above her. "Oh, some little, out of the way warehouse owned by a company that doesn't exist. A company set up with millions of dollars embezzled from Queen Consolidated."

That was not a conversation she wanted to have. Especially with the police. It would be bad.

She couldn't back off now, though. Not when she was this close. She couldn't stop now just because she was afraid. She had to see this through.

The only problem was, the vigilante now knew, too.

Sighing, Felicity leaned forward and adjusted her glasses. She grabbed her tablet computer from the coffee table and rested it across her knees. As she nibbled her lip, she scrolled down the screen. The stream of information sent a fresh wave of misery and helplessness through her and kicked her heart
into overdrive.

It hadn't been there before, but it was there now. Someone had hacked into the QC system. There were footprints everywhere. In some spots it was nearly undetectable, like NSA scary good. In others they were sloppy as hell, almost amateurish. The worst part was they seemed to know exactly where to go, what they were looking for, and how to best access it, and they'd used her security clearance to do it.

After that it was a simple matter of following breadcrumbs across the net to basic public records. Then the records to Tempest. Tempest to that damned warehouse.

She'd cleaned the trail up, of course. It couldn't be left there for anyone else to find. The question now, of course, was who'd done it. It had to be the vigilante. The news had reported many instances where he'd gotten into his victims' records and bank accounts. He then used that access to strip away assets and redistribute the wealth back to the people of Starling City. But what had set him off against the Queens? Was it the missing money? Had he, somehow, caught wind of an illegal transfer and targeted them?

Whatever it was, he'd seen the warehouse. He'd seen the boat. He had to know the significance of the wreckage. He had to know what that implied. Somehow Felicity knew he wouldn't drop by to have a nice sit down and ask. No, the vigilante was all shoot first, ask questions… never.

The tablet screen blurred before her tired eyes, and Felicity pulled her glasses off. She tossed them back on the table before she propped her elbow on her knee, her forehead against her palm. All she'd wanted years ago when this mess started were answers. The more she dug, the more questions she had, the more secrets she uncovered, the more questions she was left with. Now she was sitting on a time bomb.

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I am so screwed."

She needed help. She needed someone she could trust, but there wasn't anyone. She couldn't call Tommy. Putting his life at risk after everything he'd done for her was unacceptable. The Queens were out for obvious reasons. Even Walter. She couldn't put him in that position. And Oliver… Felicity's chest tightened as her throat constricted. Her eyelids burned. She pulled in a shaky breath. God, she wanted Oliver. She was so tired of being alone. Tired of being scared. She'd done it for so long. Worked so hard to be careful and never let anyone know. Now it was all falling apart and she didn't know what to do. Didn't know who to trust.

Trust and Oliver didn't exactly go hand in hand these days. Everything he did and said seemed calculated to hurt her, to stir up her deepest fears, and send her running. Now, every time he opened his mouth, Felicity doubted him. Hell, if she didn't know better, she'd even suspect he hadn't been marooned on an island, alone, for five years.

How could she find comfort in that? In him? How could she still love him? And why was it that—when everything was falling apart around her— all she wanted was him to hold her hand and promise everything was going to be all right? Everything out of his mouth was a lie.

Her chin wobbled as she slid her hand from her brow to her eyes. Her ragged breath filled her ears. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't. She'd spent years wishing the last five years would turn out to be a bad dream. Now that it was, now that she had him back, she still couldn't be with him.

She couldn't even tell him what was going on. Not after everything he'd been through. Not when she didn't know the whole truth herself. She couldn't put him in that kind of danger. Someone had already tried to kidnap him. She wouldn't land him in the crosshairs of another killer, a cop who
already hated him, and a vigilante with a thing for slaughtering one percenters. She had to protect him.

Felicity straightened as she wiped her eyes. She blew out an unsteady breath as she smoothed her hands up and down her thighs. Enough. She needed to calm down and focus. Panicking didn't solve problems. Action did. Cool, calm, rational choices that elevated the head over the heart.

Put that way, Felicity only had one option. She stood and hurried back into the kitchen, her socked feet slipping a little on the slick surface of the hardwood. She paused to wipe her eyes and blow her nose with a paper towel before she picked up her cell phone. She dialed from memory. That was part of the agreement. Nothing in writing. Nothing saved on a computer or in a contact list. The line rang twice before voicemail picked up.

Felicity tightened her grip on the phone. She fought to keep the tremor from her voice. "It's me. I need to see you."

She cut the call with a simple press of the onscreen button. After she erased the call from her phone's log, she cradled it to her chest and hoped she hadn't made a very big mistake.

"Screw it." She tossed the phone back onto the counter and stalked to the fridge.

Two minutes later she was several spoonfuls into a pint of mint chocolate chip ice cream with added fudge sauce. Who cared about calories if she was about to get arrowed anyway?

Felicity licked a smear of chocolate from the back of the spoon when something made her pause. A sound. A faint scuff. She peeked around the doorway toward her living room. The noise came again. Wait. Was that her doorknob? Had someone touched the knob? Did vigilantes use the front door? Felicity froze. Her eyes widened as her heart leapt into a sprint. A trickle of melting ice cream dribbled over the fingers locked tight around the spoon, then dripped to the floor.

Maybe it was her imagination. Maybe it was her neighbor across the hall. He sometimes went out, got drunk, and confused her apartment for his. Maybe —

The sudden bang on the door made her squeak as she jumped. The pint slipped from her fingers and hit the floor with a clap as the spoon shot from her fingers and pinged off the wall before clattering to the ground.

Felicity fumbled behind her for the knife block. Her fingers found, and curved around, one of the thick handles. The blade scraped against the butcher block as she pulled it free. Grip tight, she slipped back into the living room. Her socked feet allowed her to approach the front door without sound.

The knock came again.

"Felicity?"

Oliver. She closed her eyes as relief stole strength from her legs, making her sag. She practically pounced on the door to slide the security chain back. She flipped open the deadbolts in a quick one-two-three succession before she whipped the door open so fast it created suction.

Oliver stood on the other side — devastatingly handsome, smiling, rock solid, and there. His hair and black wool coat were damp from the rain, his hands tucked in the pockets. Felicity tightened her grip on the doorknob to keep from doing something embarrassing like hurling herself at him and blurring out everything.
"Oh. Hey." His smile faded. His eyes dipped before zipping back up to hers. His brow furrowed. "Did I, uh, come at a bad time?"

"What?"

His mouth firmed. He pointed.

Felicity looked down at the large chef’s knife still clutched in her fist. Light ran down its wicked edge all the way to its point. "Oh. I was… um…” She couldn’t think of a lie. How funny was that? She’d told so many for so long the well had apparently run dry. She shook her head as she waved him forward with a flick of the blade. The stainless steel sliced through the air as she poked it toward the living room.

Oliver sidled around her. He arched his back to put more distance between them as he reached for her arm. "Let me just…” He caught her wrist with one hand and the hilt of the knife with the other. He gently pried it from her fingers. "There. That's… That's better."

She shut the door and relocked it. "What are you doing here?"

He looked around, apparently for a place to put the knife, but seemed to give up and let it hang loose at his side. "Are you all right?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because you're trembling."

Felicity caught the cuffs of her pajama sleeves and curled them into her palms. "It's cold in here."

"No. It's not."

"Now you get to tell me if I'm cold or not? I should have added that to the divorce conditions." She turned on her heel and stalked back to the living room. "Is that why you're here?"

"You know why I'm here."

She waited.

"I'm here about the money."

Her pulse spiked. "What about it? I thought that was all settled with Accounting."

Oliver trailed after her. He deposited the knife on the coffee table before shrugged out of his coat. No suit for this visit. Just jeans, sturdy boots, and a tight, black knit shirt that molded every chiseled muscle like some freaking chocolate coating begging to be licked off. He took his time perusing the apartment, even glancing down the hall toward her bedroom. Finally, he wandered into the living room.

Felicity flipped her tablet off and set it on the table. As she occupied herself with folding the lime green blanket tossed at the foot of the couch, she tried to see her apartment through the eyes of the man who knew its entirety could easily fit in his bedroom alone.

She didn't care, though. She loved the brownstone walk-up. When she'd moved out of the Queen mansion, all she'd wanted was a quiet place where she felt no pressure to be anything other than herself. As soon as she'd walked through the door of the third floor apartment, she’d fallen in love with the sage green walls and honey-toned floors, the white wood and strong natural light. After all
her belongings, including her plump, cozy furniture, were delivered, the flat wasn't just some space she paid rent on. It was the one safe place she'd made for herself. It was home.

Oliver paused at the built-in bookshelves flanking the simple gas fireplace. He tipped his head to read the spines as he trailed his fingertips over the titles. He moved on, ultimately coming to a stop in front of the window and touching the potted plant on the window sill and letting one long front of the Boston Fern slip through his fingers before he faced her. "This is nice. Very… you."

"I'm thrilled you approve. What do you want?"

"I told you." He tossed his coat over the armchair. "I was checking up on the money. I wanted to make sure my mom wasn't in any trouble."

"Of course she's not. It's her money."

"It's company money. Isn't evading the IRS how they got Capone?"

"It's how they get all criminals. Moira isn't evading anything. It'll be fine, Oliver. It's not like your mom's going to jail."

"Speaking of… The cops came by this morning."

Felicity tensed. "Oh? More questions about the vigilante?"

"No. About Unidac. I'm sure you heard about Holder and Rasmussen."

"Of course." Felicity swallowed hard. Her hands shook, so she clasped them together in front of her. "It was all over the office. The vigilante—"

"Not the vigilante."

"No? Oh."

Should that be a relief? It felt like it should. Two less bodies on the guy's tally. Okay. That had to be good. Holder and Rasmussen didn't exactly have the rep for being on the up and up. Shady people had shady friends. People like that tended to make enemies. So maybe this wasn't so bad after all. Maybe she was blowing things out of proportion.

"Lance and his partner seem to think it's a professional job," Oliver said as he circled her dining room table. He seemed particularly interested in the vase in the middle. One he'd given to her on their first trip to Spain together. His eyes glittered. "They think it's tied to the upcoming Unidac auction."


He made a soft sound of agreement and then paused. He darted a quick look her way before he crossed to the kitchen. He crouched in the doorway and picked up the fallen ice cream container. "Huh," he said as he peeked inside. "Mint chocolate chip." He stood and placed the container on the counter, studied it for a moment. He slowly turned back to her. His eyes narrowed. "Okay. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she lied. What was she supposed to say? There was plenty wrong and she still wanted to trust him after every lie. After every time he'd pushed her away.

His look was pure disbelief. "Mint chocolate is your go-to stress food, Felicity. Don't tell me
nothing's wrong. I know you."

"I wish I could say the same about you."

Oliver took his time replacing the ice cream lid. "I know things haven't been easy between us but…" He lingered on her face. "I do care about what happens to you, Felicity. No matter what happens. I need you to believe that. If you're in trouble, if you need help—"

"What? You're going to swoop in like Batman and make everything okay for the helpless woman?" She rolled her eyes. "Please. I've been taking care of myself for five years. I don't need you. You know what? It's late. I'm tired and not in the mood to be interrogated. So leave."

"Enough." He crossed to her with long, strong strides, caught her by the shoulders, and hauler her closer. He gave her a small shake. "You answered the door with a knife, Felicity. What is going on? Did something else happen? The truth."

"Why should I give you what you won't give me?"

"What are you —"

"Get off it, Oliver." She jerked away from him, hating his touch because she wanted it. "You never tell me anything. I ask. You evade. We both pretend not to notice. I don't push because I'm afraid of asking for too much from you too soon. But I am not a fool."

His face shuttered.

"See? That." She ticked both index fingers at his face. "Right there. That's the problem, Oliver. You keep shutting me out. It's like… like I'm looking at two different people all the time. I can't tell where the truth starts and ends with you. Or maybe it's all lies. I don't know. I used to be able to tell. I was your wife, for crying out loud. But ever since you came back, all you seem to do is lie. Now you show up on my door, demanding I be honest with you? Ordering me to tell you the truth? You first! Pick something. Anything! Just stop lying to me!"

The apartment went silent. Lightning flashed in a rapid strobe. Thunder rattled the window, and a steady rain sang an off-key tune as it bounced off the metal of the fire escape.

Felicity closed her eyes and dragged a hand over her head. The breath she released shook. Everything inside her felt like a tightly drawn thread beginning to fray. Every second another filament snapped. Soon there would be nothing left of her control or her nerves. When that moment came, she didn't want it to be in front of Oliver Queen.

She massaged her forehead. "I can't do this right now, Oliver. I won't."

"Felicity."

"Please," she whispered, her voice cracking.

He sighed. Felicity went rigid even as his arms closed around her. He tugged her close. She fought it – or perhaps she just fooled herself into thinking she did – but when he wrapped her close, when he tucked her head under his chin and smoothed his hand down her back, and murmured that he had her, that she was safe… Felicity believed him. Maybe she wanted to. Maybe it was because he actually sounded like he meant it. Whatever the reason, she let herself lean on him and breathe him in, finding strength and comfort and hope in him merely being there.

In that moment she wasn't alone anymore. She wasn't scared. She didn't need to fight. She didn't
need to be strong because – in that moment – Oliver would be strong for her. It was as if the current of chaos she'd been fighting for so long took mercy on her and deposited her on a rock. The fear, stress, and pain flooded through her, bringing exhaustion. Felicity let her eyes fall shut. She let herself lean into him. He was here. He had her. She was safe. That was all that mattered.

"I've got you," Oliver promised, his voice low and husky. His broad hand stroked up and down between her shoulder blades. "It's all right. You don't have to be afraid, Felicity. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Just let me help you."

And as easy as that, the chaos claimed her again, dragging her back into the upheaval. Felicity fought it as she struggled against Oliver's hold. She pushed against his chest. Oliver let her go but not far. His hands slid down her arms to cup her elbows.

Even as she shook her head, Oliver tried to hold on to her. Pain shadowed his face. "Felicity."

"No. Just… No." She wiggled one arm free. "Don't do this, Oliver. Don't. I can't."

He grimaced. "Felicity. Whatever is going on… I know I've made mistakes but please. Let me help you."

She squeezed her eyes shut. "I can't!"

"Why?"

"Because I can't trust you!" she burst out, fury and fear igniting into one strong surge that allowed her to jerk free. "Is that what you need to hear? I can't let myself trust this!"

His chest rose and fell sharply. His hands fell to his sides.

Frustration welled up. It tightened her muscles, crawled up her spin. Her shoulders hunched upward as the urge to lash out, to hit him, fired through her blood. "You lie to me all the time. I don't know what to do with that. You keep doing this – pushing me away, then coming back and acting like I'm supposed to fall into your arms and let you play hero. I can't do it anymore. I can't want this."

"Want what?" Oliver demanded.

"This." Felicity flung a hand at him. "Any of this. You. To want you here. To want you hold me. To believe you when you say everything's going to be okay and that you can help me fix this. Because it's not going to be okay, Oliver. You can't fix this. And I can't rely on you. So I am the only person I can rely on is me."

"Fix what? Felicity, you've got to tell me what's going on or you're right. I can't help you."

Hopelessness opened up inside her. Ironic, really, considering everything she'd hoped for had happened these last few days. Now that she had it, though, it was going to cost her and cost her big. She'd be damned if she'd take Oliver down with her.

"Just go, Oliver. Walk away." She pushed around him, dismissing him as she headed for the hall that would take her to her bedroom. "That's what you do best."
He'd scared his own wife. Terrified her to the point she'd answered the damned door armed with a knife. To the extent she stood there, trembling, while she raged about how much she didn't want to need him. How he'd failed her. Oliver wasn't sure which hurt more: hearing it, or knowing she was right.

Whatever was going on, whatever reason she had for lying about following the money trail to the warehouse, she was too afraid to tell him. Afraid to trust him because he'd hurt her. In some twist of fate, trying to keep her safe by keeping her away had backfired in the worst way. He didn't know how to fix it.

Was a half-truth better than a whole lie, or worse than no truth at all? He couldn't tell her his secret. No one could ever know that. But the situation was obviously spiraling out of control. Whatever was going on, Felicity had unwittingly immersed herself in the middle of it, and the one person who could best protect her had made himself her biggest enemy.

Maybe whoever salvaged the Queen's Gambit didn't know about her yet. Maybe he was the only one who knew Felicity had followed the same money trail he'd followed. Maybe they didn't know what she'd seen. If that was true, no one else ever had to know. Once the vigilante didn't pursue it, didn't pursue her, Felicity's fear would fade. He just had to make sure she hadn't told anyone about what she'd found. That she didn't trust anyone but him.

"Felicity, I never meant to —"

She whipped around. Her face was flushed red by the heat of her anger, her eyes flashing fire. Her hands sank low on her hips. "What? Lie to me? Hurt me? Cheat on me? Well, congratulations. You somehow managed to do all three."

"I didn't…" He snapped his jaw shut.

"You didn't what?"

He opened his mouth to answer but his voice wouldn't emerge.

Felicity's eyes turned to slits. She stepped toward him. "Oliver. You didn't what?" When he didn't respond, her eyes narrowed even more. Her head ticked to the side. "What was her name?"

"Whose name?"

"The woman you slept with."

The change in conversational direction was enough to give him whiplash. "What does that have to do with —"

"Your mother may buy this irresponsible, adolescent playboy bullshit, Oliver, but I was married to you. I know better." She moved closer. "Her name, Oliver. Now."

Oliver couldn't. He didn't know if his brain failed to conjure a name because it honestly couldn't think of one or if it simply refused to aid in continuing his deception. He actually stuttered.

Outrage deepened her flush. "You bastard!" Felicity grabbed the nearest thing, a purple and green stripped throw pillow, and threw it at him. It hit his chest and dropped, limp, to the floor. "There was no woman, was there! You lied! How could you lie? Why would you do that to me? If you wanted out of the damned marriage, you should have said so instead of screwing me after screwing me! Y-You… You…"
He caught her arm when she went for the next nearest object, the TV remote, and swung her around to face him. "Would you just wait!"

He shouldn't have touched her. Oliver knew it the second she stumbled into him. He caught her waist to steady her, the soft flannel of her pajamas bunching beneath his palms. Except for his thumb. His thumb touched the bare, hot flesh of her belly.

She breathed hard – part anger, part fear – and each near pant pushed her breasts against his chest. This close he could see the healing cut on her mouth. See the purple and green bruises that still shadowed her face where she'd been struck during the kidnapping. More marks marred her throat. Marks left by his hand.

Most of all he saw pain in her eyes. Betrayal. She shook her head. "Why would you do that to me, Oliver? Why would you let me think…" She thumped his chest with her fist. "Why, damn you!"

He tightened his hold on her hips, jerked her forward. He shoved his face into hers, his nose nearly touching hers as his own pain ripped to the surface and he practically snarled, "Because I'm broken, damn it! Don't you understand that?"

Confusion pinched the corners of her eyes. "What are you…"

"I don't sleep. I barely eat." He let out a rough breath before lifting a hand to her throat to touch the bruises he'd put there. "That first night. I hurt you. I…" He swallowed. "I could have —"

Felicity caught his hand. Squeezed. The confusion morphed to pity. "Oliver."

His eyes burned but he couldn't look away. He couldn't lie either. He wasn't strong enough for it. Not now. Not like this. Not when lying had pushed them so far apart that the distance itself was a danger. Damned if he did, damned if he didn't. Wasn't it better to be damned for the animal he was than the façade?

He traced the bruises that discolored her flesh with a tender touch. "I don't want to hurt you. The only way I know how to stop is to —"

"Hurt me," she finished for him, the words so soft he almost missed them in a boom of thunder.

"You're safer away from me."

"Do you really believe that?" When she went to stroke his hair, he tightened his grip, preventing it. Felicity hesitated, then rested the hand against his chest instead. She met his stare head on, lifted her chin. "I'm not afraid of you."

"You should be."

"Never."

He closed his eyes and turned his face away. God, he wanted to believe that. But he couldn't because she didn't know. She didn't understand. She hadn't seen. When she did, she would be afraid, and she'd be justified. Then what? There would be no pity. No understanding. No delicate touch. She'd turn away in disgust. She'd run. Anger, he could handle. Fear? Revulsion? That would kill him.

Oliver made himself look at her. No pretenses this time. No masks. Just him – unguarded and raw, every agonizing memory burning his brain, his blood – as that darkness in his soul rose up. The beast in him began to pace. "You don't know what I did to survive."
He gripped her hips, not sure if he did it to keep her there or keep her from retreating. His thumb traced a half-moon across her hip bone. He stroked downward again. His finger pushed beneath the drawstring belt of the pajama bottoms. Lower. Her stomach tightened. Her legs shifted, restless, against his. He smirked—fifty percent arrogance; fifty percent challenge. "Prove it."

Felicity's breathing changed, grew ragged. Her pupils dilated a second before she hissed, "Damn you, Oliver Queen."

He wasn't sure who made the first move. It didn't really matter. Her mouth fused with his. He hauled her closer, practically lifting her off her feet as they stumbled backward. His hands found her ass. He hoisted her as her legs wrapped around him. Her fingers sank into his hair, clenched tight. He bit her bottom lip. She scored his scalp with her nails as she rocked her pelvis against his erection.

The floor tilted underfoot. Oliver aimed for the couch. He almost made it, too. They hit the cushions but tumbled off to the floor.

Oliver took the brunt of it with his shoulder. Concern that she'd been hurt vanished when Felicity laughed as she rolled on top of him and took his mouth again. She yanked at his shirt, tugging on the tight knit to free it from under his belt. When it didn't give fast enough, she swore and sat up. Her knees landed on either side of his hips and Oliver molded the curve of her butt down her flank, then up against, this time following the line of her inner thighs to the junction in-between. He stroked his thumbs across the taut fabric there as Felicity pulled at her top, fighting to free herself from the thick, pink material.

Oliver flipped her. The coffee table screeched as it bumped across the floor. Breathing hard, he rose over her, stretched her arms above her head against the hardwood. Their mouths brushed, but when Felicity raised her head to taste his again, he pulled back. Somewhere in their struggle her hair had come down. She'd lost the bottom four buttons of the pajama top. The fabric splayed across her belly, open almost all the way to her breasts.

He stared at those lush mounds. Wet his lips as he watched their rapid rise and fall beneath the fabric. Her stomach dimpled in with every gasping exhale. Her nipples peaked. His fingers flexed around her wrists. Tightened.

Lightning flashed through the apartment, followed by a roll of thunder so violent Oliver knew they'd both felt it vibrate through the floor. Their eyes met.

This was going to happen. Did she understand that? Did she understand that once he let go… He wasn't that Oliver Queen anymore. He wasn't satin sheets and slow seductions. It was sweaty and raw and dark and… Oliver shoved his thigh between her legs, wedged hers further apart so he could rock against her. Hard. She moaned. Her fingers straightened, curled back into her fists. Those tight nipples grazed his chest, unleashing a growl that rumbled through his chest.

And then a wicked gleam flashed through her eyes. Her mouth curved. She undulated beneath him—stretching, arching her back off the floor with a muscle control gained only through years of yoga. Her breasts lifted in blatant offer. Teasing him. Tormenting. Daring.

It was wrong. Wrong time, wrong place, wrong everything. She'd regret it in the morning. He knew that. But it didn't matter. It was a fire. A fever. And there was only one way to satiate it.

Oliver lowered his mouth toward one peak. He nipped it through the fabric, groaned when Felicity
whimpered and writhed in pleasure beneath him.

He didn't remember releasing her, but her fingers were suddenly laced together at the back of his skull, tugging him down in silent demand that he replace his teeth with the hot wetness of his mouth.

He flattened his hand against her belly, felt a surge of satisfaction when she quivered. He was going to taste her. Lick every fucking inch of her.

"Oh, God," she whimpered, making him wonder if he'd said that – warned her – out loud.

She lifted her bottom off the floor and rubbed herself against him, letting him feel the heat of her arousal through her thin pajamas pants.

Oliver stopped. His hands slapped against the floor, bracketing her beneath him. His head snapped up. His attention shot from the front door to the hall and back. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. He shifted his weight to his toes.

Felicity's head thumped against the floor. "Son of a… Are you kidding me?"

"Shhh."

"Don't you shush me!" She shoved against his chest but her slight strength didn't budge him. "Get off me!"

Without taking his eyes off from the entryway, Oliver clamped a hand over her mouth. He dipped his head low. "Did you hear that?"

Felicity twisted her head to the side, easily freeing her mouth from beneath his palm. "What?"

Oliver reached over and slid the knife off the table. "Someone's on the fire escape."

She turned white. "Oh, God. He's here?"

Oliver grabbed her hand and lurched to his feet. "Move!" he snapped, dragging her with him whether she liked it or not.

He ran for the front door, only making it a few steps before it was kicked open from the other side. Oliver caught a tall build, wide shoulders, but most importantly, the compact assault rifle in the man's hands.

Oliver veered left, Felicity behind him, as the assailant pulled the trigger. Gunfire and thunder mixed as bullets cut a neat line from one end of the living room to the other – catching the framed photographs there, kicking them off the walls, and showering the air with glass. Felicity screamed as Oliver cut back through the dining room, through her office, through the bathroom, and into her bedroom.

He barely cleared the door when the window shattered. Another gunman tumbled to the floor, landing with a thud next to her bed. Oliver shoved Felicity, sending her sliding backwards on the slick hallway floor. He darted passed her, snagging her arm to take her with him as he zigzagged back the way they'd come.

More bullets gave chase. The slugs cut down books, ripped wood, and sliced through furniture to leave it bleeding fat wads of batting. A shadow flickered in front of them. Oliver backpedalled. Felicity collided into his back as another woman – this one clad from head to toe in black leather and sporting a shock of long, white, straight hair – barred their path. She lifted her fists in a classic
fighting stance, but it was the slender, lethal blades clutched in them that had Oliver retreating. A kitchen knife was no match for kerambit knives.

A gun cocked behind them.

Oliver spun, automatically corralling Felicity behind him as he kept the wall at their back. The gunman stepped out of the entryway, leveled the barrel straight at them.

Oliver braced.

Twin shots went off. The rounds punched two holes in the shooter's chest. He dropped like a puppet with his strings cut. The rifle hit the floor and vanished beneath the couch.

The woman bolted.

Diggle rushed through the shattered front door, gun raised. He checked left, right, fired again, dropping another gunman as he charged out of the bedroom. Then the leather-clad assassin was on him, forcing his gun down with a sweep of her arm. She twisted the weapon from his grip, slammed her other elbow back. Diggle blocked it. She came back fast, the blades whistling as she slashed at his face and throat. Special Forces training made Diggle quick, but not quick enough to evade the razor-sharp edge completely and it slashed across his palm, drawing blood.

She spun on a heeled boot, used the momentum to add force behind a kick to his ribs that finally took him down. The assassin launched herself after him. She tumbled across the floor with him, rolling Diggle onto his back as her long, lean legs locked around his chest, effectively pinning his arms at his sides. Her arm swept up. The blade spun between her fingers, allowing her to shift her grip and drive the point straight at Diggle's heart.

Oliver took two running steps forward as he whipped his arm back and then snapped it forward. The chef's knife whistled through the air, clanged as it connected against the other descending blade, and struck with enough force that it slapped the weapon from the woman's hand.

Apparently knowing the tide had turned, and not in her favor, the assassin scrambled to her feet and sprinted out the front door.

Diggle grabbed his gun and was up in seconds. He went after her but, from the clear sound of her fading footsteps on the staircase, she was long gone.

Oliver turned as Felicity flew to him. She practically leapt at him, her arms locking around his neck as his seized around her waist.

"Are you hurt?" Diggle demanded.

Oliver held her tighter, wasn't sure if the thundering heartbeat that rocked him was his or hers. Hell, it was probably both. Heartbeats were good. They meant life. "No."

"Are you hurt, Mr. Queen!"

"No! No."

Sirens whined in the distance, turned into a full-fledged scream as they drew closer. Diggle crouched next to one of the fallen shooter. He pressed two fingers to the man's throat, shoving the collar down to reveal a Chinese symbol. Triad. Oliver recognized it immediately. One of the most dangerous criminal organizations in the world. Even dead, the gunman still clutched the weapon tight in his hand.
Diggle glared at Oliver. "And this, Mr. Queen, is why it's a good idea to have a bodyguard."

~*~

Her home was gone. Utterly destroyed in less time than it took to microwave a bag of popcorn. Felicity pulled the blanket snug around her shoulders and shivered as crime scene workers hefted a black body bag onto a gurney. She turned away as they wheeled it by her and toward the door.

She couldn't move without bumping into a cop, paramedic, photographer, or dead body. It was claustrophobic. One of the forensic people stepped backward, accidentally bumping her, and Felicity shuffled sideways only to catch a gentle elbow to the shoulder. They both apologized and shifted again. Glass crunched underfoot and Felicity winced, grateful Oliver had insisted she put on slippers.

She could feel him watching her. She didn't have to look, but she did anyway. A beat cop was asking questions, scribbling Oliver's answers in his notebook, but Oliver's attention never wavered from her. His face was dark, his jaw locked, and his eyes… She shivered again. If looks could kill.

"Where is she?" Quentin Lance demanded as he pushed his way around the exiting gurney. He sidestepped another cop before managing to break through the crowd. He cut a path straight to Felicity. His hands clamped down on her shoulders. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I..." She looked to Diggle, who was leaning against the back of her couch as a paramedic continued to treat his cut hand. Blood, bright and garish, already stained the white gauze wrapped around his palm. It could have been worse, she told herself. It could have been his throat. Might have been hers. Or Oliver's. She swallowed. "Mr. Diggle saved our lives."

A look of discomfort flickered across Diggle's face. He shifted. "I was just doing my job."

"No," Quentin argued, "your job is protecting him." He glared at Oliver. "It seems like whenever you're around women in this town, they tend to die. You couldn't stay away from her, could you, Queen? You never can. Doesn't matter who it hurts or what they want. You don't care what it costs them. What they lose in the end. You just can't help yourself."

Felicity flinched. "Stop it."

Oliver said nothing.

Quentin's sneered. "Maybe the next time you disappear, we'll be lucky and it'll be permanent."

"Stop it! That's enough!" Felicity shoved her way between the two men. "I'm fine. I'm okay. This wasn't Oliver's fault."

"No?" Quentin's brows shot upward. "Really? Because I was just at his house this morning, warning him about this." He pointed to one of the bodies still on the floor and the thick, dark blood puddle that had formed around it. "About killers just like this. Out there. Targeting families connected to the Unidac auction. Families like his. What does he do? Makes a beeline straight for you. Maybe we have a different definition of love and cherish. I don't know. But I sure as hell wouldn't draw a giant
bull's-eye around the woman I claim to love and lead professional assassins straight to her door."

"But he didn't—"

"It's okay," Oliver said. "He's right."

Felicity's swiped her tangled hair away from her cheek. "What? No!"

Quentin snorted. "Yeah." He dismissed Oliver with one last, disgusted look, then focused on Felicity. "Is there anyone I can call? A friend? Family? Someone you can stay with?"

She shook her head as she adjusted the blanket against her shoulder. "No. I… There's no one."

"She'll stay with us."

It was spoken so softly Felicity didn't think she'd heard right, but when both she and Quentin stared at Oliver, she knew she had.

Oliver expression was an unreadable as stone and as resolute. "We have security. Diggle. She'll be safe at the house."

"But I don't want…" Felicity caught herself. Oliver was right. If there was any safe place in the city, it was the Queen Estate. The place was a fortress with its own private security, dogs, and a state-of-the-art security system. Now, after this, the Queens would only increase measures. Plus Diggle was there. Not only would she be safe from whoever had sent these people after them, the added security presence might deter the vigilante, too. And what better place to keep looking for answers than the heart of the entire riddle?

As for Oliver… Felicity slid him a sideways look. She lingered on his profile. She could keep a closer eye on him too, and maybe even figure out why trouble was suddenly such a good friend.

The paramedic secured the last of the bandaging. "All done."

Diggle straightened. He flexed his hand and winced. "If you're coming with us, you need to pack and change."

When Quentin granted permission with a nod, Felicity wove her way through the crowd to the hall that led to her bedroom. Diggle stayed a respectful distance behind. When she reached her bedroom door, Felicity faced him. "I meant what I said back there. You saved my life. Both of our lives. I don't know how I'll ever be able to repay that."

"I have a funny feeling you'd have been okay either way."

Felicity frowned. "What do you mean?"

Reaching over above her head, Diggle pushed her bedroom door open. They both surveyed the wreckage – the broken window, toppled nightstand, and even the holes from bullets that somehow managed to find their way to the back room and shatter the mirror above her dresser.

Diggle peered down at her. "Trust me, Mrs. Queen. If something like this happens again? Stay with Oliver. That guy has nine lives, and I get the funny feeling he'd use every last one of them to keep you alive."
what are you guilty of?

Sins

Read More About the Olicity Hiatus Challenge
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Felicity decides its time to break down some walls. Oliver makes a painful decision... and a painful discovery.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on July 18, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

Felicity woke in a cocoon of down comforter warmth, sunlight against lacy curtains, and the faint aroma of coffee, bacon, and maple syrup. She stretched, languidly, the toes of one foot peeking out from beneath the covers to be met by the nip of the chilly bedroom. She opened her eyes to the time-faded mural on the ceiling above her. Chubby, naked cherubs stared back.

She blew out a sharp breath. Crap. Not a dream then. Someone really had tried to kill her and Oliver. They'd busted into her apartment like it was the set of some weird action movie and blown holes in just about everything she owned. For all intents and purposes, she was homeless. Now she was here. The Queen Estate. Right back where she started. But anything was better than dead.

She shouldn't have slept as well as she did. Fear might have sharpened exhaustion, but Felicity knew she'd slept as long and deep as she had because she knew she was safe here. She glanced at the ceiling again. The cherubs grinned those eternally eerie, chipmunk-cheeked grins. Correction. Safe with Oliver.

Felicity kicked the covers away. She scooted to the edge of the bed and, as she reached for her glasses, she fished for her slippers with one foot. God, she hated this room. She hated it now as much as she did when she'd slept in it after Oliver's presumed death.

There wasn't really anything wrong with it, she admitted as she opened the double doors of the tall armoire in the corner. Most people would love the history it contained: the antique furniture, carpet, framed needlepoint, and even the record of the Queen family tree itself captured in a series of small, oval shaped oil paintings that lined one wall. The Queen's thrived on legacy, family, and roots. There were pieces in the house – hell, the house itself – that could easily be traced back more than a hundred years.

Felicity tossed her clothes on the bed. It was a perfectly lovely room of Norman Rockwell-esque proportions... if she wanted to be trapped in the past forever. Which, she did not. The past was a dangerous place. Obsessing over what was, what could have been, and what she wished they'd be only perpetuated the blurring of lines between the truth of history and the fallacy of nostalgia.
Nostalgia was seductive. Nostalgia let people see the past through filters that edited out betrayals and lies and left only a glittery, shiny ball of illusion. Illusions you somehow managed to convince yourself were Truth. Felicity gathered her hair into a loose ponytail and secured it with a clip. Self-deception on that grand a scale was a form of denial she couldn't afford. Not after everything that had happened.

She headed for the bathroom, paused next to the closed connecting door that opened into Oliver's bedroom. She touched the knob. Was he awake? Probably. He said he didn't sleep much anymore. Whether that was because he'd become accustomed to it or because, if he tried to sleep, it was riddled with nightmares, Felicity didn't know.

It felt weird to spend the night under the same roof – Oliver on one side of the door, she on the other – and not share the same bed. She'd wanted to. God, she'd wanted to. No matter what seemed to happen, no matter what secrets or lies stood between them, Felicity still felt that pull toward him. It was as strong now as it was when they'd first met.

She flexed her fingers around the handle. She loved Oliver and, now that she knew the truth, she wanted this marriage to work. She was willing to fight for it if Oliver was. Thea had been right the other day in the car. People hid behind illusions of themselves. They used them to push people away, to protect themselves from hurt and the pain of rejection. Sometimes it was easier to cut ties with what could be than reach for it knowing You'd inevitably lose it.

In Oliver's case, Felicity got the feeling he was doing it to protect her as much as he was himself. Odd, really. She never thought of herself as someone who needed protection. She protected. She ran interference between Oliver and his family, she wrangled associates for Walter. She tried to be a friend to Thea. Even Tommy. Dear, sweet, clueless Tommy.

Oliver had suffered, no doubt. He'd lost, and Felicity could only imagine what he'd gone through. Imagine because he hadn't talked to her yet. Wouldn't share that. Why, she didn't know. He said she had no idea what he did in order to survive, but she wanted to know. She wanted him to trust her enough to share those things with her – as ugly and violent as they were sure to be. But didn't that mean she needed to share painful, horrible truths with him as well? Was sharing those burdens an indicator that she wanted to reach across the chasm that still divided them to forge some kind of bridge? Or was it simply cruel? Hadn't he been through enough?

Her hand slid away from the door and dropped to her side. She'd never considered herself a mean person. Hurting Oliver wasn't something she enjoyed, neither was reopening her own wounds for no other purpose than to let them bleed. Everyone, she told herself as she hurried into the bathroom, had scars. Physical. Emotional. Was forcing him to bear the burden of them with her the ultimate faith or simply the ultimate selfishness?

As she showered, Felicity had to admit it. She'd been unfair to Oliver last night. She couldn't accuse him of lying to her, failing to trust her, when she was guilty of the same thing. Well-intentioned or not, he had a right to know and she had to – needed to – trust him if she expected him to trust her. How much she'd tell him, she reasoned as she rinsed shampoo from her hair, she didn't know yet. Her brain and mouth didn't always connect or agree. That often left her blurring out things before thinking them through, often saying them in the worst way possible.

Was there ever a good way to share ugly truths and suspicions? Felicity wondered as she wrapped herself in a fluffy towel and exited the bathroom. Probably not. Maybe the truth, like a bandage, was best dealt with quickly and efficiently. Just rip it off and done. As for help… She adjusted her towel and retrieved her phone from her purse. A quick check of incoming text messages confirmed it. Request received. Assistance incoming, thank God.
She shot a quick text back, complete with date, time and location, then made sure to send it via an app that would erase it – in true Mission: Impossible style, complete with self-destructing message and erasure of all the sender/recipient data that went with it – once the message was read.

After making sure she locked the phone, Felicity put it back in her purse. She eyed the connecting door as she dropped the towel. There really was no choice to make. They couldn't keep dancing in circles around each other for ever. And last night... Last night had been so good. No. Not simply "good." Hot. Sexy. Pretty damned wonderful. Well, at least until the bullets started flying. She grimaced as she tugged on her underwear. Apparently people trying to kill you really dampened the mood.

Once she was dressed, Felicity snagged an orchid colored cardigan from the closet and slipped it over her black cami. Her glasses came next. As she crossed to the connecting door, she buttoned the sweater's middle buttons, then tied the thin, black belt snug around her waist. Her feet seemed to stick at the threshold, her brain arguing against her heart. This was, however, one instance where what was smart wasn't necessarily what was right.

The chatter of the television in Oliver's room drifted through the door, as did the sound of movement. He was definitely awake.

Felicity pressed a hand to her nervous stomach. She took a deep breath. "Okay, Felicity," she murmured as she caught the doorknob. "You're going to go in there and tell him exactly what's going on. It'll be fine. He'll understand. It's the right thing to do. Now. Just do it."

She twisted the knob and pushed the door open as she stepped forward and drew in the breath to say his name.

It didn't emerge.

Oliver stood, shirtless, halfway between the window and the television. Maybe the constant chatter of the news anchor, who was prattling on about the Unidac auction, masked her entrance. Maybe Oliver had simply let his guard down for a moment. Whatever it was, it gave Felicity a long, unhindered view of his naked back. His jeans hung low. Sunlight streamed through the window behind him, illuminating the twisted, jagged scars that ripped from his shoulders downward almost to the middle, almost like he'd been whipped. The wounds almost ruined what had once been a flawless, beautiful dragon tattoo on his left shoulder.

What really drew her eye, what felt like a physical blow to her heart, was the wide belt of scars that spanned his entire lower back. The wounds stretched from one side to the other, like Oliver had been burned or dragged or, hell, maybe both. They still looked raw and ragged despite being healed. They were badges of horrible, painful trauma and agony. Felicity felt each one as if they were her own, leaving her torn between wanting to cry for him and the hell he'd endured, and touching him as if she could heal that hurt while reassuring herself he'd somehow survived it.

Oliver slipped a blue shirt on. He tugged the fabric up, over his shoulders, secreting those scars away, but for Felicity there was no un-seeing them. They seemed seared into her brain.

The door behind her tried to swing shut. It bumped Felicity's butt and shuffled her half a step forward.

Oliver whirled around. His gaze flared hot for a second before his face tightened. He quickly turned that now-covered back to her. "Damn it, Felicity," he growled, "don't you knock?"

"How did... How did you get those?" she whispered. Why hadn't he told her? Why hadn't he... She
studied the rigid set of his shoulders, the faint shake of his hands as he struggled with the collar so he could button up. What the hell? Was he… Was he hiding from her? Was he ashamed? Did he think she was ashamed? Or repulsed? Was that what he meant when he said he was damaged? How could he ever think…

"No. Wait." Felicity crossed the floor with quick strides. She caught his arm and tugged. "The doctor said there were scars but…"

She pulled again, wanting him to face her. When he turned, she knew, of course, it was because he chose to, not because her slight strength had any chance of moving him against his will. She shoved the flaps of the shirt back.

Oliver's hands dropped to his side. He looked away, giving her nothing but his profile and tight jaw.

More scars. Torturous slashes across his shoulder, another long one across his gut that followed the line of his ribs. Another smaller one further down. A strange, large, spider-like one that seemed almost like a brand on his right pectoral. Opposite that mark was another tattoo – this one a strange black star.

Her gaze wandered lower, following the vertical line of Chinese figures tattooed there, to the serrated marks high on his right hip. These punctures, like all the other wounds, had long since healed, but the viciousness of the attack that made them was clear. They formed an odd pattern, she thought as she moved to touch them. A strangely familiar half moon shape that curved inward toward his belly before rounding outward and down to disappear under the waistband of his jeans and…

Teeth.

Oh, God. Shock ripped through her, swaying her on her feet. Felicity tightened her grip on his arm. A bite mark. She'd seen enough Shark Week to know what one looked like when she saw it.

Her fingers shook as they touched his skin. Tears flooded her eyes. Five years, she realized numbly as her heart shattered. Five years of hellish survival. Alone. Lost. Terrified. Not even sure if anyone was searching for him anymore. If anyone wanted him or cared or… She forced herself to swallow. "Oliver."

He clenched his jaw harder. All the muscles and tendons seemed to pulse. "Don't," he ground out.

Her gaze shot to his face. The darkness there, the pain, lanced through her. But more than that, was the fear. It showed in every deep line of his face, the hard line of his mouth, and dark shadows that haunted his eyes. They said a billion things at the same time. Don't pity me. Don't look at me. Don't touch me. Don't leave me. Don't hurt me.

Felicity shifted closer. She tugged his shirt closed, laid a hand against his chest. "Oliver. Talk to me. What happened to you out there?"

He stared straight over her head as he buttoned the shirt. His movement seemed stiff, almost robotic. When he finally looked at her, he looked straight through her as if she were of no consequence. His eyes were remote, the light behind them gone and replaced by an ice that frosted his gravelly tone when he said, "I don't want to talk about it."

Felicity tried not to flinch when he stepped around her, dismissing her with that single gesture. She tried not to let it hurt. She told herself it was another self-protective move on his part. Reminded herself that nobody liked to talk about bad times and relive nightmare moments. But if she stood any chance of ever getting through the walls time had erected between them, someone had to make the
First move. Someone had to start taking them down and make themselves vulnerable.

Growing up in Vegas, she'd watched people risk everything – their vacation money, their entire life savings, their cars, even their houses and their kids' college funds – on a simple roll of the dice. She'd never taken that kind of leap of faith, at least, not unless she was aided by the advantage of counting cards. Every gambler proclaimed you had to know when to put it all on the line and let it ride because if you didn't – if you held back – that chance would never come again.

This was that moment.

Felicity closed her eyes as she released an unsteady breath and sent a silence prayer to Lady Luck. She nodded as she smoothed a hand over the front of her white, leopard print skirt. "I can understand not wanting to talk about it."

Oliver kept his back to her. He turned off the TV.

Felicity rubbed her palms together slowly, took a tentative step toward him. "I'm sorry that I didn't knock. I should have. I just… I wanted to talk to you. About last night."

He set the remote on the table. "There's not much to say. From now on, when you leave the house, you'll go with a guard. Everyone will. The police are looking into the Unidac auction and all the potential bidders now. Sooner or later they'll figure out —"

"That's not what I meant."

His shoulders squared.

"I meant before that."

Tension crept into body, drawing him taller. Larger.

"I know that we've been having a hard time figuring out what this is. I mean, what we're doing." Her hands fluttered up. "With us. And last night I think we both agreed that we still… I mean…" She stopped herself, took a deep breath. "I want you to understand that I meant what I said yesterday. What I did. I still care, Oliver, and I think we can make this work if we try. If we talk. If we're honest with each other about what we want."

He turned then, smoothly, leaned back against the low-rise dresser behind him. His hands curled around its edge. His head tilted to the side. His eyes – still dark, still distant, and yet oddly sharp – honed in on her. The intensity of it made something in her stomach flutter. Was this how the mouse felt in a hawk's gaze?

Oliver rocked back a little. His fingertips drummed on the underside of the dresser's lip. "What do you want, Felicity?"

I want you. Three simple words. Why were they harder to say than I love you?

"I want what I've always wanted." She stepped toward him. "What we've both always wanted."

"I don't need your pity, Felicity, or some misplaced sense of guilt."

She blinked. "That's not what I'm —"

"You saw what happened to me. What I went through." He straightened purposefully, unfurled like a large, predatory cat – all muscle and strength and savagery. "That doesn't mean you know me. It
doesn't mean you know what I've become. So don't stand there and pretend that you've suddenly decided what you want."

Felicity didn't retreat. She lifted her chin. "I'm pretty sure I made that clear last night, and I know you, Oliver. I've always known you."

"I've changed."

"Of course you have. We both have. That doesn't mean I don't know you. It doesn't mean what we had isn't still there. It's obvious after last night that —"

"That we still have great sex? I think we proved that at the hospital."

Her face heated. He wanted to shock her. Wanted to drive her away. That made her more resolute to stay. She was pushing her luck by pushing him, but nothing would change between them if she didn't. She'd caught him off guard when she'd walked in and he hated it; clearly hated whatever weakness he thought those scars represented. She, on the other hand, saw exactly the opposite. She saw a fighter. A survivor. That was the Oliver she knew and loved. Scars didn't change that. His reaction was like any wounded animal's, backing away, snarling and snapping in the hopes of scaring her off because he was too hurt, too terrified, to understand or believe anyone would show kindness. Love. She couldn't let all the snarling chase her away. Not this time.

"It's more than sex and you know it," she told him. "If all you wanted was sex? You'd have had that affair you told your mother you had." She frowned. "Why did you tell her —"

"How exactly do you see this marriage going?" Oliver folded his arms across his chest. "We go back to playing husband and wife, pretending to be happy —"

"We never had to pretend," she said stiffly.

"Acting like nothing's changed. That I'm not sleeping on floors and waking up in a cold sweat at night with my hand at your throat? That you won't go to bed wondering each and every night if this will be the one where I snap and kill you?"

She softened. "Oliver. That's not true."

"It is true." His face hardened even more and the look he shot her was one of clear, stern warning. "The sooner you accept that the sooner you'll understand why this? What we're doing? Will never work."

"It can if —"

"Don't."

Her shoulder dropped. "Don't want? Care? Want to help you? Too late, Oliver." She shrugged, her hands lifted from her sides in a half-hearted flap. "I already do."

"Don't try to rescue me, Felicity. You can't, and I don't need it."

But he did, Felicity realized. Probably now more than ever. She saw it in the caged restlessness inside him. In the memories of the five years on that island. He might have come home, but a part of him would always be stuck there. How much power he gave those memories, what he was willing to let that darkness consume, that was a different battle altogether. One he didn't have to fight alone.

"I'm not Thea," he continued. "I'm not a project you can pick up and put back together again. So
save your energy. Stop fighting so hard and just accept that this is… It's done."

Felicity forced herself to meet his eye. "I don't think we should ever just accept things, Oliver. Ever. And I disagree. I think there's a lot left to fight for. You. Me. The love we have for each other. Our friendship."

He let out a short laugh, scrubbed his hand over his face. "This from the woman who left her wedding right on my nightstand table."

Anger pricked her. She claimed another forward step. "Last night you practically begged me to trust you. You wanted me to tell you what was going on."

He stilled but his eyes cut toward the door as if he wanted to run. He swallowed and dragged them back. "Last night I almost got you killed."

"That wasn't your fault."

"The hell it wasn't. Lance was right."

"No. Quentin was not right."

Oliver pushed himself to his feet. He flung his hand toward the window. "You had assassins in your living room, Felicity! You could have died. That was my fault. I led them to you."

"Because our marriage is a secret? If people wanted to come after this family, they know I'm a part of it. They'd have come after me anyway. You and Diggle are also the only reason I'm still alive. You being there is what saved my life. Why do you keep ignoring that? And if you'd shut up and listen, I'm trying to tell you –"

"That you want our marriage back? That you want… what? The house with the white picket fence? The beige sedan in the driveway and the perfect husband with a nine-to-five job? Do you really think that will ever be me?"

Felicity caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Thea. In her bedroom. Probably coming to let her know breakfast was ready. The connecting door inched open. Damn it. She scratched her forehead. "Oliver."

He didn't seem to hear her. "Life with me isn't normal, Felicity. It will never be normal because I can't be normal. Not ever again. You need to understand that and accept it because I can't do this. I can't be the man you need."

"Stop saying that! I don't need you to be anyone else! I just want you!"

For one fleeting moment he looked like he believed her, like something deep inside him ached to trust that claim, but he shook his head and that glimmer of hope vanished. "You have this vision of the two of us making the perfect home together. One with a couple of floppy eared dogs from the pound. A couple of kids whose names you've probably already circled in a baby book. But that life? It's a dream. It's dead, Felicity. It doesn't exist. It's a fairy tale, and nobody gets a storybook ending. Not you, and sure as hell not me."

It was a sucker punch. A total fluke. But it landed hard. Felicity blanched. The blood rushed from her head so fast it left her lightheaded.

All she ever wanted was a family. A home of her own. A place she belonged. A place where she loved and was loved. Oliver knew that. He'd promised, when he married her, that she had that place.
It wasn't a lie. With him, she had that place. When he vanished, it all crumbled. Everything. Every little piece of him had been stripped from her, and with a few careless words he'd reached out and ripped open scars he didn't even know existed because she, unlike him, wore hers on the inside.

Felicity cleared her throat gently. She fiddled with the bowed belt at her waist. Oddly dull, feeling detached from her own body, she retreated. Her legs felt rubbery beneath her. "I'm going to go now," she said, her voice stilted, "but I want you to understand something. I'm not leaving because you win, or because I'm giving up, or because I believe a word you just said. I'm going before I say something I'll regret and can't take back later."

He went to the window to stare out at the rear gardens as she walked out, slamming his bedroom door behind her.

Oliver closed his eyes. He dropped his head and released a tattered sigh. He wouldn't go after her. He couldn't. No matter how much he wanted to believe her, he knew he was right. Lance was right. He'd endangered her last night. He could have cost Felicity her life.

No matter how much he wanted her, no matter how much he wanted their life together – the one that had been stolen from them – it was a dream. One he'd used to survive five long years. The idea of it had kept him sane. It gave him something to hold on to. Something to fight for in order to get back to Starling City. But that's all it was. A fantasy. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real. He could never forget that.

Love wasn't the point. He loved her. He always would. He'd die before he let anything happen to her. That's why he'd keep her safe until he figured out what the hell was going on and who'd sent those killers to the apartment. But he couldn't let her believe a future existed for them when it didn't. When he couldn't allow it.

He stared at his hands. How could something bring protection and death at the same time? How could he swear to defend Felicity's life and yet be the very thing that could end it? How could he be savior and enemy at the same time?

Loving Felicity meant letting her go. It didn't matter what he wanted or how he felt. He wouldn't drag her down into this hellish abyss with him. She needed light and laughter, not darkness and death. He refused to be the thing that broke her. If that meant losing her all over again… If it meant keeping her alive and letting her find peace with the last few years so that she could move on… He'd do that. If anyone deserved happiness, it was Felicity. She deserved that damned fairy tale life. He couldn't give it to her, but by God, he could love her enough to let her go and find a man who could.

Had he done worse things on the island? Harder? He didn't know. He'd never given up hope before. Never let himself think about a life without Felicity until he was back and the reality of his current path – the things he had to do to avenge his father – finally sank in.

How could he ask Felicity to let such depravity touch her? Once you let that kind of darkness in, it never came out. That darkness was all he was now. Monstrous. Deadly. Felicity was the exact opposite. She was light. Beauty. Life. Shackling her to a lifetime of ugliness – cold and dark and stark – would smother that light. It would kill her soul.

Oliver forced himself to take a breath. He hated the thought of another man with her, another ring on her finger. Of hands other than his touching her the way he'd touched her last night. His mouth soured. Pain ballooned in his chest, making it hard to breathe. He'd expected it. Almost welcomed it like an old friend. That's how he knew it was the right choice.

Saving the city was his mission, but so was saving Felicity from himself.
Thea nudged the connecting door open with two fingers. She leaned her narrow shoulder against the door jamb and folded her arms loose over her chest. "Wow. I thought I'd mastered the art of fucking up. Clearly I was wrong. You still reign supreme. The title and crown are still yours, Ollie." She flashed him a thumbs up. "Congratulations."

Oliver braced his hands against the wood that framed the glass. "Doesn't anybody knock in this house anymore?"

"You wanna talk about it?"

The muscles in his shoulders bunched. "No. I don't."

She sighed. "Of course you don't. You never want to talk to anybody about anything, including whatever happened to you on the island. Not to me. Not to Felicity."

"Leave it alone, Thea."

"Unless, of course, you're lecturing me on my social life." She started toward the door Felicity had vanished through.

"Wait." Oliver's hands slid away from the wall. He faced her. "Where are you going?"

She pivoted toward him. Her brows lifted. "Why should I tell you?"

Oliver rubbed his eyes. He sighed. "I'm sorry," he told her, his voice soft, each word a well of misery. "I need to get better at talking about what happened to me." He looked away, swallowed. His hand clenched into a fist at his side. "But I'm... I'm not ready yet." He might never be. They sure as hell weren't. Oliver searched her face. "Okay?"

Thea studied him for a long time before she tipped her head toward the door. "You have a second?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I want to show you something out back."

Oliver had no choice but to grab his jacket and follow.

~*~

Thea said nothing as she led Oliver out of the house, down the terrace steps, and into the gardens of the estate. She remained silent as they crossed the wooden footbridge spanning the pond, passed the bronze sculptures of the herons, and down the flagstone path to the large stone wall with its hand carved wood gate. She unlatched it and glanced over her shoulder at him before continuing through it.

This, Oliver thought as he surveyed the walled-in courtyard, was the end of the road. It was a little nook of privacy. Nothing fancy. A few stone urns, a low bench and tombstones. Two of them.

Hands in the pockets of his jacket, Oliver studied the stone slabs, unsure what he was supposed to feel standing over his own grave.

Thea crouched in front of the tombstone for Robert Queen. She brushed dead leaves from the top of
it, then trailed her fingertips over the carved letters. "Since you weren't legally dead, Mom had these put here. She said we needed somewhere to mourn. Some way to visit you and talk to you. Sometimes, when I felt… whatever…. I'd come here. After they announced they'd stopped looking for the Queen's Gambit, Mom stopped going out. Pretty soon she stopped talking all together. Felicity was destroyed. She tried to keep things together. She tried to be there for me. And she was until…” Thea shook it away, shrugged. "Then the house got so quiet. So I'd come here." She stood and pointed to the other headstone. "To talk to you."

Oliver stared at the stone. At the engraving. *A loving son and brother, whose light was dimmed far too soon.* Not dimmed, he wanted to argue, struck the urge to kick that stone until it toppled and broke. Snuffed out. Just like his father's. Not by God, not by Fate, but by whoever caused the explosions on the boat. Whoever had purposely sunk it and tried to murder them all.

"It was stupid stuff," Thea continued, "like what I was doing that day. What boy I had a crush on. And then, sometimes, I'd ask you… beg you… to find your way home to me. Now here you are. And the truth is I felt closer to you when you were dead."

Oliver shifted. The headstone drew his attention back. What was he supposed to say? That *that* Oliver Queen was dead? That the one here, now, alive, wasn't the same man? He could barely accept it himself, let alone expect his sister to.

"It was hell where you were," Thea told him, "but it was hell here, too." She stepped closer, put her hand on his arm. "You have got to let someone in, Ollie. If that's me? That's okay. I would be there for you. But Felicity… She's your wife. She needs you. You need her, too."

When he started to argue, she shook her head. "No. Don't. Don't lie to me. I see the way you look at her when you think nobody's watching. I see the way she looks at you. You're both so damned scared of pushing too hard, of wanting too much, that you're stuck." She tightened her grip. "It can't go on like this, Ollie. It's killing both of you. Haven't you both suffered enough? How much more do you have to lose before you stop wasting time fighting against Felicity and starting fighting for her?"

Oliver didn't answer. He didn't even know if there was one. Finally, Thea sighed and walked away. She didn't go far, just to the stone bench where she sat and tugged her cream colored denim jacket closer around her to ward off the chill of the morning.

He crouched in front of his headstone, laced his hands together between his spread knees. Part of him wanted to believe Thea. The other part dismissed it. Being with Felicity was insanity no matter how much she said it was what she wanted. Felicity didn't know the truth, and he couldn't tell her. Not only would she not understand – what sane person would? – but it would place her in a position of either lying for him and turning a blind eye to how he was spending his nights, or betraying him to the world. How could he do that to someone he professed to love?

Thea was too young to understand the complexities of relationships like this. Yes, life had been hell for everyone trapped in this disaster, but simply deciding to be with someone and choosing to believe that love was enough… That was naïve.

Felicity was better off without him. Better off free to move on to a new life before he inflicted anymore damage. That was the truth.

As for Oliver Queen… Oliver sighed as he brushed dirt and twigs and leaves from around the base of the stone, where the grass grew thick and tall. That Oliver was gone. He was buried. Another had returned in his place, in his body, to his life, and nothing would ever be the same again. All true. Yet, at the same time, he wasn't entirely dead either. He'd been transformed. Changed. There was no denying that, just as there was no denying that coming home, being with his friends and family, was
more of a complication than he'd initially planned.

He'd told himself he could pretend. That he could wear a mask of normalcy while lying to everyone's face and find a balance that worked. What he didn't expect were the questions. The suspicions. It was a harder front to maintain than he'd thought it would be. Surprisingly, the hardest person to wrestle was himself – tearing himself between what he knew had to be done and what his soul seemed to need.

How could he have both? He couldn't. It was impossible. His mother and sister he could learn to handle. But Felicity? No. There was no handling that. He couldn't live with her, sleep with her, love her, and still maintain that wall between them. Sooner or later she'd glimpse the truth and, in the end, it would destroy them both.

Was friendship out of the equation? Was it stupid to even hope for that much? Oliver winced. How selfish was that? It would never work. Wasn't last night proof enough of that? He lost all rational thought around her. Always had. There was too much chemistry. Too much emotion. When they touched – even innocently – the sparks were instant and impossible to ignore. No matter how much time passed Oliver doubted it would ever fade. So how could he expect either of them to ever be content with being "just friends?" It seemed cruel.

No. It was better to, once this situation was dealt with and Felicity as safe, sever the bond completely. Walk away. Over time they'd both accept it, let go, and move on. After all there was nothing left to hold them together.

Oliver braced his hands against his knees and started to stand when something in the grass caught his eye. He leaned closer, brushed the plush blades back. A stone, roughly the size of an egg and almost the color of chalk, had been wedged between the edge of the headstone and the earth. He pulled it free and rolled it into his palm.

Not a stone. An angel. The carved wings folded forward, giving the tiny sculpture its rounded shape. Exposure to the elements over the last few years had worn away a lot of the detail, but Oliver could still feel the ridges of each feather. His thumb rubbed the back, picking up a different texture, and he turned it over. The stone's surface was flatter there and inscribed.

_No farewell words were spoken. No time to say goodbye. You were gone before we knew it. And only God knows why._

Oliver frowned as he turned the stone over again, ran his thumb along the v-shaped line of the wings as they came together, almost like arms in front of the angel inside. He glanced over at Thea, who studiously seemed to be examining the toes of her white boots.

He tilted the stone toward the sunlight, gently blew dirt away from the statue's worn face. His thumb stilled. His heart stuttered before breaking into a sprint. Not an angel, he realized. A baby. His baby. Their baby.

Grief ripped through him, bringing tears, burning savagely through every part of him. Killing him. His hand clenched tight around the stone as he squeezed his eyes shut, bowed his head. His mouth trembled.

They'd had a baby. They'd lost a baby.
Thea's hand touched his shoulder. Her other hand touched the back of his head.

She didn't say anything. She didn't have to. And for the first time in almost five years, Oliver Queen cried.

Read More About the Olicity Hiatus Challenge Here
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Oliver breaks his deal with Diggle, and the outcome isn't quite what he expected. Felicity meets some familiar faces in the crowd at the dedication ceremony and plots her next move.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on July 27, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow’s season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

The last time Oliver Queen ran from a problem, he'd slung a duffel bag onto the deck of the Queen's Gambit, kissed his wife's cheek – more a gesture of screw-you than see-you-later – and sailed off into the proverbial sunset. In the five horrific years that followed, running took on a far more literal life-or-death definition. Knowing when to stand his ground, versus knowing when to run, was the only instinct that kept him out of a grave.

This time, he'd slunk out of the Queen house like a thief. That act was everything he tried not to be anymore. Selfish. Cowardly. Irresponsible. Not to mention, Oliver decided as he leaned back in the restaurant booth, utterly desperate. But he'd needed this time and space alone to process. To grieve. He couldn't do that with an entire house full of people watching him, something Thea seemed to instinctively understand. She'd kept everyone, including Diggle, occupied in the living room while Oliver slipped out the front door.

Oliver sighed. He leaned forward in the seat and propped his elbows against the laminated tabletop. He rubbed his forehead. A baby. The concept still seemed so foreign, so unthinkable. They'd had a baby. Felicity had been pregnant. When did she find out? Was it before he got on the boat? God, if it was, why hadn't she told him? If it was after… His heart hurt. Oliver closed his eyes. She'd found out alone. Faced raising a child – his child – alone. His throat closed up. Tears welled. Lost that baby alone. Suffered. And never said a thing.

He drew an unsteady breath. Why hadn't she told him? Not that he blamed her. There were some wounds, he knew, that were too deep to want to reopen. But the minute he held that tiny statue in his hand, Oliver felt the joy and horror and loss all at once. It cut a hole straight to the bottom of his soul, and it left nothing but questions behind. Questions he had no right to expect Felicity to answer when he wouldn't answer hers. When he kept pushing her away claiming the past was too painful. When he shut her down again and again, and then solaced himself with the notion that leaving her in the dark protected her somehow.
Had losing the baby been what forced her, ultimately, out of the Queen house? Why Raisa had said Felicity couldn’t find peace there? Was it part of the reason Felicity had apparently withdrawn from the Queen family? Was it why Walter felt protective enough of Felicity to offer her a job at Queen Consolidated as his executive assistant?

Had it been a boy or a girl?

Grief spiked his chest, making Oliver stop breathing. He pressed his thumbs against his eyelids, forced himself to drag in a painful inhalation. Fucking hell, he’d been cruel. Not on purpose. He was a monster, but even he would never use Felicity’s miscarriage as a weapon.

Already picked out names in a baby book. Oliver groaned, silently cursing himself. Shit. He was such an asshole. He didn’t know the truth when he’d made that crack in his bedroom only hours ago but still. That careless remark must have cut Felicity deep. She didn’t lash back at him though. She could have. Instead she’d walked away. She’d spared him. But the look on her face…

Every time Oliver closed his eyes he saw it. The way she paled. The stillness that overtook her. The quiet. She’d backed away from him as if he’d punched her. Hell, he had struck her, not with fists, but with thoughtlessness. Now – knowing the truth, knowing how he’d hurt her – he’d have to carry that weight for the rest of his life because there was no making that right.

All Felicity had ever wanted was a family. They’d never talked much about hers. “Nothing to say,” was her usual answer when he asked. No one from her family had even attended their wedding. Felicity has ached for a place to belong; somewhere, someone, to call her own. They had that together. He’d promised during their vows. They’d talked about starting a family of their own one day, sure, but they hadn’t been actively trying either. Then he’d left her. In a fit of… Damn, Oliver didn’t even know what anymore. Pride? Arrogance? Did it even matter anymore? He’d left. He’d died. She’d been pregnant.

Until she wasn’t.

Oliver dragged a hand over his face. How had it not destroyed her? It was the ultimate cruelty. Give her everything she wanted – the home, the family, the love – and then strip it away one disaster at a time until she was back where she started. Alone. She didn’t deserve that. No one did.

Had she been alone? She must have been terrified. Horrified. And pain. God, she must have been in so much pain. And he wasn’t even there just to hold her.

Glass twisted his gut, making him nauseous. He had to do something. He couldn't leave her like this. She hurt. He needed to heal. That's what love meant. How the hell he was supposed to do that while keeping her at arm's length and protecting her from the danger he had no idea. But she needed him. He needed her. No one else could understand how that child, even lost, bound them together.

The restaurant door opened. Oliver glanced at the reflection in the window next to him out of reflex. His shoulder tensed as John Diggle stepped inside. The bodyguard looked sharp as always, his black suit crisp, his maroon tie knotted tight and perfectly straight. The smooth, calm air was only slightly marred by the bandage wrapped tight around his hand.

Diggle hesitated in the doorway, then cut a path straight to the pretty, mocha complexioned woman at the counter. Diggle smiled at her. His hand touched her lower back briefly. She said something, tilted her head in Oliver's direction, and Diggle headed his way.

"Crap," Oliver murmured as he shifted on the wood seat. Busted.
Diggle stopped at his table. He barely looked at Oliver, seemed more interested in the red plastic basket of food on the table.

Oliver fiddled with his plastic utensils, absently straightening them on the white paper napkin. "How'd you find me?"

"My sister-in-law." He pointed toward the woman at the counter, gave her a quick grin and wave when she smiled at him. "Carly."

"She's not wearing a wedding ring. Brother out of the picture?"

"Yeah. You could say that. Carly owns this place. She gave me a call to let me know you were here."

"Your own network of spies throughout the city, huh?"

"Something like that." Diggle picked up Oliver's plastic cup. "Chili cheese fries with extra jalapeño, huh?" He took a sip of the water using the straw as he slid onto the bench seat opposite him. "That's a cry for help if ever I've seen one."

Oliver blew out a harsh breath. "I don't know which hurts worse: this or getting shot at by assassins last night."

"Been there," Diggle told him. "Trust me. It's the bullets."

Oliver laughed, even managed a smile, but it faded as anger and pain and regret seeped back through the surface. His mouth tightened into a firm line as he stared at the basket of congealing fries and liquid cheese goo in front of him. "I know I broke our deal. Does this mean you're quitting?"

Diggle folded his hands together on the tabletop. "After the other night? I owe you one. I think I can cut you some slack this time. Consider it my way of saying thank you."

Oliver shrugged, aiming for casual but feeling brittle. "What for?"

"The knife."

"Ah. The knife." He shrugged again. "I got lucky."

A corner of Diggle's mouth lifted. "That was a kitchen knife. It wasn't even weighted properly, yet you threw it for accuracy across a ten foot room."

"Exactly. I got lucky."

Diggle leaned closer. His express was neutral, but his voice grew a rough edge as he said, "I'm not the kind of man you want to take for a fool, Mr. Queen. You understand me?"

"Yes."

"And I think I'm just beginning to understand the kind of man you are."

"Shouldn't take you very long," Oliver said, careful to keep his tone light. He managed a smile. "I'm shallow."

"And very tired."

Oliver got the funny feeling Diggle didn't mean sleep.
Diggle flexed his fingers, folded them again. "I saw Mrs. Queen —"

"Smoak."

"Mrs. Queen," Diggle said again with quiet emphasis. "She was leaving the house this morning with Mr. Steele. She looked upset."

Oliver turned his attention to the street outside the window.

"I asked her if there was anything I could do. She said no, but there was a look in her eye. One I recognized. It's the same one Carly got the day I told her that her husband – my brother, Andy – was dead."

"What happened?"

"To Andy? He was in this line of work. Got killed protecting a client. Left Carly and their son, A.J., behind. Sometimes I think that boy is all that helped her get through that."

Oliver flinched. He was too raw, still too hurt, to cover it.

Diggle nodded slowly. He looked out the window, too. His wide shoulder rose and fell. "Yeah. I had a feeling it was something like that."

The two men sat in silence for a long time, watching people wander by the window and cars roll down the street. For some reason the entire day – with its bright blue skies, fluffy clouds, and sunshine – felt like one giant middle finger.

"The day we buried Andy," Diggle said, breaking the silence, "I went out and got drunk. I stayed that way for days. I still don't remember most of it. I snapped out of it finally, but it took realizing that Carly and A.J. needed me. That I still had people I cared about who I couldn't fail."

He studied Oliver. "I get the feeling I should be impressed I found you upright and not face down on some barroom floor."

"I tried," Oliver lied. He didn't drink. He couldn't risk it. There were too many people to protect, too much work still to be done, to let himself be out of control. Alcohol would only dull his senses and lower too many inhibitions. Lowered defenses would let too many demons in. Or out. He couldn't afford any of that right now. "Besides, there's no place left to drink in this town."

"Yeah, most of them have been put out of business by Poison."

Oliver frowned.

"It's a nightclub downtown owned by Max Fuller. It opened up about a year ago. Put a bunch of places under. Most of the bars in this town are small. They couldn't compete with his deep pockets."

"Max Fuller."

Diggle tipped his head. "You know him?"

"I slept with his fiancée."

Diggle’s snort was part laughter, part disgust.

"I think the only drink he actually would pour me would be poison."

"Well." He smoothed a hand down his tie. "I'm sure he doesn't hold a —"
"It happened at their rehearsal dinner."

Diggle sighed.

"I wasn't married at the time," Oliver told him. "I didn't even know Felicity then."

Why the hell was he explaining? He never explained. He didn't care what people thought. Oliver barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. That wasn't true. He did care. About certain people. People like Felicity, and Thea, and... yeah. In some weird way, John Diggle. Maybe because, of all the people in Starling City, Diggle was a lot like him. A fighter. A survivor.

Having served in Afghanistan, Diggle had probably seen horrors most could never imagine, yet he'd returned home, put on a suit, and somehow managed to blend back into normal society as if he were still normal, too. He'd managed to hide in plain sight. A part of Oliver wondered how he did it. Hell. He envied it.

"I'm sorry about your brother," Oliver told him, meaning it. "It must have been difficult."

"I think about it every day."

"Did they catch the person who..."

"Shot him?" Diggle shook his head. "Disappeared like a ghost. But I keep looking."

"That must be hard."

"I guess that's why I can't figure you out."

Oliver hesitated before lifting his brows and ticking his fingers toward the other man in a vague gesture prompting him to explain.

Diggle studied him before finally sighing and leaning back, one hand still on the table. He tapped his fingers on its surface. His mouth compressed into a tight line as his eyes narrowed in thought. "There probably isn't a person on this planet that hasn't lost somebody they loved. A person they'd give anything just to spend another day with. Those people don't get your kind of miracle. They don't get that person back from the dead. Yet here you are." He looked around the restaurant. "Sitting in a Big Belly Burger, with someone you barely know, instead of spending that time with your mom, your sister, or your wife."

Guilt, he did not need. "It's —"

"Complicated? Yeah. It usually is. But life and death situations usually bring clarity. It helps streamline what's important in life. After seeing Mrs. Queen and, now, seeing you? I think you had one of those moments today."

"What's your point?"

"You got the opportunity to come back. You got that second chance everybody begs for when they're facing down death. Instead of holding on to what you have and fighting for it? You're pissing it away." Diggle paused. "Sir."

"I think if you're going to insult my life and my choices, you should probably start calling me Oliver."

Diggle took another sip of water from the cup. He licked his lips. "Why you're doing this?" He
shrugged. "I don't know. I've been watching you since I hired on, trying to figure it out. Maybe being that close to death, doing whatever you have to in order to survive, changed you. It has a weird way of doing that. Gives you funny thoughts about yourself. About the type of man you really are."

"You know what kind of man I am."


"Obviously you don't watch the news. My entire life is pretty much immortalized in sound bites and TMZ footage."

Diggle leaned forward. He put the drink down and then rested his folded arms along the edge of the table. "I don't pay attention to gossip. I don't put much faith in what I see in the headlines. Especially when I've seen a situation for myself. I know that, when you go through a trial, when you come out the other side of that gauntlet, it can mess with your head. You start to think that letting people in, caring about them, makes you weak. You convince yourself that they're better off without you. Safer. Sometimes you think you're even a threat to them yourself. But that's not true. Letting people in doesn't make you weak. It gives you an edge, maybe even a stronger one because it gives you something to fight for. You can stare down Death with something to live for, or not. Something to live for? Always better."

"Five years on Gilligan's Island isn't the same as five years at war."

"Survival is survival."

"Is this your way of saying you think I'm nuts? Suffering from PTSD?"

"I don't know. After five years, alone, on an island I suspect was more Dr. Moreau than Fantasy... I think there's a good chance you're more different than anybody around here realizes. Maybe more lost, too."

Oliver made himself meet the other man's eye, unblinking. Unflinching. "Do I look lost?"

"Frankly? Yeah. You do. Because you're sitting here, probably having one of the most honest conversations I think you've had since I've met you, and it's with your bodyguard." Diggle cocked his head. "Or maybe it's easier with strangers. People who aren't pushing you to remember. Begging you to be who you used to be. Or worse. Begging you to be somebody else."

Oliver shifted his jaw.

"Whatever's going on between you and Mrs. Queen? She's a good woman. I like her. And she loves you. I saw it the first time I met the two of you." He held up hand hands when Oliver started to argue. "I'm no expert at this, but I don't think she wants you to be anybody but who you are. Because love isn't about changing or saving a person. I think it's about finding the person who's already the right fit. Then holding on to them no matter what."

Oliver's laugh was sharp and bitter. "I think I burnt that particular bridge. Napalmed it, actually."

Diggle shrugged. "So things didn't go exactly as you hoped. So what? Your wife is still there. Waiting. The two of you? You fit. I've seen it. If you can open up, if you can take that risk with your heart? You'll be ready for her the next time you meet." His attention shifted toward the door. He put the cup down and sat up a little straighter. "Speaking of."

Oliver twisted in his seat to look over his shoulder at the door as Felicity walked in. His heart twisted in his chest, felt like it grew larger, lighter, as he took in her purple, belted trench coat and strappy
black heels. Her ponytail – worn high and free – made her look young and fresh, like she'd just popped out of a genie bottle. He found himself smiling a little as that bundle of hair shifted and danced behind her, catching light. His own, personal wish-granting sprite.

As if sensing his stare, she turned. Their eyes met. Her smile came then, curling her pretty pink mouth and making those blue eyes sparkle.

She was so damned beautiful. Oliver was helpless against the thought as she made her way between the tables to their booth. How was it the simple sight of someone felt like a balm? Did she feel the same when she looked at him? Like the shackles chaining her to the past, to all the pain and darkness that lingered there, somehow loosened?

Maybe Diggle was right. Maybe the right thing to do was fight for what he and Felicity had together rather than letting it go, and telling himself it was for the best. Maybe having her in his life would give him something more to fight for. Something to ground him in his struggle against the violence and the darkness that sometimes seemed to threaten his soul. Maybe there was a way to have her and protect her at the same time. The problem was, would she even want him once she realized the truth?

Would love – simple, stupid love – be enough to help them both survive what he'd become?

Felicity glanced from Oliver to Diggle and back. She stripped her fingers through her ponytail, a nervous gesture that pulled the locks taut before letting them spring back into almost perfect coils, before she slid both hands into pockets of her coat. Though she smiled again, it didn't quite meet her eyes this time. "There you are. Are you ready?"

Oliver frowned. She didn't seem upset. Why wasn't she upset? He'd vanished from the house without a guard, after nearly getting them both shot to death, and she wasn't angry that he'd done something so stupid? He looked to Diggle.

The bodyguard pushed the drink and fries away from him, then scooted to the edge of the seat. "Of course." He stood. "I apologize again for the confusion at the house. My associate was supposed to have communicated the split shift this morning so that Mr. Queen could get a few minutes to himself."

As lies went, it was pretty good, and, Oliver realized, delivered with enough sincerity and plausibility to be believable. Maybe this thing with Diggle would have more advantages than he originally thought.

Felicity touched the guard's arm. "It's all right. It happens. The main thing is he's okay. That's all I care about."

Oliver rose. "I'm sorry if I worried you."

Her gaze shifted toward him and lingered. This time there was sympathy in those blue eyes. Understanding. "It's okay."

A bit of weight he hadn't even realized was there lessened, somehow making it easier to breathe.

Felicity checked her watch. Her brow crinkled. "We should go if we don't want to be late for the dedication ceremony."

Oliver looked down at his street cloths. "I'm not exactly —"

"Your suit's in the limo parked outside. It's waiting to take you and Mr. Diggle to the site," Felicity told him. "You can change when you get there. The speech Moira had prepared is in the inside
breast pocket if you want to use it." She checked her watch again. "I need to go. I'm supposed to be with Walter already." She turned to Diggle. "You'll make sure he gets there, right?"

Diggle smiled at her, but his gaze met Oliver's over the top of her head. "Don't worry, Mrs. Queen. I've always got my eye on him."

~*~

In Felicity's experience, dedication ceremonies were a snoozefest. Nothing but boring politicians making equally boring speeches to people whose only interest in attending was a picture in the paper, a positive blurb in some society column, and a kudos to wave in the public's face if ever questioned about their dedication to lifting Starling City from its current economic woes. Cut a ribbon. Shovel some dirt. Done.

Tack the Queen family name on to the event, however, and suddenly ceremony meant party, and everybody in town – from legit business associations and friends, to paparazzi and hangers-on looking to score a front row seat to what would, hopefully, turn into a media circus – wanted in. That mean folding tables with coffee carafes and Styrofoam cups wouldn't cut it. A Queen event called for wait staff in uniforms to meander through the crowd with silver trays full of champagne glasses. Not the cheap stuff either. Quality bubbly. And also for Felicity to smile. A lot.

All this, she thought, glancing at her watch before checking the crowd around her, to stand in some gravel and stare at a lone, gray construction tent on an empty lot that would, someday, have something on it. Thrilling.

She couldn't wait for it to be done. Then she could stop faking the smiles that were making her face hurt.

“You know,” Tommy Merlyn said, suddenly appearing behind her to murmur in her ear, “if you keep your face like that, it’ll freeze that way.”

Felicity twisted around, the strap of her purse nearly sliding from her shoulder. She lifted an automatic hand to her cheek and rubbed. “That obvious?”

“Only to those who know you.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his black leather jacket. “I heard about what happened the other day. It’s all over the news. Are you and Oliver all right?”

“Yeah, we’re okay. Thanks to his bodyguard.”

“You’re sure? Because you look…”

She touched his arm. “Tommy, I’m fine. Really.”

He edged closer. “If you need a place to stay, you know the door’s always open. Guest bedroom at the ready. Just say the word. It’s yours.”

Felicity’s smile was genuine this time, even if it wasn’t as wide. “Thank you. I mean that. But until the police can figure out what’s going on, I think it’s safer for everyone involved if I stay with the Queens.”

“Ouch. Right to the ego.”
Felicity’s amusement faded. “I would never forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.”

“Hey.” He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Nothing is going to happen. To you, to me, to Oliver. It’s going to be okay.”

“I hope so.”

“It can’t be easy for you. Being back at the house, I mean. It’s been awhile.”

“Not long enough.”

His brows pinched downward. “What happened?”

Felicity shook her head. It didn’t matter. Not really. Oliver hadn’t meant to touch that particular raw nerve. He didn’t know about the baby, and she was doing her best not to focus on the pain he’d stirred. She didn’t want to remember that day. It took a long time, but she’d made peace with it. At least, as much as any woman possibly could.

“Felicity.”

“I really don’t want to talk about it.” She plastered that fake smile on her face, nodded politely at a passing couple.

“You know that if… Felicity, if something’s wrong, if you’re in trouble—”

“What trouble could I be in?” she asked, careful to keep her tone light. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Really? More ridiculous than the last time you came to me? I still don’t know what that was about. I wasn’t supposed to ask questions then either.”

“Leave it alone.”

“Oh oh,” Malcolm Merlyn said as he emerged from the crowd in front of them. “I know that tone. Better back off, Tommy.”

Malcolm, like Tommy, had an almost eternal Peter Pan flare. His dark hair was still dark, not a single hint of gray. His smile always seemed at the ready but, unlike his son, there was an edge behind Malcolm’s at times. A steely one that made Felicity always want to check her rings and count her fingers after shaking his hand.

Tommy once joked – in private, of course – that his bastard of a father maintained his youthful look by bathing in the blood of kittens and puppies. His presence, as CEO of Merlyn Global, was no surprise at the dedication ceremony. Not only was he one of Queen Consolidated’s competitors, he was a long time friend to the Queen family, probably Robert’s closest.

Malcolm clapped a hand against Tommy’s back. “Don’t you know, if you want continued access to the man in charge, you never, ever make his executive assistant angry with you?”

Tommy tossed him a withering look. “Dad. I thought we were supposed to meet for breakfast this morning to talk?”

“I got hung up at the office.”

“There’s a shock. Evicting nuns or knocking porridge bowls out of the hands of orphans when they asked for more?”
Malcolm smiled, but there was steel behind it. “Maybe if you weren’t such a bleeding heart for people and actually understood the damage they’re inflicting on our city, like what they did to your mother, you’d understand my business.”

Tommy’s jaw locked.

“It’s nice to see you again, Mr. Merlyn,” Felicity said, stepping between them as she held out her hand.

Malcolm accepted it, clasped it between his. “It’s been too long, Felicity, and I’ve told you before. Please. Call me Malcolm.” He looked around them. “I’m surprised Oliver isn’t here. I expected him.”

“Oh, he’s here somewhere. In fact, I was just going to look for him.”

“Good idea. We wouldn’t want him to get lost again. We should all get together. Have dinner.”

“That would be lovely.”

He released her hand as Walter Steele mounted the stage steps to join Moira and Thea on the platform. Malcolm glanced at his son. “We should make our way to the front, Tommy. I believe they’re about to begin.”

Tommy nodded and followed him for a few steps before he turned to face Felicity. Even as he backpeddled, he ticked one index finger against the other in a shame-on-you motion as he mouthed, “Liar, liar…”

The crowd folded around the two men, blocking them from sight, and Felicity sighed as she rubbed the back of her neck. She checked her watch again. Walter stepped up to the podium. Perfect. Dead on the hour.

“Good afternoon,” he greeted the crowd as dozens of camera flashes flared, “and thank you all for coming. Welcome to the future site of the Robert Queen Memorial Applied Science Center.”

Polite applause broke out. The crowd shuffled closer. To hear better or get a better view, maybe their picture in the paper, Felicity didn’t know. Someone bumped into her from behind, knocking her forward a step. Her purse dropped from her shoulder to the ground.

“Damn it,” she muttered as she crouched to collected it.

“Oh, I am so sorry! Here.” The man crouched with her, grabbed her purse as she did. He tightened his grip on the black leather bag, preventing her from rising with it. “Let me assist you, Mrs. Queen.”

Felicity’s head whipped up.

Ben Mitchell – all six solid feet of him – stayed hunched in front of her. His brown hair was still cropped close to his head, the scar on his chin a little more faded, but he was just as big as she remembered. Just as intimidating. Men who could probably kill with a single blow generally were.

The last time she’d seen him, he’d worn jeans and a Black Sabbath t-shirt with heavy motorcycle boots that fit perfectly with his dual exhaust Harley. Today he wore a grey business suit with equal comfort. It shouldn’t have surprised her. Men like Mitchell were human chameleons. They had to blend in anytime, anywhere.

Felicity moistened her lips as she fumbled with the zipper of her purse. “I’ve got an exposure problem,” she said, her fingers shaking more than her voice. She pulled out several pieces of paper
she’d bundled together and passed them to him. “I need this moved to a secure location.”

Mitchell straightened the sheets. He studied the top page for a moment before flipping to the next. Finally, he nodded. “Understood.”

“I should warn you. This could be dangerous.”

“What isn’t?”

“I’m serious. You need to be very careful. The vigilante might be involved.”

He accepted that with a simple nod as he tucked the papers into his jacket. “You said something about a computer issue?”

She nodded and motioned toward his coat. “Someone infiltrated my network. I tracked them online as far as I could. I gave you all the information I had, but this is… this is beyond me.”

A corner of Mitchell’s mouth curled upward. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Beyond my equipment. I need it traced back to its source. Can you do that?”

“Not my area of expertise, but I have friends who have friends.”

“Discreet friends, I hope.”

“The very souls of, Mrs. Queen.”

He cupped her elbow and guided her back to her feet, then joined in the ongoing applause.

“This building,” Walter Steele said as he swept his arm up to indicate the image of the completed building – a structure several stories tall of glass and steel and promise – painted on the stage backdrop behind him, “will stand as a monument to the man whose company and vision are his greatest legacies.”

“Whoa!” a man’s voice boomed out. “Whoa, whoa… whoa.”

Felicity closed her eyes. Her heart sank to her shoes. She, along with Ben Mitchell and the entire crowd, turned. They all watched as the very well dressed, very drunk man slugged back a glass of champagne, then another, before he claimed a third and took it with him as he wove a rather unsteady path through the crowd toward the stage.

“What about me? Right?” the drunk demanded. “I’m a legacy!”

Mitchell leaned close to Felicity, jutted his chin toward the guy. “You know that jackhole?”

“Yeah.” Felicity released a sad, weary sigh she felt to the bone. “He’s my husband.”

~*~

Oliver wasn’t sure who looked more horrified as he stumbled his way up the stage steps, slipping and banging his knee on one of them and dropping his drink, before Walter could reach him and haul him upright with two firm hands on his upper arm. Walter, who’d only wanted to do something nice
for him, for his father, and the entire family… Moira, who valued a composed public face above all else and spent her entire life covering embarrassing improprieties like this… Or Thea, who stared at him – slack jawed – obviously torn between shock and a strange sympathy and guilt because she, among all of them, had an inkling of what might have driven him to the bottle.

A bottle, Oliver thought as he patted the front of Walter’s suit in mock gratitude, that had been far more water than vodka in the limo. When it came to deception, planning and giving people what they expected to see, was everything. Today he needed everyone to understand that Oliver Queen was no hero.

All that time on the island, as he’d plotted his return, he’d never thought how hard it would be to reconnect with everyone. He didn’t know how painful it would be to keep his secrets. His father asked him to save the city. To right his wrongs. Oliver had given his word, and he intended to keep it. But to do that, he couldn’t be the Oliver everyone wanted him to be. Sometimes that meant, to honor his father’s wishes, he had to dishonor Robert Queen’s memory. For that, he would always be sorry.

“Thanks for warming ‘em up for me, Walt,” Oliver said with a shit-eater's grin. He patted Walter again, reached for the handle of the gold shovel. “Here. I’m fine. I’m fine,” he said again, motioning for his mother to sit when she started to stand. “I’ll take that shovel.”

Walter relinquished it without a smile. Oliver couldn’t blame him. It was that or put up a fight in front of their guests and the press. Nobody wanted to read that headline.

As Walter turned away, Oliver fumbled the gilded tool. An audible gasp went up from the crowd. Oliver recovered it, laughed as he waved a hand at them. “Kidding. Kidding. Geez. Kidding. I got it.”

He turned the full wattage of his smile, complete with dimples, on the crowd. Walter stayed next to him. Oliver wasn’t sure if it was to steady him if he swayed, or drag him away if he started spewing. Or maybe, he realized as Watler glanced back – not at Moira, his wife, but at Thea – he was standing between brother and sister. Protecting the girl Walter had embraced as his own daughter. For that, Oliver would owe him forever.

“Some of you may not know me,” Oliver said into the podium microphone as he gestured to the crowd. Cameras whirled, capturing his humiliation for everyone. “My name is Oliver Queen.”

The crowd stayed silent. More cameras flashed and twittered. Diggle, his hands clasped in front of him, stood as silent as ever. Behind him, nearly lost in the crowd, stood Felicity. The man next to her – with his sheered hair, wide shoulders, and expensive tailored suit – sent Oliver an unabashedly disgusted sneer before he turned and walked away. The man’s face, however, was lost in the sea of camera flashes that momentarily blinding him.

“Watch some television, read a newspaper,” Oliver advised, blinking the spots away. “I’m kind of famous right now. Mostly, though, I’m famous because I’m Robert Queen’s son. But as Walter, who’s my new dad… Huh?” He grinned at Walter, who didn’t smile back. If anything, anger flared in his dark eyes. “Sorry. As Walter was saying, I’m not much of a legacy, per say, and, uh…”

Walter inched closer, touched his back. “Oliver, you don’t have to do this.”

“What? No. Sit. Sit,” he told the other man, motioning him to claim one of the empty seats on stage. When he had, Oliver returned his attention to the crowd. “Gosh. See, I was supposed to come here today, and I’m supposed to take my rightful place at the company. The prodigal son returns home, and becomes the heir apparent.”
The light, drunken humor bled from his tone, leaving only bitterness and anger as Oliver braced his hand against the edge of the podium. He lifted his chin. “But I’m not my father.” He tossed a hard look to his mother. “I’m not the man he was. I’m not half the man he was. I never will be. So. Please.” He stepped to the edge of the stage, the shovel clasped tight in both hands. “Stop asking me to be.”

He stabbed the blade into the pile of sand, then crossed the stage to the steps, stumbled down them. This time nobody came to help him. He kept walking, dimly aware of Felicity trying to ease her way through the crowd to follow without much success, Diggle trailing at a tactful distance, and the media that ate up every second.

~*~

Read More About The Olicity Hiatus Challenge
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Oliver gets a lead on the assassin while Tommy tries to do the right thing and Felicity unwittingly courts disaster.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on August 2, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

The morning newspaper spared no detail, nor outrage, at the impudence of a possibly-still-traumatized-but-should-have-more-control-of-his-downward-spiraling-life billionaire playboy at the 'serene,' 'dignified,' and 'somber' dedication ceremony that memorialized one of the city's most beloved figures in Robert Queen. Oliver didn't mind the bad press. He didn't even mind the sidebar containing celebrity intervention sponsor suggestions, like Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, and Amanda Bynes, who might help set him straight. He didn't even mind the insinuations that he was either mentally unstable, bipolar, or suffering an undisclosed addiction.

What he did mind, however, was the photograph of the man standing next to his wife. A blurry faced man who somehow managed, in all the other accompanying pictures, to only have the back or top of his head photographed. A tall, broad man with close cut hair, an expensive suit, and posture the Queen of England would envy.

Standing outside the derelict Queen Industrial Inc., steel fabrication and welding plant, his back against the cold brick wall, Oliver studied the folded newspaper in one hand while sipping from the cup of coffee in the other. He lowered the paper, tapped it against his denim clad thigh. He glanced at Diggle, who stood nearby. The guard was abnormally quiet since accompanying him from the house to the old factory. Oliver wasn't sure if it was the guy's normal quiet or if it was more an instance of "if you can't say anything nice, keep your mouth shut and don't get fired." Or maybe the silence was the result of heightened vigilance. It wasn't every day a billionaire drove into this part of the Glades, let alone got out of the car to stand around in the open.

Oliver took another sip of coffee. He squinted at Diggle over the rim of the black plastic lid as steam wafted through the vent holes and into his eyes. After he swallowed, he ticked the newspaper in his direction. "Did you see this?"

Diggle didn't budge, didn't even glance at the paper. He remained unmoving, his gloved hands clasped loosely in front of him, the collar of his long, black wool coat turned up against the stiff wind that blew directly off the harbor. "Yes, Sir."
Back to Sir. That couldn't be good. Oliver blew on the hot liquid.

Diggle nudged the cuff of his glove back with his index finger and checked his watch. He resumed his stance. "Mr. Merlyn is late."

"Tommy is always late. It's his thing."

Diggle sighed.

Yep. Not good. The guy was definitely irritated, probably a little pissed. Diggle had tried to do him a favor yesterday. He'd opened up about his private life, cut Oliver some slack when he'd violated their no-more-ditching agreement, even cared enough about Felicity to try to mend fences. What had he gotten in return? A drunken spectacle conducted right under his nose.

Oliver frowned as he raised the cup to his mouth again. Hell, had his mother given Diggle a hard time about that? Blamed him for not keeping a closer eye on her son? What was the guard supposed to do? Wrestler the glasses of vodka from him in the limo? Dig was his protection detail, not his nanny. Sooner or later everyone had to stop blaming others for not keeping him in line and accept that Oliver was a grown-ass man responsible for himself.

The sound of an approaching car made Diggle turn, one hand automatically slipping under his coat and suit jacket to touch the holster strapped to his side. A sporty, silver Mercedes turned the corner and drove toward them, passing through the open gate and splashing through slushy puddles before it ultimately rolled to a stop.

Tommy Merlyn killed the engine a moment before he climbed out. As he slid the keys into the pocket of his black leather biker jacket, he tipped his head back to study the dilapidated exterior of the factory. "Wow, this place has gone to hell."

Oliver pushed away from the wall. "Gee. Thanks."

"No, it's just..." He flapped a hand at the building, obviously seeing what everybody else saw – a rusty, forgotten, monstrous hulk of an era long gone in Starling. A building in need of scrapping, painting, new windows, and concrete work. And that was just the outside. Tommy made a face. "Here?"

"You have to have faith," Oliver said, his hands on his hips as he surveyed the building. One end of his mouth kicked upward. "Okay. Maybe faith and a lot of vision."

"And a shitload of money."

"Trust me. This is going to be great."

"I recall you saying that same thing when we were sixteen," Tommy said. You convinced me to make a move on Angela Cooke at that party because her boyfriend was out of town. Only he wasn't. Took almost two weeks before the swelling went down and my nose stopped looking like an Idaho potato. Good ideas generally aren't in your wheelhouse, my friend."

"Yeah, but you got to third base before he busted your nose."

Tommy grinned. "That's true."

Oliver tossed his coffee into the empty steel drum that served as a makeshift trashcan, then caught the handle of the massive metal door and pulled. The barn door hinges squealed but didn't protest much, allowing the large panel to slide almost effortlessly to the left.
Sunlight spilled into the factory – a building that hadn't seen any in years except for the few rays that managed to filter through the grimy windows nested below the roofline. Water dripped from the aging pipes. Trash littered the floors, the concrete of which was pitted from delamination. Tiny feet scampered somewhere in the shadows, signaling a potential rat problem, and the whole building smelled of decay, stagnation, and cat urine.

Oliver spread his arms wide, turned to face Tommy and Diggle, who lingered behind them. "So? What do you think? Is this a great spot for a nightclub or what?"

Tommy tossed Diggle a quick look. "Sweet," he drawled, clearly not meaning it. "Though, I gotta tell you, if you're thinking about calling it Queens? I don't think you're gonna get the clientele you're hoping for."

Oliver pointed to the second floor area in the rear of the building. "Private office there to keep an eye on everything." He pointed to the first floor with the rolled up newspaper. "Bar there. DJ stage over there. DJ booth there, maybe. That whole section of there? Dance floor." He motioned to one long wall. "Lounge area there. Leave that entire area upstairs for VIP. Maybe bring in a modern, funky industrial vibe."

Tommy rubbed his mouth. He faced Oliver. "Man, are you sure you want to do this? It's not like you really have any experience in running a… well… running anything."

"That's why you're here."

"Me? Oliver, I don't have experience with this either."

"Yeah, but we both know clubs. Well, I knew them. You still do. I trust you. I trust your opinion. That's why I asked you here. I want your help."

"Me?" Tommy asked again. He looked around the factory again, lingering on the various sections this time. He nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah. Sure. I guess. Is this…" He shifted from one foot to the other, hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans. "Does this mean you're hiring me?"

Oliver paused. "You want a job?"

Tommy shrugged. He might have aimed for a casual no-big air, but there was a tension in his expression that was new. A determination marred by doubt. "Well, yeah. I mean, why not? It's about time I tried my hand at something, right?"

"Your dad riding you about the trust fund again?"


"Tommy, wait." Oliver blocked his friend's way when Tommy tried to step around him. He put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "It just so happens I need a General Manager. Someone that can be here when I'm not and oversee construction. You're probably the guy for the job."

"Will I be getting dental? This smile wasn't cheap."

"I'll look into it."

A slow smile spread across Tommy's face, one he tried, but failed, to control. It faded fast, replaced by a warmth and sincerity he rarely allowed to show. He stepped forward and hugged Oliver. Hard. "Thank you."
Oliver frowned, more concerned than puzzled, as he hugged his friend back. "You're welcome. Any time." He eased back enough to look at him. "You're my best friend."

They were more than that though. Friends, sure. They'd been through everything together growing up. When Tommy's mom was killed when he was eight – when his father, in his grief, abandoned him for two years – the Queens took Tommy in like one of their own. He'd become family. He'd become the brother Oliver never had. They did everything together, even vacations. Robert Queen stepped up as a surrogate father. He'd taken them to their first basketball game, even their first R-rated movie. There was nothing they wouldn't do for each other. Nothing they couldn't tell the other. And right now it looked like Tommy was carrying the weight of the world.

Oliver dropped his hands on his friend's shoulders. "What's going on? And don't say nothing. You know you can tell me anything."

"Actually…" Hesitation washed through Tommy's dark eyes a second before taking his voice. He darted a quick look at Diggle, who quietly given the two men privacy through distance. Either that, or the guard was totally not into guy hugs. Regardless, it seemed to give Tommy time to reassess whatever he was about to say. Ultimately he shook his head and shrugged. "Nothing. It's fine. I'm fine. It's just… I don't know. Getting you back. Thinking about things. Watching you with your family. I just…" He shrugged again "It's made me think about stuff. About my father. About the kind of person I want to be. For others. For myself. And I want… I want something different. I want to be somebody different. Someone better. Doing something like this? Getting out from under my father's thumb? I think that's a good start."

Oliver nodded. If anyone understood the weight a father's shadow could cast, he did. Starting over seemed a popular theme for the day. After everything that transpired the day before, he'd been forced to do some reassessing of his own.

His vow to his father, his plans for the city, remained unchanged. His ideas about Felicity and their marriage, however, had to be radically altered. That meant finding a logical reason to be away, take meetings, and vanish after phone calls. What better alibi than a club where people came and went at all times of the day and night? Where no one noticed if the owner disappeared in the crowd? A spot so public, so popular, that no one would think twice about what was secreted away in the basement beneath their feet.

Ditching Diggle here would be easier too. Oliver could simply claim the need for privacy during conference calls, shut his door, and slip out the back. Hopefully, owning a business would keep Felicity from watching him too closely as well. Oliver still didn't know how he was going to handle her. Deniability gave her protection. A buffer between what he did and what she knew was the only way to keep her safe and still be with her. How long he could maintain that charade, he didn't know.

One thing at a time, Oliver told himself as he slung his arm around Tommy's shoulders and moved to stand next to him. Together, they surveyed the dreary, dingy factory interior that held their future. Oliver grinned. "We are so going to rock this town."

Tommy snorted. "Nobody says that anymore, Oliver."

"No?"

"Urban Dictionary. Please. For a few hours. I'm begging you."

Oliver chuckled.

"Tell you what," Tommy said as he gave Oliver's shoulder a thump. "I'll start the research. Bring
some stuff by the house later today and we can start putting some ideas together. I know a guy who
does interior design work. Paul Jamison. You remember him."

"Didn't I sleep with his youngest sister?"

"Nobody's perfect. Besides, who stays mad at a castaway?" The ring of his phone made Tommy
pause. He checked the screen. "Ah, damn it. I gotta roll. But yeah. I'll give him a call and get back to
you."

"Thanks, man."

Tommy nodded as he headed for the door, offering a "See ya," to Diggle as he exited.

When he was gone, Oliver turned his attention to Diggle. "So."

He did a quick double-snap, snapped
his flat palm against his fist. "What do you think?"

"I'm here to provide security, Sir, not a commentary."

"Didn't stop you yesterday."

Diggle's sigh was heavy as he looked away.

"Aw, come on, Dig. Do me a favor. Speak freely. Please."

A hint of a smile curled the guard's mouth. He nodded. "Well, this is the Glades, right? Your rich,
white friends wouldn't come to this neighborhood on a bet."

"I am Oliver Queen," Oliver pointed out with more than a touch of arrogance. "Right?"

Diggle accepted that with another nod.

"People would stand in line for three hours if I opened a club."

"And no one who actually lives in the Glades will see a penny of those cover charges."

"So we make it a successful business. We gentrify the neighborhood."

Diggle scoffed. He pushed his coat back to shove his hands into the pockets of his pants. "I
wondered when we'd get around to that. The white knight swooping in to save the disenfranchised."
Amusement lifted his brows, cut lines at the corners of his eyes. "And all by his lonesome, with no
help from anybody."

"Wow," Oliver said, laughter in his tone as he rocked back on the heels of his feet. He shook his
head. "You don't think very much of me, do you."

"No, actually I have a very high regard for how… perceptive you are." His smile widened. "Sir."

Oliver's amusement faded as Diggle's smile did. The two men stared at each other.

Finally, Oliver glanced down at the newspaper he still held. He unrolled it enough to see the grainy
photo on the page. He brought it up, flat, against his chest to flash at the guard. He tapped his index
finger against the image. "This guy next to my wife."

Diggle barely looked.

"Who is he?"
"Why don't you ask her?"

"I'm asking you."

"I have no idea."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, Sir. But I'm sure his name is on the list of attendees. Everyone was checked in and out. Security precautions."

"Of course," Oliver agreed. Only the guy wasn't on the list. Oliver had already gone over it. Twice. Nothing. That meant either someone associated with organizing the ceremony had let him in, or the guy had found a hole in the security and gotten so close to Felicity he could have slipped a blade between her ribs, into her heart, and left to bleed to death on the ground before the crowd realized what happened. Both options sucked.

The twitter of Oliver's phone echoed in the factory. He pulled it from his pocket and checked the caller ID. Damn. Pushing Diggle for information would have to wait. He glanced at the guard. "I need to take this."

"Of course, Sir. I'll bring the car around."

Oliver waited until Diggle was out the door before he answered. He didn't take his eye from the entrance as he answered in Russian as the caller would expect. "Slushayu."

The man on the other end in the same tongue. "I have found someone with the information you requested. You go. Now."

Oliver memorized the address the caller rattled off, then hung up. He pocketed the phone as his car pulled up outside the doorway. He looked down at the newspaper again. As priorities went, the uninvited guest went to the backburner. He glanced at the car again. His priorities now were shaking Diggle loose and then finding his way back into the Glades without anyone noticing. The associate he'd contacted about the Unidac assassin had uncovered something in the killer's M.O. that might identify him. That meant the club would have to wait.

Tonight was reserved for the hunt.

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Alexi Leonov's automotive repair looked like any other mechanic's garage. The innocuous beige building backed onto an alley where cars could be pulled in and out via rolling overhead doors without blocking main street traffic. The sign on the door – written in Russian – provided one of the few clues that the business conducted inside might stray beyond mundane oil changes, fuel pump replacement, and tire rotation. Most people had no idea their routine car maintenance ran alongside money laundering, racketeering, and even drug and gun trafficking.

Oliver removed his baseball cap and, as he stuck its bill in the back pocket of his jeans, he paused to scan the alley. Confident he hadn't been followed, he opened the door and went inside. The snaps and pops of a welding torch and the smell of grease and rubber greeted him. Two of the mechanics – both older men in gray, prison-like overalls – stood beneath one of the car lifts, arguing about a
radiator leak in the Camaro hoisted above their heads.

Oliver cleared the bumper of a Pontiac destined for the junkyard before stopping a few feet away from the mechanics. "YA ishchu," he said, announcing himself. "Alexi Leonov."

The mechanics exchanged a look before the bald one squared himself to Oliver. He seemed to assess him before answering, in smooth Russian, "There's no one here by that name."

Oliver shook his head, claimed a few more steps. "Not in your garage. In the basement."

The bald man glanced at his co-worker, and the second man ducked out from beneath the lift. He barely cleared it before a gun appeared in his hand. He started to bring it up as Oliver struck out, catching the barrel and slide beneath his palm. He redirected the muzzle away from him before he gave the weapon a savage twist. Bone snapped. The thug screamed and dropped to his knees.

The injured thug stumbled to his feet. He backed away, his broken hand cradled against his chest. Oliver gripped the collar of his dark gray shirt and pulled it down to reveal the black star-like tattoo on his left pectoral. "I am Bratva," he told the bald man. "I want to see Alexi Leonov."

The bald man stepped forward. He bowed, both in greeting and respect. "Pleased to meet you."

Oliver inclined his head. One Bratva member acknowledging the other. "I apologize," Leonov said, using English now as he led Oliver and the injured man across the shop floor to a door.

Oliver followed the man through it. They continued down sturdy metal steps into the basement where the other business was clearly run. The workers seemed to spend a lot of their free time there. Vodka bottles, Russian newspapers, and skin magazines littered the table. A sixty inch, flat screen TV hung from one of the walls and several different video gaming systems were stored in the cabinet beneath it.

"We meant no disrespect to a Captain," Leonov said as he paused at the bottom of the steps to look back at Oliver. "Particularly an American one." He continued down, crossed the floor to the main table, and poured two shots of vodka. "How can I be of assistance?"

Oliver positioned himself opposite the man, careful to keep the stairs and the thug in his peripheral. "A mutual friend said you had information for me. I'm here to collect it."

"Ah. You're the man in the market for the hired gun. A very specific order according to our… friend."

"Seven-point-six-two millimeter rounds laced with Curare."

Leonov passed him one of the drinks. "Interpol only knows him as Deadshot. His real name is Floyd Lawton. I attempted to locate him but fear you will have to find yourself another employee."
"Why is that?"

"First..." The Russian raised his glass. Oliver did the same. "We will drink to each other's health. Then I will tell you what more I know."

Once they had, the Russian set his empty glass down with a rap. "There is an availability issues," Leonov said. "Lawton is already employed. He is only in Starling to conduct this business. But, if your project is not time sensitive, his schedule may soon have an opening."

"How soon?"

"A day. Perhaps two."

Oliver rolled the cool, slender glass back and forth between his fingers. "My project is extremely time sensitive. I would prefer to discuss it with Mr. Lawton immediately." He lifted his gaze. "Do you happen to know where I might find him?"

Leonov hesitated. "I've heard he's been spending some time at the Exchange Building. I wouldn't advise trying to catch him there. I've heard it can be a very dangerous place. Especially tonight."

Oliver had never heard of it, but a simple search online would tell him everything he needed to know, including schematics. If Lawton was the one behind the attacks on the Unidac bidders, he was obviously moving on another bidder tonight. He needed to be stopped. Oliver set his glass down and headed for the stairs. He was halfway up the steps when Leonov called after him.

Curling his hands around the metal pipe banister, Oliver peered back down at him.

Leonov poured himself another glass of vodka. "You will leave us out of this, yes? Of course, this assumes Mr. Lawton doesn't kill you first."

"Yes."

"Good. Oh. One more thing." He studied the glass for a moment before turning his gaze upward. His dark eyes seemed almost reptilian in the dim room. "I will also confirm with my associates that you are, indeed, Bratva Captain. Should this not be the case?" He tipped his glass toward the gunman on the landing above Oliver. "I will send one of my mechanics to kill you... and your entire family."

Oliver didn't respond. He didn't need to. The threat was meaningless, not only because he could handle anyone Leonov sent, but because no one would be sent. This was one of those rare moments where not having to hide who he was, what he'd become and the savagery he was capable of, actually worked in his favor.

He exited the garage, pulled his cap from his back pocket as he moved into the alley, and returned the hat to his head. Let Leonov make his call. The Russian would go straight to Anatoli Knyazev, leader of the Solntsevskaya Bratva. What Leonov didn't know was that, one wrong word, one wrong threat, and Anatoli would have Leonov's throat slit before the man could even hang up his phone.

That, too, Oliver decided as adjusted the bill low over his eyes with a simple tug, was one of the benefits of saving the mafia kingpin's life. Anatoli never forgot it. It bonded them like brothers. Oliver's family was now Anatoli's family. Whether Felicity, his mother, or his sister realized it, the Bratva had their back.

Some days it paid to have friends in low places.
Thea Dearden Queen lived up to her namesake. She was gorgeous, sure, but it was the gracefulness in her, the authenticity, and soft heart she hid behind an exterior of regal strength, that made her remarkable.

She wasn't perfect. She made mistakes. Owned most of them. Life had knocked her down – several times, in fact – but somehow she always managed to get back up. Even after the Queen's Gambit was lost, even after her father and brother were declared dead, she somehow managed to find the strength to keep going. Those events might have put a protective shell around her heart, but when it counted, when it mattered the most, Thea Queen stepped up. That's when her inner beauty shined – if possible – even brighter than her physical one.

She was also, Tommy reminded himself as he lingered outside the sitting room doorway and watched Thea prop a bare foot against the table to paint her toenails, jailbait.

His grip on the folder he'd brought for Oliver tightened. His gaze wandered over her. He took in the careless twist that gathered her dark hair atop her head, the long, artful line of her neck. In true Thea fashion, she'd dressed for both trend and comfort in a breezy white blouse, chunky jewelry, and a pair of black leather pants. A pair of thick heeled, ankle strap shoes lay on the floor next to her. Her toenails, however, were being painted a pearlescent purple.

Freaking hell, she was beautiful, he thought as she pursed her lips and blew toward her toes and fanned her fingers at them as if that would somehow dry the polish faster. She'd always been pretty, but last year – when he danced with her on her birthday – she'd looked far too mature in a shimmery white gown, cinched tight around her waist by a black belt, and cut daringly low in the front. Her normally loose hair had been tamed, smoothed back and pinned at her nape in an odd concoction of woven curls that managed to look elegant and youthful at the same time.

She'd slipped her hand into his, slid the other to his shoulder, turned those large, doe-like eyes up to his… and suddenly he'd become all too aware that her adolescent, bony knees and elbows had gained a ballerina-like elegance; that her legs and hips and breasts had rounded out in a very pleasing feminine form.

In the span of a single blink, Thea Queen had grown up and left Tommy reeling.

For so long she'd always been "just" Oliver's little sister. The cute, usually annoying little kid that followed them everywhere. The night of that party though… Tommy drew in a deep breath. She'd simply become Thea. Beautiful, funny, always make him feel good about himself, Thea.

Then, later that summer, came the bikini. The itsy bitsy, teeny weenie, sparkly green string bikini. The one that rode way too low on her hips. The one that made him think things he had no business thinking about his dead best friend's little sister.

Tommy winced. Oliver would never forgive him if he touched Thea. Not that Tommy blamed him. His track record with women was… He cringed. Not good. At least, not that anyone would ever let him forget. But things have been different lately. Hell, they'd been different since the night, almost a year ago, when he'd drawn Thea onto the dance floor. He'd intended to be a mere brotherly stand-in for Oliver but ended up walking off the floor dazed, confused, and wanting to cup Thea's face between his palms and kiss her.

That desire scared him then. It scared him now. He shouldn't want her. He couldn't want her. If not
because of Oliver, because of the decade that stood between them. He'd told himself that night that the attraction would fade, that it was a fluke. He'd thrown himself into other relationships with other women, tried to get that same freewheeling fun back. Tried to convince the old, fun-loving Tommy Merlyn to return. But it didn't happen.

Now it was nights of faking it. Of taking hot women out to wine and dine them in the most public show. In the end, he always sent them each home with a peck on the cheek and a promise to call them. A promise he knew he wouldn't keep.

People were beginning to talk. He'd heard the gossip. He knew what people called him. Merlyn the Monk. And they were right. Eight months celibate. He was surprised his balls hadn't shriveled up and fallen off. He was not a man used to going without.

Now 'without' meant 'didn't want to,' at least, didn't want to with anyone except Thea. That, too, was a fucking disaster because the one woman – girl, he corrected sharply – he wanted was the only one he couldn't ever have. Not without losing the friendship of the one man who'd been like a brother to him. Not without losing the Queens, who had practically raised him after his mother was murdered and his father abandoned him.

What if it didn't work? What if Thea didn't feel the same way? What if he blew it, like he blew everything in his life, and made her hate him? The Queen Family would turn their backs on him. He'd lose everything. He'd be alone.

But his hope that he'd get over his feelings, be able to ignore them, find someone else, and move on was rapidly dwindling. Christ, he was lonely. How the hell was that possible? He was out every night. He was surrounded by people and friends. Women sent their underwear, not to mention their room keys, phone numbers, and business cards, to his table night after night. Yet his life – his once vibrant, shiny, exciting life – was now just… hollow.

Tommy gripped the folder with both hands and stared down at it. Was that why he'd asked Oliver for a job at the club? Because he was trying to prove, to himself and to the Queens, that he'd changed? That he wasn't that bed-hopping, crass, careless jackass who had a new woman every other day? Hell. Sometimes a new woman halfway through the same day.

Was that the cause of the restlessness inside him? Why he'd decided to change? Was he futilely trying to prove to them that this was different? That how he felt about Thea had made him different? Or maybe, just maybe, he was attempting to show how serious he took Thea by finally getting serious about himself. He'd always been the joker, the class clown; the guy with a fast quip and a sarcastic brush off to keep people from looking too closely. Afraid they'd see a guy inside that simply wanted to belong somewhere. With someone.

Tommy dragged his attention back to Thea as she absently brushed a tendril of hair away from her cheek before dabbing more nail polish on another toe. No. He didn't want to just belong with anyone. He wanted to belong to Thea.

It was laughable. They didn't belong together. She was too young. He was too irresponsible. His father would laugh. The Queens would laugh. It would change everything, and then there'd be no back to the way things used to be. The really terrifying part was that he didn't know how to stop this decent into madness before he destroyed it all.

Stupid, a voice in his head suddenly sneered. Who are you fooling? They'll never accept you. They know exactly who you are. So do you. You won't change. You'll never be good enough for her or for them. So leave. Now. Go. Get out before they tell you to get out. You don't deserve this. You don't deserve her. You never will.
He turned to go.

"Tommy?"

He closed his eyes. His fingers tightened around the folder so hard they left creases. He took a quick
breath, forced that mask into place as he turned, smiling, to face her. "Hey, sprout." He wagged the
file in the air. "I'm looking for Oliver. He around?"

She rolled her eyes as she recapped the nail polish. "Is he ever? He and his bodyguard left awhile
ago. He said he had some appointment or something. He should be back soon though." She eyed the
folder as she set the bottle aside. "What's that?"

He looked down at the packet because it was easier than looking at her. "Oh. Uh. Oliver wants to
open a club."

"A club."

"A nightclub."

Thea shifted on the couch to drape her arm along the back and face him more fully. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I know. Oliver running something. Who knew?"

"No, I mean, it's actually a brilliant idea." She held out a hand, her chubby black and white bracelet
slipping up her forearm. She wiggled her fingers. "Can I see?"

"Sure," He crossed the distance between them and handed her the file, careful not to actually touch
her. With his hands free, he suddenly felt awkward and unsure what to do with them, so he shoved
his fingers into the front pockets of his jeans. "He's actually looking at converting your family's old
factory in the Glades."

"Hmm," Thea murmured. She flipped the cover open and studied the top page. "It certainly has the
floor space for it. Good natural light, too. Location's a bit sketchy."

"Yeah, I wondered about that."

She glanced up. A small smile touched her mouth as a wicked gleam flashed through her green eyes,
making the gray fleck in them spark. "But then, sometime's the danger's part of the thrill. Right?"

Tommy shifted.

Thea returned her attention to the packet. She nibbled her bottom lip as she flipped through the
pages. "I, uh, didn't thank you for the other day."

"For what?"

"The dedication ceremony. The ride home after…" Her mouth compressed. "It was nice to get away
from the media circus. If you hadn't smuggled me out, I'd have been stuck there while Mom and
Walter did damage control."

"Yeah, well, I know what it's like to get caught up in something you can't control."

"I'm sorry if I messed up your day. I know you probably had better things to do than babysit me."

"Hey." Tommy claimed the last steps between them. He swept a lock of her hair behind her ear
before letting the backs of his fingers follow the curve of her jaw to her chin. He nudged upward.
Thea resisted for a moment, blinked a few times, then peered up at him through thick, dark lashes. His thumb stroked the dimple below her bottom lip. "There isn't anything more important to me than making sure you're okay.

Her lips parted. Her breath breezed across the tip of his thumb. He could have sworn her gaze dipped to his mouth.

He drew back. His hand practically tingled. He covered it by spearing his fingers through his hair, then latching them around the back of his neck. "Yeah, so, uh, I had a guy I know put together some basic information, like floor plan samples from other projects he's done, that kind of thing. Just to help generate some ideas."

Thea licked her lips as she looked down at the folder again. "There's a trend toward big name bands playing smaller venues that would be perfect for Ollie's club," she said, sounding slightly breathless. She swallowed. "He's got the connections. He should use them. And if he's smart?" She flipped the binder shut and tossed it on the coffee table. "He'll take advantage of social media, too. You'll have to help him with that since there was no wifi on the island, let alone MySpace. Oliver should also pack the place with women. Guys will spend more, lines will be longer, and people will actually show up. Nobody wants to hang somewhere they don't think they'll score."

"Is that your personal criteria?"

"Everybody likes to feel attractive and wanted."

They stared at each other. Silence stretched between them.

Finally, Thea looked away. "And please, get somebody who can cook in the kitchen and somebody creative with drinks behind the bar. You can't get by on frozen margaritas and nachos anymore. People want adventure."

"The spice of life, eh?"

She slanted him a sideways glance. "I like spice. Don't you?"

Tommy smothered a groan. She was spicy. God. Even the lipstick she wore, smudged soft by the passing of the day, reminded him of cinnamon. When he kissed her it would be — Whoa. Tommy yanked the mental reins hard. Hell to the no. No kissing. No kissing, no touching, no nothing.


He eased a step back, actually had to curl his free hand into a fist to keep it steady. "I'll make sure I mention all that to Oliver. Those are good ideas. Thanks."

She shrugged, causing her blouse to slip on her shoulder, the fabric to emphasize the swell of her small breasts. "I spend enough time in them. Good to know somebody gets something out of it."

Tommy tipped his head. "If you don't enjoy it, why do you go?"

"I didn't say I didn't enjoy it. It just doesn't..." she trailed off, lifted her shoulders again. "Doesn't matter. So what's Oliver going to call this place, anyway? Please don't tell me he's going to call it —"

"Queens?" Tommy finished for her. He shook his head as he fished his cell phone out of his pocket. "No, I already warned him off that one."

"Thank God."
"He did text me an idea." He pulled up the message. "Verdant."

Thea scrunched her nose.

"No?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, genius." He put the phone back. "What would you call it?"

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it." She plunked her elbow on the back of the couch, her chin in her hand. "It's been a long time since I've seen the factory, but I do remember these awesome architectural lanterns on the walls. They'd be considered steam punk now. They might be a cool detail to keep if they still work. Call the place, I dunno, The Green Lantern. Something like that."

"Huh. I didn't notice those."

She smiled a dazzling smile. "That's why you keep me around. I keep you on your toes."

"Sure. Hey. I mean it." He nudged her shoulder. "Thanks."

"Just remember that when I want in without paying the cover charge."

"Oooh, I'll make sure you're carded at the door."

"Hey, I'm going to be eighteen soon."

"Carded. Definitely."

Her smile turned to a knowing smirk. "It's cute that you think that'll stop me."

He couldn't stop her, but he could control himself. Tommy forced himself to step back. "I gotta run, but I'll see you later. Thanks for making sure Oliver gets that."

"No problem."

He'd made it three steps out of the room when Thea called after him. He backtracked.

She didn't look up when he reappeared. She traced the seam on the back couch with her nail. "We're supposed to have a party. For my eighteenth, I mean. Will you... Are you going to come?"

He shouldn't. He should stay far, far away from her. That would be the wise, prudent thing to do. Wasn't that that what he was trying to do now? Make smarter, better, more responsible decisions?

When he didn't answer, Thea shook her head and scooted toward the edge of the couch to stand. "That's okay. I know you're busy. It's no big —"

"I'll be there."

Her shoulders relaxed. Her smile bloomed. "Great. And don't worry. I'll be sure to save a spot on the dance card for you."

Tommy nodded and, as he walked away, he touched his nose and wondered how long it would take for the busted bone to heal this time.
She was unzipped, braless, and in his bedroom.

The three facts brought Oliver to a standstill in the doorway. He forgot about the jacket in his hand. Forgot about Leonov, Anatoli, and the Solntsevskaya Bratva. He even forgot about Floyd Lawton. There was simply Felicity. Him. Them. And the odd comfort of watching as she stood in front of his mirror and put on a pair of dangly black onyx and pearl earrings. Earrings he had custom-made for her to celebrate their first anniversary together.

Oliver raked his gaze over her, drinking in the elegant upsweep of her hair before he followed the delicate line of her neck to her shoulders where the sleeveless, white lace back of her dress gaped. The fabric gradually narrowed as it followed the line of her spine, then pulled together at its base, offering the tiniest hint of her black lace panties beneath her equally black, knee-length skirt.

He lingered there before continuing downward, appreciating the length of her legs, the curve of her calves, all the way down to her bare feet.

Was there anything sexier than this? The familiar domesticity of a lover – a partner – in your most private of retreats? Even the room smelled of her. The damp heat of the shower she must have taken a short time ago somehow amplified her scent. It was warm and soft at the same time, like spiced blossoms and powder.

That was how this room should always smell. It was the same feminine perfume he'd try to hold on to when he'd closed his eyes and suffered another long, dark night of torture and death as the screams of his fellow inmates rang on and on in his ears.

Oliver closed his eyes and inhaled. The shackles around his heart loosened. The vile stench of threats and violence faded. As he stepped into the room, it was almost as if he stepped outside himself, leaving the beast in the shadows of the hall as Oliver Queen – simple, human, normal Oliver Queen – emerged from the prison of his past.

Felicity's attention shifted in the mirror. Her hands stilled for a moment before she went back to threading the other earring stud through her lobe. "There you are. I wondered where you disappeared to."

"I took Diggle with me," he assured her as he tossed his jacket onto the bed. Granted, he left the guard cooling his heels in the lobby as he faked a private meeting and slipped out the backdoor to meet with the Russian mob, but still. Technically. Not a lie.

"Mmmhmm."

Oliver drifted toward her, almost afraid he'd somehow spook her and send her running. "You look very nice."

"Thanks."

"Lovely. I meant lovely."

Her gaze met his in the mirror. Her smile was almost shy. "Thank you."

He waited, but when she didn't elaborate on the occasion for the dress, he said, "Please don't tell me I forgot we're supposed to be somewhere."
The corners of her mouth twitched. "No. We aren't supposed to be anywhere." She dropped her hands to the full, pleased skirt and smoothed her hands over its front. "I, however, have to accompany Walter to the auction tonight."

Oliver tensed. The beast in the hallway rounded, bounded back into his in two, full-forced leaps. His eyes narrowed. That tightness in his chest returned as the urge to fight flared hot through his blood. "What auction?"

She sighed. "Honestly, Oliver. Really?" She peeked at him over one slender shoulder. "The Unidac auction. Walter and I have only talked about it all week."

"No."

"Yes," she drawled, "that's the second stage. Unidac is in receivership. That means, after the first stage, which is tonight's auction, everything is sent back to the court to review. They'll hear any objections on the transaction and then, ultimately, approve the sale of the assets. It's a little more complicated than when your mom wanted to buy your dad that gorgeous Aztec Red '53 Cadillac Eldorado convertible at auction for his birthday. Here." She gestured to her back. "This zipper's stuck. Can you…?"

He sighed as he stepped up behind her. Not because the task bothered him – he'd zip her in and out of dresses the rest of his life if she let him – but because this wasn't the plan. This wasn't how he'd understood the auction process to work.

Oliver caught the tiny tab and tugged, but it didn't go anywhere. He frowned as he dipped his head to get a better look. "Felicity, the police think some of the Unidac bidders were murdered. Don't you think you might want to reconsider this?"

"It's my job, Oliver."

"Walter would never expect you —"

"I would never expect Walter to give me preferential treatment because I'm his step-son's wife."

Oliver glanced toward the mirror to find Felicity scowling at him. "There's such a thing as prudence."

"This from the guy who pulled a vanishing act after being kidnapped. Really?"

"And I learned my lesson, didn't I? I agreed to let Diggle accompany me everywhere."

"Yes, but you still went. You still move around like a free man. I won't be kept a prisoner in this house just because I happen have girl bits."

Oliver studied her naked back, couldn't stop himself from feathering his fingertips over the tantalizing, silken flesh of her lower back.

Felicity shivered. "Did you get it?"

"Almost." He refocused on untangling a loop of lace caught in the slider, glanced at her reflection again. "I'm not trying to keep you prisoner."

"Good."
"But I am trying to keep you safe."

"Safety is an illusion."

"That doesn't mean I have to be happy that you're knowingly walking into the line of fire."

"Accompanying Walter is my job."

"Still don't have to like it."

"I'm going."

Oliver grunted as the lace came free. He slid the tab upwards slowly. When it neared the top, he bent forward and pressed his lips to her nape. She sucked in a surprised breath but, before she could say anything, he zipped her up completely and stepped back. He met her startled eyes in the glass again. "Then I'm going, too."

Felicity twisted around, one hand curled loose and resting between her breasts. "I thought you didn't want to be involved in Queen Consolidated business?"

"I don't." He touched one of her dangling earrings, then cupped her cheek. His thumb traced the gentle arch of her cheekbone toward her ear. "I do, however, very much want to be involved in my wife."

Her lashes fluttered downward. Her lips started to form a question. It stalled there, though. Unasked. Or maybe she wasn't sure what to say.

Oliver edged closer. "I'm sorry about the other day. I…" He took a deep breath. "It's not easy for me to talk about what happened on the island. I look at myself in the mirror now and I see…" Pain. Torment. Anger. A stranger. A killer. The monster five years had carved into him. He clenched his jaw. "It's hard for me. Having you see it…"

Her expression softened. "Oliver."

He closed his eyes, turned his face away.

Felicity touched his jaw with one hand. "Oliver. I don't care about scars. Do they hurt me? Yes. Of course they do. Because when I see them, I see everything you went through, and I hurt for you. But I could never be ashamed of them. Or you. It would never change the way I feel about you. Would you care if I had scars? Would that change anything? Would you suddenly find me repulsive?"

He made himself look at her. "Never."

She offered him a small smile. "Okay, then. Glad we cleared that up."

"There's something else we should settle."

She tensed. That smile faltered. "Oh?"

Oliver slipped his fingers into her hair. His thumb stroked the tender flesh where her earlobe and jaw met. "Every day I was away from you, I couldn't think of anything but finding a way back. The thought that I never would, that I'd die there without ever seeing you again… That terrified me."

She swallowed. Her eyes turned moist. "Oliver."

He shook his head. "Then I suddenly I was back. I was home. With you. I realized that scared me
even more. Because I couldn't... I don't want to deceive you, Felicity."

Her lids flickered.

"I don't want to lie to you. I don't want to hurt you. But these last five years..." His vision turned blurry; his voice gravelly. "They hurt."

Felicity released a shaky breath as she rose up on her toes to cup his face. "Oliver Jonas Queen, when have I ever been made of glass?"

Since he'd almost crushed her windpipe. Since he's bruised her. Since he's made her cry. Since he'd found out she carried his baby, lost it, and suffered. Since everything he did seemed to hurt her again and again.

"Iron will, remember?" she prompted, reminding him of his own observations of her nature when they dated.

"With strong opinions to match," he murmured.

"You bet your ass, buddy."

Oliver settled a hand at her waist. He tugged her to him, pressed his lips to her forehead, then wrapped her close. Her arms slid around his waist. Tight. Chin on the top of her head, her closed his eyes and let her scent – that magical, healing scent – wash through him. Her heart beat slow and steady against his chest, his own falling into easy rhythm with it.

"I'm sorry I was an asshole yesterday," he said gruffly. "I'm sorry I pushed you away. You caught me off guard and I just... reacted. I want to tell you, Felicity. I do. I just can't. I know you need..."

Felicity squeezed him, silencing him. She snuggled closer. "You've always been the only thing I need, Oliver. That hasn't changed."

He sighed as he splayed his hand against her back and stared at their entwined figure in the mirror. He wanted to believe her. He did. But a part of him knew how dangerous that was. Because there were still secrets between them. Lies. Dark, insidious, violent truths that would forever change the way she looked at him if they ever came to light. She could deny it all she wanted, but he knew it was true. Knew because the things he'd done, the lives he'd taken, had forever changed the way he saw himself.

When that day or reckoning came, that broken, haunted look in her eye would kill what little piece of his soul had somehow managed to survive this long.

Oliver smoothed his hand down her back, up again. Nodded gently. It was a price he was willing to pay for her love. It was the risk he'd take if it meant being with her, loving her, rebuilding a home with her.

From this moment on, he would keep her. He would protect her. Kill for her. He'd even lay down his life for her if that's what it took. Because she was his – his home, his heart, his very soul. She belonged to him the same way he belonged to her, and God help anyone who tried to rip them apart again.

The faint twitter of a cell phone made Felicity lift her cheek from his chest. "Oh." She drew away with obvious reluctance and hurried to the dresser. She pressed a few buttons, caught her bottom lip between her teeth – worrying it there – as she studied the screen.
Oliver frowned. "Problems?"

"What?" Felicity stared at him as if she'd forgotten he was there. She pressed another button, shook her head. "No. It's nothing." She toyed with her earring. "I do need to get going though. Traffic is going to be murder getting back into town at this hour."

"You're not leaving without me."

Her hand dropped to her side, the phone clutched tight between her fingers. "Oliver, you don't have to do this. There are going to be hundreds of people there."

"And out of those hundreds of people, you're going to stick to Diggle's side."

Her head tipped slightly to one side. "Or yours?"

Something in the way she said it made him pause.

Felicity looked down at her phone, flexed her fingers around the plastic casing. "It's a secured building in the middle of the city, Oliver. What's the worst that could happen?"

"What building?"

"What?"

"The auction. Where's it taking place?"

"The Exchange Building. Why?"

Fuck. Oliver rubbed his eyes. Great. Just fucking perfect. Hundreds of people packed into one place – one of whom was his wife, another an international hitman wanted on every continent of the globe. An assassin who not only never missed his killshot, but took the extra step of lacing the bullets with one of the fastest, most deadly poisons on the planet. What could possibly go wrong?

"What's the matter?" Felicity asked.

Oliver dropped his hand, clenched it at his side. "I've never heard of it. I don't even know where it is."

"Oh. Well, you wouldn't. They only built it a few years ago. Here." She crossed to his computer and brought the monitor to life with a wiggle of the mouse that her hips seemed to mimic. She tapped a few keys on the keyboard, then stepped back as she pointed at the screen. "That's it. The Exchange Building."

Oliver joined her side. The massive high-rise was surrounded by three towers with clear sightlines into the building. Lawton could get his kill shot off from virtually anywhere.

"You know what," he said, still studying the screen, "you're right. It's going to take you awhile to get into town. I still have to shower and dress. It will take too long." He straightened. "You should go with Walter. Take Diggle with you."

"Diggle's supposed to stay with you."

"I'll take one of the guards from the ground with me when I leave." He touched the small of her back. "I want to know you're protected."

Still, Felicity hesitated. "Are you sure?"
"Positive."

She nodded slowly. "Okay. Then I should…” She gestured to the door. "I should go."

He took a gentle hold of her wrist before she could, tugged her back. "Promise me you'll stay near Diggle until I get there."

"Oliver, I'll be fine."

"Promise me."

She covered his hand. "I promise."

That's when Oliver did one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He let her go.

He watched her disappear through the doorway, stared after her for a moment before turning his attention back to the screen. He swore under his breath as he turned the monitor off.

There was no way he could cover an area that big, Oliver realized as he stripped his shirt over his head and headed for the bathroom. He couldn't protect all of Deadshot's targets. He couldn't do this alone.

Some days it paid to have enemies in high places.

~*~

Cops had plenty of reason to experience fear throughout their day – routine traffic stops, first one through the door of a domestic disturbance, that split second in pursuit of an armed suspect when the officer turned a blind corner, unsure if it would bring them face to muzzle with the gun or not. Even responding to a call for a fire truck or ambulance could result in people taking potshots at the squads that rolled up to assist.

The one place most cops felt a semblance of safety, however, was the parking lot of their own police station. Maybe that's why Detective Quentin Lance was erroneously lax when he existed the building and walked toward his car at the far end of the parking lot; why he didn't seem to give the dark shadows scrutiny, and why he didn't realize he wasn't alone in the night until he was reaching for his keys.

By then it was too late.

The impact came from behind, knocking the wind out of him as his attacker slammed him – face first – onto the hood of his car. The impact was hard enough to rock the car, brutal enough to bounce Quentin off the metal.

He swore as he reached for his gun. His fingers brushed the butt as a hand – large and almost impossibly strong – caught his. The assailant found a pressure point in his palm that Quentin didn't even know existed, then took advantage of that moment of blinding pain to twist his arm up and behind him.

Bone ground against bone. Pain sliced through his shoulder, making Quentin cry out. His attacker forced his arm higher. A sizzle of agony seared up his arm, into his neck and skull.
"You son of a bitch!" Quentin raged, impotent fury and embarrassment bursting through him in a rush.

Leather creaked. His attacker leaned closer. "Detective, quiet," the man commanded on a low growl.

Quentin caught a flash of green from the corner of his eye. The hooded freak? The vigilante that had been busting heads and putting arrows in people all over town? What the fuck? He struggled, but the tension on his arm increased, stilling him almost immediately.

Breathing hard, his cheek flat against the cold metal hood of his card, Quentin let out a bitter laugh before he practically spat, "You got a pair on you, pal. I'll say that. Pulling this at a police station!"

The vigilante pressed his forearm against Quentin's back, pinning him there. He eased up a little on the armlock. "Floyd Lawton's the one targeting the buyers interested in Unidac Industries. Interpol calls him Deadshot because he never misses." He tightened his grip when Quentin shifted. "You can look this up after I go."

"Yeah, and stop chasing you, I suppose."

"I don't know who hired Lawton. I can't be sure who he's targeting next. It might be all the buyers, and I can't protect them in a space that big. I need your help."

Quentin laughed. "Yeah. Professional help."

"Lawton uses bullets laced with Curare. Tell your men to wear Kevlar."

Quentin opened his mouth to tell him to go to hell when he was unexpectedly released. His sore arm flopped down to bang against the car, and he cursed as he shoved himself upright. He turned, his hand going for his gun, but there was no one behind him. The parking lot was empty, the vigilante gone, and he was alone. As if it never happened at all.

~*~

Read More About the Olicity Hiatus Challenge
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

The Unidac Industry's auction shows just how high the stakes have been raised. Oliver changes his mind. Felicity sets hers. Diggle makes a mistake, and a new player joins the game in time to take a few swings.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on August 2, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

The military importance of controlling high ground had been a guiding principle of war for well over two thousand years. Fundamentally, it was good advice. Holding the high ground gave controlling forces an elevated vantage point, making it easier to see the advancing enemy and maintain surveillance. It forced the opponent to, literally, fight an uphill battle. It even provided a tactical advantage when armed with inferior weaponry.

Oliver doubted, however, that when Sun Tzu devised the strategy, the Chinese military general could ever have imagined such ground would be a position five hundred and fifteen feet in the air inside a forty-eight-story building. He also doubted the warrior could conceive of a time when occupying such ground would foster a false sense of security and actually be a disadvantage against high power weaponry like a simple sniper rifle.

Unfortunately, that was the reality of the exhibit hall rented for the Unidac auction. Its perch high above Starling City offered a stunning view of the harbor, downtown corridor, and last vestige of the setting sun, but those same sprawling glass panes created an almost three-hundred-sixty-degree fishbowl for a sniper to pick off his targets.

The hall was, Oliver realized, making his way around the mezzanine and down the staircase to the main floor, one giant lobster trap. Granted, the room was gilded with all the pretty trimmings – pretty chandeliers, expensive art on the walls, hand-carved wood details, and frosted glass – but it was a trap nonetheless. The entrance funneled all the bidders into one large parlor. One side of the giant hall had been designed for mingling, the other lined with white chairs, a small stage, and podium for the auction proceedings. Once the shooting started, the only way out was the staircase, where the sniper could easily pick them off one at a time. Deadshot couldn't have picked a better location if he'd planned the damned auction venue himself.

Oliver cut his way through the crowd, automatically scanning it for his wife and taking stock of the few spots in the room that might offer protection once bullets and glass started flying. There weren't
many. Certainly not enough for the hundreds of people that clogged the room.

He never should have agreed to this. He never should have let Felicity come, not until he'd seen the layout of the place for himself. Stupid. He'd been too worried about raising suspicions, about pushing too hard only to have Felicity push back for reasons, to do what he should have done, even if that meant hauling her over his shoulder and locking her in a damned closet until he knew the assassin had been captured.

A man stepped into his path, bringing him up short.

"Oh, don't you scrub up nice," Quentin Lance said, barely sparing him a glance. His attention stayed on the move, swinging from one end of the room to the other before he checked behind him, the stairs, then back toward the bar before starting all over again.

Unlike Oliver, the cop didn't wear a suit. He stayed casual and comfortable in a black jacket and buttoned down shirt, but there was no mistaking the shape of his gun and holster strapped to his side beneath the coat.

"Here to support my family," Oliver told him.

"Yeah, me too, God help me." He pulled his radio from his pocket. "Unit One, all clear. Unit Two?"

The radio squawked. "Still no sign of Lawton."

Quentin pressed the button again. "Unit Three?"

"I'm at the north-west perimeter," a woman responded. "All clear."

"Unit Four?"

"Parking structure is secure."

Quentin glanced at Oliver. "Unit Five, what's your status?"

"This is Unit Five. All clear."

Quentin lowered the radio, nervously shifted it from one hand to the other before glancing back at the stairs.

Whatever their differences, no matter what the cop thought of the Queen family or the vigilante, Quentin Lance was obviously taking the warning he'd received in the police station parking lot seriously. The ability to put those personal feelings aside, to protect people – even if he didn't like them – was what always made the man a good cop.

Oliver stepped closer. "Detective."

Quentin's attention shifted to him.

"Thank you."

He snorted as he walked away.

Oliver went the other direction, moving through the crowd toward the edge where John Diggle stood. The crowd milled around the guard, oblivious to the true nature of his presence; seeing nothing more than another man in another well-cut gray suit, oblivious to the fact that every passing second was ticking down to disaster.
"Dig," Oliver greeted as he approached. "Got your eyes open?"

"That's what I'm here for, Sir," the guard replied, his tone dry. "That and answering patronizing questions."

Oliver sighed. "This guy's out of time. If he's going do something, it's got to be before the auction."

"Sir?"


Wait. Did that sound like a question or a statement? Shit.

"Oliver?" Walter called out.

He took the interruption and used it as an excuse to walk away. He dodged another crowd of people, managed not to bump into a waiter carrying a tray of drinks away from the bar, and arrive at Walter's side.

His step-father smiled as he shifted his bid folder to his other hand. "I'm so pleased you were able to attend."

Oliver rested his hand on the bar, darted a quick look around the room before dragging his attention back to the other man. "Walter, the police said some of the Unidac bidders were murdered. I just think we should be a little bit more careful. My mother's already lost one husband."

"Well, if Moira shared your concerns she wouldn't have come," Walter assured him as he picked up a champagne glass from the bar. He tipped it toward the rest of the room. "And you definitely wouldn't have brought your sister."

Oliver started to argue but Walter's words finally registered. He snapped his head around. There, out in the open field of beige carpet, stood his mother, Thea, and Tommy, like sheep waiting to be plucked off by wolves.

Instant fear, anger, and disgust churned in his stomach, a bitter acid that propelled Oliver forward and left Walter to stare after him in obvious confusion.

He passed Quentin, the cop still on obvious alert, his shoulders tight, his eyes never resting anywhere for more than a few seconds before moving again.

Oliver touched his mother's shoulder as he came around her back to stand between her and Thea. He nodded at Tommy to acknowledge him. "Mom. Hey."

"Oliver," Moira said, instantly beaming, "what a wonderful surprise. I didn't know you were coming."

He didn't smile back. His jaw tightened as he raised a hand and motioned Diggle over. The guard was there in three long strides. From the tension on Diggle's face, it was clear he knew something was wrong.

"I need you to get them out of here right now," Oliver told him. He checked the crowd. "Felicity, too. I want her out. Where is she?"
"I saw her earlier," Thea said. "She was talking to some guy."

Tommy pointed toward the other side of the room. "There she is."

Oliver glanced, paused, and turned back. Felicity, half hidden by one of the large support columns in the room, stood between one wall of windows and the bar. Her expression was serious, her hand gestures tight, and the set of her shoulders far too rigid for her conversation to be anything but terse. He couldn't see the man she was with, but when Oliver tilted his head a bit, he could see the man's reflection – his wide shoulders, cropped hair, and rugged face.

His eyes narrowed.

"I'll get her," Diggle said before he set off toward her.

Moira touched Oliver's arm, drawing his attention back to her as she shook her head. "Oliver, what is going on? The auction hasn't even started yet. We can't just leave —"

"Mom, please. Just do what I ask. It's not safe for you to be here." Oliver turned to Tommy. "Get them out of here. Diggle will meet you at the door."

Tommy nodded as he slid an arm around Thea's waist. "Yeah, okay. Absolutely."

Thea dragged her feet. "Wait! What about you?"

"I'll be all right," Oliver assured her as he backed away. He pointed at Tommy. "Go. Now. Felicity and Walter will be right behind you. I promise. Now go!"

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When Felicity first interviewed with Queen Consolidated, fresh out of MIT and nervous as hell, the head of Human Resources had asked her to list her three strongest traits. After considering the question, she'd answered professionalism, persistence, and intellectual curiosity. They'd landed her the job and served her well over the years. Now, however, that trio seemed to be coming together to conspire against her.

Felicity paced the west side corner of the room, twisting her fingers together and pausing occasionally to check the slender, feminine watch at her wrist. She reached the bar, checked her watch, started to turn back when she caught Walter watching her. She managed a small smile before turning her heel and pacing back the way she'd come.

Why couldn't people be on time? Why couldn't they do what they said they were going to do? Why did it seem like, lately, every best laid plan seemed to stumble over some unforeseen obstacle, like her husband or the vigilante? When had everything gotten this complicated? More importantly, she wondered as she moved behind one of the rectangular columns in the room, how the hell did she get out of it?

A hand caught her elbow from behind, dragged her back a step when she would have cleared the wide post. Felicity balanced herself with a hand against the pillar as she twisted around. Relief surged through her. "Mr. Mitchell."

Ben Mitchell, perfectly dressed in a navy suit and proper tie, released her. He shoved his hands into
his pockets. "We meet again."

"You're late."

His grin was lopsided. "Traffic was tighter than I expected." He glanced around. "The police seem very interested in this event tonight. Something I should know?"

"I don't know. They seem to think someone is targeting bidders interested in Unidac."

He frowned. "Targeting how?"

"Murdering them."

His brows bowed downward. "Why?"

"I don't know, and I don't have a lot of time. With everything going on, my husband decided he needed to join me tonight. So we need to do this before he shows up and starts asking questions."

"Understood."

That was the nice thing about Ben Mitchell, one of the qualities she liked best about him when she hired him. He didn't like questions anymore than she did, and he knew how to get down to business, translate the relevant facts, and move on. Unlike her, he'd mastered the art of indifference. He didn't care who or what or why or where. Just give him the job, pay him, and it was done.

Mitchell stepped closer and lowered his voice. "The boat will be moved tonight. I have a secured location set. Once it's there, I'll confirm delivery with you."

"What about the crew?"

He shook his head. "They don't know anything. I've worked with them before, so I know they can all be trusted. I'm meeting them off sight. They've received no other details than the meeting place and time. From there I'll transport them to the warehouse for the job. They know nothing about you or the cargo we'll be transporting. Once it's loaded, they're cut loose. I'll take it to the new point where another crew – smaller, not at all related to the first – will help me unload it. No crossover personnel. No one knows you're involved."

"You're sure?"

"I've done this before, Mrs. Queen. You hired me because I'm the best. Because you trusted me. You can still trust me."

She swallowed before forcing herself to take a calming breath. "Okay."

"It'll all be done by morning. You have my word."

"What about the computer trace?"

"Still working on it. But they did turn up one thing." He removed a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to her. When she's unfolded it, he said, "Do you recognize it?"

Felicity studied the image on the page. It wasn't a recognizable image, just a circle cross-crossed by intersecting lines. They were too geometric, too irregular to be described as spider-web-like, nor were they structured enough in any logical pattern to have some mathematical foundation. Yet somewhere in the back of her mind was the uneasy sensation she'd seen it before.
Mitchell tipped his head. "You've seen it before?"

"I... I'm not sure. Where did you..."

"It's one of the only solid pieces of information my friend found while retracing your security breach. I don't want to frighten you unnecessarily, Mrs. Queen, but I think you need to be very careful from now on. Careful about where you go, who you talk to. Who you trust."

Fear flipped her stomach. "Why? What happened?"

He took a deep breath and looked away. "I'm not sure. Maybe nothing. I just..." He peered down at her. His lips thinned. "I had the feeling someone was watching me earlier." He held up a hand when Felicity started to speak. "I didn't see anyone. I haven't seen any indication I'm being surveilled. I don't know for certain. But I'm... uneasy."

Felicity nodded as she folded the paper and slipped it into her purse. She understood that feeling. She'd never been in combat like Mitchell; never been in survival situations that honed some almost mystical sixth sense, but she knew he had. Those instincts kept men like him alive. Just because he couldn't pinpoint them didn't mean she'd discount them.

"Do you still think we should go through with this?" she asked.

"Yes. Absolutely. I took extreme countermeasures before coming here tonight, just in case I have been compromised. I'll do so again before rendezvousing with my team. But if there is a breach? The faster we resolve this business, the sooner we cease contact, the better it is for everyone. Do you understand?"

She nodded.

"I cannot stress this enough, Mrs. Queen. Take your safety seriously. Rethink what you're doing."

"I have. God." She rubbed her forehead with trembling fingers. "Believe me, I have. But it's... It's too late now. I can't go back. I don't have a choice."

"We always have a choice." He put his hand on her shoulder, squeezed gently. "You need to ask yourself if this is worth it."

Felicity's attention shifted to the stairs. She watched as Oliver descended them, absently buttoning his coat as he did so, and then cut a straight line through the crowd toward Detective Quentin Lance.

From what she'd seen someone had planted a bomb on the Queen's Gambit. They'd sunk it in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, tried to kill her husband, succeeded in murdering Robert Queen. They'd set off a chain reaction that had shattered her family, stolen her future, and sentenced Oliver to five years of hell on some godforsaken island that returned him broken and scarred and so tortured he couldn't even sleep a solid night.

When this started, she told herself she had to know. She'd become obsessed by it the second she saw the wreckage in the warehouse. The instant she understood what had truly happened. Yes, there'd been grief, but there'd been anger too. Righteous fury; the thirst for vengeance. The need to make whoever had done this to her – to Oliver – pay. But there had been fear, too. Knowledge that whatever had happened, whatever the truth – once revealed – it could never be undone.

It had all spiraled out of control so fast. Could she even stop it now if she wanted to? Could she just walk away and pretend it'd never started? Didn't Oliver deserve better than that? Didn't his father? How could she ever look Oliver in the face again knowing she was not only lying to him, but
protecting whoever had done this to them simply because she was afraid? How could he not hate her for that? How could she not hate herself?

Mitchell tightened his grip. "It's not too late, Mrs. Queen. You've been given a chance at a fresh start here. Something most people in your position never get. You have your husband back. Your family. Your whole future. It's okay to walk away."

She closed her eyes and shook her head. "How can I? Knowing what I know…"

"You don't know anything. You suspect. You fear. You don't know. Once you do – once you have proof in your hands – and they know? It will be too late to turn back, Mrs. Queen. They won't let you. From what I've seen so far? Whoever is behind this is ruthless, driven, powerful, and they don't care if the people who get in their way get hurt. That means you'll only have one choice. Get them before they get you."

Felicity shivered.

Mitchell must have felt it because he lifted his other hand to her shoulder, caging her there as he loomed closer. "Frankly, Mrs. Queen, unless you've got a private army to protect you? I don't much like your odds."

~*~

Tommy Merlyn never considered himself a smart man. If there was a bad decision to be made, the wrong woman to bed, a stupid challenge to accept, or a losing bet to wager, chances were he'd be found at the heart of it. He'd never found anything he wasn't willing to risk – money, cars, humiliation, even his father's anger and disappointment – in pursuit of a thrill. Until, he realized as he towed Thea through the crowd toward the stairs, right now.

Oliver was scared. Tommy didn't know of what. He didn't know why. He didn't care. He only knew he wasn't sticking around for whatever bad juju was about to be unleashed when there was even a remote chance Thea would be caught in its backdraft.

"Wait. Tommy! Would you just…" Thea tried to pry his hand from around her wrist. She dragged her feet and wound up nearly tripping over her high heels. "Wait!"

"Oliver wants you out," Tommy tossed over his shoulder as he pushed his way through a group of investment bankers, then snaked around a waiter.

"Oh. Since when do you do what people tell you?"

He stopped suddenly, turned, and caught her by her slender shoulder before she should crash into him. "Fine. Then I want you out."

"But —"

"No. No buts. No wait. Now."

"This is ridiculous. There are police everywhere and —"

"Damn it, Thea." He shook her. Once. "Don't you get it? Something's wrong and I am not losing
"You, do you understand?" He hauled her closer, tightened his grip. "Now you're either walking up those stairs or so help me God, I will throw you over my shoulder and carry you, got it?"

Thea opened her mouth, probably to instinctively argue, but apparently thought better of it. She lifted her chin. "I'm not leaving without Mom and Walter."

"She's right behind us," Tommy said, already scanning the room behind them for Moira.

Thea looked, too. "I don't see her. I'm not leaving her!"

He swore under his breath and maneuvered her next to the large potted fern on its marble pedestal at the bottom of the stairs. "Stay here."

"Wait!" Thea grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

"To find your mom." He disentangled himself from her, gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. "I'll be all right. Stay. Here."

He didn't wait to hear if she argued or not. He backtracked through the room and was practically back where they'd started before he found Moira Queen, who'd apparently been waylaid by one of the other bidders. He found his way around half a dozen stiffly dressed stormtrooper looking bodyguards before he had enough room to reach for Moira's elbow. "Mrs. Queen? We should go."

The woman with Moira, a tall, reed-like woman with long dark hair, dark dress, and calculating eyes, assessed him before flicking them back to Moira. "Now this is the side of you I know best, Moira."

She mimicked little legs with her index and middle finger, scampered them in the air. "Run away. Go hide your head in the sand again. It is, after all, what you do best."

Moira shook Tommy's hand off. "I've never run from anything. I don't intend to start now. But then, you wouldn't know anything about staying and fighting for anything, would you, Isabel? No, all you've ever done is swoop in, take what someone else has built, and then try to pick it apart for your own profit."

The woman smirked. "I can't take what isn't being offered."

"You —"

"Whoa. Okay, well," Tommy said, neatly inserting himself between the two women. He smiled his widest, most charming smile at the other woman, held out his hand. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Thomas Merlyn."

She ignored his hand. "Isabel Rochev."

"Nice to meet you. Do I detect a faint Russian accent? It's lovely. How do you like Starling City? That's great." He clapped his hands, turned sharp toward Moira. "Time to go, Mrs. Queen."

"Before the bidding even starts?" Isabel asked as she tilted her head to peek around Tommy's shoulder. "I know you've never offered much of a fight before when I, how did you put it? Swooped in to take what belongs to others? But I honestly expected more given your… reputation. How disappointing."

"Oh, Isabel," Walter Steele murmured, suddenly appearing at Moira's side. "I think you'll find people who underestimate my wife never have the opportunity to do so again."

"Mr. Steele. It's lovely to see you again."
He didn't return the sentiment. Instead, he slipped an arm around his wife's waist, kissed her cheek. "Having a good time, dear?"

"Perfect lovely," Moira told him.

He smiled. "You were right about having the auction here. The hostess has received nothing but compliments. She also mentioned that the auction starts in fifteen minutes. We should take our seats." He nodded politely at Isabel. "Ms. Rochev."

"I can see now why I've heard such happy stories about your nuptials," Isabel said. She signaled a passing waiter to come closer, plucked a drink from the silver tray. "I certainly hope your marriage fairs better than Moira's first. She took a sip, left a frosty pink lipstick smudge on the rim. "I assume it will. Assuming you don't take any boat trips."

Moira turned white, then red. Her fingers turned to claws as she took one lunging step. "You —"

Walter somehow got there first. He loomed over the other woman, his eyes hard, his expression as hard as his namesake.

"What's going on?" Thea asked as she stepped up to her mother's side. She glanced back and forth between the two women, touched Moira's arm. "Mom?"

Tommy edged closer to her. "I thought you were waiting by the stairs."

"I thought you were coming right back," she returned smoothly.

"Aw, the Queen family. All together." Isabel paused. "Oh. Except for Oliver. Is he here tonight? I'd love to meet him."

Walter stepped closer. "You've had your fun, Isabel. Enough."

She flashed him a smile as she turned to go, her team of security automatically parting to provide a path. She rested a slender hand on Walter's chest, patted. "Oh, Walter… I've only just begun."

~*~

If there was ever one, awkward, universal experience, Oliver figured it was the accidental wave – that moment, the street or in a store, when you thought someone was waving to you but, in reality, were waving to someone behind you – and you were left with your hand halfway in the air, feeling stupid, looking stupid, and trying to come up with some cool way to divert the action into something natural looking as not to reveal said stupidity.

In John Diggle's case, his half-nod, partial-wave wasn't accidental or mistaken identity. After his successful redirect of Walter to Moira's side for extraction, Diggle naturally turned his attention to Felicity next. He'd stepped closer. The man next to Felicity looked up. The two men locked eyes. Diggle's hand started to lift, his chin to jut up not only in acknowledgement, but in greeting. In recognition. The other man's face tightened. He gave a quick jerk of his head. Diggle stopped. His chin dropped. His hand detoured to his tie.

The damage, however, had been done. If anyone had been looking – and Oliver most definitely had – that sequence of small actions betrayed them both.
Diggle did know the man. Knew him well enough to greet him in a casual way. Like a friend. If the
guy was a friend, why hide it? Why lie and say he didn't know him? Why lie and claim not to know
how he got into the dedication ceremony? Unless Diggle knew enough about the other guy to realize
connections were to be denied. In the field of undercover operations and personal security,
anonymity was an asset. Invisibility a potential weapon.

But Diggle had been hired by Moira Queen to protect her family. If another operative had been
retained, why keep it secret? Why have the guy hover around Felicity? She knew what threatens the
family faced. She'd been kidnapped alongside him. It had been her apartment the killers stormed to
get to them. There was no need for secrecy.

Oliver glanced back at Diggle just as the guard glanced his way. The two men stared at each other.
Busted, Oliver thought as he watched the shadow of realization pass across Diggle's face.

Later, Oliver told himself as he squashed his anger and forced his attention back to his wife. He'd
deal with Diggle, his lies, and his loyalties – wherever they lay – after he had everyone out.

Diggle cleared his throat, coughed into his fist. The man next to Felicity paused and looked up. Still
holding Oliver's gaze, he said something to Felicity, causing her to turn toward Oliver – her face
turning as white as the bodice of her gown – as a waiter skirted around them to get to the bar. Light –
red light – sparkled off the cut crystal flutes on the server's tray, and then refracted in a dozen
different directions.

Time froze.

The scattered beam vanished.

Oliver wasn't sure who moved first, only that he lunged toward Felicity as Diggle did; as Quentin
Lance dove toward Walter and Moira. The supersonic crack of a bullet, the shattering of glass, broke
the silence a split second before the man with Felicity crashed into her. He knocked her backward
into the column, and she staggered under his sudden weight, her arms coming up automatically to
hold him. A second shot went off and the man dropped.

Oliver saw blood – bright, red, garish – bloom across Felicity's chest. Too far away, Oliver realized
as he shoved a waiter aside and bolted forward. Oh, God, he was too far away... Another shot
sounded, punched through the glass just as Diggle hit Felicity in a full-force tackle that snapped her
sideways. They slammed to the ground as another round cut through the glass, took a chunk out of
the column before ricocheting sideways to strike the bartender in the head. Blood, brains, and bits of
skull exploded outward, spraying the room.

Someone screamed. A chorus joined them. The herd, frozen until then, stampeded for the stairs.
More shots came, a quick staccato that took down the first three to almost reach the top. More
screams as the forward tide turned, rolled back the way they'd come. Four more went down. Blood
flowed down the steps.

"Down!" Quentin Lance roared, waving for people to get low and seek protection. "Get down!"

Oliver threw himself forward, rolled across the carpet and broken glass to come up hard against the
low-rising wall, the shattered window above his head. Diggle still lay, sprawled, over Felicity,
keeping her pinned to the ground. Beyond them, Quentin grabbed Walter and Moira and practically
shoved them behind the protection of the bar. Further out, in the room, Tommy huddled Thea behind
another column, wrapped himself around her, his body a forming a human shield.

The shots kept coming, spraying glass, dropping bodies. Somewhere in the distance police sirens
screamed.

Oliver stretched low, pushed at the bodyguard's shoulder. "Dig! Felicity!"

"Oliver?" Felicity's voice was weak, muffled under the bulk of the guard. She pushed against the man's chest, barely succeeding in moving him more than a few inches. "Oliver… I think… I think Dig's hit."

Swearing, Oliver lunged forward, grabbed the back of Diggle's jacket, and lurched backward again, rolling the hulking weird of the guard with him. He didn't give himself time to linger on the blood that soaked the man's shirt before he scrambled over him to grab Felicity around the waist and drag her across the floor, out of sight.

She squatted there, her hip and shoulder against the wall, leaving smears of blood against the plaster. Blood stained her hair, spotted her face, and soaked the front of her dress and hands. She tucked her head down, survival instinct triggering that animalistic impulse to make herself as small a target as possible.

Oliver grabbed her, catching her by the upper arms as he practically hauled her to him. "Are you hit?" When she shook her head, he gave her a hard shake, practically screamed, "God damn it, Felicity, are you hit?"

Frantic, she shook her head as she clutched the front of his shirt. "N-No. Diggle… Oh, God, Ben!"

When she started to twist around to look for the other man, Oliver caught her. He cupped her face, forcibly preventing her from looking at the dead man a few feet away. A dead man with a gaping hole in the center of his forehead. He dipped his head, made her look at him. "No! Don't look. Do you hear me? Do not look."

She managed a jerky nod and, from the glassy look in her eye, the stark white of her face and lips, Oliver knew shock was taking over. He released her and turned to Diggle. He ripped the man's jacket aside, gripped his shirt and pulled. The fabric ripped to reveal the black Kevlar vest beneath.

"Smart son of a bitch," Oliver muttered.

Unfortunately, he wasn't lucky, too. The bullet had struck high in the shoulder, managing to sidestep the edge of the vest to sink straight into Diggle's body and out the other side. The bullet had left a neat hole and blood, thick and sticky, seemed to bubble up from the wound. Every drop of it laced with poison.

"Fuck," Oliver hissed.

Diggle choked. Sweat beaded on his brow as a grunt of pain ripped from his throat. His hand twitched against the carpet, leaving crimson smears. "J-Jacket," he wheezed.

Oliver scrambled for one as Felicity crawled forward to check the other. She came up with a zippered black case. Her bloodied fingers had a hard time opening it, but when she did, she flashed the contents at Oliver. Syringes. He'd brought eight. More than half of them were cracked and now useless.

"What are they?" Felicity asked as she fumbled to free one of the unbroken hypodermics.

"Am… Amin…opy…" Diggle sputtered.

Felicity looked to Oliver.
"Aminopyridine," he told her. "It'll counter the Curare by increasing his acetylcholine levels."

Felicity stared at the needle. Her hand shook. "I… How much?"

"All of it. It's gotta be administered intravenously." Oliver rested his knee across Diggle's chest and grabbed hold of his shirt sleeve. Two tugs ripped the seam, exposing the naked flesh of his arm. Oliver clamped down at the elbow and wrist, holding Diggle's arm immobile against the floor. The pressure also helped bring veins toward the surface, increasing their visibility. "Do it!"

He winced as Felicity slid the thick needle into his arm, clearing aiming for a vein. Diggle grimaced until the pain erupted from him in a roar.

"Now, here." Oliver snatched the syringe from her hand, tossed it away, then guided that hand to the wound. "Here. Press here. Both hands. Hard!"

She did. She glanced at Oliver when he shifted back. "Wait! Where are you going?"

Oliver peeked up at the window. There hadn't been another gunshot for at least a minute now. The police sirens sounded closer but still too far away. He shot a glance toward the bar in time to see Quentin roll to his feet. Clearly the cop had reached the same conclusion he had. The shooter was done; probably making a break for it now. If they didn't go after him, Floyd Lawton would vanish again and they'd be no closer to catching him or finding out who'd hired him.

Oliver watched the cop dart across the room, careful to keep low. Quentin didn't head for the stairs like Oliver thought he would, but rather across the hall, down the aisle left open between the auction seats, and toward the back of the room. Employee door, perhaps. Maybe a fire exit.

Oliver rocked onto his toes. He cupped Felicity's cheek. "You stay with Diggle. If he starts having trouble breathing, give him another injection and keep giving until the paramedics get here. You tell them it's Curare. Get him on artificial respiration if the injections aren't enough. They have to keep him on that until all the poison is out of his system. Got it?"

"I…"

"Do you understand?"

"Yes! But..." Felicity leaned more weight against Diggle's wound, making him groan. Blood oozed up from between her fingers. She glared at him. "Don't you dare, Oliver Queen! Don't you even think —"

Oliver lunged toward her. He caught her around the back of the neck and pulled her forward for a hard, quick kiss. He drew back, a scant inch separating them at the nose. "I love you. Now stay!"

"No! Oliver, no!"

He ran after Quentin, managed to catch the service door practically secreted away behind decorative drapes before it swung shut. Three steps more had him in a stairwell. Footsteps pounded against steps somewhere below him. Quentin Lance had obviously gone down. Oliver, on the other hand, headed up.

~*~
The thunder in her ears was no longer gunfire. Thea didn't know when she realized it, couldn't tell if the frantic beat was her heart or Tommy's. All she knew was the gunshots had stopped. So had the screams.

Silence smothered the room, broken only by the distant wail of police sirens. Glass crinkled. Someone moaned. The low drone of the alarm turned into a human moan, then a sob. The refrain of grief – a weeping, mournful howl of fear and pain and anguish and death – rippled through the room.

The macabre song swelled to a deafening level, and Thea clapped her hands over her ears, hating those sounds. Hating what they meant. What they made her remember. She burrowed closer to Tommy as if he could silence it. As if he, alone, could make it all vanish. His arms tightened around her, squeezing so hard she could barely breathe. Dimly she realized she was rocking – back and forth, back and forth – as she chanted on a broken whisper, "Make it stop. Please. Please, make it stop. Oh, God… please…"

Tommy smoothed his hand over the back of her head. His lips touched her temple, her forehead. He drew back as he made a soothing sound, brushed her hair away from her tear dampened face. "Shhh. It's all right. It's over, Thea. It's over." He captured her face between gentle palms. He searched her eyes, gave her a small shake to get through the fear and shock. "It's over, honey. You're okay. It's over."

She gulped for air, for control. She curled her hands around his wrists, anchoring herself more emotionally than physically. A new fear exploded in her stomach, surged bile into the back of her throat, making her mouth tremble and bringing fresh tears to her eyes. "Oliver," she whispered. Her gaze cut left, swung wildly to the right. "Oh, God! Mom. Walter. Felicity!" She lurched away from him, her hands and knees scraping the ground at the same time as she tried to scramble forward. "Felicity!"

Tommy swore as he snapped an arm around her waist and dragged her backward. He held her there, pinned against his chest, even when she struggled. "Stop it, Thea. Stop!" He squeezed. "They're all right, honey. Quentin got 'em. See?" He pointed to where Moira and Walter sat, huddled together, against the bar. He swung his arm in the other direction toward Felicity, who was on her knees next to Diggle, clearly tending his injuries. "They're okay. It's okay." He stroked a hand over her dark hair before he pressed his lips against her temple. "It's okay, baby. We're okay. We just… We need to stay here. Right here. Wait for the police."

As if sensing her daughter's distress, Moira lifted her head. Mother and daughter locked eyes. Thea managed a stiff nod and the corners of Moira's mouth quivered upward. Tears had ruined her mascara, creating runny, black raccoon eyes and dirty trails down her pale cheeks. Glass glittered in her hair, and the right shoulder of her black dress was torn almost completely away. Somewhere in all the commotion she'd also lost a shoe.

Thea had never seen her look more beautiful in her life.

The fear-lent strength suddenly sapped from her muscles, leaving Thea plaint in Tommy's arms. She shivered. He held her tighter. She closed her eyes. "I don't see Oliver."

"I saw him. He went out after Quentin. He was okay. I swear to you. He's all right."

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter. The shivers grew. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice hoarse. "I shouldn't have fought you. I should have gone when you wanted to. I'm sorry, Tommy. I'm so sorry…"

His hand cupped her jaw, turned her face toward his. "Hey. No. No, no. It's okay. We're all okay. I'd
have done the same damn thing, Thea. I wouldn't have left my mom either. Not ever."

His mom. Thea forced her lashes up. How could she have forgotten her? She'd never known Rebecca Merlyn. The wealthy philanthropist had been murdered in the Glades three years before she was even born. That left Tommy alone, at the mercy of a cold-hearted, devastated father. Alone. Scared. Abandoned. All at a far younger age than Thea had been when the *Queen's Gambit* went down, taking her father and brother with it. At least she'd had her mom and Felicity. Hell, even Walter.

Who did Tommy have? Who cared about him? Thea raised a trembling hand to his jaw, didn't even realize she had until Tommy covered it with his and pressed it tight against his cheek.

That's when she noticed the blood. It was a small cut, directly above his left brow. A fine, crimson ribbon trickled from it and down his temple.

"Tommy, you're bleeding..."

He shook his head. "I'm all right."

"No." She struggled against him, trying to find a better position so she could face him. "No, the news said the shooter uses poisoned bullets."

"Thea, it's just a glass cut."

"No! Hold still, damn it! They said —"

Swearing, Tommy locked one arm around her waist, the move yanking her flush against him, crushing her breasts against his chest as her knees landed on either side of his thigh. Her hands flew to his shoulders on reflex and his free hand slip around her nape, his fingers into her thick hair.

His dark eyes burned into hers.

Her shiver was different this time. Her nails curled into his jacket. Her gaze dropped to his mouth a scant inch from hers. Tommy's hand tightened at her waist. Her lips parted.

"Tommy."

His fingers clenched in her hair, nudging her face closer to his.

The doors above them banged open and before Thea could react, Tommy had already flipped them over. He pinned her to the ground with his body, caged her there with his arms as he craned his head around. The police – a full SWAT team in full tactical gear, complete with helmets and weapons – stormed the steps with several paramedic teams on their heels.

Tommy eyes closed as he bowed his head. His dark hair fell forward to brush Thea's throat. His breath fanned hot against her flesh as a shudder went through him.

This time it was Thea's turn to wrap her arms around him and hold him close. "We're okay," she whispered. She tightened her embrace. "I've got you."

And after this, she didn't know how to ever let him go again.

~*~
As a child, Oliver hated hide and seek. He didn't know if it was the gloomy, gothic vibe of the house or a byproduct of the one time he'd accidentally been locked in the basement for hours on end. He'd huddled on the cold stone steps, staring into the darkness, imagining the monsters and beasts that lurked there. Monsters that were just waiting for him to close his eyes so they could strike and gobble him whole.

Back then, he didn't understand that the blackness was part of that creature; its partner and ally. He didn't know that, someday, the terror those moving, twitching, insidious shadows struck in a man's mind would become the greatest weapon he'd wield against a, then, unimaginable evil. Nor could he have conceived that he, himself, would become the very monster that hunted from within that deep, roiling blackness.

Yet, as Oliver fired the grappling hook from the roof of the Exchange Building – as the hook clanged against concrete and the zipline snapped taut – he couldn't deny the truth of this moment. He couldn't deny that, as he leapt from the ledge and sailed through the night like an avenging wraith, the friction of the snaphook screaming against the cable like the war cry of inbound vengeance, he did it with ice in his blood and rage in his heart.

Evil had many faces and forms, but Deadshot was one of the worst. He killed, not for survival or moral righteousness, but for profit. For self-interest and gain. He killed without discrimination and, judging by his method, enjoyment.

Who knew how many he'd murdered in that auction room, how many more would die from the poison slowly wicking through their blood. Good people. People like Diggle whose only crime had been protecting Felicity. His wife. His family. Oliver tightened his grip on the slide, tucked his knees up as he raised his booted feet for impact with the window glass. He would end this by stopping the man known to the world only as Deadshot, terminating his murder-for-hire business once and for all. If that also satisfied the demands of the beast within him – the demand for blood and vengeance – Oliver would accept that.

He hit the glass hard enough to shatter the pane inward. The green leather he wore protected him from injury as he swung through the opening, cut the connection to the zipline, and then let momentum carry him forward. His boots barely hit the floor before Oliver tucked into a somersault. Bullets sliced through the air above him, pinged off the metal construction pillar as he came back to his feet behind the obstacle.

Oliver drew an arrow, ducked left to fire, then pivoted back, drawing another as he stepped right and fired again. Bullets slammed into column, drumming into it like a swarm of angry bees.

Deadshot had picked a perfect nest, Oliver realized as the gunfire ceased. The entire floor of the building was vacant. The floors had been stripped down to concrete, the walls to their studs. Scaffolding rose up from the floor to form skeletal platforms that almost reached the ceiling where the panels had been stripped away to expose ventilation ducts, electrical wiring, and load-bearing beams. Security would be low here, so would the foot traffic. The assassin had probably been able to come and go as he pleased, blending into any construction traffic to poke and prod and prep without fear of being questioned.

Visqueen sheets, once hung to protect the more delicate exposed areas, now hung loose from the ceiling and platform railings. The plastic billowed with the breeze through the broken window, its edges rising to occasionally snap and twist in the air.

Glass crunched.
Oliver, his bow in hand, ducked low and slipped into the darkness. A form moved opposite him in the shadows. Oliver stilled beside a large metal barrel, braced one gloved hand against the ground for balance as he peeked around it. The edge of his hood fluttered.

Man and shadow separated. Oliver dipped his head, shifted his weight. His eyes narrowed. Deadshot. He was smaller than Oliver thought he'd be, but then most legends were. He was just under six foot, thin build, brown hair. Average looking; a bonus in his line of work. Well, average minus the odd firearms Lawton had modified, mounted at his wrist and secured to his forearm and strange ocular device strapped over his eye, lending him a high-tech pirate air. Clearly the patch functioned as some sort of laser sight to improve his targeting.

Oliver crept forward, always keeping his target in sight and to his left. He circled around him, waited until Lawton turned his back, then pounced. The collision knocked Lawton to the ground, gave Oliver time to grab one of the scaffolding's poles. He kicked off as Lawton scrambled back to his feet. Oliver spun back, using the poll as a fulcrum, and kicked out. His heel slammed into Lawton's jaw. Lawton's head snapped back as spit and blood burst from between his lips.

Lawton came back fast, his arm arcing up a second before bullets sliced through the air. Oliver leapt for the scaffolding, barely had his feet on the cross support before he propelled himself upwards, his hands already reaching for the top rail. He flipped up and over it, rolled across the wooden slats and onto his belly as Lawton rushed forward to follow.

Instead of running, as the assassin probably thought he would, Oliver lunged at him. He grabbed fistfuls of Lawton's leather jacket, used the man's shoulders for balance as he flipped over his head. He let gravity and his own body weight drop him to his knees as he pulled, slingshotting the assassin over his head and slamming him down on the table opposite him.

The wood top cracked in half, dropped the shooter to the concrete. It didn't keep him down. He scrambled up and, though he didn't have time to use the modified gun, did have time to block Oliver's bow as he swung it at the man's skull. Military training, Oliver realized as they exchanged punches. It was clear in the man's move, the amount of punishment he could take. And give. Any blow he landed felt like a brick to the ribcage.

Lawton doubled up, a solid one-two punch to Oliver's gut followed by a sharp elbow to his back, right into a kidney. A quick sweep of his foot sent Oliver's bow skittering across the floor and into the shadows.

Oliver caught his arm, twisted it behind him, then used it to shove the man away. Lawton stumbled a few steps before he tripped over a coiled air hose and went down, face first.

Oliver seized the opening to dart into the dark and retrieve his bow. He ducked behind another column, readied an arrow as the steady whomp of helicopter blades filled the night. A spotlight sliced through the darkness between the two buildings. The beam stabbed through one of the windows, cut away, stabbed again.

It wouldn't be long before the police identified the floor they were on. After that, it would be mere seconds before SWAT flooded in. The time for successful escape – both for him and Deadshot – was rapidly dwindling. He knew it. Deadshot did too, judging by the sudden, frantic burst of his breath.

Oliver pressed his back against the column, flexed his grip on his bow. "Drop your guns!"

Deadshot aimed left, then right, clearly unsure where Oliver's echoing voice originated. He eased forward, one black-booted foot crossing over the other. Indirect light from the helicopter's search
beam illuminating the folds of his black leather jacket and pants. "I admire your work," Lawton said, his arm still raised. "I guess you won't be extending me any professional courtesy."

Disgust lifted Oliver's upper lip. "We're not in the same line of work," he snarled. "Your profession is murder."

The assassin laughed as he edged closer, the muzzle of his gun coming around to point at the column. "Don't fool yourself. You've taken lives."

Oliver glanced at his bow, brought it closer. Tightened his grip. "For the good of others. You're out for yourself."

Lawton sighed. He lowered his arm. Shrugged. Surrender? Acceptance?

Neither.

The muzzle flared hot and bright, illuminating their corner of the building a split second before another burst of bullets peppered the air. The instant there was a pause – a silence that seemed to only stretch between heartbeats – Oliver darted out, fired, and ducked back.

Lawton cried out. The gunfire ceased. A second later came the muffled thump of a body hitting the floor.

Oliver waited. Smart hunters knew the best, most successful traps were the ones that lured the prey to them. Lawton hadn't become one of the best by being stupid. But when the other man didn't move, when Oliver heard nothing more, when the helicopter searchlight arced across the other side of the room and inched closer, he peeked out.

Deadshot lay, flat on his back, on concrete. Bits of broken glass littered the ground around him. The green shaft of Oliver's arrow stuck straight into the air, its razor head having sliced straight through the hitman's ocular lens, into his eye, and quite possibly into his brain.

Oliver crouched next to him, patted down his pockets and his jacket until he found a cell phone in his pocket. A touch of the screen confirmed what he'd already assumed. Password protected. Oliver slipped it into his jacket, glanced toward the elevators when the light above the doors blinked to life and the cable engine motor whirled to life.

The cops could have Lawton's body, Oliver told himself as he sprinted toward the windows. He raised his bow, fired a shot that shattered the glass, then another that sent a hook and line sizzling out ahead of him to find purchase on the next building's exterior. He had his vengeance.

Oliver snared the line around his forearm, caught it tight in his palm knowing the leather glove would protect his skin as the cable snapped tight and he leapt from the sill. The helicopter swept out, over the roof. The spotlight caught him – just for a minute – but then Oliver swooped down, away from the bright white glare, back into the blackness where he belonged, and vanished.
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Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Oliver receive support from a surprising source. Felicity makes Diggle a promise. Thea and Tommy contemplate the meaning of life over a plate of cafeteria jello. And Isabel Rochev proves she isn't done with the Queen family just yet.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity photo challenge posted on August 2, 2014 as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). As noted on the first chapter, this story is Alternate Reality, sometimes referred to as "Alternate Universe"/AU and deliberately alters facts of the canonical universe. It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

For those concerned about the Tommy/Thea thing, let me make it totally clear: They are absolutely NOT related at all. Not a drop of shared blood between them.

There were, over the last five years, probably a hundred times Oliver would have killed for an emergency room at a local hospital. He'd suffered though knife wounds, arrow wounds, lots of gunshots, bone fractures, second degree burns, and even a shark attack. While there was something undeniably comforting about having those injuries properly treated for the patient, Oliver had forgotten the fear and anxiety that accompanied those forced to wait.

He was not a waiter. He did not sit idle on the sidelines, doing nothing, while others took command of a situation. He was the doer; the one who took control, issued orders, and led the way. Over the past lustrum, Oliver was the guy expected to come up with the plan. The first one expected to cross a bridge or storm a ship. He'd disarmed missile launchers, tracked down World War II Japanese super-soldier serum, stormed a ship to seize control, then helped mastermind the sinking of said ship when the attack failed, and that didn't even touch on all the crap he'd done after getting off that freaking island two years later.

Not once, at any point during those crises, did Oliver Queen sit his ass in some neon orange vinyl covered chair – an almost empty cup of cold vending machine coffee in one hand and an unread copy of Private Islands magazine in the other – and do nothing.

He'd long ago removed his coat, shoved the tie into one of the pockets, unbuttoned his collar, and folded his shirtsleeves to his elbows. He'd pestered the nurse for updates, glanced up a hundred times whenever those swinging doors opened to reveal everybody but Felicity's doctor. It all confirmed that he did not do passive well, Oliver realized as checked his watch for the fifth time in two minutes.

The time did allow him to realize how much he hated the smell and sounds of hospitals. There was something about the cool, antiseptic, clinical scent that permeated the air that made his skin crawl. Something about the constant pings of call lights and intercom chatter calling color codes that welled
misery and fear in his gut. Visitors knew what those calls meant. They could sense the desperation and death.

Sighing, Oliver tossed the magazine onto the table and abandoned the coffee before leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. He rubbed his face, pressed his palms against tired eyes. For five years patience, planning and restraint had been key to his survival. He'd quickly learned that impatience, chaos, and agitation helped nothing. But the waiting... the not knowing... Christ.

The beast in him was surprisingly sated; apparently quelled by taking, quite literally, an eye for an eye. Perhaps knowing those he loved most were safe had tamed that murderous instinct. It left the creature within him alert, yet mournful, like a hound by the door waiting its master's return. With those murderous, rage-filled instincts tempered, all that was left was simple, human, Oliver Queen: worried son, concerned brother, and freaked out husband.

John Diggle had been taken straight to the ER trauma care with several other auction attendees. The Queens, however, whose injuries were deemed non-life-threatening, had been spirited away to the upper floors to avoid the media circus and gawkers. One of the benefits, Oliver supposed, of donating enough money to build such a wing in the first place.

Moira, Walter, and Thea were all treated for superficial cuts and scrapes and released. Felicity, however, had vanished down the hall in the obligatory wheelchair and had yet to return. Bloodied Felicity. Potentially concussed Felicity, if the way her skull had struck the column and, seconds later, the floor was any indication.

Oliver wasn't a man controlled by his imagination, but it was impossible not to think of the dozens of medical issues that could pop up following a head injury like that. Blood clots, bleeding or swelling of the brain. People were known to walk around for hours or days without realizing they were, essentially, slowly dying after sustaining a blow to the head.

Eyes closed, Oliver rubbed his brow as he swore under his breath. Felicity was not dying. He was not losing her. She was tough. Backbone of steel with a spirit to match, and God knew she was hard-headed sometimes. A small, reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as the elevator behind him pinged its arrival. It'd take more than that knock to the skull to keep her down.

What the fuck was taking them so long?

The scent of hot, fresh, strong coffee teased his nose. Oliver dropped his hands and opened his eyes.

Quentin Lance – a paper coffee cup with lid in each hand, one extended toward him – stood next to Oliver's chair. His jacket was gone, his tobacco colored shirt rumpled and spotted with dried blood. He was still carrying, though, his gun still holstered and strapped at his side and his badge still clipped to his belt. For cops, like vigilantes, the work clock never seemed to end.

Oliver accepted the coffee, clasped it with both hands between his knees. "Thanks."

Quentin didn't say anything. He glanced around the empty waiting room before looking down at Oliver again, his brow furrowed.

"Walter took Mom to go talk to the press," Oliver said before the man could ask. "Reporters kept trying to sneak up here. Those that didn't wouldn't stop calling. So Walter figured it might calm the frenzy. Tommy took Thea to the cafeteria." He looked up. "How's Diggle?"

"He's hanging in there. The doctors said those injections he got probably saved his life."

Oliver nodded before taking a sip of coffee. The bodyguard had come prepared, that was for sure.
He'd also brought an interesting knowledge of curare. Granted, as a professional bodyguard, Diggle might have taken the potential threat to the Queens serious enough to do research on precautions; but he seemed to know an awful lot about the drug before the cops showed up in the Queen living room with the warning.

"The bullet he took went straight through. They don't think it hit bone or anything vital. Doctor's expect he'll make a full recovery." Quentin eased himself down into a chair opposite Oliver with a slight groan. "They were taking him to patch up the gunshot when I left. If he stays stable tonight and there's no complications, they think he could probably even go home tomorrow."

Oliver nodded again. He looked down into his coffee, watched the oil shimmer on top. He took a deep breath and asked the one question he didn't want to ask. "How many dead?"

"Twelve."

Oliver flinched.

"Six more in critical condition. Another dozen or so injured, most of them caught up in the panic. Trampled. A lot of cuts and broken bones." Quentin slouched in the chair. He glanced at the double doors. "Any news on your wife?"

He shook his head, forced himself to take another sip.

"She'll be all right."

Surprised, Oliver looked up.

Quentin didn't move, not an inch, just sat there with his head tipped back slightly to rest against the wall behind him, his hands loose on his thighs. "She will."

It was as close to comfort and sympathy as Quentin Lance had ever given. No small feat given their history. Oliver nodded. "Thanks." He tapped his finger against the side of the paper cup, sending ripples through the near-black fluid. "What about the shooter?"

Quentin blew out a harsh breath. He scrubbed his hand against the back of his neck. "Not much help there. By the time SWAT got a team to the floor across the street, the vigilante had already been there. Looks like he and the sniper had a hell of a fight. Crime Scene Investigators are still up there collecting the physical evidence. Casings. Arrows. That kind of stuff."

"Any luck identifying the sniper?"

Quentin shook his head. "They collected some blood from the scene but..." he shrugged. "We're not optimistic there'll be a match in the system. Apparently Interpol couldn't even put a name to the guy until now and they'd been after him for years. Our odds of tracking him down are —"

"What do you mean tracking him down?" Oliver demanded, stilling. The beast in him stirred. Snarled. "I thought you said the vigilante —"

"Maybe wounded the guy. Hell, maybe it was the other way around, and the vigilante's out there with a curare laced bullet slowly pumping poison into him and saving me the job of tracking him down. I don't know. It was like a frickin' warzone up there. We've got officers canvassing the area but so far? No bodies."

Oliver ground his back teeth together. The need to go, to track and hunt Lawton down and bring him to justice, pumped through him. One thing held it in check. One thought. Felicity. She needed him.
She was hurt, scared, and vulnerable. She was his wife. His lover and his partner. She would always take priority. Always. Failing her… leaving her… that was never an option.

If Lawton was alive – and that was a big if given the arrow he'd taken to the eye – Oliver would find him. He still had the hitman's phone. There was bound to be something on it that could lead back to him. If Lawton was dead, it was conceivable the sniper had an accomplice who'd retrieved the body. Or maybe whoever hired Lawton had someone else watching who disposed of the body. If so, the police would find it eventually. Bodies had a funny way of surfacing.

The doors behind him opened and Oliver glanced over his shoulder at them, expecting another nurse. This time it was a doctor. He was a tiny bird of a man, probably no taller than Oliver's shoulders, with thin, white hair, round glasses, and nervous fingers that kept shifting around the clipboard he held. He studied the top sheet for a moment before looking up and blinking owlishly at the two men. "Mr. Queen?"

Lawton forgotten, Oliver pushed to his feet and hurried over to the doctor. "How is she?"

"Your wife is fine."

The few words lifted oppressive weight from Oliver's shoulder, leaving him jelly-kneed. He closed his eyes briefly, said a silent Thank You to a Universe he knew could be unreasonably fucking cruel. Suddenly aware of his heart that, at some point, started to beat too hard and fast, Oliver swallowed the lump it created in his throat. "You… You're sure? She's okay? Because she hit her head pretty hard…"

"I examined her thoroughly, Mr. Queen. I also sent her for a CT scan. That's what took so long. We're understandably very busy tonight. Time with the machines is tight. I went over the results with colleagues to be sure, and we all agree. There is no sign of bleeding or swelling. No fracture of any of any bones in her skull." The doctor hugged his clipboard to his chest. "She did appear to lose consciousness for a few seconds after the injury. She's having a little trouble recalling events."

"Is that…" Oliver glanced at Quentin, who'd risen to stand next to him. "Is that normal?"

"Perfectly normal," the physician assured him. "Mrs. Queen could tell me her name, when she was born, where she lived, what day it is. The slight memory loss regarding immediate events, combined with her symptoms and scan results, lead me to believe she has a grade two concussion. She's complained of a headache, some confusion, some nausea and fatigue, but those are also very common symptoms of a concussion."

"Should she stay overnight?"

The doctor adjusted his glasses. "I'd like her to. She should be observed throughout the night and over the next twenty-four hours. Purely as a precaution to make sure her condition doesn't worsen."

Panic fluttered in Oliver's stomach, tightening it. Why did there always have to be an ominous 'but' attached to good news? He knew the realities of concussions. He'd had several of his own. But this wasn't him. This was Felicity. He didn't want her hurt. He didn't want her pained. He sure as hell didn't like the threat of worsening conditions. She wasn't made of glass, but she was human. And soft. And the woman he loved. He'd do whatever he had to in order to keep her alive and healthy.

He nodded. "Okay. Yeah. Sure. Whatever she needs."

"However." The doctor took a deep breath and seemed to ease back half a step. "Mrs. Queen is refusing to stay."
Oliver closed his eyes. His head cocked to the right. "What? She's what?" He glared at the smaller man. "Why?"

The doctor lifted his shoulders. "She insists she wants to go home, that she'll be properly cared for there by family. I'm sorry, Mr. Queen, but it's within your wife's patient rights. We can't force her to stay."

"But she should stay?"

"There's no hard and fast rules with concussions. As long as no other complications —"

Oliver stepped closer. He loomed over the smaller man, didn't care that it clearly intimidated him or that his eyes rounded behind his glasses. "Should she," he asked, strongly emphasizing each word, "stay?"

"Ideally, yes. Any head trauma should be cause for some concern, and if her headache persists after a day, she should be brought back in immediately for more tests."

Oliver's attention shot down the hall. His sigh came out a growl. "I want to talk to her."

The doctor's gaze darted to Quentin, who held up a hand. The cop stepped forward. "Queen."

Oliver glowered.

The cop, however, didn't seem intimidated. He said nothing for a few seconds, then cleared his throat. He held Oliver's eye. "Maybe she doesn't like hospitals."

The doctor bobbed his head. "That was the distinct impression I got from Mrs. Queen. It's not uncommon, Mr. Queen. Many people don't feel comfortable here and believe they can recuperate more quickly in familiar surroundings."

Oliver shook his head. "If this is where she needs to be —"

Quentin grimaced. "Oliver."

He stopped.

The cop started to say something, stopped himself. His lips thinned a second before he tUCKed them inward. His jaw tightened as he shifted. Finally he met Oliver's eye as if that contact alone could beam comprehension into his brain. "Maybe she really doesn't like hospitals."

And that's when Oliver knew Quentin Lance knew something he didn't. He stared at the other man. A man who wasn't Felicity's husband, wasn't family, wasn't even a friend. A man who knew more about his wife in that moment than he did, and fucking hated him for it.

Oliver nodded. He rubbed his hand against his mouth as he turned back to the doctor. "I'd like…"

The words came out unsteady and full of gravel. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I'd like to see my wife."

"Of course, Mr. Queen." The doctor patted his arm. "Follow me."

Oliver was only a few steps down the hall when he paused and looked back as the double doors swung slowly shut. Quentin Lance was already gone.
Felicity Queen was alive.

Standing in the dimly lit hallway outside room fifty-two – his hand on the doorknob as he stared at her through the narrow privacy window in the door – Oliver drank in the sight of her. She’d yet to turn away from the large window that overlooked Starling City. The town's lights seemed to mingle with the glittering stars scattered across the black horizon. She was uncharacteristically still and quiet. Her hair had long lost that pretty upward twist and now hung in a ragged, limp, lopsided ponytail. Someone had given her a soft pink t-shirt and what looked like matching pajama bottoms with some kind of pattern on them. Her dress, now ruined and the stains more brown than crimson, had been balled up and shoved in a plastic bag that sat at the foot of her hospital bed.

Oliver lifted a hand toward the glass between them but stopped himself as he was struck, not by fear or anger, but by how stupid he’d been. The universe had given him a gift. A miracle. Another chance to set things in his life right, not just for his father's memory, not just for the people of Starling City, but for Felicity, too. For their marriage and their love, and he'd almost tossed it away again out of fear.

He'd told himself he was doing the right thing when he pushed her away. He'd convinced himself that he was protecting her from the danger of his new life, from the threat he'd become. Deep down, though, he knew he'd done it to protect himself. To protect that part that feared telling her the truth, showing her what he'd become, because he was terrified she wouldn't want him. He hadn't even given her the chance. He'd simply lashed out, hurt her, and tried to send her running. By the time he realized his mistake and started to try to correct his plans and fight for her, he'd almost lost her anyway.

Oliver closed his eyes as a ragged breath escaped from between his lips. A second or two sooner, an inch or two to the left, and Floyd Lawton's killshot would have hit Felicity's head. The poison wouldn't have mattered. She'd have been dead. Instantly. Instead, the man next to her paid the price. Oliver regretted that, but on an utterly selfish, total bastard level, he couldn't be sorry if it meant Felicity would be in the morgue instead. It was only Diggle's intervention in the seconds that followed that kept Felicity alive. For that, Oliver would owe that man forever.

The doctor behind him inched closer. "Mr. Queen?"

Oliver didn't take his eyes off his wife. He couldn't. It was as if, if he looked away, if he blinked, Felicity would vanish. "Does she know everyone's all right?"

"Yes. It was one of the first things she asked when I saw her."

Of course it was, Oliver thought with a trace of amusement. Leave it to his wife to almost get killed, then worry about everybody else.

"You may find her to be a little scattered and unfocused," the doctor continued. "That's a side effect of concussions sometimes, so don't worry about it too much. I'll have the nurse include a list of warning signs you should watch for. She'll be bruised, probably sore for a few days, but I think that, with some rest, Mrs. Queen will recover nicely. All you need is her release papers, which I'll go check on right now, and then you can take your wife home."

Oliver nodded without really hearing him, didn't realize the physician had even walked away as he twisted the knob and pushed the door open.
Felicity turned. The faint glow of the bathroom light was enough to illuminate her. It drew an angry highlight on the bruise at her temple and the ugly brown tinge of antiseptic liquid used to clean the cut that extended from it into her hairline. Her makeup was gone. Her face pale. The pajamas, too big for her slight frame, seemed to make her look even smaller.

She didn't even try to smile. "Hi."

Oliver stalled at the foot of her bed, suddenly feeling awkward and uncertain. Two instincts warred within him – one to care of her, to hold her and protect her, the other to drag her to the bed and make love to her until they were both so tired, so spent, the last thing either of them would be able to do was think, let alone remember bullets or bloodshed.

Concern won.

"Should you be up?" Oliver asked. "The doctor said…"

"I feel like I've been sitting forever. I can't do it anymore. The nurse said as long as I wasn't dizzy, it was okay."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

He wanted to tell her a hundred things. Not one of them would come out of his mouth. So much had changed between them in the last few days. He'd pushed her away, pulled her close, inadvertently hurt her, and embarrassed her in public at the dedication ceremony. He'd followed it up with a one-eighty as he tried to undo the damage he'd done to their relationship. Tried to find the right time, the right words to tell her that he loved her, wanted her, and thought their marriage was worth fighting for, too.

He'd told himself he'd ease into it because there was plenty of time. He'd convinced himself he had pieces to put into play, things to set up before he could face her and try to tell her secrets he'd buried long ago and swore he wouldn't look at again. Instead, in the span of one simple night, he could have lost it all. No do-overs. No re-starts. Done.

He'd squandered so much time pushing Felicity away, determined to save her by being strong enough to walk away, and danger had found her anyway. That was Fate – that fangled-toothed bitch – and Oliver knew now, more than ever, he'd made the right decision. He and Felicity belonged together. Period. No more lies. No more fears. No more justification. He wanted her in his life, and from this point forward, he would do whatever it took to keep her there.

Death, himself, could show up and Oliver would take the bony son of a bitch to the ground. What good was being a killing machine, a freaking animal, if he couldn't use those instincts and skills to protect what was his?

Felicity swallowed hard enough to make the tendons and cords of her throat stand out, started to scratch her forehead, but winced and dropped her hand when her fingers bumped the swollen goose egg. She shifted from one socked foot to the other as she tugged the hem of her shirt, then yanked her hand away to shove stray curls of hair awkwardly behind her ear. "When can I go home?"

"They're getting your release papers together but I…" Oliver moved closer. "The doctor said he thinks you should stay."

She shook her head. "I want to go home."
"Felicity."

She squeezed her eyes shut and jerked her head to the side, giving him nothing but profile as she pressed her lips together and sucked in an unsteady breath through her nose. Her mouth and chin trembled as misery etched itself deep into her face. "Please," she whispered, the single word breaking. "Please, I just want to go home."

Oliver was to her in two strides, cupped her face between gentle palms as her first tear fell. "Hey. Hey, it's okay. We're all okay." He pressed his lips to her brow. "You're all right, Felicity. Everything's all right."

Her next breath was a sob. She shook her head, a barely perceptible movement, as she gripped the front of his shirt as if afraid to let him go. "I don't want to be here," she choked out. "Please, Oliver. Please, don't make me stay. Please."

Fear of hospitals he understood. Nobody liked them. This was more than normal reluctance. Concerned, he drew back peer down at her. He started to ask, he wanted to know, but his attention shifted to the front of her shirt. To the cartoon stork with a newborn baby bundled in the blanket sling hanging from its beak.

That simple, cheery image stabbed him straight through the heart, left him unable to think or breathe or speak, and somehow he knew – absolutely freaking knew – that pattern on the pants would match.

Helpless rage swept through him, a wildfire driven by grief and loss and fury at whoever had been so thoughtless in their effort to help that they hadn't asked, hadn't even considered…

Oliver forced himself to exhale. Forced his touch to remain gentle as he cradled Felicity's face and wiped a tear from her cheek. He nudged her face upward and kissed her. Softly. Tenderly. As if he could heal the wounds of her soul and heart and mind with that one touch. As if he could erase the salt of misery that tinged her lips.

He rested his forehead against hers, closed his eyes. "I will never," he vowed on a whisper, "ever, make you do anything you don't want to do, honey. Not ever."

At this point, Oliver didn't give a damn if they had release papers or not. Screw them. Screw any nurse or doctor that tried to stop him. He'd fucking carry her out of here himself if he had to, and God help anyone who got in his way.

Felicity shivered but managed a nod as her arms stole around him. "O-Okay."

He stroked her hair, mindful of her wound. "Okay."

She swallowed again. "I just don't like hospitals."

He smoothed a large hand down her back. "Okay."

"It's stupid."

"It's not stupid."

"I just don't like them."

"That's okay," he assured her, though he knew it was more than mere dislike. This was memory association. This was about those damned pajamas. About their baby. Oliver knew it without her
saying a single word. Somehow Quentin Lance had known. He'd tried to warn Oliver without saying it.

"Lots of people don't like things," Felicity continued. "Thunderstorms. Spiders. Snakes. I had a friend in college who was afraid of the number thirteen. I always thought it was ridiculous. I know I'm being ridiculous."

"You're not ridiculous."

"I know it's just a building. I do. But…”

Oliver kissed her again. This time she melted into him and, when he drew back, she followed as if trying to keep that contact. Oliver offered a small smile as he caressed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "Let's go home."

Felicity caught her bottom lip between her teeth before shaking her head. "I want to see Diggle before we go. I need to… I want to see him. Just for a minute."

"We can do that."

Reluctantly he released her and went to the belongings on the bed. He ignored the dress and picked up her shoes. One was broken, the four inch heel snapped clean off at some point during the evening. Oliver tossed it back onto the bed before regarding the undamaged shoe for a moment. He shrugged, gripped the toe in one hand, the heel in other and snapped.

He tossed the heel into the trash can and it clanged at it hit the bottom. Felicity stared after it. "I loved those shoes," she told him.

"I'll buy you another pair." He pointed to the chair. "Sit."

She did without argument but only, Oliver suspected as he crouched in front of her, because her shock hadn't worn completely off yet. When it did, she'd crash, and he wanted her at home, in bed, when it did.

Doing his best to ignore those damned storks with their bundles of stolen joy, he slipped a shoe on one small foot, then the other. He looked up to find her watching him, and he offered a crooked smile before he leaned forward and kissed the back of her hand.

"Don't be nice to me," Felicity said as he straightened.

Oliver couldn't help himself, he touched her cheek, her hair. "Why not?"

"I can't hold this together if you're nice to me."

"Nobody expects you to be Wonder Woman, Felicity."

"Falling apart doesn't do anybody any good either."

His attention fell to those damned storks. Had she let herself grieve for their baby? Had she let herself cry then? Or had she put on a strong front for everyone, only letting herself fall apart when she was alone?

"Later then," he told her, cupping her cheek again. When they were home. When he could be there this time to hold her. When he would prove to her she wasn't alone anymore and never would be again.
Felicity closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. "This is all my fault."

Oliver shifted both of his hands to her knees. "That's not true. None of this is your fault."

"It is. You don't know what I…" she trailed off, sighed as she raised her hand to her forehead.
"Diggle —"

"Diggle was doing his job."

Her lashes lifted enough to know she was looking at him. "That's such bullshit."

"You don't have to like it," Oliver told her, "but it's the truth."

Felicity scoffed. "The truth." She massaged her brow as weariness seemed to slump her shoulders.
"Does anybody even know what that is anymore?"

"The truth is that this is John Diggle's job. Protecting people – yes, even getting shot for them – is his job. He knew that when he started it. He knew it when he agreed to work for my mother."

"He knew about a kidnapping, Oliver, not a sniper with poison-laced bullets."

"He knew." Probably far more than anybody else, but Oliver would deal with that later. "That's why Diggle had the syringes in his pocket. Don't go accepting responsibility for the entire world, Felicity. That kind of thinking will take you places you do not want go."

He should know. Taking on the responsibility for his father, promising to right his wrongs… those vows weighed heavy on Oliver's heart. He believed in them, yes, but he wasn't blind to the toll they'd taken on him, nor the compromises they would demand of his soul in the future. He owed his father that. He owed the city. Felicity did not.

Oliver stood and held out his hand. Felicity stared at it for a moment before she slipped hers into it and let him cup her elbow with his other hand and guide her to her feet. She swayed a little before craning her head back to look up at him. This close Oliver could see the telltale enlargement of one pupil over the other from the concussion.

A slight frown line appeared between her brows. "You're very tall," Felicity said, sounding suddenly perturbed.

"No. You're short."

"I'm average."

His thumb stroked her elbow. "Sweetheart, you couldn't be average if you tried."

She made a face. "I know. I'm horribly smart."

Oliver laughed. He didn't know if the swings in conversation were the result of the concussion, as the doctor had warned, or a sign that her shock – and the adrenaline it brought with it – was beginning to fade away. At that point, exhaustion would ooze in to replace it, bringing a mental loopiness that would only be eliminated with sleep. Either way, Oliver knew he needed to get her to Diggle and then out the door for home as fast as possible.

Felicity bristled at his chuckle. "I can't help it," she lamented, as if being smart where a horrible fate. "I don't mean to be, you know. Things just get into my brain and I can't get them out. So I think about them, and think about them, and then I get these ideas... and I have to know. So I dig until I
find an answer." Her sigh was pure distress. "I don't mean for things to turn to crap. It's my brain. I can't control it."

He winked. "Who said I was talking about your brains, lady?"

Felicity eyed him. That line etched a bit deeper. "You're being nice to me again."

"Sorry."

"Stop it."

"Can't. It goes against my nature to be mean to somebody I'm in love with."

That frown eased as her head tipped slightly to one side. "That's the second time you've said that tonight."

"What?"

"That you love me."

"I do."

"I kind of like it."

"I should hope so," he said, "you married it. You're stuck with it."

"No. You being taller. It makes me feel... safe." She let him steer her toward the wheelchair in the corner, looked up at him as he helped her sit. "They say that's because women subconsciously believe a taller man is stronger and better able to ward off physical threats to his family. They think it calls back to our beast-eats-man primitive civilization experience."

"Uh huh." Oliver bent low to release the wheel brake. She had no way of knowing he could, and had, once snapped the neck of the man who'd threatened them. No way of knowing he was capable of, and had done, far, far worse. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." She sighed as she leaned back and closed her eyes. "I just like that you can reach the high shelf in the grocery store for me."

He chuckled as he wheeled her to the door and into the hallway. "Practical to the last."

"Not always," Felicity tipped her head back to look up at him as she reached back to cover his hand with one of hers. The ugly bright orange hospital bracelet practically glowed against her pale skin. "Oliver?"

He stopped. "Yeah?"

"I love you, too."

~*~

John Diggle had survived three tours in Afghanistan, an ambush in the same, and an IED in the Paktika Province. He'd gone up against other armies, insurgents, and even terrorists. Now he could
not only add surviving a poisoned bullet to his shoulder to his list of feats, but claim a spot on the very short list of people who survived Floyd Lawton’s crosshairs.

The heart monitor blipped a steady rhythm and the occasional click of the IV pump told her the doctor was making sure the bodyguard received not only medication to help counteract the curare still in his system, but numbed him to any pain.

No lasting damage, the doctor assured them. A clean through and through. A couple of scars. He’d be as good as new in a few days, back on his feet and ready for work. Tough guy, he’d added. A real hero.

Somehow, Felicity told herself as she tugged Oliver's suit jacket tighter around her shoulders and studied Diggle's sleeping face, none of that made her feel any better. She was still the one who put Diggle, literally, in the line of fire. Still the one responsible for his injuries and near death. For Ben Mitchell's death. For all of this.

She'd seen Diggle's file. The man had family. How could she have been so selfish? How could she have let him step in to protect the people she loved, to protect her family, without thinking what she was asking him and his to potentially sacrifice?

Oh, God. His family.

She glanced up at Oliver, who stood behind her wheelchair. "Does his family know? Did anyone call…"

Oliver nodded. "I talked to his sister-in-law, Carly. She said she'd take care of the rest and come as soon as she could."

"Good." Felicity returned her attention to Diggle. "Then he won't be alone."

Oliver settled a hand on her shoulder. "He's going to be fine, honey."

Honey. A little thrill shivered through her belly, and it was all Felicity could do not to reach up and touch his hand. It all felt too real, too familiar. Just like earlier in the evening when he'd helped her with her dress. It was like old time when things were simple and he was just Oliver and she was just Felicity. It felt good. She'd left the house for the auction happy; let herself begin to think maybe things would work out. That maybe Oliver opening up to her was a step in the right direction.

Then came the gunshots. The blood and the screams and —

Oliver's hand tightened on her shoulder, pulling her back to the present.

"Try not to think about it," he murmured.

Felicity nodded even as she wondered how he'd known.

"Can't a shot man get some sleep around here," Diggle grumbled, his voice thick with sleep and painkillers, as his eyes opened. He looked to Felicity first, then Oliver. "They get him?"

Oliver shook his head.

Diggle's heart rate and blood pressure jacked up.

"They'll find him. The police are out there looking. Let them worry about that." Felicity leaned forward to reach through the bedrail and touch Diggle's clenched fist, careful not to jostle the IV line
taped to the back of his hand. "You need to focus on you."

His expression tightened. "They're not gonna find him. They never find him."

"Maybe the right people didn't know where to look before," Oliver said.

Diggle looked at him again, lingered longer there, and Felicity watched something unspoken pass between them. Guy code, she thought with a bit of disgust. What was it with that? Like possessing testosterone gave them telepathic abilities with a mere chin jut.

Oliver stepped closer to the bed. "Thank you for saving my wife's life."

"Just doing my job, Sir."

"Yeah, well, you do it damned well. I owe you."

"I might collect on that one day. I have a feeling there could come a time when having you for an ally would be a good thing." He pushed himself higher on the pillows, winced. He gestured to Felicity. "Could you give us a minute, Sir?"

"You saved my wife's, Dig. Again. You really need to start calling me Oliver."

The other man gave a grunting laugh, as if her husband had made a joke. Felicity watched him go. Only after he'd shut the door behind him did she turn her attention back to Diggle.

She squeezed his hand. "I am so sorry."

"Mrs. Queen —"

"No. Please. Let me say this." Felicity leaned forward a bit further. "I will never be able to repay you for saving my life. I know that."

"It's my —"

"Job. I know." She sighed. "Why does everybody keep acting like a paycheck makes what you did meaningless? You saved my life, John. It wasn't the first time, either. All I have done since coming into your life is put you in danger."

Diggle pondered that for a moment. He drew his hand out from beneath hers to snag the remote. A press of the button lifted the head of the bed, and he winced as he adjusted the arm sling that strapped his left arm tight across his chest. Once he was propped up, he studied her as he scratched the corner of his mouth. "Do you know why I do what I do?"

Felicity shook her head.

"I've seen people do horrible things to each, Mrs. Queen. Vile, evil things. Sometimes it's for power or money, sometimes it's for a sick thrill. I've seen good people trampled, tortured, and slaughtered while everyone else stays silent out of fear. Those people… people like you and your husband… they deserve a voice. They deserve protection. I can be that for them. So that's what I do. I like knowing I made a difference in the world. I like knowing I took a stand. Because if no one else does? Evil wins." He gestured to his shoulder. "Sometimes that means I go up against people who think nothing of kidnapping and murder. Sometimes I win, sometimes I lose. But what I'm not okay with is becoming one of the silent."

Felicity shook her head. "You don't even know us."
"I know you didn't ask to be kidnapped and terrorized. You didn't ask anyone to bust into your home to murder you. You didn't ask an international assassin to shoot at a hotel full of people. I knew when I started this business, just like my brother before me, that stopping people like that might mean taking a bullet. I made my peace with it. That's my choice. Not yours. Mine."

Felicity looked at her hands as she twisted her fingers together in her lap. "Like Ben."

Diggle sighed. "That wasn't your fault either."

"It was," she admitted on a whisper. "He was there because of me."

Diggle shifted and the bed creaked beneath him. "Look, I don't know what business you had with Ben Mitchell, but he was a good man. A good friend. If he took you on as a client, he did it because he knew you needed help, were afraid, and didn't think you could trust anyone else."

Felicity waited for him to ask, but he never did.

"Ben knew the risks," Diggle said. "The only people responsible for his death are the sniper who shot him and whoever paid him to pull the trigger, you got that?"

She nodded even though she didn't believe it.

"Felicity."

She looked up to find him watching her with sad, concerned dark eyes.

"Whatever is going on? Whatever Ben was helping you with? Whatever you turned to him for and whatever secrets you trusted him enough to share... I want you to know you can trust me with, too."

She wanted to. God, she wanted to. But how could she? Every time she did, something horrible happened and someone died. She already had blood on her hands. She didn't know if she could take more but, at the same time, she needed help. She knew she couldn't do this alone. Right before he'd been gunned down, Ben Mitchell had warned her. Whoever was on her trail was ruthless, driven, powerful, and would stop at nothing to get what they wanted. He'd been worried about her and that scared her. How could she drag Diggle into that mess after inadvertently bringing him into the Unidac mess, too?

"Ben Mitchell was my commanding officer," Diggle told her. "He was one of the best men I have ever served with. He saved my life probably a dozen times during our tours together. I owe him, and helping you helps me repay that debt. So if you need me, I'm there. No questions. No judgment. I'm there."

Reluctantly, Felicity nodded.

"Good. Now I need you to promise me something."

Surprised, she lifted her head.

"Until I get out here, promise me you'll stay by Oliver's side."

Her frown was instant. "I don't understand."

"He'll protect you."

Amazing. The man had walked into a firefight in her apartment, been caught up in a killing spree at the auction, been shot and poisoned, and even flat on his back in a hospital bed, he was not only
worrying more about her and her family than himself, but already talking about getting back on the job.

Felicity eased back in her chair to stare at him. "You're serious. You have no intention of walking away from this, do you?"

His mouth firmed, his eyes gleamed. "Hell no," Diggle said with a harsh shake of his head. "What happened tonight started long before I came to work for the Queens. It started with the sniper called Deadshot. I've been after him for years. I'm going to find that son of a bitch. I'm going to find out who hired him. Then I'm going to make both of them pay."

~*~

If anyone had ever asked Oliver how he felt about babies before now, he'd have groused about crying babies in movie theaters, the ever-fussy brat in some restaurant's high chair, the endless spit ups, upchucks, and stinkbombs. He'd have bemoaned the loss of sleep, the loss of freedom, the loss of space once reserved for his toys now reserved for baby's toys. He would also, very probably, have whined about the lack of quality naked time with a perpetually tired wife who no longer ever seemed to be "in the mood."

It would never have occurred to him then that he'd be sitting on a hospital hallway bench, in the here and now, outside a darkened gift shop and staring at the a line of alternative pink and blue teddy bears – whose tummy's announced, "It's a Girl!" or "It's a Boy!" – simultaneously hating the sight of those fucking toys while horribly, irrationally jealous of the parents who not only got one, but got the baby to go along with it.

Now those potential sleepless nights lost to two a.m. feedings sounded pretty damned good; those diaper changes lost opportunities for belly kisses and peek-a-boo.

Oliver closed his eyes as he hung his head, released a long, slow breath. Only days before he'd been so sure he could let Felicity go. That he could spend the rest of his life alone, unloved and unloving. Now the very thought of it – the thought of a future without Felicity—terrified him in a way nothing else had in the last five years.

"Mr. Queen?"

Oliver raised his head.

The tall, thin woman with the posture of a ballerina, a whiff of Russian disapproval, and the external warmth of a glacier, stood in the center of the hall. Judging by her dark, floor-length gown, expensive jewelry, and various glass cuts, bruises, and bandaged hand, Oliver figured she was one of the elite bidders present at the Unidac auction. He glanced at the five thick-necked, muscle jockeys behind her and figured they were either her personal security guards or she travelled with part of Russia's rugby team.

She took another step forward. "I saw you at the auction tonight but didn't get the chance to introduce myself. I wanted to take a moment to say how pleased I was to hear that no one in your family was harmed tonight. The Queens have already suffered so many devastating losses. To have another so soon after your homecoming seems so… cruel."

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage. Who are you?"
Something glittered in her dark brown eyes. Irritation? Anger? It vanished a moment later as she offered a thin smile. "Isabel Rochev."

He raised his brows.

"Vice President of Acquisitions at Stellmoor International."

"Ah. Yes. Well." He stood. "My mother and her new husband, Walter Steele, handle business relationships with Queen Consolidated. You'll have to excuse me."

He moved to step around her, but she anticipate it and followed, a simple sidestep, a swish of her skirts, and she blocked his path.

"I was hoping we could talk," she persisted.

"Ms. Rochev, it's been a very long night. A very trying night. I don't want to talk business. I want to get my wife and take my family home."

"Yes, I imagine you do, but this isn't about —"

"Isabel," Moira Queen said as she appeared suddenly at their side. She linked her arm through Oliver's, lifted a hand to his shoulder as she smiled at the other women with all the warmth and welcome of a mako. "I see you survived tonight's ordeal intact."

"You look surprisingly fit as well, Moira." The brunette cocked her head. "How did you find time to swing by the blood bank for a quick pick me up between press conferences?"

Oliver blinked.

Moira's smile widened. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised to find you skulking the halls of Starling General. Looking for terminally ill children to mock?"

Isabel smirked. "Oh, Moira. Witty as always. What's the matter? Is the Karma cake you baked yourself not tasting as good as you expected tonight?"

Oliver wrapper his arm around his mother's waist and steered her away from the other woman. "As pleasant as this has been, Ms. Rochev, we're leaving now. I suggest you do the same before I have security escort you and the Jonas Brothers over there out."

Isabel frowned at him. "Who?"

He sighed. "I really need to catch up on the MTV." He pointed. "Go."

"We'll talk again, Oliver," Isabel promised, her tone borderline frosty politeness. "When the company is more suitable."

Oliver watched her go, then turned his attention to his mother. "Something I should know?"

Moira crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the other woman's retreating back. "Isabel Rochev. She makes her living taking over companies and gutting them. She's cold, calculating, and ruthless, and she is not to be trusted, Oliver. Do you understand me? She's a dangerous woman."

"Mom, Rochev is the last thing on my mind right now."

Her anger deflated and was instantly replaced by concern. She touched his arm. "How is Felicity? I ran into her doctor and he said she was being released?"
He nodded. "She's in with Diggle right now. She wanted to see him before we went home."

"Is that wise? I mean, for her to leave?"

"The doctor said it was okay, and she doesn't want to stay."

"And Mr. Diggle?" Moira toyed with the gold chain around her neck. "Is he all right? The reporters were asking so many questions about poison..."

"He'll be all right."

"Thank God." She stepped closer, cupped his face. "I would never have forgiven myself if something had happened to you tonight, Oliver. You or Thea or Walter."

"We're okay, Mom."

"You're all I have. All that matters to me. Family is everything, Oliver, and after everything we've gone through... everything we've lost... I refuse to stand idly by and let anyone hurt us. Not anyone."

He caught her hands and squeezed them gently. "Nothing is going to happen to us. Queen are tough, remember? It's all in the stock. We're survivors. We take care of our own."

She managed a wobbly, somewhat tearful smile as she squeezed his hands back. "That's my boy."

~*~

"Mmmm," Tommy said as he poked at the glob of red gelatin with his spoon, making the slumping tower, and the unidentifiable fruit inside it, quiver and jiggle on the plate, "that looks delish. They should put that on the menu at Le Circ."

Thea, her chin propped in her hand, her gaze fixed on the shivering blob, her eyebrows pinched lightly together, said nothing. The same nothing she'd said since he'd escorted her to the hospital cafeteria, let her pick anything she wanted from their late night, gourmet selection of mystery foods, paid, then picked a quaint table for two under the posters for proper biohazardous waste disposal and proper hand washing techniques to avoid passing on, like salmonella, shigellosis, and good old fashioned hepatitis A.

Elbows braced on the tabletop, Tommy lowered his spoon. "If you're not going to eat this and made me buy it just so you could try to levitate this with your mind, you owe me a buck twenty."

Her thick lashes fluttered. Her unfocused gaze suddenly zeroes in on him. She gave her head a little shake as she raked her fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry. What?"

He smiled at her as he tipped his head. "Are you okay?"

"I was just thinking."

He frowned at the jello as he poked it again. "About why on God's earth you got this instead of that brownie?"

"No. About yesterday."
"What happened yesterday?"

She sighed and folded her arms at the edge of the table as she leaned toward him. "Yesterday, the most important thing was turning eighteen. Yesterday, all I thought about was what car to ask for. What color. Where I might go to college. If I wanted to go to college at all."

"Always go with red. It's sleek, sporty, sexy. Total chick... uh..." He cleared his throat. "A nice, responsible, sedate beige is often nice, too."

"I'm serious."

"I can tell." He pointed to his forehead, made a little loop with his index finger. "You got stern brow."

Thea sighed.

Tommy set the spoon down. "Okay. Sorry. You're being serious. I can do that."

She moistened her lips. "Yesterday, things were normal. Today they're... not." She held his gaze, searched his eyes. "We could have died."

He didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to ever see her look that frightened or sound that terrified again. He didn't want to think about the bodies that littered the floor around them when they'd finally gotten to their feet, about the bullet holes he'd seen in the column he'd dragged her behind when the gunfire started, and he definitely didn't want to think about the bullet hole he'd discovered in his jacket much, much later.

Thinking about it only made him want to do stupid things. The same stupid things he'd almost done when he had Thea in his arms. When her mouth was only a whisper above his, her breasts against his chest, and the fear in his blood turned to instant, heated need as he'd slid his hands into her hair to draw her mouth down to his and she'd whispered his name. Middle of the auction room or not, he had no idea what would have happened once he'd kissed her.

Thea seemed to take his silence for some form of denial because she sighed as she lowered her gaze to the gelatin. "I don't know if it's easier for you to shrug off or what but I... I'm having problems with that."

"It's not easy for me." God, every time he closed his eyes he'd see those bullets, see the look on Thea's face when he lunged at her and dragged her to the floor. Now that it was over, his imagination kept throwing What ifs at him. What if he'd been too late? What if she'd been hit? What if she'd bleed to death? What if the poison had hit her, too hard, too fast, for the paramedics to do anything? Jesus Christ, what if he'd lost her? Tommy shook the thoughts off, sucked in a quick breath. "I just... I try not to think about it."

"That's the problem. It's all I can think about." She lifted her gaze again. "I could have died."

The words cut him. "Don't think about it."

"You could have died."

"But we didn't."

"No. We didn't."

Silent, Thea reached over to the next chair and tugged Tommy's jacket into her lap. She stroked the
lapel before worming her finger through the jagged hole in the fabric. Her dark eyes shifted back to meet his.

The jello shivered between them.

Tommy couldn't say anything.

Thea drew a deep breath as she folded the jacket over her arm and lowered it to her lap. "So, now I'm thinking about different things when I turn eighteen. More important things than cars and paint colors. Eighteen is a good age to do that, don't you think?"

"Eighteen is… good."

She nodded, still holding his eye. "Very good."

"You can vote."

"Get a tattoo."

"You can join the military."

"I'm not joining the military."

"Okay," he conceded, "but you can legally pawn stuff."

"Serve on a jury," she offered.

"I can get you out of that, you know."

"Thanks."

"My pleasure."

Thea shifted in the seat. "So I think we agree that, by eighteen, I can make some really important decisions on my own. Right?"

"Absolutely."

"I'd be a legal adult."

"Totally legal."

Wait. That sounded weird. He didn't mean it that way. But he didn't not mean it either. The sentiment was right. Eighteen was legal. He just didn't mean to imply…

"Good," Thea said, nodding slowly. "Good. I'm glad we agree, because I think that's definitely old enough. Eighteen. In a little while. Don't you?"

"I… yeah."

A slow, satisfied smile curved her mouth. "Good. I'm glad we had this discussion. You know. Before."

Tommy's heart slowed, began to beat heavy in his chest, and his blood felt oddly warm in his veins. Not unpleasant. No. Very pleasant. Too pleasant. Shit. He was going to need his jacket back if they got up from the table any time soon.
Fortunately, Thea picked up her spoon. She made a face at the gelatin, then twisted around in her chair to peer back at the cafeteria line. "Hmm," she practically purred. She looked back at Tommy, her eyes light with mischievous, happiness, and the first sign of normal, spunky Thea Tommy had seen since the shooting started, and arched a brow. "Think they take gold cards?"
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Oliver confronts his demons. Felicity shares her.

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity Hiatus Challenge as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

WARNING: This chapter contains discussion of miscarriage and may be "trigger" material.

The reckoning hour came, not at midnight like for Cinderella, but at two a.m. It did not change Oliver's car to a pumpkin, the horses in the stables to mice, or his rumpled custom suit to tattered rags. What it did do, however, as the final chime faded and its ghostly echo rippled down the halls of the now silent, dark, and utterly still house, was strip away Oliver's strength and stamina.

Almost at the bottom of the staircase, where the faint glow of the sitting room light still reached, Oliver stopped. Exhaustion flooded through him. It turned his brain soft, his limbs leaden, and his muscles weak. Suddenly another step, just one, seemed impossible. Feeling old, worn, and beaten – every bone aching, every joint sore – he breathed a long sigh that was part surrender, part defeat, and lowered himself to sit on one of the carpeted stairs.

He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his spread kneed as he turned the small bundle of clothes he held over between his hands. The fabric, that disgustingly cheery pink cotton, was deceptively soft and still warm from contact with Felicity's body. It didn't smell like her though, Oliver realized. She hadn't worn it long enough for it to lose that awful, clinical nothingness smell all hospitals had and pick up her warm, citrus and spice floral scent.

Oliver drew a deep breath as he smoothed his thumb over one of the tiny cartoon storks. He'd been a dad. He could have come home to a baby. A little boy with a riot of Felicity's curls in his dark color. A little girl with her mother's intelligent, sparkling blue eyes and her father's mule-headedness. A child who'd grown up only knowing their father from photos in some album.

Which room had Felicity picked for the nursery? Had she painted it? Did she know what crib she wanted?

Grief mixed with exhaustion. The heavy weight of it settled in both his chest and his skull, right behind his eyes. Oliver tightened his grip on the clothing with one hand, lifted the other to cover his eyes, rub them as a ragged exhale escaped his lips.

Why the hell had he ever gotten on that boat?
A floorboard creaked and Oliver dropped his hand, lifted his head as Tommy appeared in the threshold of the sitting room. The strain of the evening had stolen the normal, jovial light from his friend's dark eyes. The perpetual smile was gone; the corners of his mouth pinched downward. Even Tommy's hair, normally perfectly arranged, was mussed, as if he'd combed his fingers through it hundreds of times during the evening. His jacket was gone, given to Thea, Oliver knew, since he'd hugged his sister before she retreated upstairs to her bedroom still wearing it. His shirt was partially unbuttoned and untucked, the shirtsleeves rolled halfway up his forearms, and his tie missing. But the blood – drops and spatters that had somehow accumulated over the last several hours – still remained.

"You look like hell," Oliver announced.

Tommy slid his hands into his pants pockets and leaned his shoulder against the doorway. "You should see the other guy." He glanced up the stairs. "How's Felicity?"

Oliver looked at the damned pajamas again. "She's okay. She wanted a shower and her own clothes, so Raisa's with her."

"Good."

Oliver nodded. He studied his friend again. "It's late, Tommy. You're barely on your feet. Go home. Better yet, let me have a car take you home."

Tommy shook his head. "I'm okay. I was going to go but I wanted to see you before I went. Make sure you were okay. Everybody seemed to have lost you in all the confusion at the auction. Thea was worried. We all were."

"Yeah, it got crazy."

"Diggle going to be okay?"

Oliver sat up straight, managed a small smile. "Yeah. The doctors said he's going to pull through. They're even talking about letting him go tomorrow or the day after."

Tommy's attention dropped to Oliver's hand. "What's that?"

Oliver looked down. He draped the clothes across his knee, then flattened one hand on top of it. "The hospital scrounged up clothes from gift shop for Felicity. I guess they figured she wouldn't want to put her dress back on after — It was pretty ruined." He clenched his jaw. "I wanted to get rid of them."

Tommy wandered closer. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, draped an arm over the banister as if simple balance was too much effort. He tipped his head to one side, gestured to the clothing. "You wanna talk about it?"

"Nope."

"Okay."

"I do want to say thank you, though."

Tommy's brows knitted together. "For what?"

"Taking care of Thea. For trying to get her out of there. For very probably saving her life."
Tommy looking distinctly uncomfortable with the gratitude, shrugged it off with a literal shrug and shuffle of his feet. "Not necessary."

"Yeah, it is. I…" He looked away. "Sometimes I get caught up in things. I forget to focus on what's important, and I forget to tell people when they're important to me."

"You've been through a lot, Oliver. It's okay —"

"No. It's not. My being gone for five years, what happened to me, I can't use that as an excuse. Because it's not a defense." Oliver groaned as he pushed himself to his feet, taking the clothes with him. He climbed down the steps to the last one, put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Thank you. Not just for tonight – for Thea and my family – but for every day you've been there for them. For Felicity. Hell, for me, even when I wasn't here and I needed you to be."

"Your mom's always been good to me," Tommy told him. "You know that. I care about your family like they're my own. I've always felt welcome here when I didn't feel that way in my own home."

"Because you are." Oliver smiled and patted his shoulder. "After today? You'll be lucky Thea doesn't drag you to every family dinner we have. She'll convince Raisa cook your favorite meals, too."

Tommy looked down. "She wouldn't have to drag." He shifted, looked up again. "That's kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. After tonight, you know, after watching you and Felicity since you've been home. Then after tonight, and with Thea, I realized —"

"Would you let me finish and thank you properly? Geez," Oliver said on a laugh as he squeezed his shoulder. His smile faded. "You're a good man, Tommy. A good friend. Hell, my best friend. You've always been the guy at my back. The one person I could trust. No questions. No hesitation. You always stepped up. I never told you how much that meant to me. So I'm telling you now."

"Oliver."

He withdrew his hand, took a moment to carefully arrange Felicity's clothes over the railing. As he straightened them, he felt Tommy tense, knew his friend was taking in the design and the implications. There was no doubt now that Tommy knew about the baby and the miscarriage.

Oliver curled both hands over the fabric and around the railing. "Even when I wasn't here," he said, "you took care of the people I love the most. I want you to know that I know that. I want you to know…" He searched Tommy's face. "I will never be able to repay what you did, but I will spend the rest of my life trying."

Tommy cleared his throat. His eyes turned bright and a little wet in the dim lighting. He rubbed his nose. "We're friends, Oliver," he said, his voice unsteady. "Friends don't keep score, and they never owe each other anything."

"We're not friends," Oliver said.

Tommy looked up.

"We're brothers."

They stood there. Silent. The grandfather clock struck quarter past.

Finally, Tommy motioned to the pajamas. "I'm sorry, Oliver."
Oliver shook his head. "Not necessary."

"Does she know?"

He shook his head again.

"Are you going to tell her?"

Oliver considered that, could only shrug as he said, "I don't know yet."

Tommy sighed as he rubbed the back of his neck and eyed him. "I wanted to tell you."

"I know."

"It just didn't feel like my place."

"I know. You did the right thing."

"I'm sorry, Oliver."

Oliver nodded, knowing that, this time, his friend meant it as sympathy for the loss of the baby, the pain Felicity had gone through, the one he was currently trying to absorb and find his way through, too.

"If you need anything," Tommy said, "if you need to talk… I know I'm not exactly a family guy—"

Oliver frowned. "That's not true."

"I'm not married. I've never had a kid. I've never been serious with anyone before…” He stopped. Shrugged. "I've been through a few pregnancy scares back in college but that's not…” He cleared his throat. "What I'm trying to say is: I'm not a bad listener."

"No," Oliver agreed, "but you're a better friend than I probably will ever deserve."

"Don't be so sure about that," Tommy muttered. Before Oliver could object, Tommy said, "You realize we're venturing into, like, dangerous Hallmark card and hug territory, right?"

Oliver laughed. "Yeah."

"I should go."

He hesitated and then leaned over the railing to hug Oliver. He pounded his back before drawing away. "I'm glad you're okay, man. I'm glad Felicity's okay. If you need anything…"

"I'll call," Oliver promised.

"Make sure you do. Oh, and…” He glanced up the steps, lingered in the direction of the bedrooms before turning his attention back to Oliver, "if Felicity doesn't want to talk about it, if she's okay with it, you can always talk to me."

He nodded, waited as Tommy headed for the front door. He paused to grab his keys from the foyer table, then exited, closing the door softly behind him.

Oliver was still standing there when Raisa padded down the steps behind him. He peered over his shoulder as she approached, offered her a small smile. "Thank you, Raisa."

She stopped on the step above his, touched his back. "No need, Mr. Oliver. Mrs. Oliver, she is done with her shower. I helped her into bed. The poor thing is exhausted. You should go now if you want
He propped his elbow on the railing, pinched the bridge of his nose as he battled a yawn. "Let her sleep. The doctor wants me to wake her every few hours because of the concussion."

Raisa rubbed his back in slow, comforting circles. "Mrs. Oliver will be all right. Don't worry. She's always been strong. Now, with you here, she can lean on you and the two of you? You can be even stronger together. That's love's gift. Here." She reached for the clothes. "Let me take those. I will deal with them."

Oliver let her take them and, as she tucked them against her side, he forced himself to asked, "Was it..." He swallowed, made himself meet her eye. "This is why she left, isn't it. This is why you said it was too hard for her to be here."

Raisa's face softened. Sadness clouded her eyes. "It's not my place to say, Mr. Oliver."

Which told Oliver it was exactly why Felicity left. She'd stayed a year, he recalled her saying. A year after the Queen's Gambit was lost. A year after she'd lost him. How long after she'd lost the baby? How long before the memories she said haunted her forced her out?

No peace, Raisa had tried to explain when he'd first come home. Just pain. Oliver stared at the darkened foyer, the cold, quiet house that suddenly seemed like a tomb. "How the hell does she even stay here?"

Raisa made a soft, distressed sound under her breath. "Do you still not understand?"

Oliver faced her.

"She stays, Mr. Oliver, because she needs you. Because her heart will always belong to you as yours belongs to her. Beneath the hurt, the pain, the loss of things she does not allow herself to speak of, she stays for you. She is here, Mr. Oliver. Now. So are you. "Do you not think," she murmured as she cupped his cheek with a hand, "it's time to let both of you finally come home?"

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Oliver never considered himself a coward. He'd survived a shipwreck, near starvation, stab wounds, gunshots, torture, infection, and explosions. He'd escaped military compound, prisons, madmen, and police. He'd run toward danger, instead of away from it. He'd leapt off buildings with only a thin line at his back, soared into the air with only a simple grip on the same. Fear, though existent, had always taken a backseat to purpose. To survival. It knew its place, and Oliver knew how to keep it compartmentalized enough to always do what needed to be done.

Until now.

He stood in the dark hall outside Felicity's bedroom and stared at the doorknob. His heart beat jittery. His palms grew damp. His respiration didn't seem to be quite regular. It was ridiculous. He knew that. He hadn't even been this nervous the night he proposed to her. He hadn't hesitated then. He'd simply taken her hand, looked into her eyes, and opened his heart.

He'd told her he loved her. He told her he needed her. He'd dropped that arrogant playboy façade and shown himself to her, certain she would not only take the heart he offered but give hers to him.
He'd been right.
She'd said yes.
He knew she would.

But now? Oliver released a shaky breath, curled his trembling fingers into his palms. He had no such confidence. No such knowing. All he could do was believe – after five years of being proven wrong – that love was somehow enough. Hope that, as he stood before her and stopped pretending to still be Oliver Queen – when he let the rusty, tarnished armor finally drop to show her what lay beneath – that he was worthy of being a man, let alone her husband.

Oliver exhaled again. His lungs seemed to stutter. The edges of his vision turned blurry. How could she look at him then when he couldn't even face himself in a mirror? How could he hope for love when everything in him was hatred and revenge and death?

He clenched his jaw so tight it hurt.

Once he stepped through this door, Oliver Queen was dead. The specter of his memory finally laid to rest. No hiding. No going back. Gone. It would be just him. Naked. Raw. Exposed. His throat tightened. Weak. He hadn't been weak in years. Haden't allowed himself to be. Haden't allowed himself to feel or want or need… anything.


She had to love him. He had to hold on to that. He had to believe that, when he stood before her and she saw – saw his scars, his pain, the evil things he'd done and would continue to do – and realized his heart wasn't light anymore; wasn't love, let alone untainted or even whole anymore, that she could even still want him.

Oliver nearly choked on the grief and sickness that surged into his throat. God, how could she still want him when he couldn't even accept himself? How could she find him worthy of love, worthy of her, when that was the last thing he felt?

He was a monster. A killer. He was the grotesque spawn five years of slaughter had spewed back into the universe. How could he crawl out of that repulsive ooze and dare lay his heart – ravaged by hate and revenge and, yes, even death – at her feet like some holy offering? It was worthless. Hideous. Twisted and disfigured by the things he'd done; the men he'd killed. How would that heart – his heart and his love – not sully her? How would the weight of it not eventually brutalize her, too, in the end?

He stood, in this moment, on a brutal razor's edge. Hopeful and hopeless. Starving, but almost too heavy to reach out and take. Lonely and tired of being alone, but held back by fear. Always by the fear.

Oliver shook that anxiety back, had to blink a few times before the watery haze would clear from his eyes. His throat hurt when he swallowed. His chest ached.

He'd overcome mercenaries. He'd taken command of ships. He'd fought oceans and universal forces in order to stand in this spot. To be here in this moment. Oliver put his hand on the doorknob, lifted his chin as he steeled himself. Now he would discover if the creature he'd become in order to make it back to Starling City alive could every truly come home.
She was in his bed.

Oliver hadn't understood it at first; had stood in her room, staring at her empty bed before crossing to the adjoining doorway into his bedroom. That's where his feet failed him. Where they decided to root themselves to the wooden floorboards until his eyes and his brain and heart could fall into sync.

She'd come to him. She'd chosen his bed over her own. She slept.

The shackle around his heart loosened a little, and Oliver closed the distance between door and four-poster bed with silent steps.

It wasn't right, Oliver told himself as he paused at the foot of the bed to absently tug the blankets back over Felicity's bared foot. He forced himself to pull away and curl his hand around the post. He lingered on her face, taking in the dark fan of her eyelashes against the upper curve of her cheeks, the shower-damp flaxen curls pooled across his pillow and spilled over one bare, perfectly shaped shoulder. Her lips, scrubbed free of lipstick, were full and parted slightly. Her small, delicate hand rested, curled, beneath her chin. What he felt for her, what he wanted from her, none of it was good or noble or heroic when he would benefit so much and yet offer her so little.

Love, she'd once told him, was all the reward anyone needed.

Would she still believe that when she found out he'd broken a man's neck for love? That he'd done a million worse things in his quest to come home? He sighed as he stepped closer, gave in to the weak need to touch the soft skin of her jaw with his fingertips, the curve of her bottom lip with his thumb.

He dropped his hand to his side before stepping back. He sank into the armchair Raisa had obviously positioned next to the bed, leaned back in it to rest his elbows on its cushioned arms, his hands loose over their stumps. The night deepened. The shadows in the room grew lush and thick. He didn't know what time it was when Felicity stirred, only knew when she woke by the change in her breathing and the slow, languid stretch of her limbs beneath the covers.

She stiffened suddenly. Her breath caught.

"It's just me," Oliver murmured, his voice barely a whisper in the still.

She pushed up on an elbow and raked her hair back with a careless sweep of her fingers. "Oliver? What time is it?"

"I don't know."

"What are you..." She stared at him. Not that Oliver could see, at least not well, but he felt it, just like he always did when she was near, when she watched him without thinking he knew. She lowered her hand to the blankets, tugged them upward as if preserving modesty against the low dip of the lacy front of her nightgown. "Were you planning on sitting there all night?"

"Yes."

She let out a puff of air that sounded like a laugh. "That's really not necessary."
He didn't answer.

Felicity stretched for the lamp on the nightstand.

Oliver leaned forward and caught her wrist, not hard enough to hurt her, but firm enough to stop her. "Don't." He smoothed his thumb across the inside of her wrist, felt her pulse jump. He tightened his hold a fraction. "It'll be easier this way."

She tipped her head. "What will?"

He let her go. Not because he wanted to, but because it was too difficult to touch her and do this. He leaned back. His elbows returned to the arms. His hand loose over the edges. He stared at her. "I lied to you."

Seconds of silence ticked by.

Felicity sat up. The blankets dropped to her waist. She waited, but when he didn't continue, said, "About what?"

Oliver cleared his throat. "Everything."

"I don't understand."

Stress ticked his eyelid but he didn't rub it. "After the Queen's Gambit went down and I made it to the island on a life raft, I wasn't alone. There were other people there."

"I don't understand. What are you..." She shook her head. "Who? And why didn't you tell anybody? Why —"

"Because they tortured me."

She hissed as if he'd punched her right in the gut. A second later she rocked toward him, her hand sliding toward him across the mattress as if she wanted to touch him. "Oliver."

He stared at that hand, refusing to take it. Not yet. Not until he'd told her everything. "The island wasn't unknown or uncharted or uninhabited. It's called Lian Yu. It means purgatory. The Chinese government sent banish prisoners."

"Why didn't you tell me? Is that..." Her shoulders slumped. "Is that why you were pushing me away? Because you thought that would matter to me? Like the scars? Jesus, Oliver. Do you not know me at all?"

The hurt in her tone stung, but Oliver didn't react. Didn't even blink. "No," he said, the word clipped. "I kept you at a distance because it was the only way to keep you safe."

She drew her hand back, sat up straighter. "Yeah. 'Cause that's working out so well, right?"

That stung too. He shifted his jaw. "I don't mean that. I meant safe from me."

She blew out a harsh breath. "Didn't we already talk about this? Didn't we settle this? I love you!"

"You don't even know me," he shot back, fear more than anger fueling the bite of his words.

"That's a lie."

Oliver leaned forward slowly, the chair creaking beneath him. He braced his hands against his
"I'm not the same man, Felicity."

"Yes, you are."

"No. I'm –"

"So help me, Oliver, if you tell me you're damaged like you did before I'm getting out of this bed and —"

"I've killed people, Felicity."

That shut her up.

"I can't change that anymore than I can anything else about those five years. I can't undo what I did. I can't undo what they did to me. What they… brought out in me. I'm…" He broke off, clenched his jaw as he looked away, searched the black of the room as if it were his soul. "There's a darkness in me. An anger and a violence. I've done things to survive that no one should ever have to do, and it changed me."

"Of course it did. I know that," Felicity argued. "It's been five years, Oliver. We've all changed."

"No. This… It destroyed something in me. It killed something. It had to because, if it didn't, I wouldn't have survived. I would probably have lost my mind before my life. No, when I look in the mirror, when I see what's left of me…" He shook his head. "I don't know who I am anymore."

"I do," Felicity whispered.

"You don't. You can't."

"Don't tell me my own mind, Oliver Queen. Don't you dare. You don't get to decide what I think or how I feel."

He closed his eyes, curled his fingers around the arms of the chair to keep himself from getting out of it. "That's the point, damn it. Don't you get it?" He glared at her. "I'm not Oliver Queen anymore. I'm different. I've changed. I walk around in his skin, I live in his house, I sleep in his bed." His breath came harder and shakier as his heart and eyes burned. "But I'm not him. I'm like some animal trying to scratch out some kind of life in his shadow."

Unable to sit still any longer, he stood. He stepped closer to the bed and loomed over her. His eyes had adjusted to the dark by now, allowing him to pick out her features, to see when she turned her face up to his, when her eyes met his.

"That night at your apartment," he told her, "tonight, at the auction… I don't think, Felicity. I don't apply logic. I don't stop and consider my options. I react. And when I do? It's primitive. It's dark. It's violent and ugly and bloody. Because my first instinct is to take that threat down before they can put me down. And when I do? I do it so that threat – that person – will never get up again. Do you understand what that means?"

Felicity tucked her feet beneath her and sat up. Her hands settled on her knees. "Oliver, what you're talking about… You were in a horrible situation. It was kill or be killed. What else were you supposed to do? What you did, you did to survive."

He pressed the heels of his hands to his brows and ground them against his forehead. "Damn it, Felicity, you're not listening!"
She surged upward, rising onto her knees as if that could even out the difference in their height. "How can I not listen when you keep bellowing at me?"

Air billowed through his nostrils. He clenched his hands into fists at his sides. "You want things to be normal. You think that because I'm back, everything will go back to the way it was."

"No, I don't."

"It will never be normal, Felicity. I will never be normal. When someone shoots at normal people? They run. I don't. My instinct, my need? It's to fight. It means to kill."

Felicity crossed her arms over her breasts. Her hands smoothed up and down her arms. "Why are you trying to scare me?"

Oliver stepped closer. The edge of the mattress bumped his legs. The scent of her wrapped around him, flooding his senses. It filled his head with a thousand impulses, all of them dark and erotic, driven by the urge to possess and claim. "Because you should be scared. God knows I scare myself."

Her chin jutted upwards. "Why?"

Swearing, he leaned down over her, forcing her backwards. Her butt landed against her heels and she had to lean back even more when Oliver wrapped one hand tight around the bedpost and flattened the other against the bed next to her hip. "Because," he growled, "I'm trying to protect you, damn it!"

Her eyes, wide at first, narrowed. She planted a hand against his chest and pressed him back enough that she could straighten. "From what? You?" she demand, her palm still against his shirtfront. "You saved my life that night in my apartment, or did you forget? You helped save Diggle's tonight. I don't need to be afraid of you, Oliver."

Futility swamped through him, draining the fight and leaving him spent. Oliver bowed his head. "Christ, Felicity. I'm trying to do one unselfish damned thing. Do you have to fight me every step?"

The bed springs creaked a second before her fingers – cool and gentle – touched the back of his neck. They brushed through the short, thick hair at his nape as she pet his crown with the other. "You came back to me, Oliver," she whispered. "You fought your way back. What you did, the scars it put on you, none of that matters to me. I don't understand why you think they should."

His shoulders felt like stone. He didn't know if he could move even if he wanted to. That selfish need welled up again within him. The need to take the love she offered, to accept that solace, forgiveness, and naivety because he'd kept so much hidden from her for so long.

He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, tried to ignore the comforting glide of her fingers through his hair. "I don't want you to pity me," he ground out, the words, the very idea, killing him. "I don't want you with me because you feel sorry for me."

Her hands stilled for a heartbeat before they dropped away.

That silence – that irritating, haunting silence – filled his ears.

She swallowed. "What do you want?"

Oliver's jaw turned granite. It was his turn to swallow. He lifted his head, forced himself meet her eye. "I want you to love me. Me, Felicity. Not a memory. Not a fantasy or a ghost. Me."
Instant tears welled in her eyes, turning them moonlight. One spilled to collect at the corner of her trembling mouth.

"I don't deserve it," he whispered, ragged and raw. "I don't. Because there are things I have done, that I need to still do, that people will not understand."

Felicity shook her head, pressed fingertips to his mouth, silencing him. "Stop. Just… stop." She touched his cheek, stroked down his jaw and neck, down over his heart before she let that hand drop to her lap again. "I've never cared what anyone else thought, you know that. That hasn't changed."

"I'm not a good man. I'm not a hero."

"I never asked for a hero. I never expected perfection. All I asked for when I married you was a friend. A partner. You've always been that."

"I lose my temper. I don't keep normal hours. I sleep on floors."

"I haven't slept well in five years. As for the floor thing… Maybe we can negotiate that one."

"I can put on a suit and a tie and act normal, but I will never be normal again."

"I don't think 'normal' is an adjective people would use to describe me either."

"If we do this – if I let you in – you need to mean it, Felicity. Really mean it. Because I survived almost drowning. I took torture and being hunted like an animal. I did it by becoming hard. By not caring, not letting myself need or want or hope for anything. But if you… If I do this, I will not survive you lying to me right now, telling me you want me when you don't."

She started to speak, but Oliver silenced her with a look.

"So before you make promises," he warned, "before you tell me this is what you want? You need to be sure. You need to choose carefully. Because after this? There's no going back. I will do anything to protect you because you will belong to me. You need to understand what that means."

He caught her chin, tipped it upward. "I am capable of anything when it comes to you. Anything." He traced the bottom swell of her lip, found himself staring at it. He dragged his gaze back to hers. "If you don't want this, say it now. I can accept it. I can let you go because I'd rather lose you now than watch you start to hate me for what I've become."

Felicity curled her hand around his wrist. "Everything you did," she told him, "you did to come back to me. What you say you became, this thing you claim lives inside you…" She touched his face, contoured the hard angle of his cheek and jaw. Fresh tears shimmered in her eyes and in her voice as she whispered, "It helped keep you alive so that you could come home. How could I ever hate you?"

Her mouth was a magnet. Oliver caught himself leaning toward her, stopped himself. He took the hand from her chin, slid it into the thick waves at her nape to clench. He tugged lightly, drawing her head back, putting more distance between them. Making it easier to resist those lips. "If you do this – if you say you want me – I need to know which man you see when you look at me. I need to know you know who I am when I touch you. Because I sure as hell intend to touch you."

Felicity shivered. Her fingers tightened on his arm. "I do. I do, Oliver. I know who you are." She cupped the curve of his jaw. "And I want this. I want you."

His chest heaved.
She rose up on her knees. The hand buried in her hair did tug her away, didn't pull her closer. She pressed against him, her breasts flattening against the hard plane of his chest as her hand slid up his arm to his shoulder, around it to loop her arm around his neck. Those lips neared his. That scent – that hot, sweet, maddening scent – cloaked him.

Oliver released his grip on the bedpost and found her waist instead, couldn't stop himself from stroking upward until the warmth of one soft, lush breast filled the curve of that palm. Felicity's lashes fluttered downward. A soft moan whispered from her mouth into his. His fingers tightened in her hair, tugging her head back even further than before. He tasted the underside of her jaw, her throat. Her nails curled into his shoulder through his shirt, raked downward, making him growl against her flesh.

She twisted against him, arched as she practically panted, "Oliver…"

He abandoned that breast, locked his arm around her lean waist to haul her closer, tighter, practically bringing them eye to eye. The move made her gasp, made her lock both hands against his shoulders on reflex.

Oliver's heart banged a hard, fast rhythm against his sternum. Every pulse fired an almost frenzied lust through him. Not just for sex, not only to be buried inside her, but to hear it again. Hear her say his name when looking at him like this. Knowing. He clenched those curls again, tightened his hold until her belly rubbed his erection. He could barely speak for panting. Barely think for wanting.

"Again," he demanded, dominance making that word ring.

Her eyes never left his. Her fingers trembled as they found his mouth. He nipped the tips, was rewarded with a gasp that was part surprise, part arousal.

Felicity pressed closer. She rested her brow against his, touched his lips again as she nuzzled his cheek, touched his mouth with hers. She brushed her hand across her shoulder, pushed the strap of her nightgown off. The silk and lace front dipped. It hung from one tight, beaded nipple until Felicity – watching him watch her – arched upward as she pull her arm free of the gown's strap.

The fabric dropped. Her breast freed.

"Oliver," she whispered, his name a suppliant plea.

Oliver growled low in his throat, closed his hand around that bared flesh. Squeezed.

Panting, Felicity turned her face into his throat. Her gasp became a moan when he caught that nipple between his fingers and tugged. Her mouth found his neck. Her teeth his flesh.

Oliver shuddered.

She shifted, freed her other arm and the nightgown pooled around her hips. The silk cascaded off her curves to puddle around her knees on the bed and leave her nude except for the wisp of pink fabric between her legs.

Oliver released his grip on her hair. He flattened his hand between her shoulders and stroked down her spine, loving the friction of his harder, callused palm against the petal soft flesh of her body. He lingered at the base of her spine, feathered his fingertips across the dimple at its base, gave a dark chuckle when her breathless whimper breezed across his flesh. He fanned his fingers lower until they bumped the band of her panties, then he dipped his head as he squeezed her breast again, plumping the rounded flesh as he laved his tongue across its taut peak.
Felicity twined her arms around his neck, the action lifting those gorgeous breasts higher. Oliver kissed them both, drew one peak between his lips to suckle, to bite, as he pushed his hand beneath the fabric of her underwear and cupped her ass.

She tugged at his shirt, pulled it free of his belt before she attacked the buttons in front. Her mouth – hot and wet and hungry – seemed to sizzle against his flesh as she scattered kissed against his throat, his jaw. She yanked. Fabric tore. Buttons popped. Her hands delved inside. Her palms slid across his chest – naked flesh to naked flesh – and she purred her approval into his mouth a second before her tongue flicked his upper lip.

She traced a scar high on his shoulder, followed the puckered line of another down his ribs, then followed the ripples of his abdomen lower on his belly. His muscles clenched. His blood thickened before surging south. She nibbled his mouth, bit his lower lip, his chin. Her fingers loosened his belt, dropped to pop the button and ease the zipper down.

She touched him. Her soft, slender fingers curled around his rigid shaft, squeezed hard enough to make him swear in pained delight before she stroked from base to tip. She rolled the heel of her palm across the sensitive head of his cock, sending a rushing wave of fire-laced pleasure straight through his gut, up his spine, into his brain that snapped his head back as it tore a shuddering cry from his throat.

She laughed as she did it again, scattered kisses across his collar bone, nipped and licked his chest as she pumped him again.

Oliver snared her wrists, yanked them away from his body as he pushed her down hard on the mattress. Her eyes flashed in the dark – power, sensuality, sex – and she wiggled beneath him to kick the long skirt of her gown up her thighs. Her legs parted as they lifted to wrap around him. Even in the dark her skin glistened, slick with sweat and desire.

The wildness in her called to his, or maybe his demanded it from her. Oliver didn't know. Was beyond caring. She lifted her hips and he groaned when her heat, soft and wet, bumped the tip of his penis.

Swearing, he clamped his hands around her wrists, locked them against the mattress as he rose over her. He stared down at her, his body poised to take hers, let himself push against her, but not into her, felt a thrill of satisfaction when she lifted in anticipation of that thrust, cried out, as hungry for him as he was for her.

"Say it," he ground out, flexing his fingers around her wrist. He pushed against her again, felt her hot liquid heat clasp around his crown and nearly roared as she arched her head back, squeezed her eyes shut and cried out. He tightened his grip, bruising her, not caring, wanting to mark her. Brand her. His. Now. Always. "Say it, damn you."

"I want you," she cried out, arching against him again, forcing him a little deeper. A cry tore from her throat a second before her legs squeezed around him. "I want you, Oliver. I want you. Everything. I want —"

He thrust into her. Hard. Deep. The power of it stole the rest of her words, made her gasp. And as he rode her – as he drove them both relentlessly toward that cliff, then over its edge in a burning release so hot, so complete he thought it would surely kill both of them – a howl of surrender roared through Oliver's blood as he came inside her.

He didn't remember collapsing on top of her. Didn't realize he'd rested his cheek against her shoulder until one of her trembling hands touched his hair, the other his cheek. He couldn't move. Couldn't
even open his eyes. Was barely conscious of Felicity petting him, soothing him as if he were some wounded beast.

For better or worse, Oliver thought weakly as the black stillness of sleep dragged him down. There was no going back.

~*~

Felicity woke to rain against the window and the gentle weight of Oliver's head over her heart, his palm low and flat on her belly.

She stared into the blackness above her. The rain, though light, seemed to fill her ears in an endless, mournful chant. Oliver's touch was light, the faint stroke of his thumb below her navel barely that of a feather.

She closed her eyes, pressed her lips together.

Oliver's hand stilled.

She made herself swallow. Made herself open her eyes and stare into that void. "You know, don't you."

He said nothing. Didn't move his hand.

Felicity clenched her teeth. "Thea."

Oliver sighed a second before he rose up on an elbow. The sheets rustled in the dark. Soft blue light from the alarm clock on the nightstand behind him outlined his shoulder, neck, and side of his head before streaking strands of his hair. He flattened his palm against her belly. "She never said a word."

"Liar."

"She didn't. I promise you."

Felicity swung her attention back to the ceiling. Fine. There was a technicality there. She wasn't dumb enough to not get that. All Oliver's promise meant was that the words, "Felicity was pregnant and had a miscarriage" didn't specifically leave Thea's mouth. It didn't mean the teenager hadn't taken Oliver by the hand and walked him – proverbially or literally – to that conclusion.

It didn't matter. He knew. She knew he knew. And now there it sat between them, like all secrets eventually did.

How long had he known? It couldn't have been long. He would have betrayed himself before now if it had. And he never would have said what he did about a house and a picket fence and baby names if he knew. Not ever. So when did he... Oh, damn. Damn! Was that why he'd suddenly become so affectionate before the auction? Why he'd helped her dress? Why he said he was interested in his wife? Why he told her all he'd thought about on the island was finding his way back to her? Why he'd apologized snapping at her?

If he knew about the baby – Felicity closed her eyes, covered them with both hands as she let out a miserable sigh. The hospital. Those hideous pajamas with those stupid storks. And then, once they
were home… Oh, God. Nausea welled up in her stomach, sending pain lancing through her and leaving a sliver in her heart. Tears burned against her eyelids but she couldn't take her hands away. She couldn't look at him. "Is that… Is this why…"

"No."

Felicity dropped her hands. She twisted her head on the pillow to glare at him. Guilt was stamped all over his face. Guilt and lies and pity.

Disgusted, horrified, she shook her head as she sat up and flung the covers aside. "God, you're such a liar." She kicked her feet free of the sheets before swinging them toward the edge of the bed. "Now who's here out of guilt?"

"Whoa. Hold it." Oliver caught her before she could slide away. His arm locked tight around her waist from behind and he dragged her backwards as if she weighed nothing. He tucked her naked back against his equally naked chest, dropped a kiss to her back before he propped his chin on her shoulder. He gave her a little squeeze. "Whatever you're thinking? You're wrong."

Felicity pushed at his arm but it didn't budge. What the hell did the man do in his spare time? Lift tractor tires? "Oh, so now you read minds? Is this a suddenly developed superpower?"

"No." He hooked a corkscrew of her hair and brushed it back behind her ear. "I just know you. I know how you think."

"You don't know anything."

"You're wondering when I knew. If that's why I apologized to you. If that's why I stopped pushing you away." He tightened his arm around her, turned his mouth to her ear as he murmured, "You want to know if that's why I'm in this bed right."

Her face burned. Not because having sex with her husband embarrassed her, but because he was right. Why the hell did he have to be right? Was she that transparent to him? That predictable?

Oliver sighed and rested his forehead against her temple. "I've always wanted you, Felicity. The first day I saw you get off the elevator in those panda flats. The first date we went on. The night you said you'd marry me. It's always been you." He nuzzled her hair. The arm around her waist loosened. "When I came home, the first thing I wanted was you. Even when I pushed you away, I wanted you. You're a part of me. Then I found out about the baby."

She tensed. "It hurt me. I won't lie. I can't. Not about that." His hand slipped from her hip, shifted to her belly again. "We had a baby and I never knew."

Felicity closed her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No." He lifted his head, shook it. "No. Don't apologize. Don't act like you did something wrong."

"I should have told you."

"I know why you didn't."

She couldn't look at him. "Do you?"

She felt him nod. "Because you didn't want to hurt me. You didn't want to add one more thing for
me to deal with. Why would you? Knowing wouldn't change what happened. All it would do was give me a burden to carry when you…” He tucked a finger under her chin, guided her face around so he could study her. "When you were content to carry it for both of us."

That wound in her, that deep chasm of grief and lose cracked. Felicity bit her lip. Hard.

Oliver winced. "Don't," he whispered, caressing that lip with his thumb, easing her bite. "Don't hide this from me. You told me you weren't made of glass. Neither am I. If we were, neither of us would have survived the last five years." He brushed his mouth against hers, his nose to hers, his cheek. He cupped the back of her head, guided her cheek to the crook of his shoulder. "Don't ask me not to be sorry, either. Because I am, honey. Sorry I got on that boat. Sorry I left you. Sorry my damned pride got in the way and robbed us of five years. Sorry that I wasn't there when you found out you were pregnant, and I'm damned sorry I failed you and made you go through that alone."

Felicity sniffled. She didn't want to cry. She'd cried so much after the miscarriage. No woman could ever truly get over that kind of loss, but she had made some form of peace with it. She'd had to in order to keep putting one foot in front of the other. But sometimes, when she let herself think about it, when she thought about what could have been… A tear leaked from the corner of her eyes, dashed down her cheek to Oliver's shoulder.

He stroked her hair. "You can always lean on me, honey. No matter what. And when you're ready – if you're ever ready – you can talk to me."

"It was a long time ago and yet, sometimes…”

"Feels like yesterday," he finished for her.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"That mind thing."

"Sorry."

She smiled a little. Her hand covered his, held it against her belly. "I was so happy when I found out."

Oliver tensed.

"You were gone. People were giving up hope. There was talk of calling off the search for the Queen's Gambit. And there I was, in the bathroom, holding a pregnancy test and… It was like you were there with me again, and I had a piece of you."

She traced the backs of his knuckles, let her eyes drift shut again. Maybe it was selfish. Maybe it was weak. She didn't know. But she let him hold her. She let him carry the weight of her, of the memories.

"Then, a few months later, right before my first ultrasound, I…” A lump welled in her throat, almost choking her. She forced it down. "The news announced rescue crews were giving up. The government was calling off the search for the boat. And I knew. I knew two seconds before the phone and Moira told me they considered the crew and everybody aboard the Queen's Gambit lost. You and Robert… gone. I don't… I don't even remember leaving work or getting in my car or trying to come home."
He was rocking her, Felicity realized. A small, soothing motion designed to calm. She wasn't sure if it was for her or for himself. She snuggled closer, let out a sigh.

"I shouldn't have been driving. It was dark and raining. I'd been working too hard for too long. Not sleeping. I knew—"

"Shhhh," Oliver murmured, petting her again. "It wasn't your fault."

She knew that. Everyone had told her that. The emergency room doctor. Her own gynecologist. God's will, they told her. These things happen. It's common for a first pregnancy. She'd done nothing wrong. But a part of her would always wonder.

She sucked in a deep breath, tightened her grip on Oliver's hand. "I was on Broadway. The roads were empty. It was raining." And she'd been crying. She should have pulled over. Maybe if she'd pulled over…

"Felicity," Oliver whispered, making her realize she'd been saying it out loud.

She bit her lip again. Tasted blood. "That's when the first cramp hit."

He made a pained sound, lowered his head.

"I didn't realize what was happening until the next one. Then I felt the blood."

"Christ," he growled.

"I went off the road. Not hard or anything. I wasn't hurt. It wasn't an accident. I just went off the shoulder. My purse slid off the seat. I couldn't reach it. I couldn't get to my phone. I couldn't…" her voice broke.

Oliver kissed her forehead, the bridge of her nose.

"What's with that road anyway?" she demanded, suddenly more angry than upset. "What is it? Is it cursed?" She slumped into him. "I don't know how long I was there. The rain got worse. Then suddenly there were lights. A police car. Then my door was opening and he was there."

"Lance," Oliver guessed.

She nodded. "He was afraid to wait for an ambulance. There were accidents all over. Flooding. He got me to the hospital. He called Tommy. He..." Felicity dragged her hand over her face, wiping away tears she hadn't realized she was even crying until then. "He stayed with me, Oliver. He held my hand the entire time. He never once left me. Not even when... when I lost our baby."

"Oh, God," he groaned into her hair, his voice thick.

"I lost our baby," she choked out, sobbing. "I lost it. Oliver. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

"Shhhh," Oliver whispered as he eased them back down to the bed. He pulled her against his side, held her tight. "Stop. This was not your fault, honey. Don't do that. Don't do that to yourself."

She cried anyway. For the baby they'd never hold. For herself. For Oliver. For the family they'd never be. The one taken from them.

The rain wept with her.

She didn't know how long she cried or if, exhausted, she'd fallen back asleep. She only knew that,
when she stirred a long time later, Oliver wiped the last of her tears from her cheek with his thumb. That the love in his eyes was real.

Felicity touched his face. "I love you, Oliver."

He caught her hand, carried it to his heart. "I always knew, Felicity Meghan Smoak-Queen, that when I met you, my life would never be the same. That I would never be the same. I was right." He pressed her hand flat against his chest. "I meant what I said. I love you. It might have taken us a little while to get here but…"

He rolled away, came back, and when he lifted his hand this time, there was a small, gold circle pinched between his thumb and forefinger.

Felicity stared at it for a moment before realizing what it was. A wedding band. Not the one from before; not that extravagant, gaudy rock she'd never wanted and always feared losing. No. A new ring. A simple one. A perfect, unending circle of love, devotion, and promise.

"I know I haven't given you a lot of reason to trust me," Oliver said, uncertainly shadowing his face. "I know I have hurt you and pushed you away."

"Oliver."

"If you let me… If you give me that second chance… if you accept this ring… I will never, ever fail you again."

Felicity stared at the ring – the perfect one; the one she'd have chosen for herself if she could – then lifted her gaze to his, slowly lifted her hand and slipped the tip of her ring finger through that loop, then let Oliver finish the task.

She kissed him. Man and wife. She caressed his jaw, loving the glint of that ring in the dark, the love it sent flooding into her heart.

"I take it," he said between kisses, "that's a yes?"

She kissed him, let herself linger on lips that now belonged to her, then drew back and said, "That's a yes. Only…"

He frowned. "What?"

Felicity pushed against his chest and he flopped over, taking her with him so she could straddle him, pin his hands to the bed, and demand, "Where the hell's your ring?"

Oliver shrugged. "What can I say? The wife's stingy with the gifts."

She laughed as she stretched out flush on top of him, linked her fingers with his and extended their arms up, under the pillows. "Then maybe," she murmured as she lowered her mouth toward his again, "You should try to earn it. And this time?" Felicity rolled her hips against his. "Put your back into it."
what are you guilty of?

Sins

~ * ~

Read More About the Olicity Hiatus Challenge
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Oliver tries to win Felicity's confidence. An unexpected call leads to an unexpected discovery, and Felicity connects a few dots. Or should that be... circles?

Chapter Notes

This is a fic written in response to an Olicity Hiatus Challenge as a countdown to Arrow's season 3. The idea came to me while talking about something completely different (that dreaded Moonlighting Curse). I believe the correct term for this story would be Alternate Reality (A/R). It is rated mature for language, sex, and violence.

There was, Felicity decided as she drifted out of a deep, dreamless sleep, nothing like waking up in a perfectly soft, perfectly warm bed with a perfectly naked husband whose hand was currently mid-slide over her ribcage and heading determinedly south.

With a low purr and a long stretch beneath the covers, Felicity snuggled deeper into her pillow but didn't open her eyes. "What are you doing?" she murmured, her voice husky and deep.

Oliver's hand stilled for a moment before his hand continuing its downward trek. "If you have to ask," he drawled from behind her, his mouth next to her ear, "then we haven't been doing it nearly enough yet."

Even though she fought it, a smile spread across her lips. Oliver's warm, slightly rough palm contoured her waist and followed the rolling swell of her hip. His hand stalled at the band of her panties to toy with the little bow that dotted her hipbone. He shifted behind her on the bed, the heat of him warming her back through the thin, black fabric of the t-shirt he'd found for her at some point during the night. A shirt that had somehow rucked up in her sleep to bunch beneath her breasts.

"Besides..." He paused to kiss her shoulder, then her neck. His stubble grazed her smooth skin, sending a delighted shiver through her. "The doctor said to wake you up periodically. This." He flared his fingers across her stomach, swooshing fire into her belly and down between her legs. She sucked in a breath as her insides and thighs clenched. Oliver grinned against her throat as his fingers slid across the front of her panties, curled inward. "This is periodically."

"That's what you said about the other three times."

"Hey. Number two was all you."

"That's a lie. You were totally willing."

"Of course, I was willing," Oliver said against the underside of her jaw. His fingers began slow circles against the slick fabric, dipped low and hooked inward for a stroke before going back to drawing circles. "Who wouldn't be willing? I woke up with your mouth around my —"
"I didn't hear you complaining. In fact, I believe all I heard was 'that's it, baby, just like that' and 'harder.' Oh, and who could forget, 'Suck me, honey.' I believe that was on constant loop for quite some time."

Oliver's chuckle rumbled through his chest and into her back. He did something with his hand that made her toes curl and her hips lift toward his touch. Felicity caught herself panting, bit her lip to regain some self-respect even as she relaxed her thighs and shifted, just a little, silently guiding his touch. A little further down. A little to the right and… She melted against him, sighed as her limbs turned pliant and wicked sparks of pleasure glinted in her bloodstream.

His finger stole under into her panties. The wetness there might have been embarrassing if Felicity didn't want him so much. He slipped easily between her folds, raked that callused fingertip straight over her clit.

Pure pleasure arched her back as it dragged a low moan from her throat.

Oliver nibbled her ear, bit the lobe as he grazed that tight bundle of nerves again. "You know me… I take doctor's orders very," he stroked her again, "very," deeper, "seriously."

Felicity back arched. Her hips lifted so his next stroke went deep enough to tease her opening. He retreated and she flopped down again, breathing hard, laughing, as she managed a gasping, "Oh, God. You b-bastard."

He tutted. "Is that any way to talk to your concerned husband doing his husbandly thing?"

She eased onto her back, bent one leg to grant him freer access. "Somehow I don't think this is quite what the d-doctor had in mind."

Oliver paused. "He better not or we're changing doctors."

Felicity covered her eyes as she laughed. "Oliver!"

He pushed two thick fingers into her and her laugh became a strangled whimper. Her hands dropped to the sheet, dug deep to grip hard.

And then neither of them was laughing anymore. He was kissing and touching and licking and Felicity was moaning and sweating and demanding very un-Felicity-like things until Oliver stripped her underwear away, added his mouth and tongue to the steady thrust of his fingers. Then she was flying – breaking apart, crying out as she broke – and Oliver was right there next to her the entire time to help put her back together.

~*~

"I don't think I'll ever move again," Felicity groaned several hours later as she lay, facedown in her pillow, her arms spread wide in the empty bed, and the sheet tangled around her bare legs.

She didn't care that her underwear was gone or that, the last time she'd seen it, it was hanging from the lamp next to the bed. She didn't care she was naked again. She didn't care that, judging by the lick of heated air against her bottom, her butt was on display. She didn't even care that – going by the bright sunlight through the window – it was late morning, that she should be up, dressed, and doing normal people stuff. Screw it. She'd never been so gloriously exhausted, utterly satisfied, and
absolutely content as she was in this moment, and she wasn't about to let a damn thing ruin it.

The bed dipped as Oliver planted both hands on the mattress. He kissed the back of her calf. "Then stay in bed," he whispered in that sexy, deep voice that told her he loved her and was worried even though he wouldn't say it. "Sleep."

She turned her head on the pillow, found herself staring at the pretty gold wedding band on her finger, oddly bright and hopeful against the white sheets. Sunlight gleamed off its rounded edge and, as she lay there, the sounds of a world in motion began to filter through, all narrated by the low-volumed voice of Channel 52's Bethany Snow from the TV set.

Felicity yawned. Oliver had been up awhile, she realized. He'd pulled on a pair of jeans and, judging by the empty plate and glass on the table next to the armchair on the other side of the room, gone in search of breakfast. But he hadn't left her. He'd gone no further than the chair, where he'd apparently settled to eat, read, and watch the news while she'd slept.

As if watching over her.

Felicity closed her eyes, inhaled deep, and breathed in the faint aroma of coffee and pancakes. Since Oliver didn't favor either of those since his return, Felicity knew he'd brought it back for her.

As if taking care of her.

She smiled against the pillow, stretched. "What time is it?"

"After eleven."

She groaned.

Oliver's lips touched the back of her thigh. "Stay in bed," he said again.

"I can't. There are things to do."

"It can wait."

"Important things."

He kissed her left butt cheek. "They'll keep."

She closed her eyes on a sigh. Her limbs still felt leaden. She didn't know if it was the byproduct of a night of really great sex or a much more unpleasant cocktail – one of concussion mixed with stress and terror-induced exhaustion.

Felicity itched the bottom of one foot with the toes of the other. "Really important things, Oliver."

He kissed the base of her spine, that spot between her shoulder blades, as he braced himself above her with his hands and his knees on either side of her legs, bracketing her in. "Nobody's expecting you to be anywhere today."

She didn't like that he was worried. Shifting onto her back, she stared up at him. Backlit by sunlight, his shoulder turned to gold, his face to shadow. Every inch of him seemed sculpted, tight, and tones. How could a man look so impossibly hard and yet, at his core, be so soft?

Offering what she hoped was a reassuring smile, Felicity touched his shadowed jaw. "I'm okay, Oliver."
"I know."

Her heart softened when the troubled shadows in his eyes didn't lift, nor the creases at the corners of his mouth and eyes ease. He was such a terrible liar. She cupped that chiseled curve, let her thumb stroke his cheekbone. "I'm better than okay."

"How's the head?"

"Terrific."

His brows lifted.

"Great. It's fine. Really. It's pretty good."

"Okay. You realize you went from 'terrific' to 'pretty good' in, like, two seconds, right? That doesn't instill confidence."

Felicity met his eye, gave him her best stern-face. "I'm fine."

His look was doubtful, his sigh equally so.

Felicity settled her hands on his forearms. "I'm okay. Honest, Oliver, I swear. I feel much better. I'll be back to my old self before you know it."

Those eyebrows knotted together. "You're not just telling me what I want to hear and lying to me, are you?"

Felicity blinked. Tension crept into her shoulders. Not because he was right. She was okay. She wouldn't lie about something as serious as her health. She knew the dangers of concussions, but her head barely throbbed at all. A couple of aspirin and she'd feel back to normal. But lying to him? She inched her chin up. "Of course not."

His eyes narrowed. "Felicity."

"Oliver."

He lowered himself, a simple crook of the arms that brought them nose to nose, yet kept the length of his body suspended a whisper from hers. The heat of him flushed her from head to toe, making every inch of her flesh tingle in anticipation of his touch. The scent of him washed over her, leaving her dizzy, lightheaded, and feeling a little drunk on his nearness. Her nails dug into his skin. Her mouth tilted up toward his, already hungry for the pressure and taste of his.

He bumped her nose with his, went in for slow, hot, wet kisses that only seemed to tease her lips. His tongue dipped in to stroke hers.

Felicity sighed. She slipped her hands up his taut arms to his shoulders, across their granite-like surface to his neck, where she threaded her fingers through his short hair.

Oliver lingered on her lips, nibbled the bottom one before kissing the corner. He raised his head, paused to brush her hair away from her cheek. He searched her eyes. "You know you can trust me, right?"

"Of course I do." If she didn't – if she had any doubts at all – she could never lay with him like this. Never let him do the things to her body, to her heart, that he had last night. Didn't he understand that?

"Because sometimes it feels like I'm here… and you're here… and we're talking…" He stroked her
cheek, let his fingertips slide through the baby-fine hair at her temple. "And suddenly you go somewhere else."

"I'm sorry."

He frowned. A deep crease carved itself between his brows a second before he gave a slight shake of his head. "No. That's not what I — You disappear into that brain of yours and I don't know what sends you there. Sometimes, though, it feels like I'm going to lose you to it and I'll never know why. Because you go and you don't let me come with you. I don't know what to do when that happens. What to say."

"It's just things," she told him. "Going on. In my head. That's all."

He hesitated before nodding. He traced the shell of her ear, let his fingers trail over the industrial piercings there before following that line down to her jaw, along the curve to her chin. He stroked the backs of his knuckles down her throat. "I know a lot has happened. I know I'm… different."

"Oliver —"

"I know you're worried about me."

She pinched her lips together.

"I might be damaged, Felicity, but that doesn't mean I'm weak."

"You're not —"

He pressed two fingers to her lips, stopping her. "Whatever is going on in there – in that beautiful head of yours – don't think for a minute you have to be strong for me. Don't think you have to do everything, carry everything, alone because you think you have to protect me. You're my wife. I'm your husband. We're partners, remember? Fifty-fifty. That was the deal."

"I know." But that was before this mess. Before Ben Mitchell's death. Before that stupid circle glyph, snipers, bullets, and blood. Before the hooded vigilante chased her out of the warehouse. Before the Queen's Gambit. Before —

"There you go again." Oliver took his weight on his knees. He caught her face gently between his palms and peered into her eyes, searching them. "Where are you going, honey? Why are you leaving me behind?"

"Oliver..."

"Sometimes I look at you and I think, I came home. I'm here. Right here. But you're still out there somewhere – lost – and it's like nobody's even noticed you were missing."

The sudden sting of tears caught her off guard and unprepared. She tried to look away, but Oliver leaned closer.

"Well, I noticed," he told her. "I noticed, and I'm coming after you, sweetheart. You hear me? Because you are not alone, Felicity. Not anymore. And I will fight to bring you back from wherever the hell you've got yourself trapped. Do you understand?"

She trembled, not because she was cold, but because she was afraid. When she was alone, she had nothing to lose. Now? Now she had everything. Everything she'd done, every question she'd asked, every lie she'd told… they'd seemed harmless at the time. Now each one was coming home to roost,
posing new threat, and it didn't seem right, didn't seem fair, to put Oliver back in the crosshairs when he'd already suffered so much.

Walk away, Ben Mitchell had told her at the auction. It wasn't too late.

But it was.

It had been too late the minute her brain took all the facts, all the suppositions, and spewed out one haunting question. It had been too late when someone kidnapped her and Oliver, and much too late the night Ben died. The sad part was, Felicity hadn't only been lying to Oliver. She'd been lying to herself, too. That was the danger of lies. They could seduce anyone into believing anything as long as they wanted to believe it badly enough.

Things were so out of control. But Diggle believed Oliver could take care of himself. More, the bodyguard thought her husband could not only protect himself, Diggle thought Oliver could protect her too. He'd seen something in Oliver. Felicity didn't know what. Or maybe the ex-soldier simply understood Oliver on a level Felicity couldn't. The man hadn't said what gave him that faith in Oliver's abilities, but he had told Felicity to stick by her husband. Oliver had saved Diggle's life in her apartment. He'd saved her life. Nine lives, Diggle had observed of Oliver as they stood in the wreckage that had been her home. A man with a strange habit of coming through impossible situations alive.

Didn't that warrant trusting him with the truth? But she didn't have the truth. Not really. She had suspicions. She had pieces. Could she rip Oliver's life apart for that? Could she do that and still claim to love him? But the same was true of the reverse. To lie to him, to hide it from him, to pretend she didn't know when she did… That would be a betrayal of everything she respected in herself. Of their vows and their love. Their trust and friendship.

Oliver growled under his breath as he slid an arm around her waist and flipped onto his back. Felicity squeaked as he took her with him, holding her flush and tight against his with that lone arm. Her legs tangled with his. The rough denim of his jeans scratched the inside of her thighs and, oddly liking it, she pressed closer.

Oliver released her to thread his fingers through her thick curtain of hair. He lifted it up and back to clench it a messy knot at the back of her neck so nothing stood between them. He rubbed her hair absently between his fingers. "Why won't you trust me? What are you afraid of?"

Losing him. Again. Losing herself if she did. Or maybe, even more frightening, of hurting him, of making him hate her, and having to live with the knowledge that what she'd done for him – for them – actually cost her the very thing she'd done it for.

But he was her partner. Her lover. More than that, he was her friend. She couldn't go on like this. It wasn't right. She couldn't let the fear be stronger than their love. She wouldn't.

Closing her eyes, Felicity took a deep breath and curled her hands into fists against his chest. She moistened her lips with a flick of her tongue. "Oliver. I-I need to tell you something." She bit her lip for a moment, lifted her lashes. "I —"

The loud, sonorous gong of a bell cut her off, and Felicity groaned as she dropped her forehead to Oliver's chest.

He tensed beneath her. His hands dropped to her shoulders, letting her hair tumble, free, down her back. "What the hell is that?"
The bell came again, deep and full and imposing.
"Cloister bell," Felicity mumbled into his chest.

"The what?" It gonged again and Oliver winced. He made a sound of protest when Felicity pushed herself up on an elbow and reached for her smartphone on the nightstand. "Felicity, let it go to voicemail."

"I can't," she said, even as the phone went off again in her hand. She tapped a button, silencing the ringtone, as she glanced at him. "It's the cloister bell. It's only to be used in times of great emergencies or danger."

Oliver stared at her, his brows knitted tight together.

"Doctor Who. The TARDIS. It's the bell that warns them whenever... Never mind. It's my ringtone for Walter's private office line. He never uses it unless it's important."

He groaned. His arms dropped to the mattress. "Felicity."

"Oliver." She wrinkled her nose at him before she rolled away. She took the sheet with her, struggling to wrap it sarong-style around her as she brought the phone to her ear. Somehow it felt weird to talk to her boss while naked and astride his step-son. She tripped over the sheet, nearly dropping the phone. She hiked the fabric as she ignored Oliver's snort of laughter behind her. "Walter? What's wrong?"

"Felicity," the Brit sighed, his of relief practically a breeze through the phone. "Thank God. I wasn't sure you'd answer —"

"What's going on? Why are you at the office?"

"Never mind that for a moment. Are you all right? If you're not well..."

"I'm fine."

Oliver threw a pillow at her. It smacked her butt before it dropped to the floor.

Felicity put a hand to her offended end and mock glared at her husband. It was, however, pretty damned impossible to stay mad at him as he propped himself up against the headboard – all half-naked and mussed with those bedroom eyes promising all sorts of fun, fully-naked, sweaty things – and crooked a finger at her. She let her gaze wander over him, taking in the hard lines of his muscles, those tight, six-packed abs, all the way down, past his navel to where the jeans weren't quite buttoned. Even the zipper wasn't exactly tugged all the way up. She sucked in her bottom lip. Her nipples tingled under the sheet.

Dimly realizing her boss was still talking, Felicity turned her back on Oliver. She put a hand to her forehead, made herself close her eyes to focus on the other man's voice. "I'm sorry, Walter. What did you say?"

"I hate to impose."
"Walter, I'm fine. I promise. I was already up. What do you need?"

"In light of last night's...events, the court has changed the auction process for Unidac."

Ugh. Unidac. The company that just kept on haunting.

"They want all the bids, sealed, and submitted to the court."

"That's no problem."

"By four o'clock this afternoon."

"Oh."

"I would never think to bother you —"

"It's not a bother."

"Bull. We both know it is. But I can't find everything here. No one seems to know where anything is, and our original bid packet was... Well, let's just say we can't send that."

Felicity cringed at the imagined fate of their proposal. Trampled. Dirty. Probably covered in blood. Yeah, a court would definitely frown on that. She adjusted the sheet again. "Fortunately you have a paranoid executive assistant. I have everything you need."

"You do? That's wonderful, Felicity. Thank you. Is it at your desk or filed?"

"Neither, actually. It's here at the house. I had an extra copy printed off to proof and keep on hand, just in case."

"I'll find a messenger to swing by the house and bring it back to the office so we can send it —"

"Walter, that's ridiculous. I'll arrange for a messenger to come pick it up from here and take it directly there."

"Felicity, I can't ask you to —"

"You're not asking." The bed creaked behind her. Felicity glanced back as Oliver roll out of it and on to his feet. "I'm offering. Besides, it takes nothing to put it in an envelope and hand it to a courier."

"You should be resting," Walter argued. "I feel awful about this."

"It was just a knock to the head. I promise." She looked to Olive, waited until he looked back. "I'm fine."

Oliver shook his head and gestured to the shower. Felicity nodded and he disappeared into the ensuite. He didn't close the door, just shucked his jeans, opened the glass shower door, and stepped in.

Felicity twirled a curl of blonde hair around her finger as the muscles in his backside flex, creating dimples in each cheek. Every now and then he'd shift – to turn the water on, to reach for the soap – offering a quick peek between his legs. Oliver faced her as he rubbed the soap between his hands, building up lather, before he looked up, right at her, reached down and... Wow.

Felicity's face flushed. Her thoughts scattered. She spun around, away from him, her heart thumping against her breast like a jackhammer, which was silly. She'd seen her husband naked before. She'd
seen him shower. Hell, she'd showered with him plenty of times. But this… this was different. It felt
different. Maybe because he was different.

Oliver had never suffered a lack of confidence. He was, after all, Oliver Queen. He'd never had a
shortage of attention, women, or sex. His technique in past was simple: soft music, a romantic dinner,
a bottle of a wine… Seduction was refined and purposeful; most definitely mutually satisfactory. But
now? This was… Felicity peeked over her shoulder as Walter prattled on in her ear. Oliver's hand
stroke down his shaft, up again, before scrubbing low across his belly. The hard ridge of muscles all
came together in a vee at his hips and rippled with every move.

Felicity's throat went dry. Her blood hot. Every beat of her heart seemed to echo between her thighs,
making her shift to squeeze them together, which only seemed to make the sudden need to be
touched worse.

It all felt like a dare. A blatant, sexual, hungry dare. Slightly naughty, a little dirty, not at all polite or
refined, and definitely nothing 'slow' about it. And a part of her really, really wanted to accept the
challenge. A part of herself she didn't realize existed.

She followed a trail of steam as it coiled around his calves, drifted up his thighs, around that
magnificent waist where his hand slid boldly down again to wrap around his cock and tug. Felicity's
attention jumped to his face. Oliver's gaze locked with hers. His eyes glittered. Hot. Feral.

He pumped himself again. Felicity's legs wobbled. Her hand strayed toward her thighs.

"Felicity?"

She jumped and yanked her hand away, snapped around as if Walter could somehow see what she
was doing, and told herself that was not Oliver's low laugh she heard echo in the bathroom. "I-I'm
sorry. I, uh, dropped the phone. W-Where did you need this to go?"

"Do you have a pen?"

"Hold on." She hurried to the desk and grabbed one from the cup there. She opened one drawer,
than another. How the heck could someone be the heir apparent to a multi-billion dollar international
industry and not have paper was beyond her. "Ah ha," she muttered as she opened the middle
drawer and a small notebook slide forward. She opened straight the back and set it down on the
desktop. "Okay, I'm ready, go ahead."

Walter gave her the address and Felicity repeated it back as she wrote it. Once he confirmed it, she
clicked the pen closed, set it aside, and straightened. She ripped the page out. "Got it. I'll call a
messenger service and have this sent out right away."

"Don't push yourself," Walter warned. "As long as it gets there by four we're fine. That gives you
almost four hours."

"Yes, Walter."

"I'm serious, Felicity. I don't want you to push yourself."

"I will be very careful walking the few steps to get the bid and very careful sealing the envelope."

He sighed. "Is this your way of saying I'm being too protective?"

She laughed. "Just a little." Especially considering the more strenuous activities she'd been engaging
in all night long.
"I can't help it. I blame myself for yesterday. If I hadn't asked you to be there…"

"You couldn't have known."

"I should have. The police warned us."

"It wasn't your fault, Walter. You're not responsible."

"It feels like it sometimes."

"I know that feeling," she murmured, glancing back at Oliver for a whole other reason this time. He had his back to her now, fully engaged in the mundane task of actually showering versus titillating her. Water and suds sluiced down his back.

"Thank you, Felicity. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd survive."

After they'd hung up, Felicity sighed and set her phone down. She reached for the drawer again to return the notebook, but paused, her arm outstretched, as the condition of the book suddenly registered. Frowning, she straightened. She ran her fingers over the dirty, damaged, cover. The white had faded to a dingy ivory. The once pretty leather was now marred and rippled. It had obviously been used, abused, and exposed to the elements, including water.

Felicity clamped the bed sheet secure around her with a simple squeeze of her arms. She shifted the book and fanned through the pages. They were equally neglected. The fore edge was stained with grime. The fine, straight lines of the pages had turned wavy from going through cycles of wet-dry, wet-dry. She opened the book, rubbed her thumb along the top corner where age had foxed brownish spots and stains on the paper.

She closed the book and turned it over in her hand. She fanned the pages again, kicking up the faint smell of dust and mildew. Weird. The book looked vaguely familiar. Not in this shape, of course, but she was certain she'd seen it before.

Felicity opened it again, let several pages flip by without taking in the words beyond the fact that they formed some kind of list. All the writing was in the same penmanship and in the same odd brown ink. Or maybe, Felicity realized, the ink had merely faded to that color over time. Some of the items on the list, however, had obviously been crossed off more recently in a newer, bolder, black ink.

Oliver had brought this back with him from the island? Why? It wasn't his handwriting. She'd seen that plenty of times to know. But it was familiar. She'd seen it before. What was this? Some kind of weird diary? If it was anything like the ones she kept as a teen, there'd be a nameplate in the front. Some sort of 'Property Of' line. She flipped the front cover open.

A faded, dingy, circular emblem stared back.

Frown deepening, Felicity turned toward the sunlight streaming through the bedroom window.

An arm locked around her waist, dragging her backward as the book was plucked from her hand and sent flying toward the bed with a careless flick of Oliver's wrist. Felicity gave a surprised shriek of delight as he tossed her over his shoulder. He locked an arm across the back of her thighs to steady her as he straightened, pivoted, and strode – naked and dripping wet – back toward the bathroom.

Laughing, Felicity wiggled against his hold, half trying to free herself, half enjoying the fact that his
strength made impossible. His wet body soaked the front of the sheet, making it cling to her breasts, belly, and thighs, and each jostling step made her upside-down world bounce and her hair swish back and forth in time with Oliver's steps. She eyed his backside, couldn't help a deep, appreciative sigh. He really was rather spectacular.

She crooked her legs upward to trap his arm there, then struggled to lever herself upward. Oliver smacked her butt, a blow not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make her stop wiggling, and just stinging enough to enough to send an unexpected jolt of pleasure through her. She gasped. Excited wetness grew between her thighs as she rocked her hips back toward his palm.

Oliver jerked to a stop. His arm tightened. He twisted to peer down at her over the other shoulder as his hand came back. This time he rubbed, caressing her ass with a slow, soothing stroke that let his thumb graze between her cheeks. She arched her back, lifting her bottom, and that hungry look flashed through his eyes again, dark and untamed. His mouth firmed. His nostrils flared. His thumb rubbed the sheet against her slick folds with torturous, erotic friction. "Don't tempt me, Felicity."

She bit her lip, shifted again. She practically moaned when he squeezed one buttock and those long, thick fingers of his curved inward once more. The breath burst out of her, wounding an awful lot like a helpless whimper of pleasure. "You're getting me wet."

His eyes flared.

Felicity squeezed her eyes shut, gave her head a quick shake. "The sheet. I meant the sheet. You're all wet."

He laughed as he continued into the bathroom, that large hand still on her backside. "Work with me, Queen."

Another three steps and they were in the bath. The world tilted and Felicity found herself on her feet. The bed sheet dropped to the marble tile floor, leaving her nude. There was no chill; the room was still warm and steamy, the air spiked with the scent of Oliver and slick soap.

Oliver opened the large glass shower door, tested the water before nudging the temperature hotter. He edged back, making room for her in an already generous shower stall. He dipped his head under the spray, dragged his hand over his head, sending water swirling down his forearm, his bicep to his shoulder and chest. Down. Lower.

Felicity wanted to lick it. To taste him. She wanted sip from those abs as she slipped to her knees.

"Felicity."

The low, growling sound of her name rolled through the bathroom like distant thunder. She dragged her attention back to his face. Oliver's jaw was impossibly tight. His lashes spiked with droplets. His arms were outstretched, his hands braced on the walls on either side of him. His chest heaved. His jaw angled. Those eyes flashed, this time with power, with hunger, and yes, arrogance.

"Come here," he commanded, raw sex radiating in the two words.

She shivered. Not cold. Definitely not. At this point she believed Oliver could look at her across a room and she'd go hot. That he could purr something in her ear and make her come with the simple sound of his voice. Still she hesitated. Not that she didn't want a shower. She did. She also wanted the shower sex so clearly about to happen. But she wanted more than that. She wanted Oliver at her mercy this time. She wanted to wield the same intoxicating power over him he so thoroughly cast over her. She wanted to take him in her hand, her mouth, and torture him with pleasure until he
begged her for release. The moans she wanted to hear were his. Calling her name.

Water pounded. Her heart sped up to race it.

Felicity stepped in, tugged the door shut behind her, then held out her hand. She didn't blink. "Soap."

Oliver didn't move. Water dropped from his chin.

Felicity lifted hers.

Slowly, he did as ordered. He pressed the bar into her hand, curled her fingers around the still-soft bar.

Felicity tsked as she edged closer. The hard tips of her breasts grazed his chest and she smirked as his breath caught and his pupils dilated. Her eyes wandered over him, appraising what was hers. What was about to be hers when he surrendered completely to her touch.

Holding his gaze, Felicity let her empty hand wander down his chest to his abdomen, where the muscles clenched beneath her touch. She leaned forward, kissed the strange, star shaped tattoo on his pectoral, lower. A little lower.

Oliver's breath quickened.

She glanced up, found him watching her with eyes that smoldered. Her fingers feathered down the length of his cock.

He reached for her. His thick penis flexed upward.

"Uh-uh." Felicity dodged his hands. The soap thumped at it struck the shower floor. She caught his wrists, guided his hands firmly back to the walls, and then held them there. She gave him a stern warning look. "Stay," she ordered with a firmness in her tone that surprised them both.

Oliver braced his hand there, fisted this time, looking more like a warrior about to enter battle than a man ready to make love.

Felicity trailed her hands down his arms, his chest. Appreciating his shape. Memorizing his lines. Conquering his will. She rubbed herself against him like a cat, enjoying the slickness of her wet, heated skin against his; loving the shudder that rolled through him as she kissed her way across his clavicle, the way his cock jerked against her leg as she began a downward path with her mouth.

Oliver dropped his head back. He swore at the ceiling, cursed her, or maybe revered her. Words melted into a ragged, guttural moan as his back arched.

Felicity smirked as she retrieved the soap. She went to work, lathering the slick bar between her palms as she sank to her knees before him, took him firm in her hand, and murmured, "Now it's my turn."

~*~

An hour later, after Oliver had left to run an errand and check in on Diggle's recovery at the hospital, Felicity found herself on her knees again. This time, however, she was dry and dressed, and it was the far less enjoyable and satisfactory task of peering under the bed instead of being in it.
Nothing. Just empty space and dust-free hardwood flooring.

She dropped the comforter back in place and sat up. Drumming fingers on her knees, Felicity looked around the room. The book had to be here somewhere. Oliver had tossed it in this direction when he'd snagged it from her early. She could have sworn the journal landed on the bed amidst the tangled bedding, but it wasn't there anymore. It wasn't on the nightstand either. It wasn't behind the headboard, kicked off against a wall, or, even back in the desk drawer where she'd originally found it. It wasn't anywhere.

It was just gone.

Felicity shook her head and adjusted her glasses. "That's impossible. Things don't just disappear."

That left one option. Someone took it.

She propped her elbow against the side of the mattress, drove her fingers through her hair to scratch the back of her head. No. Not just someone. Oliver.

Impossible. Why would he?

Unless…

Felicity closed her eyes even as the thought formed. No. He hadn't taken it from her because he didn't want her to see it. He'd taken it flippantly. He'd wanted to make love to her, not seduce her as a distraction. It was just a book. What harm ever came from reading a book?

Sighing, she pushed herself to her feet. The whole idea was ridiculous, not to mention paranoid. Hell, she didn't even know why she needed to see the stupid book again. The glyph in front wasn't at all the same as the one on the paper Ben Mitchell had given her at the Unidac auction. It couldn't be. Her mind was playing tricks on her, that was all. With everything going on, she couldn't really blame it. So seeing the book again would simply ease her mind. She wanted to take the journal, with its weird list of names and its weird circular sticker, and compare it to the printout. Once she'd done that, she could dismiss it, laugh at herself, and move on.

Felicity crossed back through the connecting door into her bedroom. There, in the middle of the bed, where Raisa had left it, was her purse. Ignoring the dried blood on the outside, she unzipped it and pulled out the stained, folded piece of paper.

It would be totally different. Nothing at all like the one in Oliver's notebook. Whoever had hacked Queen Consolidated to shadow the embezzled funds transfer, whoever had spooked Ben Mitchell into thinking someone was following him, whoever had erased their presence so thoroughly from the QC network that she couldn't trace them and had only left behind one tiny graphic as a footprint, couldn't have any connection to Oliver. Certainly not a connection he'd want to hide, especially from her.

She unfolded it.

The circle stared back.

The same goddamned circle.

Her hand shook. Her stomach rolled. Bile burned the back of her throat.

Her phone rang in the other room, that same somber, imposing ring of church bells. *Danger*, it seemed to toll. *Turn back. There's danger here…*
That's when Felicity remembered exactly where she'd seen that book before.

Old habits, indeed.

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